An assortment of rusty tools and several burnt wagons surrounded by many recently gnawed bones marked the site of a prospector’s camp in the Black Hills of Dakota Territory. Bloody Knife, Custer’s favorite scout, was moving among the debris, kneeling from time to time to carefully examine something on the ground. Occasionally he would find a bit of yellow metal that he put into a small pouch hanging from his belt.

“I see that the Colonel has you collecting any gold that you find,” his companion, James Washington, said as he made some notes in a journal.

Bloody Knife did not respond immediately. He just continued his explorations for a few more minutes before saying, “I pick up pieces of yellow metal. You write in book for Yellow Hair.”

Washington replied, “I guess that makes us a good team.”

Looking up from his journal and closing it with a loud snap, Washington said, “Custer sent us here to find Hank O’Toole and bring him back to the fort. I think Custer believes that the whole regiment is on the verge of deserting over the rumors of gold in these Black Hills, and he wants to put a stop to it. At the same time, he wants to know more about the possibility of gold in the Black Hills and whether or not prospectors are overrunning the place.”

Bloody Knife just grunted and continued searching, paying close attention to the remains of clothing that intermingled with many of the bones, while Washington scanned the horizon.

Washington was a civilian scout for the 7th Cavalry under Colonel George A. Custer. He was known as Night Buffalo to the Crow, who had accepted him into their tribe when he married one of their people. He had been a First Sergeant in the 13th Colored Regiment during the Civil War.

Bloody Knife was an Arikara scout for Custer, who had an intense hatred for the Sioux. He was half Sioux himself through his father. He had been driven away from his father’s village after being severely beaten by a chief named Gall.

Custer had high confidence in the scouting skills of these two men and had sent them on a special mission into the Black Hills of the Dakotas. A deserter had stolen Custer’s mount and fled into the Black Hills. He wanted that horse returned, and the deserter brought back for hanging right after the regiment returned to Fort Lincoln.

Also, Custer planned on leading a major expedition into these same hills in 1874, and he wanted additional information about them. They were sacred to the Lakota Sioux and rumored to have vast gold deposits. He wanted to know if there was any activity by white prospectors and if there was, were they finding any gold.

Bloody Knife and Washington had worked their way south, along the eastern flank of the Hills for three days before encountering the site of a destroyed mining camp. It was the first evidence that prospectors were encroaching on Sioux Territory.

The prospectors were dead more than two months, as evidenced by the state of the bones discovered lying around. It was also evident that the Sioux returned here from time to time. There were pony tracks through the camp that were less than a week old.
Washington was making additional notes in his journal while Bloody Knife examined the remains of the camp.

“How many prospectors do you think were here when the Sioux attacked?” Washington asked.

“At least six. The way the bones are scattered, there may have been others. The Sioux may have also taken some elsewhere to kill more slowly,” Bloody Knife answered.

Finding a gold nugget under the remains of some clothing and bones, Bloody Knife stood and walked over to where Washington was writing in his journal. “Yellow Hair want any of the yellow metal we find. You no pick any up for him.”

“He doesn’t need it all. He has plenty of his own. I will take notes for him.”

“I have enough for him from here. He no need more.”

“I’ll be done with my notes in a few minutes. Take one last look around and see if we missed anything. Then we’ll see if we can pick up O’Toole’s tracks to the south. I suspect he’ll be turning west before too long,” Washington said.

They spent about an hour at the massacre site before continuing south and going higher into the Hills. They watched for Indian sign but had seen none along their route. The only tracks were several days old and left by O’Toole. They were easy to follow. A notched shoe on the left front hoof indicated it was Custer’s horse.

The Sioux were always watching for white men coming into their sacred lands, but the area was vast, and the Sioux spent most of their time out on the plains.

The treaty did allow the army to travel into the Hills. Since both scouts wore variations of 7th Cavalry Uniforms, they should not have problems with the Sioux.

Bloody Knife wore a blue jacket with sergeant stripes and brass buttons. His blue trousers were covered with a leather breechcloth. A broad-brimmed slouch hat with yellow trim and a feather in its brim sat over shoulder-length, braided hair. A regulation cartridge belt around his waist held a .44 caliber Colt Army pistol and a short-bladed scalping knife in its sheath.

