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STEEL and HONOR

Antietam

From Secession to the Bloodiest Day

By

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PROLOGUE

WEST POINT — JULY 1860

The hats went up first, hurled skyward as if the oppressive July heat itself had torn them from the cadets' hands. They spun in bright arcs over the Plain before spiraling back toward the ranks, swallowed by shouts and laughter that echoed off the cliffs above the Hudson. Andrew McAllister stood among the newly commissioned officers, his attempt at stoic discipline collapsing into a grin that had waited four years for release.

When Commandant William J. Hardee barked, "Class dismissed!" every formation broke apart at once. Cadets who had lived by the cadence of drills and regulations burst into embraces and shouts, boots scuffing the chalked guides they had followed moments earlier. Even the sunlight seemed brighter, as if celebration itself intensified it.

At the edge of the field, Nathaniel McAllister stood with his arms folded, the faintest smile revealing itself despite his reserve. Captain James Tanner stood beside him, shading his eyes as he watched the chaos unfold.

"He belongs up there," Tanner said.

Nathaniel nodded. "He'll outpace us both."

"You first," Tanner replied dryly. "I have a reputation to defend."

Nathaniel snorted. "You lost that when Hardee made you recite infantry drill by lantern light."

Before Tanner could answer, the rising noise thinned into a respectful hush. The official party approached with the unhurried gravity that came naturally to men accustomed to shaping the Army. Superintendent Richard Delafield walked at the center, erect and

commanding. General Winfield Scott came beside him, one hand resting heavily on his cane. Major Alfred Mordecai followed with quiet severity, and Hardee trailed behind, still carrying his tactics manual as if unwilling to be separated from it.

The cadets snapped to attention.

Delafield stopped before Andrew. "McAllister," he said, his voice touched with familiarity.

"Your brother served this Academy well, and I recall his observations from Europe with the Delafield Commission. I see precision continues in your family."

Andrew straightened. "I hope to live up to that, sir."

General Scott studied him with a gaze sharpened by decades of command. "Lieutenant, your instructors praise your steadiness. Hold to it. These are years when a steady man is worth more than a bold one."

"Yes, sir."

Scott leaned slightly closer. His voice dropped so only Andrew heard. "Your brother and Captain Tanner saw what modern artillery did at Sevastopol. You have not yet seen war's true ground. But you will. When everything around you loses its footing, keep your measurements exact."

Andrew felt an unexpected weight settle in his chest. He did not yet understand the full meaning of Scott's warning, but he recognized truth in it, heavy and immutable.

Mordecai gestured toward the small notebook in Andrew's pocket. "Detail is the skeleton of every fortification. Keep your figures honest."

"I intend to serve wherever I'm needed," Andrew replied.

Hardee stepped forward, narrowing his gaze. "Your brother rides with the Second Cavalry. They tolerate no errors. Do not give them any."

Tanner murmured to Nathaniel, "He'd salute a fencepost to stay in regulation."

Nathaniel answered, "Only if the fencepost kept its chin tucked."

When the senior officers moved on, Thomas and Ann McAllister reached their son. Ann embraced him, pride glowing in her eyes. Thomas gave a crisp nod, though emotion strained behind the discipline he held.

"You wear the bars well," Thomas said.

"I haven't earned them yet," Andrew replied.

"You will."

Eleanor Tanner approached with her usual poise. "You carried yourself beautifully, Andrew. Even Hardee almost smiled."

"That would violate his training," Tanner said.

Andrew offered his assignment papers to Nathaniel. "Survey duty in Washington. Bridge assessments. Timber inspections."

Nathaniel shook his head. "Engineers win wars long before the infantry arrives."

Tanner clapped Andrew's shoulder. "Serve where you stand. That's the whole business."

But beneath the laughter and celebration, Nathaniel felt something shift. It was faint, like a tremor beneath the ground. He watched Delafield and Scott pause beneath the lone oak, speaking with low, serious intensity. The wind carried heat but also something taut, something waiting.

"It feels strange," Nathaniel murmured.

"What does?" Tanner asked.

"As if the earth is moving."

