

Chickamauga and Chattanooga: Lines of Command

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Sample Chapter One

Chapter One

The Days After Victory

Major Nathaniel McAllister saw James Tanner among the prisoners before the rain showed him his mistake.

The gray officer stood near a broken wagon with one hand pressed to his ribs. His cap hung low. Mud streaked his face. For three breaths, Nathaniel knew the set of those shoulders.

Then the man turned.

Younger. Narrower. A stranger with Tanner's coat color and none of Tanner's bearing.

Nathaniel's horse shifted under the pressure of his hand on the reins. He loosened his grip and rode on.

Gettysburg offered many ghosts that morning. This one belonged to another family.

Rain softened the road before it cleaned anything. Powder smoke still clung to the grass, the fence rails, the torn haversacks, the wheels left without wagons. The storm pressed blood into the mud and made the entire field darker.

No one cheered now.

Nathaniel rode with a staff memorandum tucked inside his coat. He was to check prisoner groups, wounded officers, and burial notations where staff reports remained incomplete. Names mattered. Units mattered. A wrong line on a page could send a family into grief, or leave one trapped in hope.

Men worked because work remained. Burial parties moved in bent lines. Stretcher bearers stepped around muskets, torn shoes, and broken cartridge boxes. Surgeons cut cloth from wounds and called for water. Prisoners sat under guard with their arms wrapped around their knees. Some stared toward Seminary Ridge, as if the road back might still open.

Near a stone wall, a young Union private knelt beside a Confederate.

The private looked no older than nineteen. His kepi sat crooked, and rain ran from its brim. He held a canteen to the gray soldier's mouth with both hands. The wounded man drank, choked, and gripped the private's sleeve.

"Easy," the private said. "There is more."

Nathaniel halted his horse.

The private glanced up and stiffened. "Sir."

"What is your name?"

"Private Elias Rupp, sir. Company B."

"Who ordered you here?"

Rupp looked down at the Confederate. "No one, sir."

No defiance. The boy saw thirst. That was enough.

Nathaniel nodded once. "Continue."

Rupp lowered the canteen again. The Confederate's hand shook against his sleeve.

A burial detail moved along the fence line. Sergeant Amos Brill stood over them with a notebook wrapped in oilcloth. His face showed gray stubble and no surprise. He lifted two fingers to his cap when Nathaniel came near.

"Sergeant."

"Major."

"How many did you mark?" asked Nathaniel.

Sergeant Brill looked at the rows forming beyond the fence. "What we can, sir! Rain takes the rest."

Nathaniel looked toward the men bent over their work. One soldier drove a stake with a flat stone. Another searched a coat pocket and brought out a small Bible, soaked and swollen.

"Do what you can," Nathaniel said.

Brill's mouth tightened. "Yes, sir."

Nathaniel rode on.

Near the angle, caps, muskets, and torn cartridge boxes lay scattered in a way no officer could dress into order. Men would name the place later. For now, it smelled of iron, wet wool, and split wood.

Behind him, Private Rupp spoke again to the wounded man in gray.

"There now. Not too fast."

Nathaniel did not look back.

By late afternoon, headquarters looked like every other place the battle touched. Mud on boots. Maps under stones. Horses with lowered heads. Men speaking softly because loud voices no longer seemed decent.

Lieutenant Samuel Greenwood found Nathaniel beside a wagon where a clerk sorted dispatches under a piece of canvas. Greenwood was young, sharp-faced, and too careful with his salute. Mud streaked one sleeve from cuff to elbow. His hand shook before he closed it.

"Major McAllister?"

"Yes."

"Orders, sir."

Nathaniel took the packet. The seal bore a wet thumbprint.

Greenwood said, "You are to carry reports north and confer at Harrisburg if needed. Cavalry observations, casualty summaries, and dispatch copies. The authorization allows you to stop for forty-eight hours."

"Forty-eight hours," Nathaniel said.

"Yes, sir."

The packet held copies for headquarters channels, not decisions for him to make. The orders carried weight. Every page stood for men, horses, roads, and losses still being counted.

Greenwood looked past him toward the field. His eyes did not settle on anything.

Nathaniel slipped the packet inside his coat. "When did you last sleep, Lieutenant?"

Greenwood blinked. "I do not remember, sir."

"Eat before you fall over."

"Yes, sir," Greenwood turned, then stopped. "Sir, the men speak well of your work on the ridge."

Nathaniel studied him.

The lieutenant reddened. "I mean no presumption."

"No. You meant kindness."

Greenwood's face changed. He looked, for a breath, like a boy called by his Christian name.

Nathaniel said, "Kindness is in short supply. Keep yours."

Greenwood gave another salute and went back through the mud.

Nathaniel stood with the orders under his coat. Harrisburg lay north and east, close enough for memory, not close enough for peace. Clara would be there. His father. Ann. James, taller now, old enough to ask questions no boy should need answered.

The army still moved. Meade's army did not destroy Lee's Army. The roads south would pull men after him soon enough.

A brief stop at home should comfort a man.

Nathaniel felt only the weight of leaving the field while others remained.

He mounted near dusk. The rain slackened. Water dripped from his hat brim onto his gloves. Behind him, the burial parties worked until their figures blurred into the gray.

In Harrisburg, Clara McAllister knew Nathaniel's letter was already old before she touched it.

The date was June twenty-ninth. Before the newspapers learned the names of hills. Before Gettysburg became a word, neighbors lowered their voices to say.

The letter lay open beside the lamp. Clara touched the old crease with her thumb and smoothed it flat again.

My dearest Clara,

We are in motion, and I cannot say much beyond that. The horse holds up well enough. Tell James I expect him to mind his grandfather and not argue over the Latin. I know he will argue, but he should do it with discipline.

The sentence once made her smile.

Now it felt like a voice from a room that already emptied.

The newspaper was inside her elbow. The print listed towns, roads, rumors, and phrases that knew less than they promised. Cemetery Hill. Round Top. Seminary Ridge. Heavy losses. Enemy repulsed. Lee withdrawing. Federal victory.

Clara stared at the word victory until it meant less.

Colonel Thomas McAllister sat across from her with his spectacles low on his nose. He read more slowly than usual. That frightened her more than any headline.

Thomas read the date on Nathaniel's letter once, then looked away.

Ann moved between sideboard and the stove. She kept to minor tasks, as if order in the kitchen might hold the world together. The coffee on the sideboard smelled burned. No one touched it.

James stood by the window, one hand pushing the curtain aside. He stood too straight, trying to look older than his fear.

"Mother," he said, "when we win, Father can come home."

Clara did not answer at once.

Thomas lowered the newspaper. "An army's work continues even after holding a field."

James turned. "But what if they beat General Lee?"

"If he retreats, someone must follow. If he stops, someone must face him again."

James frowned. "But Father helped win."

