



Lesson of the White Eagle

a young adult novel

(a chapter excerpt)

By Barbara Hay

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“WHEN YOU ARE IN DOUBT, BE STILL, AND WAIT;
WHEN DOUBT NO LONGER EXISTS FOR YOU,
THEN GO FORWARD WITH COURAGE.

SO LONG AS MISTS ENVELOP YOU, BE STILL;
BE STILL UNTIL THE SUNLIGHT POURS THROUGH
AND DISPELS THE MISTS—AS IT SURELY WILL.

THEN ACT WITH COURAGE.

—WHITE EAGLE,
CHIEF OF THE PONCA

Chapter 2

I slipped my arms into my jacket. Jenna must have sensed me staring at her, because she turned, waved, and smiled. I two-stepped it down to the sidewalk. As I approached Jenna, Rosalee took off towards her house. No surprise there. Rosalee and I had never hit it off. I think it had something to do with the time I dropped her spelling book through the sewer grate in fourth grade. It was an accident. But that's the way people are around here. They never forget anything.

“Hi, Dusty,” Jenna said to me, in that sweet, high-pitched voice of hers. She sounded like a little girl, but we are the same age. “My mom made some of those brownies you like.”

She pushed yellow-blond strands of hair behind her ear. “You know, with chocolate icing.”

“Okay,” I said.

I never could turn down food, especially her mother's brownies. We started walking toward her house, and as we



crossed the street, I heard the growl of Garret's Chevy behind us. The car backfired, like a gunshot. I turned to look behind me, as the Chevy rolled up alongside us and slowed, keeping pace with Jenna and me as we walked.

"Hey Dusty!" Garret yelled over the rumble of the engine, his straw-colored mop of curls hanging out the window. "Eight o'clock at the Fun Zone?"

"No problem!" I yelled back.

He waved, gunned the engine, and left us standing in a cloud of black smoke.

We walked on down the sidewalk, not in any hurry, except I could already taste those brownies.

"Why do you hang out with that jerk?"

"I don't know," I said, with a shrug.

We'd had this conversation before, but Jenna knew me well enough by now to know that I didn't always know why I did things. And she didn't like Garret, because he hated Indians. And she, having moved here from Delaware in eighth grade, had an insatiable curiosity about Indians. I often thought that Jenna wished she were an Indian, but for what reason I couldn't say. Most of us around here don't pay attention to them, and they kind of keep to themselves. It's just as well, I think.



Just as that thought ended, a strong gust of unseasonably cold air whipped around my legs and accelerated, nearly taking my feet out from under me. Overhead, I heard a penetrating scream. I looked up to see the most incredible white bird. It floated on the stiff wind, gliding across the sky. Its eight-foot wingspan cast a dark shadow on the street. I stopped and stared up at it. The bird circled above me, screeching, coldly staring back at me. A shiver ran down my spine and goose bumps raised on my arms.

“Look!” I said, pointing up.

Jenna glanced up.

“What?”

“That huge, white bird,” I said. “It looks like an eagle.”

“Eagles aren’t white,” said Jenna, “and I don’t see anything.”

“Can’t you hear it screaming?”

“No,” she said, peering up at the sky.

I looked up again, and the white eagle was gone.

“You had to have heard it. Are you sure?”

“Absolutely, positively. I didn’t see or hear anything.”

“That’s weird,” I said, craning my neck, searching the sky for evidence of the white bird. I shivered again.

Jenna grabbed my arm. “Come on.”



The temperature seemed to have dropped ten degrees under the shadow of the clouds. We hustled into the house, as the storm door nearly flew off its hinges. I grabbed it and followed Jenna inside.

A fire blazed in the brick fireplace in the living room. Jenna's house isn't a big house, or grand, like some of the other houses in town, but I always took off my shoes at the front door. I dropped my jacket on the arm of the couch and followed Jenna through the living room to the kitchen. Mrs. Marker was setting out glasses of cold milk at the table. I spied the plate of thick, chewy brownies on the counter. Mrs. Marker must have seen me gaping at them.

"Care for a brownie, Dusty?" she said, with a chuckle, deliberately passing them under my nose.

I sniffed the chocolaty aroma and groaned.

"I assume that means yes."

