

# CHAPTER ONE

1872

It began in a year of plenty when the north-west plains were trampled by a million buffalo and the water birds were thick in every slough. It began on a hot afternoon when cicadas buzzed, and clouds drifted lazily behind their own earthbound shadows. It began with a dead youth laid upon a willow-pole platform and in the heart of the man who mourned him bitterly.

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At first it seemed like every other summer day to the big Cree as he guided his horse out along the higher ground, checking the herds near the Red Deer River. Heat-shimmers distorted the horizon and small dust-devils whirled up out of the drying buffalo wallows. Sweat had smeared the paint on his face and naked chest.

By the time the sun was directly overhead, Poundmaker turned and headed for home. Buffalo were grazing in all directions out from the camp. No one would need any help in finding them. Soon he would see the fanned poles above the tepees and then the lodges themselves, coning up sharply beyond the creek where the children played. Then he paused, frowning. There were no children in the creek water; the muddy churned-up banks were empty. He crossed over and up, coming within sight of the camp again, then he dismounted and, rifle in hand, moved on warily. The big camps were always noisy places, but the wind carried no sound to him at all.

His face tightened as he glanced toward the rise, south of the camp where the horses were pastured, but they seemed to be grazing as peacefully as usual. He could see his own lodge now and that of Yellow Blanket's, close beside it. He slipped into the shadows between them.

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He noticed his brother, sitting in his usual place by the doorway, leaning against his drum.

Yellow Blanket spoke very quietly. "Come here and sit with me. Put your gun down."

"What is happening?" asked Poundmaker as he looked around. "Who are the strangers?"

Several women, a few children and some men were moving slowly around the big circle attempting to shake hands with those who did not draw back and passing out tobacco to the few who responded. Two of the women wore the poor clothing and smeared ashes of mourning. Yellow Blanket grinned at his younger brother as he replied.

"You would not believe me if I told you."

Poundmaker made an impatient sound.

"Well then sit quietly, now—we have some Blackfoot visitors."

Poundmaker could only stare at him speechlessly.

"That's what they are, all right. They just appeared suddenly, coming in from the west, making peace signs. Red Pheasant and Wuttunee went out to talk to them and after a while the chief came back and spoke to us in that voice he uses when he means to be obeyed. 'Put down your guns and stop your war-talk,' he said. 'They are Blackfoot, but they come in peace to fulfil a pledge their chief made to the memory of his son.' Some of us gave him an argument but the councillors backed him up. So, there they are."

"Which one is the chief?" asked Poundmaker, finding his voice again.

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“He is in Red Pheasant’s lodge, smoking with the council. He spoke to us in sign-talk, after we got the families safe inside the lodges. He said something about losing too many sons because of the hatred between our people and that he had ridden his last war trail. He brought in gifts of furs and horses for the band.”

Poundmaker just shook his head, then stared at the Blackfoot people curiously. Here they were, near his lodge, the deadly, implacable, merciless foes that all Crees learned to hate and fear before they were weaned. Why his own skin was scarred from Blackfoot knives and bullets, vivid reminders of past encounters with these rivals for the buffalo ranges!

Yellow Blanket moved uneasily, and nudged Poundmaker. “Why is she looking at you like that—ahay! What is wrong with the woman?” She was standing close to them, her hands tight against her breasts as though she fought to control some pain within them. Perhaps beneath the black smears of mourning she was a comely woman but only her eyes were unmasked, and they glittered strangely. After a long, silent moment she bowed her head and turned away.

The two Crees stared at one another.

“She seemed to recognize you,” whispered Yellow Blanket, and then his lips twitched at the look on Poundmaker’s face. “You have not been sneaking into some Blackfoot lodge after dark, eh?”

“Oh yes, every night,” said Poundmaker dryly. Then his attention was diverted. Red Pheasant’s door-flap had opened and the Cree chief and his councillors filed out, followed by a very tall man.

The Blackfoot chief was one of the most impressive-looking men Poundmaker had ever seen. His hair fell unbound past his shoulders, framing a lean, high-boned face that held strength in every line. He walked with a limp, but this detracted in no way from the dignity of his bearing or his complete composure.

“I wonder who he is?” Poundmaker said to his brother.

“Did I not tell you that? He is Crowfoot.”

Crowfoot! Every band and tribe of the buffalo-hunting people had their famous men, those legendary ones whose names were known far beyond the borders of their own territories. Red Crow, Old Sun, Big Swan, Piapot, Big Bear, Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse and Crowfoot. Some were fanatical warriors. Others were medicine men and there were some revered for their wisdom and concern for the progress of their people. Crowfoot was one of these last, a chief high in the ranks of the Confederacy of Blackfoot, Bloods, Peigans and Sarcees. It was easier now for Poundmaker to understand why Red Pheasant had been willing to allow the Blackfoot party to enter his camp.