“Heat will do that,” Tanner said, though uncertainty flickered in his tone. He trusted Nathaniel’s instincts more than he cared to admit.

Nathaniel listened again, sensing a tension under the surface. The ground always spoke before it broke.

FORT MASON — AUGUST–SEPTEMBER 1860

Texas stretched beneath a sky so white and fierce it seemed determined to scour the land clean. Dust clung to every surface—horses, saddles, mess tins, and even the sweat-darkened collars of tunics. Company D drilled in relentless heat until sabers rose and fell in a unified rhythm that Nathaniel demanded with quiet insistence. The frontier permitted no carelessness. Mistakes were punished, not corrected.

The days unfolded with punishing consistency. The creosote-soaked beams of the stables radiated heat. Farriers hammered shoes back into place while flies hovered in slow, persistent clouds. Men sweated through their coats before the sun cleared the ridge. The land spoke plainly and without pity. Nathaniel respected it for that honesty.

Yet the supply trains told a different truth. Wagons arrived late or underloaded. Letters took weeks instead of days, arriving dust-caked and creased. Nathaniel reread Clara’s recent letter, her script steady even as her phrasing revealed worry she tried to conceal. She wrote of calm days and well-meaning neighbors, but the tension beneath her words carried across the distance. Nathaniel folded the letter with deliberate care, aware of how distance could widen worry.

Inside the mess hall, frustration simmered. Earl Van Dorn slapped a newspaper onto the table. “Secession spreads faster than fever,” he muttered.

John Bell Hood shook his head. “Talk’s not the danger. Texans act before they argue.”

The younger lieutenants whispered, afraid that speaking openly might commit them to a future they did not yet understand. Nathaniel listened more than he spoke, measuring the men around him. Crisis revealed character quickly and without apology.

At night, he walked the corral under a sky crowded with sharp, bright stars. Coyotes yipped in the distance. The scent of hot iron and dry grass mingled with mesquite. Usually, the frontier steadied him. Now it felt brittle, as if the land itself strained to hold together.

A thin wind swept across the open country, carrying a tone he did not like—too sharp, too hollow. Nathaniel paused, listening closely.

He whispered a hope that the storm gathering across the nation might pass them by. The wind gave no answer.

WASHINGTON CITY — LATE 1860

Washington pulsed with restless energy from the moment Andrew arrived. Coal smoke drifted low over Pennsylvania Avenue, mingling with the foul odor rising from the City Canal. Wagons clogged the intersections. Cattle wandered the Mall. Clerks, laborers, and soldiers moved with the anxious urgency of people who sensed something important had already slipped out of their grasp.

Andrew's survey assignments carried him across the ridges east of the Capitol and along the Long Bridge approaches. He measured gradients, tested soil, evaluated timber piles, and recorded figures with the careful precision that grounded him. Lately, even numbers felt uncertain, as if the world beneath them were shifting.

While pacing off a distance near the Virginia abutment, he paused as a lamplighter raised a flame to the dim afternoon. The wick sputtered before settling into a steady glow. The faint

crackle mixed with the smell of whale oil and the damp, metallic scent drifting from the Potomac.

“You measuring trouble, Lieutenant?” the lamplighter asked.

“Possibilities.”

The man shrugged. “Same thing these days.”

Andrew resumed his work, unsettled by how openly civilians acknowledged the tension.

The Capitol Dome remained unfinished, wrapped in scaffolding like a thought the nation no longer had the strength to complete. Shops closed early. Families hurried home before dusk. Conversations died when officers passed.

One afternoon, while Andrew examined the western approach to the Long Bridge, Tanner approached with rolled sketches under his arm.

“You walk this bridge anymore,” Tanner said, “you’ll wear a trench through the boards.”

Andrew straightened. “Improving the drainage.”

Tanner shook his head. “Engineers solve problems the rest of us haven’t learned to fear.”

They walked toward the center span, the water below reflecting a sky turning dim before its hour.

“Strange days,” Tanner said.

“Strange measurements,” Andrew answered. “Some ground feels unstable.”

“You sound like your brother.”

Andrew looked at the river. The wind carried a chill sharp enough to feel like a warning.

