

AFTER THE LAST STAND

Written by

Gary J Rose

Groser1@pacbell.net
(530) 613-9232

EXT. MONTANA PLAINS - DAY - JUNE 25, 1876

A vast expanse of wild, rolling prairie. Storm clouds gather on the horizon. The earth trembles under the thunder of hoofbeats.

A cavalry column rides hard—dust in their wake. In front, riding apart, is GENERAL GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER (37), golden hair flowing beneath his wide-brimmed hat. His posture is proud. Determined. Arrogant.

Riding nearby—his brothers, CAPTAIN TOM CUSTER and LT. BOSTON CUSTER, exchange wary looks.

Custer scans the horizon, hand shielding his eyes. See Indian encampment.

GEN. CUSTER

We strike now. Before Terry even smells their trail.

TOM CUSTER

We were to wait for Gibbon's force.

GEN. CUSTER

(smirking)

And hand him the glory? I think not.

He turns his horse sharply and rides toward the bluffs ahead. The others, though uncertain, follow.

Custer draws his sword, the polished blade flashing in the sun.

GEN. CUSTER (CONT'D)

The Seventh rides to history.

He charges forward.

The officers follow. A cloud of dust swallows them.

FADE TO BLACK.

TEXT ON SCREEN:

"Two Days Later"

June 27, 1876

The Valley of the Little Bighorn

EXT. RIDGE OVERLOOKING BATTLEFIELD - EARLY MORNING

A hush. The wind rustles tall grass. A black cloud of crows rises from the valley below.

GENERAL ALFRED TERRY (50s), upright and grim, pulls his horse to a stop at the crest. With him, MAJOR MARCUS RENO (38), gaunt and shaken, and CAPTAIN FREDERICK BENTEEN (40s), hardened and cynical.

Behind them, soldiers rein in—eyes already watering from the smell rising up the slope.

PRIVATE (O.S.)
God almighty...

They look down.

A field of death.

Bodies lie strewn in every direction. Arms twisted. Faces bloated. Dozens of stripped, scalped corpses rot under the sun. Uniforms in tatters. Limbs hacked. Crows peck at eye sockets.

A trooper vomits violently.

BENTEEN
So... this is where they made their stand.

TERRY
Get the surgeon. Start marking who we can identify.

They ride slowly into the heart of the massacre.

EXT. LAST STAND HILL - CONTINUOUS

CUSTER lies on his back beneath the open sky. Eyes closed. Arms crossed over his chest like a man at peace.

Except...

Two long bone knitting needles have been jammed into his ears.

SCOUT (O.S.)
(Lakota dialect,
subtitled)
They say it helps the dead hear...
what they failed to hear in life.

Terry dismounts, shaken.

Next to Custer lies TOM CUSTER—his face pulverized beyond recognition, uniform shredded, entrails half-spilled.

Nearby, a Native scout kneels to whisper a prayer, brushing flies from a corpse's face.

TERRY

They fought... to the last man.

RENO

Or were left to.

A soldier uncovers a cluster of bodies in a shallow ravine. All have been scalped. One is missing his genitals.

He collapses to his knees, sobbing.

Another man clutches a rosary, blood-stained fingers frozen in mid-prayer.

BENTEEN

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph...

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - LATER

Soldiers dig shallow graves. Others lay blankets over the dead. Hacked boots. Severed hands. Buzzards circle above.

TERRY (O.S.)

(Bitterly)

So much for a swift campaign...

He looks back at Custer's body, then turns away.

TERRY (CONT'D)

We bury the dead. Then we tell
Washington what they don't want to
hear.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - LATER

A soldier hammers a crude wooden cross into the earth. Another drapes a torn cavalry coat over a faceless corpse.

Men move among the dead with bandanas over their faces—the stench unbearable.

PRIVATE KELLY (19), pale and shaken, kneels beside a fallen friend. He fumbles to read the initials carved into a scorched belt buckle.

PRIVATE KELLY
Jimmy... Christ. Jimmy...

He places the buckle in his pocket, eyes glassy.

Nearby, a surgeon crouches beside a half-buried body, checking for any clue of identity. He shakes his head.

SURGEON
No tags. No insignia left. We'll never know who most of 'em were.

TERRY
Then mark what you can. And give them each a prayer, even if nameless.

Benteen walks among the carnage, boots squelching in mud and blood. He stops beside a dead Crow scout, his eyes wide open.

BENTEEN
No medals for them, eh?

He picks up the scout's bow, now cracked in half, and leaves it across the man's chest.

Reno watches from a distance, drinking from a flask. His hands tremble.

EXT. TEMPORARY GRAVE SITE - LATE AFTERNOON

Corpses lie side-by-side in a long trench. Some partially wrapped in blankets. Some not.

Terry stands at the edge with Benteen and Reno.

TERRY
When we return to Fort Lincoln, I'll telegraph the War Department. They'll want a report. Clean. Official.

He looks over the mass grave.

TERRY (CONT'D)
This isn't the story they want. But it's the one we'll carry the rest of our lives.

BENTEEN
And Libbie Custer'll want something else entirely.

RENO

She'll get her version. We all
will.

A beat.

Thunder rumbles distantly over the bluffs. Crows call from a nearby tree. The sun begins to set behind a veil of smoke.

FADE OUT.

TEXT OVER BLACK:

"One Year Later - West Point Cemetery" - Day

A military procession moves through the manicured grounds. A flag-draped coffin is carried by six solemn pallbearers. A brass band plays low and slow.

LIBBIE CUSTER (34), veiled in black, rides in a carriage behind the coffin. Her face is unreadable. Hands folded in her lap. A small American flag clenched tight.

Reporters jot in notebooks. Sketch artists capture the moment for Eastern papers.

DIGNITARY (O.S.)

...Major General George Armstrong
Custer, hero of Gettysburg, martyr
of the frontier.

A twenty-one-gun salute cracks the silence.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Libbie does not flinch.

PRIEST

Ashes to ashes... dust to dust.

The casket is lowered. A soldier plays "Taps" on a bugle. The note trembles in the warm summer air.

Libbie steps forward. She drops a yellow rose on the lid of the coffin.

A tear rolls down her cheek—but her spine remains rigid.

LIBBIE (V.O.)

They want the story of a gallant
charge. Of a man who stood alone,
sword drawn, against a horde of
savages.

A beat.

LIBBIE (V.O.)
Let them have it. Let them need it.

As the casket settles into the earth, clicks of cameras and scribbling of pens fill the air.

Libbie turns and walks away. Controlled. Composed. But something in her eyes—fire, not grief.

INT. WAR DEPARTMENT - WASHINGTON D.C. - DAY

Mahogany walls. A smoky haze. Two WAR DEPARTMENT OFFICIALS stand over a desk covered in dispatches and battlefield reports.

OFFICIAL #1
So Custer's a hero now?

OFFICIAL #2
According to the newspapers, yes.
According to the men who
survived... that's a murkier tale.

He sets a file down labeled:

"CONFIDENTIAL: COURT OF INQUIRY - MAJ. M. RENO"

OFFICIAL #1
Jesus. First they lionize him, now
they need a scapegoat.

EXT. FORT LINCOLN - DAY

A steam engine hisses to a halt. RENO and BENTEEN step off the train in full uniform. The few soldiers present offer cold, unsure salutes.

Benteen scans the platform—feels the judgment in the silence.

BENTEEN
Welcome home, Major.

Reno says nothing. He looks hollowed out, eyes rimmed in red. His gloved hand trembles at his side.

INT. LIBBIE CUSTER'S PARLOR - NEW YORK CITY - NIGHT

Gaslight flickers. Newspaper clippings are spread across a table. Engravings of George. Sketches of the battlefield. Headlines screaming:

"CUSTER'S FINAL GLORY"

"A MARTYR TO THE INDIAN WARS"

INT. LIBBIE CUSTER'S PARLOR - NEW YORK CITY-NIGHT (CONT'D)

Libbie, now without her veil, sits at the table in a stiff-backed chair.

She clips articles with precision. Places them in a scrapbook. Every image of George, pristine. Every line rewritten in ink, correcting headlines with her own narrative.

She smooths a page with gloved hands. Then stares-hard-into the candlelight.

LIBBIE

You will not be forgotten. Not by me.

She opens a fresh journal. Writes at the top in perfect cursive:

"The Story the Nation Must Remember."

INT. BARRACKS - FORT LINCOLN - NIGHT

Benteen sits on a cot, boots off, staring at nothing.

Across the room, Reno pours from a bottle into a tin cup. His jacket's off, sweat-soaked shirt clinging to his back.

RENO

They'll put me on trial, Fred. You'll see.

BENTEEN

They're not after justice. They're after a clean story.

RENO
 (shaking head)
 You and I were supposed to die on
 that hill. That's the only ending
 they would've accepted.

He downs the whiskey.

A long silence.

BENTEEN
 We survived. That's our sin.

Reno looks up. Eyes sharp.

RENO
 What if we didn't survive, Fred?
 What if we're still out there... in
 that valley?

EXT. VALLEY OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN - NIGHT - FLASHBACK
 (SURREAL)

The field of corpses under moonlight.

The wind howls.

Custer's body lies still on the hill. The knitting needles
 gleam in the dark.

A faint WHISPER rides the wind—voices of the dead.

BACK TO SCENE - INT. BARRACKS - NIGHT

Reno sits motionless. Haunted.

RENO
 I still hear them.

EXT. WAR DEPARTMENT - WASHINGTON D.C. - DAY

A carriage pulls up in front of the stone façade. MAJOR
 GENERAL SCHOFIELD steps out, papers in hand, and enters.

INT. MILITARY BOARDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

A dozen high-ranking Army officers gather around a large oak
 table. Maps. Reports. A framed portrait of Ulysses S. Grant
 looms overhead.

SCHOFIELD
Gentlemen. The public wants
clarity. The Army wants closure.

He lays down a fresh file labeled:

"COURT OF INQUIRY - MAJOR MARCUS A. RENO"

SCHOFIELD
We'll convene in Chicago. Official
proceedings. Witnesses,
transcripts, the works.

COLONEL
And what if Reno tells the truth?

A long beat.

SCHOFIELD
Then we publish the version they'll
accept.

INT. PARLOR - MANHATTAN - DAY

Libbie Custer sits across from SENATOR HENRY DAWES (50s),
stiff and uncomfortable in her curated, immaculate space.
Teacups clink.

LIBBIE
General Custer's name deserves more
than a postscript.

DAWES
The inquiry may not favor him,
Libbie.

LIBBIE
Then perhaps Congress should hear
from me first.

She opens a folder. Inside: letters of support, editorials,
battlefield drawings, glowing testimonials from Custer's
Civil War service.

She slides it across the table with an icy smile.

LIBBIE (CONT'D)
Tell them the General's widow is
watching. And she has the public's
ear.

EXT. PINE RIDGE - DAKOTA TERRITORY - DUSK

A Lakota camp, peaceful in the fading light. Children play near fires. Elders sit in a circle.

ELDER TATÉ (70s), leathery and wise, speaks to a young white reporter with a notebook. A translator stands nearby.

TATÉ (IN LAKOTA, SUBTITLED)
They came with guns, like thunder.
But they could not see what lay
before them.

TRANSLATOR
They thought victory was waiting
over the hill.

Taté gestures with a stick to a crude drawing in the dirt—a hill, a ring of warriors, a sun overhead.

