

THE COWBOY'S TREASURE

by
Charlene Tess

CHAPTER ONE

Ogallala, Nebraska 1868

A blanket-covered form bounced on the back of Jack Carter's mare as it plodded up the road.

Sara White strained her eyes and smoothed back her thick auburn hair that was even more tightly curled and unruly than usual due to the weather. The clouds had gathered thick and black adding a sticky, humid overtone to a day which she would forever remember as heavy and dark.

"I found your papa by the south fence, Miss Sara." Jack's voice was thick with regret. "It looks like his heart plumb give out, and he's gone to meet his maker. I'm sorry, ma'am. Real sorry."

Later, after she had covered her father with a clean sheet and knelt beside the bed to pray for his swift entrance into Heaven, she thought about his lifeless body draped over that horse and became violently ill. Since then she hadn't been able to eat much of anything.

Somehow she had lived through two weeks of wearisome days while finding a way to do all of her father's chores as well as those that had always

been her responsibility. Last night she had looked the whole house over for coins, including going so far as to search through her father's things—even the pockets of his old blue work pants, but no money turned up. This morning, she had even found it difficult to locate a pan in which to cook the oatmeal for breakfast. She dusted off the last jar of applesauce and struggled to open its tightly sealed lid. Just because she couldn't keep any food down was no reason to let Adam go hungry.

With each passing hour, she became increasingly frightened to think of spending the winter alone, so far from town and fourteen miles from her nearest neighbor. Already, she had used up all the corn meal, and the supply of beans and molasses was running low. A trip to the Cox's Store in Ogallala would be necessary. She also planned to stop at the bank and talk to Harold Philburn.

"Sissy, it's too hot. I wanna' wear my old shirt."

"No, Adam, you'll wear your good one. I won't have people thinking I can't take care of you just as well as Papa did."

"Where is Papa? Is he coming home soon?" His voice sounded thin and whiny.

Adam clamped his pearly front teeth over his bottom lip and chewed gently — a sure sign that he felt worried. Sara sat down on the edge of his narrow bed and took both of his chubby hands in hers.

"No, honey, Papa won't be coming home. He's gone to Heaven to be with Mama." She reached up and pushed back an unruly shock of red hair from his forehead, and then raised his hands to her lips and kissed him at

the spot where his plump arm creased just above the wrist. Was there anything in all the world as fragrant as a precious, healthy, sweet-smelling, freshly-bathed child?

Her patience wearing thin, she vowed not to take out her lack of sleep and nourishment on her four-year-old brother. “Come on,” she said and gently led him out the door into the burning heat of a Nebraska morning. After several tries, she successfully hitched the horses to the wagon, and she and Adam bundled off to town. She had tied her shiny hair back off her face, and wore a blue and white calico bonnet to shield her delicate skin from the blistering sun.

Ahead of them, the road stretched out, dusty and full of potholes. There had been no rain for weeks, and the short timothy grass loomed gray and flat.

“Sissie, look!” Adam insisted.

On their left, a jackrabbit sat with its huge, stiff ears pointed skyward. As the sound of the horses and wagon came nearer, he jumped and skittered off into the wild wheat field among the weeds and black soil.

Adam giggled in delight. “That’s old Jumpin’ Jack, ain’t it? I can see his toof.”

“Isn’t it,” she corrected him.

His little face looked so cute. When he grinned the gap between his two front teeth showed his bright pink tongue. His habit of sucking his thumb when he felt tired or upset had caused his front teeth to protrude slightly. He had difficulty pronouncing *th* sounds and the word *tooth* came out *toof*.

Sara smiled and reached over to ruffle his copper-colored hair. She loved to read to him and had been making up stories to tell him about Jumping Jack Rabbit, Miss Polly Pig, Mrs. Clara Cow, and Puck-pa-duck Chicken. He had heard the stories so often, he knew them all by heart. Even their father had sometimes called their milk cow Clara. The thought brought the threat of stinging tears to Sara's eyes and made her nose burn. Papa, what will we do now?

By the time they had traveled the four miles into town, they were both drenched with sweat. Her hair had lost all semblance of respectability and spilled out in loose, wet tendrils beneath her wide-brimmed straw hat.

She pulled up hard on the leather straps and stopped the horses in front of the Coxes' Driver's Store on the broad strip of dirt that served as the main street of Ogallala. She stepped down gracefully from the wagon, smoothed her hair and straightened her bonnet. The hem of her black skirt touched the top of her scuffed leather shoes as she walked down the dusty street.

Grateful to get out of the bright sunshine, she entered the store. Although she had been here many times before, this time she felt strange. In the past she had prepared a list for her father and not given a thought as to how he would pay for it. This time, she would need to determine the exact price of each item on her list. Since she had no money with which to purchase the few things she needed, she was hoping to work out a credit system with Mr. Cox and figure out how to pay him at a later time.

Several rows of rough board shelves held a stock of goods that included salt, flour, coffee, tobacco, and liquor. From baskets and barrels came the pungent smell of dried herbs, fruits, and vegetables. Jugs of sorghum molasses were arranged on the shelves. A tin cup hung from a whiskey barrel near the door that led into the living quarters in the rear of the store.

Adam ran to the counter that stood nearly level with the top of his head. There, arranged in glass jars, sat an array of brightly colored, hard candy. Mr. or Mrs. Cox usually let Adam reach into one of the jars to choose a candy to suck on while the grown folks did their shopping. Today, a stranger stood behind the counter with a broom handle in his hand.