"Yes," Thomas said. "He did."

That was all.

Mrs. Abigail Price arrived before supper with a wet shawl and a face arranged for sympathy. Clara saw it through the front glass before Ann opened the door.

"Mrs. McAllister," Mrs. Price said, "I do not mean to intrude."

Clara knew such words seldom kept visitors out.

Clara stood. "Come in, Mrs. Price."

"I heard from Mrs. Weller's nephew that cavalry officers suffered. I thought you might know more."

Thomas removed his spectacles. The room cooled around him.

Clara said, "We know only what they print."

"Of course. Of course. I only thought, with the Colonel's connections."

"My son writes when he can," Thomas said. "The army reports when it chooses."

Mrs. Price colored. "I meant no harm."

"I am sure you did not."

Ann brought tea that none of them wanted. Mrs. Price spoke of prayer meetings, bandages, and men passing through the station. Her voice softened each time she said Nathaniel's name.

When she left, Clara closed the door with more force than was required.

James looked up.

Clara kept her hand on the latch until her breathing steadied.

Thomas said, "Rumor travels faster than the wounded."

Clara turned from the door. "And arrives cleaner."

No one answered.

Evening settled into the house. Rain ticked against the glass. The lamp turned the old letter amber. Clara left it open where it lay. She could not bear to put it away and could not bear to read it again.

At the Harrisburg rail stop, Nathaniel stepped down into a churn of mud, cinders, and voices.

Men in stained uniforms waited on benches or lay on baggage planks. A hospital steward called names from a paper. A woman crossed the platform with a basket of bread wrapped in linen. Somewhere beyond the shed roof, a bell struck once and lost itself in the rain.

Corporal Daniel Metz stood near the baggage wagon with his left arm in a sling. A hospital mark in chalk crossed his right sleeve near the cuff.

"Major McAllister?" Metz asked.

"Yes."

"Driver's this way, sir. Your valise is here."

Nathaniel reached for it.

Metz shook his head. "I'll manage. Books in it, I think."

"Careful with that one, Corporal."

Metz gave a quick grin. "Books survive better than men, sir."

The grin faded before Nathaniel could answer.

They crossed the platform. Nathaniel smelled hot iron, wet wool, horse dung, and the sour smoke that clung to his own coat. He wondered if Clara would smell the field before she touched him.

Metz lifted the valise into the wagon.

"Glad you made it home, sir."

Nathaniel looked toward the streets beyond the depot.

"Just forty-eight hours," he said.

The wagon wheels turned through Harrisburg's wet streets. Houses stood close to the road, their windows lit in yellow squares. At two corners, civilians stopped talking as the wagon passed. Nathaniel looked down at his gloves.

His hands shook once.

He closed them.

At the McAllister house, Clara heard the wheels before James did.

This time they slowed down.

Hooves stopped before the gate. A man's voice spoke low near the walk.

James ran to the window.

"Mother."

Clara stood.

The front door opened before Ann reached it.

Nathaniel filled the doorway without filling it as he once did. Mud marked his boots and the hem of his coat. His face looked leaner at the cheekbones. Rain darkened his hat and ran down the side of his jaw. He brought in wet wool, horse sweat, and the sour smoke of the field.

For a heartbeat, no one moved.

Then James crossed the room.

"Father!"

Nathaniel caught him with one arm. The motion was quick and fierce. He pressed the boy close, then loosened his grip as if remembering the strength in his own hands.

Clara walked to him.

"Nathaniel."

He looked at her then. His eyes found hers, and the room seemed to draw away from them.

"I am here for only forty-eight hours," he said.

Clara heard the duty in them before she heard the husband.

Clara nodded. "Then come in."

"Sit first," Ann said. "Then speak, if you must."

Nathaniel took one step and stopped.

His saber caught on the doorframe.

For a moment he stared at it, as if he forgot he still wore the thing. Then he unfastened the belt with stiff fingers and handed it to Ann.

"Forgive me," he said.

Ann took the saber as she took his hat, without fuss. "Nothing to forgive."

She turned the hat once in her hands, saw the mud along the brim, and set it on the sideboard instead of the peg.

Thomas rose from his chair and stood straight, an old soldier serving a soldier. Neither man spoke for several seconds.

Ann guided Nathaniel toward the fire, though July air already pressed warm and damp against the walls. Clara saw his coat in the lamplight. A darker stain lay near the cuff. Not fresh. Not his, she thought. Then she hated herself for needing that comfort.

She touched the sleeve with two fingers.

Nathaniel watched her hands.

"It is not mine," he said.

Clara withdrew her fingers. "I did not ask."

"No."

James stood close to him, staring up as if his father might vanish. "Did you see General Meade?"

"At a distance."

"Did you see General Lee?"

"No."

James glanced toward the newspaper on the table. "Were you near the place in the papers?"

Thomas said, "James."

The boy stopped.

Nathaniel placed a hand on his son's shoulder. "I saw enough of it."

James's face changed. It was the first time that night he understood a question could wound.

Clara moved to the table. Nathaniel's old letter still lay open near the lamp. She saw him notice it.

"I kept reading it," she said. "It was the last one."

Nathaniel looked at the date.

For a moment his face gave way. Not much. Only enough for Clara to see the distance between the man who wrote the letter and the man who now stood before her.

"I wrote that before we knew," he said.

"Yes."

The room fell silent.

Ann set bread and cold meat on the table. Thomas poured coffee. James kept one hand on Nathaniel's sleeve, as if touch could serve where questions failed.

Nathaniel sat because they asked him to sit. He ate because Ann watched him. He answered what he could and let silence cover the rest.

Outside, the wagon rolled away.

Inside, Clara left the pre-battle letter open beside his plate.

The ink looked older than a week.

Two Sons Rising

Nate slept less than three hours.

Clara knew because she slept less than that.

She woke before dawn and found the other side of the bed empty. For a moment she lay still, listening. The house made its small morning sounds. A board settled in the hall. A hinge clicked below. Somewhere outside, a wagon rolled over wet stone.

A quarter of his leave had passed by morning.

She rose, wrapped a shawl around her shoulders, and went downstairs.

Nathaniel stood in the dining room with his coat off and his shirtsleeves rolled to the forearms. His saber belt lay on a chair. His boots stood near the kitchen door, still crusted with Pennsylvania mud. He held his pre-battle letter in one hand.

Not reading it.

Only holding it.

"You should be asleep," Clara said.

"So should you."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the one I possess."

She crossed the room and took the letter from him. The paper felt soft from too much handling. She set it on the table and placed the lamp chimney beside it, away from the ink.

"You wrote about Latin," she said.

"James argues like a lawyer."

"He argues like your father."

Nathaniel's mouth moved once. Almost a smile. Then it passed.

Clara glanced toward the stairs. "He tried to stay awake. He lost the fight near midnight."

