

B I L L Y W E S T

By Daryl Henry

EXT. RIVER FLAT - DAY

The South Dakota prairie in the winter of 1898-- scattered trees on snow-dusted arid hills. A river wanders through the Standing Rock reservation, cutting deep, flattening out in a grove of naked cottonwoods. Under the trees is an Indian encampment-- a cluster of canvas tepees, three or four sod-roof cabins, two broken wagons, a dozen thin dogs. Maybe 25 Sioux, hungry and cold, wait at an empty snake-fence corral.

Down a draw comes what they're waiting for-- a steamy knot of cattle herded by a forty-year old COWBOY we'll come to know as BILLY WEST. Soft eyes in a hard face, built like one of the steers he nudges across the shallow river. Billy rides a magnificent pale gray horse, gently, without spurs. A city man ten years ago, now in charge of delivering beeves to the reservations, he's become a legend in Dakota Territory, a friend to both his cows and his customers.

One of the Sioux swings bareback onto a spotted pony and splashes across the river to meet him. TWO CROWS is tall, craggy, proud. Well past his prime, he endures his dependence on the white man with great stoicism.

TWO CROWS

Hey, Billy, you get that job?

BILLY

Sure did.

Their words come out in great billows of condensation.

TWO CROWS

You going alone?

BILLY

Hell, yes.

Billy takes a new cardboard box of .22 ammunition from the pocket of his sheepskin coat, tosses it to Two Crows. The former warrior catches it easily in one hand. Billy grins.

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BILLY (CONT'D)

If you'd learn to hit them rabbits the first shot, Two Crows, you wouldn't go through those so fast.

Two Crows smiles his thanks, then glances nervously back toward camp. His POV SINGLES OUT two Indian POLICE, blue-jacketed, wearing tin badges. Billy looks, too.

BILLY (CONT'D)

What'n hell are those metal-breasts hangin' around for?

TWO CROWS

(uneasy)

They're lookin' for my brother's widow.

BILLY

You dumb bugger, you don't have her hidin' out here, do you?

Silent, Two Crows turns his pony and leads the way to camp. Billy, disgusted, herds the unwilling cows toward the corral, slapping his muddy hat against his thigh, WHOOPING.

EXT. INDIAN CAMP - LATE AFTERNOON

The pudgy five-year old face of a boy named KOTI pushes up the tarp on a crooked wagon bed and peers out. Just as abruptly his head disappears, pulled out of sight. It's replaced by that of a WOMAN, strikingly beautiful. Hard charcoal eyes in an otherwise soft face, the opposite of Billy West. She is Koti's mother, SHENAWI.

She watches the activity at the corral-- Billy allotting the fortnightly beef ration. He's sitting at a table surrounded by Sioux. Included are the two native policemen, unwelcome and uncomfortable. Billy adjusts his reading spectacles and peers at a list.

BILLY

Okay, who's next? Where John Medicine Hat?

An elderly Indian shuffles forward. Billy squints up, recognizes him, waves him to the left of the table.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Scolding Woman?

A wrinkled matriarch moves directly to the authorized group. Two families remain unsummoned.

(CONTINUED)

BILLY (CONT'D)

That oughta do it. That's everybody.

TWO CROWS

You left out Bent Feather and Kicking Horse.

BILLY

They never signed the treaty.

Billy glances toward the policemen, then back again.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Look, what'n hell do you expect me to do? Government says if you wanna git fed you become a Treaty Indian.

TWO CROWS

But you got two cows left over.

BILLY

And if they don't go astray on me, I'm takin' 'em back to the fort.

He and Two Crows exchange hard looks, betraying nothing. The treaty Indians climb into the corral to claim their beef. The two metal-breasts mount up and ride slowly out of camp.

EXT. TWO CROWS' HOUSE - DUSK

A small tepee and a hide-covered sweat lodge outside a squared-log house. In the yard is the broken wagon that concealed the hard-eyed woman and the boy. A fire throws shadows up at the cottonwoods, illuminating Billy who hunkers down watching Two Crows heat up the stones for his sweat ceremony. In the near b.g. Shenawi, wrapped in a warm buffalo robe, hangs strips of fresh beef over a smoke rack. Billy glances at her.

BILLY

You're takin' a hell of a chance keepin' Shenawi around here. They'll hang you, too.

TWO CROWS

I know.

BILLY

What you gonna do with her?

TWO CROWS

Ask you to take her away with you.

Billy is speechless. Shenawi stops working, listening now.