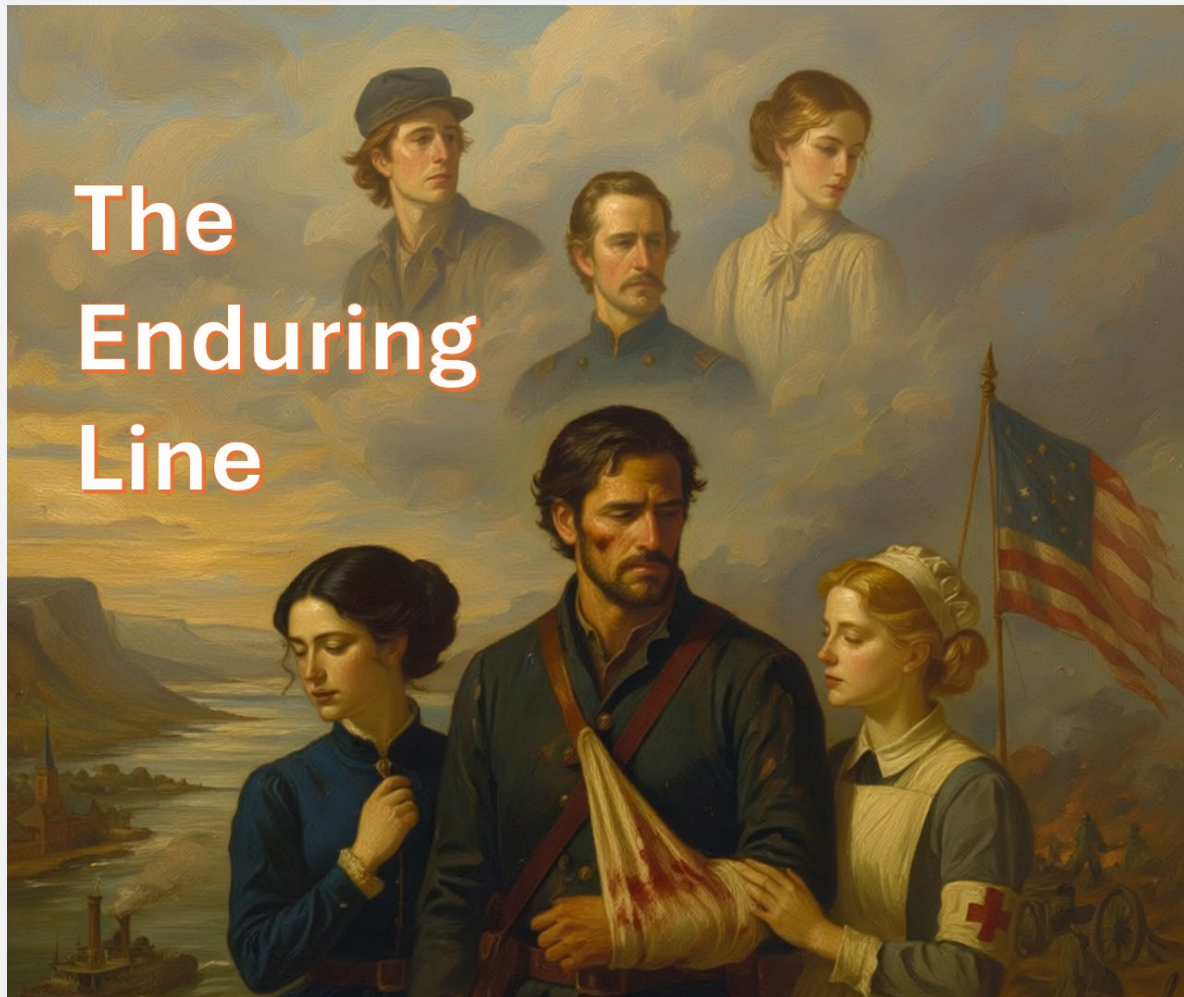




The Enduring Line

A State of Confusion

Jay Kastigar

THE ENDURING LINE: A STATE OF CONFUSION

by

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(87,459 words in length)

