I Am Jason Littlebear

Reuben Lachmansingh

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PART I

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CHAPTER 1

Niagara Falls, 2000

As the hall clock struck 8:00 a.m. on the last Monday of January, I peeped through the dingy curtain of my one-room unit. Thank God, I thought, the plows were roaring, clearing the snow off the main streets. In a couple of hours, I'd be driving from Niagara Falls to Niagara College in Welland to write the final theory examination in welding. That would be my ticket to join the Professional Association of Mohawk Welders of America, and along with it, the satisfaction and pride of knowing that a lad from the Six Nations on the Grand River Reserve had found his niche.

"This is what you've been put here, on this planet to do," Constable Johnson once told me. He'd been my friend and mentor throughout my stay in Niagara Falls, one who dished out pieces of advice to me from time to time. "Finding your calling unlocks a brand-new level of

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passion that you didn't know existed within you, Jason," was one of the few he gave me.

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"Can't think on an empty stomach, can we, Dusty?" I said as I shared my tuna sandwich with my dog. "Here's your share, buddy. You like that stuff, eh?"

My only companion, my border collie, was keeping me company. Ever since I'd gotten him two years ago, I'd been out of trouble, clean as a whistle. Dusty took the place of Junior, my kid brother, and brought good luck and meaning to my life.

The previous night, I hadn't been able to sleep a wink. All night long, songs by Madonna had played loudly from my neighbor's apartment. The noise and sickeningly sweet smell of pot bothered me, but I didn't want to get involved with neighbors ever since I'd been stabbed by Bruiser, an ex-con at the Red Clover Motel parking lot right here in the city.

Constable Johnson had been the officer on the scene that day. "You messed with the wrong dude this time, Jason. You're not at the rez, you know," he said to me.

Once stationed in Brantford close to the reserve, he knew me as a kid who got into scrapes, though nothing serious. What I appreciated most about him was that he always handled me with kindness, and I liked him for that. This time was no different.

"Jason," he said, soon after the stabbing incident, "why don't you use all that pent-up energy and do something meaningful with your life?"

"You're right, Constable. I'll work at it and shoot for something higher rather than just knocking around doing odd jobs here and there. Got to get out of this darn rut." This was not a New Year's resolution. That was how the conversation usually went.

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Whenever Johnson drove by in his cruiser, I always waved at him while I played "fetch" with Dusty in the front yard of the rooming house where I stayed.

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My mind often drifted back to my grandmother's two-room shack, all blown over with dust in the summer, and hidden by snow in the winter, at the Six Nations on the Grand River Reserve. Then back to my old grimy rooming house on Bridge Street, close to the railway tracks in Niagara Falls, where at night I could hear the trains go by.

"I wish they passed by my old rez, 'cause I sure would've taken a ride on one," I'd say to myself.

The chief at the reserve, a self-educated man, had asked to meet with my grandma in an attempt to stop me from following the path of most of the men on the reserve, part-time trappers of beaver, muskrat, and the occasional marten—when they weren't drinking.

"Jason can do anything he puts his mind to," he said. "Send the boy to a city school, something I missed out on. He's a smart kid who can make a name for himself. You'll be proud of him someday, Ms. Nokomis."

That was before the government people grabbed me and took me away to a residential school, then later to Lord Elgin Tech in Niagara Falls.

At first, I couldn't concentrate on anything. It was hard attending school with white kids who were so different from me.

My guardians, the McPhersons, on Valley Way, treated me like their own son. They accepted me for who I was: a simple Indigenous lad from the reserve, who spoke poor English and sometimes sulked. Before long, my English and the way I carried myself improved to the point where I'd participate in conversations at the dinner table.

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Surprisingly, the teachers seemed to have a lot of faith in me. I never knew that doing chemistry experiments and electricity projects, like building breadboard circuits, could have real-world applications in electronic engineering that could lead to things like renewable energy and climate solutions.