Washington also wore the blue uniform but without the loincloth. He also concealed a small revolver on the back of his right hip and two Bowie knives, one on his belt and the other in the small of his back. He was a foot taller than Bloody Knife, but anyone watching them would quickly realize how equal they were in their work.

For the following three days, the two scouts rode past four different locations where the conditions appeared favorable for gold prospecting. The sites were empty and showed no signs of any activity. O’Toole had spent the night at one of them and then gone on. He was pushing his horse, and they were not gaining on him. They had even fallen a bit more behind him. Custer had the best mount in the 7th Cavalry, and it could probably continue its fast pace for quite some time. Especially since O’Toole was smart enough to steal a sack of oats when he took the horse.

The sun was disappearing behind some mountain peaks when they approached a fifth possible prospecting site near a fast-moving mountain stream. As they reached the edge of the clearing, something did not feel right.

Night Buffalo had the sensation of being watched. He also noticed that Bloody Knife was acting unusual as if he was sniffing the air in response to a foul odor.
As they cautiously moved into the open, they saw two large tents and a wagon near the water. Bloody Knife signaled that he would move to the downstream side of the clearing, and Night Buffalo started to acknowledge the signal when everything suddenly went black.

As he became aware of his surroundings, Washington had a searing pain in his head. He tried to suppress it when he realized he was tied to a wagon wheel, and it was night.

Three scruffy men sat around a fire about ten feet away, and a young boy was standing near one of them while wiping blood off his face.

One of the men threw a stick into the fire as one of the others said, “Cass, you had no reason to hit the kid with that stick. He was doin’ what you said.”

“You mind your own business, Sam. Just ‘cause he wasn’t kilt with his old man, doesn’t mean we gotta take care of him.”

Then Cass looked at the kid and said, “Next time you move slow when I tell you to come, boy, I’ll use my fist, and your nose won’t be stickin’ out so far. Your daddy’s dead, and you are gonna work for your keep.”

When he stood up and stretched, Washington noticed that the left side of Cass’s face was a mass of scars, and his left eye was gone. He was just over five feet tall and wore a flannel shirt with jeans. He looked like a prospector, but he was mean and dangerous.

The other two men appeared to be more typical and acted like Cass was the one in charge.

Washington wondered if there were more men on guard duty and whether Bloody Knife was okay. He stopped when he became aware of the kid standing next to him with a bucket of water.

“How can you spare a drink of water, boy?” Washington asked in a weak, croaking voice.

Before the boy acknowledged, Sam called over, “Ben, you get away from that nigger. We’ll be takin’ care of him later. First, he has to answer some questions.”

Ben ignored the man and took a tin cup from the lip of the bucket and dipped it into the water. He quickly gave Washington a drink.

Cass did not like it and quickly walked over to them. He said, “I warned you to listen. Boy,” as he knocked the cup out of Ben’s hand and slapped him hard on the side of the face. The bucket flew one way, and Ben went the other way.

“Now go get some more water. You spilt what you had,” Cass said as Ben slowly got to his feet.

Then he looked at Washington and said, “You are one big nigger, and I see you been ridin’ with some redskins. Just ‘cause you stole some army gear don’t make you a soldier boy. We was warned about you and your friends coming along and makin’ trouble for any prospectors.”

Sam came over and handed him a jug of whiskey. He took a long drink before continuing. “I’m gonna make you cry for your mama just before I cut out your tongue. Then you can just gurgle while I keep cuttin’.”

When Washington just sat quietly staring straight ahead, he continued, “You understand me, boy? Or you been livin’ with the savages so long you forgot how to speak?”

Washington still did not respond, and Cass started to get angry. “I might let you keep your tongue if you use it to tell me a few things. I want to know how many Injuns are with you.
That deserter told us there was just one or two. I want to make sure. I saw one just before I winged you. I tried for a headshot, but you moved when I fired. But that is okay because now I’ll get to have some fun.”

Then he shouted at Sam, “You and Coot go relieve Jack and Charlie. They been on guard duty long enough. Besides, they said they wanted to help cut up the nigger.”