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	8
Characters and Profiles:	10
Primary Characters.....	10
Secondary Characters.....	10
The 1st Minnesota Infantry	11
Schwartz Farm Field Hospital	12
The Travelers	12
PART I – Smoke on the River (Spring 1861- Spring 1862)	14
Chapter 1: First Smoke	15
Chapter 2: After the War Eagle	19
Chapter 3: Faith and Conviction	28
Chapter 4: Fort Snelling.....	48
Chapter 5: The Preparation	59
Chapter 6: First Blood.....	65
Chapter 7: The Enduring Watch	77
PART II: The Cost of the Line (Spring 1862–Summer 1863).....	85
Chapter 8: Home Front Despair	86
Chapter 9: The Peninsula and the West Woods.....	94
Chapter 10: The Guns of August and September	106

Chapter 11: Trouble at Home	119
Chapter 12: State of Confusion.....	131
Chapter 13: The Enduring Core.....	143
Chapter 14: Gettysburg	151
Chapter 15: The Aftermath	157
PART III: The Orphaned Widows (Summer 1863-Autumn 1864)	161
Chapter 16: The Bulletin Board.....	162
Chapter 17: Shouting the Ghost.....	167
Chapter 18: Blood and Stitches.....	178
Chapter 19: Two Hearts in the Ward	191
Chapter 20: The Hardening Ground	204
Chapter 21: The Living Line.....	219
Chapter 22: The Enduring Courage	227
PART IV: The Final Journey (Autumn 1863-Spring 1864)	234
Chapter 23: The Migration to Home.....	235
Chapter 24: The Meeting on the Levee.....	249
Chapter 25: The Living and the Dead.....	267
Chapter 26: No More Tears	278
Chapter 27: The Plowing	286
Chapter 28: The Endurance Rests.....	293

Epilogue – First Smoke 1864.....	301
APPENDIX: The Primary Letters In Chronological Order	305
Letter 1: After the Departure.....	306
Letter 2: Before First Bull Run	307
Letter 3: The Gentle Boundary	308
Letter 4: The Turning Point	310
Letter 5: The Misunderstanding.....	311
Letter 6: The Hardening.....	312
Letter 7: The Unsent Confession	313
Letter 8: The Final Request.....	314
Letter 9: Written at Gettysburg, Unsent.....	315
Letter 10: William’s Letter Home.....	316
Letter 11: Tom’s Unsent Letter Home.....	318
Letter 12: Tom Calls for Marie	320

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to recognize the immense contributions by the volunteers of Winona, Minnesota. The dedication and sacrifice of these soldiers in the 1st Minnesota Infantry and more specifically, Company K, cannot be honored enough by my humble attempt at this work of fiction. Their valor is well known and honored. The communities in and near Winona also suffered immensely from the war as their young men served a noble cause.

To all of them, I dedicate this story.

This is a work of fiction with the backdrop of the American Civil War. The primary and secondary named characters are not based on any specific person from history. They are blended into the very real events of the Civil War. The events, political and military leaders, and geography are real, and I have tried to faithfully represent those events as accurately recorded in history. I apologize for any indiscretions that may arise from this book. War is a terrible thing, and I do not mean to take it lightly here.

Finally, I could not have written this without the enduring support from my wife, Marie. She is my joy and treasure – the love of my life.

CHARACTERS AND PROFILES:

Primary Characters

Thomas “Tom” Barlow (19): A devout but conflicted youth from a Quaker family. He feels the burden of his family’s poverty and the strict pacifism of his faith, yet he is drawn to the Union cause and a need to find himself. In his mind the question, “who are you?” keeps haunting him.

Catherine “Cathy” Sterling (18): A spirited young woman from a wealthy Winona shipping family. She is patriotic, highly educated, and focused on the war effort, viewing Thomas only as a dear childhood friend.

William “Billy” Sterling (20): Catherine’s older brother. Chivalrous, ambitious, and eager for glory. He views enlistment as his civic duty and a path to political prominence.

Marie Patterson (17): A sharp-witted, fiercely resolute young nurse from Pennsylvania. She volunteers at the makeshift hospitals around the battlefields. Her pragmatism reveals a resolute belief in the humane treatment of the wounded with the power of healing hands and voices.