"Good."

"He wants to ask you everything."

"I know."

"He is old enough to understand when we hide the truth from him."

Nathaniel faced the gray window. "He is not old enough for Gettysburg."

"No one is."

The answer struck closer than he meant. He knew it as soon as she went still.

"Forgive me."

Clara shook her head. "Do not spend your forty-eight hours apologizing."

The front of the house stirred. Colonel Thomas McAllister entered with his cane in one hand and his spectacles in the other. He wore his coat though the room felt warm.

"Morning comes early for soldiers and anxious women," he said.

"And old colonels," Clara said.

Thomas took his chair. "Old colonels earn their habits."

Ann came from the kitchen with coffee and bread. She placed the tray on the table and gave Nathaniel one hard look.

"You will eat before anyone starts a war in this room."

Nathaniel sat.

Thomas settled across from him. Clara remained standing for a moment longer. It comforted her to see Nathaniel at the table. It frightened her to see how quickly he looked ready to leave it.

James appeared on the stairs just as Ann cut the bread. His hair stood in one place at the crown. He tried with his jacket and failed with the collar.

Nathaniel saw it and said nothing.

James came into the room with care. "Good morning, Father."

"Good morning."

"You are still here."

"I am."

James nodded, as if confirming an order. He took his seat.

For several minutes they ate like a family that remembered how breakfast worked. Knives touched plates. Coffee poured. Ann corrected James's collar with two fingers and no comment. Clara watched Nathaniel tear bread into smaller pieces before he ate it.

A knock came at the front door.

No one moved at once.

Ann set down the coffee pot. "I will see."

Thomas's eyes went to Nathaniel. Nathaniel wiped his fingers on a cloth and stood.

"No," Clara said.

He stopped.

She had not intended her words to sound so harsh.

Ann returned with a damp soldier behind her. He stood in the doorway with his cap held under one arm and a leather dispatch case against his side.

"Corporal Patrick Doyle, ma'am," he said. "Courier from the Harrisburg military office."

Nathaniel stepped forward. "For me?"

"Yes, sir. These came in with the morning dispatches."

Doyle handed over a sealed packet. Though his face kept its youthful bloom, his eyes betrayed a deeper, older soul. A man who carried messages learned faces before names.

Nathaniel broke the seal.

Clara watched his eyes move over the paper.

No one spoke.

Then Nathaniel lowered it.

Thomas said, "Well?"

Nathaniel's voice remained even. "Notice of promotion."

James sat straighter. "Promotion?"

Nathaniel turned the page; the light caught the order. "Lieutenant Colonel."

For one clean second, the room lifted.

James smiled first because he understood rank before he understood cost. Ann set one hand on the back of a chair. Clara looked at Nathaniel, not the paper. Thomas lowered his eyes, as if the old army had spoken in the room.

Corporal Doyle shifted near the door. "Congratulations, sir."

Nathaniel seemed to remember him. "Thank you, Corporal."

Doyle gave a small nod. "The men declared you earned it."

The room grew still again.

Nathaniel folded the notice once along its existing crease. He did not put it away.

Ann moved first. "Corporal, you will take coffee before you go back into the rain."

Doyle hesitated. "Ma'am, I should not trouble you."

"You already trouble me by dripping on my floor. Sit near the stove."

James almost laughed. Doyle obeyed.

Clara took the notice from Nathaniel. He let it go.

The words looked clean. The paper showed no mud. It knew nothing of the field that raised it.

Lieutenant Colonel Nathaniel McAllister.

She touched the line with her thumb and then faced him.

"You earned this," she said and hugged him.

Nathaniel answered, "Others earned more."

Thomas's gaze sharpened.

Clara heard the rebuke before he spoke, but Thomas said nothing at the table.

A second knock came before the first feeling settled.

Ann glanced toward the hall. "If this house is to serve as an office, someone ought to pay rent."

This time James stood and went with her. He returned carrying a smaller packet, wrapped in road-stained paper.

"It is from Andrew," he said.

Nathaniel turned.

Clara took it, then stopped herself. "Read it, James."

His eyes widened. "Me?"

"Read it."

James broke the outer paper with care. He unfolded the letter and smoothed it on the table. His finger traced the opening line before he spoke.

"My dear family," he read. "I write from the lines before Vicksburg and do not know when this will reach you. The heat here has a temper of its own, and the dust seems determined to enter every instrument, boot, and prayer book in the army."

Ann smiled despite herself.

James continued.

"The captain's straps sit strangely on a coat I still think of as new. I cannot claim that I feel taller because of them. Sergeant Harlan says mules recognize no rank unless it carries oats."

Nathaniel stared at the table.

Clara watched him hear the word.

"Andrew. Captain."

Until James read it aloud, Nathaniel still saw Andrew at West Point, thin-faced, earnest, and too proud to admit homesickness.

The letter continued with siege roads, engineering work, and cautious words about the army's position. Andrew did not boast. He sounded older. Not old, but no longer a cadet, Nathaniel still carried in memory.

James reached the end.

"Your affectionate son and brother, Andrew McAllister, Captain, United States Army."

He looked up. "Captain."

Clara could not help herself. She smiled.

Thomas leaned back. "Two sons rising in rank in one morning."

Ann took the letter from James and held it away from the coffee. "And both still needing to eat."

James studied Nathaniel's notice, then Andrew's letter. The promotion notice lay square and clean. Andrew's letter curled at one damp corner.

"Does Lieutenant Colonel outrank Captain?"

"Yes," Nathaniel said.

"By much?"

"Enough."

Thomas said, "Rank is not a ladder, James. It is a responsibility handed out where everyone can see."

James considered that. "But Father outranks Uncle Andrew."

Nathaniel said, "Yes. Today."

Clara heard affection in the words. She needed it.

James touched Andrew's signature. "Will Uncle Andrew be proud?"

"He will try not to show it," Nathaniel said. "Then fail. We will be proud for him."

That time the smile came and stayed for more than a breath.

Even Thomas allowed a faint one.

For a few minutes, the room held something close to joy. It did not feel light. It felt earned and fragile. Clara wanted to protect it from the next knock, next headline, next order.

Corporal Doyle finished his coffee by the stove and stood. "I thank you, ma'am."

Ann took the cup. "You may thank me by carrying more messages like this."

Doyle's expression changed. "I carry what they give me."

Ann's face softened. "I know."

Nathaniel walked him to the door.

Doyle saluted on the porch. "Lieutenant Colonel."

The new rank sounded strange in open air.

Nathaniel returned the salute. "Safe road, Corporal."

When the door closed, the room did not resume its former shape.

The promotion notice lay beside Andrew's letter. Clara saw two boys at different ages. Nathaniel with scraped knuckles and a wooden sword in her father's yard. Andrew small enough to trail behind him, fierce with admiration.

