

# PROLOGUE

## *Washington and Montana Territories (1877)*

It is said the Palouse was once as green as the Pacific, its rolling hills like waves frozen in time, the bunchgrass so dense it covered the valleys like shag, the wheatgrass so tall it swallowed deer, and meadows so vast the eye could not tell their beginning or end, the only break in the ceaseless green the white-tasseled cheat grass on the crests of the hills, frothing like sea foam in the breeze.

Each spring the Nez Perce led their snowy-hipped horses onto this sea of grass, slipped their halters and set them free. The Appaloosas galloped their joy over the lush meadows, wheeling again and again like shoals of fish, wringing the last drop of sprint from their hocks to course up a hillside and burst through its tasseled whitecaps, plunging down the far slope into a grassy glen, milling and snorting before lowering their heads to graze and fatten over the summer like ravening bears.

Within a week, mares that had the summer before nibbled and teased stallions with pheromone-laced urine squirts now swirled as if chasing their tails, their sagging bellies swaying in the birth dance as they tromped thick grass into oval beds, dropping with a groan to deliver their foals.

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The newborn lay dazed and glistening in their afterbirth, waiting like new butterflies for wings to fill and unfurl. Then, like the flick of a switch, the foals were up bucking, kicking, leaping straight into the air, the seed of Pegasus launching into flight, surprised when they fell back to earth as though their kind was meant to fly, the skill lurking somewhere deep within their genes, forever taunting the young of their blood to make the attempt, to become completely free.

The tribes of the plains prized the Nez Perce's mounts above all others, trading precious buffalo hides for the horses and stealing them in night raids once the hides ran out. But the Appaloosas were a breed unknown to the farmers, merchants, ranchers, and soldiers swarming into the territory, drawing bogus borders with fences in a land where the only real lines were forged by rivers and canyons, prairies and mountains.

Some of the tribes went to war to stamp out these pests, the most ferocious being the Sioux who annihilated Custer and all of his troops. 'Yellow-Hair' was not long in his grave before the army struck back, not against the fierce Sioux but with an ambush on the village of the Nez Perce, a people notorious for their peaceful ways, a Christianized tribe so devout it had sent braves all the way to St. Louis to get Bibles.

It was an unequal contest and therefore ideal, for the army itched to match the slaughter of the Little Bighorn. Like lazy hunters bludgeoning seal pups, the soldiers picked off the easy targets first, the women and children and stumbling arthritic elders. The braves, slipping in the slicks of Nez Perce blood, did their best with bows and arrows against rifles but were hunters not warriors, proving their mettle not by killing other men but testing themselves by turning blue, stripping naked in the dead of winter and plunging into the Snake River to swim its icy rapids across

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its width and back.

Chief Joseph and two hundred surviving braves gathered up the women and children that were left, put them on horses and escaped at a pounding gallop. The cavalry tried to keep up but their horses were not hardy Appaloosas and soon lathered and collapsed, rolling dead onto their riders. Other cavalry were sent after Joseph and his tiny band, each passing the baton after riding their mounts into the ground, the army forced to empty remudas across the territory to supply the fresh horses needed to dog Joseph on his twelve hundred mile dash to Canada.

The last mounted army finally caught up at Bear Paw Mountain, only forty miles from the Canadian border. Weary saddle mounts drawing Howitzers soon arrived, the straining horses puffing clouds of crystalized breath under the whip to move the artillery into position. After the cannons first volley, Nez Perce women gouged trenches with pottery shards and bare hands and put in the children and wounded, layering them with buffalo robes as shields against the zinging shrapnel.

Joseph could have escaped with his braves in a final race for the border by leaving behind the women, children, the ill and lame, but he allowed the braves who wished to leave while he stayed put at Bear Paw to care for those left behind, heart-broken from the twist of fate that had put him so close to victory, ending his dream of dismounting in Canada to pluck a fistful of grass and wipe the foam from his stallion, whispering his gratitude for the countless miles that had worn the horse's hoofs down to the quick.

After the cannons fell silent, the cavalry kept its distance, waiting at the base of the mountain for Joseph's next move. Snow had begun to fall. In the distance there appeared a lone Indian, a blanket wrapped around

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his shoulders against the cold, advancing slowly, head bowed.

The troopers knew Joseph's real name, Thunder Rising in the Mountain. In the long months of the chase across five states, Joseph's braves had triumphed in many a skirmish, collected rifles and discovered they had an eye for pinpoint shots. Soon they were picking off troopers from a half-mile distant, the soldiers falling dead before the crack of the shot caught up to pass overhead like rolling thunder, the rumble attaching itself to the idea of Joseph so that in the minds of the troopers his name had become the echo of death.

But the tall Indian walking toward them did not look like the demon that haunted their nightmares. Joseph plodded as though his feet no longer obeyed and had to be dragged. He carried his rifle not as a weapon but like an old stick, a hand around the muzzle, the rifle's butt furrowing the snow. Joseph surrendered the rifle to an officer and proclaimed with a catch in his voice that he would "fight no more forever."

To make sure this was true, nine years later white men drove stakes on a rise where the Appaloosas once grazed, sinking the sticks to the hilt in topsoil that was a hundred feet thick, the loam so soft and rich that farming it was like plowing whipped cream. There on the knoll the workers built a hallmark of their civilization, a brick prison with watchtowers at each corner, looking from afar like a cavalry fortress, as the architects intended.

The prison's first warden was a stern man named John Justice. Its first inmate the murderer Bill Murphy. Soldiers of the state's National Guard wearing Union blue had collected Murphy at a county jail in the rainforest on the coast, put him on a horse and rode in a downpour into the mountains for the razor peaks of the Cascades, their officer

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absentmindedly tugging the brim of his black Stetson to release the rain pooling in the hollows of his hat's curled rim.

In four days they entered a pass blasted through granite by army engineers and reached the mountain's other side. The troopers urged their horses down, emerging two days later onto the high desert where the sun had baked the clouds away, cooking the desert floor until it shimmered air like a stove, the horses' hooves stirring whirlwinds of dust that hung in suspension, clinging like cat hair to the troopers' uniforms.

In a week they arrived at the prison as gray as Confederate soldiers. Their commander, a young lieutenant, ordered them to spiffy up. The troopers slapped their tunics and spanked prairie dust from their thighs. Murphy wanted to swat dust too but his wrists were shackled, as were his ankles. He was led into the prison shuffling in his chains where warden Justice handed him his striped prison clothes, the shirt carrying on its back the number "1".

A century later the numbers were in five digits, though Washington State Penitentiary at Walla Walla remained essentially unchanged—a stolid red brick fortress in the middle of the humped prairie, baking in the relentless summer sun.