Secondary Characters

Isaac Barlow (55): Thomas’s father. A devout Quaker and subsistence farmer. However, his deep convictions to his faith abhors all violence – even war. To him, the Civil War is not a righteous crusade, but an evil affront to morality and a failure of man’s duty to God.

Martha Barlow (46): Thomas’s mother. She is the anchor in the Barlow home. Her Quaker belief is instinctive and guiding. Her motherly grace is deep in silence and enduring tradition. She is shattered by the chasm the Civil War creates in her home.

George Sterling (59): The widowed father of Cathy and William. A proud but ruthless timber and shipping magnate whose health rapidly fails. His decline forces Catherine to take over the family business, turning her into a hardened woman struggling to keep her family going.

Sam Miller (19): A jovial, naive farm boy from Winona, and Thomas's closest childhood friend outside the Quaker community. Sam is the bridge between Thomas and the secular world. He enlists alongside William with grand ideas of adventure.

Sarah Miller (17): Sam's younger sister and close friend of Cathy. Warm, quick-spoken, and devoted to her brother, she follows the war through the letters he sends home. What she learns from them steadily reshapes how she sees the town that cheered its young men away, and she becomes the one voice willing to tell Cathy the truth she does not want to hear.

Alexander Miller (40s): Sam and Sarah's uncle, and the cynical foreman of the Sterling business. He resents taking orders from anyone and has selfish motivations to take over the business and finally gain the importance of his position in Winona.

Elijah Penrose (19): A young man from Winona and a childhood peer of Thomas. Elijah chooses the path of Quaker compliance, staying behind to work his family's land in peace.

Ephraim (50s): A freedman from Nansemond County, Virginia, who walked nine nights to reach the Federal lines. Steady, plain-spoken, and entirely without illusion, his own son's enlistment gives him a father's stake in the war that Isaac Barlow refuses to claim.

The 1st Minnesota Infantry

Sergeant Donald "Mac" MacInnis (30s): A veteran lumberjack and Company K's drill sergeant. He is incredibly hard on Thomas for his pacifist hesitation but grows to respect the boy's quiet endurance and physical stamina. His firm control over the company is absolute.

Corporal Thaddeus "Thad" Vance (22): A "privileged" young man who serves in Company K. He is cruel and uses his family's political connections to shield him. He represents the toxic side of military privilege.

Private James “Jimmy” Lewis (20): An anxious and nervous young man, recently returned from college studying philosophy when he enlists. Jimmy and offers balance and insight to those who listen to him. He is thoughtful and reflective on the trappings human frailty and often recites philosophical principles at just the right time.

Schwartz Farm Field Hospital

Dr. Harrison Vance (50s): An exhausted Union surgeon at the Schwartz Farm field hospital. He is Thad’s uncle. Overwhelmed by the wounded, he performs surgeries on the wounded soldiers. His cynical medical logic creates a conflict with Marie, yet he admires her steadfastness.

Nurse Libby Fellows (22): A most capable surgical nurse and friend to Marie. Her duties are primarily to assist the physicians with the endless surgeries. She provides her experience, guidance, and realism to Marie’s inexperience and naivete in caring for the wounded and dying.

Private David “Davy” Todd (14): A traumatized drummer boy recovering in the cot next to Thomas. His petrifying fear provides a shared purpose for Thomas and Marie. Helping Davy learn to cope with his battle-induced catatonia forces Thomas to look outside his own heartbreak.

Private Rufus Desmond (19): A severely wounded Confederate soldier from Stuart, Virginia, who enlisted with a Shenandoah Valley company while working away from home. He shows determination to become well enough to return to his home and be with his family.

The Travelers

August Jereczek (27): A Kashubian immigrant from Luzino, Poland. Devoutly Roman Catholic, he was seeking a new life with relatives who settled in Winona. His trade was lumber and sawmill work as he traveled with his wife and daughter.

Rozalijô “Rose” Jereczek (22): She was the wife of August traveling to Winona. She had a strong command of English and is well educated. She provides translation support to August, who was not a very good speaker of English.