Sam stood and dropped his plate, complaining, “Coot and me wanted some fun with him too.”

“Yeah,” Coot said. “Don’t go killin’ him right away.”

As they disappeared into the darkness, Washington felt his bonds being cut. Ben had left the bucket by the stream and crawled under the wagon to cut the ropes securing Washington’s arms. Then he sat his pocketknife on the ground by his side.

The shadows around the wagon hid Ben’s actions while Cass was giving orders. Ben slowly crawled back toward the stream while Cass watched Sam and Coot walk away. Then Cass turned and pulled out a Bowie Knife.

“This is a mighty fine blade you was carryin’. It’s razor-sharp, and I’m gonna carve you up with it. I’ll try a few small cuts until Jack and Charlie get here.

Before he took a step, Sam and Coot came running back into the light from the campfire.

“They’re dead and scalped,” Sam shouted just before he grunted and fell forward with a tomahawk stuck into his back.

The distraction gave Washington a chance to take the Bowie from between his shoulder blades. With a smooth motion, he threw it and caught Cass in the center of his chest.

Coot had stopped running and was scanning the dark for the source of the tomahawk when he heard Cass scream. He turned and raised his rifle to shoot Washington before he could cut the rope away from his legs.

Ben had run to get a pistol from Cass’s bedroll to help Washington, but quickly realized he did not have enough time. He grabbed a chunk of burning wood from the fire and threw it at Coot, hitting him on the side of the head with the burning end of the firebrand, making his shot go wild.

The distraction gave Washington enough time to get free and attack him with the pocketknife. The blade was short but sharp. He cut Coot’s throat with it, and the fight was over. Then he found his belongings and took three scalps while Ben watched, fascinated.

Washington noticed that Ben was looking nervous, even more so as he watched Bloody Knife ransacking the camp. He said, “Don’t let Bloody Knife scare you. We are both scouts for the 7th Cavalry, and we are after a deserter who came through here a few days ago. He is making it look like Sioux attacked this camp. If nothing else, it’ll confuse the Sioux enough that they won’t come looking for us.”

“But both of you took everyone’s scalp.”

“Bloody Knife is an army scout, but he is also an Arikara warrior. Custer likes it when he takes scalps. It gives people the idea that Custer has a real savage under his command. These scalps Custer will never see because they are white man scalps, but word will get around. Besides, it makes the appearance of a Sioux attack more believable.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“How old are you?”
“Thirteen this past year.”

“Listen, Ben. You helped me when I needed it at the risk of your own life. We will take you with us until we get back to Fort Lincoln. Take whatever you need before we set fire to everything.”

Ben saddled one of the mules from the wagon. He had a Sharps Rifle in a scabbard and a knife in a sheath on his belt. He even carried a hatchet in an old set of saddlebags along with some extra clothing and a bedroll.

Washington checked him out and asked, “Do you know how to handle a Sharps?”

“My dad taught me how to use it. Cass took it from my dad’s belongings after he died. Now I got it back.”

 Bloody Knife had tied canvas sacks onto the horses’ hooves to mask their tracks. The three of them rode into the stream and followed it down for about a mile before exiting onto a rocky bank. They went several hundred yards from the water into a copse of trees where they settled in for the night.

 Bloody Knife doubled back and wiped out any sign they may have left behind. Any Sioux coming by would never notice where they exited the water.

 Washington showed Ben where to throw his bedroll and said, “Dawn is about four hours away. Let’s catch some sleep, and we’ll move on in the morning.”

 As the sun rose in the east, a faint column of smoke was rising from the prospectors’ camp. Washington was on guard, and as soon as he saw the smoke, he woke Bloody Knife. As they studied the smoke, Bloody Knife said, “Sioux find camp and burn wagon and tents. They must have heard shot from rifle.”

 Before Washington could reply, a large group of Sioux rode by, following the stream on both banks. They were apparently searching for whoever killed the prospectors.

 As they rode out of sight, Washington said, “They seem a bit confused. The camp looked like an Indian attack, but they would know if it had been a Sioux attack. They want to know if other tribes are trespassing in their sacred lands.”

 Ben had awakened and quietly joined them. He sat still until the Sioux were out of sight. When he started to speak, Washington motioned for him to stay quiet.

