

Chico Boy

GINA HOOTEN POPP

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This book is dedicated to those who need to squish their negative thoughts.

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CHAPTER 1

The day could have gone either way for Chico Boy. Maybe it was the fact his pogo stick was working so well that made it lean toward being a good one. After all, how could you not feel good when riding on a pogo?

“Get off that damn pogo stick and come with me.” The voice belonged to Talula, his best friend since the third grade.

“Don’t curse, Talula. It ain’t attractive on a girl.”

“Don’t say ‘ain’t.’ It makes you sound less smart than you are.”

Chico Boy continued to pogo and the result were his words were timed to his bounces. “I cain’t . . . *boing* . . . quit . . . *boing* . . . saying ‘ain’t’ . . . *boing, boing* . . . oh, no . . . oh.” And just like that, he pogoed headfirst into a parked car. It was a brand new 1974 Catalina Station Wagon, but he reasoned it only made a tiny mark, nothing worth tracking down the owner over. He, on the other hand, had quite a big dent right on his upper forehead near his hairline.

“Let me see, Chichi.” He knew Chichi was her pet name for him when she was trying to be extra nice. And that meant he might be hurt bad.

Sitting down on a nearby curb, he waited patiently as she used her dirty fingers to part his hair. He felt her digging around in his wound as she simultaneously pushed on a bump that had formed underneath the fresh cut. Talula was a tomboy through and through. He tried not to wince in front of her because she would notice and comment.

“Is it bleeding?”

“A bit. We’ll wash it later. Right now, we need to go feed Silver for Mr. Jamison.”

Chico Boy shook off the pain and handed over his pogo stick to Talula so she could put it across her handlebars like she always did when they rode together. Then he got on the back of her bike’s long banana seat and settled in.

“Be sure to hold your legs up and out,” she said as she took off. Luckily, they didn’t have far to go in their small East Texas town since she didn’t have the strength to go fast with him on board.

As they bumped along on the old bike, Chico Boy said, “Last night I dreamed I was riding a motorcycle up a meat mountain.”

“Raw meat? Or cooked?”

“What’s the difference?”

“One’s bloody, and the other isn’t,” Talula huffed as she spoke. Chico Boy could tell she was getting tired.

“It was raw—blood everywhere.”

They quit talking—the only sound was of Talula’s heavy breathing. When they got to the little shed where Mr. Jamison kept Silver’s feed, she stopped and Chico Boy got off first. He looked around at the small wooden shed with its attached covered carport on the east side. Mr. Jamison had originally built it for the trailer next door, but it ended up making a perfect shelter and storage place for his horse. When Jamison leased the place out a few months ago, he made it clear to the renters they would not have access to Silver’s carport and storage shed.

The horse saw them coming and ran across the field to greet them. It was a beautiful sight to see him in full gallop with a red dust cloud flying close behind. Chico Boy knew Silver wasn’t truly a white horse—he was only light gray—but Silver was as close to being true white as any horse he’d seen.

As Silver approached, Chico Boy reached out to stroke his nose. The day was hot and dry. Not even the birds were moving. The only sound came from people arguing in the nearby trailer.

“No . . . Sam . . . don’t do that,” were the only words Chico Boy could make out clearly.

Looking behind him, he saw Talula coming out of the shed carefully carrying the special feed Mr. Jamison had bought for Silver in a large bucket. The arguing next door escalated to a fevered pitch as Talula poured the feed into a big plastic tray. Now the words were easy to hear.

“No,” a male voice trembled with fear. “Oh, my God. No.”

“Sam, no,” another male voice shouted.

Silently, Talula and Chico Boy watched Silver eat as they tried to ignore the fight next door.

Then . . . *Pop. Pop.* Two shots rang out.

In the silence that followed, Chico Boy ducked for cover behind the metal water trough. Talula froze. Silver started to neigh loudly, backing off from his food tray. Without even thinking, Chico Boy got to his feet and grabbed Talula’s arm. He pulled her into the small feed shed and pushed her under one of the handmade wooden workbenches. He pulled a few boxes and boards in front of her. Then he went down to the end to the workbench and crawled under it. Little slivers of light came in from the half opened door. He saw the overturned bucket Talula had managed to carry back in with her.

