

## FOREWORD

This is a historical novel, not a history book, but I have tried to be true to the facts of all the actual historical events while keeping the fictional characters involved in the action.

These are the life stories of a race of people who lived, loved, and struggled for their existence and had to fight and die to maintain their way of life and control of their future; and another race of people who were caught in the government's pursuit of *Manifest Destiny* determined to seize all the land within the borders of the United States.

These events take place on the Great Plains that stretch over two thousand miles from the Rio Grande River to the boreal forest in Canada. Grass covers it like an endless blanket. Tall or short, the grass provides the nutrients for the food chain that sustains life for all the creatures inhabiting the land; be they worms, insects, reptiles, birds, fish, or mammals. All of the grazers from prairie dogs to buffalo draw their life from the grass. In turn they provide life to all the predators and scavengers. Grass also gave life to the humans who lived on the plains. It was the source of food for their horses and the animals that lived there which provided most of the necessities for the people's existence.

If grass is the bread of life on the plains, then water is its life's blood. For nothing, including grass can live there without it. All are dependent on the potholes, ponds, lakes, streams, and rivers—especially the rivers—to survive. Life therefore is enmeshed in the availability of water. Although many animals seem to wander aimlessly around the plains, in reality, all of their movements are controlled by the sources of water.

The Lakota say “*mni wiconi*” (water is life). They too were restricted and confined by the need for water. Their travel in the warm seasons

followed the waterways or went from one source to the next. Those that lived in permanent villages built them on the banks of rivers. The nomads wintered in secluded and protected bottom land of some waterway, dependent on it for their and their horses' survival. The cottonwoods growing there provided fuel for their fires and food for the horses until the snow melted and the new grass emerged.

The names of rivers flow through the pages of this book and those of the history of the Northern Plains, their names often printed in blood: Marias, Sand Creek, Washita, Sappa, Rosebud, Yellowstone, Punished Woman, Wounded Knee, and of course, the Little Bighorn. The Lakota and Cheyenne erected their villages on the banks of those streams and the Army found them and attacked them there. The Nations fought there in battles won and lost. The victories won by either side changed life on the plains for everyone and everything ... forever.

But the grass still grows and the rivers still flow.

*Hóto a nāvōhta hanê*

(This is a sad story.)

# CHAPTER 1

## YOU MUST GO

TODAY, AUGUST 6, 1945, EARLY MORNING  
LAME DEER, NORTHERN CHEYENNE RESERVATION,  
MONTANA

Robert declares, "I'm not going! I don't care what Grandmother says. I'm not going to go back up there."

But, he knows he will go. He knows he has to go. He has no choice. His vision showed him this day and the man he would meet there and Grandmother came again in his dreams and told him to go. But he does not want to go. He has vowed never to go back to that place again.

Robert Killsun stands with his arms outstretched, facing the rising sun and ponders this dilemma. He is a Northern Cheyenne Kit Fox Warrior, and as he thinks about going back to that ridge high above the Little Bighorn, he trembles.

The eastern sky blazes bright red and orange as the sun rises over the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation. Robert stands high on a hill above the town of Lame Deer. For many years he has climbed this hill in the false dawn to perform his prayers and meditations.

He massages his left arm, thinking, *It really hurts today, seems like you have a new hurt every day once you reach my age. I love to come up here and start the day but I'm not sure how long I can keep it up. It was a tough climb this morning. Maybe I will have to meditate outside my house. I love to see the sunrise, smell the sagebrush, and the smoke from the breakfast fires.*

He meditated this morning about the solar eclipse which occurred one moon ago and what it means in his life. His vision foretold this event and what would happen on the next dark of the moon which

is tonight. The old ache in his heart over the debt he cannot repay saddens him. Last night's dream disturbs him. *I don't want to do it. I don't want to go back there again. Grandmother, it's too painful. I don't want to relive those memories again.* But they flood his mind, he feels the pain, sees the blood, the dust and gun smoke swirl and clouds his vision. He sees himself standing at the top of a hill above the Little Bighorn River. The acid taste of burnt powder sears his tongue. He cannot stop the sound of the screams from the victors and those who are dying and those begging for mercy. He feels his friend's hand in his as he walks beside the travois carrying his dying friend down from that terrible hill. The guilt and shame of his actions return as he thinks of his friends and relatives left dead in the grass and he yearns to find the part of his soul he left behind up there. He shakes his head trying to clear it. *Grandmother, I know you have led me on straight paths many times and I think it would be blasphemy if I don't listen to you, but I don't want to do it. Don't make me go!*

Struggling to bend down, Robert picks up his cane and shuffles down the hill towards Judith and Tom's house. His grandson Tom died from cancer in 1931. His widow, Judith, still lives in the house with her youngest son, Joe, who just turned eighteen. With Tom, her parents, and grandparents dead, Judith sort of adopted Robert, a widower, and most days Robert takes his meals at her house. Robert walks an old man's walk, leaning heavily on his cane. *It is almost as hard coming down this hill as it is climbing up.*

He wears laced packer boots, a Carhartt jacket and pants held up by suspenders decorated with silver Conchos, and a belt with a large silver buckle engraved with 1st Vol. and crossed swords. He wears a long-sleeved white cotton shirt with red roses printed on it, buttoned at the wrist and neck, a brown leather vest, and a sweat-stained Reservation hat. Pinned to the sweatband is a Wounded in Action ribbon and a Campaign Medal. A lone eagle feather slants backwards over the brim. Around his neck is a sweat-soaked checkered red bandanna. His long hair, which once shined black as a raven's, now almost white, hangs loosely down his back to his belt.

