

Cowboy
Ninja

&

THE SCHOOLMARM

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Cowboy Ninja and the Schoolmarm

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Chapter 1 The Cowboy Ninja

Pat sat atop the golden, grass-covered hill next to a newly lain pile of rocks. The white-gray stones had been placed with care, and she had lovingly decorated the rocks with a generous sprinkling of freshly picked wildflowers. At the head of the rocks stood a wooden cross, two lengths of irregular wood nailed together as straight as possible, secured in the ground with packed dirt and rocks. A blue ribbon was tied with a bow at the cross-section. The new grave had been purposefully put out there in the wild instead of in the town graveyard.

“Mama, it’s truly so beautiful here, just like you said it would be,” Pat whispered quietly to her dead mother.

The view that sprawled before the young girl was breathtaking. It was dawn, and the sun had just yawned over the tallest peak of the distant mountain range, its warm light setting the valley afire with a hearty glow, the winding river flowing through the vast flatland, sparkling like liquid diamonds.

Filled with love and sadness, and touched deeply by the beauty of God’s lovely Eden, Pat stood up and breathed in the clean, brisk air, her light brown eyes deep and clear, framed by her heart-shaped face. Her long brown hair in its neat and tidy blue-ribboned braid swung lightly, gently tapping against the blue schoolmarm dress patterned with intricate, tiny white flowers. It

had been her mother's, and it was still big on her, loose and full of space for her to fill, but it hung on her all right, comfortable and airy. And she wanted so much to grow into it. She wanted her mother to keep living through her, to still be alive through her. She needed it.

She remembered how her mom had wanted to run through this beautiful valley like a jackrabbit, free and unfettered. Unfortunately, her mother was never well enough to do so.

With a smile that was half forced, half inspired, Pat stood up to her full fifteen year old height of five feet and seven inches, and just like when she was a little girl, took a step, then a hop and a skip before she jumped into a run down the hill.

As she pranced around on the land, the blue of her dress stood out in the brown, golden valley, and it seemed to draw everything towards her.

Unfortunately, that included trouble.

Pat noticed the dust cloud made by the horse's hooves first. Initially, she thought it might just be a little dust devil, a twirling knot of wind straying from the main current, but the sun was already climbing pretty fast up into the sky, lighting up everything, and the horse and rider kicking up the dust were quickly apparent to her.

Of course, Pat felt alarm shoot through her like lightning, but she tried to stay calm. Suddenly she regretted running so far out into the beautiful valley. Trying not to be too obvious, she started skipping and turning her path around to head back towards her mother's grave, to get over the hill to where her family's new home was, closer to town.

Unlike her mother, Pat was as healthy as a horse and pretty athletic as well, a lot like her Pa in that respect. On the journey west, she had gotten more exercise than was normal for the bookish-type of girl she was, having found the changing landscape around her the best story she'd ever read, and she had read most of that tale with her curious feet and sturdy brown boots.

As she headed back towards town trying not to look or feel frightened, she broke into a run here and there, skipping again when she got a little out of breath or when she wanted to look like she wasn't trying to run away. She kept a smile on her face and pushed the fear of the unknown rider back, thinking to herself, *I'll make it back home an hour before church for sure.*

Even when she heard the sound of the hooves coming up behind her, she tried to keep that relaxed smile on her face. And when the stranger in the dark and dirt-crusting clothes ran his horse ahead of her and wheeled around in front of her, she tried to keep the panic out of her eyes.

"Good mornin' girly." The man was missing a few teeth, and the ones he had left were shadowed with dark rot. His face was whiskery and uneven, his smile crooked, and the rim of his broad hat blocked the sunlight from his face, but even then, Pat could see the no good in his eyes.

"Mornin'," Pat said politely while trying to walk around the man and his horse which he had maneuvered to block her path.

"Woah, pretty miss," he shifted the horse to block her again, "where you headed off to?"

"Church," she said and waving him off like she was late and in a hurry, she tried to walk around him and his horse again, and again he moved his horse to block. She felt her fear swelling in her chest, but she just kept trying to walk past him. He swiftly dismounted and stepped towards her, and on his dismount, she had caught a glimpse under his long black coat of the bullet-lined gun belt and the gleam of the gun's metal catching the sunlight. And that was it, too close for comfort. She broke into a run, fully expecting a bullet in the back, but it never came. For all his creak and crust, the stranger was fast on his feet. In a moment, he had grabbed her wrist with his left hand.

Pat screamed.

But before she could go into full-on kicking, scratching, and yelling to high hell, the stranger let go of her wrist with a cry of pain. Tumbling backward a little, Pat saw something copper and shiny stuck in the stranger's left arm. It looked like a sheriff's badge, a pointed star, only the edges were sharpened into blades.

Staggering, the stranger's right hand reached for his gun, but his body was suddenly assaulted with a rain of the same razor-sharp stars. From Pat's point of view, she could see a few on his leg, two in his shoulder, and one ripping the flesh in his left cheek. Now it was the stranger's turn to scream, and he instinctively pulled out the razor in his face, letting the blood from the deep cut in his face gush out and drip down his neck. Before he could reach for his gun again, he got a knee jammed into his gut followed by an elbow smashed down on the back of his head. He was out cold on the ground in no time.

It was then that Pat saw who had attacked the stranger. By his lanky build, he seemed to be a young boy about her height, but he was heavily covered in coat, hat, and chaps that all seemed a little long on him. His face was covered with a brown bandanna, and over his eyes were a pair of goggles with circular lenses that reflected the light and made him look like a large bug with gleaming eyes.

Not really sure if this new stranger was friend or foe, Pat turned and ran, not wanting to take any chances. She didn't see the boy stare at her retreating back in thoughtful silence and then kneel down with a rope and tied up the man he had just downed.

Chapter 2 The Sheriff

"Pa!"

Pat was breathless when she burst through the door of the small wooden house.

Her Pa was a mid-sized man, lean and quick, with a warm smile and kind eyes. He was sitting at the dining table, but stood up with alarm at the sound of her panic-filled voice.

"What is it Patty?"

"I was...I was out visiting Mama, and this man on a horse tried to...he grabbed my wrist..."

Pa reached for one of two Winchesters, long and sleek rifles leaning against the wall next to the door, a look of wild anger flashing in his eyes.

Pat's older brother, Garrett, who was only a few years older than her, jumped off the top of the bunk bed that he and Pat shared. Like always, he'd been enjoying his Sunday morning sleep-in, but his sister's alarming news scared any grogginess he had away.

"Did he hurt you?" Garrett grabbed her by the shoulders and inadvertently shook her. His brown eyes were wide with anger and concern, and his brown hair was sticking up from a bad case of bed head.

"No...someone stopped him, some boy, but I ran away all the same. Just in case."

"Good girl," her Pa said, "but looks like you can't go running off Sunday mornings on your own anymore, even in this town. Grab your rifle Garrett. We'll head on out there right now."

Garrett tripped a bit on his way towards the door trying to pull on his pants and buckle up at the same time. Soon he had the rifle in hand, though his shirt wasn't tucked in.

"Pat, you go on into town and call the sheriff and lead him out to where we are," Pa added, and he and Garrett were off running in the direction of Ma's grave.

With one quick glance at her brother and father, Pat hurried off into town.

People were just starting to stir in town, some folks getting ready for Sunday service. The town was building up to be quite civilized looking, with brown buildings of respectable

businesses lining a main street that had quickly taken a solid shape over just a few short years. Even the saloon looked to have a woman's elegant touch to it, and the town's Morality Committee, a group of self-appointed middle-aged to elderly women, made sure that undesirables and immoral businesses stayed out of the town. They had the luxury to do so, given the booming town that was flourishing under the watchful Sheriff Cody, who upheld the law with the help of some very capable official and unofficial deputies. Tawny was a small town, but the place had filled to capacity and then some. It was known in these parts for being the safest town around, a place where parents who had chosen to push west could feel pretty good about raising kids while pursuing opportunities of a lifetime, seeing as there were some decent silver mines nearby and plenty of good land around to homestead on.

Tawny's reputation as a safe place was why Pat's mother, a trained teacher, had decided to answer the ad for a schoolmarm in this booming town. Pa had packed up his print shop to take along, eager to give Ma a chance to recover her health in the warm and dry air flowing freely over new lands of the west. The town's good reputation was also why every Sunday morning, Pat felt safe enough to run off and visit her Ma's grave over the hill, facing the beautiful valley on the other side.

But today, Pat had discovered it wasn't safe, well, at least not as safe as she had thought. No place was completely safe, not even Tawny, so named for the way it turned a deep golden yellow when the sun rose and set.

She ran straight down Main Street, past her dad's print shop, the laundry shop, the bank, and the general store, up to the doorstep of the Sheriff's across from the saloon on the corner. She pounded quite loudly on the door.

"Sheriff! Sherrriff!" she yelled.

The door creaked open revealing the sheriff, a man who was a little taller and heavier built than her father, in black belt-buckled pants, beige long sleeve shirt, and wheat colored, hat-matted hair. His gray eyes had a strange way of being soft and hard at the same time. In his hand this morning was a tin mug of black coffee.

"Mornin' Pat. What's all the ruckus about?"

Sheriff Cody didn't even have his gun belt on, having expected that a quiet Sunday morning wouldn't need to be shattered with the sound of gunfire.

"I was visiting my Mama on the other side of the hill, and some vagrant came out of nowhere, grabbed my wrist, but then someone attacked him. Pa and Garrett ran over there with their rifles, and Pa told me to come get you."

By the time Pat was done talking, Sheriff Cody already had his gun belt on and was out the door. He checked to make sure his revolvers were fully loaded.

"Let's ride over," he said and headed to his horse, dark brown with a white stripe down its forehead, that was tied to the wooden post of the building. After a smooth mounting, he reached a hand down to Pat, who took it and was quickly pulled up to sit behind him.

They were out of town and over the hill in a few quick minutes, and Pat craned her neck out from behind the sheriff and saw her father and brother standing over the stranger who was lying on the ground in fetal position, all tied up and unconscious. Seeing no imminent danger, Sheriff Cody helped her dismount before doing so himself, with Pat running on ahead.

"Is this the one, Pat?" Garrett asked, his hand gripping his rifle so tight his knuckles were turning white.

"Yeah, that's him."

Garrett gave the man a rough kick in the back.

“Out cold. You said someone attacked him? Is that why he’s all cut up and bleeding?”

The sheriff knelt down to examine the stranger. He looked carefully at the multiple wounds. He snorted a little, almost sounding like he had laughed, and shook his head so slightly it was barely noticeable.

“Miss Pat, tell me about the one who attacked this man.”

“Well, he was about my height, maybe a bit taller. I couldn’t see his face because it was all covered up with a neckerchief and a pair of...spectacles, but they were thick and metal spectacles, like two pipes cut for his eyes and wrapped around his head with leather. And he was throwing something that looked like copper stars, like this.” She pointed to the sheriff’s badge that was displayed prominently on his chest.

“Like this one?” The sheriff raised a hand and held one of the razor stars up for them to see. It was stained on one of its five points with blood.

“Yeah, that’s it!”

“What is that Sheriff?” Pa said holding out a hand for it.

“It’s uncommon, that’s what it is,” Sheriff said as he dropped the small yet effective little projectile weapon into Pa’s hand.

“Can it be shot out of a gun? Is it like a type of bullet?” Garrett walked up to his Pa to get a closer look.

“I didn’t hear any gun shots,” Pat said. “They came flying, quiet as the breeze. Didn’t see them coming until they were all over him.”

“Maybe it’s like an arrow, shot from a bow and string,” Garrett thought out loud.

Pat looked from him to the sheriff as the sheriff took the strange weapon back from her Pa. “Is there only one Sheriff Cody? There were a lot before.”

“Guess our mystery boy took the rest and missed this one.” He got up and dusted off his knee. “Let’s haul this unseemly fellow in and lock him up in a cell. When he comes to, we’ll find out where he’s from, and I’ll send for an available judge, see what will be done. One thing’s for sure, he ain’t going to walk freely in this town.”

Sheriff Cody tipped his hat at Pat, and she smiled back appreciatively.

“I’d feel a lot safer if he wasn’t,” Pat sighed in relief. She had gotten lucky, but she’d learned a lesson.

“Yes Ma’am,” Sheriff Cody nodded, then said to his deputy, “We should have Dr. K take a look at his wounds.”

“Oh, Sheriff?” she said, stepping forward towards him and holding out her hand.

“Yes?”

“Can I keep that little metal star?”

He looked down at the small copper star-shaped blade in his hand, laughed with amusement about something that he didn’t share with Pat and her kin, then dropped the mysterious item into Pat’s outstretched hand.

“Sure. Careful with it, though.”

“Yeah,” she said as she looked down at the weapon with intense curiosity, wondering who the owner was and why he had come to her rescue. Aside from being grateful to the unknown boy, her mysterious rescuer, she was also the kind of girl who loved a good mystery.

Chapter 3 The Metalsmith

It was Monday, and Pat wore her usual dark brown pants and tan, button-down long sleeved shirt. They were her work clothes for busy days, and she reveled in being able to wear them, since they were more accepted for women out here in the great West than back east. Her brown boots kicked up whiffs of dust as she walked briskly down the dirt road with a large bundle of grimy laundry wrapped in her arms down Main Street, heading for the laundry shop. She turned her nose up and away from the package. Even though it was wrapped up, the stench of her father and brother's soiled clothes still seeped through. They didn't bathe nearly as much as she wanted them to.

As she turned her nose away from her odorous bundle, her eyes happened to look straight at the dark-lettered sign of the metalsmith's shop. Then, an idea struck her. She had the copper razor star from the day before with her. It was the first thing she thought about when she woke up in the morning. She took it with her to the kitchen as she cooked up breakfast, carried it around as she finished other morning chores, and as she left the house, she dropped it in her pocket. It was like a charm that had a spell on her, and she wanted to have it with her because her mind always wandered back to it no matter what she was doing.