Wiggling around, he sidled up to Talula, who was very still. He could see her eyes looking around wildly. She seemed to be having a little trouble breathing. He hoped her asthma wasn’t acting up.

A door slammed on the trailer next door. Two sets of heavy footsteps were headed toward the feed shed. Silver neighed loudly and snorted. The footsteps moved around to the area where Talula had left her bike.

“Hey, a pogo stick,” a gruff male voice said.

“And a bike,” a deep, melodious voice commented in a worried tone. “Those two kids we saw earlier are still here.”

More footsteps, followed by silence.

Next, a single set of footsteps moved toward the shed door. Chico Boy felt the thud of his heart in his head. A nearby dust bunny moved as the door opened wide. A large body darkened the doorway as it stepped inside and looked around. Chico Boy couldn’t see the man’s face from his position under the workbench and Talula had her eyes shut tight.

A second man entered the dark shed’s interior. Chico Boy memorized their shoes as they moved a few sacks of the special feed and some loose rope around. The man with the gruff voice wore exotic snakeskin cowboy boots and the other dress shoes with tassels. Both pairs of shoes were expensive and both were covered with red dust.

“They’re not here. Probably off at that creek over yonder.” The one in the cowboy boots was doing the talking.

“Still that’s close enough to have heard.”

The two men left the shed and moved out into the open. When they closed the door behind them, the small room immediately became stifling. Chico Boy shifted a bit and noticed Talula still had her eyes clamped shut.

Outside, Silver snorted and neighed. The two men tried to reassure the horse but their efforts were futile. After some muffled conversation, the footsteps retreated toward the trailer. In a few minutes Chico Boy heard the sound of a car engine engaging and driving off. He wondered where it had been parked since he hadn’t seen a car anywhere around the trailer. It must have been on the opposite side.

Seconds later, he put his hands down flat on the dirty cement floor and started pulling himself out from under the hiding place. A nail scraped his back and he flattened himself out and pulled again. Soon enough he was standing upright.

Opening the door a crack, he looked down under the worktable. Talula was completely hidden by the boxes and boards. Moving a few, he found her with her eyes still closed. He was surprised she was so frightened because she was pretty brave for a girl. But she was only twelve years old. Every once in a while, the two years he had on her in age seemed like a lot more. Especially when she was scared like right now. Which wasn’t often.

“Talula.”

She opened one eye in response.

“Talula, we need to move. Get up.”

Without a word, she slipped her tiny form out from under the table and went outside. The sunlight made them both squint. Talula’s bike was exactly where she had left it. The pogo stick, however, was missing. Chico Boy did a quick search in vain. He knew the men had taken it.

“Talula, get on the bike,” Chico Boy said gently as he held it out to her. “I’m going to run

beside you.”

Talula took the bike by the handlebars, her face stone. “We need to go back the long way.”

“Why?”

“Because their car took off that way.” As she spoke, the normal take-control Talula started to return. “And we don’t even know if they were both in the car. I don’t want to pass by in front of the trailer.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Chico Boy couldn’t help but admire her quick thinking. Pointing to some nearby trees, he said, “Let’s keep to the woods instead of the road. I’ll push the bike.”

Talula looked around. “Where’s your pogo stick?”

“The murderers took it.”

“Chico Boy don’t say that! It could’ve been firecrackers.” When he didn’t answer, she continued. “I really don’t think someone was killed. Not while we were just standing here feeding a horse.” Her voice seemed to plead with him to tell her life was not that way, that bad things don’t happen on ordinary days to average people going about their daily business.

He looked down at the sincere expression on her innocent face and took her bike by its handle bars.

“I’ll push it through the woods,” he repeated.