Zofijô “Sophia” Jereczek (4): The precocious and curious daughter of the Jereczeks. She was amazed with the hustle and bustle of her new country asking countless questions.

PART I – SMOKE ON THE RIVER (Spring 1861- Spring 1862)

Chapter 1: First Smoke

Sam Miller had been staring south through the brass telescope so long that his right eye watered in the cold.

The wool cap his mother had knit for him kept sliding down over his ears, the collapsible scope kept fogging whenever he breathed, and the Mississippi itself seemed determined to make a fool of him. Great broken plates of winter ice drifted past the levee planks with a solemn, grinding indifference, and every pale smear of morning smoke along the far bank looked just enough like a steamboat stack to tempt a man into public humiliation.

“Not yet, Sam,” he muttered to himself, wiping the glass on his coat sleeve. “Don’t be old man Rogers. Don’t holler First Smoke over somebody’s breakfast fire and get laughed clear into July.”

He lowered the telescope, squinted into the bitter April light, then raised it again. For a moment there was only river glare, a torn ribbon of fog, and the hard, slow current carrying winter south. Then the shape came clear: twin stacks, sidewheels, dark smoke pouring steady against the pale sky. Behind her, more boats followed in a ragged procession.

Sam’s mouth fell open. “Slap my face with a wet catfish and call me a greenhorn,” he breathed. “She’s actually here.”

Then he exploded into motion, racing down the levee boards with his arms windmilling and his voice cracking the cold morning wide open.

“First Smoke!” Sam whooped. “The *War Eagle* is coming! The *War Eagle* is coming!”

Front Street stirred as if a match had been struck under the town itself. Clerks abandoned ledgers. Teamsters dropped harness straps in the mud. Children burst from doorways, and men in shirtsleeves came running from warehouses with their coats half-buttoned. First Smoke meant letters, newspapers, medicine, oranges, and, after a winter that had seemed unwilling to die, the river’s return.

By the time Sam thundered around Johnson Street and cut back toward Lafayette, half of Winona seemed to be moving toward the levee. He found Thomas Barlow outside the Blacksmith and Horse Shoer shop, speaking with Elijah Penrose and old Josiah Chappel, and skidded to a halt so hard his boots sprayed gravel.

“War Eagle,” Sam gasped, bending with both hands on his knees. “Packet boats behind her too. If you three don’t move, I’ll tell every woman in Winona you were too slow to greet the first boat of spring.”

Tom gave Sam one doubtful look, but Elijah was already running. Chappel snatched up his hat, muttered something about the Lord favoring fools and scouts, and all four of them sprinted toward the river.

The landing had become a festival before the *War Eagle*’s lines were fully secured. Hundreds crowded the planks, calling for manifests, mailbags, newspapers, and familiar faces. Flags appeared from upper windows. Boys scrambled onto crates for a better look. For one bright instant, all of Winona seemed united by the whistle, the smoke, and the promise of spring returning on the river.

Then William Sterling forced his way through the crowd with a newspaper in one hand and fire in his face.

“Tom!” Billy shouted. “Have you heard? Fire and furies, the rebs have done it now. Fort Sumter has fallen. Lincoln has called for volunteers. We’re at war.”

The word struck the levee harder than the steamboat’s gangplank. Around them, laughter thinned into murmurs. Men leaned over fresh newspapers with whitening knuckles. A woman near the mail wagon covered her mouth. Somewhere behind the crowd, Sam let out an astonished, delighted whoop that died midway through when he saw Billy’s expression.

Billy thrust the paper toward Tom. “Governor Ramsey is offering a regiment. There’ll be a rally at Huff’s Hotel on Friday. You and Sam need to sign with me.”

Sam’s face had gone red with excitement. “By Jove, I’m volunteering right off. I need to tell my folks before Mother hears it from some dry-goods clerk and nails my boots to the kitchen floor.” He bolted toward Mankato Street, Elijah chasing after him and calling his name.

Tom barely heard them go. He looked down at the ink-heavy headlines Billy had shoved into his hands: **WAR INAUGURATED! THE PRESIDENT CALLS FOR 75,000 VOLUNTEERS! CIVIL WAR HAS AT LAST BEGUN.** The letters seemed too large for the page, too large for the morning, too large for the narrow space between his father’s faith and the town’s sudden hunger for action.