The door to the shop was open, and the steady clang of hammer against metal echoed out of it, as if it were the toll of a large clock bell marking the passage of time. Inside was a tall black man, his skin and hair the color of deep charcoal, matching the pile of black fuel stacked next to the large open furnace. The whites of his eyes contrasted sharply with the rest of him, and despite the heavy sledgehammer that he lifted again and again with ease to swing back down on the hot metal, his eyes and every movement of his body was gentle and graceful. He looked up at Pat when she walked in, blocking some of the sunlight coming in from outside.

"Why good mornin' Miss Pat. What can I do for you?" William politely put down his hammer and the metal he was working, wiped his brow with an old rag, and stepped forward to greet her.

"Morning William," Pat smiled back at him. She looked up and around at all the metallic creations that William had made. There were shapely iron bars hanging on the walls, lanterns and hooks stacked on a shelf, a large ornate gate leaning against another wall, and even some delicate looking silverware laid carefully on a cloth on the table. William was well known in those parts for being particularly skilled with the shaping all sorts of metal. The breadth of his skill was amazing, but it was the elegant art of his creations that caught people's eye. Even the simplest coat hook or iron crow bar was made with a sophistication in design that made it extraordinarily beautiful. If anyone could tell Pat where the copper razor star came from, she figured it would have to be William. Putting the bundle on the dirt floor, she pulled out the razor star from her pocket.

"I just had a question about something curious that I found." She held it out to him. He stared at it for a moment in silence before he smiled with a hint of amusement and looked up at her.

"May I?"

Pat nodded, and William wiped his sweaty hand on his pant leg before reaching out and gingerly picking up the little copper conundrum from her small hand. His smile suddenly faded as his brow furrowed with concern.

"You get this off 'a that man who harassed you yesterday?"

"Yeah, Sheriff told you about it?"

He nodded. Like everyone else, Pat knew that William and Sheriff Cody were close friends.

“That drifting cowboy got a thing or two to learn about how to treat a lady.” He shook his head with disapproval while flipping the little copper star in his hand and then holding it up to look at it from the side, as if he were about to throw the thing like a dart.

“He’s a cowboy?” Unpleasant images of the man who wouldn’t let her pass made her frown involuntarily. She crossed her arms across her chest.

“Yeah, Cody told me that he claims to be part of a run north that comes near town regularly. Says his name is Simon Crocker, brother of a Charlie Crocker, who should be coming into town to bail him out of jail.”

William threw the copper star down on his worktable, and it stuck into the wood. He looked like he was imagining the table was Simon Crocker’s face, the way he stared at it.

“Good blade. It’s copper coated. Inside is a heavier metal, to give it weight for throwing, probably,” William muttered.

“Do you know where it came from?”

William looked up at her and smiled again with the same look of mirth.

“Someplace uncommon. Sorry Miss Pat, I can’t tell you where it came from.”

Uncommon. Pat noticed that was the same word Sheriff Cody had used to describe it. She let out a sigh of disappointment. “Thanks anyway William.” She stepped forward and pulled the copper star out of the tabletop.

“I appreciate you taking a look at it, William.”

“Anytime.”

Putting the copper star in her pocket again, Pat picked up her bundle of dirty laundry and left.

Chapter 4 The Laundry Man

“Mr. Li?”

Pat stepped into the shop filled with the smell of clean linen and steam. It was a pleasant fragrance, not because it was flowery or sweet, but because it was clean. Pat liked things clean.

Mr. Li wasn’t at his front counter like he usually was. There was a large heavy curtain that hung over the door behind the counter that opened to the back of the building where Pat guessed the laundry was washed.

“Mr. Li?” she said again a little louder. There was no response, just the sloshing of water and the sound of boiling liquid coming from the back. She looked from side to side and saw the wooden benches there specifically meant for waiting customers. She put her bundle down on the counter. Her hands came up to rest on the counter on either side of her bundle, and her fingers drummed against the wood, lifting and falling like ocean waves, impatiently lapping a shore. She was a little behind schedule after dallying at William’s shop and had to hurry off to the schoolhouse soon or she’d be late for class.

Leaving her bundle, she stepped around the counter, cautiously like a cat.

“Mr. Li?” she called yet again, as she stepped up to the heavy curtain that covered the back. It was larger than the door, no doubt to leave no crack for people to peak inside, which of course made Pat all the more interested in what was behind it. Lifting a hand, which in its relaxed and curled state did look very much like a cat’s paw, she pushed the tarp away, peeking with her big brown eyes.

What she saw made her jaw drop. The back room was grand in a laundry sort of way. More clothes than she’d ever seen at one time were hung on ropes that lined the sides of the large,

high-ceiling room, but there were no ladders or stairs to get up to the top of them, just long poles leaned against the wall, long enough to reach to the very top. The long poles were strange, nothing like Pat had ever seen. They were like the trunks of very slender trees that grew very tall and were sectioned from bottom to top. These strange poles were used to hang the laundry on, too, and they were strangely flexible yet sturdy, bending as they leaned against the walls. To the left were a series of large furnaces that were all busy boiling up large pots of hot water for washing, and the centerpiece of the whole room was a massive wooden basin on a raised platform. The basin itself was about the size of a small bedroom and it had a pipe welded into the side of it, special-made to let the water in it run out when needed. It was currently plugged up with a large cloth stuffed into the pipe.

But all of that wasn't what left Pat's mouth hanging open. Standing in the basin was the town's only young Chinaboy in pants that had been cut off to a little above his knees. With steam rising up all around him and water splashing and sloshing below him, he was stomping and jumping and moving in the basin like he was dancing. Pat thought it looked like some kind of Indian spiritual dance. His arms were waving around, and he looked like he was trying to push and punch the clouds of steam away from him. The white mist swirled around him as he moved.

"Can I help you?"

Pat jumped at the sound of Mr. Li's voice and her hand shot back to her side, letting the cloth fall back into place, covering up the strange sight she had just beheld. He was about the same height and build as Pat's father, although there was something a little more physically solid about him. He always wore a black hat with a gray feather in it over his jet-black hair, and he wore a white button down shirt that was always impossibly clean tucked into a pair of black belted jeans.

"Uh, yes, Mr. Li. I just stopped by to drop off this week's laundry," she said as she quickly scurried back around to the outer side of the counter, placing herself behind her laundry bundle.

Mr. Li picked up the laundry, scrawled some strange markings on a paper tag and strung it to bundle.

"Yes, thank you," he said as he turned to push aside the covering curtain and place the bundle on a shelf inside next the doorway.

Pat couldn't help but try to catch another glimpse of the Chinaboy and the grand laundry room in the back.

"Sheeow Lohng!" the laundry man called out.

"Shrrr Bah!" the Chinaboy replied.

"Sahng kuh luh!"

"Shrrr Bah!"

Mr. Li turned back around to look at Pat. She had a look of surprise on her face. The Chinaboy attended class at her schoolhouse, but never spoke a word. All the other kids thought that he was deaf and dumb, but she had seen his work at the schoolhouse and knew he wasn't dumb for sure. She hadn't been sure about the deaf part. He seemed to understand what people were saying to him, but she had read about deaf and mute people who could read people's lips. Now she knew the Chinaboy could hear and speak.

"What did you just say to him?" Pat said, dying to know. It was the first time she'd heard this language that she figured was the Chinaman's language.

"I told him it was time for school." Mr. Li's voice was deep and steady, his English only lightly flavored with his mother tongue. He was good at adapting.

“Oh.” She placed the coins for payment on the counter. “What does ‘Shrrr bah’ mean?” She didn’t realize it, but she mimicked what the Chinaboy had said exactly, and Mr. Li’s eyebrow raised ever so slightly in recognition of how accurate her speech tones were, for tone in speaking the Chinaman’s language was critical. She would learn this soon enough.

“It means ‘Yes, Pa.’”

“Oh,” Pat nodded, then added, “well, I’m off to school now, too. Thank you Mr. Li.”

“Thank you,” he nodded, picking up the coins Pat had left on the counter.

Chapter 5 The Schoolmarm

“Good morning Patty Cake,” a tall boy with dusty golden wheat hair and sky blue eyes winked at Pat as she came in. It was Tom, the leader of the town’s pack of young boys. They all surrounded him, about five in all, and they chuckled as he winked at her. “Wish you would wear your pretty Sunday dress everyday instead of those pants. Pants are for men, not girls.”

Pat rolled her eyes as obviously as she could. She didn’t like him.

“That’s Miss Patricia to you Tom,” Pat said, giving him a look packed with as much disdain as she could muster. “And I’ll wear what I want to with or without your approval, thank you very much.”

“Yes’m Miss Cake, Schoolmarm ma’am,” Tom said, giving her a little salute.

“Don’t call me schoolmarm either.” Pat shot him a hard stare. “That’s my mother’s title, and I haven’t earned it yet.”

The mention of Pat’s dead mother and her suddenly serious eyes shut Tom up, at least for the moment.

“You should know when to keep your mouth shut Thomas Bryant. Really, learn some manners will you?” said a girl about Pat’s age, around fifteen years old, with deep black hair and hazel eyes wearing a very pretty white dress with yellow daisies all over it. “Pat, I got the water ready for boiling.”

“Thanks Lucy. Help me pass out the readers.”

“Sure.”

As the books got passed out and kids got in their seats, Pat suddenly noticed the Chinaboy was sitting quietly in the corner like he always did, but today, instead of passing her eyes over him, the memory of him doing that wild and mysterious dance in the oversized laundry wash tub made her stare at him the way she did when she first saw him.

She had read about China or the Celestial Empire in books, and he had been the first Chinese that she’d ever seen before in her life. He looked just so strange to her and unlike anyone else that he was the first person in the schoolroom she got really curious about. But things got so busy and eventful and he was always so quiet there in the corner that she had forgotten all about him.

The Chinaboy had black hair that had been lightened by generous western sunbaths, with strands of it glimmering a little golden when the light hit it just so. His almond-shaped eyes were light brown, and his skin was dusted dark. She had read that a Chinaman’s skin was yellow, but his was so darkened brown by the rays of the sun that she couldn’t see any yellow if there was any there to be seen. If she hadn’t known any better, she might have mistaken him for an Indian.

“What is it?” Lucy said, noticing Pat staring.

“Oh, nothing. I was just wondering when he came in. He’s so quiet, like you never know that he’s there. Has he always been like that?”

“Yup, long as I can remember. My family and I have lived here for the past three years, and I’ve never heard a peep outta him.”

“Has he been here longer than you?”

“Seems like it. Seems like he’s been here since this town was set up. His dad was the one who bought all the materials for this school building, which is why he’s here studying with us. Normally chinks aren’t allowed to study in schools with the rest of us. They weren’t allowed in the last town I lived in anyhow, and there were a lot more of them around there. I don’t know why he wastes his time in here. He’s clearly not learning anything. Look at him, he’s just staring at that reader like he’s staring at a wall.”

Pat decided she wouldn’t share with Lucy that she’d read the writing he’d turned in and corrected his math, that when he turned in work, it was always when no one was looking and he’d put it under everyone else’s work. She wouldn’t share what she saw and heard in the laundry shop this morning either. She was a little selfish about her mysteries and would rather explore this one on her own. That and she knew that although Lucy Perkins was nice and helpful and all, she was kind of the gossiping type of girl. Also, Lucy liked Tom a lot, which was why she was often like a pecking hen around him.

“Hey, the Chinaboy is pretending to read again!” Tom laughed and his boys laughed with him.

“You all mind your own reading!” Pat shot at them. She never liked it when everyone ganged up on one kid, especially not when the one being picked on hadn’t done anything to provoke the others. Unfortunately, it seemed like the Chinaboy’s mere existence was enough to provoke the rest of them.

She looked at the Chinaboy who didn’t seem to hear anything of what Tom said. He didn’t even flinch, just kept on staring at the book he held out in front of him.

“He can’t hear or understand a word we’re saying anyway,” Tom shook his head at Pat’s reprimand. He smiled back at his gang. “Wouldn’t be surprised if all Chinamen were deaf and dumb like him.” This elicited a round of laughter from his crew of boys.

“Yeah, that’s why they’re only fit to do women folk’s work,” one of them chortled.

“There’s a reason why they’re yeller skinned! They’re too yeller to do a man’s work.”

“Uh huh, wash that laundry chink boy! Wash it good!” another yelled out in the direction of the Chinaboy. The younger children snickered and giggled. Gender jokes were easy to understand, even for the little ones.

One boy got up and started making a motion like he was holding clothes with both hands and pushing them up and down on a washboard between his legs while hopping up and down making it into a ridiculous looking monkey dance.

“You all had better stop your yapping and get back to your studies!” Pat glared at them, using that same look she saw her mom give her students when she was giving them a good talking to. What she really wanted to do was throw her reader at them and then pick up the yardstick and give them all a good whacking. Only the memory of her mother’s patience kept her from doing that.

“Don’t tell me you’ve got a soft spot for chinks, Miss Cake?” Tom said with a meaningfully raised eyebrow.

“What I’ve got is a tough spot for students who are horsing around instead of minding their studies.” Pat stood up and crossed her arms across her chest and tilted her head back a little so

she could look down her nose at him despite being shorter. She was one of the oldest kids in the classroom, but not the oldest nor the tallest, and plus she was a newcomer in town. However, she had to try to hold down the class of students and do her best to take on the responsibilities in the place of her mom who would've been the teacher here if she hadn't passed away. Some days when her dad or brother could get away from printing work, they would come and lead the class, which made things easier since they were older and male, but most of the time it was just Pat, a baby chick who was trying to be the mother hen to the rest of them. "If you don't get back to work, I *will* write a letter to your mother telling her that you've been disruptive in class and not reading when you're supposed to. Hank and Jenny, it's time for your lesson."

