

THE TIME FOR
Healing

RAMONA K. CECIL



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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

Dedicated to Mary Jane and Randy Smith, whom I miss every day as I treasure the memory of our friendship.

*A time to kill, and a time to heal;
A time to break down and a time to build up;
Ecclesiastes 3:3 (KJV)*

1

Shawnee village, southern Missouri, 1824

“Life will change for you soon, Daughter.”

At her mother’s quiet words, anger rumbled through Red Fawn like the low howl of the autumn wind outside their wigwam. She knelt and tugged the shaggy buffalo robe closer under her mother’s swollen chin. Their tribe had moved twice since they buried her father where the Pigeon Creek flows into *Spelewathiipi*, the big river the white man called Ohio. She hated the thought of moving again before the time of the Spring Bread Dance. And she hated the whites who would force that move.

“Life will change for all of us when the white man makes new laws that will force us to move west again.”

Would Mother even survive another move? Red Fawn's heart quaked at the thought.

"No, Daughter." Mother shook her head as she rose onto one elbow and coughed. Her raven braids streaked with silver shook with her convulsive movements. Red Fawn snatched a scrap of cloth from a nearby basket and handed it to her mother, who pressed it to her mouth. Despite Red Fawn's efforts, her mother grew weaker.

When her coughing had subsided, Mother grasped Red Fawn's hand. The comparison of her own freckled skin against the smooth brown hue of Mother's jarred Red Fawn anew, reminding her that she hadn't been born a Shawnee.

"No, Daughter," Mother insisted through a wheezy breath. Her grip tightened and her dark gaze grew intense. "You will not be going west. You will go east. The Great Spirit has told me in a dream."

Red Fawn's heart clenched. She eased her hand from her mother's and stepped toward the fire pit at the center of the wigwam. Normally, she wouldn't question her mother's visions. Everyone in their tribe knew that, along with Falling Leaf's gift of healing, the Great Spirit had given her a special gift of prophesy. But lately, Mother's visions had become disturbing.

Frowning, Red Fawn crouched beside the circle of stones that surrounded the shallow fire pit. Tugging at the blanket draped around her shoulders, she wrapped herself tighter in its warm folds and gazed into the orange flames and the plumes of pale-gray smoke that wafted up through the wigwam's vent hole.

The tin kettle resting on a bed of hot stones near the fire rumbled and began spewing foggy vapor from its spout. Gingerly grasping the kettle's doeskin-

wrapped handle, she poured some of the boiling water over crushed herbs she'd sprinkled into a cup.

"The white man will never allow us to move back east." Red Fawn returned to her mother's bedside and handed her the cup of steaming liquid. "I fear the jimson weed seeds I mixed with the herbs to help you sleep are clouding the true visions the Great Spirit is trying to send you."

In the shadowy confines of the wigwam, the firelight burnished Mother's coppery profile. "My visions do not come from the jimson weed." Her voice held an unusually sharp edge. Cradling the earthen cup in both hands, she inhaled the aromatic vapors spiraling from it and turned a distant gaze toward the hide flap covering their home's doorway. With a whispered *thwap-thwap*, it billowed and collapsed against the buffeting winds.

"The Great Spirit has shown me two horses, one light and one dark." With each word Mother's voice grew stronger—stronger than Red Fawn had heard it sound for many days.

"I saw you take the reins of the dark horse," Mother said, "but it turned and moved away and would not allow you to mount it. It pulled you to the light horse." She paused to draw in a deep, ragged breath.

Red Fawn wished Mother would save her energy, but the urgency in Mother's tone stopped the words of caution before they left Red Fawn's tongue.

"You mounted the light horse, but you kept the reins of the dark horse in your hand, so it followed you as you rode east into the morning sun. Into a new day. A new world."

Red Fawn lowered herself against the curved bark

wall beside her mother's bed and pulled her knees up to her chest. She wrapped her arms around her doeskin-clad legs covered by her black skirt. "You know very well that I have never been fond of riding horses of any color."

Mother drained the last of her drink and handed the empty cup to Red Fawn. Instead of softening the severe lines around Mother's mouth and eyes as Red Fawn had hoped, her light remark seemed to have etched them deeper.

"If you are to be a healer, Daughter, you must never brush away the Great Spirit's guidance as you would an insect from your nose. And you cannot hide from what is meant to be, like the turtle that pulls his head into his shell."

"I am sorry, Mother." Contrition dragged down Red Fawn's voice. "I will pray the Great Spirit will bless me with words and visions to guide me as He has guided you."

She could not find the courage to tell her mother that she, too, had experienced visions. But hers were not glimpses of the future. They were scenes of an odd dream-life that had haunted her since childhood. Like rays of the sun caught in a turning glass they flashed in her mind and then vanished, leaving her feeling unsettled.