“Do you think the Union will break?” he asked.

Tanner considered. “I think the country stands on a bridge under stress. Engineers should take careful notes.”

They shared faint smiles, acknowledging what neither wished to speak aloud.

PRIVATE MEETING — GENERAL WINFIELD SCOTT AND ANDREW

Two mornings later, Andrew received a summons from the Engineer Bureau. He recognized the handwriting before he opened the envelope.

Inside the bureau, Totten reviewed his reports. Major Barnard bent over defensive sketches spread across a table. General Winfield Scott stood near the window, leaning on his cane as he watched the city below.

“Lieutenant McAllister,” Totten said, “your assessments remain thorough.”

Scott turned. “Thoroughness saves lives.”

Andrew stepped forward. “Sir.”

Scott lowered himself into a chair with slow, controlled effort, each movement marked by age but not weakness.

“Your brother serves well in the cavalry,” Scott said. “Your father before him. The McAllisters have a habit of measuring their steps.”

Andrew steadied his breathing. “I try to observe carefully, sir.”

Scott’s gaze sharpened. “What do you observe now?”

Andrew hesitated. “The city feels suspended. As if something strains beneath the surface.”

Scott nodded once. “War does not begin with cannon. It begins with ground shifting underfoot.”

He leaned forward slightly.

“You will one day stand where the cost is highest. When that hour comes, remember: precision is clarity when others lose theirs.”

Andrew felt the words settle deeper than duty. They felt like truth spoken ahead of its moment.

“I will remember,” he said.

“See that you do,” Scott replied.

Andrew left the bureau with the uneasy sense that the general’s warning would return to him at a future he could not yet imagine.

TEXAS — WINTER 1860–1861

Winter came late to the Texas frontier, and even then it offered little relief. The cold arrived in uneven gusts that cut across Fort Mason like a reprimand, reminding the Second Cavalry that any mercy granted by the land was both temporary and conditional. Nathaniel spent many evenings in the stables, partly for the warmth radiating from the horses, but mostly for the steadiness they offered. A horse never lied about danger. It felt tremors long before men recognized them.

By December, conversation in the regiment had shifted from speculation to inevitability. No one called the nation whole anymore. Officers spoke instead of fractures—slow, creeping ruptures stretching across the continent like unseen faults. Each passing day pressed those lines deeper. Nathaniel sensed the pressure long before the news arrived that Texas had voted to leave the Union.

The announcement came on a brittle morning. A young corporal rode into the post with dispatches strapped to his saddle, his horse lathered from the hard ride. Nathaniel met him on the parade ground and took the documents from hands that trembled more from the message than the cold. He read the orders in silence, though the shift they announced moved through him like a physical blow.

Texas had left the United States. Federal officers were to evaluate their positions at once.

Nathaniel closed the papers and drew a slow breath. He thought of Clara—her calm strength, her attempt to shield their children from fear, and the way her letters tried to remain steady even as tension grew in every town and farm across the country. He thought of Andrew in Washington, still young enough to believe that careful measurements could stabilize a nation breaking apart. He thought also of James Tanner—a friend as close as a brother—standing in a capital where loyalties no longer aligned cleanly with geography or oath.

That evening, Nathaniel found Hood again in the stables, polishing his saddle with a practiced efficiency that suggested a decision already reached.

“You’re leaving,” Nathaniel said.

Hood paused, then nodded once. “I’ve delayed long enough. My people are in Texas and Tennessee. I can’t fight against my own.”

Nathaniel rested a hand on the stall door. “Then God watch over you.”

“And you,” Hood replied. “You’ll stay with the Union.”

“I will.”

Hood extended his hand. Nathaniel clasped it firmly. For a moment the two men stood in silence, weighted by the knowledge that friendship did not always survive the terrain of history. When Hood left at dawn, his hoofbeats faded into the dry wind, leaving only the echo of a bond cut by forces larger than either of them.

Two days later, Clara’s letter arrived. The envelope was dust-smeared, but her handwriting remained steady.