Pat transitioned straight into working with the two youngest kids in class to cut Tom off from escalating the confrontation. Knowing Tom, he would just keep on going until things were out of control. With the little ones in front of her, even he knew he would look the selfish bully keeping Pat from helping the youngest just to feed his big ego. So Tom backed down as the two children sat down obediently in front of Pat with their books and small chalkboards. He sat back down and mumbled something to his group of boys who snickered appreciatively at whatever insulting remark he had just made. Pat ignored this.

When everything had settled down more, she glanced up at the Chinaboy for a moment when no one was looking. He was still staring at his reader, motionless and expressionless, still looking deaf and dumb, but she noted that he had turned the page.

Chapter 6 The Printer

With a large tin of beef stew in each hand, Pat strolled up to the door of her Pa's print shop, as brown and dusty and creaky as all the other stores around. Without a free hand, she kicked it with a free foot. Garrett opened the door, and immediately his eyes lit up at the sight of lunch.

"Bout time! I'm starvin'!"

"You're welcome," Pat said with a dry look on her face.

The beef stew was from the lunch she cooked with Lucy on the schoolhouse stove. All the students had eaten their fill after lessons and gone home for the afternoon to do chores and what not. Everyday she would make extra of whatever was for the school lunch to take to the print shop. Today she had more on top of that.

"You must have read my mind, bringing so much today, Pat," Garrett said eyeing the two large tins hungrily.

"Ain't all for you," Pat said. "I thought I'd bring some to the Sheriff today on account of him helping me out yesterday."

"That's a good idea Pat," Pa said, "but I don't want you going over there by yourself. Garrett, you walk your sister. That man's locked up there after all. Just drop off the stew and come straight back here. We'll eat when you get back."

"Let me just finish this page," Garrett said.

The print shop was busy. Her brother was laying out the print, letter by letter, getting ready for the inking and printing of the next sheet in their weekly paper. Her Pa was busy at his desk writing and planning the next page with notes scattered all around him, most of them crinkled or crumpled.

"What are you working on Pa?" Pat asked. She was always one to look forward to her Pa's writing. Every week she read their paper from end to end, not missing a word. She even read through every single ad.

“Town’s been astir over the possibility of a new vein of silver. Word’s traveling and attracting even more people here. Folks here are worried it might bring some less than desirable people.”

“Like who?”

“Well, who’s desirable and who’s not is a matter of opinion. In this town, undesirables most often named are gamblers, drunkards, dance hall girls, and all of such ‘immoral’ folks.”

“You don’t think of them as ‘undesirable’ Pa?”

He gave her one of his thinking smiles.

“It’s not that I condone certain behaviors, but we can’t go around judging people without trying to understand them first. It’s like Christ said, who’s really worthy of casting that first stone?”

Pat nodded thoughtfully. Her father went back to writing, but he kept talking while looking down at his paper.

“People are also afraid that the new silver vein will attract too many Chinese here again.”

Her ears perked up at this.

“Oh?”

“Yes, I did some digging, and apparently there used to be a lot of Chinamen here in the first strike, before the town was officially established, but they got driven away. It’s still not clear what happened exactly. I’m still looking into it. Not many of the original miners are left in this town.”

“Driven away? Why? Don’t they have a right to mine, same as everyone else?”

Her father turned to look at her pointedly.

“Americans think it’s not fair that the Chinese are coming to this country to take gold and silver from our land and shipping it back home to their country. They believe those riches should be reserved for the Americans.”

“I guess they got a point. Sure doesn’t sound fair,” Pat thought out loud.

“Indeed. But tell that to the Indians that were here before us. This was their home, their land, and we stole it from them. Maybe the Americans shouldn’t be the ones complaining about the Chinese taking from this land.”

Pat frowned. She loved how her father always gave her something to think about in one way or another, but she was often troubled by what he said.

“Then ain’t it wrong for us to be here right now, Pa? Making a living in this new town? On land that was stolen?”

Her father smiled at her, pleased with her clear thinking.

“It is Pat. So what do you suppose we should do about it?”

Pat stood for a while, thinking in silence. Her father turned back to his writing again, leaving her to her thoughts, and her brother continued on with laying out the page he was working on. She listened to the sounds of their work, staring down at the tin of beef stew she had packed for the Sheriff. Finally, she spoke.

“I don’t know what to do about it Pa. I don’t want to leave because this is our new home, and Ma’s here, but I don’t want to stay either, because it’s wrong.”

Her father looked up from his work again at her and smiled sadly, then turned again back to his work.

“At least you know a little now of how the Indians must feel. And that’s a good start.”

Garrett finished up and wiped his hands on a dirty rag before heading towards the door with his sister.

“The sooner we deliver this, the sooner I get to eat. Let’s go.”

Chapter 7 The General Goods Store Owner

“Garrett! I’ve got to check!”

“Aw Pat, I’m pretty hungry. Can’t you wait ‘till tomorrow?”

“It’s probably not here yet. I just want to check!”

“Fine.”

“Here, hold this.” She handed the tin over to her brother.

“I’mma wait out here.”

She burst through the doors to the general goods store. It was a bright place, full of sunlight streaming in through the large windows and reflecting off the white-washed walls and furniture. There were supplies stacked everywhere, grain sacks in the corner, canned and jarred goods on the shelf, combs and other knick knacks in buckets on tables. The most cheerful part of the store was John Riley, a Hispano who was born Javier Murieta, but taking on the name John Riley made it easier to do business, especially on paper.

John always had a warm smile on his face, but he had an especially warm one for young ones who loved to read.

“It’s here,” he said before Pat got a chance to open her mouth and ask.

“Yes! Thank you thank you thank you thank you!”

“Just came in this morning. Got a new mail order catalogue today, too. You want a copy of that too?” His English was richly flavored with a Spanish accent that he saved for the people he was the most comfortable with.

“Yes! It’s like Christmas today!” Pat hopped a little in her excitement and clasped her hands together. New reading material out here where there were no libraries and no bookstores, not even small ones, was always quite the occasion for her. It was a relief her father was a writer and her mother had been a book collector, so she had her share of printed material to pour over, but it was always wonderful to get a fresh new batch of ideas and adventures to digest. Besides her father’s print shop and its publications, the general goods store was the only place around that got regular shipments of new printed material.

John laughed; Pat’s excitement was infectious.

“Here you go.” He handed her the large, encyclopedic mail order catalogue and the latest slim and trim dime novel that had come in. John’s store doubled as a post office for the town, so he was the first to get everything.

“Thank you!” Pat said, eagerly taking the two publications in hand. “‘Deadwood Dick, the Prince of the Road.’ Have you read it John?”

“Only just started.”

“Is it good?”

“Real good so far. Got a new character I think you’ll like.”

“Oh?”

“Name’s Calamity Jane. Real rough and tough gal.”

Pat smiled, “That’s a swell name, Calamity Jane.”

“Based on a real person of that name.”

“Really?”

Pat smiled and hugged the books to her chest lovingly and then reached a hand in her pocket and pulled out a dime. She held it out to John. He shook his head.

“Let’s pretend today is Christmas.” He held both hands up in a halting gesture, refusing the dime.

“No John, please take it,” Pat pushed the dime in her open hand even closer to him.

“Just think of it as a thanks for that nice little article your Pa wrote about the store. You take this book and just promise me you will tell him that I am grateful for his kind words.”

“Well, all right, I really appreciate this.”

“Besides, I know you will be back next week to buy another one, so I’ll get that dime soon enough.”

Pat laughed. He was right about that.

“By the way, I heard about what happened out in the golden valley yesterday,” John said. He reached over behind the old and creaky cash register, opened a drawer, and pulled out something. “Here, keep this hidden. It’s not much, but it may come in handy if you ever find yourself in a bad situation again.”

He placed a small miniature dagger in a fine leather sheath on top of her dime novel and closed her fingers over the two items with his own worn and rough hands. The dagger had a beautifully reddish wood handle, the leather sheath had a short belt attached to it, clearly meant for strapping the dagger to an arm or leg. It was expertly made and looked expensive, at least five dollars, which was practically a whole year’s worth of dime novels.

“Oh no, John, I can’t. The dime novel is already Christmas enough!”

John laughed, somehow jolly and sad at the same time.

“Take it. I had a daughter about your age once who found herself in a bad situation.” Pat saw the slight glimmer of a tear form and then disappear in the old man’s eyes. “She was very much like you. Loved books and adventure. Maybe this would have been helpful to her in bad situations.”

Pat felt a clenching in her heart as she could see the faint shadows of painful memories on John’s face. Usually he had a youthful joy about him that belied his age, but today, Pat got a sense of the lifetime he had lived.

“Thanks John. I’ll make good use of this. I promise.”

She waved to him cheerfully as she left, leaving him smiling and waving in his store.

Chapter 8 The Crooked Cowboys

Pat reached out a hand for the door to the Sheriff’s office before it suddenly opened by itself and she had to step back quickly to avoid being hit by it. Out stepped the Sheriff and a group of dirt and dust covered whiskery men who looked like they’d been riding long and hard for at least a couple of weeks.

“I sure am sorry for all the trouble Sheriff,” the least dirty of them said as he shook hands with the Sheriff. He had a very formidable and symmetrical face despite his sun-worn skin and the frizziness of his chin.

“He needs to stay until the trial tomorrow,” the Sheriff said, keeping his expression steady and closing the door to his office behind him when everyone had fully stepped outside.

“Which judge did you say it was?” the man said.

“Judge Roy Bean. He’s already on his way on the next stagecoach over. Should be here by tonight.”

“Bean, yeah, from the next town over. I know him. Maybe we can all have a round of beers tonight at the saloon when he gets here.”

“No thanks, I’ll be on duty tonight, but thanks for the offer.”

“Are you sure you can’t have one of your deputies watch things while you take a break?”

“I’m sure I can’t, thank you.”

“And the bail?”

“Will be decided by the judge tomorrow.”

“Fair enough. But losing a day off of our trail will cost some,” he looked at the Sheriff pointedly. “Let’s go boys.”

As they left, the cowboys noticed Pat and Garrett standing off to the side, waiting their turn to talk to the Sheriff. The leader tipped his hat at them politely and the other men followed suit. Pat hugged the large mail-order catalogue and dime novel against herself, her dagger completely hidden, pinned between herself and the books she held. Garrett stood protectively in front of Pat, but Pat stared the men straight in the eyes without flinching.

When they were gone, Pat held up the tin to Sheriff Cody.

“I made some extra beef stew at the school today and thought I’d bring it over to you as a thank you for your help.”

Sheriff Cody smiled warmly at them.

“Thank you Pat. I always appreciate a warm cooked meal. I’m looking forward to it.” He took the tin from her.

“Who were those men, Sheriff?” Garrett said. That was what Pat had wanted to ask next, but her brother had beat her to it.

“That man’s Charlie Crocker, brother of Simon Crocker, the man we have locked up back in there.” He motioned to the closed door of his office.

“The judge is gonna try him tomorrow?” Pat said.

“Yes, which is why I’m glad you’re here. It would be best if you could be there Pat at the trial to tell the judge what happened. I know it’s hard, but it would make it easier for us to keep him out of this town.”

“Keep him out? Can’t we keep him locked up?” Garrett said.

“I wish we could, but there are a few things that are going to make it hard to even just keep him out of this town. First of all, Simon Crocker didn’t actually hurt Pat, even if he was intending to, which I’m sure he was, the judge won’t see this as a crime that’s been committed. Second, Judge Bean is easily...swayed by favors, but he’s the only judge we have close by enough to come on such short notice for this trial. Last, the Crockers aren’t just hired cowhands; they’re sons of a rich rancher, and Charlie Crocker is quite adept at swaying people in his favor with money and whatever else he has at his disposal. If you can be there to testify, Pat, it would give us a chance to at least ban him from our town. But it’s not going to be easy. How do you feel about it?”

“I’ll do it,” Pat said without hesitation.

“Good, now I’ll be sure to get some of the town folk there. I’m sure when they hear the case, they’ll pressure the judge to keep this man out of town. That’ll be our counter to whatever they offer the judge. You’re being there will make the difference.”

Pat’s forehead furrowed with the determination she felt. “I don’t want someone like him to be around this town, especially not a town with a good number of kids in it. I’ll be there for sure, Sheriff.”

“One more thing Pat.”

“Yes?”

“Be sure to wear a dress to the trial.”

“A dress? Why?” She loved wearing pants, now that she could do it regularly.

“Just think of it as presenting yourself in a manner that would curry the most sympathy from the judge and townspeople.”

Pat thought about it. Although it was acceptable for some women to wear pants on working days, it was still considered more proper for girls to wear dresses. She understood what the Sheriff was planning at.

“I see Sheriff Cody. I’ll do it.”

Chapter 9 The Bartender

The next afternoon, Pat and Garrett went with the Sheriff to the saloon. Pat wore a pale yellow dress with white lace. It made her look like an innocent and pure prairie girl. Underneath, her dress, however, was the small dagger John had given her, strapped to the outside of her right thigh just above her knee.

“What’ll it be?”

Sally Lee, the bartender and owner of the saloon was wiping some plates dry as the three of them walked in through the batwing swinging doors and up to the bar. Despite being a place with all sorts of folks coming in and out all the time, the saloon was rather elegant looking and well kept up. On the windows were some fine looking red curtains, and the chairs and stool had deep red leather covers. The bar itself was a large ornate wooden spectacle with horses and buffalo carved into the wood as if they were all frozen mid-stampede. Behind the bar was a large mirror that reflected the bottles of wine and whiskey that lined the shelving in a classy sort of way. The floor was a dark wood, and the substantial light that came in through the large high-ceilinged windows was supplemented with some oil lamps in some of the darker corners. The place was a little over half full of patrons, and the low hum of conversation filled the air. In the two months she’d lived in this town, Pat had only come in here once before. Normally she had no business in the saloon.