When I graduated and branched off on my own, my kid brother, Junior, and I stayed as weekly tenants at the Red Clover Motel on Stanley Avenue. We did jobs like shoveling snow from parking lots, mowing lawns, and even cleaning rooms when the maids didn't show up. We managed to earn enough to pay our rent and grocery bills with just enough left over to splurge on chow mein and wonton soup at Peking Restaurant at the end of the month. We both took to Chinese cuisine because of its variety of flavors, from sweet and sour to spicy. But more importantly, it was affordable.

When times got tough, like during a recession, we'd split up. I often went on welfare and bounced around from motel to motel. A couple of times, I worked on construction projects, which allowed me to salt away a few dollars.

Sometimes Junior and I would argue over the smallest things. That was expected when two people live in such close quarters, when there was so little food to go around. Thankfully for me, Junior decided to move across the river to New York State. After getting help for substance abuse, he dedicated himself to playing lacrosse, something he was particularly good at. With a combination of talent and hard work, playing night and day, he was eventually picked up by the Buffalo Bandits of the National Lacrosse League, making a name for himself as an attacking left-winger. That Junior was quite the ball player, something that didn't come naturally to me. Other than hockey, which I played for fun, I couldn't see myself making a living playing ball. It just goes to show that even though you have the same parents, two brothers can

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be as different as night and day. Has to do with this DNA thing I've been told.

To pay the bills, I decided on a career in construction and everything that came with it, such as theory and practical. With the help of an old high school chum who recognized my potential, I registered for night school courses at Niagara College–Welland campus, in technical mathematics and architectural drafting.

"Who knows? I could be an engineer someday," I said to him.

"You've got to be kidding, Jase. Night school courses are good for your well-being; they would give you a sense of purpose and satisfaction, but don't expect that they would send you on a path toward professionalism. For crying out loud, you're an Indian, and you must bear that in mind," he said, with a toothy grin. "How many engineers look like you?"

"Well, let me see … Hey! Maybe I could be the first."

I tried to let it appear that my friend's reminder to know my place didn't bother me, so at the first opportunity, I discussed my career aspirations with my former high school counselor.

"Right now, I think you're aiming too high, Jason," he said. "Why not set the bar a bit lower and go for something you could be good at?"

Again, I paid no heed to what I heard and plodded through my courses. That's when I ran into Constable Johnson, a real godsend, showing up at a time when I needed him most.

"Sign up for the two-year welding course at Niagara College," he suggested. "It could be a stepping stone to bigger things. From what I hear, it's a course that could set you up with a job in no time. You'll earn good money."

And that's exactly what I did.

To pass the time last night, when I couldn't sleep because of the loud music next door, I put some finishing touches on the axe handle I was

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making for my landlord. It was a replacement for the one that broke while we were working on his backyard fence. Doing some last-minute sanding to get rid of the slivers. I could already imagine the smile on my landlord's face when he sets eyes on my "masterpiece."

"Great job," he said after I had spot welded his balcony last summer. Students, a few at a time, were allowed to bring home a beginner's welding kit to practice some spot welding on their own. It was a way to put our budding skills to good use.

"You lent me money for groceries, so this is like payback."

Only two weekends ago, I'd taken a trip home to the rez. I trudged through knee-deep snow with my worn-out old snowshoes to find just the right limb on a shagbark hickory tree.

My ancestors had planted shagbark hickory trees around the rez to provide nuts, not only for squirrels, chipmunks, and black bears, but for the family as well. Most of the natural forest had been cleared for logging and agriculture, so there were no black bears left in the area, which, to me, was a sin. I must admit, though, that on occasion a black bear could still be seen wandering the rez looking for food.

I cut a limb off one of the hickory trees and trimmed it. After paring it down, I brought it back to my room to make the axe handle. I made sure it was the right fit by comparing it to the broken one.

