

CHAPTER ONE

July 15th, 1875

Before the attack, they killed all the dogs. Several of them, mostly troop mascots, had followed the regiment from Camp Harrison in the Dakotas as it pursued a hostile raiding party deep into Wyoming Territory. Now, within two miles of Running Hawk's Cheyenne village on Crazy Woman Creek, Colonel Gannon wanted to ensure absolute silence. He put 2nd Lieutenant William Raines, two months out of West Point, in charge of the gruesome task.

With the surrounding mesas faintly visible in the darkness, the young officer gathered a detachment of fifteen troopers and set to work. They muzzled the dogs with ropes and then either silently strangled them or knifed them. Some men grumbled when they learned Colonel Gannon spared his two staghounds from the executions.

The task proved more difficult than expected for Raines' troop when their own mascot, a big wolf-like mongrel named Bob, wouldn't die. He was first strangled but five minutes later stumbled back into the troop area. Sergeant Reardon cursed, grabbed the dog and plunged a knife into its belly. Then, because he had loved the mutt as much as any man, he gently carried him to a dry creek bed and laid him to rest atop a grassy mound in the center. Several troopers wanted to bury him, but the sergeant said angrily they didn't have the time.

"Get back to your horses," he snapped.

A few minutes later, Bob wobbled back among them, wagging his tail and bleeding out of his belly. That's when Colonel Gannon marched up, furious. Every bit the dandy, he wore a red plume in the band of his slouch hat and a fringed, buckskin jacket with no insignia or rank. Even after weeks in the field, he still smelled heavily of lilac water.

"Lieutenant Raines, why is this animal still alive?" he demanded.

Raines sputtered, "The dog seems... he seems not to want to die, sir. Perhaps—."

Impatiently, Sergeant Reardon stepped up. "Colonel, sir, Old Bob's a quiet one. He won't make a sound."

Gannon cut him off with an abrupt wave of his hand. "This is not a debating society, Sergeant. Can't anybody in this damn army follow orders? Finish off that dog."

"I'll do it," Frank Nash, the Chief of Scouts, said as he appeared out of the darkness. From his belt, he drew out a long, thin picket pin and grinned. "I have just the ticket."

His unkempt brown hair fell from under an old flop hat like filthy spigot water. Shriveled human ears dangled on rawhide from his buckskin shirt, trophies he bragged taken off Indians. Ironic then that his own left ear was missing, lopped off he claimed in a stand up fight with a Sioux warrior, but word around camp was a woman had cut him. Raines didn't like the man, despite his frontier fame. He was essentially a bully.

Stamping his boot impatiently, Colonel Gannon said, "Then, for God's sake, do it. We move out in five minutes and woe be damned the man who is not ready."

While Gannon marched off, the men watched in frustration and anger as Nash held Old Bob down with his knee, the rope muzzle still in place, and with a rock quickly hammered the picket pin into his skull. The dog's muffled yelp was cut off, and he finally went limp. Standing up and brushing his hands off, Nash said, "There. Now that's how you kill a goddamn dog, boys."

Raines swore under his breath. After an instant's silence, Reardon cursed at the men, "Move, damn you! Don't stand there like mules. Get to your mounts."

Moments later, the regiment rode out toward the Cheyenne village, leaving Old Bob lying in the buffalo grass.

As the regiment neared the encampment, Gannon split his men, sending two companies around to the rear to block any escape, while the main body moved up to the ridgeline ahead. Approaching his first battle, Raines's bowels felt watery. He had never been so frightened in his life. Having prepared for this moment seemingly all his life, now that it was here, he'd rather be anywhere else on God's earth.

Unusually tall and lean, he appeared anything but a cavalry officer. His campaign cap askew, a shock of unruly blond hair poking out, he seemed more the bumpkin than the scion of a wealthy New York City family. When he reported to Camp Harrison, Colonel Gannon seemed affronted that he'd been sent such a useless officer and assigned him to a company of Irish malcontents, the regiment's most hopeless troop, where they called him *Billy Boy*, not *lieutenant* or *sir*. They saw him as a laughing stock who would get them killed, and Raines feared one of them might take it upon himself to dispatch their new lieutenant.