Now both names wore rank.

James touched Andrew's signature. "Captain."

Then he touched Nathaniel's notice. "Lieutenant Colonel."

Clara let him.

Thomas stood. "Nathaniel. Walk with me."

It was not a question.

They went out through the side door to the narrow porch. The rain had stopped, but water still dripped from the eaves. The garden smelled of wet soil and crushed stems. Beyond the fence, Harrisburg wagons moved toward the station.

Thomas stood with both hands on his cane.

Nathaniel waited.

"You looked at that notice as if it accused you," Thomas said.

Nathaniel's jaw tightened. "I do not reject it."

"I did not say you did."

"The timing is hard."

"Timing seldom asks a soldier's permission."

Nathaniel stared across the garden. "Men who stood beside me will not read another order."

"No."

"Others led as well as I did."

"Some did."

"Maybe better."

Thomas let that sit between them.

A wagon rattled past the far street. A woman called to a child. The day went on with indecent patience.

Thomas shifted his cane. Its iron ferrule slipped on the wet porch board.

Nathaniel reached for him.

Thomas caught himself and gave him a sharp look. "I am not the wounded one."

Nathaniel drew back.

Thomas planted the cane again, harder this time.

"Do not make guilt out of respect, Nate."

Nathaniel turned toward him.

"The army did not raise you because you lived. It raised you because men trusted you while others died."

Nathaniel's eyes held his father's.

Thomas's voice did not soften. "You know the difference."

Nathaniel looked away first.

Thomas shifted his cane against the porch boards. "Respect is not comfort. But it is not nothing."

For a long moment, Nathaniel said nothing.

Then, "It feels expensive."

"It is."

Thomas looked toward the closed door. "Your wife knows that. So does Ann. James is learning it faster than he should."

"That is what I fear."

"Fear it. Then do your duty anyway."

Nathaniel almost smiled. "That is your counsel?"

Thomas looked toward the street. "It served me well."

The words struck deeper than praise.

Nathaniel looked through the window. Clara stood at the table with Andrew's letter in one hand and his promotion notice in the other. James leaned near her. Ann cleared plates and left the papers untouched.

"Andrew signed as Captain," Nathaniel said.

"Yes, he did."

"Sounds older."

"He is."

Nathaniel breathed in the wet morning air. "I still think of him at West Point."

Thomas nodded. "That is the trouble with sons and younger brothers. Their fathers and brothers keep meeting the boy after the man appears."

Inside, Clara looked toward the porch. She could not hear them, but she saw Nathaniel's shoulders change. Not eased. But not braced quite so hard.

Thomas tapped his cane once on the board.

"Come inside, Lieutenant Colonel. Your forty-eight hours are not generous enough to waste."

Nathaniel faced him.

Then he opened the door.

Clara did not ask what Thomas said.

She set Andrew's letter beside Nathaniel's notice. Then she placed one hand over Nathaniel's.

After a moment, he turned his hand beneath hers and held on.

The Captain At Vicksburg

Before the letter reached Harrisburg, Andrew wrote it outside Vicksburg beneath a heat-stained canvas fly.

Dust lay on the page before the ink dried. It lay on his compass, rule, coat sleeve, haversack, boots, and the folded map he used as a writing board. Beyond the canvas, mule teams strained along a clay road that looked firm from a distance and treacherous under wheels.

Captain Andrew McAllister stopped after the first line.

My dear family,

He stared at the words.

A week earlier, he would have signed himself Lieutenant. Now the captain's straps lay across the back of his coat, sewn and still too clean. His duties did not change all at once. The army did not hand him a new war with the new rank.

But men listened differently.

The young sergeant waited longer for his answer. A lieutenant watched his face before writing a report. A clerk brought him papers with less explanation. The rank did not move him into glory. It moved more decisions onto his table.

Outside, Sergeant Caleb Harlan's voice rose from the road.

"No, that rut is not an ornament. Mark it before it kills a wheel."

Andrew set down the pen and stepped from under the canvas.

Vicksburg's surrender lay only days behind them, yet victory still looked like work. Gabions slumped in the heat. Trenches held broken boards, powder tins, canteens, and cartridge paper pressed flat by boots. Confederate soldiers waited in tired groups for parole papers, watched by Federal guards who looked almost as spent as the men they guarded. The river beyond the city flashed under the sun, hard and bright as beaten tin.

Harlan climbed from the lower approach with a rolled map under one arm and mud up both legs. He was broad through the chest, sunburned across the nose, and old enough in army years to distrust officers who spoke aloud.

"Road report, Captain," Harlan said.

Andrew still turned when someone used the rank.

A rank should not feel borrowed. The notice came through proper channels. The straps sat on his coat. Men now waited for his answer before they acted. Still, when the word reached him, part of him looked over his shoulder for someone older.

He took the map. "You sound displeased."

"I am finished with it."

"That is not the same thing."

"No, sir. It is the honest thing."

Andrew unrolled the map against a plank laid over two ammunition boxes. A broken shovel held one corner down. Harlan set a canteen on the other.

The road line bent around a washout, passed a ruined fence, then narrowed near a ravine and the drawing looked neat. It was the ground that did not.

Colonel Haupt taught Andrew that a map was never proof. A map was only a question put to the ground.

"How deep?" Andrew asked.

"Deep enough to break a mule's leg if the driver trusts this drawing."

Andrew glanced toward the road.

Harlan scratched at his beard. "Begging pardon, sir. Road looks sound on paper. Mules say different."

"Then we shall listen to the mules."

Lieutenant Josh Howell approached from the south road, carrying a clipboard and wearing the grave expression of a young man entrusted with too much paper. His boots, polished above the mud line, suggested he still believed effort could separate him from the earth.

"Lieutenant Josh Howell reporting, Captain."

Andrew saw Harlan lower his eyes.

Howell saluted. "I inspected the lower approach. The route is passable for wagons with minor repair."

"Minor repair," Andrew said.

"Yes, sir."

Andrew tapped the map near the ravine. "Did you walk the full line?"

Howell hesitated. "Most of it."

"Most roads fail at the part not walked."

Howell colored.

Harlan studied the river with great interest.

Andrew kept his voice even. Haupt taught him that an officer who embarrassed a man in front of a sergeant gained obedience and lost trust. Sometimes the correction mattered more than the sting.

"Go back with Sergeant Harlan," Andrew said. "Walk it to the end. Mark every washout, stump, abandoned caisson, and soft patch. If a wagon cannot pass in rain, the road is not passable."

Howell swallowed. "Yes, Sir."

"And Lieutenant."

"Sir?"

"Do not make a report neat until the ground earns it."

Harlan coughed once into his fist.

Howell saluted again. This one was less polished and more useful. He followed Harlan down toward the road, the two men already arguing over where the line turned.