Mrs. Marker reminded me of the sitcom moms on late night cable shows. She even wore an apron over her dress. But instead of high heels, she preferred crew socks and sneakers. She smiled a big red lipstick smile and set the plate of brownies on the table.

"I've got to run out to the store, Jenna," Mrs. Marker said, removing her apron and picking up her sweater from



the back of the chair. “I’ll only be a few minutes.”

Mrs. Marker looped her arm through the strap of her purse.

“Okay, Mom,” Jenna said, in her little girl voice.

That pip-squeak of a voice made Jenna sound vulnerable, as if she was the kind of girl who needed someone to protect her, but I’d learned soon after meeting Jenna that nothing could be less true.

When I heard the front door close behind her mom, I grabbed a couple of brownies from the plate and crammed one in my mouth, followed by a long gulp of milk. I looked up to find Jenna staring at me. I’d done something wrong, but what?

“Hungry?” she asked.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

“Nothing,” she said, but I caught the sarcasm.

She picked up a brownie and nibbled a corner of it, making sure each crumb fell on a napkin. I stuffed the second brownie into my mouth and finished off my milk.

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

Jenna finished chewing and swallowed before answering.

“You want to play pool?”

“Okay.”



I grabbed a couple more brownies in one hand. Jenna led the way down the steps to her basement and pulled the white cord that hung by from the ceiling by the door. It took a moment for the fluorescent lights to come on, so I used the time to stuff another brownie into my mouth. Even with the lights on, the paneled room was dark, and what pale light there was created black shadowy silhouettes of us against the walls. I set my other brownie down on the open edge of the steps and licked chocolate icing off my fingers. We each chose a pool cue, and I racked up the balls in the center of the pool table.

Jenna eyed the triangle of colored balls, leaned over, aimed her cue stick, and, with one swift motion, broke the set. Balls fell in three pockets. She stalked her next shot, like a hunter in the wilds of Africa.

“Seven-ball in the side pocket,” she said.

Swish, it went in. So did the rest of them.

That’s about how it went for the next hour. Occasionally, Jenna would miss a shot, and I’d get a turn to play. I never questioned why Jenna was better than me at pool. I just figured she practiced a lot, since she had her own pool table and no brothers or sisters to hog it. Jenna was the first girl who could whip the pants off me at pool. And I’m pretty good.



I can beat Garret, sometimes, and he is the local champ. But then again, Garret has never played Jenna.

After we tired of playing pool, I headed home. I live on North Fifth Street, across from Pioneer Park. Growing up across from a park was great. Garret and Jimmy always wanted to come to my house because of it. We liked going to the park, especially after it rained, to play on the Big Toy's tire swing and spiral slide. It's so flat in this part of Oklahoma that after almost any rain a huge puddle would form at the bottom of the slide. We'd fly down and land with a splash in a foot-deep pool of water.

Trees fill the park, too. But the parks department cuts off their lower branches so no one can climb them. Maybe to compensate, the city has attached swings on long chains to the trees, swings that let you soar into the sky. Sometimes when my father comes home from the grocery store, my mother would have a picnic basket ready, and we would all walk across the street and eat at one of the picnic tables in the park. We haven't done that for a long time, though. Not since the oil refinery started laying people off.

As I walked up Fifth Street, towards my house, I was met by the all too familiar stink of sulphur. The oil refinery is on the south end of town, and when the wind blows north, it



carries that putrid smell across Ponca City. It hasn't been as noticeable, or as frequent, since they started shutting down parts of the refinery. I guess some good has come from the cutbacks, but most of the locals either work for the refinery or own businesses that depend on the people who work for the refinery spending their money there, like my father's grocery.

Since the cutbacks, my father has steadily lost business, and he's not like he used to be. He used to take me fishing at Kaw Lake or hunting in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri. But now he works all the time. This past summer, we only took the pontoon boat out once. He laid off his assistant manager and his accountant, which had to be difficult since they had been with him since he opened the store. And now that I'm fifteen, I have to work after school and on weekends as a bag boy, bagging groceries. But not this weekend. He gave me this weekend off. I could almost taste the freedom.

I walked up the concrete driveway to our home, a large odd-shaped house with a stone wall across the front that continues on the opposite side of the driveway. That was the other reason friends always wanted to come to my house: that stone wall. It made a great fort.