In the early days, when Ma and Pa were still together, Pa always left the family in the winter to go trapping for pelts on his trapline up North. Many winters ago, Pa quit the trapping business. Was I ever happy to have him around to plug up those darn cracks that brought so much cold air into our shack? His presence didn't last long because when Junior and I were still kids, he abandoned the family. Since Ma's new partner didn't want us, Grandma Nokomis took us in.

At the rez, a former resident who had just returned after serving time in the Thorold jail had a name for Junior and me because we had

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no father at home. But that bothered us little, thanks to the love our grandmother showered upon us.

Yep! It was great linking up with friends that weekend. My grandmother was long gone, having succumbed to cancer. I even managed to get in a game of hockey on the outdoor rink. Like in the old days, one player pretended to be Stan Jonathan of the Boston Bruins, and another was Ted Nolan of the Detroit Red Wings, our Native heroes from back then. I wasn't as good a stick handler as Junior, but I used my size and some rough play to score goals. Despite my lack of skill, I called myself Wayne Gretsky.

"Try scoring with the great Wayne Gretsky on the ice, you guys," I said to them.

Finally, they came in a rush and sneaked one past Chubbie, my goalie.

"We've scored against Wayne Gretsky," the scorer yelled across our own little Maple Leafs Gardens.

"You just got lucky," I replied.

"Yeah! Yeah!" they shouted in unison.

Life was very carefree on the rez, but there were problems of a different sort. Parents drank too much booze, and kids lost their minds sniffing glue—so easy to get at the general store in those days.

Back at the rooming house, "Vogue" was now playing louder than ever:

Let your body go with the flow
You know you can do it.

I opened my door and yelled out to deaf ears, "My dog, Dusty, don't like your American music! He's Canadian, through and through."

"A genuine Molson canine Dusty is," Johnson had once said, after

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seeing him licking a Molson Canadian beer bottle. Now, amidst all the music, I heard a woman screaming in the next room.

"What's the landlord doing?" I asked.

Dusty's ears perked up, and he growled.

For whatever reason, the music and commotion suddenly stopped. Someone was kicking down my door. Without thinking, I grabbed the axe handle I'd been working on and waited.

Two policemen barged in and confronted me, both with guns drawn. Dusty, who had never attacked anyone before, looked bigger with his hair standing on end. True to his instinct, he stood next to me. One of the policemen, moving with the elegance and grace of Fred Astaire, sidestepped to the left and fired a shot at Dusty, hitting him in the neck.

Tears poured from my eyes like rain, and I released an inhuman scream.

"You shot Dusty, you! Oh Lord! What am I going to do?" I pounded the floor with the axe handle. "My life is over." My wail carried throughout the rooming house. It was a cry like no other. "Why? Why?" I yelled at the top of my lungs.

Never in my wildest dreams did I foresee this happening to my beautiful dog, who was not only a pet but also a part of my family.

"Drop it!" the shooter repeated. Before I could comply, there were two loud bangs. It must have happened very fast.

"Oh, darn it! Darn!" the shooter yelled, his voice sounding far away, as if surprised that he had pulled the trigger.

All feelings started to leave me.

After a gurgle, I summoned enough strength to crawl toward my dog. I patted his neck where the bullet had entered. Dusty moaned as if to thank me.

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"Oh, Dusty! You don't need to hang on, baby. It's over for you and me. You tough … Tougher than I could ever be."

The smell of blood, like fresh meat, hung in the air.

Johnson, who must have answered a call on the police radio, rushed to the scene and entered my room.

"Jason, what happened? Oh my! Dusty, too!" the constable yelled, waking me from what felt like a dream.

"Just take care of Dusty," I managed to whisper.

Constable Johnson pointed at the officer, still with the gun in his hand, "You! Why did you have to shoot them?"

His deafening shout reverberated throughout the halls of the rooming house, and his eyes seared through the shooter's like red-hot coals.

As I gulped for air, Constable Johnson spoke into his phone:

"Hello, 911? This is Constable Johnson. Send an ambulance …. Rush! Tenant shot!" His voice sounded distant, like he was in another room.