Andrew watched them go.

Better Howell blush now than a driver bleed later.

He returned to the letter and sat beneath the canvas. The heat gathered there and would not leave. His ink had thickened. He stirred it with the pen and tried again.

My dear family,

I write from the lines before Vicksburg and do not know when this will reach you. The heat here has a temper of its own, and the dust seems determined to enter every instrument, boot, and prayer book in the army.

A fly landed near the wet line. Andrew brushed it away before it could drag dust through the ink.

He let the words settle.

A joke could cross the miles more safely than fear.

The captain's straps sit on a coat I still think of as new.

He stopped there longer.

The straps were not strange because they were cloth. They were strange because men such as Howell would now take correction from him, and men such as Harlan would test him until he proved worth obeying. Somewhere in Harrisburg, Clara and Colonel Thomas would understand that at once. James would understand the shine first.

Nathaniel would understand the weight.

Andrew wrote on.

I cannot claim I feel taller for them. Sergeant Harlan says mules recognize no rank unless it carries oats.

He smiled despite the heat.

Then he stopped smiling.

Mules were within his writing capabilities. But, he could write of dust. He could write of roads, because roads seemed harmless if a man did not mention where they led.

But, he could not write everything.

Andrew trusted the work more than the speeches. Vicksburg fell to roads, trenches, river batteries, fatigue details, and men who counted distance by yards. A road marked passable could become a graveyard by noon if rain found the wrong rut first. A battery placed fifty yards too far back might waste powder. A supply wagon delayed at the wrong crossing could empty a regiment's stomach before evening.

Andrew knew the family would hear the word victory.

He knew they would not smell the city.

Civilians moved through the streets with faces hollowed by siege. Children watched soldiers with the flat curiosity of those who learned early that uniforms carried food, orders, and danger. Federal men shared tobacco with Confederates waiting on parole papers, then turned away as if embarrassed by the kindness.

Near a supply wagon, a Confederate soldier sat on an overturned crate. He held a tin cup with both hands and stared into it. His jacket hung loose at the shoulders. A Federal guard stood a few paces away, musket butt in the dust.

The soldier raised his eyes when Andrew passed.

"Captain."

Andrew stopped.

The guard shifted. "You heard him. Stay quiet."

Andrew raised one hand. "Let him speak."

The man wet his lips. "Are the parole papers true, sir?"

"They are."

"Then we are to go home?"

"You are to give your word not to take up arms until exchanged."

The man nodded, but the answer did not settle him. "My wife is in the city. If I leave before word reaches her, she may think I am dead."

Andrew looked toward Vicksburg's roofs, baked dull under the sun. Grant meant to empty the works without feeding and guarding an army of prisoners.

"What is your name?"

"Private Thomas Elzy. Twenty-seventh Louisiana."

Andrew took out his notebook. "Her name?"

"Rebecca Elzy. Near Cherry Street, if the house still stands."

Andrew wrote it down.

The guard frowned. "Captain, there will be hundreds of such requests."

"There already are," Andrew said.

Elzy gripped the cup harder. "Thank you."

Andrew closed the notebook. "Thank the clerk if the message reaches her."

He walked on before the soldier could make the gratitude larger than the act.

Elzy's name stayed in the notebook. Andrew did not trust himself to put it anywhere else.

When he returned to the canvas fly, the family letter waited where he left it. Dust had settled along the wet edge of one line.

He wrote around it.

We are busy with roads, reports, and repairing campaign expenditures. The city is quiet now, though quiet here does not mean peace. General Grant's work has altered the map, and every man who can hold a shovel seems likely to be kept busy.

He paused.

He stopped there. Harrisburg could carry that much.

He signed the family letter by lantern light.

*Your affectionate son and brother,
Andrew McAllister,
Captain, United States Army.*

He sanded the ink, tipped the excess away, and left the page open until it dried. The letter would travel north without the smell of the trenches, without Private Elzy's thin face, without the sound of Harlan arguing beside a ravine. It would arrive cleaner than the day that made it.

Then he took out another sheet.

Dear Meg,

If this reaches you, forgive the condition of the page. Vicksburg dust has joined the Union cause and attacks every surface without waiting for orders.

He paused, pen lifted.

Writing to Meg required a different discipline. With family, he chose what not to worry them with. With Meg, he had to choose what not to reveal too soon.

Andrew wrote of the river, of engineers who argued with mules, of roads that lied on paper, and of men who seemed too tired to celebrate victory. He wrote a city could surrender before every wall fell.

But, he did not.

That thought was not ready for ink yet.

Lieutenant Howell appeared at the fly entrance near dusk. His boots were no longer polished above the mud line. A dark smear ran across one cheek.

"Captain."

"Lieutenant."

Howell held out the revised report. "Full line walked. Sergeant Harlan says the north bend will fail under rain."

"And what do you say?"

Howell straightened. "Sergeant Harlan is correct."

Andrew took the report. "Good. Now it is useful."

Howell looked relieved, then ashamed of looking relieved.

"Sir, I should have walked it the first time."

"Yes."

Howell waited for more.

Andrew signed the bottom of the report. "You did not. Now you have. Learn the difference and waste less time next report."

"Yes, Captain."

Harlan appeared behind him, chewing something that might once have been tobacco. "He found three washouts I missed."

Howell turned toward him.

Harlan shrugged. "Truth is truth."

Andrew marked the report, then handed it back. "Send this to the quartermaster. Make a copy for our file."

Howell saluted and left.

Harlan lingered. "He may do."

"He may."

"Little stiff."

"Most new officers are."

Harlan looked at Andrew's shoulder straps.

Andrew noticed. "Say it."

"Nothing, Captain."

"Sergeant."

Harlan shifted the tobacco in his cheek. "Straps still look new."

"They are."

"Mud will help."

Andrew laughed once. It surprised him.

Harlan seemed satisfied. Harlan stated, "I will see what mud the doctor can spare."

He went out into the dusk.

Andrew placed the family letter beneath a folded map. The letter to Meg went inside his notebook, unsealed.

Outside, wagon wheels creaked toward the river. Somewhere in the dark, a mule brayed with offended dignity.

Andrew looked at the shoulder straps lying across the back of his coat.

They no longer looked like decoration.

They looked like a question he would answer every day.

Wilmington Before Augusta

Major James Tanner reached Wilmington with the dust of Maryland still in his throat.

Not all of it was dust.

Smelling road smoke, powder residue, damp wool, fever breath, and the sour steam from wounded men when rain stopped and the July sun returned was part of it. Some of it was the smell of horses that had pulled until their eyes went dull. Some of it was the Potomac road, where wagon wheels groaned in darkness and men learned whether pain had a bottom.

James washed, changed linen and scraped mud from boots, gloves, saber belt, and dispatch case. None of that altered what traveled with him.

The train south made memory worse.