Fighting the worry gnawing at her chest, she tucked the buffalo robe more snugly around her mother. Though she'd lived eighteen winters, fear and sadness gripped her at the thought of facing the future without her only remaining parent.

At a cold gust of wind, Red Fawn turned around. The wrinkled face of Spotted Bird poked through the hide flap covering the doorway.

"I have news." The old woman's eyes popped wide and a tremor of excitement warbled through her voice.

Red Fawn nodded toward the cooking fire. "Come. Warm yourself and tell us what you know." Old Spotted Bird loved nothing better than bringing news to her fellow villagers.

The old woman bustled in. The bright ribbons edging her black skirt flashed as they caught the firelight.

"Two white men have come to our village and are asking permission to enter." Spotted Bird reached her hands toward the fire and the many copper bangles on her arms tinkled merrily.

"We have little to trade, Spotted Bird." Falling Leaf's voice sounded strained from her cot across the floor. "But if they have the cloth they call flannel, we could exchange Red Fawn's woven baskets for enough cloth to make new winter undershirts."

"These men are not traders." Spotted Bird turned her back to the fire. "They have come with the book the white man says holds the words of the Great Spirit." She gave a snort that ended with a chuckle. "As if there could be such a book."

"Has the council decided if the men should be allowed to enter the village?" Mother's voice sounded serious, as if she considered the decision one of great importance.

Red Fawn brushed a stray strand of hair from her mother's face. "Surely a council is not needed for such a decision. Such men have come to our village before, and Chief Great Hawk sits and talks with them and then sends them away."

Spotted Bird came and crouched near Falling

Leaf's bed. "Not this time. Chief Great Hawk has asked for all the elders to come to the council house. And as you are the head of the women's council, Falling Leaf—"

"You know my mother is not well." Red Fawn did not try to blunt the sharp edge of her words as she frowned at Spotted Bird. "I have just given her a hot drink to help her sleep. I will not allow her to get up from her bed and go out into the cold."

"You must go in my stead, Daughter." The words crawled slowly from Mother's lips, and her eyelids fluttered as if fighting sleep. "The time has come for you to take your place at the council. And you speak the words of the white man better than I do. Even better than Chief Great Hawk."

"I will do as you say." The sooner the council met, made their decision, and sent the men on their way, the sooner she could get back to her mother. "Rest. I will be back soon." Red Fawn followed Spotted Bird out of the wigwam.

"The time has come."

Red Fawn barely caught her mother's parting words as she emerged into the gray, blustery afternoon. But the finality of her tone chilled her more than the north wind slapping her in the face.

She glanced across the village to where two white men stood beside their horses—one animal dark and the other pale. Her mother's prophetic words rang in her ears and shot fear through her heart.

The older of the two men fixed her with a piercing gaze. Suddenly, the vision of a face much like this man's flashed before her mind's eye. In the vision, she'd looked down upon the laughing, whiskered man as if he'd picked her up and held her above him.

A great shiver shuddered through Red Fawn. She hurried toward the council house with Spotted Bird puffing behind her. The sooner they sent these men on their way, the better.

~*~

Jeremiah Dunbar blew on his frigid fingers and crossed his arms over his chest to tuck his hands into the warmth of his armpits. He stomped his feet to get the blood circulating through his frozen legs and made a quarter turn to keep the slicing wind at his back.

He gazed over the little Indian village dotted with dome-shaped wigwams. Covered with slabs of bark, they looked like large inverted baskets laid out in haphazard fashion.

With each passing minute, his patience seeped away with his body's warmth. He wished Zeb didn't have his mind so set on preaching to these Shawnee.

Over the past weeks, he and Zeb had shared God's Word with settlers, keelboat river men, and the occasional band of Delaware and Miami Indians they'd happened across on their journey. In most instances their efforts had been met with respect if not enthusiasm. Jeremiah rejoiced that several of the encounters had resulted in souls won for Christ.

It had been for the specific purpose of bringing the Scriptures to these Missouri Shawnee that they'd traveled westward for the better part of a month. But having reached their destination, he saw no advantage in freezing to death while waiting for permission to enter the Indians' village.

"How long do you think they'll make us stand here?" Jeremiah could not keep the aggravation from

his voice.

"Reckon they'll need to talk it over a might 'fore they let us come any farther," Zeb said as his horse neighed and shifted its dark bulk.

A shiver shook Jeremiah. Earlier today, they'd ridden through an icy drizzle, and the sore throat he'd awoken with this morning had become a searing pain. With each swallow, it felt as if someone were ramming a hot poker down his throat. For support and warmth, he leaned against the smooth coat of his cream-colored mare as he tried to push the pain, fatigue, and biting cold from his mind.

