

The Bad River Valley

Dakota Territory

Chapter One

1836

The smell of the smoke from the burning wood took Yellow Cloud back to that great day so long ago. The memory was vivid. After all these years he remembered that day, one of the best days of his life in full detail. It was his sixteenth birthday. His day had started early, well before the sun rose. He and three of his best friends, Little Bear, Black Elk and Swift Bird had set up a hunting camp one quarter days walk north of their village. While game was plentiful they hadn't done much hunting, for it was a more of celebration time. Tonight he would be married to Chief Walking Eagle's daughter Morning Smile. Meanwhile his friends still slept.

They had sat around the campfire the night before and talked of great things. Who the others would marry, who was the bravest, what of the Wasicu and who would be Yellow Cloud's second when he was Chief. Yellow Cloud would be Chief one day. Chief Walking Eagle had no sons. He had three beautiful daughters but no sons. Yellow Cloud was to marry the eldest of the daughters, Morning Smile. Yellow Cloud's father, Running Thunder was Walking Eagle's second. Yellow Cloud had been raised to one day be Chief. He ran the furthest and the fastest, was the best shot with a bow and keenest of hunters. He was well respected and looked up to by his peers. He was a natural leader. His marriage to Morning Smile would cement his spot in the line of ascension.

It was well, since they were already in love. They had been thrust together as soon as she was born; although he was only two years old and didn't recall the event. They had been

together ever since, their families were friends, Yellow Cloud and Morning Smile had always been the best of friends.

Yellow Cloud was the only one that had awakened for the hunt; the others were too worn out from their late night bonfire and party. The evening before, as the sun set at their backs they had watched as several deer had come down from the rocks to feed in a grassy field. Just as night fell, several bucks came out as well and began to chase the does around. As they followed the sunset back to their camp he remembered thinking that love was in the air.

On the way, Yellow Cloud had noticed high wispy clouds moving in from the west. It was a warm night but he knew that at this time of the year those clouds signaled change. He knew that the hunting would be good by the field in the morning, made even better by the incipient change in the weather. The animals knew these things too.

Yellow Cloud had awakened to a clear crisp pre-dawn morning. The persistent howl of the coyotes was confirming his forecast for the change in weather. The wind was still out of the east. It seemed that it was coming directly from the belt of the great hunter in the sky. He had left camp walking with the North Star in front of him and to his left. After awhile he turned and walked with the great hunter on his left. It was a technique he had used many times before. By doing so he could walk around the field where the deer were feeding and climb into the rocks above without the deer noticing. Perhaps, if The Great Spirit willed it, he would catch one on the trail coming back into the rocks to bed down for the day.

Yellow Cloud was feeling euphoric. Here he was a favored son of the Oglala tribe of the Lakota Sioux. One day he would be a Chief. He was thankful for his three friends, younger sisters and brothers. His tribe was of the Lakota, the Tetonwan tribe or Dwellers of the Plain; the Oglala branch to be specific known as “Those Who Scatter Their Own”. His people were spread about this territory, split from the Dakota and Nakota many years ago when the Lakota, along with their horses, moved west of the Missouri River. Their

lands were immense. He could travel several weeks ride in all directions through this enchanting wilderness with little fear. Sure, the winters could be harsh with bitter cold and lots of snow. The summers could be equally harsh with oppressive heat and the occasional drought, but the long seasons between made the difference. Here he was appreciating the wakening of nature before first light as only a hunter could. Soon Morning Smile would be at his side. What a great life he had!

Yellow Cloud's navigation was flawless. In the setting moonlight he could make out the edge of the field. It would still be dark for a while so he could not see the field. He had confidence that this would be his day.

He sat in the dark and thought.

He had been given his name for when he was born there were fiery yellow clouds in the western sky as the sun set. But there was more to it than that. To be named after a cloud color was a great honor and denoted a regal heritage. Some of the young warriors from other tribes were named after colored clouds. Red Cloud, a brave from a neighboring tribe within the Oglala was known as a fierce warrior. He warned of the Wasicu, advocating war over peace.

Yellow Clouds own father, Running Thunder had been born during a fierce storm. His parents had been to a trading village on the west bank of the Great River where the Bad River joins it. They were there to trade meat for salt. The next day the first Wasicu they had ever seen came up river on a boat. They spoke of seeking a great body of water called an ocean. Their faces were pale and ghost-like. They were very friendly and traded with many strange but wonderful things. That would have been thirty-two years ago. The Wasicu stayed for two days and moved up river. It is said that they came back two years later, much fewer in number.

The eastern horizon was beginning to show brilliant signs of the sun preparing to open and adorn the day, but still it was quite dark among the rocks. A faint wisp of smoke told

him that his friends had awakened and rekindled the fire. Yellow Cloud thought he saw movement just ahead of him. Two doe deer had silently stepped out onto the path ahead of him not twenty paces away. Both were of good size. He drew his bow slowly and silently. He aimed at the larger and closer of the two and released the arrow. It was too dark to follow the arrow but he knew he had scored a hit as he both heard the arrow strike and saw the deer jump. It was a disgusting sound, a combination of a squash and a pop.

“Strange” he thought, the deer didn’t run.

The second deer walked up to its mortally wounded comrade and sniffed her. It startled a bit and both began to look around.

Yellow Cloud had already notched another arrow and drawn. He aimed at the second doe and released his arrow. This one hit a shoulder bone since made a sound like a wet crunching stick. The deer jumped high in the air and both ran out of site.

