

THE LAND GRAB

The Legend of Big Heart • Book 1



Pathfinders

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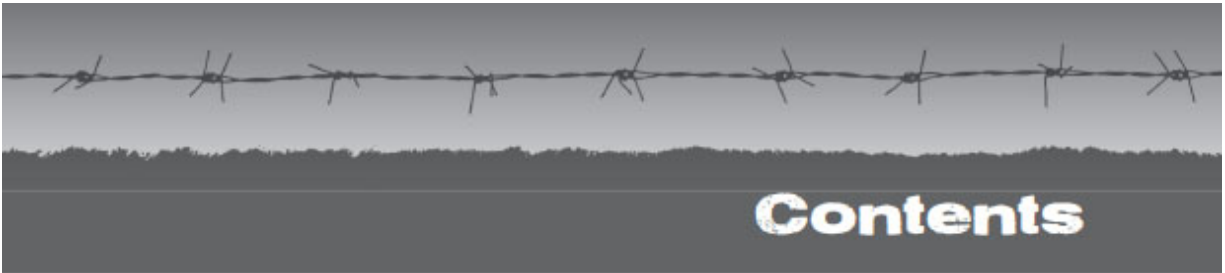
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About the Author



Lakota New Year

It was the first day of spring and nature's new year. *Boom! Crack! Boom! Crack!* The thunder of colliding ice chunks that tumbled in the rushing water of the Missouri River was deafening.

I was excited to accompany my grandfather and my brother, Elmer, to the Missouri River for a water ceremony. I prepared well for the ceremony with my braided hair wrapped in otter skins. My center part and face were painted with sacred red-earth clay, and a golden eagle feather was tied to my scalp lock. A pair of hard-soled quilled deerskin moccasins adorned my feet. Grandfather let Chepa, my yellow Labrador, come with us. He romped through the tufts of new grass that lined the path as he looked for gophers.

I asked Grandfather, "May I paint Chepa with sacred red-earth clay?"

"No," he answered. "A dog is sacred and only painted for a special occasion, like for a sacred clown ceremony. Long before the horse came to our land, we depended on our dogs for many things. They carried our belongings across the prairies, played with our children and kept them safe, and warned us of danger. Once the horse arrived, everything changed. We became a horse nation of fierce warriors, ruling the great plains from north to south. We called the horse holy dog. The horse was much like our dogs—loyal, dependable, and resilient—but much faster."

A golden eagle swooped in front of us. "Kwitkwit-kwit-kwit-kee-kee-kee-kee-ker." The eagle landed in a nearby tree and watched us.

Grandfather said, "Grandchild, the golden eagle is one of your spiritual helpers and came here to help you pray. At your birth, a golden eagle perched itself in a tree near the bedroom window where your

mother was in labor, and it stayed there until you were born. It then flew away until he was only a dot in the sky. It is good it came to you today. Your time for transition into manhood is close. That is why you need to dream your spirit name.”

“Why is it important for me to have a spirit name?” I asked.

Grandfather said, “Our spirits live in the spirit world long before we come to Earth as human beings. We all have spirit names in the spirit world. Often, on this human journey, we forget our spirit names. Dreaming helps us remember.

“A spirit name is vital because it will protect you. Alfred is not your spirit name. It was given to you in honor of a German doctor your parents were fond of. When your spirit dreams start, I will ask Pete Flying Crow to conduct a ceremony for you,” Grandfather said.

How could I tell Grandfather that my spirit dreams already came to me every night? They showed me things that would soon happen, and sometimes they warned me about danger.

Like last month I had dreamed Junior White Hail ambushed me. The next day, I took a different path home from school, and I avoided getting beat up that day. My best friend, Orson, said Junior was mad and determined to beat me up, so he thought he should warn me to watch out.

Skirting from one side of the path to the other, I tried to avoid the mud puddles left over from the winter snowmelt. I was used to my thick socks and leather boots, so my tender feet felt every rock through my moccasins’ rawhide soles.

“Ow!” Something poked me right through my left moccasin. It was a smooth, round black stone. When I picked it up, the stone throbbed in my hand like a beating heart. I put it in my coat pocket to show my friend Orson later.

When we reached the Missouri River, we saw the icy waves lapping against her shore. I thought Mother Nature chose her paints well today. Slivers of pink and lavender cut through the thick river fog like wildflowers on a vast Dakota prairie. The glow of the dawn colors reflected off the white bald eagle feather tied in my grandfather’s long silver braids.

I could faintly hear Grandfather over the roar of the river as he handed me his elk-skinned drum.