 Ten minutes passed, and the Sioux reappeared, moving back upstream. They were moving fast and no longer searching for a sign. In a few minutes, they were well out of sight once again.

 “We travel now,” Bloody Knife said. “We must go west from here before turning toward the north.”

 After two hours of travel, they stopped and ate some jerky while Washington made some notes in his journal. When he closed his book, Ben became the topic of discussion.

 Bloody Knife said, “Having boy along slow us down and make mission more difficult.”

 “I can keep up with you,” Ben said.

 “I owe him,” Washington said. “Besides. If we see any more prospectors, having a boy along will help to put them at ease.”

 “Are you here to catch a deserter like you told Cass, or are you looking for gold?” Ben asked.
“We are looking for a deserter named O’Toole. He stole Colonel Custer’s favorite horse, and he wants him back. We are also gathering any information about activities here in the Hills. Nobody knows for sure about any gold, but there are traces here and there. But there doesn’t seem to be nearly as much as the rumors say.”

“I have an uncle who is prospecting in the north. He and my dad were with Cass and the others. They had a big fight, and he went off on his own. Maybe we’ll come across him when we go through that area.”

“If we have time, we’ll do a little extra searching. For now, we have to check out a few places here in the southern part of the Hills and then work our way along the western edge.”

Turning to Bloody Knife, Washington said, “O’Toole’s trail is cold, but I suspect we’ll come across him if we make a circuit. His horse’s tracks are distinctive, and he was heading west. I doubt he would go very deep into the Hills since he’d be more likely to get caught by the Sioux.”

Bloody Knife had been sitting quietly while Ben and Washington talked. He suddenly stood and said, “We go now. Sioux coming.”

Looking where Bloody Knife pointed, Washington saw a lone Sioux scout a half-mile away. He appeared to be following their trail without making any attempt at concealment. There was most likely a sizeable party behind him. They were probably the ones who had burned the prospectors’ camp.

Uniformed soldiers were allowed in the Black Hills, according to the Fort Laramie Treaty. Still, just the two of them with a boy looked too suspicious. Besides, Bloody Knife was an Arikara, and Washington carried and wore Crow regalia. The Sioux would probably attack them on sight.

Their route across the southern part of the Black Hills provided many opportunities to mislead and confuse anyone trying to follow their trail. Eventually, they lost any sign of the scout that had been following them.

Two days later, they turned toward the north to work along the western edge of the Hills. There was no evidence of any prospectors, but they did come across some signs that O’Toole had passed along this way. They were days old but definitely belonged to him.

O’Toole’s trail became more distinct and led them directly to a prospector’s camp in the northwest area of the Black Hills.

Three prospectors were panning for gold in a large stream. The water was moving fast, and the noise covered their approach. The prospectors did not know they were there until Washington stood on the bank and cleared his throat.

The prospectors did not know what to do. An Indian and a Negro dressed mostly in army uniforms stood on the stream bank between them and their weapons.

What are you fellas up to?” Washington asked.

“Who are you, and what do you want?” one of them responded.

“We are hunting a deserter who came through here a few days ago. We are also warning prospectors to clear out of the Black Hills. The Sioux kill any they find for trespassing.”

“Why should we listen to you?” You don’t look like real soldiers. You even got a boy with you.

“Because we got your guns,” Washington answered, showing a broad smile.
Before anyone could say anything else, a spent arrow hit the ground between Washington and the water. It had come as a warning from a lone Sioux on a ridge just inside of rifle range.

The Sioux disappeared, and the three men came rushing out of the water. The first one said, “Where are the rest of you. You’re just scouts for a patrol, aren’t you? We want your protection.”

“Just us,” Washington said, signaling to Bloody Knife to let them get their rifles.

As the men went for their rifles, he continued, “That arrow was a warning. He was a scout, and he went to get the rest of the war party. I think they want to give us a head start before they hunt us down.”

“We ain’t seen no sign of gold, and I don’t want to lose my scalp. I’m for headin’ back to Montana. Maybe we can still find gold there. At least we’ll keep our scalps.”

The three prospectors threw gear onto a packhorse and mounted up. They were riding out of the camp in less than ten minutes.