“Mornin’ Sally. This here is Pat and her brother Garrett,” he motioned to them respectively. “I was wondering if we could use your saloon this afternoon as a courthouse. Most of the town’ll be attending, so we need a big space, and yours is the biggest space there is around here.”

“Sure, as long as I can keep doing business, you can hold whatever meeting you want in here Sheriff,” Sally said, perking up at the prospect of all the extra clientele along with the presence of the watchful peace officer increasing her day’s revenue. She went to the side curtain-covered doorway and stuck her head in and yelled, “Chris! We’re gonna have a lot of people here this afternoon so get ready! And fetch Henrietta next chance you get!”

There were a lot of pots and pans that clanged in response. Pat heard the distinctly Southern flavor to Sally’s melodious voice.

Sally was a middle-aged, golden blond woman with crystal blue eyes, and she was the sharpest mind in town when it came to numbers. Immediately she started assessing the count of chairs and tables she had out in the main room, estimating the potential number of people who would be showing up, and figuring all of that out with what she had in storage. She glanced at Pat and Garrett and then back at the glass cup she was drying. “Are you the young lady this trial’s all about?”

“Unfortunately I am Ma’am,” Pat sighed.

“Here,” Sally pulled out three brown bottles of sarsaparilla and popped the caps off of them. “On the house.”

“Thanks!” Garrett and Pat said in unison. It was a rare treat. The bubbly sweet delight tickled their mouths as they put the cold bottle glass to their lips and poured the fizzing liquid down their throats.

Sally smiled, then shared a look with the Sheriff before nodding silently to him. He took a drink from his bottle of sarsaparilla.

“I’ll go and get Judge Bean. He’s over in the boarding house. Pat, Garrett, you two stay here and help Sally set up,” Sheriff Cody said as he left.

“We’d be glad to!” Pat answered for both herself and her brother.

“Oh I would appreciate that a lot, thank you. Here, come with me.” Sally came out from behind the bar, revealing her grand yet comfortable looking royal blue, long-sleeved dress that narrowed at her waist and cascaded outward over her hips and legs, her ankles and feet completely hidden underneath. She walked over to the staircase that led to some offices and rooms upstairs. Underneath it was a rather spacious storage area that could be accessed through a small sized door. She opened it, reached inside, and pulled out a wooden chair of simple yet sturdy construction. “I’m probably not going to have enough chairs to go around, so there will have to be some people standing, but let’s set up all the chairs I do have at least.”

Pat and Garrett got to work pulling all the chairs out of the storage and setting them at open spaces around the many round and rectangular tables around the room. Sally disappeared behind the cloth that covered the doorway to the back kitchen for a bit and then came back out.

“Here, let’s take that one table and make that the judge’s.”

They helped her clear the table, move it to the small raised stage area where musicians usually perform, and put a red cloth over it to make it look more stately.

“There, now take the rest of those chairs and line them up here in front. They’re sure to fill up for those who want premium seats.”

Soon the place looked more like a performance hall than a saloon.

“I’m gonna head on back to see if Pa needs some help finishing up so he can get on over here right away,” Garrett said. “You going to be all right over here?”

Pat nodded and Sally added, “You don’t worry. She’ll be safer here by this bar with me than in any place else in town right now.”

“All right thanks,” Garrett said as he headed out in a jiffy, leaving the batwing doors swinging behind him.

“I wish he wouldn’t fuss over me so,” Pat sighed a bit to herself. “I’m not a totally helpless girl.”

“I understand how you feel, honey,” Sally said with a laugh, “it’s silly, but menfolk always need you to prove you can take care of yourself before they will believe it.”

Pat nodded, wondering how she would prove herself one day.

“Come on, you’ll sit over here near me,” Sally pointed to the chair near the end of the bar that was closest to the judge’s table on the stage. “How you feelin’?”

“Okay. A little nervous.” Being the center of attention was going to be tough, and it was also going to be tough to be in the same room as that dreadful man again.

“It’s good to be nervous or even a little scared. You just channel that energy properly and you can make good use of it.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Sally went to the back kitchen again. Pat looked at the wooden chair set up for her with three more next to it, one for her Pa and one for her brother, and she guessed the last seat was probably for Sheriff Cody. She didn’t like to be treated as helpless, but still she was glad that she wouldn’t

be sitting up here all by herself. Sally came back out with a tray of freshly cleaned glass cups and started to stack them on the back against the mirror within easy reach. She suddenly lowered her voice to a pitch that couldn't be heard by the other patrons in the bar.

"Pat, sweetie, I don't mean to scare you some more, but it's better to know than not. The Crocker brothers, they got a reputation."

"Sheriff told me a little about them, that they're rich ranchers and use money to influence people."

Sally nodded her head as she continued to stack the glass. "We've been working hard to keep that kind of influence out this town, but it's not easy. Money does indeed talk. Makes people do things they normally wouldn't do, especially in hard times. The Crockers got a lot of resentment about us trying to keep them out of this town. They don't need to control us; they've got enough connections to grease all of their operations across the entire West. But it's a matter of pride and power, and they just don't like the idea of our little town not paying our respects to them the way everyone else does. So it's just unfortunate that you ended up caught up in the middle of all this. I'm just saying, you can't be too careful. Now that you've crossed paths with them, they might use you in some way."

Pat pursed her lips and her brow furrowed with concern.

"Use me?" She wondered what that would entail. "What should I do?"

Sally leaned back away from her and went back to wiping the bar table. "You just tell them what happened to you," she said in a normal voice that people around them could hear easily if they were paying attention.

Pat nodded and her gaze wandered back towards the set up of the makeshift courtroom they had just put together. Then she heard Sally sort of half mumble to herself, "If anything happens, your guardian angel is just in the other room."

"Excuse me?" Pat said, wondering what she meant by that.

"Oh, I'm just saying you've got nothing to worry about. Your guardian angel will watch over you."

"Guardian angel?"

"You know, we each got one and all."

"Oh, yeah, thanks," Pat said, though she was pretty sure she didn't fully understand what Sally really meant.

Chapter 10 The Judge

The Sheriff came back into the saloon soon after they had it all set up. He was followed by a rotund man with a thick mustache and dusty shoes who seemed to be trying very hard to look as distinguished as he could with his dangling pocket watch chain in his vest pocket, the mahogany pipe in his hand, and the monocle in his other.

"Right over here, Judge Bean."

"Very nice, very nice, yes, thank you," Judge Bean replied with some attempted gruff.

"My apologies for needing to set up the trial in the local saloon. There's quite a bit of local interest in this little trial, so this is the most spacious place we have in town."

"Not at all. Quite at home here, yes, quite at home."

"Here, let me introduce you to the owner of this saloon." Sheriff Cody led him to where Sally and Pat were. "This here is Patricia Stephens, the young lady that's tangled up in all of this."

“Pleasure to meet you,” Judge Bean said with a nod of the head.

“And this is Sally Lee, proprietor of this fine establishment.”

“Pleasure to meet you. A lovely proprietress for a lovely saloon,” Judge Bean said.

“The pleasure is all mine, Your Honor,” Sally said with a sudden coyness in her voice and batting of the eyelashes that replaced the practical gal that had been talking to Pat earlier. She held out her hand demurely, and the Judge gladly took it and touched it to his lips.

“This is indeed a fine place you have here Miss Lee.” He looked up and around, intending to look like he was examining the place with the eyes of a connoisseur. “Fine choice in décor, if I may say so, and very roomy.” He cleared his throat in approval. “I, too, have a few saloons, though of course, not as classy as this one.” He gave Sally a wink.

“Oh my now,” Sally said, turning up some of her old southern charm, “you’re much too gracious. My humble little place here is no comparison to your many well-known saloons, Your Honor.”

“You’ve heard of me?” Judge Bean said with his chest and belly swelling out a little more, stretching his vest buttons dangerously tight.

“Who hasn’t heard of the legendary Law of the West who also happens to be one of the most established business men in these parts. Why, your reputation as a man of justice and defender of the weak is well known to everyone, especially me.”

Judge Bean was too busy swelling up even more with pride to notice Sheriff Cody’s wry smile. Sally bat a few more eyelashes at him, clearly aware of how effective her golden curls, bright blue eyes, and milky complexion were.

“Well, now, you flatter me too much my dear. I’m just doing my job and trying my best to make my way in this world.”

“And such an important and respected job it is. And so successful too. Don’t be modest Your Honor. You’re so kind to come to our quaint little town for this trial.”

“Well, huh, there’s hardly any trouble in this town that I was surprised to get the request from Sheriff Cody. I thought it my duty to come and see to what had happened, however small, since this town is so well known as a safe place.”

“You are such a gentleman and a man of duty, Your Honor.”

It was amidst all this flattery and pomp that Charlie Crocker and his pack of cowboys came in and made themselves comfortable at two large round tables, filling in about twelve seats altogether. They were quite a formidable group, and it was clear that there were a number of them out by the herd of longhorns on the trail, waiting for them to return. It was a bigger outfit than was normal, but that’s how the Crockers did things, bigger and better than everyone else.

“Excuse me kindly, Your Honor, while I go and attend to my guests.”

“Ma’am.” Judge Bean took off his bowler hat and gave her a little bow, clearly disappointed that her attentions were being taken away from him. As Sally went over to attend to Crocker’s crew, Judge Bean added, “An exceptional woman, running a place like this all on her own. Her husband should be here to help her out.

“I don’t believe she is married, Your Honor.”

“Oh? What a pity. I would imagine an exceptional woman like her has had many suitors. But I’m sure being the fine lady she is, she is holding out for someone more of her caliber, I’d imagine. Yes, exceptional woman indeed. Should marry someone worthy of her.”

“She is a very fine lady and sure does deserve someone worthy of her,” Sheriff Cody agreed, although he winked at Pat while the Judge was busy staring at Sally.

Sally came back and went to the back kitchen to put in some orders and then came back out to join them again.

“If you’ll excuse me Pat, Judge Bean, I have to go and bring Simon Crocker here to his trial. I’ll leave you here in the very capable hands of Miss Lee.”

“Let me show you to your seat, Your Honor.”

“Thank you, thank you,” Judge Bean said, beaming again now that the lady he found so lovely was paying attention to him again.

Pat stayed by the bar and watched as the town folk came in, filling in the seats first as a trickle and then as a flood. Sally’s help, Henrietta, showed up, and the two women were quickly bustling back and forth.

“I’m sorry to have to call you in on your day off Henrietta. I’ll be sure to fairly compensate you for this.”

“It is fine Miss Sally,” Henrietta said, her intelligent and warm dark eyes glancing over at Sally in between doing one thing or another, her silky black locks lively with her bustle, “I’d rather work than do the laundry for the week. If you just don’t mind giving me enough to cover the costs for a load of laundry with Chris’ help, that would make up for the time I lost for chores.”

“Oh darling, I’ll give you more’n that. We’ll be raking in a lot today, and it would be a mess in here without you. Only fair we all get what we earn.”

“Thank you Miss Sally,” Henrietta smiled brightly, grateful for some extra coins to send to her family.

“I should be the one thanking you, surely.”

Pat twiddled her thumbs a bit, feeling a bit useless at the moment.

“Isn’t there anything I can help with Miss Sally?” she asked the next time Sally came rushing by her way.

“Thank you Pat, but you focus on your task at hand.”

Pat nodded and turned to look at the large audience that was already seated. All the seats were taken now, and more people were coming in, taking some of the standing space. Pat took a deep breath.

Chapter 11 The Preacher

“Good afternoon Pat,” a male voice with a noticeable British accent greeted her from the side. It was the town preacher, John Thompson.

“Good afternoon Preacher Thompson.”

Preacher Thompson was a tall fellow with broad shoulders and a thick white beard that would have made him look a bit like Santa Claus if he hadn’t have been built like a steam engine. Standing straight, Pat only came up to his elbow, and she wasn’t that short for a fifteen-year-old girl.

“Sally, I’d like a tall glass of milk if you’ve got it.”

“Coming right up Preacher.”

“It looks like this is going to be quite the party.”

“Yes indeed,” Pat said, smiling politely.

“Here you go,” Sally placed the clear glass of milk on the counter and slid it over to Preacher Thompson. Not a drop of it spilled as it slid into his waiting hand.

“Much obliged.”

Pat was thinking how interesting it was to hear a British accent on American English when she noticed that the Preacher was packing some revolving six-shooters under his coat. They were made of a dark wood and metal that matched his charcoal colored coat, so they weren't easily seen unless you were up close. She never knew Preacher Thompson to carry guns before and wondered if it was even proper for him to do so. Regardless, the sight of the guns made her nervous, wondering what sort of trouble he was preparing for.

Suddenly a thought crossed Pat's mind. She'd never been to a real court trial before, but she had read that usually there were lawyers involved to speak for each side. She looked around trying to decide who to ask about this.

"What's wrong Pat?" Sally whispered into her ear.

"I was just thinking," Pat whispered back. "Don't I need a lawyer or something?"

"Don't you worry Pat," Sally whispered into her ear. "Out here, we don't always have everything we need, but we make do with what we have. There are no lawyers in this town yet, so Preacher's going to do some talking for you. You just do as he says, and everything will come out just fine."

Pat nodded, feeling a bit more reassured. She knew the Preacher was a good man, he was a man of God, and she trusted him. And she knew he was one heck of a speaker.

Just then, there was a hush over the saloon as Sheriff Cody brought Simon Crocker in. He wasn't in handcuffs but was carefully escorted by the Sheriff Cody and Deputy Michaels. His face was visibly bandaged up from the cut he had received. They walked him over to his seat facing the left hand side of the stage while Pat's seat was on the right side. Her father and brother hurried in right after and took their seats next to Pat.