As a joke, the furrier assigned Raines an ancient, broken down nag as his cavalry mount, one so old it had actually served in the Civil War. Everyone had a hearty laugh about it. He had to admit he and the horse did make a comical pair looking like Don Quixote and Rocinante. Like that great mount, this poor beast's fastest gait was a creaking walk, her head bobbing like a chicken.

Now, aboard his Rocinante the Second and a couple hundred yards from a massive Cheyenne village of murderous hostiles, he saw his lifelong desire for an army career as a foolish adolescent dream. He'd give anything if he could be back safe in New York with his family. Instead, it was his lot to die on a grassy field in Wyoming Territory.

Moving cautiously, the regiment spread out along the ridge overlooking the sleeping encampment and waited for the colonel's order. It was still too dark, but on the eastern horizon the sky glowed faintly gold. It would not be long. There were at least a hundred tipis stretching across the narrow valley. Raines could do the math. A hundred tipis meant around four hundred warriors. This would be bloody. Too many would die. He thought the colonel insane to attack them with only two hundred and eighty men.

Below lay not only the great chief Running Hawk but also the vicious Cheyenne war leader Spotted Horse, who had been making settlers cringe throughout Wyoming, Montana and the Dakotas. To bag both of them today would be too much for Gannon to resist, even if he had only five companies in his command.

In the morning quiet, the dread of imminent battle sat in Raines's stomach like a sponge soaking up his courage and he belched. Beside him, Sergeant Reardon glanced his way but said nothing. His hand shaking, the lieutenant drew his sword in a sweeping movement, forcing Reardon to duck. "Jesus, Billy Boy, careful with that thing," the sergeant whispered harshly. "Put it away. Use your damn sidearm. That blade will get you killed. Got to get in too close to use it."

Reardon was no friend but the advice made sense. He sheathed the sword, drew his pistol and sat his horse, waiting as each interminable second passed. He glanced at the colonel twenty yards to the left, talking in hushed whispers with one of the newspaper correspondents accompanying the expedition, James Howard of the Chicago Tribune most likely. Gannon loved the press and they loved him.

Behind them were the Crow scouts, Frank Nash among them, their horses stamping about excitedly. Then, mounted on greys, stood the brass band, ready when the attack began to break

into the regimental song “Pat Murphy of the Irish Brigade.” Raines thought it an odd battle hymn since it sounded more like a sad Irish drinking song than anything martial, but then most of his men were Irish and all of them drank.

Reardon leaned toward him. “Steady, Billy Boy.”

Flustered, he gripped the reins of his nag. “I am steady, Sergeant.”

“You’re passing gas like you was trumpeting the charge, lad. Colonel Gannon’s going to be putting you in the band.”

At that moment, dogs began barking in the Indian encampment and a shot rang out from somewhere distant. They had been spotted. The colonel cursed and ordered the charge.

At the first blast of the bugle, Raines’s old nag snapped up her head and bolted forward like a cannon shot, racing far out in front of the regiment. Frantically, the lieutenant pulled on the horse, but it had no effect. In seconds, he was already thirty yards in front, widening the distance rapidly and heading straight for the Indian village.

CHAPTER TWO

In his blind panic, Raines considered leaping free, but that would likely break his neck. If he was lucky enough to survive the fall, it would make him look the fool. They'd say he fell off his horse or worse that he was a coward. As scared as he was, he preferred death to ridicule. So, he clung for dear life and made himself as small a target as he could.

Behind him, the regiment screamed *huzzahs*, the bugler kept blowing the charge and the band played "Pat Murphy." The clamor spurred the crazed mount on more wildly. In a terrifying few seconds, it carried him splashing across Crazy Woman Creek and into the heart of the Indian camp itself. Warriors were pouring from their lodges and firing a hail of bullets and arrows at him. He would have died there but the horse kept running right on through them so quickly they could not get a clear shot. It took him on out the other end of the encampment, rose up on its hind legs and swung back on another run through camp, back through a rain of arrows. Finally, she drew to a halt right in the middle of the village, bucked once, then sagged, spent, her head nestling close to the ground, gasping for breath.