It gave him hours with no road to clear.

Through Maryland, Virginia, and the long rail movement toward the Carolinas, Tanner sat with his dispatch case against his knee and watched the country rearrange itself beyond the glass. Rainwater dried in streaks on the window. Telegraph poles rose and vanished, rose and vanished, each one holding the sky before the train took it away. At stations, men asked for news before they asked for water. Women looked first at uniforms, then at faces. Boys ran beside the cars until smoke drove them back.

No one said Gettysburg unless forced.

The name moved through depots as if it might stain the tongue.

A lieutenant across the aisle slept with his mouth open and one hand clenched around a casualty return. Across from him, a quartermaster clerk wrote numbers in a ledger with the blank devotion of a man trying not to understand what numbers meant. Two wounded artillerymen sat near the far door, one with his arm bound across his chest, the other holding a boot he could no longer wear.

Tanner looked at the boot too long.

Private Jacob Smithfield came back to him then. Seventeen. Fever-bright. One hand gripping a wagon sideboard while the road tried to shake the pain loose from him.

Are we whipped, sir?

Tanner had answered that they were moving.

On the train, that answer no longer seemed large enough.

The defeated army had kept its shape. That mattered. Roads, orders, wagons, bridges, ambulances, provost guards, and curses had held when pride could not. Lee crossed the Potomac with an army rather than a panic.

It did not make the army whole.

At one stop in Virginia, Tanner stepped down for air and found it thick with wet boards, hot iron, and unwashed men. A newspaper pasted near the station door announced Federal losses in Pennsylvania with a certainty no honest staff officer possessed. Someone had scratched one word beneath it with a knife.

Vicksburg?

No answer followed.

Tanner stood before the world until the conductor called for passengers to board.

Vicksburg did not belong to him in the way Gettysburg did, yet it pressed against the same wound. One army staggered south through Maryland. Another surrendered a river city in Mississippi. The two defeats did not meet on a map, but they met in the body. They made the Confederacy smaller without asking permission.

He returned to his seat and opened the dispatch case.

Inside lay orders from the Ordnance Department, inspection notes from Richmond, supply memoranda, powder estimates, and a packet marked for Augusta. Colonel Rains needed assurance that output would hold. General Gorgas needed assurance that rail movement would not fail. Richmond needed assurance because Richmond needed everything.

Tanner closed the case again.

Assurance had become another military fiction. Like courage, decisiveness, and the belief that glory could replace footwear.

He took out his notebook.

A page to Eleanor still lay inside, smoothed flat from handling. He had begun it on the road west of Gettysburg beneath a leaking fly.

*Eleanor,
I feel safe enough for tonight.*

Later he had added:

We are still an army, but not the same one.

He had not sent it

Now, with the train rocking southward and smoke pressing past the window, he read the two lines once. Then he slid the page beneath the notebook cover and held it there with his thumb.

The words remained true.

That was why they were useless.

By the time Wilmington received him, the train seemed as tired as the men it carried.

Tanner stepped onto the platform beneath a brown veil of smoke and stood still until the noise separated itself into useful parts. Wheels. River bells. Warehouse chains. Hooves on plank. Sailors arguing over cargo. A woman calling a child's name twice, then once more with fear in it. A porter pushing through the crowd with a crate marked for hospital use.

Wilmington did not sound like Richmond.

Richmond spoke in offices, corridors, sealed envelopes, and men who lowered their voices near doors. Wilmington spoke through wharves, pilots, warehouses, rail yards, naval rumors, and the quick footfall of people who understood that every steamer entering the Cape Fear might carry both salvation and ruin.

Captain Lewis Mebane from the local provost office found him near the baggage room.

"Major Tanner?"

"Yes."

"General Whiting's office received advice that you might come through. Your carriage is waiting. Your family expects you at the Ashcroft house."

That one word reached him before the rest.

Family.

He looked toward the street.

Mebane noticed, and to his credit said nothing for several breaths.

"I am instructed to place myself at your disposal," the captain continued. "General Whiting can receive your memorandum in the morning unless you require an immediate call."

"Tomorrow will do."

"Yes, sir."

"My dispatch case stays with me."

"Of course."

They crossed toward the carriage. Wilmington lay under white heat that flattened color from brick, plank, and canvas. The town smelled of tar, horses, river mud, salt air, pine boards, hot rope, and too many people working too close together. Cotton bales sat under cover. Barrels of bacon and salt fish stood near a warehouse wall. A line of wagons waited to unload near the wharf, each driver watching the street as if hunger might steal from him in daylight.

Tanner took it in without seeming to stare.

"Busy port," Mebane said.

"Too busy to be safe."

The captain gave a dry smile. "That is the general opinion of every man who depends on it."

They turned toward the river before going to the Ashcroft house. Tanner asked for ten minutes, and Mebane gave him twenty.

The Cape Fear moved with a brown, patient strength. Steamers and smaller craft lay at the wharves, their funnels, spars, lines, and cargo nets forming a confusion that only sailors seemed able to read. Men shouted from deck to dock. A Black stevedore bent under a load of boxed goods while a clerk counted aloud from a paper. Tanner's eyes followed the crate, then the cart, then the road, then the rail connection beyond.

A port was not a place. It was a throat.

Everything the Confederacy needed tried to pass through it: cloth, medicine, shoes, salt, lead, machinery, paper, quinine, coffee when luck allowed, and rumors whether luck allowed. Wilmington swallowed from the sea and fed the interior by rail, wagon, and river. If the throat closed, armies far from the coast would feel the surrounding hand.

But no throat held itself open by courage.

Fort Fisher guarded New Inlet and was growing into the work men already praised. Old Fort Caswell watched the old bar with the stubborn dignity of older masonry. Fort Holmes, river batteries, signal stations, pilots, obstructions, magazines, and small craft belonged to the same fragile system. The Cape Fear defenses were not one fort, one commander, or one brave reputation. They were a chain.

Chains failed at the link men stopped inspecting.

Mebane watched him. "You see the problem well."

"I see several."

"Fort Fisher has become the name people trust."

"Names do not stop ships."

"No, sir."

"Nor does sand, unless shaped, armed, drained, supplied, repaired, and commanded."

Mebane looked toward the river. "Colonel Lamb will say the same."

"Then he and I will have little to quarrel over."

"That would disappoint Wilmington."

For the first time that day, Tanner almost smiled.

Almost.

Then a wagon wheel struck a rut behind them. The sound came hard through the street.

Tanner turned before he meant to.

It was only a wagon. Only a barrel shifting. Only a driver cursing at a mule.

His right hand had gone to the dispatch case handle.

Mebane saw it. He looked away at once.

That mercy counted.

"The Ashcroft house," Tanner said.

"Yes, sir."

