

Gettysburg and Vicksburg: Summer of Decision

By Tom O'Connor

Copyright 2026

Chapter 1

Orders in the Rain

Fredericksburg, Virginia — November–December 1862

The rain began before dawn. It stayed with the army through breakfast, through the morning ride, and through the long, gray hours when roads forgot their purpose and turned back into clay.

Major James Tanner sat his horse on a low rise west of Fredericksburg. He watched a gun team fail by inches. The lane below dissolved under iron rims, straining traces, and the stubborn weight of a twelve-pounder. The lead pair leaned into the harness until the leather sang. The right wheel sank. Mud climbed the rim almost to the hub. Drivers shouted while a sergeant waved men forward with fence rails torn from a nearby line. The gun moved only a foot before it settled again. The road took hold and meant to keep it.

Tanner watched the struggle. He did not see glory. He saw the breaking point of Virginia's soil. The earth gave way under over two thousand pounds of bronze and oak. The whole march lost its order in the muck.

General James Longstreet rode up with two aides behind him. Rain darkened his beard and the brim of his hat. His seat remained loose. Tanner distrusted this posture. Ease belonged to dry rooms and stone steps, not to a cow path that threatened to swallow a field piece before the morning coffee cooled.

"How many more guns before that road quits on us?" Longstreet asked. His voice rumbled over the rhythmic sucking sound of hooves in the muck.

Tanner kept his eyes on the wheel. He watched a bubble of air pop in the slurry. "Two light pieces more, perhaps. One heavy battery? I would not trust it. The crust is gone. We move through a swamp now, General."

"That certain?"

"As certain as I can be in this rain, sir. The bottom gave way a few minutes ago."

Longstreet watched the team lurch and fail again. The horses lathered despite the cold. Their breath came in ragged white plumes.

"That will do. Too many men offer me spirit when I ask for weight. Spirit does not pull a

Napoleon out of the sinkhole."

Tanner opened his notebook beneath the shelter of his sleeve. He kept the paper dry with a practiced motion. He wrote in a tight engineer's hand.

Grade poor. Drainage nonexistent. Clay beneath thin topsoil. Wagon traffic is tolerable in dry weather. Heavy artillery destructive.

Longstreet glanced at the ledger. "Lee says you count ground the way a banker counts debt."

Tanner closed the book halfway. "The ground will tell us soon enough, General. It either holds or it does not."

Longstreet gave a low grunt. A heavy stillness replaced it. The kind that comes before a campaign. He pointed east, where the Rappahannock country lay hidden beneath a shroud of rain and November haze.

"Burnside leads them now. The word from the picket says he wants speed. He thinks he can steal a march and get between us and Richmond. I want to know what speed costs him in this."

"Then he fights the mud first," Tanner said. He closed the notebook with a sharp snap. "Men walk through this. Guns sink. If he moves faster than his wagons, he reaches the river with empty cartridge boxes and hungry horses."

They turned onto higher ground and left the lane to its misery. The ridge track ran firmer, though it remained unkind. Bare oak branches shook cold drops whenever the wind shifted. The smell of wet wool, wood smoke, and dying livestock clung to the damp air.

Tanner saw the same want he knew from the Augusta Powder Works: thin horses, cracked harness, and men making rags serve where boots belonged. A wheel there had once slipped its block and crushed a laborer's leg; the memory returned whenever an exhausted team fought bad ground.

"How many teams can we lose," Longstreet asked, "before the line lies to us? Before a colonel says he holds a battery in position when his guns sit two miles back in a ditch?"

"Fewer than the clerks in Richmond believe," Tanner said. "A horse only pulls so much. In this mud, every mile takes the work of two. The horses will fail first. The guns will stay where they fall."

Longstreet accepted that. "Then I require more of your sums before nightfall. I need to know where the ground holds a line and where it betrays us."

They reached a farmhouse serving as temporary quarters for the First Corps. The modest white structure sat surrounded by a moat of dark paste where wagons churned the yard into a bog. Orderlies splashed between the porch and the stable. Behind the barn, a makeshift forge stood under a sagging lean-to. Two blacksmiths worked with frantic rhythm. One held a shivering horse's hoof while the other drove a nail into a shoe worn so thin it might not last the week. The ring of the hammer on iron remained the only sharp sound in a world muffled by water.

Inside, the front room served as a hive of quiet, tense activity. The air carried the thick scent

of wet wool, tobacco, and lantern metal. Major Moxley Sorrel, Longstreet's chief of staff, bent over a large dining table. "More reports are arriving from headquarters," Sorrel said without looking up. Red veins mapped his eyes from lack of sleep. "The enemy's movement grows firmer. He masses at Falmouth. Fredericksburg looks likely."

Longstreet stripped off his gloves, finger by finger. "How soon, Moxley?"

"Soon enough to matter. The scouts sighted the pontoon trains. Burnside committed himself."

Longstreet turned his heavy gaze on Tanner. "There is your work. The river acts as the obstacle, but the heights provide the answer. Go to the table."

Tanner stepped forward. The map spread across the wood. He looked for hidden ground: dips where an enemy might disappear, draws where water collected, and roads that could carry ammunition.

"If Burnside reaches the river before we settle on the heights," Tanner said, his finger tracing the contour lines, "we fight where his crossing drives us. But occupy the ridge first, and the ground works for us."

Longstreet rested one large hand on the map, covering Fredericksburg. "Give me the terrain."

Tanner pointed to Marye's Heights. "This is the anchor. It commands the approach from the town. The slope below stays open. A sunken road at the base provides a stone wall. If we put infantry there, they stay hard to see until the last moment. The guns on the ridge above can sweep most of the plain." He moved his finger south toward Prospect Hill. "The line will stretch, General. And the roads govern its movement. If the lower tracks soften any further, shifting batteries will grow slow and costly. If that happens, the flank grows dear."

"And where does sensible ground end?" Sorrel asked.