“Let’s head east and see if we can lose that Sioux for good,” Washington said.

“He probably lead war party after those three. They be easy scalps to take,” Bloody Knife said.

Ben hadn’t said anything. He had gotten off his horse and looked through the things the three men had left behind. Other than an old bullwhip and a few cartridges for his Sharps, there wasn’t anything of value.

Bloody Knife had disappeared into the surrounding forest by the time Ben remounted. Washington watched him settle onto his mule before asking him, “What do you want with an old bullwhip?”

“My dad taught me how to use one. When he hauled freight, he became very good at it. He could flick a fly off a mule’s ear, and the mule didn’t even know it. He said I had a natural knack for it.”

Washington shrugged his shoulders, and the two of them followed Bloody Knife into the forest.

They were following O’Toole’s trail two days later into a canyon near the northeastern edge of the Black Hills when they came across signs of prospecting. It was an abandoned campsite along a large stream flowing down from higher up in a mountainous region. As they followed the stream toward its source, they passed two active claims.

The first claim had five men working it. As they rode into their camp, the men stopped panning and picked up their rifles. “What do you fells want?” one of them shouted before they got very far into the camp.

“We’re looking for a deserter and warning all prospectors to get out of the Black Hills. The Sioux are killing anyone they find, and according to the treaty, the prospectors are trespassing,” Washington shouted back.

“Well, you can keep movin’ right along. We ain’t goin’ nowhere,” one of the others said.

“We go on,” Bloody Knife said to Washington. “Leave these fools for the Sioux.”

“We warned them,” Washington said, turning his horse onto a trail that followed the stream higher up into the hills.

Their reception at a second camp within shouting distance of the first was no different. The three men here appeared to be nervous about something. They were sitting together talking
when the two scouts appeared. Washington gave them the same warning and continued toward a
third camp just past a major rockfall.

The third claim had four men working it, and they were jumping about in the water when
the scouts saw them.

Three of the men ran for their guns when they saw the scouts, but the fourth man just
stood and stared. The other three stopped running when he shouted, “They ain’t here to cause
trouble. They got Ben with them.”

Walking over to where Ben sat on his mule, the man said, “Where is your father? Did
Cass do somethin’ to him?”

“No, sir. He died accidentally like.”

The man stepped back and looked at the two scouts. Before he could say anything,
Washington said, “Ben here saved my life. Are you his uncle?”

“Yes, I am. Thank you for bringing Ben here. I can take care of him now.”

“It appears you fellas found some gold in that there stream.”

“We did, and the army ain’t gonna make us leave or take it away from us.”

“You are here illegally and have no choice. Besides, the Sioux are hunting and killing
prospectors on sight. A big war party is a couple days south of here.”

“We’ll take our chances.”

“Think about it. We’ll be back tomorrow to check on you and the other two camps
downstream. They better all be empty.”

Ben had been sitting on his mule next to Bloody Knife during the exchange between
Washington and his uncle. He told the two scouts, “I appreciate all that you
have done for me. Now I must stay with my uncle.”

Bloody Knife said, “It good to be with family, but these men be dead in three days.”

“I don’t care. I will stay here with my uncle.”

“You take care of yourself, Ben,” Washington said. “I hope I don’t see you here
tomorrow.”

As the scouts turned to leave the camp, Ben asked, ”What about the deserter you been
hunting. Did he get away?”

“We’ll pick him up tonight. We know where he is hiding,” Washington said.

The two scouts moved downstream a short distance and camped a hundred yards off the
trail in a small group of pine trees. As they settled in to wait until dark, Washington said, “I’m
not sure where O’Toole was hiding in the second camp, but he picketed Custer’s horse with their
horses and mules.”

“He was watching from behind some rocks,” Bloody Knife said.

“We must have surprised him away from his rifle, or else we would have had some
shooting.”

“We go back just before sun rises. We surprise them all.”

The two scouts spent a quiet night, and just before sunrise, they rode downstream. They
approached the camp as the sun was rising. The men were gone, and after a quick look around
the site, they saw that other men had joined them, and the whole group had moved upstream
along a narrow trail along the other side of the water.
“O’Toole must have been spying on the upper camp and was returning when we arrived. That’s why he was in those rocks and didn’t fire his rifle,” Washington said.

