

Chapter 1

EPICENTER: THE LITTLE BIGHORN VALLEY

June 25, 1876

The ground was moving but not from within the earth. The rumbling came from 1,000 Native American warriors, riding their horses in a counterclockwise circle around the bottom of a hill. They were supported by an additional 1,000 warriors on foot, who crept and crawled through the sagebrush and tall grass, toward the summit of the same hill. With each passing minute, both rings of warriors advanced. They were in the final minutes of what would be the greatest battle any of them had ever participated in. The stakes could not have been higher: they were fighting for their way of life and their very existence.

At the top of the hill, desperately trying to hold on, were roughly 100 members of the 7th Cavalry. Up until this point, they had been on offense, but there was no mistaking that their situation had turned; they were now on defense. Like a giant boa constrictor surrounding its prey and gradually tightening its grip, death was certain, but just when it would come is unknown.

As the scene grew increasingly bleak, chaos and confusion spread like wildfire among the soldiers. Where there had once been hubris and bravado, there was now fear and doubt. The smell of gun powder filled the air. So did the dust! Kicked up by the Indians' horses, the dust was so thick it obscured targets and made it hard to breathe. Weapons jammed and became difficult to reload. The high-pitched wail of the Indians' eagle bone whistles pierced the air and made the battle seem "other worldly." In the distance, a bugle called for men to advance. The sound of gunfire cracked every few seconds. The soldiers' throats were dry, and they needed water. But they would find no relief, no thirst-quenching liquid to satisfy their cotton mouths. Even if there had been water, there was no time to consume it. With every minute, the battle only intensified.

Each soldier was literally and proverbially "a thousand miles away" from home. Months of riding, day after day, and being pushed hard to reach this place had taken its toll. There had been little sleep the night before and they were exhausted. But the human spirit will suppress all of this, in its will to survive. Each man knew he was in a fight for his life.

This was the moment, the moment where you live or die.

At the center of the madness was a confident leader. He wore a buckskin jacket and a broad-brimmed hat. Around his neck, there was tied a bright red scarf, his trademark. He was fair complexioned, with sharp cheek bones and steely blue eyes. His name was George Armstrong Custer, and he was a Lt. Col. in the United States Army and the regimental leader of the 7th Cavalry. His reputation for valor preceded him. At times, over the previous decade, his name had been on the lips of every man, woman, and child in the country. During the Civil War, he was known as "the boy General." That's because he rose so quickly in rank, that he became one

of the youngest generals in history. Some even credit him with being the reason the north prevailed over the south. He was present when Lee surrendered to Grant, he found gold in the Black Hills; he protected railroad expansions; he entertained Tsars; and he penned best-selling novels. Americans could recite his deeds from memory. However, the past few years found him out of the spotlight, and his name had nearly been forgotten. But if he could secure another victory, this time, for President Grant, then he would surely secure his place in history.

It was the Summer of 1876, and he and his men were in the hills of Southern Montana, just above the banks of the Little Bighorn River, nine days shy of the country's 100th birthday. He was 36 years old, and he was fighting the last battle of his life. But, at that moment, there was no way he could have known that.

Custer loved a crisis; he thrived on it. Perhaps that's why he remained ever calm as he took inventory of the situation. The terrain on which he and his men found themselves left them fully exposed, with no cover. They were surrounded on all fronts, making the hill they stood on a death trap. In a desperate attempt to stay alive, Custer ordered his men to circle the horses and prepare to shoot them. Each man knew that this action would seal their fate. Without their horses, there would be no escape. There would be no way to ride away from this madness and back to the safety of Fort Abraham Lincoln. Just before giving the command, Custer looked to the south again. He looked in the direction of his third in command, Col. Fredrick Benteen. An hour earlier, he had sent a messenger to Benteen with orders to bring reinforcements of men, weapons, and ammunition. If Benteen could be found on the horizon, then Custer and his men might still have a chance. But, the distant hill was silent and still. There was no Benteen on the horizon. The cavalry was not coming to save the day. The only thing Custer could see through the dust and smoke were the endless, empty Montana plains. And Indians. So many Indians.

He turned his attention back to his men, and shouted, "Your attention men! On my command, you are to shoot your horses!" It was all too real at this moment. "Ready your pistols! Take aim. . . fire!" 39 horses were instantly sacrificed. As soon as their hides fell into the Montana tall grass, the soldiers dropped down behind them to take cover. They continued firing into the haze, but their bullets had little effect. The number of warriors advancing seemed to multiply with every minute that passed!

Drawing closer, but just at a distance, the Indians continued to circle the soldiers on horseback. They were such skilled riders that they could use their horses as living shields. This was achieved by hanging off their horses' necks and firing at the soldiers as they galloped. Just beyond the riders, and still unseen, were the Indians crawling and crouching through the tall grass. They fired their long guns and shot steel tipped arrows into the soldiers' defenses, picking them off one by one. As they advanced, some warriors would stand up and run towards the soldiers, breaking the line. They swung their hatchets upside the temples of their enemy, delivering a deathblow!