A second later, he spoke again;

"Humane Society! Constable Johnson here. A dog's been shot … needs to be put down."

Outside, the ambulance screeched to a halt. The paramedics revived me, brought me out to the ambulance, and loaded me in. The final chapter of my life was unfolding. I could hear Dusty moaning when, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a uniformed female officer from the Humane Society.

There were two shots, and no further sound came from Dusty.

"Thank you, Officer," I whispered, "for … taking care of my Dusty. A true friend he was, right up to the end."

Why were they trying to save me? I didn't want to live anymore, not without Dusty.

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I knew that if by some magic I survived, I would only be a shadow of what I used to be. Never again would I dream of being like my idols, Wayne Gretsky, or the great Native Americans: Jim Thorpe, the greatest athlete in the world, the warriors Geronimo and Sitting Bull, and Tom Longboat, Boston Marathon winner, from my rez.

When it came down to it, I only wanted to be plain Jason, a Six Nations young man from the rez, who just wanted to succeed in this life.

Was I asking for too much? How could that be when I was expecting the minimum?

I could barely sense the ambulance racing toward the emergency room of the Greater Niagara General Hospital when I heard Constable Johnson on his phone: “Is this Mr. Thomas of Niagara College? Constable Johnson here. Jason won’t be showing up for his final exam—he was shot.”

“Good heavens! The best student I ever had,” Mr. Thomas said. “He was going to be a super welder. Jason still has enough marks to earn that piece of paper, so, whether he makes it or not, I’ll request permission to award him—posthumously, a Welding Certificate, First Class—and hang it up on the wall of my classroom. He’ll be a role model for all students.”

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CHAPTER 2

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I had a vision while under anesthesia as the surgeons worked to save my life. In that vision, a panoramic view of my past unfolded before me. It went back as far as I could remember, to growing up in a tiny shack made of plywood, supported by concrete blocks for a foundation. My father, who had built the house, packed soil around the base to keep out the cold air and rats. The roof, made of corrugated zinc sheets, leaked whenever it rained. I entered a deep trance, my mind becoming a theater where the scenes of my life played out before an unseen audience. I saw myself as a child, growing up with my brother, Junior, in the cramped confines of our humble shack.

But amidst those sparse surroundings, I found moments of joy and laughter. I recalled playing "Indian lacrosse" with Junior and our friends, running through the fields and nearby woods, chasing rabbits, our laughter echoing in the crisp air. I remembered the warmth of my grandmother's love, her unwavering support and encouragement, shaping me into the person I had become. Raised by my grandmother, Nokomis, I learned the traditions and stories of my people. I listened

intently to her tales of ancestors who had faced adversity with unwavering resolve. Grandma Nokomis instilled in me a deep love for my heritage and a fierce sense of pride in my identity, not to mention a great spiritual and cultural connection to the land.

"Our ancestors hunted and trapped animals in the surrounding woods and streams for food, shelter, clothing, and tools for centuries," she reminded me. "They used wood or rock deadfalls to crush mink, raccoon, and muskrat; also pits and wooden enclosures to capture them. They used sinew to snare foxes, skunks, and rabbits."

My ears perked up when she continued, "it means no guns that poison the land with lead." Her voice sounded squeaky and crackly with age. "You see, our people took good care of the land and its waters, Jason."

"Grandma, you're very smart to see the importance of the environment."

"Jason, it doesn't take much brains to see the truth of what I'm saying. The white man knows all of this, but money and what they see as progress are their priorities."

Only when I grew older did I witness firsthand the truth of what Grandma was telling me.

"Our ancestral hunting grounds have almost disappeared with the encroachment of white settlers, Jason," she said. "The lands that have been set aside for us are no good for farming; the soil is too thin and rocky. You won't see Indian corn drying on rooftops anymore … it is so sad."

"Grandma, why don't the women on the reserve fight the system … at least try to have a garden, where they bring in some topsoil and grow corn, a few beans, squash, or pumpkins? They taught us those things at residential school." I quickly followed up with another question: "And why are so few men hunting or trapping?"