Tanner kept his eyes on the map. "Where the ground stops supporting the line and men must make up the difference."

By afternoon, Tanner returned to the saddle. He was not alone. Longstreet assigned him a small party of pioneers and an artillery officer from the New Orleans Washington Artillery, Lieutenant Rene Bouchard. Bouchard was a lean man who wore his uniform with more care than the weather deserved. Mud reached his knees all the same. He kept wiping rain from his gloves, though it served no purpose. Tanner marked the habit. Vanity alone did not explain it.

"This ridge is a masterpiece, Major," Bouchard said. "We can stack the guns wheel-to-wheel. We will sweep the Federals back into the river."

Tanner ignored the romance. "You will stack them until a limber breaks an axle. Then you will get into a traffic jam while their heavy guns find your range. Ten yards between pieces, Lieutenant."

"Ten yards?" Bouchard said. He wiped mud from his cheek. "That weakens the fire. My men want to stand together."

"Your men will die together if you crowd them," Tanner said. "A battery that cannot move is just a row of targets. We mark for a fight, not a parade."

Bouchard opened his mouth, then shut it. He looked back toward his team, standing in the rain with their heads bowed. "One of my wheel horses went lame this morning," he said at last. "If I lose another, I do not move at all."

The admission improved Bouchard in Tanner's estimation. "Then we protect the horses by leaving room to work."

They reached a small creek crossing two miles south of the town. The bridge looked like a simple timber-and-plank affair. Tanner dismounted. His boots sank into icy water at the edge of the creek. Grit slid into his socks.

"Lieutenant, bring a lantern," Tanner said.

He waded under the span. The water numbed his legs. He found the downstream silt where it met the stone. The wood looked too dark. He drew his engineer's knife and drove the point into the timber. It sank four inches with a soft, sickening thud.

"Rot," Tanner said.

He climbed back out, dripping and shivering. "This bridge might hold a wagon. I would not trust it under a heavy gun. The center will go."

"We lack the time to rebuild a bridge, Major," Bouchard said.

"We lack the time to drag a gun from the creek while the Federals cross," Tanner said. He turned to the pioneer sergeant, a man with a face like cracked leather. "I want shoring. Cross-braces on the downstream side. Use the timber from that barn."

The sergeant looked at the rain and spat into the mud. "The men are spent, Major. They worked ten hours in this."

Tanner handed him the knife. The blade carried the stain of rotten wood. "The timber still cuts, Sergeant. If this bridge fails, the guns stop. If the guns stop, your friends hold the ridge without them. Do you want that on your conscience?"

The sergeant took the knife. He looked at the rot on the blade, then at the bridge. "No, sir. We will fix it."

They started the work before full dark. Axes rang out through the rain. Lanterns swung. A brace went up crooked. Men tore it down and started again. One mule slipped in the mud and snapped a trace. The delay cost them an hour. Tanner said nothing while the men cursed and hauled. He checked the angles again, only by lamplight.

On the second day, the party rode into Fredericksburg itself. The town sat in a strange silence, as if waiting to hear its sentence. Tanner rode down Caroline Street. A shop window still showed a roll of bright blue ribbon and a set of delicate China cups. A church bell rang for the noon hour. A woman stood in a doorway, her shawl pulled tight. She watched the officers pass.

"Move your things, Ma'am," Tanner said, drawing his horse up. "The high ground is better."

The woman did not blink. "My mother died in this house, Major. My husband built that

shelf with his own hands. I think I will stay."

Tanner looked at the ribbon in the window, then at the woman's hard eyes. He felt an icy knot in his stomach. She did not see a firing line or a lane of approach. She saw her dead husband and her walls.

The shelf she mentioned stood just visible through the doorway. A Bible rested on it. A tin cup. A child's shoe. He could not look at the shelf without seeing the angle of fire for a sharpshooter from that window. That was the thing he could not stop. He looked for angles even in a woman's grief.

The woman watched him study her house. "You've already decided," she said. It was not a question.

"You should at least board up the lower windows," he said more quietly.

"Will boards stop cannons?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Then let the house stand as it is."

Bouchard shifted in the saddle beside him. "It is a shame we must turn it into a fort."

Tanner kept his eyes on the woman. "It gives their sharpshooters cover. We must block those cellar windows. And that square will help them find the range."

They climbed the heights again. They reached the Marye house. The rise stood fifty feet above the town. Its shape served well enough. Tanner spent the rest of the light measuring intervals. He drove split stakes into the soft earth. He walked the reserve line twice. Then once more.

At dusk, he stood at the stone wall at the base of the hill and looked up toward the ridge.

"If they come across that field," Bouchard said, standing beside him, "it will be a graveyard."

"Yes," Tanner said.

He was an engineer. He built things to hold weight, not to direct fire. This ground made killing too simple, and that offended some quiet part of him he no longer named.

That night, Tanner found a small room above a wheelwright's shop. By the light of a single candle, he opened his portfolio. His cramped hands hindered him. He forced his fingers to hold the pen.

Dearest Eleanor,

I write this from a room in Fredericksburg. The shops still hold their finery. I saw a roll of blue ribbon today that reminded me of the dress you wore when I left for Augusta. The church bells still mark the hours. Yet the air carries the weight of the coming storm. Men pace the heights above these streets with stakes in hand. They measure the earth not for crops, but for graves.

General Longstreet is a man of heavy silences. He does not ask for valiant stands. He asks what a road will bear and expects a number. I prefer his coldness to the heat of the fire-eaters.

Burnside stays across the river. I remember him from our days at the Point. He always felt the weight of expectations. I fear he will throw his men against these heights because he will not know how to stop once the motion begins. It is a terrible thing, Eleanor, to see a man's habits rise to the scale of an army.

Tell Cate that a road dies if you do not tend to it. Tell Maggie that I saw that ribbon and thought of her hair. I still carry the drawings they made of the wildflowers. The paper has wrinkled now, but the colors remain bright.