Aunt Virginia Ashcroft lived in a house that faced the street with more composure than the war deserved. Its shutters needed paint. Someone mended the porch rail. The flower beds showed effort rather than abundance. A narrow strip of shade crossed the front steps, and a clay pot beside the door held basil gone sharp in the heat.

Eleanor opened the door before the servant reached it.

For one instant Tanner saw her as if the train had not stopped yet. Dark dress. Sleeves altered. Hair pinned with discipline that cost more than vanity. One loose strand at her temple. A face thinner than the one he carried from memory.

Then the girls came out from behind her.

Cate stopped first.

She was old enough now to understand that men could return and still not be whole. Maggie did not wait for understanding. She ran into him and struck his leg with both arms.

"Papa."

The word undid more order than any road in Maryland.

Tanner crouched and held her with one arm because the dispatch case still hung from the other hand. When he realized that, he set the case down on the porch with more force than needed and hugged Maggie.

Cate came then, slower.

He opened his other arm.

She entered it as if crossing ground she did not trust.

Eleanor stood in the doorway and watched him hold their daughters. She did not cry. That would have been simpler.

Aunt Virginia's voice came from behind her.

"Major Tanner, if you intend to frighten this household by looking like a man dug up from a road, at least do it inside where the neighbors cannot enjoy it."

Tanner looked over Maggie's head.

"Mrs. Ashcroft."

"Do not Mrs. Ashcroft me on my porch. Come in before the entire street decides whether you are a ghost."

He obeyed.

The front hall smelled of beeswax, lamp oil, old paper, and the faint salt damp that entered every Wilmington house no matter how often a woman fought it. A map of the Cape Fear lay open on the parlor table, weighted by a sewing tin and a small blue cup with a crack through the glaze.

Tanner saw the weights before he saw the map.

No one in this house trusted paper to stay where grief placed it.

Eleanor noticed his eyes. "Cate keeps the map open."

Cate lifted her chin. "So we know which doors matter."

Tanner turned toward her.

"Your mother told you that?"

"Vicksburg was a door," Maggie said from his side. "It broke."

Virginia closed the front door harder than necessary. "Children listen when adults forget how loudly fear speaks."

Tanner looked at Eleanor.

She gave one small shake of the head. Later.

That single motion told him what the train could not: the war had arrived here before he did. It had sat at this table. It had taught his daughters geography through dread.

Supper came early because Tanner would not have much of the evening.

Virginia insisted on it as if ordering a battery into position. The table held corn bread, a little ham, beans, stewed tomatoes, and coffee Virginia described as an insult she served only because the alternatives were worse.

Eleanor sat opposite Tanner. Cate sat to his right. Maggie dragged her chair close enough that her shoe touched his boot under the table.

He let it remain there.

For a while they ate as families eat when everyone fears the first real question. Plates moved. Virginia corrected Maggie's grip on her fork. Cate asked whether Augusta had machines taller than houses. Tanner answered. "Yes, some were large enough to make a child think so. No, they did not explode every day. Yes, Colonel Rains was strict. No, strict men were not always frightening. Sometimes they were the reason other men survived."

Then Cate asked, "Did you see the battle?"

Eleanor's hand stopped near her cup.

Virginia looked down at her plate.

Tanner set his fork aside.

"Yes."

"All of it?"

"No one sees all of a battle."

"Did you win?"

The same question, he thought. Every house had its version.

He looked at Cate. "No."

Maggie's shoe pressed harder against his boot.

Cate received the answer without flinching, which hurt him more than fear would have.

"Did you run?" she asked.

"No."

"Then what did you do?"

The answer came in his mind. Roads. Wounded. Guns. Orders. Ambulances. Mud. Men with limbs wrapped in blankets. Lee in the rain. Longstreet's face. A boy biting his sleeve. Nathaniel's name crossed out in wet ink.

"I helped keep the army moving."

Cate studied him.

"That sounds small," she said.

"It was not."

Eleanor's eyes met his then.

No apology. No rescue.

Only witness.

Maggie said, "Were men crying?"

Virginia inhaled.

Tanner did not look away from his youngest daughter.

"Yes."

"Soldiers?"

"Yes."

"Officers?"

"Some."

"Did you?"

The room held still.

Tanner looked at the cup, the map, the sewing tin, the hands of his children resting near plates made plain by war.

"Not where anyone could see."

Maggie considered that with grave dissatisfaction. "That does not count."

"No," Tanner said. "Perhaps it does not."

Eleanor lowered her eyes, but not before he saw what passed through them. Pain first. Then recognition. Then something like gratitude, though he had done nothing worthy of it except answer a child without lying.

After supper, Virginia took the girls upstairs to prepare for the evening. Cate argued she did not need help with her hair. Maggie argued Papa should too. Virginia told both of them that rebellion did not improve knots.

For the first time since Gettysburg, Tanner heard laughter in a house.

It did not last long.

Eleanor remained at the table with him.

"You have not eaten enough," she said.

"I ate."

"You performed the motions."

"So did the army."

She looked toward the hall, where the girls' voices faded above them. 'They are asking for more now.'

"They should."

"But, they ask what I cannot answer."

"Then tell them that."

"I do."

He touched the edge of the map. Fort Fisher. Fort Caswell. Smithville. New Inlet. Old bar. Wilmington. Rail north. Rail south. River bends. Each name carried consequence.

"I am sorry," he said.

"For what part?"

It was not cruel. That made it harder.

"For not being here when the doors broke."

"You were where duty put you."

"Cate used those words."

"She hears everything."

Tanner nodded.

Eleanor watched him a moment. "Did you see him?"

The question did not need a name.

"No."

"James."

He looked toward the map.

"That was not my question."

The house seemed to quiet around them. Above the ceiling, Maggie laughed at something Virginia said. Then Cate answered, lower, older.

Tanner rested one finger near the Emmitsburg Road he could not see on this map.

"I saw a man who might have been Nathaniel."

Eleanor did not move.

"Across the field?" she asked.

"Near the ridge. Smoke took the face. Distance supplied the rest."

"Was it him?"

"I do not know."

"Which is worse?"

He looked at her then.

"Yes."

She absorbed that. "You both lived long enough for uncertainty."

"That is a strange mercy."

"It may be the only kind war can spare."

He wanted to answer, but no answer stood.

Eleanor reached toward the map and moved the cracked blue cup an inch from the river line.

"You are not the only one who did not go to the place where someone else is assigned his duty."

The sentence entered him.

He thought of absence as a soldier's burden, a thing he carried because orders required it. Eleanor corrected him without accusation. Absence sat beside her too. It helped teach their daughters to read maps, to distrust headlines, to measure food, and to understand that words like victory and defeat entered houses by different doors but used the same rooms.

"I know," he said.

"No," Eleanor answered. "You are beginning to."

That was fair.