TATÉ (SUBTITLED)
We let them come.

The translator hesitates. The reporter leans forward.

REPORTER
Let them come?

TATÉ
We watched their dust before they
even knew we were near. The earth
told us.

A long pause. Taté pokes the dirt again, making little Xs around the cavalry mark.

TATÉ (SUBTITLED) (CONT'D)
We swallowed them.

INT. CHICAGO - MILITARY COURTROOM - DAY

Rows of seats. Military decorum. Officers in dress uniform. The room hums with anticipation.

A sign outside the door reads:

"UNITED STATES ARMY - COURT OF INQUIRY - MAJ. M. A. RENO"

Reno steps inside, adjusting his collar. Benteen follows, glancing at reporters already scribbling.

Libbie Custer, in black and lace, sits in the front row.

The presiding officer bangs a gavel.

PRESIDING OFFICER
This inquiry will now come to
order.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. WAR DEPARTMENT - WASHINGTON D.C. - DAY

A black carriage pulls up to a government building, sleek and silent. Stepping out is MAJOR GENERAL SCHOFIELD (50s), ramrod-straight, with a folder tucked beneath one arm.

INT. WAR DEPARTMENT - BOARDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Twelve high-ranking military officials sit around a long oak table. Maps of the western territories are spread before them. Smoke curls from cigars.

SCHOFIELD
Gentlemen... the nation mourns a
martyr. But the truth, as always,
is more complicated.

He drops the folder onto the table.

Bold print reads:

"COURT OF INQUIRY - MAJOR MARCUS A. RENO"

SCHOFIELD
We give them a hearing. A
courtroom. The illusion of
accountability. The press eats it
up, and we move on.

GENERAL #1
And if Reno starts assigning blame?

SCHOFIELD
Then we bury the transcripts. Or
him.

INT. PARLOR - NEW YORK CITY - DAY

A sharp, sunlit room. Books. Portraits. Flags.

LIBBIE CUSTER (34) pours tea for SENATOR HENRY DAWES (50s), who shifts awkwardly on the velvet settee.

DAWES

Libbie, I must be candid. There's talk—accounts not favorable to your husband's judgment.

Libbie smiles politely. Reaches for a leather binder beside her.

LIBBIE

These are letters. From his men. From generals. From the mothers of boys he led.

She slides it to him.

LIBBIE (CONT'D)

My husband served this nation from age 22. He died defending it. You will not let Washington paint him a fool to cover their failure.

DAWES

(stiff)

Of course not.

Libbie leans forward.

LIBBIE

Good. Because I've already secured speaking slots in Boston, Philadelphia, and St. Paul.

A beat. Dawes blinks.

LIBBIE (CONT'D)

Let the Army hold its inquiry. I'll hold the truth.

EXT. CHICAGO STREET - MORNING

Edith hurries past newsboys, clutching a folder.

NEWSBOY

"Custer inquiry today! Will the General be cleared?"

She pauses. Sees a poster outside a barber shop:

"HERO OR FOOL?" above Custer's portrait.

She pushes on, her eyes tired — but blazing.

EXT. PINE RIDGE - DAKOTA TERRITORY - DUSK

TATÉ (70s), Lakota elder, sits near a fire. Feathers in his gray hair. Before him, a white reporter (25) scribbles notes. A translator kneels between them.

TATÉ (IN LAKOTA)

(subtitled)

The men wore blue. Their horses
breathed fire. They came over the
hills like ants—but did not know
they were walking into the mouth of
the bear.

He draws a circle in the dirt. X's inside it.

TATÉ (CONT'D)

(subtitled)

They did not understand. We did not
want war. But we would not run.

The translator hesitates. The reporter looks confused.

REPORTER

He says you didn't want war?

TRANSLATOR

He says they brought it. We ended
it.

Taté's eyes flick toward the sky, where smoke trails drift west with the dying sun.

EXT. FORT LINCOLN - NIGHT

A train depot under gas lamps. RENO and BENTEEN disembark. A few soldiers linger, avoiding eye contact.

BENTEEN

Looks like we're not due a hero's
welcome.

RENO

They're waiting to see if we hang
ourselves before they hang us.

INT. BARRACKS - FORT LINCOLN - NIGHT

Reno sits on his cot, shirt open, bottle half-empty. Benteen lights a cigar across from him.

RENO
Think she'll show? The widow?

BENTEEN
Libbie Custer wouldn't miss it if
the President himself were on
trial.

RENO
Let her come. Let them all come.
Let them hear what really happened
out there.

He raises the bottle.

RENO (CONT'D)
Here's to the truth... and the end
of whatever's left of me.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - CHICAGO - DAY

Crowded, hot, and silent.

SPECTATORS, officers, and reporters pack the gallery.

A long table. At its center: RENO, in uniform, bags under his
eyes. Next to him sits Benteen.

Across the room, LIBBIE CUSTER sits poised and cold in black
lace.

PRESIDING OFFICER
This Court of Inquiry is now in
session.

The gavel falls.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - CHICAGO - DAY (CONTINUED)

The gavel falls.

PRESIDING OFFICER
This Court of Inquiry is now in
session to determine the conduct of
Major Marcus A. Reno during the
events of June 25 and 26, 1876.

Pencils scratch. Reporters lean forward. Officers adjust in
their seats.

Libbie Custer doesn't blink.

EXT. CHICAGO STREET - LATER THAT DAY

Carriages roll past in muddy slush. A woman in a long coat and gloves steps onto the sidewalk, adjusting a notebook in her satchel.

This is EDITH LORIMER (30s) - business-like- an ambitious newspaper correspondent for the New York Graphic, one of the few female journalists admitted to the proceedings.

She lights a cigarette. Watches a wagon pass filled with illustrated posters of "CUSTER'S LAST FIGHT" - a traveling panorama exhibit.

She exhales smoke.

EDITH (V.O.)

The court says it seeks truth. But
Chicago only wants theater.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Edith sits at a desk, writing by gaslight. Her pages are stacked with quotes, drawings, and margin notes:

"Hero or fool?"

"Reno: coward or scapegoat?"

"What did Benteen see?"

A knock at the door. She opens it to find CAPTAIN GODDARD (40s) - historical figure, Army escort officer assigned to press protocol. He hands her a note.

GODDARD

You're permitted in the officer's
gallery again tomorrow. Just...
tread lightly, Miss Lorimer.

EDITH

The truth tends to trample things,
Captain.

He leaves. She pins a small photo of George Armstrong Custer to the edge of her notebook.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - THE NEXT DAY

RENO takes the stand. Sworn in.

JUDGE ADVOCATE (O.S.)
State your full name and rank for
the record.

RENO
Marcus Albert Reno. Major, 7th
Cavalry, United States Army.

The crowd shifts.

JUDGE ADVOCATE (O.S.)
Describe your actions on the
morning of June 25th, 1876.

RENO
We were ordered to cross the river
and initiate engagement... before
the rest of the regiment flanked
from the north.

EXT. LITTLE BIGHORN - FLASHBACK - DAY (JUNE 25, 1876)

A cavalry charge across the river. Water splashes. Dust and
war cries fill the air.

Reno's men gallop forward into a wave of confusion.

Smoke. Gunfire. Screams.

Reno pulls up short - his horse panicking - as he sees
hundreds of Lakota warriors rising from the grass beyond the
river bend.

RENO (V.O.)
The enemy... they were already
massed. We were outnumbered.
Surrounded.

The sound of hooves. Horses scream.

SOLDIERS FALL around him - one hit in the neck, another
pulled from his horse by a rider with a hatchet.

RENO (V.O.)
I gave the only order I could...

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - DAY (PRESENT)

Reno, sweating now, shifts in his seat.

RENO
...I ordered a retreat into the
timberline.

A murmur runs through the crowd.

Libbie's lips part—not surprised. Disappointed.

INT. SPECTATOR GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

Edith scribbles notes as two officers near her whisper:

OFFICER #1
That's not what Benteen said
happened.

OFFICER #2
Well, someone's lying.

Edith writes: The story splits here.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - DAY

JUDGE ADVOCATE
Major Reno, did you send a message
to Captain Benteen requesting
reinforcements?

RENO
I did.

JUDGE ADVOCATE
Do you recall the content?

RENO
Yes. I instructed him to hurry...
that we were engaged and needed
support.

JUDGE ADVOCATE
And did you believe Captain Benteen
responded in time?

RENO
I believe Captain Benteen... made
his own decisions.

Murmurs ripple through the gallery.

INT. COURTROOM - LATER

BENTEEN sits in the witness chair. Straight-backed. Calm. A man used to walking a tightrope.

JUDGE ADVOCATE

Captain Benteen, did you receive a written message from General Custer on June 25th?

BENTEEN

I did.

He pulls a small, folded note from his breast pocket. The courtroom leans forward.

BENTEEN (CONT'D)

This is the original. It read: Benteen. Come on. Big village. Be quick. Bring packs."

He hands it over. The note is stained with blood.

Libbie Custer eyes it with laser focus.

JUDGE ADVOCATE

And your response?

BENTEEN

I proceeded in the direction indicated, but I also secured the pack train. I had no knowledge of the scale of engagement.

JUDGE ADVOCATE

Some say you delayed intentionally.

BENTEEN

I made a judgment call. One I live with.

A beat.

BENTEEN (CONT'D)

But I will say this: Had Custer waited as ordered, none of us would've needed rescuing.

Gasps. Reno stiffens.

Libbie clutches her gloves tighter.

INT. GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

EDITH LORIMER fills pages. She looks down at her boots—mud from Pine Ridge still clinging to them.

EDITH (V.O.)
Every man tells his own truth. But
the ground beneath them remembers
everything.

INT. HOTEL BAR - NIGHT

Edith sits at the counter, drink untouched. CAPTAIN GODDARD joins her.

GODDARD
Benteen always had a flair for slow-
burning damnation.

EDITH
You ever wonder if this is more
than soldiers covering their asses?

GODDARD
It's always more. We just stop
asking.

She pulls out her notebook, flips to a page:

A name circled: Private August Lukin.

EDITH
Who is he?

Goddard tenses.

GODDARD
Scout. Pack train detail. Wasn't
called to testify.

EDITH
Then I will.

INT. ARMY ARCHIVE ROOM - LATE NIGHT

Edith, candle in hand, unlocks a cabinet with a borrowed key.
Dust and silence.

She flips through files—field reports, telegraphs, scout
logs.

She stops.

A dispatch addressed to Custer, never opened.

Stamped:

"RECOVERED ON FIELD - DO NOT FORWARD"

She stares at it. Folds it into her journal.

EXT. FLASHBACK - LITTLE BIGHORN - NIGHTFALL

Through smoke and shadow, a young Lakota warrior (fictional composite) kneels beside a dying cavalryman.

The soldier weeps, muttering "God... God..."

The warrior hesitates. Then slits his throat.

EDITH (V.O.)

The stories we tell ourselves...
are never the ones the earth tells.

EXT. CHICAGO STABLES - NIGHT

A thin fog creeps in. Lanterns flicker.

EDITH LORIMER, coat wrapped tight, waits beside a horse cart. The hoofsteps of an approaching rider echo.

PRIVATE AUGUST LUKIN (20s) - , wiry, nervous, a Czech immigrant who served in the pack train detachment - dismounts. He eyes her cautiously.

EDITH

Private Lukin?

LUKIN

You shouldn't be here. They told me
not to speak to no one.