You once told me that the lines I draw on paper make too much sense to trust. You were right. The earth corrects every drawing I make. I only hope that when the fire begins, the ground I chose is enough to bring me back to you.

Yours always, James

He blotted the ink and folded the paper. Outside, the sounds stayed mechanical: hoofbeats in water, a hammer on iron, the groan of a wagon axle.

Morning brought the news. A courier reached the farmhouse soaked through and shivering so hard his teeth rattled against the rim of his tin cup. "They move, General," the boy rasped. "The Federal columns hit the riverbank. The bridges go down."

Longstreet read the dispatch. His expression did not change. He handed it to Sorrel. "There it is. The dance begins."

The urgency shifted at once. Tanner returned to the ridge by eight o'clock. He moved along the line, checking his stakes. He saw a captain crowding his guns too close together on a narrow terrace.

"Captain. Move the third and fourth pieces twenty yards left," Tanner said.

"But the cover is better here, Major," the officer said.

"The cover will not matter when one shell strikes your limber and cripples the whole battery. Move them now."

The captain hesitated half a breath too long. Then he moved the guns.

General Lee arrived on Traveller around noon and inspected the positions with Longstreet. Tanner remained with his stakes while the two generals studied the river approaches, the stone wall, and the guns along the ridge.

Tanner turned back to his stakes. The line thickened. Pioneers finished the roadbed. Infantry filed into the sunken road. Their bayonets looked dull under the gray sky. The guns moved into their final positions. One wheel stuck, then settled true. Another limber pulled up short. An officer waved it farther left. At last the line stilled. The preparation ended.

Now the Earth began its work.

Stone and Cedar

Near Murfreesboro, Tennessee — December 31, 1862

The cold bit harder than the rain. Before first light, Major Nathaniel McAllister sat on his horse near a rail fence west of the Nashville Pike. He listened to the Army of the Cumberland wake by fragments. A wagon chain clanked in the dark. A mule coughed. Somewhere beyond the next rise a teamster cursed a wheel sunk deep in frozen mud. The lantern hanging from the fence post lit a map spread across a cracker box. The yellow light stained the dark more than it drove it off. Beyond that weak circle, the cedar brakes rose like black walls. Close and mean. Fit for nothing except hiding men until they were too near for comfort.

The pike itself ran pale through the dark like a strip of old bone. Beside it, the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad cut the winter ground in a straighter line. Nathaniel looked from road to rail. He turned over the same thought he carried since coming up before dawn: if the right broke and the army bent back toward Murfreesboro, those two lines would matter more than any fine language headquarters might later use to describe the battle. The road and the railroad were the army's spine. If they failed, the army would fail with them.

A signal sergeant waited on a low swell with two flagmen and a coil of line. Nathaniel valued the equipment, but cedar, smoke, and broken ground could blind flags and slow couriers. Every method failed somewhere; his work was to judge which report remained useful.

A rider came in fast from the east, checked hard by the fence, and slid from the saddle with a muttered curse. His horse's flanks steamed in the cold. "From the cavalry screen near the Wilkinson trace, sir. Confederate movement in force. More than first thought."

Nathaniel took the folded slip. The edge was wet, and the pencil marks blurred at one corner. Before he finished reading it, another courier came in from farther south. Mud covered the second man's coat up to the waist. His eyes carried the flat, alarmed look of a rider who moved through trees too long before first light.

"Sir, another patrol says the stronger movement lies lower on the line. If that first report was true, it is old now."

Nathaniel read the second slip, then looked back at the first. Both might be right. Neither was fresh enough to trust with comfort.

He heard an indistinct murmur behind him and turned. Corporal Eli Mercer stepped up from the dark with his satchel under one arm and his cap pulled down to the ears. The cold, reins, and too many hurried dismounts split the skin across both his hands. He kept flexing his fingers and whispering to himself while he waited. "Five-ten. Five-twelve. Screen east of the cedars. Five-fifteen." He did that whenever messages crowded together. He fixed the times in his head so that one order would not drown another.

Nathaniel handed him the first note. "Take this to Captain Leland with the reserve batteries near the pike. Tell him cavalry reports pressure north of the cedars. He is to hold one section limbered and ready, but not advance without fresh word."

Mercer repeated the order back in full. Nathaniel gave him the second slip. "Then carry this to the cavalry officer south of the cedars. Tell him his report came in late and I want another at once with exact road use if he can get it. I want to know not just where they are, but how they move."

Mercer tucked both messages into the satchel. "Artillery first. Then cavalry south."

"Yes."

The corporal mounted and rode off. Nathaniel slipped one hand inside his coat and touched the edge of Clara's last letter. He did not draw it out. He felt only the paper there, dry and square beneath the cloth. Then he turned back toward the cedar line.

By first light, the firing started in earnest on the Union right. It rolled in from the south and west in ragged bursts, then thickened until it felt less like sound than pressure in the chest. Men came back from that direction not in rout at first, but in pieces. A file here. A rider there. A horse without a mounted man. Then more. Then too many.

Reports reached headquarters faster now, but not cleaner. McCook's right was under heavier attack than expected. Units took the blow before breakfast. Some twisted out of line. Others vanished where cedar smoke and broken ground gave no room to dress ranks or see more than a few yards ahead.

Nathaniel rode toward the pike at a hard trot. Staff officers cut across the fields. Orderlies shouted. Ambulances lurched north. Along the railroad embankment and the Nashville Pike, guns gathered where they could answer any Confederate force that broke through the shattered right. That was no accident. The center's advantage was the shorter roads, firmer reference points, and the pike itself. It was a crude interior line, not beautiful on a map but powerful in practice. Men and guns could still move there when the fields to the south turned to confusion and fragments.

He found Captain Leland, one of the artillery officers attached to the center, near a low rise by the pike where two batteries wanted the same strip of ground. Leland sat square in the saddle, rammer staff tucked beneath one knee, watching the road the way a banker watched a vault door.