After eight minutes of fighting, the combined effects of hot lead, hand-crafted arrows, and blunt force trauma began to take their toll on the 7th Cavalry. Their numbers were decreasing. Cries of, "More ammo! More ammo!" were heard throughout the battlefield. Everyone was choking on dust as they tried to reload their rifles. All attempts to regain the upper hand had failed. The soldiers, now numbering roughly 60, realized they had no other option than to fight until death consumed them all. Surely, they began to realize that their fight was vain. The best any of them could hope for at this point was to die with bravery and honor.

Employing a brilliant tactical maneuver, the warriors of the Sioux, Cheyenne and Lakota, pointed their arrows to the sky and released them. When gravity retuned the arrows, they fell

within the ring of dead horses and found purchase in muscle and matter. The warriors repeated this tactic several more times, wiping out half the soldiers.

Still, Custer remained alive. With every breath he took, he searched for a solution, a way out. Twelve years earlier, during the Civil War, he had faced similar odds. But somehow he had always prevailed. It was during those battles that he first adopted his signature red scarf. The scarf served two purposes: it made him easier to find on the battlefield, which was good for the men under his command, and it taunted the enemy; and Custer loved having a little flare. Those battles exemplified Custer's bravery and willingness to fight alongside his men. That's where the name Custer first crossed into legendary status.

In the heat of this battle, as the odds seemed overwhelming, he remained steadfast and focused. He fired his Colt pistol at an advancing Indian and the warrior's head exploded. Directly behind that Indian, another appeared. Custer took aim again, and the Indian darted out of the way. Custer's sight remained locked on his target. He pulled the trigger and felt the gun give an empty "click." Instantly, he realized that he was out of ammunition. He cursed as he saw his target disappear in the dust. He fumbled for his ammunition, as warm blood splattered the side of his face. The man to his left had just been struck down and had fallen at Custer's side. Bullets slipped from his fingers as he wiped the blood off his face. His eyes quickly scanned the horizon for the next attacker. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, sweat flowed from his pores, and his nostrils flared for more oxygen. This was a rush. He laughed. This was the thick of the battle! he loved this- for he was a soldier! He took one more glance at the distant hill where he expected to see Colonel Benteen; but, nothing.

At this point, the Indians were so close you could actually hear them breathe. As his men died around him, he still remained certain that he could save them.

That was the last thought that went through his head, just before a bullet struck his right temple and ended his life. He fell, face up, onto the two men that lay behind him, one of whom had died only half a minute before him. The only part of Custer's body to touch the ground was the small of his back. It was a glorious death. Perhaps, that's why there appeared to be a smile frozen on his face.

Seconds later, an Indian brave appeared over Custer's lifeless body and fired another shot into his chest. With Custer now dead, the remaining soldiers abandoned the hill and raced on foot for the cover of a nearby ravine. Scores of soldiers were cut down as they fled. Eventually, some made it to the deep ravine, but they would find no safety there. One by one, they were shot from above, like fish in a barrel. When it was over, none of those who fled the hill survived.

However, on a distant hill, there was one last soldier still alive. He was 2nd Lt. Henry Harrington, and he had just witnessed Custer's death on what would later be known as "Last Stand Hill." At that very moment, his survival instincts took hold. He mounted his horse, broke free of the warriors that surrounded him and raced away from the carnage. One Indian who witnessed his tenacity called him "The bravest man I've ever seen." Seven Indian warriors mounted their horses and gave chase, but their chief called out for them to let the man go. A few did not heed the call and persisted in the hunt. Fearing the warriors were about to catch him and then scalp him alive, the 27-year-old soldier pulled out his revolver and shot himself in the head.

Because Harrington's body was never recovered, he would be listed as "missing in action." He was survived by his wife, Grace, and their two children, back at Fort Lincoln. She would later make several trips to the battlefield, searching for his remains. But no remains were ever recovered. Less than a decade later, she disappeared while visiting her sister in Texas. Nine days later, she was found wandering by herself, suffering from amnesia and pneumonia.

Like many of his fellow soldiers, Harrington had enlisted in the Army as a means of survival. He had been with the Army for only four years. Still others were far more “green.” Some killed in action had been with the 7th for less than a year. Or, in the case of one soldier, Private David Summers, he was incredibly unlucky. On his second enlistment, he was assigned to the 7th just four days before they departed on this campaign. He, along with 268 others, would die in this battle. Some of the soldiers were so badly mutilated, that they would never be identified. Still others, like the afore mentioned Harrington, were never found. The rest would all have the same date etched on their tombstone: June 25, 1876. Everyone who fought alongside Custer was killed that day. Among them were four members of Custer’s family - his two younger brothers Thomas and Boston, as well as his brother-in-law and his 18-year-old nephew.