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"Alcohol and drugs are major problems, by and large, due to frustration. You see, First Nations people can only hunt and fish for food within the areas where they can prove that their people have traditionally done so for thousands of years."

"So, the Indian Act places that burden on the poor Indian."

"It's a big burden, since the laws relating to hunting, fishing, and trapping rights are difficult to understand."

"Even though I'm only a boy, I can see what you're talking about, Grandma. Perhaps that was done on purpose."

"Our life on the rez is a merry-go-round," Grandma said. "We will have to break free from the white man's grip if we want to better ourselves. That's so easy to say. The Indian agent has made life on the rez a dead end; he wants us to live in poverty, waiting for handouts for the rest of our lives."

"I hear you, Grandma. Don't worry—I'll follow a different path when I grow up."

The childhood scenes faded, allowing my mind to drift to more recent memories—the struggles and triumphs of my life in Niagara Falls. I was reliving the challenges I had faced, the minor scrapes and hardships that had tested my resolve. But I also relived the moments of triumph, the small victories that had made my life a success. I saw visions of myself hanging on to life, yet from the corner of my eye, I could see Junior keeping vigil over me. That gave me comfort, so much so that my mind was filled with a sense of peace and acceptance.

* * *

I forgave my father for not taking better care of my brother and me. In the early years, when we were a family, he had tried his best to look after his wife and children. He tried to grow garden crops, but soon gave up because of low yields. Once, when he carted in cow manure from a

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farm, he had a good crop of cabbage; unfortunately, he could not sell the surplus because he needed permission from Indian Affairs. That left him with more cabbage than he could eat, and much of it went to waste, despite his giving several heads to neighbors.

In his youthful days, Pa, we heard, was a good lacrosse player—the sacred medicine version, I mean—but the details of his playing skills were lost in the struggle to survive on the rez in the midst of so much poverty. I saw firsthand evidence that he was a good hunter and trapper, Junior more so than I did. In the winter, he'd snare jackrabbits in the woods, trap beavers and muskrats in the streams, and do some ice fishing for yellow pickerel, whitefish, and perch at a small lake. Then he'd turn around to gaff and dip-net smallmouth bass and speckled trout in the clear streams back of the reserve. That was all the meat the family ate, since store-bought meat like chicken or pork was too expensive. Besides, not many on the rez had developed a taste for domestic meat.

He taught his children valuable skills, like looking for tender shoots and roots that were edible. During the summer, he'd take the family to gather chokecherries, elderberries, huckleberries, oak acorns, sunflower seeds, and black walnuts, which were dried and pounded for easy storage to supplement our winter diet. Grains such as corn, wheat, and wild rice were harvested, dried in the sun, and, when mixed with tallow and dried meat, were stored in pouches made of rawhide for winter use.

My father, however, had a dark side. His struggle with alcoholism cast a shadow over our household, leading to moments of tension and fear, especially when he drank and became prone to violent outbursts. Bootleg alcohol, readily available despite its illegality, only exacerbated his drinking problem, causing him to overindulge and lose control.

During those times, Junior and I had to tread carefully so we didn't provoke our father more than necessary. However, when that aggression turned toward Ma, and she faced bodily harm, I bravely attempted

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to shield her from serious injury. It was an environment fraught with uncertainty and danger, where the specter of alcoholism loomed large and cast a long shadow over our family. It got to the point where we boys were forced to seek help from the chief of our Six Nations people.

Still, both our parents made sure we never went hungry. Even if the cupboard was bare, there was always oatmeal mush for breakfast. For other meals, we would scrounge around for vegetables buried under the snow, and whatever dried berries we could lay our hands on. Sometimes, in desperation, we resorted to begging from neighbors; all pride and embarrassment would just fade away in the face of hunger. Fortunately for us, no one on the rez would allow little kids to go hungry. As for fresh fruits and vegetables, though, that was almost out of the question.