"You sent word of pressure north of the cedars," Leland said. "Another man arrived two minutes later and swore the harder blow was farther south. Which report do you want me to believe?"

Nathaniel looked across the broken fields. Fences stitched them together in crooked lines. The cedar brakes cut the land into blind pockets. Smoke pushed through the trees in gusts. The road behind them already showed the wear of too much traffic.

"Believe both in part," Nathaniel said. "Act on neither in full. Keep one battery on this rise. Hold the reserve section limbered behind the pike with the teams angled north. If the right folds

farther, your first duty is to keep the road under guns."

"You are asking me to wait," Leland said.

"I am asking you to hold the road until the reports agree."

Leland frowned, then gave the command. The teams leaned into the traces. A limber jolted left. One wheel struck a frozen rut, lurched, then caught again. Nathaniel watched until the reserve section settled where it could answer either the rise or the road.

A signal sergeant reported that smoke and timber limited the flag station to three fields. Nathaniel ordered him to keep the short link working and use couriers beyond it.

A cavalry lieutenant reached him near the railroad cut with mud to the shoulders and one cheek streaked black where powder mixed with sweat. "They came through the trees in force," the man said. "We slowed them, but only enough to give you this." He handed over a penciled sheet. "They are not moving by one road. They break around the cedar and reform where they please."

Nathaniel scanned the note, then turned at once to Leland. "Do not push the reserve section south. They'll lose sight and then lose direction. Keep them to the pike and let the broken ground channel the enemy toward your front."

Leland gave him a sharp look. "So the cavalry proved useful."

Nathaniel ignored that. "It proves the cedars are doing half their work for them."

By midmorning, the line no longer felt like a line. It felt like cloth pulled from too many corners at once. Reports arrived broken. Some bore no signature. Others carried information that belonged to an hour already dead.

"So either choice costs us."

"Yes. Bring the caissons halfway and keep the road open."

Before the man could answer, Mercer came in again, hat gone, one sleeve torn to the elbow. "Sir, message from the cavalry screen north of the Round Forest. Confederate pressure is still building there. They request immediate support should any troops be available."

A second messenger arrived not thirty seconds later, this one on a horse lathered white. "Battery south of the forest asks relief at once. Their right is giving way and they cannot hold long without support."

Nathaniel took both slips and stared at them. Two threatened points. One movable reserve section near enough to matter. One decision that would help one place and fail another.

Mercer stood waiting, whispering the times beneath his breath. "North line. Nine-forty-two. Battery south. Nine-forty-four."

Nathaniel looked toward the pike. If the line north of the Round Forest failed, pressure could roll toward the road and railroad. If the southern battery failed, the men there would pay first and soon. He made his choice.

"Mercer, take this to Captain Leland. He is to shift the reserve section north of the Round Forest at once and hold the pike under guns. Repeat it."

Mercer repeated it without error. Nathaniel turned to the second messenger. "Ride back to the battery south of the forest. Tell the captain he must hold with what he has and retire by sections only if forced. No full withdrawal unless the line breaks outright."

The rider stared at him. "Sir, they said they could not stand much longer."

"I heard what they said. Ride."

The man went. Nathaniel hated the order before the dust of it settled. That changed nothing.

He rode toward the Round Forest where the fighting thickened into a choking mass of cedar, smoke, and men trying to hold ground that gave no clean line and no clear sight. Guns fired where officers could see little and infer less. Infantry clung to patches of woods and field edge because the next patch mattered more than the last. Sound outran sight in every direction.

He found George H. Thomas just behind a rise near the pike where staff officers moved in and out with dispatches and fragments of news. Thomas sat broad and still in the saddle, mud streaking his horse, his face composed in a way that made other men's haste seem childish without his needing to remark on it. Nathaniel came up, saluted, and reported, but Thomas cut to the thing that mattered.

"What ground is still ours, Major?"

"The pike and railroad line remain firm, sir. Pressure north of the Round Forest is increasing. Unless they receive support, the enemy may force one battery back south of the Forest."

Thomas looked toward the smoke. "Can the road behind them still carry?"

"Yes, sir. For now."

Thomas nodded once. "Then keep it clear. If that road chokes, we are done."

Nathaniel turned back toward the guns. He reached the north side of the Round Forest in time to see Leland's reserve section coming into place. Teams strained. Wheels jolted against stone and root. The captain caught Nathaniel's eye and gave one hard nod before shouting his guns forward. A few minutes later the section opened with a crashing volley. It tore into gray ranks pressing out of the smoke and bent their advance just enough to keep them from striking the pike. Men cheered, more because they still could cheer than because they believed they had won anything.

Mercer did not return at once. When he came out of the smoke, he was on foot, carrying his hat by the brim. "I reached Leland in time, sir," he said. "Then I rode south with the second correction, but the battery there was already hit. Lieutenant Baines took the paper from me while they were dragging a wheel horse clear. He said it could save him two teams if it came twenty minutes sooner."

Nathaniel stared at the corporal's split hands. One knuckle opened and bled into the crease of the reins. "You were as quick as any man could be," Nathaniel said.

Mercer looked down. "Quick was not enough."

The fighting did not ease until late in the day. By then the army bent back and hardened

along the pike and railroad, held together by artillery, shorter interior movement, and the refusal of enough men to leave the road. Nathaniel understood the shape of it only after the noise dropped. The Confederates did not break the army. The army did not beat them cleanly either. It refused to die where it stood.

In the days that followed, Bragg struck again and failed to break the line. When he withdrew, the field belonged to Rosecrans, but it looked less like victory than a calamity turned aside at the last minute.

When the smoke thinned, Nathaniel rode south of the Round Forest and saw what the delayed message cost. One gun stood crippled against a fence, its wheel split. A dead horse still hung in the traces, frozen into the harness by blood and cold. Men cut the leather free in silence. Nearby, Lieutenant Baines sat on a limber chest with one arm bound in a dark sling. He looked up as Nathaniel approached and drew the folded order from inside his coat.