EDITH

That's exactly why we should talk.

A long silence.

He checks the alley behind them. Then nods.

INT. STABLE - MOMENTS LATER

By the dim light of a swinging lantern, Lukin drinks from a tin flask, hands shaking.

EDITH

You were with the pack train?

LUKIN

Yes, ma'am. Day and night. I saw the message come. I saw Captain Benteen open it... but he didn't move fast.

EDITH

Did anyone say why?

LUKIN

He said... "Custer's gone off on another damned crusade." That he wouldn't lose the whole regiment chasing ghosts.

He swallows hard.

LUKIN (CONT'D)

When we found the bodies... they were like meat. Peeled. Black with sun. Like they never were men.

A beat.

LUKIN (CONT'D)

And Major Reno? He hid in the trees. I saw him under a log. Crying.

Edith freezes. This detail is nowhere in the court record.

EDITH

Would you testify?

LUKIN

No ma'am. I like breathing.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - NEXT DAY

LIBBIE CUSTER sits stiffly, fanning herself with a funeral program.

She watches Edith in the gallery—eyes narrowed.

JUDGE ADVOCATE (O.S.)

Captain Benteen, do you recall delaying after receiving Major Reno's message?

BENTEEN (O.S.)
I recall assessing risk. Not
delaying.

Libbie shifts in her seat, scanning the officers, the notes, the expressions. She sees control slipping, the narrative fraying.

She turns her head slowly—to Edith, writing calmly in her notebook.

Their eyes lock.

Libbie's expression hardens.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - THAT NIGHT

Edith sits at her desk, surrounded by notes. Lukin's story. The missing dispatch. The whispered contradictions.

She looks up at the wall-pinned above her desk:

A newspaper sketch of Custer, sabre raised.

A quote from Libbie:

"My husband died for honor, not ambition."

She tears the quote down. Replaces it with her own note:

"Who ordered the silence?"

INT. LIBBIE CUSTER'S PARLOR - NEW YORK - FLASHBACK (1 MONTH PRIOR)

Libbie sits with a military aide, sipping tea.

LIBBIE
They'll come for his name. I expect
it.

AIDE
The inquiry will be contained.

LIBBIE
If it isn't, I will bury them in
his shadow.

INT. STABLE - NIGHT (CONTINUED)

LUKIN (QUIETLY)
They said I could stay quiet and
keep my stripes... or speak and be
transferred.

To Arizona.

EDITH
You think they'll bury you out
there?

LUKIN
No. I think they'll bury me in
there.

He rises, jaw clenched.

LUKIN (CONT'D)
You didn't see those bodies, Miss
Lorimer. You didn't smell what the
sun did to them. No war medals for
that.

He exits into the night. Hoofbeats fade.

INT. LIBBIE CUSTER'S HOTEL SUITE - EARLY MORNING

A luxurious suite draped in black crepe. Libbie Custer sits
at a writing desk, composing a letter.

Over her shoulder, we see the salutation:

"To The Honorable President Rutherford B. Hayes..."

She dips her pen again. Keeps writing.

LIBBIE (V.O.)
If the Army will not defend his
memory, I will take it to the
people. If the generals will not
stand for him, I will go to their
wives.

A knock.

ATTENDANT (O.S.)
Ma'am, the papers just arrived.

Libbie opens the door. Takes the stack of morning newspapers.
Her eyes scan quickly.

Front page of the Chicago Tribune:

"Reno Testifies - Silence on Custer's Final Orders Raises Questions"

And lower on the page:

"Female Correspondent Stirs Courtroom with Observations" - by Edith Lorimer

Libbie's fingers tighten on the paper. Her mouth goes cold.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - LATER

CAPTAIN BENTEEN is back on the stand.

JUDGE ADVOCATE

Captain, to your knowledge, did General Custer send any direct orders to Reno or yourself after the initial separation?

BENTEEN

Not to me. I received no follow-up from Custer after his split from the column.

JUDGE ADVOCATE

And yet Major Reno claims—

BENTEEN

Major Reno claims a great many things, sir.

Tension bristles in the room.

Libbie watches from the gallery, expression unreadable.

INT. GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

Edith scribbles notes. Then looks up—studies Libbie, now icy still. An idea forms.

EDITH (V.O.)

She's not mourning. She's maneuvering.

INT. CHICAGO PRESS CLUB - NIGHT

Dim, smoky, full of men arguing over scotch and column inches.

Edith enters, handing a clerk a folded note.

CLERK
Graphic deadline's in two hours.

EDITH
Then you'd better run ink fast.

She exits. The clerk opens the note.

The headline reads:

"Was Custer Betrayed?"

Inside the Missing Dispatches and the Voices the Army Ignores.

INT. LIBBIE'S HOTEL SUITE - SAME NIGHT

Libbie sits near the fire. The glow casts her in silhouette.

She holds Edith's article.

No tears. Just steel.

She drops it into the flames.

Watches it curl and burn.

LIBBIE (V.O.)
You want a scandal, Miss Lorimer?
Then God help you when you find it.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - DAY (CONTINUED)

BENTEEN remains composed under questioning.

JUDGE ADVOCATE
You testified there was no follow-up from General Custer. Are you certain?

BENTEEN
As certain as a man can be when no one's left alive to contradict him.

Soft laughter from the gallery. The presiding officer BANGS the gavel.

PRESIDING OFFICER
Order!

JUDGE ADVOCATE

Do you believe General Custer made
a tactical error?

A long pause.

BENTEEN

I believe he was consistent to the
end.

The words land like a loaded statement.

Libbie clenches her gloved hand.

INT. ARMY ADMINISTRATION ROOM - LATER

Benteen removes his gloves. A COLONEL (50s) steps in, closes
the door.

COLONEL

Fred, you're skating thin ice out
there.

BENTEEN

Truth's a slippery surface.

COLONEL

It's not the Army's truth. And it
sure as hell isn't the widow's.

He places a document on the desk—a "transfer recommendation"
form.

COLONEL (CONT'D)

Keep talking like that, and you'll
be stationed so far west you'll
piss into the Pacific.

EXT. CHICAGO NEWSSTANDS - EARLY EVENING

Papers snap in the wind. Headlines shout in bold print:

"Was Custer Betrayed?" - Lorimer Column Stuns Inquiry Room"

"Scout's Hidden Story Suggests Cover-Up"

Civilians crowd newsboys. Soldiers look on warily. One man
tears a paper in half.

INT. LIBBIE'S HOTEL SUITE - NIGHT

Libbie meets with GENERAL SHERIDAN (historical), aged and politically wary.

LIBBIE

I need a statement. An endorsement
of George's decisions.
No backpedaling. No equivocation.

SHERIDAN

Libbie, you're turning the man into
marble. Men crack when they're
carved too smooth.

LIBBIE

So let him be carved.
(beat)
He deserves a statue. Not a
scandal.

Sheridan rises, sighs.

SHERIDAN

You're more dangerous than he ever
was.

INT. CHICAGO PRESS CLUB - SAME NIGHT

EDITH walks in as men eye her with mixed admiration and contempt. Whispers surround her.

She crosses to a quiet corner table, takes out a folded document: the undelivered dispatch found in the archive.

She smooths it out.

"Hold position. Await full recon. Do not engage. - G.A.C."

A line at the bottom:

"Delivered to scout Mitchell. Not forwarded."

EXT. HOTEL STABLE - NIGHT

PRIVATE MITCHELL (fictional composite) - wiry, scarred, and drunk - smokes alone.

Edith steps out of the shadows.

EDITH
 You carried this. Then didn't
 deliver it.

She holds up the dispatch.

He flinches.

MITCHELL
 You don't know what you're playing
 with.

EDITH
 No. But you do.

He walks off into the dark.

INT. LIBBIE'S HOTEL SUITE - NIGHT

Libbie alone. Gaslight flickers.

She opens George's journal - the last he carried.

Blank pages.

Except one, where the ink is faint from sweat and blood:

"I've split the column. They will know me or kill me. Either
 way - history wins."

She closes the book. Stares ahead.

LIBBIE (V.O.)
 If the truth won't serve the Union,
 then the lie must.

EXT. HOTEL STABLE - NIGHT (CONTINUED)

MITCHELL walks into darkness. Edith follows.

EDITH
 Why didn't you forward that
 dispatch?

Mitchell stops. Doesn't turn around.

MITCHELL
 Orders. I was told the General
 changed his mind. But... he didn't.
 I read it.
 (pauses)
 I was tired. Scared. We all were.
 (MORE)

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

I thought... maybe it was better if nobody knew.

EDITH

That one dispatch could've spared over two hundred lives.

MITCHELL

Yeah.

(beat)

And destroyed Custer's legacy.

(turns to her)

You think they want to know the real end of that story?

He lights another cigarette.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

They want blood and glory, not delay and doubt.

(softly)

Maybe we all do.

He disappears into the fog.

EXT. FIELD CAMP - DUSK - FLASHBACK

MITCHELL watches Custer writing a note by firelight.

CUSTER (V.O.)

"The moment must be seized - even if the cost is blood."

Mitchell fingers the envelope.

He hesitates... then pockets it instead of passing it along.

INT. CHURCH HALL - DAY

A massive crowd has gathered for a public memorial service.

On the dais, a large painting of George Custer in Civil War uniform—heroic, windswept.

LIBBIE CUSTER approaches the podium, wearing mourning black, a veil tucked behind her hat.

The room quiets.

LIBBIE

My husband died not in defeat...
but in defiance.

Murmurs of agreement.

LIBBIE (CONT'D)

He died believing this country
could still stand for something
noble. For duty. For honor. For
courage.

She gazes at the painting.

LIBBIE (CONT'D)

Do not let the cowards rewrite him.

The audience erupts in applause.

Among them, an Army general nods.

At the back, Edith stands in the shadows, notebook clutched
in her hand, watching.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - NEXT DAY

BENTEEN watches as a new witness takes the stand - SERGEANT
VICKERS (fictional), one of Custer's trusted men who survived
Reno's timberline retreat.

VICKERS

We heard gunfire for hours from the
ridgeline. From where Custer went.

But no one ever came back.

JUDGE ADVOCATE

Did you believe he expected
support?

VICKERS

Yes, sir. I believe he died waiting
for it.

A long silence in the room.

BENTEEN lowers his eyes. He knows.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

EDITH places the recovered dispatch beside her notebook. She
opens a fresh page and writes at the top:

"Suppressed: The Final Order of General George Armstrong
Custer"

She hesitates, then adds below:

"Source: P. Mitchell - off record"

A knock at her door.

She opens it to find BENTEEN, out of uniform, face gaunt.

BENTEEN
We need to talk.

Before it's too late.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Edith and Benteen sit facing one another.

BENTEEN
There's something you're not being
told. Something even the inquiry
won't put on record.

He produces a folded letter - brittle with age and grime.

BENTEEN (CONT'D)
Custer wrote it three days before
the battle. Sent it with a scout.
It never reached Fort Lincoln.

EDITH
What does it say?

BENTEEN
He wasn't just hunting Sioux.
(beat)
He was chasing glory - and
politics. He wanted to run for
President.

Edith's breath catches.

EDITH
That's... never been printed
anywhere.

BENTEEN
Because it never left his tent.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT (CONTINUED)

EDITH studies the brittle letter. It's faint, scrawled on
Army-issue paper.