They walked along saying nothing with the cumbersome bike between them. It had been rough pushing it through the thick undergrowth in the woods in the places where they didn’t have a clear path to follow. His ankles had taken a beating from the pedals hitting them, but he didn’t dare take the bike out on the open road. He didn’t want anyone following them.

As they neared his house in the older part of town, he glanced at his watch. It had taken them well over an hour to make it back going the long way.

“The shower feels good on my hurt head.” Talula could barely hear Chico Boy through the thin bathroom door.

“Hey, did you notice I put out a towel and jeans for you on the back of the toilet?” She yelled to make sure he heard her over the steady stream of running water.

“Talula, did you come in here while I was in the shower?” he yelled back.

“No, don’t freak out. I put them in before you got in the shower,” she yelled back through the flimsy door, “while you were feeding your sister’s cat.”

Talula had insisted he wash the wound on his head. However, she was feeling a little strange because his mom, who was supposed to be home, was working double shifts at the restaurant and his sister was out with her friends. Now they were the only two there besides the cat and, as if the situation wasn’t weird enough, she found herself yelling, “I couldn’t find any underwear.”

“That’s because I don’t have any.”

“Not even for special occasions, like Easter?” She heard the water stop.

“Hey, come help me doctor my head wound.”

Talula waited a full two minutes before carefully opening the door and poking her head around. She was happy to see he had on clothes. Well, not his shirt. Moving slowly inside the tiny bathroom, she noticed his muscles glistened on his still damp body as he shook his wet hair like a dog. Talula picked up a towel and dried off her arm where the droplets had landed.

Trying not to be obvious, she watched as he towed off his hair and looked at his face in the mirror. He was starting to get a little bit of a mustache, but it was blond and hard to see. Apparently, he was very pleased with the new growth because he kept rubbing his finger across it. Then she realized he was watching her watch him in the mirror, so she said in a very formal, doctor-like voice, “I’ll need some antibiotic ointment.”

She observed him open the medicine cabinet and dig around a lot of junk before pulling out a half-used medicine tube.

“Sit here.” She nervously pointed to the closed toilet seat.

As she applied a dab of the ointment to his head, she gently held his hair back. Checking his head over for other cuts and bruises, she was very aware he was staring straight up at her. It made her jerk in surprise when he suddenly announced, “Did you notice how big my arm muscles are getting?”

“Yes,” she said quickly before changing the subject as he flexed his muscles for her. In a very serious tone, she said, “Stop that. And let me see your pupils.”

In an exaggerated effort, he opened his eyes extremely wide. She ignored his silliness. Putting her hands on either side of his head, she moved him toward the direction of the overhead light and stared directly at his pupils.

“Why are you looking at my eyes, Doctor? The bump is on my forehead.”

“If one pupil is larger than the other,” she said, “you might have a concussion.”

“It doesn’t matter if I have a concussion because we can’t afford a doctor visit.”

Talula continued her careful assessment. “Looks like your eyes are normal.”

Just then, Chico Boy reached up and touched the side of her face. She held up her arm to stop him. As she tried to twist away he started tickling her stomach.

“Stop it! You’re going to make me wet myself,” she cried as she ran from the bathroom.

“Then why are you running from the bathroom?” He said as he pursued her down the hall, threatening to continue his tickle torture.

“Stop it! I mean it!” she said as she swatted at him. Suddenly, she got very quiet. A pang of worry

stabbed at her heart.

Chico knew it was time to knock it off.

“Are you okay?” he said. “Did I hurt you?”

She watched as his expression turned to concern.

“The shooting . . . someone got hurt today. And here we are goofing around.”

“Would it make you feel better if I go back and look in the trailer?”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No, I’ll do it after my tutoring class at the church. I’ll take Big Mike with me. If we find a dead person, we can tell the cops what we heard and saw this afternoon.”

“What if the person isn’t dead? What if they’re lying there hurt?”

“I’ll go after class.” He put an arm around her and hugged her close as he said it. She nearly hyperventilated. Sometimes she didn’t think he understood the effect he had on her nerves. She liked him so much and he just seemed to think of her as one of the guys.