"This came late," he said. "No crime in that. But it came late."

Nathaniel took the paper. "We held until we could not," Baines went on. "Then we drew back by pieces. It spared what it could."

Nathaniel looked at the broken wheel, the dead horse, the men sawing stiff leather free. His stomach tightened until he thought he might be sick in the mud beside them.

"I am sorry," he said.

Baines let out a tired breath. "Be sorrier for the teams. Good wheel horses are dearer than lieutenants."

Nathaniel found no answer worth giving. He walked the ground on foot after that. He passed dead men he knew that morning only by unit marks and road positions. He saw a courier boy no older than James lying on one side with one hand still shut around a strap. He saw a signal flag trampled into mud that was once white. He saw Mercer standing alone by a ditch where a horse fell and did not rise.

Two days later, when the immediate aftermath work loosened enough to permit it, Nathaniel wrote Clara by lantern light.

My dearest Clara,

The battle is done. I leave for the east within days. If the rail holds and no fresh necessity stops me, I will reach you soon. I know better than to promise an exact hour while armies still sit in the field. But I am coming.

We held the Nashville Pike. In holding it we kept the army from worse ruin. That is the plainest truth I can give. There was hard fighting in cedar and broken fields where no man saw enough and every message seemed to arrive one hour late or one field short. I spent most of the day between riders and guns, trying to turn fragments into something useful. Sometimes it was enough. Sometimes it was not.

Do not be surprised if I seem tired upon my arrival. Winter and this work mark any man. I remain sound. Tell James I still mean to bring the map case I promised him, though he may find

his father less talkative than when last we sat under the same roof. Tell Mother that no army has yet matched her kitchen. Tell Father that Tennessee builds its roads from lies and frozen mud.

I am coming home.

Yours always, Nathaniel

He sealed the letter and sat a moment with it in his hands before giving it over.

That night Mercer wrapped fresh cloth around his split knuckles and said, "If I sleep now, sir, I'll hear the hoofbeats again."

Nathaniel looked toward the dark line of cedar beyond the campfires. "So will I."

When the train carried him north through winter country, he sat by the window and looked down once at his hands resting in his lap. Mud still marked the seam of one glove. He wiped at it with his thumb and spread the stain. Home, he thought, would see what the war made of him before he spoke a word.

Iron, Wire, and Winter

Camden Station, Baltimore — January 1863

The snow along the sidings turned the color of furnace ash.

By dawn Camden Station was alive with couplings, teamsters, steam, and southbound trains. Fredericksburg was behind Andrew, but its wounded and supply demands still moved through the yard by timetable.

Andrew stood near a stack of bridge timbers and flexed the fingers of his left hand inside his glove. Cold always found the old injury first. The joints stiffened before breakfast and answered when delicate work was required. He could still grip a pencil. He could still mark a map. But the hand no longer obeyed without protest, and the protest grew sharper in winter.

Herman Haupt came out of the station office at the pace he used for everything, quick, direct, one step short of collision. His hat sat low over his eyes. His coat was plain enough, but no one in the yard mistook him for an ordinary man.

He pointed toward the southbound train. "That bridge train should be clear already. Instead it sits there like a dead mule. Come along, Lieutenant. There is work enough for both irritation and thought."

Andrew fell in beside him. "What stopped it, sir?"

"A mistake made by men who believe abbreviations are a substitute for intelligence."

Haupt handed him a damp dispatch sheet. Snowmelt blurred one corner, but the body of it remained legible. Someone routed the construction train bound for Virginia wrong in the night. Worse, the telegraph wagon for the bridge crew was no longer where it belonged. If someone did not correct the error at once, the bridge crew would wait idle through the day. Behind that would come delay in timber, delay in tools, and delay in a troop movement already balanced to the

clock.

Andrew read the sheet once, then again.

The error reached beyond one train. A delayed bridge crew would block the afternoon supply movement, the evening military express, and every consist tied to the same line.

They stepped into the station office. Coal heat fought with the draft around the window frames. Maps of the line hung beside movement tables marked in pencil, grease, and thumbprints. Two telegraph operators bent over their desks. Haupt's appearance made one clerk stand rigid, as if awaiting dismissal or humiliation.

Haupt pointed to the central table. "Show him what you wrote."

The clerk laid down the movement sheet with a hand that tried not to shake.

Andrew bent over it. The train, the wagon, the routing mark, the timetable, the relay points, all of it came together at once. He felt the line in his mind, not as ink on paper but as motion. He saw where the error began and where the damage would spread.

"Hold the southbound train at Relay if it is still there," he said. "If it already passed, stop it at Savage and reverse the telegraph wagon by light engine. Do not wait for the full train to turn. The bridge crew can begin with men and hand tools, but not without the instruments."

The clerk blinked. "Sir, that splits the train."

"That saves the line," Andrew said.

He marked the table with his right hand. His left pressed the paper flat. Pain moved through the damaged fingers, but he kept his face still.

"Hold the ordnance freight in Baltimore until the military express clears. If you let powder cars drift south on schedule, they will choke the branch when the bridge train reverses. After the express passes, release them in order."

Haupt struck the table once with his knuckles. "Do it. And write the message in plain words. The Army has no shortage of fools who can misunderstand precision."

At the telegraph desk, Corporal Duffy turned halfway in his chair. Coal dust darkened the creases beside his nose. Poor sleep showed in his eyes.

"So this is a cheerful morning," he said. "Another day saved by men who could spell."

Andrew moved to his desk and handed over the corrected routing note. "Savage first. Then the express. Then the powder cars."

Duffy scanned it once. "That at least sounds like a sentence."

"It is one."

He bent over the key and began sending.