“He see men find gold. Now all these men go to that camp,” Bloody Knife said. Before they started after the men, they heard shots from the direction of the upper camp. They mounted and rode up the original trail until they had the camp in sight. It was quiet with a wisp of smoke rising from a small fire pit near two tents. Several men were lying about, but not in bedrolls.

Bloody Knife moved through some brush to the uphill side of the camp, while Washington moved quickly into the open and checked several of the dead men. There were six of them altogether, and all had bullet wounds.

Bloody Knife walked down into the camp and stopped beside Washington. He said, “I find three dead men in trees. They shoot each other with pistols.”

“In the camp are two dead men from here and five from the other camps. The man standing guard must have given the warning and shot one or two of these men before two of the attackers found him. Then they all shot it out with pistols.”

“These men fight for yellow metal. They bad fighters and kill each other.”

Washington showed a poke full of yellow nuggets to Bloody Knife and said, “This yellow metal makes white men do crazy things. I think some of the attackers even shot each other. Everyone wanted gold, and no one wanted to share it.”

After checking inside the tents, Washington said, “I don’t see any sign of Ben or his uncle.”

“The woman is not here as well,” Bloody Knife said.

“What woman?”

“The one they try to hide when we come yesterday. She dressed like a man and hide behind rocks near water.”

“Let’s look for their tracks. They probably went downstream,” Washington said. They found tracks going into the water and spotted some disturbed rocks in the downstream direction. They also saw other prints going into the stream and coming out on the far side before turning downstream.

As they mounted their horses, they heard shots from the direction taken by the survivors of the attack.

“We have two men following Ben and his uncle with the woman. One of them is O’Toole.”

Following the tracks of the two attackers, they came close to the gunfight. Dismounting and going into the large rocks from an old landslide that had once blocked the stream, they went to a high spot that overlooked the lower edge of the rockfall.

Below, and about 200 yards away, a man was aiming a rifle across the stream. Another man was crouched behind some rocks and holding a pistol. A third man dressed in army trousers and a leather jacket was farther downstream, standing next to a woman while pointing a gun at her. She wore a man’s clothing, but her long hair and shape gave her away.

The man with the pistol exposed himself to the rifleman to see what was happening to the woman. Before he could shoot, the rifleman suddenly screamed and grabbed at his face, dropping his rifle. The crack of a bullwhip sounded over the roar of the water moving through
the rocks. When the man reached for Ben, Washington shot him through the lungs, knocking him into the water.

O’Toole was holding his pistol on the woman. The distraction of Washington’s rifle shot caused him to glance away, allowing the woman to pull a small pistol out of her belt. Knocking his gun to the side, she fired two shots from a derringer into his chest, causing him to fall into the water and be rapidly carried away.

The two scouts remounted and rode down to a flat area across from the second prospector’s camp where they met Ben and the other two.

Ben was smiling when they dismounted and said, “You met my Uncle Isaiah, and now you can meet my Aunt Sally.”

Tipping his hat slightly, Washington said, “It’s nice to meet you, ma’am. You saved us the trouble of taking that deserter back to Fort Lincoln.”

Isaiah said, “I told myself that if we survived today, we were leaving here and going far away from any gold. I hear that Oregon has lots of rich farmland and plenty of space for new settlers. We’ll gather some supplies and find our way to Oregon.”

“You can ride back to Fort Lincoln with us if you want, but we best be on our way. All this shooting will be attracting unwanted attention. We need that black horse picketed on the other side of this camp,” Washington said. “It belongs to Colonel Custer.”

During the ride back to Fort Lincoln, Ben showed Bloody Knife how to use a bullwhip, and he gave Ben lessons on tracking. There was no sign of any Sioux, other than a lone scout who watched them exit the Black Hills.

When they reached the fort, Custer was pleased for the return of his horse but upset that he could not punish the deserter. Bloody Knife did not hang around the fort, and Washington rejoined his friends in the scout’s quarters.

Ben and his new parents continued south and decided that since it was too late in the season to travel to Oregon, they would settle in the Nebraska Territory.