By then the place had turned into Dante's Inferno.

The regiment had come and people were dying. Mostly Indians. Men, women and children alike. The soldiers fired at anything that moved while the Crow and white scouts set upon the Indians and scalped them dead or alive. Raines's fear turned to nausea.

That's when the oddest thing he'd ever seen in his life took place. Old Bob showed up. The spike still sticking out of his head, he loped across open ground toward the Indians as if knowing exactly where he wanted to go. Astonishingly, the line of Cheyenne ceased firing and allowed him to pass through. He kept going right on up into the hills behind the village.

Then, like a thunder clap, the firing commenced again.

As a great haze of gunpowder drifted over the village, an unarmed Cheyenne with long grey braids stepped out of his tipi near Raines, planted an American flag in the ground, and folding his arms stood in front of it. Raines thought it the bravest thing he'd ever seen. For about ten seconds, cavalymen galloped past the Indian without noticing. Then Colonel Gannon rode up and shot him in the head.

At that moment Raines's childhood dreams ended. All his life he had believed war was about glory and heroes. There was nothing glorious or heroic in this. It was slaughter.

Gannon reined his horse up next to him and shouted excitedly, "That was Running Hawk. I killed Running Hawk."

Raines stared at him with a mixture of confusion and horror.

"Well, get after them, man." The colonel gestured with his pistol.

"Sir?"

"That's your troop, isn't it?" He pointed to the hills where several cavalymen were pursuing a group of Indians up a coulee. "Go after them. Lead them. Don't let a single one of the bastards escape."

"Yes, sir," he said halfheartedly and turned the old nag toward the hills. The horse managed a lumbering gallop.

As he left the village, a dense black cloud of gun smoke engulfed him. The acrid smell singed the hairs in his nostrils and made it hard to breathe, and the poor visibility renewed panic through him. He imagined warriors coming out of the mist in every direction.

"Ride, you dumb beast, ride," he shouted angrily and spurred the horse on. She shot forward, the bitter smell or his growing terror seemingly giving her renewed energy.

When he finally escaped the mist, he found himself far up a narrow coulee but the wrong one. His men were not here; he was alone. He thought that just as well since his first battle had been an utter disaster. He had found himself wanting in every way as a soldier. The images of women and children cut down in volley after volley made him feel sick, and he feared he might actually vomit.

Suddenly, he heard the pounding of a horse's hooves and turned to face an Indian boy, thirteen or fourteen, with a drawn pistol trying to ride by him. Raines had his own pistol in his hand and realized he'd not fired a shot yet. In an instant, he made the decision to let the boy pass.

Desperately, he tried signing to him his intention, but the boy fired at him from only a few feet. The lieutenant heard the bullet whine passed his ear. The boy fired again before Raines snapped off a shot but missed also. Wildly for several seconds, they kept shooting at each other, hitting nothing.

Finally, a shot caught the old nag in the head, splattering blood and grit onto Raines's face. The horse dropped instantly and the lieutenant rolled away. The boy shrieked a war cry and rode right at him. The lieutenant fired twice more, the second time hitting the boy in the chest, toppling him from his pony.

Raines stared at the body, at the tiny hole in the chest and the vacant eyes. This was supposed to be a rite of passage, killing your first Indian. It did not feel like a rite of passage. Instead, a vast emptiness spread inside him.

Disgusted, he started walking back toward the village. He had had enough. They would court-martial him, drum him out of the army if he was lucky, put him in front of a firing squad for desertion if he was not. Right now, he didn't care. He wanted no more of it.