He watched with interest as Crowfoot shook hands with the Cree chief and councillors then turned and beckoned to the boy who waited with the Blackfoot horses. The visit was over. The tall man accepted the reins of his horse then paused to speak to one of his women. The others gathered closely, then after a few moments they all turned to stare in the direction of Poundmaker's lodge.

Again, the two brothers glanced nervously at one another. "Now what?" muttered Yellow Blanket. "I thought that woman was upset when she saw you. Look, she is bringing the chief this way."

Poundmaker could see that for himself. He rose as they approached him. The woman halted then, and Crowfoot came on alone until he stood directly in front of Poundmaker. There could be no mistaking the pain and shock in his eyes as he looked at the younger man. The whole Cree camp looked on in utter silence.

The Blackfoot chief gestured abruptly. "I ask you to forgive my rudeness, long enough to learn the reason for it."

Poundmaker merely nodded, watching the other's hands intently.

"As you see, we mourn. We grieve for the son who was to follow after me, destined, we all thought, for high leadership in our Confederacy. He was killed in a fight with one of your people. I will hide nothing from you. With the men of my family I rode out to avenge him and so a Cree died too. But spilling blood did nothing to ease my sorrow, and I am heavy with such

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memories. Once my lodge was full of sons. Now only two are left to me, a boy who cannot hear or speak and another who is blind.”

Poundmaker was moved to a quick reply. “I understand. My first child will be born soon, and I hope very much for a son.” He hesitated. “But why do you speak to me? There are other more important men here...”

“Not to me. You are Cree and a few years older than he was, but I could be talking once more to my own lost son. You are like him in every way.”

Poundmaker shook his head. He half-turned toward Yellow Blanket then shook his head again. The older brother stepped forward and gestured sharply. “That is not possible. He has no great and powerful family. Our parents died when we were young—why, we cannot even remember our Stoney father. You must know how it is with such children, passed from one lodge to another, depending on kindness of the chief, waiting so long for horses of our own, some old, discarded guns to hunt with—how can you say he is like any son of yours?”

“I meant only that he looks just like him. I have no way of knowing more than that.” The chief turned back to Poundmaker. “This is as strange to me as it is to you. I can tell you this much; for weeks I have kept to my own lodge, resenting other men with their children and grand-children, speaking only to my women, useless to my people and to myself and too bitter to think that I would ever care about anything anymore. Then I had a dream. I was in a Cree camp, but not to raid to fight. I was giving gifts and smoking with them in friendship. There was still sorrow in my heart but all the pain of it was gone. I decided to try to make that dream come true. One of our hunters discovered your camp. And in this camp my woman found you.”

The woman had come a little closer. Poundmaker could see that her hands were mutilated, the first joints missing from several fingers, the wounds recent. She had done this to herself, he knew, just as Cree women did sometimes in the first agony of unbearable grief.

“I do not know how to answer you,” he signed at last. “It is bad enough when a man loses even one son. But so many...” he paused, then took a deep breath. “Is there something you wish to ask of me?”

Crowfoot nodded slowly. "You are guided by dreams and visions just as we are. But they are just that—signs to point out the way, a beginning. I think I was meant to find you here today. Now I go on from that. I would like you to come to visit my camp; to be an honoured guest in my lodge."

Poundmaker's eyes flickered. He wiped his hand uneasily across his mouth. "No!" blurted Yellow Blanket in sudden, angry protest.

The woman stepped closer then and murmured something very softly. "She wishes you to come, too," signed Crowfoot. He smiled for the first time and his sombre hauteur vanished abruptly. "She is the daughter of Red Crow, head-chief of the Bloods as well as my wife. She is seldom refused very much."

Poundmaker nodded and smiled slightly himself. He suddenly made up his mind. His mouth was dry, and he could feel tension like a hard knot in his belly and he knew his friends would think him a fool or worse than that. Red Pheasant might be angry and Yellow Blanket certainly would be. There was also Little Beaver, swelling with child. But he would go to the lodge of Crowfoot, in the camp of the Blackfoot people.

"We are on the far side of the Red Deer River, near the crossing place, below Rosebud Creek," signed Crowfoot.

"In four days' time, near sunset, I will come to the crossing-place," replied Poundmaker.

"My brothers and I will be waiting." Crowfoot turned then, went back to his waiting horse and soon the Blackfoot party were out of sight.