EDITH

"-the Democrats are fractured.
Hayes is weak. I could take the
nomination if the right victory
reaches the East before fall."

She looks up.

EDITH (CONT'D)

He went to Little Bighorn to launch
a campaign.

BENTEEN

And took two hundred men with him.

A beat.

EDITH

Do you know what this would do to
his widow? His legend?

BENTEEN

Do you know what it's already done
to me?

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - NEXT DAY

The courtroom is tenser now. A young LIEUTENANT (fictional
composite) reads a telegram aloud under oath.

LIEUTENANT

"...no further messages received
after Benteen's column linked with
Reno. General Custer's position
unknown until two days later."

JUDGE ADVOCATE

Was there any written confirmation
of Custer's strategy?

LIEUTENANT

None that survived the field, sir.

Libbie's jaw tightens in the front row.

INT. GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

Edith observes, arms folded. She leans toward a court sketch
artist.

EDITH

Make sure you capture Benteen's eyes. The regret. It's everything.

The artist nods.

Libbie watches from a row ahead – then turns slightly. Eyes narrow. She knows Edith is working angles.

INT. PRESS CLUB – LATER

Edith pushes through the doors with a sealed envelope. She hands it to the editor.

EDITH

Front page. Tomorrow. Run it before they bury me under Custer's monument.

He opens the envelope – sees the letter from Custer.

EDITOR

You realize this makes you radioactive?

EDITH

Only if I survive it.

INT. LIBBIE'S SUITE – THAT NIGHT

Libbie stares at a telegram just delivered.

FROM: BOSTON HERALD – "EDITORIAL ON CUSTER'S PRESIDENTIAL LETTER SCHEDULED. ADVISE RESPONSE."

She walks to the fireplace. Shoves the paper in. Watches it burn.

Then she turns to her maid.

LIBBIE

Send word to Senator Dawes. I want a public letter from him on George's behalf by morning. And if he hesitates–

(beat)

Remind him how generous I've been with his wife's charities.

INT. BARRACKS - LATE NIGHT

BENTEEN lies awake in bed, staring at the ceiling. Across the room, other officers sleep.

His hands twitch. His breathing shallow.

FLASH CUT - LITTLE BIGHORN

The sound of screams. A young trooper on fire.

A Native warrior raising a hatchet.

Custer yelling something we never hear.

BACK TO BENTEEN - eyes wide. He sits up, soaked in sweat.

INT. CHICAGO STREETS - PRE-DAWN

Newspapers are dropped by wagon in stacks. Headline:

"CUSTER'S SILENT LETTER - Edith Lorimer Reveals Ambition Behind the Slaughter"

INT. NEWSROOM - MORNING

Presses clatter. Edith watches them run. The letter is out.

EDITH (V.O.)
They wanted a martyr.

I found a man.

And history will have to choose between the two.

INT. PRESS CLUB - LATE NIGHT (CONTINUED)

The editor watches Edith walk out.

He looks again at the letter. Sits. Lights a cigarette.

EDITOR
Christ almighty, Custer...

INT. LIBBIE'S HOTEL SUITE - SAME NIGHT

Libbie stands at the window in her robe, holding a copy of The Graphic - the advance copy delivered discreetly.

She reads the headline again, jaw tight.

"CUSTER'S SILENT LETTER - Edith Lorimer Reveals Ambition Behind the Slaughter"

She turns.

LIBBIE
Bring me a pen. Now.

INT. LIBBIE'S WRITING DESK - MOMENTS LATER

She scribbles furiously on monogrammed stationery:

To The Editors of the Boston Herald, The Chicago Tribune, and The Times of New York...

The woman named Edith Lorimer has no authority to speak for my husband. She profits from slander...

Her words become a blade.

LIBBIE (V.O.)
Let them believe they've found a scandal. I will bury them in patriotism.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - NEXT MORNING

The courtroom buzzes louder than usual. Officers whisper behind hands. The Chicago Tribune lies folded under one man's cap.

JUDGE ADVOCATE
We call Captain Frederick W. Benteen back to the stand.

Benteen enters. Slower than before.

Libbie watches. Expression unreadable.

INT. GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

Edith slides into her seat. She meets Benteen's eyes for a moment.

They exchange no words.

But everything is said.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - DAY (CONTINUED)

BENTEEN takes the stand. Murmurs fade. Everyone leans in.

JUDGE ADVOCATE
Captain, given new public
allegations... do you wish to
revise any previous testimony?

Benteen looks to Libbie. Then to Edith. He breathes slowly.

BENTEEN
I do not.

JUDGE ADVOCATE
Are you aware of a letter—allegedly
written by General
Custer—suggesting he intended to
seek political office?

BENTEEN
(silence)
I've heard of it.

JUDGE ADVOCATE
Did it influence your decisions in
the field?

BENTEEN
No. But I think it influenced his.

His hand trembles. In his ears — a faint echo of gunfire.
Screams. He closes his eyes.

JUDGE ADVOCATE (O.S.)
Captain Benteen—compose yourself.

He nods. Wipes his face.

A stunned silence.

INT. GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

Edith jots a single word in her notebook:

"Loyalty... fractured."

Libbie does not blink.

INT. MILITARY OFFICERS' LOUNGE - LATER

A group of officers crowd around the Tribune. The headline about Custer's presidential ambition dominates.

MAJOR #1

I served with Custer. That man
wasn't chasing votes.

CAPTAIN #2

No? Then what the hell was he
chasing out there?

INT. ARMY OFFICE - SAME TIME

LIBBIE sits across from GENERAL SHERIDAN, calm but coiled.

LIBBIE

You owe me a statement. Not just
for George. For the Army.

SHERIDAN

You want to weaponize the press?

LIBBIE

No, General. I want to rescue
history before it's rewritten by a
woman with ink-stained fingers.

EXT. CHICAGO STREETS - LATE AFTERNOON

Edith walks briskly past a newsboy yelling:

NEWSBOY

Custer's letters! Army in turmoil!
Extra!

She passes a soldier in uniform - Private Mitchell - standing
at a corner, pale.

EDITH

You still have time to speak.

He doesn't answer.

EDITH (CONT'D)

You're not the only one who read
it.

Mitchell turns away and vanishes down an alley.

INT. HOTEL LOBBY - NIGHT

Edith checks with the clerk.

EDITH
Private Mitchell left a message?

CLERK
No, ma'am. But... someone came
looking for him.

EDITH
Who?

CLERK
Didn't leave a name. Just said they
were from Command.

She nods. Slowly walks away.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - NEXT DAY

PRESIDING OFFICER
Due to extenuating circumstances,
Private Mitchell is no longer
available to testify.

Gasps. Edith stiffens.

BENTEEN, from his seat, clenches his jaw.

INT. LIBBIE'S HOTEL SUITE - THAT NIGHT

Libbie writes a letter to a widows' committee. Calm,
composed.

LIBBIE (V.O.)
The Army endures only when its
heroes are above question. We owe
it to the next war, to the next
George...

She folds the letter, seals it.

EXT. RIVERFRONT - NIGHT

Edith stands alone near the water. She stares at the latest
edition of her own paper.

She flips it shut.

EDITH (V.O.)
Truth doesn't always win.

But sometimes, it lingers just long enough... to haunt the lie.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - DAY (CONTINUED)

PRESIDING OFFICER
...Private Mitchell is no longer
available to testify.

A low, shocked murmur spreads through the gallery.

EDITH lowers her pen, her face tight with suspicion.

LIBBIE sits serenely, hands folded - but her eyes track Edith without blinking.

INT. GALLERY - MOMENTS LATER

Edith leans toward a younger reporter beside her.

EDITH
(offhand)
He was afraid. Said something about
Arizona.

YOUNG REPORTER
Mitchell?

EDITH
Gone before the truth made it into
the record.

She scribbles one line into her notebook:

"The silence of the missing is often the loudest voice."

INT. MILITARY OFFICERS' LOUNGE - SAME TIME

BENTEEN throws down a whiskey shot. He's alone at a corner table, shoulders slumped.

A fellow officer (COLONEL BRICE, 50s) - fictional character - approaches.

COLONEL BRICE
Careful, Fred. You're starting to
sound like her.

BENTEEN

Maybe she's the only one who's not lying.

Brice doesn't sit. He leans in.

COLONEL BRICE

You're on the wrong side of this. They'll gut you for it – slowly.

BENTEEN

They already are.

INT. PRESS OFFICE - EVENING

Stacks of Edith's stories – some folded, some pulled – lie in heaps.

An editor gives her a strained look.

EDITOR

We've had pressure. Subscriptions threatened. Donors calling.

EDITH

Because I printed the truth?

EDITOR

Because you printed the wrong truth.

He slides a marked-up copy of her latest draft across the table. Whole paragraphs are red-penciled.

EDITH

You're gutting it.

EDITOR

I'm saving your byline.

A long beat. Edith picks up the copy and leaves.

INT. LIBBIE'S HOTEL SUITE - NIGHT

LIBBIE reads her latest public rebuttal, drafted for the Ladies' Patriotic Circle.

"No war was ever won without courage. And no legacy should be buried beneath gossip."

She signs her name in full:

Mrs. Elizabeth Bacon Custer

EXT. NEWSPAPER PRINTING WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Edith walks past printing presses thundering.

She holds her original, unedited draft of the Mitchell story.

She doesn't stop to hand it off. She walks past.

EDITH (V.O.)

They buried Mitchell without a
coffin, without a headline, and
without guilt.

She drops the story into the street. It's swept up by the
wind.

INT. BENTEEN'S QUARTERS - LATE NIGHT

He pulls a small, folded telegram from his coat.

"Transfer Request Approved. Fort Craig, New Mexico Territory.
Effective Immediately."

Benteen stares at it.

Then burns it in his ashtray.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - DAY

JUDGE ADVOCATE

This Court calls Sergeant Thomas
Yates.

A grizzled NCO in his 50s - fictional composite, survivor of
the timberline retreat - steps slowly to the stand.

YATES

Sir.

JUDGE ADVOCATE

Were you present with Major Reno
during his withdrawal from the
river engagement?

YATES

I was.

JUDGE ADVOCATE
 Did you witness Major Reno engage
 in any conduct unbecoming?

YATES
 (pauses)
 He was drunk, sir.

Murmurs sweep the courtroom.

YATES (CONT'D)
 I saw him drink from a flask before
 the charge. He dropped it. Drew his
 pistol with the wrong hand.

Libbie's face darkens.

INT. GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

EDITH freezes. Even BENTEEN stiffens at the admission.

YOUNG REPORTER beside her whispers:

YOUNG REPORTER
 That's a hanging offense. Not for
 the Sioux - for Reno.

INT. BOARDING HOUSE PARLOR - NIGHT

An aging Lakota woman holds a faded photograph.

WOMAN
 "My son died on that ridge. But no
 one remembers his name."

Edith listens, wordless.

On her notebook, she writes: "History has teeth."

INT. HALLWAY - LATER

Edith walks briskly, notebook full.

She's intercepted by a clerk, who hands her a sealed envelope.

CLERK
 For you. Delivered anonymously.

She opens it:

"Miss Lorimer is a fraud. See the attached—"

Inside is a draft editorial, full of red ink and rebuttals. Her own sources cited as unverified. Scribbled in pencil at the bottom:

"You'll never write in this town again."

She crumples it.