"Is that him Pat?" her father said, looking over at Simon Crocker.

"Yes."

And then she watched with some apprehension as a look of intense hatred flashed in her father's eyes. He was a generally a gentle man, thoughtful and caring, always trying to see things from different sides. But today, she saw only pure animosity in his expression, something she'd never seen in him before. Garrett was usually the more hotheaded one in the family, but seeing her Pa so angry made her realize a little of where Garrett got it from.

After downing the rest of his milk, the Preacher sat down in the seat Pat had thought was for Sheriff Cody. She sat closest to the bar, then her brother and father, and finally the Preacher was closest to the stage. Charlie Crocker took the empty seat next to his brother while the rest of his outfit stayed where they were.

The room was already quiet, but the judge pulled out a gavel, which had apparently been strapped to his belt where a gun would be, and knocked it against the table for an authoritative effect.

"Court in session." Judge Bean looked over at the Crockers and nodded to them, and then looked over at Pat's party and saw the lovely Sally smiling encouragingly at him. He gladly returned her smile. "Let's begin by hearing the plaintiff's complaint. Plaintiff will be represented by a John Thompson."

"Thank you Your Honor," Preacher Thompson got up from his seat, his towering height and strong stature clearly commanding respect, even from the Crockers and their group. Pat noticed them sizing the Preacher up and taking some time doing so, and then she suddenly noticed that Mr. Li, the laundry man, stood inconspicuously behind Crockers' men, with his arms crossed in front of him.

“Your Honor, people of the town, visitors, I am here to present to you an event that happened this past Sunday, right before church service. Miss Pat Stephens was out paying respects to her deceased mother, the late Mrs. Ann Stephens’ grave, like she has dutifully done since the sad event of her mother’s passing.”

Unaware of it, the mention of her mother’s death and grave made Pat involuntarily look down sadly at the floor. She didn’t realize that all the eyes of the townsfolk that were on her were pained and sympathetic to her small act of grief.

“While out there, she unfortunately caught the attention of Mr. Simon Crocker, the gentlemen you see over here.” He pointed to Simon. “At which time, Mr. Crocker accosted her while riding horseback, blocking her path, and then dismounted and grabbed Miss Stephens by the wrist. An unknown rescuer stopped Mr. Crocker’s harassment of Miss Stephens, and said stranger knocked Mr. Crocker senseless. The following is a testimony of eyewitnesses to the event. First we will have Jonathan Stephens and his son Garrett Stephens, father and brother of Miss Stephens, share their accounts.”

Pat watched and listened as her father and brother stood up from their seats and shared what had happened from their perspectives, from the moment she had burst into the house yelling to the time when they were out by the tied up and unconscious Simon Crocker. Then Preacher Thompson called upon Sheriff Cody to share his account of things. At first, she wondered why Preacher Thompson was starting with all of them instead of her since she was clearly the primary witness, but then she recognized a good storyteller. By starting with their testimonies, he was building up the suspense for when she would speak. It was good strategy. Finally, it was her turn.

“Next, I’d like to call Miss Pat Stephens to tell us of her frightening ordeal on a peaceful Sunday morning right before church service.” The Preacher was clearly choosing his words carefully.

Pat took another deep breath and stood up.

“Well, like Preacher Thompson said, I was visiting my mother, God rest her soul, like I always do every Sunday, and sometimes more often than that. I’ve always felt real safe in this town, ever since my family moved here.”

There were many nods of approval from the townspeople who definitely took pride in the reputation of the town they called home.

“Sometimes when I’m out there, I like to run out into the beautiful valley, because Ma always said she was going to run out there when she got better...but she never did.”

A few women put their hands up to their mouths with emotion and there was a whisper of ‘the poor child’ and nods of agreement.

“That was when Simon Crocker, that man sitting right there,” just as Preacher Thompson had done, she pointed at him, feeling it was important to make perfectly clear who she was talking about, “rode toward me on a horse. I guess he saw me as I was wearing my mother’s blue dress, my Sunday’s best. He greeted me, and then I greeted him back politely and told him I needed to get to church for service. I was feeling kind of nervous, being out there all alone with a strange man and all. I didn’t know who he was then, thought maybe he was some drifter. Then as I tried to walk around him, he moved his horse to block my way. I tried again, and he blocked me again, only this time he got off his horse and came toward me. I saw he had guns on him, so I got scared and tried to run, but he chased after me and grabbed my arm. I screamed, and the next thing I knew, he was covered in some strange knives. They weren’t big, but there were a lot of them, and he was cut up some by them. Then a stranger out of nowhere knocked Simon Crocker

out. I ran for my Pa and Garrett, and they sent me to the Sheriff, and you all heard the rest of what happened from them.”

There was a murmur of concern that passed through the crowd, shaking heads with looks of disapproval at the Crockers, and nodding heads at whispered chastisements of them. There was one particular group of middle-aged and elderly women who had especially stern looks on their faces.

Preacher Thompson turned and gave Pat a reassuring smile and nod of approval as she sat down. She nodded back in acknowledgement.

They had played their cards. Now it was the other side’s move.

Chapter 12 The Outlaw

“Thank you very much for sharing your frightening ordeal with us, Miss Stephens,” Judge Bean said, unconsciously using the words the Preacher had used. “I’m sure it must be unnerving to have to recall such unpleasant events. Now let’s hear from the defendant’s side. Here is Mr. Charlie Crocker to represent his brother.”

Charlie stood up. “Thank you Your Honor and to the gracious people of the town of Tawny. My brother and I are both sorry to hear that the noble Miss Pat Stephens was given such a fright. I am going to present to you another side to the story, which will hopefully clear up any confusion. I implore you to listen to this contrary account of events.”

Charlie sat down, and Simon stood up. “Uh, Your Honor and people of the town of Tawny. On this past Sunday I had gone riding out on my own to warm up my cowpony before getting back on the trail when I saw Miss Stephens here out in the valley on her own. I rode up to her to say hi, like she said I did, and when she started running away, I don’t know, I just thought I’d play a friendly joke with her. I didn’t mean no harm in it. Sometimes my practical joking just gets a little out of hand. You can ask my brother here about that. I didn’t mean to frighten her.”

Simon sat down. It was clear who was the more eloquent and refined of the two brothers, but Charlie’s expression was full of confidence in his argument that this had all been a misunderstanding. The crowd along with Judge Bean seemed to be somewhat accepting of his explanation.

Pat sat in turmoil. Had she overreacted? Had she caused a whole ruckus over a simple misunderstanding? Did she make a big deal out of nothing? Her face flushed a little red, but she tried to keep calm and composed and was able to quiet down her rushing emotions for the moment. The threat had felt so imminent at that moment, the look of no good in Simon Crocker’s eyes on that Sunday morning was so clear and obvious and the fear of him so tangible and real in her gut, that if it was that same day, she would have had no doubt of her assessment of the situation and felt fully justified in her reaction. But now, a few days after the event, with memory sometimes being an unreliable thing, she doubted herself.

Judge Bean spoke next. “Well, it does indeed sound like there was a misunderstanding of intentions here. Preacher, what do you and your side have to say in response to this.”

Preacher Thompson stood up, not even the faintest shade of doubt visible in his eyes.

“Your Honor, Miss Stephens surely felt that the danger at that moment was real or she wouldn’t have reacted so prudently and run away. As they say, better safe than sorry. Everyone in town knows she is a reasonable, responsible, and intelligent girl who does the work of an adult, taking care of the students and providing them with the important daily schooling in the place of her late mother. If any of us were in her situation, and a strange drifter kept blocking our

way and then chased after us when we ran, we would all think he was up to no good. Even I would suspect the motives of such a person. If indeed this had been just a simple misunderstanding and Mr. Simon Crocker here was just a decent, good, and innocent man, then we can quickly clear up this confusion and move on with our lives. What gives me pause, Your Honor, is Simon Crocker's moral character as a man."

At this, Preacher Thompson pulled out of his very large coat a pile of neatly stacked papers. It wasn't surprising that he would be able to inconspicuously hide a stack of papers in his large coat's inner pocket, but it was still quite a sight to behold. The papers seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. "This here are official copies of records of Simon Crocker's past indictments. Theft, public drunkenness, fighting in a public place, lascivious harassment of ladies, and manslaughter in a saloon brawl."

Visibly, the townsfolk shifted uncomfortably as they were currently sitting in a saloon.

"Your Honor, my brother is innocent until proven guilty. He was not found guilty of manslaughter." Charlie Crocker was trying to save whatever he could of the situation, but he was clearly aware that the damage had been done, and he was just trying to do damage control to lessen the blow of the information the Preacher had just shared.

"It is true," Preacher Thompson confirmed, "but he was found guilty of the other crimes and paid fines and bail in order to rectify them to some extent. However, it is enough to give us pause as a community regarding the moral character of Mr. Simon Crocker and to seriously consider that Miss Stephens apprehension of him was in fact an accurate assessment of the real danger posed by his presence."

A hand raised in the audience. It was Mrs. Perkins, Lucy Perkins' mother, who also happened to be the head of the town's self-appointed Morality Committee. She had a stern face and sat among a flock of stern faces, for the group of severe looking women Pat had made note of earlier was indeed the members of this Morality Committee. None of the other townsfolk particularly rejected the activities of this committee, although they sometimes did find them a little stuffy and nosy as people.

"Yes madam?"

"Your Honor, as head of our town's Morality Committee, I'd like to speak as a representative of this town," Mrs. Perkins said. She stood up, full of self-righteousness. "I have a daughter the same age as Miss Stephens. In fact, they are friends at school and my dear Lucy helps with classroom management and chores so that Miss Stephens can spend more of her time teaching the children all that her mother had taught her."

The women who sat around her nodded their heads in agreement.

"I would be most upset to see a man of questionable moral character such as Simon Crocker in our beloved town, especially when Tawny has a fine reputation for safety and morality that we are all very proud of. If Simon Crocker were to walk our streets freely, I would feel afraid to have my daughter out, and the general moral character of this town would be compromised. Practical joker or not, we do not need the likes of him here tarnishing our good reputations and making our young girls afraid of walking freely on the streets of their own homes."

She finished her speech with a firm nod of her head as she sat down, and her cronies around her clapped approvingly. Simon Crocker rubbed his forehead nervously and gave his brother some anxious glances. Charlie, on the other hand, was as calm and confident as before. Judge Bean thought for a moment in silence, a little vexed by the situation but still composed. He looked from the Crockers to the Stephens and back at the townspeople that all stared at him

expectantly. He was a man that was pressured by what people thought of him, and there were a lot of people thinking about him at that very moment.

“Well, I understand the sentiments of this town. Tawny does indeed have a strong reputation for safety, and uh morality, too. However, Simon Crocker did not actually commit a crime, so he cannot be punished for that. At the same time, given Simon Crocker’s questionable moral record and the scare he gave to an innocent young lady, I charge him with the minor offense of harassment and disorderly conduct. As such, he is banned from Tawny until further notice.”

“Your Honor, may I say something?” Charlie politely raised his hand.

“Yes Mr. Crocker, you may.”

Charlie stood up. “Your ruling is fair and reasonable, and we accept it. However, we are overlooking another issue here. My brother Simon Crocker was attacked and injured by an unknown vigilante outlaw. Blood was spilt—my family’s blood, and I would like to get some justice for that. Please let me present some evidence on the matter.”

Judge Bean rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Very well.”

Chapter 13 The Doctor

Charlie Crocker stood up, ready to use the ace up his sleeve.

“First, notice my brother, Simon Crocker’s face is bandaged, and that is not the only wound he suffered. I’d like to ask Tawny’s very own Dr. K to give testimony on his wounds.”

Up stood the town’s doctor, a weathered and leathery middle-aged man with some gray in his black hair. He was known by everyone in town to be what people called a half-breed, someone who was half Indian and half white, even though he looked visibly Indian to most people. His father had been a mountain man fur trapper, and his mother had been a Maidu woman. It was not uncommon for mountain men to marry an Indian squaw, but it was common for their children to have difficulty finding a place where they belonged. Dr. K had found a good home here at Tawny and had a solid reputation for being an effective doctor and medicine man. Although not everyone felt warmly towards half-breeds in this town, they were forced to appreciate a good doctor, especially when they or one of their loved ones needed medical attention. He made his way up to the front and stood by Simon Crocker.

“Dr. K, would you kindly tell Judge Bean how many wounds my brother suffered.”

“No less than twelve cuts to his body.”

A murmur ran through the crowd.

“And how severe were these wounds?”

“Some of them were close to vital organs, but none of them were fatal wounds.”

“So it would be accurate to say that my brother was almost killed by this attack?”

Dr. K gave Preacher Thompson a quick glance, and the preacher gave him a quick, hardly noticeable nod of the head.

“Yes, it would be accurate.”

“Your Honor, unlike the young lady who was merely frightened, my brother was nearly mortally wounded by an unknown attacker. If the townspeople truly want to preserve the reputation of this town as a safe haven of the West, I propose that there be a warrant placed for the arrest of this unknown assailant. Preacher Thompson, may I ask Miss Stephens a few questions?”

Preacher Thompson looked at Pat with a sideways glance and saw her slightly nod her head.

“You may.”

“Miss Stephens, again my sincere apologies for the scare you had on account of my irresponsible brother. Unfortunately, we have a problem on our hands that is more serious than a drunkard that likes to pick fights. There is a stranger out there who made an attempt on my brother’s life. Do you know the identity of that person?”

Pat shook her head. “No, I don’t.”

“Could you describe him for us?”

Pat took another deep breath, feeling the wrongness of how the person who had saved and protected her was now being painted as a menace to society, but she had no choice but to tell the truth.