The office grew tighter with each passing minute. Couriers came and went. Snow melted from boots and turned the boards slick. A second locomotive from Washington arrived late with injector trouble. Two quartermaster men argued over car priority near the freight desk. A stack of requisition papers slid from a stool and scattered across the floor.

Andrew wrote three corrected waybills, signed two movement slips, and redrew a sequence

chart for the south line. By then the ache in his left hand sharpened enough to make his pen strokes ugly. He shifted the paper and went on.

Haupt noticed.

"Still troubling you?" he asked.

"Only when I ask it for neatness."

"Then stop asking. Use the hand for weight. Use your clerks for neatness. War does not care how gracefully a man draws a line."

The door opened again, and Meg Carter came in from the cold with two ledgers under one arm and snow on the shoulders of her dark cloak. Her father's office handled enough railroad traffic she crossed these yards with more confidence than many officers.

She looked first at Andrew, then at the confusion on the tables.

"So the Army has misplaced something large again," she said.

Haupt took one ledger from her without ceremony. "Not large. Only essential."

Meg set the second book down beside Andrew. "Then you may be grateful that railroad offices remember what army offices lose."

She removed her gloves. Ink marked the side of one thumb. Andrew noticed it at once, and she noticed him noticing.

He said, "We are searching for a telegraph wagon transferred in the night."

"Then you are searching in the wrong book."

She opened the ledger to a page of freight transfers. Her finger moved down the column. Andrew stepped beside her and followed the line of entries. There it was. The wagon was not with the bridge train at all. Someone shifted it late to another set of cars under a general tools mark, then reclassified it under ordnance support to clear space elsewhere.

If it stayed there, his correction failed. The bridge crew would still wait. The line would still seize.

Haupt leaned over the page. "Who did that?"

Meg read the notation. "Captain Weller, by the look of it. He wanted room on the repair train and assumed the tools could travel later."

Andrew looked at the movement sheet, then back at the ledger. "Not later. Separate. Hold the ordnance cars. Pull the wagon and send it by the express engine."

Meg shook her head. "Not from Relay."

He turned to her. "Why not?"

"Too many hands. Too much confusion. At Savage the yardmaster will know the Carter transfer mark at once. Relay will waste twenty minutes hunting for it."

Andrew saw it the moment she said it. She was right.

He handed the revised order back to Duffy. "Change of station. Savage, not Relay. Mark the wagon by Carter transfer six. Immediate priority."

Duffy began tapping before he finished the sentence.

A captain from the Quartermaster Department burst in ten minutes later, angry and wind-burned, waving a telegram from Washington. He wanted his hospital stores and winter clothing released at once. Meigs's office, he said, would not tolerate delay.

Haupt read the paper and gave it to Andrew.

The demand was short, urgent, and blind to the mechanics below it. Speed. Capacity. Forward movement. As always, Washington asked for results and left friction to other men.

The captain jabbed a finger toward the yard. "My wagons cannot sit there all day."

Andrew met his eye. "Release them now and you block the branch. You lose the whole afternoon south. Hold them one hour and they go through clean."

The captain hesitated, then looked to Haupt.

Haupt said, "The lieutenant already did the arithmetic. Do not make him repeat it for your education."

The captain left.

By late afternoon the confirmations returned. The military express cleared its slot. At Savage, someone found the telegraph wagon, detached it in minutes, and sent it south by light engine. The bridge crew reported receipt before dusk. The held ordnance cars followed without clogging the line.

Then the whistle came, long, low, and clear.

Andrew turned toward the window. The southbound bridge train was moving at last, its lanterns swinging through the smoke as it rolled out under the darkening sky. One correction, made early enough, kept the entire schedule from stiffening into failure.

Andrew stood near the platform window and watched steam drift past the glass. His hand hurt now. He opened and closed it once, then pressed the thumb into his palm until the worst of the ache eased.

Meg found him there.

"You are pale," she said.

"I am occupied."

"That is not the same thing."

"No."

She stood beside him and looked out over the yard. Men moved between lanterns and shadow, each carrying paper, tools, or news. The whole machine still labored, but now it moved.

"You saw it," she said. "Not the wagon. The complete break."

Andrew kept his eyes on the line of cars. "I cannot seem to stop seeing it once it begins."

She said nothing for a moment.

Then she said, "Then I will keep the ledgers. You keep the line."

He looked at her then. There was no pity in her face, only steadiness.

Behind them, Haupt called for the revised movement summary.

Andrew straightened. "Duty recalls me."

Meg picked up the ledger. "Then let it find you standing. Not falling."

He almost smiled.

When he laid the final summary on Haupt's desk, the older man read it through in silence.

"You missed one coal car in the middle column," Haupt said.

Andrew saw it at once and corrected it.

Haupt read the page again. He looked once at Andrew's left hand. Then he picked up his pen and wrote one line at the bottom of the movement order. He turned it toward Andrew.

South line review. Lieutenant McAllister. Monday next.

"After dark," Haupt said, "use your clerks for fair copy. An injured hand is a poor thing to waste."

Outside, the lamps burned yellow through the station smoke. Meg waited near the gate as he came out. They walked without haste into the evening cold. Wheels rang on frozen ruts. Somewhere behind them, another locomotive whistled for the south.

After a long minute Andrew said, "All day I saw the line in my head. Not one train. Not one office. The whole thing. Where it would seize. Where the failure would spread."

"And now?"

"Now I know I will go on seeing it."

Meg slipped one hand through his arm. He covered her hand with his good one.

Behind them, the railroad still moved through the dark. A red lantern swayed on the last car as the train took the curve and vanished south.

Household Weather

Wilmington, North Carolina — January 1863

Before dawn, the Ashcroft house listened to the river wind.

The shutters stirred once, then struck the frame with a dry wooden knock. Eleanor Tanner opened her eyes and lay still for a breath, counting the sounds that mattered. The grate in the parlor still held some life. Nothing dripped. No child cried out upstairs. The house was cold, but not failing. In winter, that counted as mercy.