Isaac Barlow would not rejoice over this. Tom could already hear his father’s grave, unhurried voice warning that the peace testimony was not a cloak a man discarded when the weather turned foul. Killing was wrong; Tom believed that as deeply as he knew the smell of plowed earth. Yet the slaveholder’s rebellion was wrong too, and the Union now sounded less like an idea in a newspaper than a house on fire.

Behind him the crowd was already breaking into knots — men arguing over a shared newspaper, women pulling children back from the planks, someone still calling for the mailbags. The *War Eagle* went on unloading. Letters, newspapers, medicine, oranges: everything the town had waited all winter for came ashore in the same steady line it had come ashore every spring of Tom's life, and no one on the levee thought to stop it. He folded the paper along the crease Billy had made and put it inside his coat. The ink came off black on his fingers.

Chapter 2: After the War Eagle

Later that afternoon, Thomas brought firewood on a wagon up the gravel drive behind the Sterling offices on Front Street and found the shipping yard in an uproar. A St. Paul freight agent stood beside a flatbed piled with salt barrels, stabbing one gloved finger at a folded bill of lading while George Sterling's clerk hovered helplessly near the office door.

"The rate was agreed at eleven cents a bushel from Winona to La Crosse," the agent snapped. "Not twelve. If Mr. Sterling wishes to keep the St. Paul houses friendly, he'll correct the charge before the evening packet."

Catherine Sterling came down the platform steps before the clerk could answer. She did not hurry, and even the horses seemed to quiet for her. Her dark blue dress brushed the wagon wheel as she took the paper from the agent's hand, read the crossed-out figure, and turned the page to the smaller ink note on the back.

"Eleven cents if the barrels are delivered before the thaw breaks the lower landing," Cathy said. "Twelve if Sterling wagons haul them through river mud after your warehouse boys missed the first loading call. The ink is your own, Mr. Haskell. I would be embarrassed to ask my father to honor a bargain you amended and then forgot."

The agent's face reddened. George Sterling, watching from nearby, gave one dry cough that might have been laughter. The clerk looked as if he had witnessed a cannon discharge at close range.

Cathy folded the document neatly and handed it back. "We can charge twelve and be correct or charge eleven and keep your pride intact. I propose eleven and a half, with the difference credited toward two additional deckhands when the spring timber rafts arrive. You save face, my father keeps the contract, and the men on the planks gain wages they will spend in this town."

Mr. Haskell stared at her, then gave a reluctant bow. "Miss Sterling, I believe your father has trained a sharper negotiator than he admits."

"My father trains no one," Cathy replied, the corner of her mouth lifting. "He only leaves ledgers open where a curious daughter can read them."

Thomas stood by the wagon tongue with the reins looped over one wrist, watching her turn anger into agreement as easily as another person might fold linen. When Cathy finally noticed him, her expression softened at once.

"Tom, forgive me. I meant to bring you coffee before this quarrel swallowed the yard." She took a cup from the tray near the door and carried it to him herself. "Father says the river makes every man greedy in spring."

"The river doesn't make a man anything," Thomas said, accepting the cup with both hands. He kept his eyes on the steam rising between them because her nearness made the words harder to manage. "It just shows what he already is."

Cathy studied him over the rim of the cup, momentarily disarmed. "That is a very plain way to defeat an argument, Thomas Barlow." Then she smiled, warm and trusting. "I am glad

Billy has you. When he turns every thought into a parade, you keep his boots on the planks. You are like another brother to us, truly.”

The word *brother* struck Thomas harder than he let show. He tightened his calloused fingers around the warm cup, nodded once, and lingered near the wagon rather than trusting his face to remain composed. Behind him, the river wind carried Cathy’s calm instructions back toward the office, while the ache of what she had not meant lodged under his ribs.

At the front entrance, William Sterling intercepted a young banker’s son who had been lingering on the boardwalk with a bouquet of winter-creased violets and far too much confidence.