Feeling the morning heat, he takes off his overall jacket and tucks it under his arm. Robert stands five feet eight inches tall and slightly bent. A ragged scar runs from his nose and across his face to his right ear, caused by a flying rock fragment. He limps because a 7mm bullet passed through his pelvis. A scar from a horse bite shaped like a circle curls around the back of his left shoulder. Three toes on his left foot were

amputated due to gangrene from frostbite. Most of the little finger on his left hand is missing. He made a considerable amount of money over his lifetime, but now lives on scant means, most of his wealth given to the needy on the Reservation.

He opens Judith's door, smells coffee, drapes his jacket over the back of a chair, sits down at the table, and says, "I see you have coffee."

Judith sets down a fruit jar filled with daisies on the table covered with a red and white checkered oilcloth and replies. "Of course I have coffee, and happy birthday to you, Grandfather. Are you looking forward to your party this afternoon?"

Today is August 6<sup>th</sup> and Robert will celebrate his 85<sup>th</sup> birthday this afternoon. It is not his actual birthday which is July 18, 1860. As an Old Man Chief and once a member of the Council of Forty-Four, the prominent members of the tribe will attend, along with his family and the few friends who still live. Robert's family consists of two sons, twelve grandchildren, twenty-six great grandchildren, and several great-great grandchildren.

Robert answers, "Are you baking a cake?"

"You know I am."

"Then you know I am looking forward to it."

"Would you like some breakfast? I can make flapjacks, I have corn pone, there's porridge on the stove, and some of that deer meat's left over."

Robert screws up his face, "No thanks, I'm not hungry. I'll just have coffee. I'm feeling my age this morning."

Judith chuckles, "Isn't that a surprise, you are only eighty-five, why should you feel old?" Judith places a cup and saucer on the table, "Three teaspoons of sugar, just as you like it. For the life of me I can't see how you can drink it that sweet."

Robert smiles because she says the same thing almost every morning. He pours some coffee onto the saucer, lifts the saucer up to his lips, blows on it, and then slurps it. Judith smiles and thinks, *Both of my grandfathers and Tom drank coffee this same way. I can never understand why, but I love to watch Robert do it. It brings back so many memories.*

He surveys the room. Like most houses in Lame Deer, it is only one room. A white six-point Hudson Bay blanket hangs on a wire and separates the sleeping quarters, giving some measure of privacy. A table, four chairs, a small wood cook stove, the only source of heat, and some shelves fill the room. Two windows and two kerosene lamps hanging from the ceiling provide light. The house has no running water, electricity, or tele-

phone. The wooden floors are swept clean and ruffled curtains hang at the windows. The house smells of coffee and human living.

When she married Tom, the people considered her the most beautiful girl on the reservation. Now, at age forty-seven, her three children, government rations, and Cheyenne genetics have joined to give her a heavy figure. Her beautiful black eyes are still bright and her long black hair shines in the morning light. The ends of her braids are tied with strips of ermine fur. She wears a floral cotton dress; hand-sewn from feed sacks. Over her dress she wears a black and white checkered apron. Her feet are encased in beautiful beaded elk skin moccasins.

Left with three small children, she has struggled for years to make ends meet. Robert helps in many ways with the children and finances. He is special to her, and she will always be a special person in Robert's life.

She looks at him and says, "I see you have on your special red roses shirt. Is it because of your birthday? How many of those have you owned?"

"I think four. They last a long time. And no, it's not for my birthday. Grandmother came last night again and told me to wear it today. Where's Joe?"

"I think he's down at the store listening to the radio. Why would she want you to wear it today?"

"I'm not sure. Today might be important."

He looks at her, "Have you heard from the boys?"

Both of Judith's older sons are in the service. James, twenty-four, serves with MacArthur in the Philippines in the Alamo Scouts, which places him almost always somewhere behind the Japanese lines. Gary, twenty-one, enlisted in the Marines in 1942 and serves with the First Marine Division on Okinawa as a Wind Talker along with other men from different tribes.

"No. Not for a couple of weeks. I'm expecting a letter from Gary and you know I never hear from James, him being a scout and all, so I never know if he is alive or not. I pray to God every night for their safety. They'll both be in on the invasion of Japan for sure. I don't know how they will survive."

Judith twists her head as if she tried to throw the thought away, "Do you want me to braid your hair?"

"No, I am going to wear it loose today."