INT. LADIES' PATRIOTIC CIRCLE TEA - SAME TIME

A crowded, candlelit hall. LIBBIE speaks before a sea of upper-class women and reporters.

LIBBIE

This city is being poisoned by so-called journalists who never rode into danger... who never served or sacrificed.

(beat)

Their pens are filled not with ink
— but envy.

Applause.

LIBBIE (CONT'D)

George died a soldier. Let no woman
diminish that truth.

A rousing ovation. Flashbulbs pop.

INT. NEWSROOM - LATE EVENING

EDITH returns to find her desk half-cleared.

A junior editor avoids her gaze.

JUNIOR EDITOR

Management says you're on "pause"
until the inquiry concludes.

She nods. Doesn't argue.

Instead, she gathers her things.

INT. BENTEEN'S QUARTERS - SAME NIGHT

He stands at the window with his dress coat on the chair.

The transfer order sits beside a half-empty bottle.

COLONEL BRICE steps in uninvited.

COLONEL BRICE
This is your last night, Fred.
Clean sheet. Or speak again and
you'll leave in irons.

BENTEEN
(ironic)
Good to know honor still has rules.

Brice exits.

Benteen stares at a handwritten copy of Custer's final note Edith gave him.

He pockets it.

INT. LIBBIE'S SUITE - THAT NIGHT

Libbie removes a pair of white gloves.

Across from her is a reporter from the New York Times, taking notes.

REPORTER
And what would you like the nation
to remember most?

LIBBIE
That no one rode harder, believed
more, or gave everything like
George.

She leans forward.

LIBBIE (CONT'D)
And that nothing - not jealous
rivals, not bitter officers, not
hysterical women - will erase his
name from history.

INT. NEWSROOM - NIGHT (CONTINUED)

EDITH sits at her desk, reading the "pause" memo from the managing editor.

Reporters avoid eye contact.

She gently closes her notebook. A long breath.

EDITH (V.O.)
Truth has a shelf life in this
city. And mine just expired.

INT. CHICAGO BOARDING HOUSE - LATER

Edith enters a small, rented room. One desk. No fire lit.

She unpacks her satchel:

Custer's suppressed letter

Benteen's handwritten confession

A single photograph of Private Mitchell, taped inside her
notebook

She stares at it.

INT. BENTEEN'S QUARTERS - SAME TIME

Benteen stands over his trunk. Inside:

His commission papers

A campaign medal

A flask

A folded flag

He sets the flask aside.

He picks up Edith's note, scrawled after their last meeting:

"You may be the last man in this uniform who still bleeds
when he lies."

He pockets it.

INT. LIBBIE'S HOTEL SUITE - NEXT DAY

Libbie sits before a Times reporter, composed.

REPORTER

Do you have a final statement, Mrs.
Custer, ahead of the inquiry's
conclusion?

LIBBIE

Yes.

She adjusts her gloves. Looks him dead-on.

LIBBIE (CONT'D)
 My husband died for this country.
 And no battlefield coward or self-
 promoting woman will rewrite that.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Benteen walks slowly toward the stand.

Edith sits in the gallery - not with press credentials, but as a guest.

Libbie turns to see her. A faint, bitter smile.

JUDGE ADVOCATE
 Captain Benteen, are you prepared
 to make a final statement?

BENTEEN
 (straightens his coat)
 Yes, sir.

He scans the room - soldiers, judges, politicians.

His eyes settle on Edith.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - DAY (CONTINUED)

JUDGE ADVOCATE
 Captain Benteen, you may proceed.

BENTEEN stands before the tribunal. The air is taut.

BENTEEN
 I served with George Armstrong
 Custer from the Shenandoah to the
 Yellowstone.

I watched him chase medals, glory... and ghosts.

Libbie stiffens. The audience murmurs.

BENTEEN (CONT'D)
 I don't question his courage. But
 courage alone doesn't save men.

It gets them killed when judgment is gone.

He holds up a weathered piece of paper - Custer's field note, bloodstained and scorched.

BENTEEN (CONT'D)

This message was sent from the field.

"Come on. Big village. Be quick. Bring packs." But we were too far. And he was too far gone.

Gasps ripple across the room.

BENTEEN (CONT'D)

The dead were brave. But they died for a plan that had no future — and a man who couldn't see past his own reflection.

LIBBIE closes her eyes, breath shallow.

BENTEEN (CONT'D)

The Army will bury them with honors.

But if we bury the truth alongside them... Then we dishonor every man still breathing in uniform.

Silence.

JUDGE ADVOCATE

Captain Benteen, that will be entered into the record.

INT. GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

EDITH watches. Her eyes are glassy, but she doesn't blink.

Her pen remains still.

INT. LIBBIE'S HOTEL SUITE - THAT NIGHT

Libbie paces. Alone.

She holds a telegram from Washington:

"Inquiry ruling favors Reno. Benteen's testimony acknowledged, not endorsed. Public dissent growing."

She sits. The first tear falls.

But she swallows it.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - THE NEXT MORNING

Final proceedings.

PRESIDING OFFICER

This inquiry concludes:

Major Marcus A. Reno is cleared of misconduct in the field.
No formal charges brought against Captain Benteen.

Mixed reactions.

PRESIDING OFFICER (CONT'D)

Let the record show that General
George Custer remains a decorated
officer in memory, and no fault is
attributed to his command under the
circumstances.

INT. GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

Libbie closes her gloved hands. She's won - technically.

But the applause is half-hearted. The silence between claps
is louder.

She looks up.

Edith is gone.

EXT. CHICAGO STREETS - LATE AFTERNOON

Edith walks alone, past newsboys shouting:

NEWSBOY

Custer inquiry ends! Reno cleared!
No fault!

She ignores them.

She rounds a corner and disappears into the crowd.

INT. TRAIN STATION - PLATFORM - MOMENTS LATER

Benteen, duffel in hand, stands in uniform beside a steam
engine.

He stares out at the city one last time.

Behind him, someone steps into frame. Edith.

They don't speak.

She hands him an envelope.

EDITH
It's not over. Not if we write it
down.

He nods, boards the train.

Steam hisses. The train pulls away.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - DAY (CONTINUED)

PRESIDING OFFICER
Let the record reflect that Captain
Benteen's statement has been
entered without objection.

The courtroom is dead quiet.

Libbie sits forward, her lips tight, shoulders trembling but composed. Her glove falls to the floor - unnoticed.

INT. GALLERY - MOMENTS LATER

Edith gathers her things silently. She watches Benteen as he steps down, never looking at Libbie.

Their eyes meet - hers filled with grim pride. His full of quiet collapse.

INT. MILITARY BRIEFING ROOM - LATER THAT DAY

The tribunal confers behind closed doors.

Papers shuffle. Stamps strike. Voices low, urgent.

We don't hear the dialogue - only the ticking of a clock.

INT. LIBBIE'S HOTEL SUITE - THAT NIGHT

Libbie reads a telegraph by firelight.

"Inquiry ruling favors Reno. No misconduct found. No formal charges against Benteen."

She exhales - not victory, but survival.

Then she picks up her pen.

LIBBIE (V.O.)
If the Army will not guard his
legend, then I shall build a
fortress from ink and grief.

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM - NEXT MORNING

Final proceedings. High-ranking officers and reporters crowd
in.

PRESIDING OFFICER
This Court concludes its review of
the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Major Marcus Reno is cleared of misconduct.

Captain Frederick Benteen - no disciplinary action.

No cheers. Just muted shuffling.

PRESIDING OFFICER (CONT'D)
The Court further finds:

General George Armstrong Custer acted within his authority,
and no direct fault is attributed to his final actions.

Libbie closes her eyes. Then opens them. Still stone.

INT. GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

Edith stands. Doesn't applaud. Doesn't react.

Her notebook stays closed.

She turns and leaves before the room clears.

EXT. CHICAGO STREET - LATER

A steady snowfall. Edith walks alone. A folded newspaper
under her arm.

The headline reads:

"CUSTER CLEARED. QUESTIONS REMAIN."

She walks on, disappearing into the gray.

INT. TRAIN PLATFORM - EVENING

Benteen, in uniform, boards a departing train west. He carries only a small bag.

EXT. FORT CRAIG - NEW MEXICO - DAY

The wind howls through sun-bleached barracks. Dust devils twist across the parade ground.

CAPTAIN FREDERICK BENTEEN, gaunt and grayer, arrives alone - uniform crisp, eyes hollow. He steps off a military wagon with one weathered trunk.

A lone PRIVATE greets him stiffly.

PRIVATE

Captain Benteen. Welcome to Fort Craig.

No salute. Just formality.

BENTEEN

(choked dry)

Guess I should feel honored.

INT. FORT CRAIG - OFFICERS' QUARTERS - NIGHT

Benteen sits at a small desk lit by oil lamp. On the desk: - A worn Bible - A telegram from Edith (unopened) - A half-filled glass of whiskey - An empty envelope addressed to:

"Lorimer, E. - c/o Independent Journal, Chicago"

He writes a line.

BENTEEN (V.O.)

I could lie and say I've found
peace.
But it's just quiet here - and
quiet lets the ghosts talk louder.

He stops. Tears up the page.

INT. FORT CRAIG - MESS HALL - DAY

Four officers eat in silence. One chuckles at a joke.

Benteen sits alone, reading Edith's article.

A YOUNG LIEUTENANT approaches.

LIEUTENANT
Sir... is it true what they say?
About the token?

Benteen doesn't look up.

BENTEEN
Would you believe it if I said yes?

LIEUTENANT
I think... I'd want to.

Benteen folds the article and walks out.

EXT. FORT CRAIG - PERIMETER RIDGE - SUNSET

Benteen stands alone, watching the sun sink behind jagged hills.

From behind, a Lakota scout, old and silent, watches him. They say nothing.

After a long beat, the scout simply nods... and leaves.

Benteen watches until he disappears.

INT. FORT CRAIG - QUARTERS - NIGHT

Benteen unpacks his trunk.

Inside: - His original battlefield orders - A crumpled sketch of the dead - The telegram from Edith - A folded American flag - And one item wrapped in cloth - the token Libbie took, now returned to him somehow

He unwraps it slowly.

Holds it like it might burn him.

Then finally... places it gently in a small wooden box.

Locks it. Labels it in pencil:

What He Held.

As he takes his seat, he opens a small envelope.

Inside: a copy of the Tribune article and a short note from Edith:

"Ink lasts longer than marble."

He folds it back into his coat pocket.

The train lurches forward.

INT. COURTHOUSE LOBBY - MOMENTS LATER

Edith exits into a flash of snow and shouting newsboys.

She clutches her coat tighter – not from cold, but from something deeper: frustration, fatigue, grief.

She steps away from the crowd.

EXT. POST OFFICE - LATER THAT DAY

She drops a thick envelope into a mail slot.

Inside:

Custer's original dispatch

A sworn letter from Benteen

Her final editorial:

"They buried 210 men in Montana.

And they've buried the truth here in Chicago."

INT. LIBBIE'S PARLOR - NEW YORK - TWO WEEKS LATER

Sunlight streams into an elegant East Coast home.

Libbie, now back in her New York circles, addresses a gathering of women, newspaper editors, and clergymen.

LIBBIE

He wasn't a man of errors. He was a
man of destiny.

She unveils a proposed statue design – Custer astride a horse, saber raised.

LIBBIE (CONT'D)

If they will not give him a
legacy... we shall build it.

Polite applause. A New York Herald reporter takes notes.