My dearest,

Rumors shift like weather here. One day the streets are calm, the next everyone whispers of war. The children sense something, though I try to shelter them from the fear tightening this community. If Texas leaves the Union—and I know now it has—please remember that duty must never eclipse your life or the family who waits for you. Return when you can. We pray for you each night.

Yours always,

Clara

Nathaniel folded the letter and slipped it into his breast pocket, aware of the weight it carried. Clara had written with restraint, but beneath her words lived the fear shared in every household as the nation pulled apart. The letter steadied him even as it troubled him, reminding him what he stood to lose.

By February, the regiment had thinned. Officers resigned in clusters, some without farewells. Nathaniel watched each departure with a tightening in his chest. The Second Cavalry, once bound by shared hardship and frontier service, now dissolved under the pressure of divided loyalties. Duty had become a dividing line, slicing through friendships with a precision that felt almost engineered.

When orders arrived directing federal troops to withdraw from Texas, Nathaniel saddled his horse without hesitation. He would leave with the Union column, though their destination remained uncertain. As he rode out, he glanced back at Fort Mason—the post that had shaped his years as an officer. The fort receded into the pale light, its outlines dimming behind dust and distance.

The nation was coming apart. All that remained was to decide how to hold one's place as the ground shifted beneath every step.

WASHINGTON CITY — JANUARY 1861

Andrew sensed a change in Washington as soon as the new year began. The city had always pulsed with political energy, but now it hummed with a tension that felt almost electric.

Conversations fell silent when officers passed. Clerks studied one another with wary expressions. Even lamplighters hurried their routes as though darkness carried new consequences.

His work in the Engineer Bureau intensified. Colonel Totten assigned him to the defenses around the Long Bridge, where frozen planks creaked like old bones beneath the winter wind. Andrew measured every span with the precision Scott had praised at West Point. But now his calculations felt heavier, weighted by the possibility that the bridge might soon mark a boundary between two nations.

One frigid morning, as he finished recording stress measurements, he saw James Tanner striding across the western abutment. Tanner raised a gloved hand.

“Still keeping the bridge upright, Andrew?”

“If it collapses, sir, I’ll submit my resignation before Totten drafts it for me.”

A thin smile crossed Tanner’s face. “Wise. Totten breaks pencils before he breaks his temper, but only just.”

They walked together toward the city. Their boots rang across the planks in uneven echoes.

“You’ve heard the news,” Tanner said quietly.

“I have. Mississippi, Alabama, Florida... and Georgia soon.”

“And Virginia watches. That will be the fulcrum point.” Tanner paused. “Scott worries. He hides it well, but I have known him too long.”

Andrew considered that. “Do you think he doubts the Union will survive?”

“No.” Tanner shook his head. “He knows the cost of preserving it. He saw too much evidence of modern war in the reports from Crimea to pretend otherwise.”

They reached the end of the span. Tanner clasped Andrew’s shoulder lightly. “Take care, Lieutenant. The next few weeks will test the city—and us.”

“And you?” Andrew asked.

Tanner looked out over the Potomac, its surface glazed with ice. “I am still choosing my path.”

He left without further explanation.

THE SCOTT MEETING — JANUARY 1861

Two days later, Andrew was summoned to General Scott’s residence. The request startled him. Scott rarely met with junior officers unless duty required it. When Andrew arrived, the general sat near a window overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue, sunlight catching the brass on his epaulettes. Age had curved his shoulders, but his presence filled the room with a gravity no uniform alone could command.

“Lieutenant McAllister,” Scott said, motioning him forward. “You are your brother’s equal in bearing, if not in height. How does the frontier suit him?”

“He serves with steadiness, sir. But Texas is unsettled.”

“Everyone is unsettled. That is the first symptom of national crisis.” Scott gestured to a chair. “Sit.”

Andrew obeyed.

Scott tapped his cane softly against the floor. “Your brother and Captain Tanner traveled with Colonel Delafield’s Commission. Their reports on Sevastopol taught them what modern war consumes. You, however, have only studied such things.”

Andrew nodded. "I expect to learn quickly if war comes."

Scott's gaze narrowed, weighing him. "War will come. The question is what kind of officer you intend to be when the storm breaks."

"I will serve wherever I am assigned."