Four miles to the south, on another hill, Colonel Benteen and Major Reno were still battling the Indians. Their battle would persist through the night and into the next day. As the sun began to set on that first day, the attack subsided. Under the cloak of night, these men stood watch, reloaded weapons, dug shallow trenches, and tended to the wounded, all while looking over their shoulder for the next wave of warriors.

Back on Last Stand Hill, the desecration and looting of the dead began before sunset. Chief Sitting Bull had instructed the warriors not to touch the dead or take their belongings, but the temptation proved to be too great. Female members of the tribe worked in tandem with the men and young boys. These warriors scavenged what they deemed useful: weapons, ammunition, leather belts, buckles, jackets, canteens, and saddlebags. Some of them were hoping to collect “trophy of war,” such as a flag or a bugle. They also collected scalps and mutilated bodies. The gutting and maiming of the dead served two purposes: punishment in the afterlife and a message in this life. For example, many bodies had their ears severed. By taking their ears, they believed their enemy would hear them better in the afterlife. By cutting their hands off, they wouldn’t be able to harm their enemies. By cutting gashes down their inner thighs, they would not be able to ride a horse. Finally, taking the scalps of the dead was meant to intimidate the living; and it was very effective.

Just north of where Custer fell, on a distant hill, cloaked by the tall grass, a massive creature covered in hair was watching all of this unfold. The creature studied the movements of the Indians, and he waited...when he sensed the moment was right, he moved in.

There was but a handful of Indians left scavenging at this point. Three of them were women, one was a young boy, and the other was a young warrior who had been wounded. They were so preoccupied with their self-assigned tasks, that they never realized that they were standing in the shadow of a massive beast. The creature roared, sending adrenaline and fear-fueled shockwaves down the spines of those who gazed up at him. He spread his arms wide, in a display of deadly potential, and the Indians fell backward from fear.

The only warrior who was armed managed to cross his bow with an arrow, but before he could raise the weapon, the creature ripped it from his hands and turned it into splinters. The natives began to scatter, heading back down the hills toward their village. Some dropped their loot in order to move more quickly. Now alone, the battlefield belonged to BIGFOOT.

A slight breeze distributed the scent of gun powder through the air, and the only thing that moved were the tall, amber blades of grass. Bigfoot scanned the fallen soldiers for something or someone. The setting sun kicked up such a glare that his eyes tightened to provide relief. Just then, he spotted it, a bright red scarf around the neck of the man who died from a shot to the temple. It was Custer.

Bigfoot knelt beside him and studied his face. Custer's unblinking eyes stared out at the sky as if searching for Heaven. Bigfoot gently closed his eyes. Then, he slammed his massive hands together and created a sound so loud it could be heard all the way back to Benteen and Reno. He placed his hands on Custer's chest, over his heart, and then looked into the sun. Just as the sun set, there appeared a green flash! When Bigfoot looked back down at Custer, his eyes were open once more, and they were blinking with life!

Custer sputtered and gasped. He felt air fill his lungs, and his heart fluttered and beat. Bigfoot lifted his torso off the ground and then slammed it back into the soil again. He repeated this action two more times. Finally, Custer was released. Slowly, he sat up and attempted to make sense of the situation. The dead surrounded him, smoke wafted through the air, and blood soaked into the soil. He studied his hands as if for the first time. He flexed and waved his fingers. Then he remembered a wound. He quickly felt his temple and found no wound. He was both stunned and relieved at this revelation. He staggered to his feet and steadied himself. He saw something sitting on its ass, human-like, but he couldn't identify it. At first, he thought it was a grizzly bear, but a buffalo made more sense. And yet, nothing made sense. He searched his memory for the last thing he could remember, and he decided to focus on that. He stepped away from the creature and called out to his brother.

"Thomas!" His voice seemed weak. Knowing he could do better, he cleared his throat and then cried out for his younger brother once more. "THOMAS! Where are you? THOMAS!?" There was no reply from Thomas, but there came a reply from someone else... "QUIET!"

Custer turned in the direction of the voice and witnessed what he thought had been a bear rise from the grass and stand on two feet. This hair covered mass towered above him as Custer struggled to make sense of what he was seeing. Just then, Bigfoot spoke again, "They can't hear you. They're all dead. Every last one of them."

Custer was bewildered; he kept trying to process what was happening, but it led nowhere. Meanwhile, Bigfoot wasn't about to waste any time. He turned away and began searching among the dead soldiers for *something*. In a matter of minutes, he had found what he was looking for. He held his hands over the body of a dead soldier and then moved his hands back and forth as if he were conducting an orchestra. He gestured in a way that propelled the body to rise like a hot air balloon. Bigfoot called to Custer once more, "Now, follow me. We must leave immediately."