“Well, he looked like a young man about my height, maybe a little taller, and he was dressed as a cowboy, with chaps and hat and a brown neckerchief that he had tied around to cover up the bottom half of his face. He also wore something like round spectacles that wrapped around his head so you couldn’t see his eyes. Pretty much everything he wore was brown. That’s all I remember.”

“Thank you Miss Stephens. I truly appreciate your cooperation in apprehending this heinous killer.”

What happened to innocent until proven guilty? Pat thought immediately. But before she could say anything, Charlie Crocker was already finishing up with something that caused everyone in the room to gasp.

“This mysterious assailant spilled my family blood, left my brother for dead, and even stole the guns my father gave to my brother. My brother was found stripped of his guns. My family will give a \$500 reward for the capture of this dangerous miscreant, dead or alive. I await your approval, Your Honor.”

With that Charlie sat down. The money was what caught everyone’s attention.

Again, Judge Bean sat quietly as he pondered over what had just transpired. In mid-thought, he happened to look over at Sally who was smiling sweetly at him. He smiled back involuntarily. Finally, he said, “This vigilante stranger does sound dangerous enough to warrant arrest and trial. I approve of this warrant for the arrest of this stranger, but I do not condone killing him. He should be brought to trial. Change the terms of the reward for him to be captured and arrested alive, and I will give that my full stamp of approval.”

“We agree to that Your Honor.”

“Fine then, it’s all settled. Case dismissed.”

As the sound of the gavel hitting the table ended the trial, the townsfolk began to leave, the saloon emptying out as quickly as it had filled up.

Charlie Crocker came up to Preacher Thompson.

“I don’t know how you came up with all that paperwork on such short notice preacher, but it was a good move. Until next time.” He didn’t hold his hand out to the preacher, just merely lifted his head in mild acknowledgement.

“Next time,” Preacher Thompson said, staring into the younger (and shorter) man’s eyes with a rock-steady stare.

Without a second glance at anyone else, Charlie Crocker headed for the door of the saloon and his brother and men followed him out.

“Thank you Preacher, for handling this for my family,” Pat’s father said gratefully, shaking the preacher’s hand. “I knew we were in good hands with you speaking up for her.”

“Just doing part, Mr. Stephens.”

“If you’ll excuse me, my son and I have to get back to work at our print shop. We’ve got a deadline coming up. Garrett, can you walk your sister back to the school house?”

“I can go there by myself Pa. I always do.”

“Mr. Stephens, I’ll escort your daughter,” the preacher offered.

“Oh we don’t want to trouble you more than we already have.”

“It’s no trouble at all. I’m headed that way anyways.”

“Well, all right. We truly appreciate it. Come on Garrett, we have to hurry.” They rushed out of the saloon and headed straight for the print shop.

Dr. K came over to them.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know he was going to use my testimony that way.”

“No need to be sorry,” Preacher Thompson said. “The stakes are just a bit higher now, that’s all. I know Charlie Crocker. He’s very good at playing by the rules until he’s not. Then he breaks them left and right, and we’ll catch him with the smoking gun when does.”

“I don’t get it,” Pat said, “How are the stakes higher now? Stakes for what?”

The doctor and the preacher shared a look before turning to her.

“Don’t worry about things yet. Let’s just get you to safely back to the school house so you can finish up your afternoon work.”

“Thanks. Usually I can go by myself, but my Pa’s been extra worried about me lately, because of all the commotion about me.”

“He’s more right to be worried than he knows, Miss Stephens. You can see these Crocker fellows are real snakes that like to twist and tangle things up so they can strangle whoever they want. So like I said earlier, better safe than sorry.” He motioned for Pat to start heading out and they headed down the street to the schoolhouse on the other side of town. Pat waved at Sally who had just let Henrietta go back to her day off since things had calmed down after the trial in the saloon. Sally waved back, smiling, before she moved on to the next task she needed to busy herself with.

“You know Preacher, I could have told them that those cuts looked to me like they perfectly missed the vital organs, as if the person who threw them purposely missed them,” the doctor thought out loud as they walked. Pat listened with interest.

“No one would have believed you,” the preacher said. “You said what you had to say. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“I know, I just hate the role I had to play in this mess.”

“Yes, I can understand that.”

Pat could help herself and cut in on the conversation.

“So, Dr. K, are you saying the person who threw those star blades was so accurate that he actually missed the vital organs on purpose?”

The doctor glanced at the preacher again before he said, “Yes, I’m saying it’s a possibility. But we really can’t know for sure. And that kind of accuracy, well, like Preacher said, it’s really unbelievable.”

Pat nodded and looked down at the ground, burning with curiosity, wondering if it was indeed possible to throw knives that well.

“Well you know,” she thought out loud, “there are those circus people who can throw those daggers at a person and hit an apple on their head without hitting the person. And I’ve seen some people play so well at darts they can hit the center again and again. So it’s not entirely impossible, is it?”

“You make some good points, Miss Stephens,” the preacher conceded and laughed a bit.

“Please call me Pat. Not even the school children call me that formally.”

Preacher Thompson nodded.

“Well, here we are.”

In pondering over the possibility of extreme knife throwing accuracy, Pat hadn't noticed that they had reached the schoolhouse. There was some activity inside, with some of the kids finishing up some of the lessons they didn't complete yet while others were busy with their turn to do chores at the schoolhouse or engaged in some recreational reading.

“Looks like you're in a busy place here. Be sure you don't walk around alone, just for a few more days until the Crockers are back on the trail and far away. Remember, better safe than sorry,” the preacher said.

“Thanks, thanks for everything,” she said, and the doctor and the preacher left her to join the bustle of the schoolhouse. She didn't quite understand why there would be any more trouble for her. Simon Crocker had been ordered to stay out of town, and Charlie Crocker got what he wanted, an official warrant for the arrest of the stranger who had attacked his brother. The case seemed closed, so she felt ready to move on and forget about this whole ordeal.

The rest of the afternoon, she busied herself with correcting through some of the student work and figuring out who hadn't been doing their lessons and who had been doing them all wrong so that she could make sure to properly get on everyone's case. While she worked, the kids left one at a time, until finally she found herself alone in the classroom. She had forgotten all about the preacher's warning about being alone, and hadn't realized she was now all by herself in the classroom and would have to walk alone to her father's print shop. At first she felt a little worried, finally remembering the preacher's admonition, but then she thought about how she had been alone in this schoolhouse and walked alone to the print shop plenty of times before and how there was still daylight. She would just be sure to leave before the daylight waned, regardless of whether or not she was done with her chores at the schoolhouse. Just when she determined this, she realized she was in fact *not* alone in the one room schoolhouse.

Chapter 14 The Chinaboy

In the otherwise quiet classroom, Pat heard the turn of a page and whizzed around to see that the Chinaboy was sitting in the corner again, quietly reading. Like his father, his wind-tousled hair was cut short, not long and braided in a queue like Chinamen were known to do.

Students weren't allowed to take books out of the schoolhouse on account of how expensive and hard to come by they were. When Pat and her family moved into town, they increased the modest school library from a measly dozen books to an entire tall bookshelf full. At first, everyone took interest in the new books and stayed in during the afternoons when they could to flip through the pages on their own. However, that interest soon waned for everyone except for the Chinaboy. Every free moment in class and every afternoon he seemed to be able to get away from work, she noticed him systematically reading through all of the books on their shelf, and he was currently on Book C of an encyclopedia set, a very expensive imported gift given to her mother by a doting and wealthy bachelor uncle.

When her mother had brought the leather-bound set to the school, Pat had expressed concern that they might be ruined by the rough handling of the children, but her mother had responded to her concerns by saying, “Knowledge is worthless if you can't share it.” It turned out Pat's concerns were unfounded, since all the students handled the books with care, especially the encyclopedias, which for many of them was the finest thing they had ever been allowed to touch.

The Chinaboy often came and went without anyone noticing, so it wasn't surprising that Pat, being busy with everything, just didn't notice when he came in. As she whizzed around, she gasped, and he looked up at the sound, saw her, realized he had startled her, and gave her a nod of his head and smiled in apology.

"I'm sorry, I didn't notice you back there," Pat breathed a sigh of relief. "When'd you get in here anyways?"

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled again. Pat immediately wondered if he understood what she was saying and had an impulse to say it all again but louder and slower. Then she thought better of it. He could, after all, read *and* write, so speaking should be the easy part right? He must understand some English at least. She got curious.

"How come you don't talk?"

He smiled and shrugged again. It really seemed like he couldn't understand what she was saying, and she could tell why everyone else just thought he was deaf and dumb. She had that impulse again to speak slowly and loudly, but she fought it.

"I know you can talk."

He smiled and shrugged again, but still didn't make a peep. Now she was getting a little irritated and showed it to him by pursing her lips a little, like she had just eaten something sour.

"You know, you shouldn't go on pretending to be deaf and dumb. It does make less thoughtful folks think that all Chinamen are that way. And don't you shrug your shoulders again. Open your mouth and talk. I've heard the sound of your voice before. I heard you, at the laundry shop, and your Pa can speak English just fine, so you should be able to too."

The Chinaboy's eyes perked up, clearly a little surprised by her revelation, for he didn't know she had heard him earlier that week responding to his father. Then he opened his mouth and took a deep breath in. Pat almost leaned a little forward, full of anticipation at hearing him speak, but then he just breathed out in a sigh and gave her a toothy grin.

"Fine," she said, picking up a reader stacking it a little roughly on top of another in her mild frustration, although she found his smile and demeanor rather charming. "I won't force you to talk but at least help me collect these readers," she scolded lightly.

With his smile going a little crooked with amusement, he stood up and started to collect books from around the room, scattered on tables and chairs and the tops of low shelves. As he did so, Pat thought of an idea.

"Say, would you mind just walking with me over to my Pa's print shop? It's on the way to the laundry. I don't mean to trouble you, usually I go by myself, but with all this fuss about the trial and all, Preacher Thompson suggested that I never go anywhere alone."

The Chinaboy nodded.

"Thanks. Can you finish collecting these and putting them on the shelf?"

She held the books in her hands out to him. He came up to her, and as he took them from her and moved passed to get the books behind her, she noticed he smelled fresh and clean, like newly washed linen. *Must be 'cause he's always washing clothes and things*, she thought quietly to herself. She stared at his back for a moment with curiosity, wishing everyone else kept as clean as he did so they would stop offending her nose. She had never been this close to him standing up. He was just slightly taller than her.

"I'm going to pour the rest of this unused water out. Be right back."

He looked her way, nodded, and pushed a stack of the books onto the high bookshelf where all the readers were usually kept, then went to collect another scattering of readers on the other side of the room.

Pat grabbed the handle of the bucket and lifted it off the ground, the creak of the metallic joints of the bucket handle and the swish of the remaining water inside followed her as she carried it out the back door.

Pat walked up to a prickly bush behind the schoolhouse, which was in the direction away from the town and couldn't be seen from the main streets. The land was golden again as the sun began its descent, and as she looked up from her task to enjoy the orange and red painted blue sky, a large hand holding a cloth suddenly covered her mouth and an arm went around her waist. She was easily lifted up off her feet, as if she were a weightless feather being plucked off the ground. Panic and fear flooded through her as she screamed into the cloth gag, but it of course muffled her cries. The bucket made a louder noise of clanging and spilling water as it fell from her grasp and onto the ground, rolling around a bit. The cloth was shoved into her mouth as a gag by one pair of hands, and another pair bound up her arms behind her. She kicked wildly.

"Get her feet, will you," she heard one male voice whisper harshly.

"No time, let's git!" Still kicking and trying to scream through her gag, Pat was thrown belly down over in front of the saddle of a horse, one of her kidnappers scrambled up into the saddle, and off she was carried, with more terror flooding her heart than she had ever known in her life. All she could see now was the dirt kicked up by the horses' hooves and into her face.

"Someone saw us."

"It's just the town's deaf and mute chink. He won't be able to tell no one what he saw."

"He's running after us. No, wait, where'd he go?" A pause. All Pat could see was the ground speeding by under her as she lay there, draped over the horse and helpless.

"He won't catch up on feet. He's just a boy."

"I could have sworn he was just there, running after us, but then he vanished into thin air."

"Don't matter."

They rode on, and Pat had stopped screaming, but was instead thinking furiously of what to do. She didn't get a good look at the men who had abducted her, but she knew this all must have something to do with the Crocker brothers. It was the only explanation. She remembered she had tied the small dagger John had given to her around her leg under her dress. She would have to wait until they set her down on the ground before she could find a chance to reach for it and try to cut herself loose.

The ride was long, and Pat worried how she would find her way back home even if she did manage to get away. One thing at a time. First she had to get away.

Chapter 15 The Bounty Hunters

When they had finally stopped, it was deep into the dark night, she was blindfolded, and her legs were tied up before she was taken off the horse and settled on the ground to sit with her back against a rock. Soon there was the crackling of fire going in front of her. She could feel its warmth on her face.

"She sure is a pretty girl," one of the men said, which made Pat's stomach go weak.

"You think any girl is a pretty girl 'cause you only see 'bout one or two a year."

"Well, I'm just saying it's too bad we're not to hurt her."

"Yeah, well, you don't want a whole town after you, especially not her town. You heard the rumors."

"I heard, I heard. You hear that Miss," Pat couldn't respond since she was still gagged, "you tell your town folk that we didn't hurt you."

“Yeah, you’re just bait for the boy with \$500 on his head.”

Pat stared out into the blindfold, which only let in a faint glow of the light from the campfire. She shook her head, trying to signal to them that she didn’t know that stranger and that there was no guarantee or reason to believe he’d come after her. They paid no heed to her communications.

“What now?”

“We just wait. We’ve hooked the worm, time to wait for the fish.”

“You take first watch then.”

“Fine.”

“I’m beat.”

“And I’m not?”