"Most officers say that." Scott leaned forward. "Engineers shape the ground upon which battles are decided. You may never fire a shot, yet hundreds may live or die based on the lines you draw."

Andrew steadied himself. "I understand, sir."

"You will." Scott's voice quieted. "Your family carries precision in its marrow. But remember: precision without judgment is mere arithmetic. You must see the field before others recognize it."

He dismissed Andrew gently. As Andrew stepped into the street, the cold wind bit through his coat, but he hardly noticed. Scott's words echoed through him, settling deeper than he expected.

The roads ahead were diverging. And he was already on one of them.

WASHINGTON CITY — FEBRUARY 1861

By mid-February, Washington felt like a city waiting for a sound it could not yet identify.

Officers moved with stiff anticipation, clerks slept in their offices, and rumors swirled faster than printers could set type.

Andrew continued surveying the eastern heights, adjusting measurements as Totten revised defensive lines. The more calculations he made, the more visible the crisis became.

Fortifications revealed truths men often hid: where they feared assault, where they expected collapse, where they hoped the line would hold.

One morning, crossing the Mall, he saw Tanner near a newspaper seller, scanning the headlines with a grim expression.

“South Carolina demands the surrender of federal property,” Tanner said. “Sumter most of all.”

Andrew exhaled. “Everything points toward conflict.”

“Yes.” Tanner folded the paper. “And Virginia watches both sides.”

They walked in silence past the skeletal dome of the Capitol. Scaffolding climbed the structure like ribs, more suggestive of warning than progress.

“Your brother will soon be moving east,” Tanner said. “Frontier regiments are being recalled.”

“I expected that.” Andrew hesitated. “Will you stay, sir?”

Tanner’s breath clouded in the air. “I am still making my calculations.”

Andrew smiled faintly. “Engineers all measure differently.”

Tanner snorted. “Don’t flatter me.”

They parted with a handshake that lingered in Andrew’s mind long after Tanner disappeared into the winter haze.

THE LETTERS — FEBRUARY 1861

Two letters arrived that week—one from Clara, one from Eleanor. Their tones reflected a nation shifting from fear into resignation.

Clara wrote first.

My beloved,

The streets change daily. Some families prepare for separation, others cling to hope. I wish I knew which future awaits us. The children ask when you will return. They miss your

stories at bedtime. I miss the steadiness your presence gives this house. Whatever comes, remember you are not alone.

Yours,

Clara

Andrew read the letter twice. Her calmness carried weight; he sensed how much she hid to spare her husband worry. He folded the paper carefully before opening the second envelope. Eleanor's handwriting was tighter, the ink pressed more forcefully into the page.

James,

Richmond holds confident voices and quiet fears. Men speak loudly of honor, but their wives whisper of the cost. Your mother prays for clarity. I pray for your safety. If Virginia secedes, our city will not remain quiet. Write soon. Tell me where your heart stands, if you know.

With love,

Eleanor

Andrew held both letters for a long moment, struck by how differently fear expressed itself in different hands. Clara steadied; Eleanor braced. Both revealed how deeply the fracture cut through families even before the first shot was fired.

THE FINAL BREAK — FEBRUARY 1861

Snow drifted across the city on the last day of February, thin and restless. Andrew stood once again on the Long Bridge, listening to the wind rattle the boards. The Potomac flowed dark beneath the ice. For the first time he understood, physically, what Scott meant about boundaries—they were more than lines; they were tensions living in the land itself.

Behind him, Washington pulsed with movement: wagons, messengers, clerks shouting names across courtyards. The government repositioned itself like an army bracing for an unknown blow.

When Andrew returned to the Engineer Bureau, Totten met him at the door.

“It has come,” Totten said simply. “Lincoln arrives soon. And with him, a new condition for the nation.”

Andrew nodded. Words felt insufficient.

He looked across the city as dusk settled. Lights flickered unevenly through the rising snow.

Somewhere across the river, Tanner was measuring his path. Somewhere beyond the horizon, Nathaniel was riding toward a Union that no longer resembled the one he had sworn to defend.

The fracture had widened.

The roads were diverging.

And soon, all three men would follow them into the storm.