“Mr. Ames,” Billy said pleasantly, stepping between the young man and the path toward the office. He drew his gold pocket watch, snapped it open, and glanced at the miniature portrait inside before closing it with a crisp click. “My sister has business with the freight ledgers this afternoon. Any flowers intended for her may be left with the housekeeper at our Harriet Street house, along with a note short enough not to bore her.”

The banker’s son tried to laugh. Billy did not. His politeness stayed perfectly arranged on his face, but his shoulder blocked the gate like a locked timber boom. After a moment, Ames surrendered and retreated toward Harriet Street, suddenly very interested in the mud on his boots.

Billy watched him go, checked the watch once more, and slipped it back inside his waistcoat. “We have enough men in Winona who think charm is a bank note,” he said to Thomas, as if the matter concerned the weather. “Cathy deserves better accounting.”

Thomas did not know whether to answer. Before he could decide, Sam Miller bounded around the side of the carriage house and clapped a heavy arm across his shoulders with enough force to rock him sideways.

“Grease my ankles with lard and throw me to the river rats!” Sam bellowed. “Tom, you look like a man who just learned his best mule eloped with a steamboat captain. Was it the freight quarrel, Billy murdering a bouquet, or did Cathy Sterling say something fatal?”

“Brother,” Thomas muttered.

Sam froze with theatrical solemnity. For two whole seconds, he looked almost capable of prayer. Then both hands flew into the air. “A brother! By Jupiter, Quaker, that’s worse than a spring thaw taking the bridge before market day.”

Thomas’s mouth betrayed him with the smallest twitch. Sam seized it like a man claiming disputed acreage. “There he is! A living soul under that funeral hat. Come on. When the next packet screams up from Galena, I’m dragging you to the docks for oranges, engine smoke, and a full education in how not to stare at a woman like she’s the only verse left in the Bible.”

A shriek from the street rescued Thomas from answering. Sarah Miller came across the street with two account ribbons looped over one wrist, a smudge of ink on her thumb, and the triumphant expression of a girl who had escaped arithmetic with honor intact.

“Well, stitch my apron strings to a bucking heifer,” Sarah said, skidding to a halt when she saw Sam bowing grandly in the carriage yard. “If it isn’t my brother pretending to be useful. Cathy says if you touch one more telescope before supper, she’ll make you copy tariff figures until the numbers march across your dreams.”

Sam clutched his heart. “Cruelty from my own blood! Thomas, witness this domestic uprising. The women of Winona have seized the office ledgers, captured the platform, and declared war on us honest river scouts.”

Cathy appeared behind Sarah, shaking her head though she could not quite hide her smile. “Honest river scouts do not leave muddy maps on my father’s carpets or use my mother’s silver cake knife to point out sandbars.”

“Then I shall serve the Republic by keeping him outdoors,” Sarah declared, linking her arm through Cathy’s with easy affection. “Come along, Cathy. Before Billy decides every man with flowers is a threat to the Union and starts drilling suitors in the shipping yard.”

Their laughter carried toward the road, bright and careless, while the river ice cracked somewhere beyond the warehouses. Thomas watched Cathy go beside Sarah, Sam’s arm still heavy across his shoulders, and felt for one foolish instant that Winona’s divided worlds might be held together by a joke, a ledger, and a young woman’s smile.

That illusion did not last. At the Sterling lumber docks the foreman, Alexander Miller, had already begun shouting at a pair of tired deckhands for stacking pine boards a thumb-width out of line, his voice carrying up from the levee like a saw blade striking a nail.

Beyond the yard, Elijah Penrose waited by the street with his hands folded over a plain wagon rail, watching Sam’s noise and Billy’s polish with the wary silence of a young man already choosing obedience over adventure. Thomas climbed back onto the firewood wagon and gathered the reins, but for a moment he did not move. Cathy’s word *brother* sat beneath his ribs; Billy’s call to enlist still rang from the levee; Sam’s laughter chased at fear without removing it. He clicked his tongue at the team and turned them toward the road beneath Sugar Loaf Bluff. The wind off the river came up behind him and carried the smell of smoke and spring mud the whole two miles home.