But aside from his physical discomforts, he most wished he could rid himself of the disquiet burrowing deep in his chest. Just as uncomfortable as the inclement weather and his weakening constitution, this emotion seemed stubbornly entrenched and far more troublesome. He knew its name.

Resentment.

Even now, twelve years later, the word Shawnee still conjured frightful memories of being besieged in Fort Deux Fleuves at the age of twelve. The horrific attack on Pigeon Roost Settlement by a band of Shawnee had resulted in terrifying nightmares that had plagued his boyhood dreams.

He wasn't convinced that a people capable of such acts of cruelty would be receptive to notions like God's love and mercy and Christ's salvation. He wondered how Zeb could be so sure. Zeb's brother, sister-in-law, and baby nephew had been among those slaughtered at Pigeon Roost, and his little niece had vanished, presumably taken by the marauding Indians. How could Zeb be so zealous to take the gospel to the very people who'd visited such atrocities on his family?

Jeremiah scrunched his head between his shoulders so his hat's wide brim blocked November's icy gusts from nipping at the back of his neck. "We've been here a good half hour. You'd think by now they'd either allow us in or send us packin'." He gave a little snort, beyond caring that his tone had turned downright petulant. "Maybe they think if we get cold enough, we'll just leave."

The aroma of roasted meat wafting from the village teased Jeremiah's nose and made his stomach grind, reminding him that he hadn't eaten for many hours. From the top of each wigwam, a thin finger of gray smoke curled toward the pewter sky as if taunting him with the knowledge of warmth and shelter within reach, but denied to him and Zeb.

"If we are to win their respect, we must, in turn, respect their ways. I'm sure it will not be much longer—"

At the abrupt halt in Zeb's voice Jeremiah's gaze slid over to him. Zeb's narrowed eyes seemed fixed on a couple of black-skirted Indian women crossing the village toward the longhouse.

"Did you see what I saw?" An uncharacteristic tremor shook Zeb's voice.

"You mean the two Shawnee women?" Jeremiah saw nothing remarkable about them.

"One had red hair. I caught sight of it just before she covered her head with her blanket." Zeb's voice sounded more awestruck than curious.

"Probably some kind of adornment." With every muscle of his half-frozen body aching, his stomach growling with hunger, and his throat on fire, Jeremiah didn't give a whit if the woman's hair were grass-green.

At that moment a lanky Indian draped in a blanket and wearing a spiky headdress of dyed red animal hair ambled toward them with a bandy-legged gait. A half-grown boy followed close behind him.

"You may come to the council house," the older Indian said without emotion. "Chief Great Hawk wants to hear of the white man's book that holds the words of the Great Spirit."

Without waiting for a reply, the man turned and headed toward the oblong structure the other Indians had entered.

"Praise be to God." The prayer puffed from Jeremiah's lips on a relieved sigh.

The boy took hold of their horses' reins, and Jeremiah and Zeb followed the other Indian across the village. Jeremiah shot a parting glance over his shoulder at their mounts, wondering at the wisdom of leaving their possessions in the Shawnee's care.

At the longhouse, the Indian pushed aside the buckskin flap covering the opening, and Jeremiah and Zeb ducked into the dim, smoky structure. The scents of sassafras, wood smoke, and tanned leather blended with a mixture of other pleasant, but less familiar aromas. A fire burned in a rock-lined pit in the center of the space, welcoming them with the warmth Jeremiah had craved.

A man of about forty-five years of age sat on the far side of the fire. The moving flames raked him in alternating light and shadows, so he appeared apparition-like. He sat with his deerskin-clad legs crossed in front of him at the ankles, his knees pointing outward. A woolen blanket hung about his shoulders, while copper rings dangled from his ears and a small ring hung from his nose.

“Sit.” The Indian punctuated the one-word command with a sharp nod.

They obeyed. Mimicking the chief’s posture, they faced him across the fire pit. As Jeremiah lowered himself to a woven mat on the hard-packed dirt floor, the room tilted before his eyes. He fought the dizziness gripping him. It wouldn’t be prudent to show weakness to this Shawnee.

Though dimly aware of the intense gazes trained on him and Zeb by the many villagers lining the longhouse walls, Jeremiah focused on the man before him.

“I am Great Hawk, a chief among my people.” The Indian’s voice sounded distant in Jeremiah’s ears. “You are not the first to bring to the Shawnee this book that holds the words of the Great Spirit. I have heard that its medicine is strong.”

Zeb’s head bobbed in agreement.

Great Hawk glanced at the Bible Zeb clutched in his hands. “Tell me, does the new white chief in Washington believe what is in this book?”

Zeb took a deep breath. “To my understanding, President Monroe is a Christian man. But I am not privy to the depth of his faith.”