Snapping back to reality, she heard him say, “It needs to be dark.”

She shook her head in agreement. He gave her a sympathetic smile, then he abruptly rubbed the hair on her head really hard in a twisting motion using the extended knuckle on his curled up second finger. A move he and Big Mike called a “nuggie.” Talula’s heart fell when she realized he was just being his big-brother-silly-sort-of-self. Obviously, he still thought of her as a kid. Lost in her thoughts, she watched absentmindedly as he went back to the bathroom to comb his wet hair in the mirror.

“Earth to Talula. Come in, Talula,” he said in his best NASA astronaut communications director impersonation. “What are you thinking about so hard?”

“I don’t know,” she said as she followed him down the hall into his room.

Pretending to admire his trophy collection, she averted her eyes as he put on his shirt.

Without turning her head, she cut her eyes back to him. Once she was certain he wasn’t looking at her, she turned around in time to see him open the top drawer of his desk. Rummaging to the bottom of a pile of papers, he pulled out a spiral notebook. The cover was pink—bright, bright, bright shocking pink. It even had a multi-colored butterfly sticker on the back.

She didn’t know what to say, so she didn’t say anything. But he did.

“This notebook’s one my sister had leftover. I didn’t want to ask Mom to buy a new one.”

Gesturing at the flamboyant pink notebook, Talula asked, “How’s the tutoring going?” She was incredibly proud of him for going to summer tutoring. She knew he was smart. He just hadn’t gotten off to a good start this past year of school what with his parent’s separation and his mom having to work all the time. There was no one at home to help him, no way for him to keep on track once he’d fallen behind.

“Actually, I’m surprised. I’m really making headway.” She heard a twinge of pride in his voice. “Wouldn’t it be something if I could be somebody one day?”

“You’re somebody. You’re Chico Boy.”

“Yeah, I could kill my grandfather for giving me that crazy nickname.”

“I like it,” Talula said as she tossed her hair.

“He named me Boy Boy. It’s stupid.”

“No, it shows you’re half Mexican and half American.”

“It’s redundant.”

“Wow, did you learn that word in summer tutoring?”

“I heard my substitute teacher, Miss Lancer, use it and asked her what it meant.”

This Miss Lancer was really helping Chico Boy catch up with the class, you’d have to give her credit for that. The new substitute had even gotten him interested in current events. The other day, he had surprised her when he had made a comment about Nixon being subpoenaed to turn over the tapes. Talula was proud that he was going the extra mile to learn by watching the nightly news and reading the newspaper.

Leaning back against the wall with her arms crossed, she considered for the first time that he might not like his nickname. “Okay, Chico Boy,” she said, “tell me what you want to be called and I’ll start calling you that.”

Without a second’s hesitation, he shot back, “Allen.”

Talula was shocked as she knew his real name was not Allen but Richard. “Hmmm, Allen’s a nice solid name. But how about I tell everyone to call you Chichi like I sometimes do?”

“Chichi, I like it,” he said.

“Then from here on out, you will officially be known as Chichi.” She wrote the word *Chichi* on a page in his pink notebook and held it in the air. “So it is written, so it shall be done.”

She noticed he laughed at her dramatic interpretation of Ramses from the recent movie about Moses. Her heart jumped wildly with delight as he lightly punched her shoulder before saying one more time, “Chichi—I like it. But wouldn’t it be easier to just shorten my name to Chico since that’s how everyone knows me?”

“Then Chico it is. I’ll alert the world to drop the word ‘Boy.’ I think it’s very appropriate as you seem to be growing up lately, what with your good grades and expanded vocabulary.”

“Yeah, I’m definitely starting to get a lot better at English and math, thanks to Miss Lancer’s help. If things keep going like they are, I may be a math whiz one day.”

Gathering her things, she motioned for him to follow her toward the front door.

At just the moment she was preparing to exit, Chico’s big sister, Debra, came in the door. With big, soft brown eyes like a doe and long, shiny, wheat-colored hair, Talula thought she was so cool looking. With a sense of awe, she watched as the older girl swept past them, hardly acknowledging their presence as she went to the kitchen.