Judith, surprised, gives him a questioning look. *Why would you want to do that on this day of all days?*

They are startled as Joe bursts into the room. A typical teenager, he wears cowboy boots, a hat, a grey tee shirt, and neckerchief. He stands five feet nine inches with a slim build. He breathes heavily after running up the hill and pauses a moment before he gasps.

"Mom, Grandpa Robert, have you heard the news?"

They both say, "What news?"

"The Air Force dropped some new kind of big bomb on a Jap city. The entire city was wiped out and it killed a hundred thousand people."

Robert asks, "My god, what kind of bomb could do that?"

"It's called an atom bomb and it's the most powerful in the world."

Robert tilts his head and says, "This will end the war for sure. There's no way the Japs can survive against that kind of technology."

Robert stares at his saucer, it seems almost too much to comprehend. *What has the world come to if we can kill a hundred thousand people in one blast? I've read Einstein's theories about nuclear fission, but I can't believe we have actually done it.*

He thinks about his life and how he was born into a hunter-gatherer culture, before the Civil War, and now sits drinking coffee, while ten thousand miles away, thousands of people have been killed by atomic power. He sits quiet for a long time, while Joe and Judith talk. He thinks again about his vision, the debt, and last night's dream. Puzzled, he rubs his left arm. *Why is my arm still hurting?* He knows what he has to do. *There is no sense waiting. It's my fate. I have to go. What the hell. You know you have to go, so get going. Grandmother, you win again. I'm going!*

He asks Joe, "Is there gas in the Lizzie?"

Perplexed, Joe answers, "Yes. Why?"

"Enough so we can drive about ninety miles?"

"Sure, I even have an extra gas coupon."

The war's gas rationing is in effect, so coupons are precious. Ten years ago, Robert bought a used Ford Model A, called a Tin Lizzie.

"Where are we going?"

"I need to go down to the Little Bighorn, the battlefield."

Judith looks at him, "The battlefield?"

Robert pushes himself up, grabs his cane and jacket and starts out of the house saying, "Yes, I need to go there today. I have to get some things from my house. Joe, when you get the Liz come up and get me."

He stops, looks at Judith, smiles, and says, "You know, you always remind me of my grandmother. She meant so much to me. Thanks for the coffee and putting up with an old man for so long. Goodbye. Brave

up, your sons will be home soon and so will I. This will not be their good day to die."

Judith, puzzled, replies "I hope you are right. It is going to be hot today, so please take it easy. Remember the party is at three."

She puts her hands on her hips and shakes her head as she watches him hobble up the hill.

"Did grandpa Robert fight at the Little Bighorn?" Joe asks.

"Yes, there is an old legend about how he killed a White Thunder Being there. Some sort of demon. But I never believed it. It's just some old wives tale. Besides, he was pretty young. He's never talked about it, not to nobody, and as far as I know he's never been back. He refuses to go to the reunions or meet with any officials. He won't talk to any of the book writers who come around. People say he wouldn't even talk to Bird (George Grinnell). Why on earth would he want to go back now? Go get the car. You drive careful and take care of your great grandfather. You hear?"

Robert labors up the hill, moving like an inchworm until he reaches his house. He hangs his hat and jacket on pegs on the back of the door and sits to catch his breath. Years ago Robert built a fine house outside of Lame Deer, but sold it later to raise money for the people on the Reservation.

He now lives in a house that is a duplicate of Judith's, one room with windows on three sides. Over the door a .30-40 Krag-Jorgensen rifle rests on a deer antler gun rack. Below the rifle is a Model 97 Winchester 12-gauge pump shotgun with a barrel cut to twenty inches. A bed is along the back wall with a bow and a quiver of arrows in the corner. Two other walls are lined with shelves filled with books. There is a complete set of the Encyclopedia Britannica with updates, history books ranging from *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* to Custer's *My life On the Plains*. There are novels by Hemingway, Eliot, Fitzgerald, and others. Books by Plato, Socrates, and Locke are visible. There are many scientific journals and a shelf full of copies of the National Geographic, Popular Science, and Popular Mechanics magazines. Books of poetry by Yeats, Browning and others are well worn. There are citations, plaques, and faded pictures of men in and out of uniform, including a large one of Teddy Roosevelt in his Rough Rider uniform. On one wall hangs a framed pennant with COMPANY L 1ST US VOL CAV embroidered on it. There is a small faded movie poster about Custer and the Little Bighorn.

He sighs, pulls a small box from under the bed, and places the con-



tents in a canvas haversack. He takes an old black slouch hat with a five-pronged metal emblem pinned on one side. Thinking for a moment, he takes the ribbon and metal from his Reservation hat and pins them on his vest. He takes a knife in a beautifully decorated sheath and threads it on his belt. A small decorated pouch hangs on the wall; his medicine bundle holding all his charms. He has carried it in battle and for most of his life. He hangs it around his neck, sighs, and then looks around, satisfied.

As he walks by Teddy's picture he pats it, chuckles, and says, "Bully! Bully!" then walks out to the car.

Joe says, "That's not your regular hat. Where did it come from?"

"I found it a long time ago."

"Why are you wearing it now?"

"I'm going to take it home."