Great Hawk looked at Jeremiah. “Do you believe that this book holds the words of the Great Spirit and has strong medicine?”

Jeremiah licked his parched lips. They felt as stiff and cracked as strips of leather that had dried for days in the sun. He prayed he could form an intelligible reply.

“Yes.” Though his voice sounded hoarse, the word rang with the strength of his conviction. “I believe it with all my heart.”

A hint of a smile lifted the corner of Great Hawk's mouth. "In my life I have heard the voice of the Great Spirit in the wind, the rushing waters of the rivers and streams, and in the cry of my brother hawk, my clan totem. I have learned that the Great Spirit can speak in many ways. Great Hawk and his people are willing to listen to the words of your book. We will decide for ourselves if they are truly the words of the Great Spirit."

During the chief's soliloquy, a sudden chill shuddered through Jeremiah. He gripped his knees in an effort to still his body's convulsive movement, while praying Great Hawk didn't notice. He swallowed and tried not to grimace at the pain it caused him. This wasn't a good time to fall ill, but he couldn't remember when he'd felt worse.

Great Hawk looked sharply at Jeremiah. His lowered brows above his long, noble nose reminded Jeremiah very much of the bird for which the chief was named.

"We will talk again tomorrow. The owl calls, and the shadows grow long. You will sleep here in the council house tonight. Our women will bring you food and blankets."

Great Hawk rose, and Zeb followed. Somehow Jeremiah managed to push himself up on unsteady legs while the chief beckoned to several of the women.

Jeremiah's attention shifted from Great Hawk to the women who came forward to take the chief's directions. One of them—the youngest, it appeared—had red hair twisted into two braids that draped over her shoulders. This must be the girl Zeb had seen earlier.

The woolen blanket draped around her blue calico

blouse and black skirt could not hide her appealing form. As he admired her profile, the gentle curve of her pale cheek reminded him of a rose petal. Long lashes, a shade more golden than her hair, fringed large, wide-set, blue-green eyes. This girl couldn't have been born a Shawnee.

A sudden movement to his right accompanied by a guttural grunt wrenched Jeremiah's gaze from the beguiling vision. He turned to find Zeb on his knees, tears streaming from his wide eyes down his ashen face as he gazed at the girl.

Zeb raised his hands above his head. "Dear Lord in heaven, praise Your holy name!"

The Indians fell silent as they turned toward the spectacle Zeb presented.

"Ginny girl, do you know me? It's your Uncle Zeb." His voice shook with the heart-rending plea. "I declare, you are your ma made over."

The scene before Jeremiah began to swirl. The Indians' mutterings became like the roar of a distant waterfall in his ears. He sensed the villagers rushing toward him and Zeb as blackness descended.

2

Red Fawn crouched beside the council house fire. Glad for something to do, she reached unsteady hands into a skin bag, pulled out a fistful of dogwood bark shavings, and dumped them into an earthen cup. The bearded man named Zeb had shifted his attention from her to the other white man, now rousing from a fever-faint. But the name he'd called her echoed like ghost whisperings in her ears.

Ginny. The word had haunted her dreams as far back as she could remember. And now this stranger had called her by it, as if it were her name.

The sputtering of the kettle heating over the fire drew her back to the work at hand. She poured the steaming water into the cup she'd prepared, covering the bark.

Glancing at the younger white man, now sitting up and rebuffing the ministrations of his friend, her conscience chafed. She should feel no gladness at the man's illness, even though it had interrupted the unsettling words his friend had uttered. Hadn't

Mother taught her that to be a true healer she must have a compassionate heart for every living thing that suffered an affliction?

Sniffing the steam rising from the cup, Red Fawn surmised that the bark's healing properties had sufficiently leached into the hot water. She rose, cradling the warm vessel in her hands, and carried it to the sick man.

"Drink," she said, using the English she'd known as far back as she could remember. "This will take away your fever." As she transferred the cup to his hands, their fingers touched, sending a pleasant tingle up her arm.

A look of gratitude shined from his blue eyes, glassy with fever. As she watched him lift the cup to his cracked lips, she had to admit she found him pleasing to look upon. His hair, the tawny color of cornstalks in autumn, fell across his wide, tanned forehead. Sandy stubble covered a square jaw that gave him a strong, determined look.

He grimaced as his throat moved with his swallow, and Red Fawn made a mental note to cook a syrup of horehound honey, the best sore-throat remedy she knew.

"Thank you." He handed the cup back to her and smiled, sending warmth spiraling through her.

Red Fawn reached down for one of the blankets the women had brought, hoping her face hadn't betrayed her reaction to his smile. "You sleep now," she said, handing him the blanket with barely a glance at his face. "I will bring you more medicine tomorrow."

As she stood, she noticed the man called Zeb staring at her. Her insides squirmed like a nest of