INT. CHEAP BOARDING ROOM - CHICAGO - NIGHT

Edith works by candlelight. Dozens of clippings are pinned to the wall:

Field reports

Autopsy diagrams

Officer rosters

Letters to the editor - many critical of her

She stares at a small photograph: Custer's body, as it was found.

Something catches her eye she'd missed before - something in the background...

A native ornament near the ridge.

She reaches for a field map. Lines up the image.

Her hand freezes.

INT. MILITARY ARCHIVES - NEXT DAY

Edith moves through a back aisle, breathless.

She pulls a long-sealed file labeled:

"Re: Body Recovery Notes - 7th Cavalry, June 29, 1876"

Inside:

A report from the burial detail

A hand-drawn sketch of Custer's corpse - with something tucked in his hand

The marginalia:

"Item removed by Officer on site. Unknown designation."

She blinks. Then flips another page:

"Delivered to Maj. Libbie Custer, personal effects, July 8, 1876."

INT. LIBBIE'S NEW YORK STUDY - SAME TIME

Libbie sits alone, staring at a small wooden token in her hand - a carved native figurine.

The one Custer held when he died.

She places it in a velvet-lined box. Locks it.

Slides the box into a drawer... and closes it.

INT. EDITH'S ROOM - THAT NIGHT

Edith pins a new headline draft above her desk:

"What He Held in His Final Breath: The Detail They Buried With Him"

She sits back, eyes rimmed red, fingers ink-stained.

Then: a knock at her door.

She rises, opens it.

It's a young Army courier, hat in hand.

COURIER

Message for Miss Lorimer.

From... Fort Craig.

She tears it open. Reads.

Her eyes go wide.

EXT. TRAIN PLATFORM - NEXT DAY

Edith, wrapped in her winter coat, boards a westbound train. In her satchel: the report, the sketch, and the article draft.

Steam hisses. The engine roars.

She doesn't look back.

INT. EDITH'S ROOM - NIGHT (CONTINUED)

Edith stares at the telegram from Fort Craig.

"Tell her she was right. Some things don't burn." - Benteen

She folds it slowly. Then stands.

INT. MILITARY ARCHIVES - EARLY MORNING

Edith returns before the clerks arrive.

She scans a shelf of inventory manifests - each with handwritten annotations from the burial team.

She finds one:

"June 29, 1876 - Ridge 3 Recovery (Major G.A. Custer)"

Listed among the items:

Colt revolver (broken)

Tunic (bloodsoaked)

Personal ring (removed)

"Native token - hand-carved - retrieved, reassigned"

EDITH (V.O.)

He died holding something from the
people he fought. Or for. Or
maybe... from someone else
entirely.

She closes the file.

INT. LIBBIE'S PARLOR - NEW YORK - SAME DAY

Libbie sits before a portrait of George.

The box containing the token sits on her lap, unopened.

She studies her husband's painted face. Then speaks aloud, as if to him.

LIBBIE

They will never understand what you
were trying to prove.

She opens the box. Inside: A small, carved Lakota figurine - weathered, detailed, reverent.

She touches it, eyes glassy.

Then: she places it in the fireplace.

It smolders.

But won't ignite.

She stares.

INT. EDITH'S ROOM - SAME

Edith loads her satchel:

The burial sketch

The dispatch

The photo

The article:

"What He Held in His Final Breath"

She zips it shut.

INT. TRAIN STATION - CHICAGO - LATER

A westbound train waits under gray skies.

Edith climbs aboard with her satchel, glancing back one last time at the city behind her.

INT. FORT CRAIG - OFFICERS' MESS - DAY

Dust swirls outside the windows.

Benteen, now leaner, grayer, sits at a lonely table reading a worn book.

A young soldier approaches.

YOUNG SOLDIER

There's a woman here to see you,
sir.

BENTEEN

Of course there is.

He closes the book.

INT. FORT CRAIG - BENTEEN'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Dust settles in the lamp-lit room. Benteen studies Edith's article draft. His hand trembles slightly. A quiet storm beneath his soldier's mask.

BENTEEN

(soft)

She won't let it go... not even
now.

Edith crosses from the window, holding the sketch of Custer's
body.

EDITH

Libbie's building monuments. I'd settle for a footnote – but
a true one.

He exhales.

BENTEEN (CONT'D)

Truth is a cold horse, Edith. Not
many want to ride it.

She leans forward.

EDITH

Then let's give it one more rider.

INT. FORT CRAIG – POST TELEGRAPH OFFICE – NEXT MORNING

Edith watches as the telegraph officer punches keys, sending
out the article to five small western and frontier
newspapers.

TELEGRAPH OFFICER

Won't run in New York or Boston.
You know that?

EDITH

They're not the audience anymore.

He nods. Sends it.

INT. LIBBIE'S PARLOR – NEW YORK – SAME

Libbie unwraps a letter from Senator Dawes:

"Confirming placement of the Custer statue bill before
committee. Strong bipartisan support."

She smiles. Quiet, proud.

Then notices a news clipping tucked inside – small, local
paper from Colorado:

"Truth at the Little Bighorn? Lorimer Claims Custer Held Native Token When He Died."

Her fingers twitch.

INT. WASHINGTON, D.C. - SENATE HEARING ROOM - DAYS LATER

Libbie, now in black lace, sits beside a bronze maquette of Custer on horseback.

A senator speaks before a sparse but formal audience.

SENATOR

Let it be known this statue does
not honor one man's tactics...

but his courage and the frontier he stood upon.

Libbie bows her head.

No one mentions Benteen. Or Reno. Or Mitchell.

INT. FORT CRAIG - BENTEEN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Benteen wakes coughing. Labored breath. He rises slowly.

He opens a drawer - takes out an old, unopened letter from years earlier. The corner reads:

"To be opened if I fall in the field."

He laughs. Bitter.

BENTEEN

Damn fool, you're still standing.

He tosses it in the stove.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - KANSAS TERRITORY - DAY

A young typesetter posts Edith's article on the board for proofing.

An old cavalry veteran, arm in sling, reads over his shoulder.

VETERAN

I was there. Ridge Three.

We saw the smoke but got no orders. Maybe he really did hold something.

The typesetter nods. Sets the article in motion.

INT. LIBRARY - EAST COAST UNIVERSITY - NIGHT

A student flips through a newspaper archive. Sees Edith's byline. Reads it.

Underlines one line in pencil:

"No throne was ever found out there. But plenty died trying to sit on one."

INT. BENTEEN'S ROOM - LATE NIGHT

Edith watches as he struggles to sleep. His breathing ragged.

He turns to her.

BENTEEN
Don't let her win.

EDITH
I don't need to win. I just need
the truth not to die where it fell.

A pause. Then he laughs - dry, honest.

BENTEEN
You write that down.

She does.

EXT. FORT CRAIG - MOMENTS LATER

Edith waits under the awning.

Benteen steps outside, squints.

They meet eyes. Both nod.

No embrace. Just shared exhaustion - and understanding.

INT. FORT CRAIG - PRIVATE QUARTERS - LATER

Benteen pours them tea - no whiskey this time.

She lays out the photos and the sketch.

EDITH
They buried something with him.
Libbie took it.

BENTEEN
Then she took more than the Army
ever gave him.

A long silence.

BENTEEN (CONT'D)
I'm tired of being quiet.

EDITH
Then let's speak - before they
paint over everything.

INT. FORT CRAIG - PRIVATE QUARTERS - NIGHT

A desert wind rattles the shutters.

BENTEEN sits at a table strewn with Edith's files, the
battlefield sketch, and the dispatch.

EDITH
If we go public, it'll undo both of
us.

BENTEEN
You've already been undone. I've
already been forgotten.

He lays a hand on the dispatch.

BENTEEN (CONT'D)
Let's make them remember the right
thing.

She nods.

INT. TRAIN - MOVING - NEXT DAY

Edith sits alone in a dusty passenger car, editing her
article draft longhand.

The title scrawled in ink at the top:

"What He Held in His Final Breath"

INT. LIBBIE'S PARLOR - NEW YORK - SAME

Libbie dictates to a young stenographer.

LIBBIE

George once told me the saddle was
his throne, and the West his
battlefield of destiny.

She glances toward a small locked drawer. The token is gone now.

LIBBIE (CONT'D)

Chapter One. "A Hero's Journey
Begins."

The stenographer types.

INT. NEWSPAPER PRESSROOM - LATE NIGHT

Edith stands with a sympathetic printer (fictional character) as a single press run begins - small circulation, private publication.

PRINTER

You're sure? This won't reach the
dailies.

EDITH

It only needs to reach the next
century.

The machines churn.

INT. LIBBIE'S DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Libbie hosts a dinner party - senators, generals' widows, publishers.

A mock-up of her memoir sits at the head of the table.

LIBBIE (V.O.)

We shape history one dinner, one
headline, one chapter at a time.

She smiles as a publisher raises a glass.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - LATER

Edith reads the letter:

"No syndication. No funding. But you did the right thing."

She folds it and places it into her journal. The same journal holds a photo of Mitchell... and now a sealed envelope from Benteen.

She stares at it but doesn't open it.

Then a knock at the door.

She opens it to find a young man in uniform - early 20s, awkward.

SOLDIER

Ma'am. I-I read your article.
Thought you should know... there's
someone who saw it. Ridge Three.
Name's Elmer Swain.

He hands her a note with a name and address.

SOLDIER (CONT'D)

He don't talk to folks much. But he
said... maybe you'd listen.

INT. TRAIN - MOVING - NEXT MORNING

Edith reads Swain's field journal.

Scrawled entries:

"June 25 - Smoke rising from Ridge Three..." "June 26 - Found
Custer. Token still in his palm. No blood on him." "June 27 -
Officers arguing. One says, 'Burn it all.' Benteen won't."

She closes the journal, shaken.

She removes the envelope from Benteen - still sealed.

She stares at it.

INT. LIBBIE'S HOTEL SUITE - WASHINGTON D.C. - NIGHT

Libbie rehearses her speech before a mirror, dressed in full
black mourning.

LIBBIE

He was not defeated. He was
betrayed by hesitation and
cowardice.

His legacy is not the loss... but the stand.

Her voice cracks at "stand." She stops. Wipes a tear before continuing.

EXT. WASHINGTON PLAZA - STATUE UNVEILING - DAY

Crowds gather beneath a draped figure.

Reporters scribble, generals shift in full dress uniform, young soldiers watch in silence.

Libbie stands at a podium, paper in hand.

LIBBIE

Today we do not merely honor a man...

We commit to memory what it cost to build this nation - and what it costs to forget it.

She nods to the soldiers.

The cloth is pulled.

The statue of Custer is revealed: sword raised, eyes carved defiantly westward.

Applause. But not unanimous.

A reporter leans to another.

REPORTER

That Lorimer article's making the rounds.

Different kind of monument, isn't it?

INT. TRAIN STATION - PHILADELPHIA - NIGHT

Edith steps off, holding her satchel close.

She's met by Professor Gaines, mid-40s, calm, academic.

GAINES

Miss Lorimer. We'd be honored if you'd allow a reading of your manuscript.

She hesitates.

EDITH

It's not finished.

GAINES

That's what makes it honest.

She considers.

Then hands him the envelope from Benteen.

INT. UNIVERSITY LECTURE HALL - DAY

Students sit, notebooks ready.