The girls came down in clean dresses altered at the hem. Cate carried herself as a young lady, already practicing the self-command adults had forced upon her. Maggie held a ribbon in one hand and announced that Aunt Virginia had tied it wrong because beauty should not pull at the scalp.

Virginia followed, carrying her shawl. "Beauty has survived worse than your scalp."

Thalian Hall stood a short carriage ride away, bright with lamps and public courage.

The building held itself with civic dignity, a place built for government, performance, ceremony, and illusion. Carriages waited near the street. Women moved past in dresses altered and re-trimmed to conceal age, shortage, and mourning. Men in uniforms bowed over gloved hands. Laughter rose, then stopped too soon.

Bodies and lamps filled the hall, creating a snug atmosphere. Fans moved. Programs rustled. The air carried perfume, wool, pomade, dust, and the faint chemical smell of gaslight. Tanner saw officers, merchants, clerks, wives, widows, girls pretending not to watch the door, and old men who studied young officers as if counting the future one face at a time.

Cate stood beside him and looked up at the chandeliers.

"It is almost like before," she said.

Virginia, just behind her, answered before Tanner could. "But, not quite the same."

Eleanor glanced at him. The line had landed too close to truth.

They took seats along a side row. The performance had something comic in it, though Tanner followed little of the plot. Men laughed at lines he did not hear. Women smiled with practiced attention. A child somewhere behind them said something and was hushed by a mother who sounded near tears.

Tanner watched the stage, then the audience, then the doors.



Sketch 1: The Tanner family enjoys an evening of entertainment at Thalian Hall.

In Richmond, men hid fear behind policy. In Wilmington, they hid it behind movement. At Thalian Hall they hid it behind applause. The disguises differed. The fear did not.

Eleanor's gloved hand rested on the seat between them. His own hand lay close enough that he could feel the warmth of it without touching. After a long while, when the hall darkened for a scene change, she moved one finger against his.

No one saw.

Or everyone did and had the mercy to pretend otherwise.

When the performance ended, applause filled the hall with a brightness that did not survive the walk to the street. Outside, newsboys called old headlines as if selling them louder might alter their meaning. A carriage wheel struck a rut. Somewhere toward the river, a whistle sounded.

Tanner paused at the sound.

Cate saw.

She did not ask.

That restraint told him more than any question she might have spoken.

They returned to the Ashcroft house beneath a sky without stars. The girls slept before Virginia finished pretending they would not. Maggie's ribbon lay abandoned on the parlor table. Cate placed the Cape Fear map back where she wanted it, then weighed one corner with the sewing tin before going upstairs.

Later, after the house settled, Tanner sat in Virginia's small back room with a lamp, his dispatch case, and a sheet of military paper. Eleanor had gone upstairs with the girls. Virginia had left coffee beside him without asking whether he wanted it.

He wrote the memorandum on Wilmington's vulnerabilities in controlled, severe lines.

Fort Fisher at New Inlet as a fortress against naval power.

They must consider Fort Caswell, Fort Holmes, river batteries, pilots, signal stations, obstructions, torpedoes where practicable, interior rail movement, powder allotment, and harbor intelligence together, or they will not consider them at all.

Cape Fear defense depends upon coordination, not reputation.

Blockade-running cannot remain a private enterprise dressed in patriotic language.

We must enforce cargo priority.

Medical stores, shoes, arms, lead, and powder materials must outrank luxuries, speculation, and political favor.

He paused, listening to the house breathe around him.

Then he added one more line.

Every port believes itself open until the day it is closed.

That sentence he did not cross out.

He took out the unsent page to Eleanor and laid it beside the memorandum. The two lines from the road west of Gettysburg looked thinner under lamplight than they had on the train.

Tonight, I feel secure.

We are still an army, but not the same one.

He did not smooth the page this time. He let the creases and worn places show. Then he wrote beneath them.

I saw children studying a map, and they seemed to believe that knowing river and fort names could defend their childhood. I do not know how to forgive the war for that.

The ink held.

He waited for the impulse to strike the sentence out.

It did not come.

Near dawn, Tanner slept in the chair instead of the bed.

Morning came hot and colorless. He woke with his neck stiff, the lamp burned low, and the Wilmington memorandum beside his hand. From upstairs came the careful noises of a household preparing not to make parting worse by naming it too soon.

He washed, shaved, dressed, and placed the memorandum with the sealed papers for Augusta.

At breakfast, Maggie refused to sit unless she could keep one hand on his sleeve. Virginia allowed it for three minutes, then announced that grief did not excuse elbows on the table. Cate said nothing until the meal was almost over.

"Will Augusta explode?" she asked.

"No."

"Will you?"

Virginia closed her eyes.

Tanner set down his cup.

"No."

Cate looked at him. "That is a promise?"

"It is an intention."

"I dislike intentions."

"Neither do I."

Eleanor looked at him across the table. There was no accusation in her face. Only the exhausted knowledge of a woman who understood why honest men feared promises.

When the carriage came, Tanner took up the dispatch case.

Maggie held his hand until the doorway. Cate stood very straight beside Eleanor. Virginia remained near the parlor table with one hand resting on the Cape Fear map.

"Major Tanner," she said, "if Augusta intends to keep you, tell Colonel Rains that Wilmington has prior claim."

"I will convey the threat."

"It is not a threat. It is a household position."

He bowed. "Then I will convey the truth."

Maggie cried before he reached the steps. She seemed angry at herself for it. Tanner returned, crouched, and kissed her hair.

"That counts," she whispered.

He closed his eyes once.

"Yes," he said. "It does."

Cate offered her hand. He took it solemnly.

"Keep the map open?" she asked.

"Yes."

"But not because we are afraid."

"No?"

"So we know where the doors are."

He looked at Eleanor.

She did not rescue him.

"Yes," Tanner said. "So we know where the doors are."

Eleanor walked him to the carriage.

No one followed.

For one breath they stood in the narrow shade beside the street.

"Do not become proud of endurance, James," she said. "It is a hard habit to break."

The words struck more cleanly than a rebuke.

"And you?"

"I am already guilty."

He reached for her hand. This time he did not stop because of windows, neighbors, or passing wheels. He gripped it, long enough to make the promise physical, but too briefly to satisfy either of them.

"I will write from Augusta."

"Write what is true."

"I do not always know how much truth mercy can bear."

"Then do not mistake silence for mercy."

The driver shifted on the box. The horse stamped at a fly.

Tanner released her hand.

By noon he would be on the road toward Augusta and the powder works, where danger at least announced itself with sulphur, sparks, machinery, and rules. Wilmington would remain behind him with its river throat open, its theater lamps burning, its confident merchants counting profits beside fear, and Eleanor standing where public light could not warm her for long.

At the carriage step, Tanner took up the dispatch case.

For the first time since Gettysburg, it felt heavier than orders.

It felt like home.