The second floor of our house is covered with wood



siding and painted coral. I remember pleading with my mother and father to let me camouflage it so my buddies and I could hide from the enemy better, but my parents said if we painted it jungle colors it would just stick out more, defeating the purpose. The lower level of the house is laced with sandstone. The backyard is enclosed by a wood fence, with boards placed so close together vertically that it made a perfect holding cell for our prisoners-of-war. We used the one-car garage as the general's headquarters. Like I said, a perfect setup.

I opened the side door to the house and stepped inside to the smell of chicken frying.

"Is that you, Dusty?" my mother called from the kitchen.

"Uh-huh," I said. I threw my jacket on the rattan chest by the door and headed for the kitchen. My mother stood by the counter, patting a chicken breast into cornmeal. Her short brunette hair was curlier than usual, and she was wearing the old denim dress with pockets that she always wears when she's been cleaning.

I tugged the refrigerator door open, took a swig from the gallon jug of orange juice, put it back, and closed the door. Luckily, my mother didn't notice.

"Get washed up now, and set the table," she said, with



her back still to me. “Daddy will be home shortly, and he’ll expect supper to be on the table. He only has an hour break.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, taking the steps two at a time to the upstairs bathroom. I picked up the comb on the sink and ran it through my short hair, wishing my hair would grow out faster. Under the sink, I found a can of mousse. After working a mound of the white foam into my hair, I ran the comb through my hair again, taking the time to look at myself from every angle, checking to see if any hairs were still askew. Satisfied I’d gotten the obstinate devils under control, I washed the remaining foam from my hands.

When I came back downstairs, the place was empty.

“Where is everybody?” I called, as I counted out five plates from the corner cabinet in the dining room and set them on the table.

“Danielle has cheerleader practice until five o’clock, and Stephanie is next door,” mom answered.

She poked her head out of the kitchen.

“Be a dear and run over and get her, will you?”

“Do I have to? I’m tired,” I said, frowning. I plopped into a chair.

“Is it too much to ask, after all your father and I do for you?”



Oh, jeez. Not this again. My mom gave me a look that could freeze Mount Vesuvius in mid eruption.

“Oh, all right,” I grumbled, “but remember this is supposed to be my weekend off.”

I found Stephanie playing on the swing set behind Tanya’s house. She and her friend were on either end of the toy, hanging from the crossbars upside down by their knees and giggling.

“It’s time to come home,” I said.

Stephanie’s brunette curls dangled in spirals from her head, sweeping the ground as she swung back and forth. She and Tanya untangled themselves from their perches, and I started for home.

“Wait for me!” Stephanie called, running to catch up with me. “Daddy’s not home yet. Why do I have to come home?”

“Mom said.”

“But Daddy’s not home, yet.”

One thing I had learned about five-year-olds is that it doesn’t pay to argue with them. They just keep repeating the same thing over and over until you think you are going to scream. So I kept repeating back, “Mom said you had to come home.”



“Is Daddy home?”

“No. But Mom said to come home, now.”

As our driveway came into view, Stephanie finally realized there was no turning back.

“I don’t know why I have to come home now. Daddy’s not even home. See? His car isn’t here.”

I didn’t even bother answering her. We went inside, and, while Mother washed the mud from Stephanie’s face and hands, I finished setting the table. I was almost done, when I heard my father’s car pull in the driveway and the engine stop. When he came in, my father was smiling broader than a creek bed.

“Hey, Dusty. How’s it going?” he said, striding across the room and clapping me on the back.

“Fine,” I said.

Actually I was in shock. I hadn’t seen my father smile like that in what seemed like forever.

“Where’s your mother?” he asked.

“The bedroom,” I said, smiling.

He started down the hall towards their bedroom, turned, and came back. He was still smiling but now in an apologetic way. “I’m afraid I’m going to need your help in the store tomorrow,” he said.



“But you said I could have off!”

I wasn’t smiling anymore.

Neither was my dad.

“People have been calling all day, ordering roasted chickens and baked hams. If business is this good tomorrow, there won’t be enough baggers to keep up.”

“But I’ve already made plans,” I said, not believing what I was hearing.