Professor Gaines begins reading:

"Testimony of Captain Frederick W. Benteen - To Be Released Upon My Death..."

Edith stands at the back. Unnoticed. Eyes closed.

GAINES (V.O.)

â€œThere were orders. There were hesitations. There was pride...

But what killed those men... was silence."

INT. LIBBIE'S STUDY - NEW YORK - NIGHT

Libbie sits by herself. No guests. Just silence.

She opens a worn scrapbook.

Inside: newspaper clippings, sketches of the statue, articles praising George - and one scrap from Edith's piece.

She rereads the underlined sentence:

"Bravery does not cleanse ambition. It only disguises it."

Tears well - then vanish as quickly as they came.

She slams the book shut.

EXT. COLORADO SANITARIUM - DAY

Edith arrives by stagecoach.

She meets SERGEANT ELMER SWAIN, late 70s, blind in one eye, sitting on a bench under an old oak tree.

EDITH

I'm told you saw the token.

He taps his cane twice.

SWAIN

Saw it. Watched a Sioux lay it in
his hand.

They didn't hate him, you know. They feared what he
represented.

A long pause.

EDITH

And what was that?

SWAIN

A new god... with brass buttons and
no mercy.

He hands her something wrapped in cloth – his own journal.

SWAIN (CONT'D)

Pages are scattered. But you'll
find the part that matters.

She takes it with trembling hands.

INT. EAST COAST NEWSPAPER - NIGHT

A younger editor reads Edith's original article. He sets it
beside Libbie's memoir.

Turns to his assistant.

EDITOR

Print them both. Side-by-side.

ASSISTANT

Isn't that... dangerous?

EDITOR

So's letting a myth become law.

INT. LIBBIE'S PARLOR - NEXT DAY

Libbie reads the double-column article.

Left side: her words.

Right side: Edith's.

She rises, crosses to the fireplace... and stops.

She doesn't burn it.

She folds the paper neatly. Tucks it into George's old field satchel.

Edith reads a letter from her editor in Chicago.

"No syndication. No funding. But you did the right thing."

She smiles, folds it, places it in a journal beside a photo of Mitchell.

INT. WASHINGTON, D.C. - LOBBY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS - WEEKS LATER

A copy of Libbie's memoir is placed into a glass display case.

Next to it: a brass plaque.

"Boots and Saddles - Elizabeth B. Custer, 1885"

Defining the memory of a legend.

INT. PRIVATE LIBRARY - SAME TIME

A lone historian opens a small bundle wrapped in cloth - Edith's limited publication.

She flips through yellowed pages.

Stops on the final sentence:

"They died not just for a mistake - but for a man chasing a crown in a land that had no throne."

MONTAGE: THE LEGACY WAR

- Libbie signing books
- Edith alone at a train station, staring west
- A schoolteacher reading from Boots and Saddles
- A small bookshelf in a dusty archive: Edith's article stored under "Anonymous Accounts - 1876"
- A child in 1910 riding a stick horse named "General Custer"

INT. LIBBIE'S STUDY - NIGHT - YEARS LATER

Libbie, older now, writes in a quiet house.

She signs a final draft:

"Mrs. Elizabeth B. Custer"

She closes the manuscript.

LIBBIE (V.O.)
He gave them a story.
I gave them a legend.

INT. HARPER'S WEEKLY - EDITORIAL OFFICE - NEW YORK - DAY

A bold woodcut of Custer on horseback hangs behind a polished desk.

LIBBIE CUSTER, veiled and poised, sits across from a SENIOR EDITOR mid-50s, skeptical.

EDITOR
It's a compelling memoir, Mrs.
Custer.

But controversy sells more papers than courage these days.

Libbie hands him a leather-bound copy.

LIBBIE
Then package it with courage.
They'll buy both.

He studies her. Intrigued. Opportunistic.

INT. WOMEN'S CLUB LECTURE HALL - BOSTON - NIGHT

Libbie speaks from a candlelit podium.

LIBBIE
I stood by his side as he chased
manifest destiny -
not for conquest, but for unity.
For peace.

The audience - socialites, publishers, widows - applaud.

But in the back row, a younger woman quietly takes notes. Her notepad bears the header: "Chicago Tribune."

INT. CARRIAGE - LATER

Libbie sits with her publicist, 30s, fast-talking.

PUBLICICIST

The book tour's locked. Boston to
Richmond to Philly.

Harper's pushing syndication. You've made him a folk hero.

Libbie gazes out the window.

LIBBIE

He already was.

PUBLICICIST

Then you've made him a god.

INT. GILDED PARLOR - PHILADELPHIA - NIGHT

A private dinner. Candlelight. A few generals' widows and one
U.S. Senator.

They pass a mock-up of a bronze statue across the table.

WIDOW #1

Can we secure federal land for
placement?

SENATOR

Might be easier to secure public
sentiment.

He raises a glass.

SENATOR (CONT'D)

To Mrs. Custer. Keeper of his
flame.

They toast.

Libbie smiles - but her fingers tremble slightly as she lifts
the glass.

INT. HOTEL SUITE - LATE NIGHT

Libbie, now alone. Candle flickering.

She stands before a full-length mirror in mourning dress.

From a drawer, she removes the second copy of Edith's article
- creased and annotated.

She rereads one line:

"We buried myth alongside the men. Only one was dug up again."

Libbie whispers to herself.

LIBBIE

This is not your century.

She folds the article tightly – and buries it beneath the base of the statue mock-up.

INT. UNMARKED STORAGE ROOM – SAME

A copy of Edith's final manuscript, wrapped in cloth, rests in a box marked:

"Unpublished Correspondence – Benteen, F.W. / Lorimer, E."

The box is sealed.

FADE OUT

INT. FORT CRAIG – BENTEEN'S QUARTERS – NIGHT

The lamp flickers low.

BENTEEN sleeps in a narrow bed, breathing heavy.

Wind rattles the window. Then... quiet.

A metallic squeak. A chair being dragged.

Benteen's eyes snap open.

Across the room: a figure sits at his desk.

Uniform gleaming, boots polished, face shadowed – but unmistakable:

CUSTER.

Not bloodied. Not ghostly. Just... impossibly present.

BENTEEN

(frozen)

George.

The figure says nothing.

BENTEEN (CONT'D)
I rode for you. Lied for you.
Buried men you never knew. And they
still called you hero.

Custer remains silent.

BENTEEN (CONT'D)
Say something, damn you.

A beat. Then the figure speaks – voice eerily calm.

CUSTER
You think they wanted the truth?

Benteen rises slowly.

BENTEEN
I didn't write it for them. I wrote
it for what's left of me.

Custer tilts his head.

CUSTER
That's not history. That's
confession.

BENTEEN
Then confess something back.

Silence.

Custer stands.

CUSTER
I gave them a charge.

BENTEEN
You gave them a graveyard.

They lock eyes.

Then – in a blink – the chair is empty.

The room still.

Benteen breathes hard, eyes damp.

INT. FORT CRAIG – SAME

He pours water from the basin. Washes his face.

Looks at his reflection in the window – and in the warped glass, for half a second, Custer still stands behind him.

Gone.

Benteen exhales, shaken but grounded.

He opens the drawer again, removes Edith's article...

and this time, begins underlining it.

INT. CHICAGO – INDEPENDENT JOURNAL OFFICES – DAY

Stacks of unsold broadsheets fill the lobby.

EDITH LORIMER meets with her editor, 60s, weary, loyal – but defeated.

He taps a single returned envelope.

EDITOR

Every major syndicate passed.
Again.

EDITH

Even St. Louis?

EDITOR

Especially St. Louis.

She sighs. Grips her satchel.

EDITH

Then we keep knocking.

INT. EASTERN PRESS SYNDICATE – LOBBY – DAY

A receptionist glances at Edith's submission.

RECEPTIONIST

Ma'am, we're no longer reviewing
unsolicited editorial rebuttals.

EDITH

This isn't a rebuttal. It's a
record.

RECEPTIONIST

Right. Thank you.

The envelope is tossed in a bin marked: REVIEW LATER.

It doesn't move.

INT. CHICAGO - HOTEL BAR - NIGHT

Edith sits alone. Whiskey untouched.

Across the bar, two young reporters laugh reading a glowing review of Libbie's book.

REPORTER #1

"Thundering heart of the West." Who writes this crap?

REPORTER #2

Apparently, she does.

They toss the review aside and walk off. Edith stares at it.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - LATER

She opens a telegram.

"No testimony permitted. Journalistic ethics board ruled Custer record closed."

Another door slammed.

She paces. Furious.

Then notices a slip of paper tucked into her coat lining - a note from Benteen, faded.

"They'll print her story. But history's not always written in ink. Sometimes it's in blood. And dust. And the quiet."

She breaks.

Collapses onto the bed - sobbing silently.

EXT. CHICAGO - LAKEFRONT - NEXT MORNING

Edith walks the shoreline, wind tugging at her coat.

She pulls out Swain's battlefield journal and begins reading again.

Her face steadies. Breathing slows.

Resolve returns.

INT. SMALL PRINT SHOP - DAY

She enters with a stack of pages and a trembling hand.

EDITH
How much to run fifty copies?

PRINTER (O.S.)
Depends. You selling truth or
fiction?

She sets down a dollar.

EDITH
Let's find out.

EXT. PINE RIDGE RESERVATION - SOUTH DAKOTA - DAY

Wind whistles through a sparse grove of pine. A tribal funeral in progress.

EDITH, in black but bareheaded, stands respectfully at the perimeter.

She's guided by a reservation liaison, 40s.

LIAISON
He's the last one alive who saw the
smoke that day.
Doesn't speak to many outsiders.

They approach TATÉ IRON HORSE, 80s - wrapped in a bison-hide shawl, eyes clouded but piercing.

He sits on a hand-carved stool beside a fire.

INT. TRIBAL LODGE - MOMENTS LATER

Edith sits across from Taté, quietly. She offers tobacco.

He accepts, packs a ceremonial pipe, and lights it.

Silence.

Then, he speaks in Lakota. The LIAISON translates softly.

TATÉ (IN LAKOTA)
Your soldier... the one they follow
still...
He was not brave. He was cursed.

LIAISON

He says Custer was not seen as
brave – but as a man marked.

FLASHBACK – TATÉ'S MEMORY – 1876

TATÉ'S POV:

Through tall grass and rising smoke, Custer's final stand. He sees Custer still alive, standing stunned – gun jammed, surrounded.

A Lakota warrior lays something in his hand – the token – and steps back.

Then, silence. No scalping. No mutilation.

Just wind and flies.

INT. TRIBAL LODGE – PRESENT

Taté finishes the story, tapping the ash from his pipe.

He says one last line. The Liaison looks at Edith.

LIAISON

He says... you will not fix this
with ink.

A beat.

EDITH

No. But ink might outlive the
statues.

Taté studies her. Then... nods.

He unwraps a cloth bundle.

Inside: a carved wooden effigy – weathered, cracked, shaped like a throne with no base.

He hands it to Edith.

TATÉ (IN ENGLISH)

He chased this.

EXT. RESERVATION – LATE AFTERNOON

Edith walks away, wind cutting across the plain.

She clutches the effigy like a final piece of the puzzle – something neither Libbie nor the military will ever include in their stories.

INT. U.S. CAPITOL – CLOSED COMMITTEE ROOM – DAY

Shutters drawn. Brass fixtures gleam beneath dim gaslight.