This did not worry Yellow Cloud in the least. Arrows cause death most often by causing massive bleeding. A good archery shot will sail through lungs; liver and a lucky shot might hit heart. He was elated at the prospect of a double kill! Since arrows cause death by bleeding one must allow the bleeding to run its course. This takes time.

Yellow Cloud relaxed against a rock to wait.

A massive crashing about just down the trail interrupted his wait. It was light enough to see now and he could see a bush being thrashed about. He stifled a laugh. It was a buck deer wild with the hormones of the rut. It stepped into the trail and sniffed the ground. This was a nice buck. There were four or maybe five points on each side of his rack, with antlers spreading well outside of its ears.

He let the third arrow of the morning loose and it flew straight and true. Since the buck was standing quartering toward him, left side facing him he sent the arrow sailing into the

left breast of the animal. Without hitting bone the arrow sailed through the base of the deer's left shoulder, cut off the top of its aorta, continued through its right lung and exited just below the ribcage. Deer are amazing animals. Even mortally wounded and with no blood flow to its body the buck still ran almost a hundred paces before collapsing. There was no blood. It had flowed out of the buck's wound and onto the ground allowing Yellow Cloud to find it easily.

He dragged his prize back to camp.

He recalled with joy returning to camp. First the looks of astonishment on the faces of his friends when they saw the antlers of the buck he had just killed, and second, their look of disbelief when he said "Now lets go find the those two doe I killed!"

Chapter Two

1874

The shouts of the soldiers and screams of his people brought Yellow Cloud back to the present on the south bank of the Bad River. The smell of burning wood was that of his village, his home; it was on fire. His son Yellow Eagle had fought bravely outside the village but was no match for the pale-skinned soldiers carrying rifles. They had shot Yellow Eagle several times and had dragged him, bleeding, into the village roped behind a horse. They all wore uniforms of dark blue. They called themselves the US 7th Cavalry, their leader was a man with a yellow sash, yellow bars on his shoulders with yellow eagles and a funny yellow feather sticking out of his hat. Yellow Cloud thought it was rather odd, almost humorous that these men had such a fixation on the color yellow. It obviously helped them understand their ranks. It might have been funny, except there was nothing funny about this day.

He closed his eyes again

How did it come to this? He thought. The Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 strictly forbade this invasion. Yet it was real! The Wasicu had made it to his home.

He and others had fought along with Red Cloud to secure the Laramie treaty. It was supposed to guarantee that the seven tribes known as the Cheyenne Sioux would have this land and the rights to it for all of time. Yet here he was, taking our land.

Yellow Feather pointed at Yellow Eagle and spoke to the man next to him, the one with several yellow stripes on his sleeve, called him sergeant and barked an order. "Stripes on Arm" drew a pistol, shot Yellow Eagle in the heart and put the weapon back in its holster. Yellow Eagle collapsed, mortally wounded blood oozing on the ground around him. Morning Smile attempted to rush to his side wailing with grief but was restrained by a soldier without yellow on his uniform but with his saber drawn.

Yellow Feather turned to face Yellow Cloud. Through his interpreter, a traitor named Howling Wind, he spoke. “Great Chief Yellow Cloud, on behalf of the United States Government I claim this land, the area between the Cheyenne and White Rivers, including the Bad River Basin west of the Missouri as land to be mined for gold. You and your people will be relocated to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in the southern portion of the Dakota Territory. Gather only what you wish to carry. We leave in one hour.”

Yellow Cloud felt in his heart that he could never accept such disgrace for himself or his people. He had fought too hard. These Wasicu had broken their promise. Yellow Cloud had been a party to the Treaty. He did not sign the treaty but he helped negotiate its terms. His father Running Thunder and Morning Smile’s father Walking Eagle had signed the treaty. This land was supposed to be theirs forever.

That was only four short years ago! Yellow Cloud had heard of the man with the golden eagles on his shoulders and the feather in his hat. Everyone had. This man was famous amongst the Wasicu. He had been a hero in the war in which the Wasicu had fought among each other. He had told his fellow Wasicu that he was exploring the geology of the land, making maps, but some thought that he was looking for gold, which had indeed been found. In fact his mission was to reconnoiter the area and make the trails safe for white miners to travel.

The Black Hills were sacred to the tribes of the Sioux. The Treaty was supposed to ensure that this land remained in the hands of the Sioux tribes forever. Now, Yellow Feather and his men were relocating the native people like they were animals obstructing his way.

Knowing the inevitable result of his reply Yellow Cloud spoke through the interpreter to yellow feather.

“I can not,” said Yellow Cloud

“Can not? Why not?” Bellowed Yellow Feather.

"This land has been my home my entire life, the life of my father, and the lives of his fathers before. We have no desire to leave it. Please allow us a small area in which to live fish and hunt and we will not bother you or your people for I can not, will not lead my people away from our homeland"

Yellow Feather replied, “For the second time I demand of you that you order your people to gather what you can carry” He said rather impatiently.

“I will not!” replied Yellow Cloud defiantly.

Yellow feather slowly drew his saber from its scabbard and held it high in the air.

“Perhaps you misunderstood me! I now ask you for the third time. Order your people to leave here or your life I will surely take.” Yellow Feather growled from atop his horse, pointing his saber at Yellow Cloud.

Knowing full well what was next the proud and defiant Yellow Cloud cried out, “My life you may take but my integrity, never!”

Yellow Feather turned his head in anger to Stripes on Arm; called him Sergeant again, pointed at Yellow Cloud with his saber and angrily shouted a command in the Wasicu language.

The last thing Chief Yellow Cloud saw while on this earth was the twisted scowl of hatred as Sergeant “Stripes on Arm” drew his pistol, aimed it at him and fired.