Things quieted down after that, and all Pat could do was sit there, helplessly bound and gagged. She couldn’t reach for her dagger, which was hard because her hands were tied but also because she couldn’t tell if one of them was watching her. Her mind continued to race but she tried to calm down and conserve her energy for when she could do something. She thought things through. First of all, from their voices and the partial glimpses she had got of their faces in the earlier scuffle, they weren’t either of the Crocker brothers for sure.

As the night wore on, she felt the fire burning down and heard no attempts to rekindle or feed it. At first, there was just one snoring sound filling the campsite air, but soon there were two, and she realized the both of them must have fallen asleep. As quietly as she could, she started to move and position herself in a way that would hopefully allow her to get at her dagger. She heard the sound of the soil and pebbles grinding under her as she moved, but luckily the snoring was so loud that it covered up any sound she was making. Slowly, she got to the blade tied to her thigh, and pulled it out, the unsheathing making no sound at all. Then she flipped the little dagger to point upwards with the blade against the ropes that bound her hand and began to painstakingly saw through the ropes. This went on for a while, and the ropes finally came loose, but she tried to pretend that her hands were still tied as she started working on the rope tied around her ankles. They were still snoring when she finally cut her legs free, too.

For a moment, she sat there, arms and legs untied but still held in place to make it look like she was still tied up, trying to think of what to do next. The snoring was still going on pretty regularly and loudly, so she moved one hand carefully up to her face, pulled off her blindfold and then the gag out of her mouth. She found herself sitting against a steep rock wall facing a crackling fire with her two kidnappers asleep on either side, one sitting up and leaned against a wall with his arms crossed under a drooping head and another lying flat on his back with a hat over his face. She was trapped. The only way to get away was to step over one of the two men or jump over the fire to get away.

Slowly, she stood up, the dagger held firmly in her hand, and she began the painstaking task of tiptoeing across the uneven and gravelly ground. Each step was a crunch of soil and pebbles, and she eased into it, trying her best to minimize the noise she was making. She decided to step over the man who had a hat over his face as he slept. As she stepped over his legs, she held her dress skirt up a bit, carefully not to have any part of it brush against him. When she was fully on the other side of him, she continued on, putting one foot in front of the other as silently as she could, but just when she was feeling far enough away to start picking up her pace, she heard a click.

“That’s far enough Miss.”

All her hopes for freedom suddenly fell into an abyss and an overwhelming dread flooded through and almost drowned her. She knew the sound of that click—it was the sound of a gun being cocked. Even with her back turned to them, she knew she had a loaded gun pointed at her.

“Now, Miss, if you’ll be so kind as to turn around and head on back towards us.”

Slowly, with dagger still in hand, Pat turned around to find that it was the man lying on the ground that had pulled out his gun and pointed it at her. He was still lying down when she turned, but now he was getting up, his gun still on her. The other man roused.

“What?” he snorted.

“You fell asleep on the watch.”

“Oh geez, I...”

“Save it.” He turned his attention back to Pat. “Miss, toss that knife you got there on the ground.”

Pat’s grip tightened on her dagger. She was unwilling to let go of her only defense, even if there was a gun pointed at her.

“Miss, we don’t want no more trouble than needed. We just want to catch the outlaw with the bounty on his head. After that, we’ll let you go unharmed.”

She looked at the gun pointed at her and highly doubted his words. He seemed to realize she wasn’t going to give it up, so he turned to his partner in crime.

“Go on and get that knife away from her.”

The other man looked at him sheepishly, not wanting to face the sharp edge of a blade but reluctant to say no since he did fall asleep on the job. He took a step towards Pat while she held the dagger so tight her knuckles were turning white.

Then the curious sound of flapping cloth fluttering through the air reached them as a figure all dressed in brown seemed to fall right out of the dark night sky and land right where Pat had been tied up against the high stonewall. It was the same stranger that had come to Pat’s rescue before! There he was again, wearing the same hat, coat, and chaps; his face was still hidden behind the strange goggle spectacles and brown bandana.

The two bounty hunters naturally turned their attention towards him, and the gunfire started. A scream for them to stop was about to explode out of Pat’s mouth, but just as the bullets flew, the stranger seemed to spin like a dust devil and drop to the ground, dodging the bullets meant to kill him, as a spray of glittering copper metal pieces flew out from where he was, every projectile hitting its mark. Both bounty hunters yelped and grabbed their legs in pain, and the stranger was on top of one of them like lightning, his elbow coming down hard on the back of the man’s head, just like he had done to Simon Crocker. And just like that, the bounty hunter that had caught Pat sneaking away was out cold. Then some more gunshots sounded out as the other man, despite his leg injuries, was able to fire some more shots at the stranger. Luckily, his pain made his bad aim even more inaccurate, and the stranger easily and skillfully dodged each bullet, spun, and ducked. In one smooth movement, he picked up the unconscious bounty hunter’s dropped gun in the course of his spin and flung the gun at the other man. The metal weapon flew through the air and struck the other bounty hunter square in the forehead, knocking him out cold.

Just as he had done before, the stranger started to pull out some rope and tied the two unconscious bounty hunters up. Only this time, Pat didn’t run away, partly because running blindly out into the night seemed pointless now that her kidnappers were no longer a threat and because she wasn’t afraid of the stranger anymore. Still recovering from the strain of it all, she stood there, kind of dumbfounded, while watching him swiftly tie them up. When he was done, he turned towards her. He put his right index finger up to where his mouth would have been if

the neckerchief had not covered it, indicating for her to be quiet. She nodded, realizing it made sense to avoid get out of there before any reinforcements, if any, were on their way, and he motioned for her to follow him. As they slipped quietly away into the night, she caught the faint whiff of a now familiar smell, but it wasn't the time for her to be her usual curious self. Her eyes trained on the back of his slightly oversized coat, the moonlight barely making anything visible as her eyes were still adjusting to the night after coming out of the firelight.

They weaved in and out of all the rocks, which provided easy cover and lots of hiding places for them to make a speedy getaway. Finally, after a turn around a particular large set of rocks, Pat saw a large horse chewing on some wild grass. It was a light palomino horse, had nothing but a saddle strapped to its back, and seemed to be bored and waiting for them. When they came around the rock, it looked over at them and then turned back to take another bite of grass as the stranger climbed into the saddle. He scooted back in his seat and held a hand out to her. She quickly took it, put her foot in the stirrup and allowed herself to be hoisted up with ease, swinging her other leg over to sit securely in the saddle in front of the stranger. This was no time to worry about sitting like a lady in a horse, even if she did have a dress on. Not falling off was far more important.

Without any spurring, the horse started walking and then, after a bit, started trotting. When they were at a good distance from their starting point, it was galloping, and Pat, having never ridden a horse at full gallop, and this being a particularly fast one, was holding on for dear life to the horn that stuck out from the saddle in front of her. The stranger behind her, however, seemed right at home and rode without grabbing on to anything.

When she had gotten used to the speed and felt secure enough where she was, she looked up and around at the view flying by around her. The vast sky loomed above them, filled with countless glimmering stars and the flat lands around them were bathed in the gentle light of a full moon. The only sound was the steady pounding of the palomino's hooves. Soon all the dread and fear from earlier seemed to be carried off by the wind that whipped past them, and in their place was wonder and joy at the beauty of an exhilarating ride through a glorious western night.

She almost had to remind herself of the terrifying ordeal she had just been in, and when she remembered, she held the horn tightly and craned her neck, turning around as far as she could to look behind them. There was nothing there but more dark, moon-bathed nature, peaceful and serene, no sign of a pursuit in sight. Then she glanced at the stranger, his hat, goggles, and bandana securely in place, his gloved hands hanging to his side, arms relaxed and body swaying with the motion of the horse's efforts. She looked forward again, smiled, and then turned back again, but this time to look at the stranger and show him her smile.

"I know who you are," she said with a smug smile. He stared blankly at her, no expression discernable under all that coverage, and when she turned forward again, he stayed silent behind her. She turned back again, this time with more seriousness in her expression. "Thanks," she said with a sincerely grateful smile, "for saving me...twice."

She turned forward again, and again her companion remained quiet behind her. Pat had an uncontrollable smile on her face. She was truly safe now, and she suddenly felt like she was living out a wild west adventure like the ones she had read about so many times in all those dime novels she'd been devouring regularly ever since the moment her Ma told her that they would be moving west. If only her mother could see her now.

The memory of her mother shot a bit of carelessness through Pat, and she let go of the horn of the saddle and let her arms stretch out on either side of her like wings. She felt their speed push her to lean back and a hand came up to press up against her, keeping her from falling back.

“WOOOOOOHHOOOOOO!” Pat called out recklessly into the night. She never felt so free in her life.

Pat wasn't sure if she imagined it, but she thought she felt a trembling in the stranger's hand that held her up, like he was chuckling.

Chapter 16 The Cave of Wonders

Pat glanced about curiously as the palomino horse slowed down to a trot at one of a number of rock formations that jutted out of the flat landscape like layered pillars carved out by ancient oceans. The infinite and horizontal lines were even evident in the moonlight, and if stared at long enough, would make a person go cross-eyed.

The horse turned suddenly, walking straight for one of the rock solid walls, and Pat cried out a little in surprise, thinking the horse really had gone cross-eyed from staring at the mountain side and was hypnotized to walk right into it, but right when she thought the horse's nose was going to hit the rock surface, it magically went through unharmed and unhindered. She suddenly realized that it was some kind of illusion, the wall looking like it was solid but there was actually an opening there. She gaped in amazement as the horse turned left, again looking like it was going to walk right into another wall, but again it was a hidden opening, and the amazing thing was that it was hidden in plain view. They turned a few more times, through a veritable maze, and the final turn opened out into a hidden oasis with a starry-night dome above them and a trickling stream of fresh water flowing from somewhere above and forming a small pool in the middle. Around it grew a ring of grass and plants, some opening up with flowers, and in the moonlight, they looked like flowers that had grown from seeds that had fallen from the heavens.

Pat figured the horse needed rest and watering, and she was right. It was heaving from its run and its coat gleamed from the sweat of all the exertion. It strolled right up to the stream and started to drink from it. A gloved hand came up to her left, and she took it, swinging her leg over and dismounting. The stranger dismounted after her, and while Pat was looking all around her in wonder, taking in every detail of the place, he took off the saddle, wiped down his horse, and threw a large blanket over him to keep him warm. After a long drink, the horse turned its attention over to grass, soon munching contentedly, much preferring the fresh green and well-watered growth to the dry fare it had had back by where they had picked up Pat.

“What's her name?” Pat asked the stranger as he grabbed a bucket of oats and corn and hauled it over to his hungry horse. As the horse shifted over to eat from the bucket, he pet its mane with his gloved hand. He didn't answer her question. That annoyed her.

“You can stop pretending now. I know who you are. I can smell you a mile away. You're too clean and fresh smelly to be anyone else but one person,” she said with a little scolding in her voice. She didn't know his name, but she didn't want to call him by the name everyone else referred to him by. The title “Chinaboy” seemed mean somehow, even if it was accurate. It was like always calling someone “human person” or something, like their name wasn't worth knowing. “Hey, you *owe* it to me to at least tell me your name.”

“I'm the one who saved you! You owe me!” he finally blurted, followed by an “Aw, shoot.”

“HA!” Pat couldn't help but exclaim in triumph. “I knew you could speak English!” Then she wondered at the fact that his English was, well, it was flawless, or as flawless as English out in the American West could be. And if she hadn't known that it was the Chinese boy who was under that hat, mask, and eyepiece, she would have assumed it was a homegrown American white boy of the plains under all that costume. “So, let's have it.”

“Have what?” he said, putting his hands on his hips, challenging her pushiness.

“Your name of course!”

“Oh, well, it’s not important.”

“Of course it’s important! It’d be troublesome if I have to keep referring to you as ‘hey you’ or ‘Chinese person’ or something.”

“I’m not Chinese.”

This threw Pat aback.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I don’t know, my Pa keeps telling me that I’m not really Chinese, not totally anyway. Must be ‘cause I was born here and grew up here.”

“Oh, okay,” Pat responded, wondering why someone who was obviously Chinese would say he’s not, even if his Pa did tell him so. It seemed illogical.

“Are you a half-breed?” It seemed like a reasonable question, but the silence that met her question was uncomfortable, and she got the sense she had said something wrong.

“If you’re asking if I’m half-white, I’m not. My mother was Chinese.”

“Then what are you?” Pat blurted out. She was trying not to be so nosy, but the complexity of trying to figure him out just kind of turned her mind and heart inside out. Still, she felt a little guilty, being so overtly curious and rude.

The boy shrugged his shoulders. “I guess I’m American if I ain’t nothing else.”

Pat took a moment to digest this. Her immediate reaction was to say that he couldn’t possibly be American when he was obviously Chinese. But this time she stopped herself from blurting those thoughts out right away.

“Well, technically, if you’re born here,” she reasoned, “then you’re officially an American citizen, right?”

“That’s what I figured. I can read even the newspapers and laws.”

“I know you can, you don’t have to tell me twice,” she rolled her eyes at him.

“I only told you once.”

“Whatever, that’s just an expression.”

“Not one that makes sense in this case,” he threw back.

“Hey, wait a minute, you still haven’t told me your name,” Pat realized out loud. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Your *name!*” Pat said impatiently.

He was silent for a bit, brushing his horse’s mane with his fingers.

“If I tell you, you promise not to tell the other kids in town?”

“Sure, but I don’t know why you gotta keep it a secret.”

“I got my reasons.”

“Okay, fine, I promised already, so tell me.”

Another pause. The sound of the water and the horse chewing on its meal filled the silence.

“It’s Christian.”

“What’s Christian?”

“My name.”

“Okay, like Paul or Peter or something?”

“No, it’s Christian. My name is Christian.”