A small group of men sits behind a long table: – SENATOR HATHAWAY, mid-60s, Army veteran – BRIGADIER GENERAL MYERS, uniform stiff with medals – ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF WAR, bespectacled, discreet

A staffer distributes copies of Edith's article and the affidavit from Sergeant Swain.

SENATOR HATHAWAY

This is gaining legs in the West.
Local dailies, even Sunday
circulars.

GENERAL MYERS

Then we amputate the leg.

They all look to the War Department official.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY

We remind publishers of military
decorum. Revoke embedded access.
Threaten sedition charges if they
suggest officers withheld
reinforcements.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE – LATER

LIBBIE CUSTER, veiled, emerges from the committee room.

Her gloved hands tremble, though her posture is steel.

She's intercepted by REP. STANTON, friendly but firm.

STANTON

Ma'am. If I may...

He walks beside her discreetly.

STANTON (CONT'D)

You've won more hearts than
ballots.
But you keep pressing this statue
bill, you may fracture the chamber.

LIBBIE
 Then let it fracture.
 They didn't die for silence. They
 died for memory.

STANTON
 Whose?

She stops. Face cool.

LIBBIE
 The one we can still control.

INT. WASHINGTON TELEGRAPH OFFICE - NIGHT

A low-level Army clerk taps out a coded message.

TELEGRAPH
 "OPPOSE distribution Lorimer
 account STOP Recommend expunge
 records relating Benteen memorandum
 STOP"

A second message follows.

TELEGRAPH (CONT'D)
 "Greenlight statue vote next
 session STOP Support confirmed by
 Senator Dawes STOP"

The wires hum. History rewrites itself at the speed of
 command.

INT. CHICAGO INDEPENDENT JOURNAL - OFFICE - NEXT DAY

EDITH slams down a returned article - red-stamped "DECLINED."

EDITOR
 They're closing ranks, Edith. It's
 coordinated now.

She pulls out Swain's affidavit, Taté's photo, the effigy.

EDITH
 Then we go small press. We go west.

He exhales. Then nods.

EDITOR
 We ride until we print, or hang
 trying.

EXT. WASHINGTON D.C. - CAPITOL GROUNDS - DAY

A large white canvas-draped statue towers over a modest crowd.

Brass band tuning. Spectators gather: widows, officers, reporters, civilians.

LIBBIE CUSTER, now fully the icon of mourning dignity, stands at the podium. Her black veil flutters in the breeze.

At the edge of the crowd: EDITH, hat low, near-invisible among vendors and press.

INT. BACKSTAGE TENT - EARLIER

Libbie stares at her reflection in a compact mirror. She presses a trembling hand to her chest.

SENATOR DAWES enters.

DAWES

Press is everywhere. You ready?

She closes the compact.

LIBBIE

I've been ready since the first lie.

EXT. CAPITOL GROUNDS - MOMENTS LATER

The curtain drops.

THE STATUE is revealed:

Custer atop his horse, saber raised, eyes cast west.

Polite applause.

LIBBIE (O.S.)

My husband rode not toward glory...
but toward a promise - that no
land, no people, would be
forgotten.

Edith exhales sharply. She turns to leave - but stops.

EXT. EDGE OF CROWD - MOMENTS LATER

As the crowd disperses, Libbie and Edith lock eyes across a moment of chaos.

Neither moves.

No words. No approach. No resolution.

Just two women, standing on opposite ends of history.

Then: Libbie turns, cloaked by generals and society wives.

Edith remains in the dust.

INT. CARRIAGE - MOVING - LATER

Libbie rides away. She opens her satchel.

Inside: one yellowed, folded copy of Edith's article.

She stares at it.

Then... tucks it beneath a book titled Boots and Saddles.

EXT. CHICAGO - RAIL PLATFORM - NIGHT

Edith boards a westbound train. In her lap:

- Taté's effigy
- Swain's affidavit
- Benteen's final letter
- Her own manuscript

She clutches the documents like relics - and looks forward, into darkness.

MONTAGE - "THE RACE FOR MEMORY"

- 1891 - BOSTON

A classroom of girls reads aloud from Boots and Saddles.

The teacher underlines:

"A noble soldier's death in defense of American values."

– 1893 – DUSTY PRINT SHOP – COLORADO

A lone typesetter locks in the title of Edith's booklet:

"What He Held in His Final Breath"

Only 50 copies roll off the press.

– 1895 – ARMY WAR COLLEGE LIBRARY

A new librarian catalogues Libbie's memoirs in the "Notable Military Figures" section.

He finds Edith's article – misfiled under "Fiction."

He doesn't correct it.

–

– 1901 – BRONZE STATUE DEDICATION – KANSAS CITY

Libbie, now older, stands beside another monument.

A child on a stick horse shouts: "I'm General Custer!"

She smiles... but her hand trembles on her cane.

–

– 1904 – CHICAGO – UNIVERSITY BASEMENT ARCHIVES

A young assistant opens a forgotten donation box.

Inside: Edith's full manuscript, Swain's affidavit, and Benteen's sealed letter.

She starts to read...

–

– 1910 – SOD HOUSE – OKLAHOMA

A Lakota boy sits by lantern light, carving a tiny wooden figure – a broken throne – as his grandmother whispers in Lakota.

We don't hear the words, but the rhythm is the same as Taté's voice from earlier.

–

INT. LIBBIE'S STUDY - NEW YORK - NIGHT - 1913

Libbie, now frail and alone, signs a final letter:

LIBBIE (V.O.)
 He gave them a story.
 I gave them a legend.

She seals it and places it in a drawer labeled:

"To Be Opened Upon My Passing."

She looks once more at George's portrait.

Her candle flickers out.

INT. PUBLISHER'S LOBBY - WASHINGTON, D.C. - DAY

The unveiling is over. Libbie enters a refined lobby lined with portraits of bestselling authors. A doorman tips his hat.

She carries a bouquet and a first-print copy of *Boots and Saddles*.

As she reaches the stairs—

EDITH LORIMER steps into her path.

Disheveled, eyes sunken — but burning with clarity.

LIBBIE
 (icy)
 Miss Lorimer. Always where you're
 not invited.

EDITH
 And you're always where history
 can't afford you.

Libbie offers a tight smile.

LIBBIE
 History has a fondness for the
 composed.

EDITH
 No, just the published.

She holds up Swain's affidavit, folded, dog-eared.

EDITH (CONT'D)

He begged for backup. You buried the dispatch, just like your husband buried every mistake.

LIBBIE

He didn't bury them. He led them.

EDITH

To what? Glory? Graves? A throne that never existed?

A tense silence.

LIBBIE

They needed a story, Miss Lorimer. Something to salute. Not... your cynicism.

EDITH

They needed the truth.

LIBBIE

No. They needed something that outlives the truth.

She steps forward, voice quieter now.

LIBBIE (CONT'D)

You write for the dead.
I write for what lives.

Edith doesn't flinch.

EDITH

Then I'll haunt what lives.

Libbie exhales – just a flicker of emotion behind her eyes.

LIBBIE

You'll be forgotten.

EDITH

Only if you win. And I don't think you have.

A pause.

LIBBIE

We'll see which name they remember in fifty years.

She brushes past, graceful and cold.

Edith stays frozen, gripping the affidavit.

A voice from behind her – the doorman:

DOORMAN (O.S.)
Ma'am... are you... her rival?

EDITH
(softly)
No. I'm just her shadow.

INT. UNIVERSITY LIBRARY – SPECIAL COLLECTIONS ROOM – PRESENT DAY

A graduate student, MAYA LORIMER, 30s, African American, sharp-eyed, opens a climate-sealed box labeled:

"Unpublished Correspondence – Lorimer, E. / Benteen, F.W."

Received: 1964. Never catalogued.

She unwraps a weathered manuscript, its title page faded but intact:

"What He Held in His Final Breath" – by Edith Lorimer

INT. UNIVERSITY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS – CONTINUOUS

Maya sits at a long reading table under soft halogen light. Dust motes drift around her like echoes.

She flips through the brittle manuscript. Handwritten notes in the margin. Battlefield sketches. Ink-splotched timelines. A faded photograph of Benteen – annotated:

"Final post: Fort Craig."

MAYA (V.O.)
You may be the last man in uniform
who still bleeds when he lies...

She pauses, finger resting on a line Edith circled:

"They buried more than men that day."

Maya exhales, visibly moved.

MAYA
You told it all, Edith.

INT. READING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Maya flips through pages – maps, telegrams, the affidavit from Swain, the effigy sketch.

She pauses on one handwritten note, now browned with age.

EDITH (V.O.)
If no one believes you, write
anyway.

If they bury your pages, make sure you bury them deep enough to be found again.

She pulls out her phone. Snaps a photo.

Then hesitates... and opens her laptop.

INT. LECTURE HALL - DAYS LATER

A small seminar: "Mythmaking in American Military History."

Maya stands at the podium.

MAYA
Most sources about Custer come from
one woman – Libbie Custer.

But today, we're going to read another.

She hands out printed excerpts of Edith's manuscript.

In the crowd, one student whispers:

STUDENT
So which one's true?

MAYA
That's the wrong question.

She steps closer to the edge of the podium.

MAYA (CONT'D)
Ask: Which one was allowed to be
true?

MONTAGE - "LEGACY UNFOLDING"

– A Lakota youth on a reservation museum tour sees a replica of Taté's effigy

– A war memorial historian adds Edith's name to a display panel

– A second-grade textbook reprints both a Libbie excerpt and Edith's quote:

"They died not just for a mistake... but for a man chasing a crown in a land that had no throne."

INT. UNIVERSITY LIBRARY - LATER

Maya places the manuscript back into the box. Pauses.

She adds a new label beside the old one:

Verified: 2025. For inclusion in public archive.

She smiles.

EXT. NATIONAL MALL - EVENING

Two statues stand across from one another –

One bronze, heroic.

One small – barely noticed, tucked in a memorial garden: a broken throne carved in granite.

FADE OUT

EXT. FRANCE - TRENCH LINE - 1918 - NIGHT

MUD. BARBED WIRE. The muffled THUD of distant artillery.

A young AMERICAN INFANTRYMAN, barely 18, sits against a sandbag wall under a dim oil lamp.

Helmet beside him. Rifle cradled.

From his coat pocket, he pulls a crumpled booklet – its cover nearly illegible.

He opens it.

One visible page:

"They died not just for a mistake... but for a man chasing a crown in a land that had no throne." – E. Lorimer

The soldier stares at the line.

He folds it carefully. Tucks it inside the lining of his Bible.

EXT. NO MAN'S LAND - PRE-DAWN

The soldier prepares to go over the top.

He closes his eyes for a moment.

Then:

COMMANDING OFFICER (O.S.)
Stand ready!

The boy rises.

SOLDIER (V.O.)
(choked whisper)
No thrones here either.

He charges forward - into the gray.

TEXT ON SCREEN:

Elizabeth Custer published three memoirs and helped shape the national image of her husband.

Captain Benteen died quietly, never publishing his account.

Edith Lorimer's manuscript remained sealed for nearly 80 years before being rediscovered in 1964.

It was verified and archived publicly in 2025.

Custer's remains were re-interred at West Point, New York. In 1881, a granite memorial was erected on Last Stand Hill by the War Department. The remains of soldiers and attached personnel buried on the field were collected and re-interred in a mass grave around the base of the granite memorial on Last Stand Hill.