The sun had come up and burned off the morning chill. He sat on a fallen log, as tired as he had ever been in his life, and waited for whatever was to come. He listened to the staccato sound of distant gunfire, the shouts and commands and screams of battle as if he were the lone person in the audience at the Academy of Music Opera House watching Tristan in hell without his Isolde. He pushed the tumult from his mind and thought of his own Isolde, his fiancée Nancy. The glorious Nancy Merchant. He pictured her beautiful face framed by golden ringlets, saw the coy smile that so entranced him. Odd, she came to mind now. Missing her at this exact moment, he felt a palpable ache.

He was reaching into his pocket for the locket with her picture when an Indian bounded on foot over the crest of the coulee, darting right at him. He jumped up fumbling for his gun, then froze. It was a girl, maybe seventeen or eighteen, with wild terrified eyes. At sight of him, she shrieked in alarm but kept coming. A moment later, Nash sprinted over the top after her.

"Stop the little bitch, Lieutenant," the scout yelled.

She dodged past him, but Raines did not attempt to stop her. Something in her eyes shocked him, her terror, yes, but something more. In the numbing fog of battle, he couldn't fix on it.

"Damn it, Lieutenant," Nash cursed, rushing past, firing a shot at the girl.

She fell but quickly scrambled up, trying to limp away. By then Nash was on her, viciously clubbing her once with his pistol, knocking her to the ground. In no hurry now, he began unbuckling his belt.

Raines took a couple steps forward. "What are you doing?"

"She's a quick one, she is," he said, glancing back at him with a hideous grin. "I owe her this. Stay out of it."

She was on her belly, one arm pinned under her, the fingers of the other groping in the dirt. He dropped his pants and stood bare-assed over her and said as if he knew her, "You know you got this coming, girl. You know you do."

Falling to his knees, he violently jerked her onto her back. As she spun, she lashed out with a knife, slicing his thigh open. He stumbled back, screaming, "Bitch!"

She struggled up once more and tried to escape. From his sitting position, Nash aimed carefully and fired. She fell hard this time, blood seeping quickly into the side of her calico dress.

Calmly, Nash tied a kerchief over the wound on his leg, pulled up his pants and hobbled over to her. He drew his knife and clutched her hair, yanking her into a sitting position. She stared up at him with a mixture of terror, rage and hatred. He was going to scalp her while she was still alive.

Raines shouted, "Stop! That's an order, Nash."

Nash's eyes darkened. "You got no say over me, Billy Boy." He put the knife to her forehead and began cutting. Blood flooded out.

Raines's sudden fury overwhelmed his fear. He jammed his gun hard into the man's temple and cocked it. "This says I do. I'll scatter your pea brain all over this ground if you cut one more whit. Do you understand me, you bastard?" His voice was high pitched and frenzied as if he'd gone mad.

Nash stopped. "No you won't, Billy Boy." But his tone indicated he was not so sure.

"I swear on my soul I will."

The cut across the girl's forehead was barely an inch long but it bled profusely. When Nash released her, she fell back onto the ground, gasping for breath, wiping blood from her eyes. They were frozen in that tableau, her on the ground, Raines pistol pressed against Nash's temple, when Sergeant Reardon and two soldiers rode up. "What's going on here, Billy Boy?"

Raines didn't answer immediately, but Nash did. Brushing the lieutenant's gun aside, he said, "Damn, Reardon, glad you're here. Do something about this lieutenant of yours. I'm trying to kill myself an Injun, but the boy here don't seem to get the purpose of this day."

The sergeant glanced at Raines. "Lieutenant?"

Raines didn't know what to answer. To say he was not going to allow anymore killing of women and children might not work with men caught in bloodlust, though he had to admit Reardon seemed in control of himself. He had not seen the sergeant shoot anyone. Still, the colonel seemed to want every Cheyenne dead. He would back Nash. But, Raines was not going to let anyone kill this Indian girl, not even Reardon.

Before he could speak, the girl struggled into a sitting position, holding one hand on her forehead and one at her side as if trying to stop all the blood from escaping her body. Suddenly, he realized what was so strange about her. Her eyes were pale grey, the color of river ice. She spoke to Reardon in a sharp voice that carried a distinct Irish lilt. "Are ye blind, man? I am Morgan O'Connor, and I am no Indian."