We were seven and nine when our father suddenly died of a heart attack. The loss of our father was a devastating blow to Junior and me. We were left without a primary caregiver, and Ma was not receiving enough social benefits from Indigenous Services Canada. She weighed the situation and made a difficult choice, one that was in the best interests of her two children. She moved in with a widower and placed her two boys in the care of her mother, Nokomis. It was a utilitarian decision, made seemingly without emotion—that was the general feeling throughout the small community in which we lived.

One person asked, "Mary, do you have no love for Jason and Junior? Why did you fall for a man who wanted no part of your boys? He should have taken all three of you or none."

In the long run, Ma's decision was for the benefit of both Junior and me.

Living with our grandmother provided a sense of stability and love during a critical time in our lives. Grandma Nokomis took on the role of caregiver with compassion and dedication, ensuring that we were provided for and loved. Despite the absence of our parents, we found

solace and support at our grandmother's home: no drinking of alcohol, no squabbles, just a home filled with peace and quiet.

Junior and I attended an elementary school that consisted of a cluster of portables boarded up with aluminum. Attending school in a series of portable classrooms was a common experience for many children on the rez.

The school had no gymnasium, library, or cafeteria. Students often came to school hungry. It was hard to focus on the lessons, so the teacher would sometimes send us home early to allow is to forage the neighborhood for food to satisfy our hunger.

Right around this time, my paternal uncle visited the home where Junior and I lived with our grandmother. He made himself useful by chopping firewood for her. On one occasion, he patched the leaking roof by applying a sealant. However, he had a dark side, which I find difficult to talk about because it is a taboo subject among people in our community on the rez. Nevertheless, it is important that I bring it out into the open.

When Grandma was outside searching for food to feed us, he would molest us boys; Junior was too small to do anything about it. I didn't know how to tell our grandmother about what was going on or where to turn for help. A young lad like me knew nothing about whatever support was available.

The next time he attacked, I said, "Uncle, if you don't stop, I will tell Grandma."

Surprisingly, it worked. I had to act, since the situation could have escalated. He chose the response of simply walking away from the house. By asserting myself and standing up to him, I let it be known that I was getting bigger and would no longer put up with his evil ways.

However, there was a price to pay. Uncle stopped helping with simple repairs to the shack and no longer brought wild meat, wild rice,

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or berries to the home. We used to look forward to Uncle cooking up a meal of beaver tail and muskrat boiled with corn and potatoes. Beaver tail is quite a delicacy, and I would recommend it to anyone who has never tasted it.

Native wild animals like deer and beaver, and plants like Indian corn and pole beans, meant a great deal to Indigenous people. These foods sustained our societies for thousands of years. The Six Nations people of the Grand River couldn't compete with modern farmers in the growing of tomatoes, pumpkins, and squash. How could we? As I've said before, the soil on the rez was too infertile and thin, with too little organic matter, for those delicate plants to thrive.

This was the injustice we faced as a people. Just because we were Indigenous didn't mean we should be treated differently. I knew that our lands had been stolen from us and that we were placed on reserves to spend the rest of our lives waiting for handouts. We are no different from anyone else, wanting the pride of autonomy and self-determination. We would rather earn our food from the land, as our ancestors did since time immemorial.

* * *

Over a period of two days, the school nurse visited our school. In the long parade of students that she examined, Junior and I were placed in a special batch for malnourished children.

The nurse had an interview with our grandmother. "Ms. Nokomis," the nurse said, "these are two growing boys. Based on their pronounced ribs and dry skin, I could tell their growth and development are stunted due to malnutrition."

"Nurse," my grandmother said, "their parents more or less abandoned them, and their uncle was not helpful at all. An old lady like me can only do so much."

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"Ms. Nokomis, I will make a special request for these two boys to get a daily drink of powdered skim milk and two vitamin tablets daily."

"Thank you very much, Nurse," my grandmother said. "I will work harder to make sure they are not malnourished."

"I will book you for a follow-up visit in two months," the nurse said.

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