She rose in the dark and took the lamp from the table. The flame came up thin. In the kitchen, Aunt Virginia was already awake, wrapped in black wool, measuring flour with a spoon leveled by the back of a knife. She did nothing careless with the flour. Not oil. Not thread. The fever months and the war together burned waste out of her like sickness out of a body.

"You are late," Virginia said.

"I am earlier than yesterday."

"That only proves yesterday was worse."

Eleanor set the lamp by the stove. The kitchen table held its meager order. Two eggs. A heel

of bread. Molasses thinned for the girls. A scrap of salt pork. Coffee no longer lived in the house except as memory. The sugar crock sat pushed to the back shelf, not hidden, but no longer granted the place of an ordinary thing.

Cate came in first, hair braided crooked, apron strings still untied. She looked once at the table, once at the flour bowl, and said nothing. That silence pained Eleanor more than any complaint would. Cate was too young to count as a woman and too old now to be still be a child. War did that quicker than years.

Maggie arrived dragging one stocking and her doll by the arm. She climbed into her chair and peered into the tin cup Virginia set before her.

"This is not coffee," she said.

"No," Virginia replied. "It is what stands where coffee used to stand."

Maggie frowned at the cup. "I dislike war."

Virginia cut the bread. "No sensible person does. Eat."

Cate reached for the preserves, then stopped. She looked toward Eleanor, then spread a thin scrape across both slices instead of a thicker one on her own. It was a small motion. Eleanor felt it like a hand pressed hard against her ribs.

"You need not do that," she said.

Cate kept her eyes on the bread. "I know."

Virginia watched the exchange and wiped the knife clean. "We are not poor yet, but we will behave like people who know the road there."

Maggie looked from one face to another. "Are we on the road now?"

"No," Eleanor whispered. "We are in our own kitchen."

"But we are walking toward it?"

Before Virginia could answer, Eleanor stepped in first.

"We are walking through winter," she said. "That is enough to think on before breakfast."

Maggie accepted that because children often accept half-truths when someone speaks to them. Cate did not. Cate looked at the cupboard where the lamp oil used to stand in two bottles instead of one and lowered her head over her plate.

On the mantel in the next room, James's last letter lay folded beside the work basket. Eleanor knew every turn of the paper now. She read it first for news, then for the pressure of his hand, then for the spaces between the words where fatigue and longing sat without naming themselves. She meant to stop touching it so often. She never did.

Breakfast passed in the careful way of winter mornings. Virginia measured the girls' portions without seeming to. Cate rinsed the cups and set them upside down to dry. Maggie dressed her doll in a torn strip of ribbon and asked, with the full seriousness of childhood, whether bridges could grow back if Yankees burned them.

"Not quickly," Cate said before Eleanor could answer.

Maggie turned. "Then do letters wait by the river until they can cross?"

Eleanor paused with her shawl in her hands.

"Sometimes they take a longer road," she said.

Maggie seemed to think that unfair but possible. She tucked the doll under one arm and went upstairs for her shoes.

Virginia tied the shawl at Eleanor's throat. "Buy soap if you can. Lamp oil if you cannot. And if the grocers turn righteous over Confederate paper, turn righteous back."

"I am not as skilled in righteousness as you."

"You are when the children need shoes."

Eleanor took her basket, her list, and the little purse that would not satisfy either. The front hall still smelled of vinegar and smoke from the months of sickness. Even now, certain habits remained. Windows opened less. Guests lingered less. They washed their hands as soon as one came in from the street. Houses that lost children in the fever kept their curtains pinned tighter than before, even in daylight. Wilmington lived on, but it did not forget.

Outside, the wind off the Cape Fear cut through her shawl at once.

The city was awake and under strain. Wagons still moved. Bells still rang. Men still shouted at dray horses and cursed at loads that stuck in mud. The ease was gone. Doors opened and shut more sharply. People weighed words before spending them. The port was busy, the streets crowded, and still they felt the pressure that sat over the town like low weather.

At the market, women stood with baskets pressed against their skirts as if someone might strip them from their arms. Flour, soap, cloth, candles, dried peas, lamp oil, salt fish, all the plain things of life, each now carried the temper of military stores. Eleanor waited at a grocer's stall while the man behind the counter pinched Confederate notes between two fingers as if they smelled bad.

"One pound," he said, leveling meal into a sack. "And not an ounce more at that price."

"It was less last week."

"It was before Christmas, too. We do not live there now."

A woman behind Eleanor leaned in and spoke near her ear without moving her lips. "They burned the bridge at Goldsborough and rode back toward New Bern before our men could breathe twice."

Mrs. Pritchard. Eleanor knew the voice before she turned.

"They did worse than burn timber," the grocer said. "They taught every fool in town to talk of rail lines as if he laid them himself."

Another woman farther down the stall answered, "If they can cut the road north, they can put hunger on every table here."

No one raised her voice. They did not need to. The truth traveled well enough in a city like Wilmington. New Bern fell the spring before. That fact lived in everybody now. It was not a place on a map. It was proof. Union troops could hold a North Carolina town. They could strike inland. They could reach bridges men once spoke of only in railroad terms and turn them into

household dread.

Eleanor bought less cloth than the house needed, less soap than Virginia asked for, and no lamp oil at all. With what remained she secured dried peas, coarse flour, and a packet of herbs Miss Thomas requested the day before.

As the woman wrapped the herbs, she said, "A bridge goes, and the whole state lives dearer."

Eleanor tucked the packet into her basket. "We learn that."

She cut toward the river because it shortened the walk and because some stubborn part of her still believed the water might steady her. It never did.

At the riverfront, wagons backed toward warehouses under tarred canvas. Rumor still carried the story of William Gould and other enslaved men escaping by boat the previous September—a reminder that the Cape Fear offered danger, supply, and, for a few, a road to freedom.