“Oohh.”

She pondered it for a moment. Somehow, she had expected his name to be a bit more exotic sounding, something foreign, like the way he looked, but then again, he kind of looked a bit like

an Indian too, with his dark sun-tanned skin and all, and like her Pa said, the Indians were here first before the white folk came. And in that case, she was the one that wasn't from around here, especially since she just moved here a couple of months ago. So in a sense, she realized, she was more of a foreigner to these parts than he was. She looked back at him and then got irritated again.

"Will you take off all of that? Talking to you with that eyepiece on makes me feel like I'm trying to hold a conversation with a giant beetle dressed up like a cowboy. You got nothing to hide from me. I know what you look like already."

Christian looked at her a moment, shrugged and then pulled off his hat and purposefully tousled up his hair to get rid of his uncomfortably matted hat hair. Next he pulled off his goggles and pulled down his neckerchief from his mouth so it hung about his neck just below his chin. In the moonlight, Pat thought he looked kind of handsome all dressed up like that, looking like a gallant cowboy knight who had come to her rescue when she was in dire straits, but just as the word 'handsome' ran across her consciousness, she felt her cheeks suddenly flush with heat. He took off his jacket.

"All right, you don't need to take off more'n that," Pat said, trying to cool her cheeks down. "It's getting cold out tonight and you might catch your death."

"Oh, it ain't as cold in here as it is outside. The rocks block out the wind and keeps the warmth in," he said as he walked towards a dark corner in the rock wall of the oasis. "Since you're here, I might as well show you."

"Show me what?"

"Hold on a second, let me light the lamp."

From the ground next to the wall, he picked up an oil lamp, just like one of the ones in William's blacksmith shop, which was probably where it was from, and he struck a match and lit the lamp. As the light grew and emanated outward, growing in strength, Pat could see that the patch of darkness in the rock wall was actually a hole to a cave.

"Come on," Christian said, motioning for her to follow him. Feeling a little timid at first and then irritated at her own timidity, she strode on after him with a bit of forced confidence.

Right when she stepped through the opening of the cave, she exclaimed, "Oh my goodness!"

All around on the walls of the cave, the rock formations created natural shelving that spiraled upward, and these natural shelves were filled with books, books, and more books. It was like a grand library that would have made old Benjamin Franklin proud if he had still been alive to see it.

"How did you get all of these books?" It was more than Pat and her family had ever had, and they were book people, so that was saying something.

"I don't know, just kept collecting over the years."

"It must have cost a fortune."

"Over time, it doesn't seem like much, but I guess it does add up to a lot."

"No wonder you keep reading our books at school. You've probably read more books than anyone in town."

Christian seemed to think about this for a moment and then responded, "It's possible. I like reading more than anything. Well, almost anything."

"What do you like better than reading?"

"Writing."

Pat turned to him, surprised. She'd seen him write for school assignments, but they were never for more than a few sentences here and there, mundane exercises really that aren't at all interesting. He must not be talking about that, she figured.

"What do you write?"

"Well, I like making up stories. It's great 'cause then I never run out of stories to entertain myself with if I can keep creating them."

Pat laughed out loud, realizing how true those words were. She came from a family of wordsmiths, so she could appreciate exactly what he was talking about, even if she didn't really write too much herself. She was more of a reader than a writer.

Then something caught her eye. She ran to one side of the wall.

"These are all Dime Novels! I've never seen so many in one place!"

"Yeah, I've been collecting them as long as I can remember. They're fun."

Pat nodded and then turned her attention back to the collection, running her fingers across the spines of the thin books, not noticing that Christian was staring at her and not his books.

"There are so many here I haven't read!"

"Well, if you promise not to tell anyone about this place, you can borrow any of the books in here you want."

"Really!?" Pat was about to explode. This collection alone would keep her reading for more years than she could figure. Then her excitement fell. "But then I'd have to take them out of here."

"It's fine. Even if you don't return it, I don't mind. You can even take ones you think would be good for the other kids at the schoolhouse and just pretend they were yours. I mean, I like rereading some of them, but they seem kinda lonely here, sitting there and not getting read. What's a book good for if nobody's reading it?"

Pat gave him a surprised look, feeling like he had just read her mind. She remembered what her mom had said about the encyclopedias.

"I'm not sure how much the others will read them, seeing as how they barely touch the ones we put there, but it's a good idea, and very generous of you, too."

Christian shrugged his shoulders, "It'll make more room for me to get new ones."

"It looks like you've got plenty of room here already."

He laughed, "Yeah, I suppose. Come on, we can make the rest of the way back to town on foot."

"Can I take this one?" She pulled one out titled 'The Real Exploits of Little Sure Shot Annie Oakley'.

"Sure."

She hugged the precious book to her chest. Now she had two new books to read this week. It really was like Christmas this week, despite it all.

"We should get going. It's quite a walk. Are you tired?"

"I'm alright."

He extinguished the oil lamp when they walked back out to the pool outside.

"Oh, it's Thunder."

"What?"

"My horse, her name is Thunder."

Pat looked at the elegant horse that was now napping by the pool and smiled.

"Good name."

Christian put his hat and goggles back on and pulled his bandana up again to cover his mouth and half of his face.

“Hey Christian.”

“Yeah?”

“Does this place have a name?”

“Uh, I don’t know, always just thought of it as ‘My Cave’.”

“How about the Cave of Wonders?”

Christian adjusted his hat and goggles and stared at her.

“Cave of Wonders? That sounds kinda...stupid.”

Pat crossed her arms at the insult and gave him a dirty look.

“You think of a better name then.”

“Okay, okay, fine, Cave of Wonders it is.”

Chapter 17 The Homecoming

When they got closer to town, Pat noticed that the town was unusually aglow with light. Usually, at this time of night, most of the windows were dark as most people would be asleep, but tonight everyone seemed awake, and the glow from the town was almost like a sunrise.

“They must be looking for me,” she said as she turned to her right to look at Christian who had been walking by her side, but she suddenly realized he was gone. “Christian!” she yelled. But there was no answer. She wanted to start looking for him, knowing he couldn’t have gone far and was probably hiding behind a bush or a rock somewhere, but then it struck her—Christian had a bounty on his head! He was wanted by the law! The unfairness of it all started to boil her insides, but she understood that all she could do now was to keep his secret. She had to go into town alone. “Okay,” she called out, “I’m going in first then!”

Turning back around, she started heading towards town again, first walking briskly and then breaking out into a full run. The light from the town was so bright it lit her way. She passed her mother’s grave and over the hill, and she found that a mob had formed in the main street. Many were holding burning wood torches in their hands. She ran towards the crowd.

“If the Crockers don’t come out, we burn the hotel to the ground!” someone yelled.

“Calm down everyone! Please! We might be barking up the wrong tree!” Sheriff Cody called out.

“People of Tawny, my brother and I, along with our men, have been in the saloon all evening. We have alibis, and there is no evidence to support that we were in any way involved with the unfortunate disappearance of Miss Stephens,” Charlie Crocker said.

“Please, we have no idea where to look for her. If it’s not you, then who is it?” It was Pat’s father. His voice was full of desperation.

“PA!” Pat yelled, not able to stand the worry she could hear in his voice. She ran towards him.

“PAT!” Pa yelled with a look of disbelief as she jumped into his arms. “You’re here and you’re okay!” He held her tight.

Garrett pushed his way through the crowd. “Pat!” he cried out too as he threw his arms around her and their father.

Everyone turned to look at the happy reunion. When Pat's family finally let go of their hold of her, Garrett said, "What happened to you? I came to the schoolhouse to get you and found it empty and unlocked, all the doors wide open. We were worried to death!"

Catching her breath, Pat explained what had happened to her, about the two men who abducted her, about the how she got away, and about the mysterious stranger who rescued her. She kept the stranger mysterious, though, saying nothing about Christian or his Cave of Wonders.

"...and then the stranger brought me near town and dropped me off at the edge of it and then rode off into the night," she finished.

"So you see ladies and gentlemen, we were not involved."

Pat's father looked back up at Charlie Crocker who was still talking out of his window. Again, that flash of hatred burned in his eyes again.

"Mr. Crocker, it's clear to me that you are indeed involved. Those bounty hunters kidnapped my daughter as bait to claim the bounty that you put on the head of that stranger, someone who has saved my daughter from both them and your crooked brother. Whether or not you are associated with those men or not—"

"Are you accusing us of something Mr. Stephens?" Charlie objected, but Pa paid no attention to his objection.

"—you most definitely responsible for putting my daughter in danger, twice. Please pack up your things and leave. Neither you nor your brother nor anyone associated with you is welcome here in our town."

The townsfolk chimed in in agreement.

"That's right."

"You tell them Jonathan."

"We don't want your kind here."

Pa took a deep breath, more to calm himself and his rage than anything else.

"We'll be collecting our things and on our way right now, Mr. Stephens," Charlie said and turned a bit to walk away but looked back out the window one more time. "But the bounty on that stranger's head still stays. He is a vigilante that almost killed my brother, and that is not something I will let pass lightly. Like you Mr. Stephens, I watch out for my own." He tipped his hat and disappeared from the window.

With that, the crowd began to disperse, with Sheriff Cody assuring everyone he and his deputy along with Preacher Thompson would make sure the Crockers and their gang leave town immediately. A few people patted Pa on the shoulder, sharing their relief that Pat was back safe and sound and no harm had come to her.

Finally, Pat and her father and brother made their way to their home. On the walk back, Pat caught a glimpse of Mr. Li and smiled brightly at him with a nod of appreciation, to which he responded with a raised eyebrow, but Pat saw no sign of Christian anywhere.

Holding the book about Annie Oakley in her hand, she smiled privately to herself, thinking about how she knew where to find Christian tomorrow, sitting in that corner of the schoolhouse like he always did, reading while he waited for lessons to start.

Chapter 18 The Chinese Princess

The next morning, Pat was walking to the schoolhouse with her brother Garrett, dressed in her usual pants and button down shirt, looking forward to a new day of class, and looking

forward to seeing Christian again. She had the book he had lent her tucked under her arm, not because she would have time to read it while lessons were going on, but because she just wanted to have it with her. In her pocket was star-shaped blade, the souvenir that she had collected from that first time he had come to her rescue.

Pat and her brother walked on in silence, and Pat thought about how she would keep everyone from knowing that she and the “Chinaboy” had become friends. She was afraid she might accidentally call him by his real name, or maybe talk to him or notice him too much to where people would start wondering and figuring out that something wasn’t the same. It would be tough, pretending nothing was different or out of the ordinary, especially when she found her thoughts kept wandering back to that Cave of Wonders he had shared with her. And she was so grateful he had shared it with her. In any case, she was determined to keep the secret no matter what. Actually, she found it extremely exciting and fun having a secret like this to keep. It felt mysterious and adventurous all in one.

As she was lost in her thoughts, the morning stagecoach came roaring in just in front of her. She was a little early for class today, having jumped out of bed and gotten breakfast all ready early for everyone so that she could head on over to the school right away. The events of the night before only seemed to energize her, not exhaust her.

“Hey Garrett, we got some time. Want to see if the stagecoach brought in anything interesting?”

“Sure,” Garrett said, game for a little excitement.

The stagecoach pulled to a halt, and a long wooden box tied to its back suddenly came loose and fell. The lid that had been hammered shut cracked open. Pat and Garrett instinctively ran to help them with the fallen luggage, when suddenly the lid started to slide away, being pushed by a slender hand. Out of wooden box that had been nailed shut just moments earlier climbed a young Chinese girl, dusty and worn out. The sight almost made Pat and her brother turn around and run the other way, for the way the girl came out of the long box was a lot like a dead body rising from a coffin. It was spine-tingling to say the least, and the girl being so pale, frail, and sickly looking made the whole scene all the more spine chilling.

“There’s a girl in the box!” Pat found herself yelling out before she knew it. She ran up to it and helped the dusty and worn out girl to her feet.

People nearby started to make exclamations of surprise. The passengers on the stagecoach quickly got off to see what all the commotion was about, and so did the driver. Apparently, no one had known that an additional passenger had been riding along with them, hidden among the luggage.

“Who’s box was this?” the driver questioned the passengers. None of them made claim to it. It had somehow been loaded up with the rest of the luggage and didn’t belong to anyone.

“Are you alright?” Pat asked the Chinese girl who looked up at her weakly and said nothing. The ride to Tawny looked like it had been a hard one on her, and that ride didn’t just include the part where she was in a nailed up box on the back of a stagecoach. Some people get the shorter end of the stick from life, and it looked like this girl was one of those people. She passed out as Pat was trying to talk to her, and now Pat was trying to hold her limp body up.

“Here,” Garrett said, putting one arm under the poor girl’s shoulders and another under her knees. He lifted her up with relative ease. “I got her. Woah, she’s light, lighter than is healthy I think. We gotta get her to Doc K.” He started heading over that way with the Chinese girl unconscious in his arms. Pat ran up ahead to call the doctor and get him ready for his new patient.

Wait'll I tell Christian about this, she thought as she ran up to Doctor K's door.

Be on the look out for Cowboy Ninja Series #2: Cowboy Ninja and The Chinese Princess!

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[*The Legend of Phoenix Mountain*](#)

About the author:

Tinabot is a writer and educator. Her debut novel *The Legend of Phoenix Mountain* is a teenage American kung fu romance inspired by eastern philosophy, Asian mythology, video games, anime, and martial arts movies. She has written for Asian Week as a columnist. She received her B.A. from Claremont McKenna College, her M.A. from Claremont Graduate University, and her Ph.D. from the University of Southern California. She has taught as a public school teacher and college professor and currently runs her own authentic literacy development clinic, The Literacy Guild LLC. Aside from reading and writing, she enjoys watching movies, supporting local musicians, swimming, karaoke, and martial arts.



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