William Sterling turned away from the crowded landing, his boots striking the timber planks of Front Street with a fast, ambitious stride. He did not head toward the hotel or the public

squares where the teamsters were already shouting. Instead, he marched straight inside of the second-story brick offices of the Sterling Timber and Shipping Line.

He pushed open the heavy oak door and found his father, George Sterling, standing by the wide window overlooking the levee. A sudden, dry cough seized the older man; his hand trembled as he pressed a silk handkerchief to his lips. The winter had been hard on his lungs, but when he turned to face his son, his yellowed eyes still held the sharp, predatory intensity of a man who had conquered river commerce.

"Blood and thunder, Billy," George rasped, his voice a low, gravelly rumble. "The clerks say the telegraph from St. Paul is melting the wires. The rebs have really done it?"

"Fort Sumter is reduced to ruins, Father," William said, stepping up to the walnut desk, his chest swelling beneath his waistcoat. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his gold watch, snapping the casing open out of pure nervous reflex before clicking it shut. "The Governor is asking for a thousand volunteers immediately. I am going to the Huff's Hotel rally on Friday, and I intend to write my name at the very top of the enlistment roll."

George Sterling did not shout or offer words of caution. He slowly leaned his weight against the desk, tracking the smoke rising from the *War Eagle's* great sidewheel out on the water.

"An enlistment roll is final, son," George muttered, his chest catching with a faint, dry rattle. "And a Sterling doesn't sign a contract unless he intends to own the terms. This war isn't only a crisis of flags, William. It will restructure the American river. With New Orleans closed, every bushel of spring wheat and every foot of white pine from this territory will be pushed east. The federal government will need logistics, transports, and timber to move its armies."

"It's about the design of our Republic, Father," William insisted, his eyes flashing with a desperate desire for prominence. "It's our civic duty to protect the Union. The town expects us to lead."

"The town expects whatever the brass band plays for them, Billy," George shot back, a cold, pragmatic sneer flaring beneath his gray mustache. "But the Sterling family needs to look at the bigger picture. When you put on that blue lieutenant's coat, you aren't just a target for rebel lead. You are the public face of our business empire. Your commission will secure the government contracts we need to freeze out the other merchants. It will turn Winona into the gateway to the West, and it will guarantee your path to political leadership when the line is finally drawn."

The old man stepped closer, his frail, cold hand gripping William's shoulder with an unexpected, fierce strength.

"Your sister Catherine has the mathematical mind to run these ledgers while you're away, but she cannot command the loyalty of the levee without a uniform backing her name. You must march into the war, William. Whip those rebels before the autumn harvest reaches the docks. Bring glory to this house and make certain that when this war machine finishes turning, the Sterling name holds the keys to the river."

William looked down at his father's hand, then out at the crowded levee where American flags whipped in the crisp spring breeze. He checked his watch one final time, the mechanical ticking a tiny, fierce heartbeat against his ribs, and told his father his name would be at the top of the roll before the candles were lit on Friday night.

* * *

The echo of the *War Eagle*'s whistle still vibrated through the river mud as Sam Miller sprinted down Mankato Street. His boots kicked up wet gravel, his wool cap slipped back until his red hair caught the cold spring wind, and excitement drove him forward faster than breath could follow.

"Sam! Sam, wait up, you madman!"

Elijah Penrose's voice cut through the excited air, sharp with panic. Elijah was entirely out of breath, his chest pumping hard under his unadorned gray Quaker coat as he finally lunged forward and grabbed the tail of Sam's wool vest, forcing his childhood friend to a sliding halt near the corner of the Miller fence line.

"Slap my face with a wet catfish, Elijah, let go!" Sam hollered, spinning around with a wild grin, his chest heaving as he pumped his fists in the air. "Did you not hear Billy? The flag's been hit! Fort Sumter is reduced to ash, and the Governor's calling for a thousand volunteers! I've gotta get inside and tell Mother to pack my kit. I'm writing my name beneath Billy's before the ink even dries on Friday night!"

Elijah didn't match his enthusiasm. He stood in the damp road, his face pale, his dark eyes wide with a sudden, terrifying realization of the world's noise. He clutched his hands tightly against his chest, looking at Sam as if his friend had just announced he was jumping straight into the Mississippi current.