“Grandchild, sing the four-directions song.”

I knew the song well, since it was the first song I learned from my father.

Boom-boom. Boom-boom. The drumbeat resonated deep into the earth and bounced up into the heavens. Overhead, a chorus of squawking geese showered their blessings on us.

Look toward the West.
Your Grandfather is looking this way.
Pray to Him, pray to Him! He is sitting there
looking this way!

Look toward the North.
Your Grandfather is looking this way.
Pray to Him, pray to Him! He is sitting there
looking this way!

Look toward the East.
Your Grandfather is looking this way.
Pray to Him, pray to Him! He is sitting there
looking this way!

Look toward the South.
Your Grandfather is looking this way.
Pray to Him, pray to Him! He is sitting there
looking this way!

Look up above, upward.
God, the "Great Spirit," sits above us.
Pray to Him, pray to Him! He is sitting there
looking this way!

BOOM, boom, BOOM, boom.

Look toward the Earth.
Your Grandmother lies beneath us.
Pray to Her, pray to Her! She is lying there
listening to your prayers!

Grandfather motioned with his eagle fan to each of the sacred directions and started his prayer: "Great Spirit, Creator, hear my prayer

and my grandson's prayers today.

"We give gratitude to you, who embodies all goodness and directs all things. We give gratitude to our Mother Earth, who sustains and feeds us. We give gratitude to the sun, moon, and stars above. We give gratitude for water of life, our first medicine. We give gratitude to the Missouri River and all her creeks and streams. We give gratitude for this new season and the hope of rain and growth. We give gratitude to the water nations, the plant nations, the winged nations, the four-legged nations, and the two-legged nations. Lastly, we give gratitude for our traditional teachings you have taught us, and for Earth. We are all related."

Grandfather opened his porcupine-quilled bag. The wind wrapped the smell of dried traditional tobacco leaves around us. The sweet aromatic scent stung my nostrils.

"Grandchild Alfred and grandchild Elmer, take a pinch of tobacco from this bag and hold it in your right hand to make your offering prayer."

I reached into the bag and grabbed a small portion of dried tobacco. I handed that bag to Elmer, and he copied me. We shared our prayer with our tobacco offering and sprinkled it into the cold churning water of the Missouri River.

Grandfather handed me his porcupine-quilled bag and drum. As we walked home, I stayed behind him while he carried his eagle fan.

On our way home from the river, we passed by our uncle Jay's cabin. He was outside fixing a sagging clothesline. Uncle Jay was the youngest brother to my father. We waved at him, and Uncle Jay waved back. On impulse, I kicked up a few fancy steps and bellowed out a loud victory whoop. "Hoka Hey. Hoka Hey!"

I sheepishly shrugged my shoulders at the surprised look from Elmer and my grandfather.

"Well, I am just happy to see him," I said.

Grandfather's wrinkled eyes sparkled with amusement. "With a voice like that, you make a good camp crier."

When the red feed bin and oversized cottonwood tree near our house came into view, I exhaled a loud sigh of relief. My arms ached from the loose quills on the tobacco bag that poked me all the way home. The smell of buffalo stew and fresh Lakota fry bread made me forget my sore arms, and I thought only of my hungry stomach.

My grandmother stood on the porch, holding a tea towel. Her silver braids were tied in a coil under her black hairnet. She wore a clean white

apron of starched muslin made from a flour sack.

“Come in, everyone, it is time to eat! Grandchild Alfred and Elmer, wash up and put your moccasins and ceremonial clothes away.”

I dampened a few twigs of dried sage and wiped the wase from my head and face. My ceremonial clothes were carefully packed into a rawhide suitcase, and we placed them on the top shelf in my bedroom closet.

My extended family and I sat around the round kitchen table that my grandfather made for Grandmother many years ago. The oak table served as a centerpiece for meals. It was the table we used for homework, canning, sewing, drawing, painting, reading, and sitting around when welcoming friends and family. We shared many human emotions around this table. I always shared my stories and laughed along, pretending I was at ease, but I was not.

In my dream, I felt a sad wind blowing through my mind like a buffalo running against a storm. It was a strange storm, in a strange place, and all the things I ever wished for were stuck in the storm with me.

I wished I had the courage to tell Grandfather about my dreams, about the ghosts and spirits that came to me; I wished I had a spirit name; I wished I had a lot of friends like Orson; I wished I could stand up to that bully, Junior White Hail, even if it hurt; and I really wished my father hadn't left us.

I dreaded the nighttime and the dreams that sucked me into the portal beyond this world.

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