Talula heard his sister rattling around in the background getting out a bag of chips from the pantry while she and Chico stood awkwardly at the door saying goodbye. If only she had half the sophistication of Debra, then her love life would be wonderful. But she didn't, so she squeaked out in a shy voice the only thing her tomboy-self could think of to say, which was "Call me when you finish checking out the trailer no matter how late." She had her own phone in her room. If she caught it on the first ring, her parent's wouldn't hear.

Chico heard them behind him as he entered the church parking lot. They must have followed him at a distance then moved forward quickly when they finally had him isolated. He heard their heavy panting as they half-ran up on his back. There was no need to turn around. He knew who they were.

"Hey, doofus." Chico always thought Randall's voice was high for a bully.

He mentally prepared to fight all three of them.

The one who had called him "doofus" was Randall and he was the largest. He outweighed Chico by thirty pounds and was a few inches taller. In his head, he liked to refer to Randall as Fat Boy. The other two were brothers that looked a lot alike, so much so it was difficult to tell them apart. The only distinguishing difference between them was one had a heavy mop of long dark hair and the other had a mop of short dark hair. Other than that they looked a lot like each other and a lot like many other fourteen year olds—skinny, tall, with the start of a bad acne problem. Chico referred to the brothers in his head as Ignoramus One and Ignoramus Two.

Fat Boy pulled the pink notebook out of Chico's bag. He started turning the pages looking at the math problems and creative writing samples. Chico reached out for the pink notebook and, as expected, Fat Boy punched him. Only this time it wasn't just one punch—it was a flurry of fists. Hatred boiled over out of every one of Fat Boy's pores. And the other two jumped in and held Chico's arms so he couldn't defend himself.

Then Fat Boy began to throw in all kinds of verbal slings, too, mostly about Chico's lack of intelligence. And the part that hurt the most is a lot of it was just plain true. Chico definitely lagged behind the rest of the kids his age. You can't hide stuff like this in a small town. And when you tried to change it—well, most people didn't want to let you, except for people like Miss Lancer, who actually tutored him for free here at the church.

Chico looked up in time to see Fat Boy pick up a big chunk of concrete in his right hand. As he drew back to throw it, a female hand appeared from behind his big body and stopped him. Next thing you know Fat Boy was rolling in the air before coming back down flat on his back. The two brothers shot a quick look up at Miss Lancer before they released Chico's arms and ran. She gave chase to them for a short distance yelling for them to stop.

Fat Boy took her distraction as an opportunity to escape as he ran off in the opposite direction of the twins. Chico could hardly stand. He watched as Miss Jillian Lancer, the only teacher he'd ever had a crush on, picked up his pink notebook and book bag. Only a few stray hairs had escaped her tidy ponytail. Her neon lime green polyester pantsuit remained wrinkle-free and her makeup looked fresh. The only sign that she'd just driven away Randall and the Ignoramus twins was a slight line of perspiration on her upper lip.

Be still my beating heart, Chico thought as she walked beside him toward the church's youth center. After they had entered the gymnasium, she turned and said, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he hesitated before adding, "Miss Lancer, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?" She looked at him with concern.

"I was wondering," he stopped and started again as he put his pink notebook down on one of the tables set-up for tutoring. "I was wondering if one day you might show me a few of those karate moves you did today?" Chico managed a smile at her. "You looked just like one of those female fighters on that new secret agent TV show. Didn't even mess your hair up."

"It's not Karate. It's Aiki, although I know Karate, too," she said as she retied and tightened the belt on her pantsuit. "Maybe I can get you into some martial arts classes at the Y."

"Does it cost money?"

"Or we can work on some moves at the end of each of our tutoring sessions."

For one split second, his dream of riding the motorcycle up the meat mountain came back to him, and he remembered he was actually negotiating the squishy, bloody beef pretty well just before he woke up. The thought gave him hope for the future.

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