“I’m sorry, son. You’ll have to change them.”

“But I promised the guys I’d . . .”

“Dusty, that’s the end of it.”

“I don’t want to hear any more about it.”

He turned and walked down the hallway.

Chapter 3

I walked into the Fun Zone a few minutes before eight o'clock. The place was already packed and the noise volume was exactly the way I liked it: loud. I pushed my way past the video game crowds and headed to the back of the long, narrow room. Kids from my class were playing pinball, skee-ball, and basketball—only with just the backboard and hoop. The pool tables were farther back. Garret and Jimmy had already snagged us a table and were racking up the balls.

“Hey!” I shouted, because they couldn't hear me if I didn't shout.

“You made it,” Garret hollered back.

Garret had on his coolest black T-shirt and his lucky jeans, the ones with a hole in the seat. He called them his lucky jeans, because he'd almost killed himself in them once climbing a fence in the alley behind Miss Margaret Bly's house. At the time, there'd been talk that Miss Bly and Mr. Dale Rimpke, our high school principal, were engaging in . . . How shall I put this? Adult activities. Garret was trying to



confirm the rumors by spying on Miss Bly, when his jeans got caught on a barb on top of the fence outside her house. That wasn't as unlucky as it sounds, because getting hung up on that barb kept him from falling into Miss Bly's yard and coming face to face with her Doberman pinscher, Spades. Miss Bly is the new librarian, and she doesn't take kindly to kids climbing on her fence or to being spied on. For some reason, Garret refused to sit down for about a week after his encounter with the fence. Barbed wire fences can do nasty things to folk's tender parts.

I picked out a cue stick and chalked the end of it. Garret let Jimmy break the set. He knew Jimmy would be lucky to make any clean shots. Jimmy eyed the five-ball, which sat right at the edge of the corner pocket. His long brown bangs hung into his eyes. It was a touchy shot. If the cue ball hit it too hard, both balls would go in, and he would scratch, losing his turn. Jimmy blew at his bangs. His lanky frame forced him to lean way over in what appeared to me to be the most uncomfortable, contorted position I'd ever seen. It didn't, however, seem to bother him. He pulled the stick back and took his shot. He scratched.

It was my turn. Garret knew once his turn came around, the rest of us would be mostly standing and watching. I fig-



ured my angle for the six-ball and settled into position. When the cue made contact with the ball I knew it was a sinker. I made a couple more good shots, and then scratched, as the cue ball followed the ball I was aiming for into the pocket as if I had planned it that way.

I turned the table over to Garret.

Garret always drew a crowd for his turn. Kids oohed and aahed every time he sunk a ball. He rarely missed a shot, so Jimmy and I were reduced to spectators until he finished.

Garret was now on his last shot, the eight-ball. He had taken his time and lined up his angle clean. I could tell he felt pretty sure of himself, because he wasn't chewing on his bottom lip. If he had a tough shot to make, sometimes he'd chew his lip until it bled. He called "eight-ball in the side pocket," pulled back the stick, and was just about to pull the trigger, when someone shoved Stephen Crazy Arrow. Stephen bumped the end of Garret's pool cue, throwing off the angle. The eight-ball rolled lamely toward the side pocket and stopped. Garret had missed the call. He spun around, scarlet-faced.

"Somebody bumped my stick!"

Stephen stood alone now. Everyone else had stepped away from the table.



“Was it you, Indian boy?” Garret shouted. “You’re going to pay for this!”

Garret grabbed Stephen’s shirt at the neck and hoisted him into the air, shaking him hard. Stephen hung there like a side of beef on a hook. His eyes squinched together, preparing for the first blow; he was trembling down to the tips of his braids, hanging there as helpless as a baby. Nobody said one word. Then from somewhere in the thick crowd of kids, a voice shouted.

“Leave him be!”

Funny thing was I recognized that voice, though I couldn’t quite put it to a face, until Jenna pushed her way through the mob. I’d never heard her speak so forcefully before.

I was shocked. And embarrassed. And scared for her.

“I said, ‘Leave him be!’ You big bully!”

It was clearly Jenna who’d spoken. Garret was so taken by surprise he released his grip on Stephen. Stephen fell in a quivering heap on the floor. Garret faced Jenna.