The parish rooms beside the church held a different strain. The air smelled of broth, vinegar, damp wool, and old wood warmed too often and never enough. Miss Thomas looked up from a table of folded linen.

"You found the herbs."

"I found fewer than I hoped."

"That is still more than I expected."

A younger volunteer, Mary Ellis, stood near the stove with a basin in her hands and a face gone white under the freckles. She was old enough to sew a neat seam and young enough to believe every hurt should yield to care if care were enough.

"Mary," Eleanor said, "set the basin down before you drop it."

The girl obeyed at once. On the bench nearest the fire sat a boy in gray no older than Cate might believe a soldier should be. A blanket wrapped his shoulders. His lips were dry. Fever brightened his eyes, but it did not yet carry him away from the room. Across from him, a riverman with a hand split open to the thumb sat with his arm cradled against his chest and tried not to groan when he moved.

Miss Thomas came close and spoke low. "One clean roll of linen left. One lamp for after dark. I can stretch the broth, but not the cloth."

Eleanor looked across the room. The riverman's wound needed the clean bandage. The boy by the stove needed warmth and light. An old man in the corner needed broth before the coughing took the rest of his strength. Mary needed direction plain enough to keep her from breaking down.

The room seemed to settle around the choice and wait.

"Use the clean linen on his hand," Eleanor said, nodding toward the riverman. "Tear the older sheet for the rest. Warm another brick for the boy and move him nearer the stove. Mr. Bell gets the broth first."

Mary swallowed. "And the lamp?"

"Keep it for the room after dark."

The boy lifted his eyes to her. "Ma'am," he said, voice just above a whisper, "could I hold it a little while?"

In his hand lay a small object on a string. At first Eleanor thought it a button. Then she saw it was a brass buckle from a child's shoe, polished by handling. Something from home. Something that wanted light not for reading or work, but to be seen again.

Her throat tightened without warning.

"No," she said, and the word came harder than she meant it to. She softened her voice at once. "Not now. Today we need the heat. We need the lamp later."

He looked at the buckle in his palm, then closed his fingers around it.

"I reckon the dark lasts the same either way," he murmured.

That did it. For one dangerous instant Eleanor felt tears rise, hot and helpless, and she hated them. She turned from him at once, reached for the brick with bare hands before the rag was ready, and almost burned herself rather than let the room see her face.

She set the brick at the boy's feet and tucked the blanket closer.

"The dark lasts," she said. "That is why we keep what light we can."

He nodded, accepting from her what no child needed to learn.

After that the room moved faster. Mary steadied herself once she received tasks she could handle. Miss Thomas wrapped the hand. The old man took his broth in short, angry swallows. Eleanor crossed the room again and again, lifting, stirring, carrying, wringing, folding, never sitting, never pausing long enough to feel the weight of what she denied.

At one point Miss Thomas touched her sleeve and said quietly, "You are bleeding."

Eleanor looked down. The base of her palm blistered on the brick and never noticed.

"It is nothing."

"It is a hand."

"There are worse wounds in the room."

Miss Thomas did not argue. She only handed over a rag and let Eleanor wrap it herself.

By late afternoon the light thinned and the one saved lamp mattered. Mary whispered, "I thought kindness would feel kinder than this."

Eleanor tied off the rag around her palm. "Kindness is not always soft."

When she returned home, Cate sat at the table with the account book open and a pile of mending beside her. Maggie sat on the floor with the doll and James's old handkerchief spread over both their knees. Aunt Virginia was trimming a candle end with the same concentration she once gave to flower arrangements before the war.

Cate looked up first. "I only used half the lamp in the schoolroom."

"You need not account for every drop to me."

Cate's fingers moved over the edge of the page. "I know."

Virginia sniffed. "She says she can stop reading after supper. Save the oil. As if a girl ever got wiser by going early to bed."

Cate flushed. "I did not say wiser."

"No," Virginia said. "Only useful. Which is a more dangerous habit."

Eleanor set down the basket and touched Cate's shoulder. "You will read after supper when there is reason enough to light the lamp."

Cate looked at the page, not at her mother. "There is not always reason enough."

It was not rebellion. That made it sadder.

Maggie looked up from the floor. "If the Yankees break the bridge, do Papa's letters walk the rest of the way?"

Again that silence came. Eleanor wished James could hear the question himself, to feel what absence looked like when it learned to speak in a child's voice. She pressed the wish down as quickly as it rose.

"Sometimes," she said, "they must take longer roads."

Maggie frowned. "Then we should mend bridges faster."

Virginia gave an abrupt sound that was a laugh in another year. "There. All strategy in one sentence."

Supper passed by one lamp and the sound of the wind at the shutters. Cate mended while she listened. Maggie leaned closer and closer until her shoulder rested against Eleanor's skirt and stayed there. No one mentioned moving away.

When the girls were asleep and the coals banked, Eleanor sat at the small desk by the parlor window. James's letter lay beside the ink bottle. She took a fresh page instead and began.

James,

The girls are well, and the house still runs, which is as much victory as I can claim this week. Cate kept an account of flour and lamp oil as if she means to shame us all with her good sense. Maggie asked today whether your letters must walk if the bridge is gone. I told her they may take the longer road.

Do not trouble yourself over us more than duty allows. I know what claims your hands, and I would not wish them idle. Only write when you can. When permitted, tell me where you are.

Yours,Eleanor

She read it once and almost added more. That she was tired in the bones. That the girls were growing too into wartime children. The river, rail line, and market now appeared to be connected by a single, extended thread of unease. That today she told a feverish boy not when he asked for light and wanted afterward to go into the yard and weep where no one could see.

She added none of it.

The lamp burned low. The house slept around her. Beyond the glass, the wind moved off the Cape Fear through rigging, shutters, bare branches, and all the places where Wilmington lay awake while pretending not to. Eleanor folded the letter before the ink dried and sat one minute

longer in the failing light, listening to the house breathe.