“Howdy, cowboy,” he said to the little boy whose big blue eyes peeked over the wooden counter. He reached into the candy jar and handed Adam a pink and white peppermint stick. Adam looked up at the tall man and smiled, but he was too shy to say anything as he reached for the candy with his tiny hand.

At the sound of a deep resonate voice, Sara turned from the bolt of calico she had been inspecting and looked at the handsome stranger who had spoken to her brother. He stood tall— well over six feet, and his sun-streaked brown hair hung long over his ears. She couldn’t help thinking he could use a trim like the ones she used to give her Pa. He had bushy sideburns and a dark shadow on his face that suggested a heavy beard. He wore blue jeans and a well-worn indigo calico shirt.

“Say ‘thank you’ to the man, Adam,” Sara said as Adam hid behind her skirt. But Adam stayed put, sucking on the sweet candy, making no attempt to get acquainted.

“Kinda’ shy is he? That’s okay, ma’am. I used to be that way myself when I was his age if I didn’t know somebody. I’m Jeremiah Boyd,” he said. He reached up to tip his hat before he realized he wasn’t wearing it at the time. He smiled at the mistake, wiped his hand on his pants, and then extended it across the counter.

Sara noticed two things at once. He looked down right handsome, and he knew how to behave in the presence of a lady. She didn’t think she’d had anyone tip his hat to her in Ogallala in her entire lifetime, except for the preacher. It both pleased and flustered her to be in the presence of such a polite, good-looking man. She extended her hand and they exchanged a brief handshake. His big hand felt rough and warm. His firm, yet gentle grip pleased her.

“How do you do, Mr. Boyd?” Sara finally managed to say. “I’m Sara White, and this is Adam. I’m looking for the Coxes. Where are they?”

“Gone to the train station at the moment. They’re expecting a load of supplies today from Chicago. I’m minding the store for them. Can I help you find something?”

Sara’s face grew hot with humiliation. She had expected to see the kind, elderly couple who owned the general store. She couldn’t reveal her pathetic situation to this man she didn’t know. “No, no. I’m not ready yet. I need to do some business at the bank first, and then I’ll come back.”

“Sure, whatever you say.”

“Come on, Adam.”

Adam didn’t even look up. His lips were already red and sticky.

“Leave the boy here if you like. He won’t be any trouble,” Jeremiah said.

Sara looked at Adam. “You stay right here. I’m going to the bank and I’ll be right back. Don’t be a bother to Mr. Boyd, you hear me?”

Adam clamped his front teeth over his lower lip and nodded. She thought he might protest. Adam hadn’t let her out of his sight since his father’s death, but he seemed perfectly content to sit there on the stool and suck on his candy.

After Sara left, Jeremiah was startled to see Old Joe Watkins standing near the doorway. He was a regular customer at the store. “Joe, I didn’t see you come in.”

“Didn’t think so. I saw the way you were lookin’ at that pretty gal. You’re mighty smitten, ain’t you?”

Jeremiah ignored the remark and busied himself by straightening jars of canned peaches on the shelf behind him. His embarrassment quickly turned to annoyance.

Jeremiah scratched his head. *Why in the world did I offer to keep the boy? What do I know about watching children?*

It wasn’t that he didn’t like young ones. Sure he did. But he hadn’t had much experience around them, and he had certainly never volunteered to watch one all by himself. Could it be because it might provide another chance to see the lovely Sara White again?

Adam made short work of his candy and jumped down off the stool.

“Hold on there, partner,” Jeremiah said. “Don’t get too far out of my line of sight. I wouldn’t want the lady to get mad at me.” His voice was much louder than he intended it to be.

Adam sat down on the floor and clamped his pearly front teeth over his bottom lip. “She won’t be mad, mister.”

“Well, good. Let’s see. What can we do to pass the time until she comes back?”

Adam looked up at the tall cowboy through long, dark lashes. “I could suck on another candy stick.”

Jeremiah couldn’t help but laugh at the young one’s clever solution. “Well, why not. They’re mighty good.” He handed another peppermint stick to Adam.

“Thanks, mister.”

Jeremiah sat down on a barrel and watched the boy enjoy the sweet confection. “I’ll reckon your mother won’t be too happy with me, but she don’t have to know everything. We fellas have to stick together.”

Adam stood up and walked over and looked up at Jeremiah. “My mother’s dead. My papa too. Sissie says they’re in Heaven now.”

Oh, no. What do I do now that I’ve put my foot in it. Jeremiah pulled the little boy closer, ruffled his hair, and inhaled the fragrance of the sweet-smelling child. “I’m sorry, son. Of course they’re in Heaven. And it’s a mighty fine place, I hear.”

Adam grinned and turned his attention back to his candy.

Jeremiah needed to ask one more question, just to be sure. “I take it Miss Sara White is your sister?”

He had enjoyed watching Sara White for several moments in the back of the store before she saw him. The sight of her slender frame, tiny waist, and womanly curves quickened his pulse and made him happy to have been standing in for the Coxes.

Adam nodded in the affirmative, and Jeremiah’s mood elevated like smoke on a windy day. All of a sudden he felt good—real good. In fact, this was the best he’d felt since he’d ended up flatfooted in Ogallala at the end of June.

Thanks for reading.
My books are inexpensive
and enjoyable.
Only \$2.99 in the Kindle Store