“Are you talking to me?” he said, wearing the smirk I knew so well. It was the same one he’d worn right before he’d last punched me.

“Are you hard of hearing?” she said. “Who do you think



you are? Picking on Stephen like that. He didn't do it on purpose. It was an accident."

"He made me miss my shot. Now he's going to pay for it."

"How?" Jenna asked.

I had never seen her green eyes so angry.

"With Indian blood," Garret said.

"I have a better idea," Jenna said, picking up a cue stick. "You play against me. If you win, you can do what you like to Stephen. If I win, you forget the whole thing happened."

Garret laughed. A big, uproarious laugh that sent chills up my spine. When his laughter subsided, his face became serious.

"You're on."

Garret told Jimmy to rack up the balls. Jimmy jumped to it, gathering the balls into the triangle. Garret chose a different stick and chalked the end of it.

"Ladies first," Garret said.

Jenna looked over at me. I shrugged. I was not getting stuck in the middle of this one. Garret would beat the living life out of me.

Jenna broke the set and, true to form, three balls went into pockets. She set up for her next shot, calling it.

"Two-ball in the side."



It went in. She called each shot and made each shot. Each time the ball went in the pocket a cheer went up from the teens who had crowded around the table, packed together like licorice sticks. Garret seemed to shrink with each perfect sinker she made. Finally, the eight-ball was the only one remaining on the table. It sat snuggled along one long side of the table. Jenna called her shot.

“Eight-ball in the corner pocket.”

The room grew quiet, as quiet as it could given the noise coming from the pinball machines and the stereo speakers. All eyes were on Jenna and that eight-ball. She made a pyramid with her fingers on the table, set up her angle, pulled back, and struck the cue ball. It glided easily along the table’s side, tapped the eight-ball, and nudged it into motion. The eight-ball rolled the remaining length of the table and fell into the pocket. Jenna had won.

And Garret had not made one shot.

I looked across at Garret. His face was flushed with anger. He growled and stomped out of the place. Everyone cheered for Jenna. She went over to Stephen and hugged him. I looked at Jimmy and Jimmy looked at me, and we both took off after Garret.

Outside I spotted Garret climbing into his car.



“Garret! Wait!” I ran down Grand Avenue as fast as I could and grabbed onto the side of his car. He was pulling away but stopped when he saw me.

“Where you going?” I asked, gasping for breath.

“Get out of my face. You and your Indian-loving girlfriend can go to hell!”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I said.

I didn’t think about what I was saying; I only knew I had to stop Garret from doing something stupid.

“Let’s go get a burger,” I said, trying to change the subject. “You’ve got to forget about what happened. It’s a stupid game anyway. Knocking balls into pockets with a stick.”

“Yeah, a stupid game,” said Jimmy, who had quietly hopped into the back seat of the car. “I’m starving, man.”

Garret’s expression softened.

“Is that all you think about? Your stomach?”

He threw a look over his shoulder at Jimmy. Jimmy sat there rubbing his belly.

“Okay, but it’s got to be greasy or nothing,” Garret said. “Hop in, Dusty”

I hopped in the car, and he hit the gas. The wheels of the car squealed as we pulled away from the curb. Jenna was coming out of the Fun Zone with her arm hooked through



Stephen's, as we drove away. I know she saw me, because Garret's car backfired right in front of them. She looked up, but I couldn't read her expression. I also couldn't keep from staring at her. It was beyond my understanding how she could even want to touch that Indian, much less be seen hanging on him like that in public.

Garret must not have seen Jenna and Stephen, because he didn't say anything more. Instead, he drove down Grand Avenue, cruising through town. It was nearing ten o'clock, and the cruising traffic had begun to thicken. He turned north on Fifth Street and followed it to Hartford Avenue. The drive-in was on the corner. He pulled into an empty space and pushed for the intercom. He ordered burgers, onion rings, and sodas. While we waited for the waitress to bring our food, we listened to music on the stereo. Garret's speakers are great. Sometimes when we cruised through town, he'd turn his bass up so loud it was like being in the middle of an earthquake.

Garret turned to me. "I don't know why you hang around with that Jenna girl."

"I don't know, either," I said.

The last thing I wanted to talk about was Jenna.

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