"Thee is speaking with the tongue of a madman, Sam," Elijah whispered fiercely, his voice dropping into the solemn, unhurried cadence of the Quaker meetinghouse. "A call for volunteers is a call for slaughter. Have thee forgotten what the elders say? To take up the sword, to strike down another child of God, is to drown the Light within thee in blood."

“I’m not a Quaker, and your elders are living in the old times, Elijah!” Sam laughed, clapping a heavy hand onto Elijah’s rigid shoulder. “The South is pulling the Republic apart, and we can’t sit on a rail fence watching timber rot while the rest of the territory makes history. Besides, isn’t it wrong to keep humans in bondage? What about that?”

“There is no righteousness in blood, Sam,” Elijah shot back, his jaw tightening until the muscles bunched beneath his smooth skin. He stepped directly into Sam’s path, his unvarnished plain tongue cutting through the martial fervor of the morning. “Thee looks at Billy Sterling in his fine clothes and thinks of parades and glory. But a contract signed in ink out here is paid for in flesh on the field of battle. If thee goes into that fire, Sam, the world will change thee. It will harden the parts of thee that are gentle.”

Sam’s laughter dropped away for a split second, replaced by the earnest, naive intensity of a frontier boy who had spent his winters dreaming of the world beyond the bluffs. He adjusted his wool cap with a stubborn flick of his wrist.

“Then let it harden, Elijah,” Sam said softly, adjusting his wool cap with a stubborn flick of his wrist. “I will not hide forever on eleven acres of hard dirt behind a plow while our boys march to war. If I stay behind, I won’t even be able to walk the planks on Front Street. I’m signing the roll, Elijah. And I’ll bet a horse to a hen-coop our friend Tom Barlow will be standing right alongside me when the band strikes up.”

Elijah recoiled as if struck, his hands dropping to his sides. “Tom? Thomas W. Barlow would never. Isaac would bar his own door against him before he let his only boy touch a weapon.”

“Just wait and see,” Sam muttered, his jovial grin returning in full force as he bounded up the wooden steps of his porch, his hand throwing the door wide. “Keep your tinder dry, Quaker!

Because when the first smoke clears, Winona's going to remember who held the line, and who stayed home to check the weeds!"

Elijah stood alone in the gray road, the slamming of the Miller door echoing like a gunshot through the quiet neighborhood, leaving him entirely trapped under the shadow of Sugar Loaf Bluff.

Chapter 3: Faith and Conviction

By the time Thomas reached the Barlow farm, the ride from the Sterling carriage yard had stretched into a private reckoning. Cathy's word *brother* still lodged beneath his ribs. Billy's

voice still insisted that loyal men would sign. Sam's laughter still tried to make the whole thing sound like adventure. But the folded newspaper in Tom's coat pocket seemed heavier than the firewood wagon itself. The sun had lowered behind the bluffs, and the steady *chop-thunk* of Isaac Barlow's axe carried across the yard like a metronome of judgment.

Isaac Barlow did not look up at once. He split another log cleanly down the center, then another, each swing measured and controlled. Only when Thomas stepped into the yard did Isaac rest the axe head on the chopping block and wipe his brow with the back of his hand. His eyes moved first to the paper bulging beneath Thomas's coat, then to the river soot on his cheek.

"The town is loud enough to frighten the crows from the cornfield," Isaac said. His voice carried the deep, unhurried cadence of the meetinghouse, but Thomas heard the strain beneath it. "Even here, the whistles came over the ridge. What has the river brought us this time, son?"

Thomas pulled the folded newspaper Billy had given him from his coat and held it out. The page trembled once before he steadied his hand. "The *War Eagle* brought the news from downriver. Fort Sumter has fallen. President Lincoln has called for seventy-five thousand volunteers. Governor Ramsey is offering a Minnesota regiment. Billy means to sign Friday night, and he expects Sam and me beside him."

Isaac looked at the paper for a long moment but would not take it. The printed words seemed to cast a physical shadow across his weathered face. "A call for volunteers is a call for blood," he said at last. "Men make fine speeches over flags, so they need not hear the crying of mothers after the guns begin. This is not righteousness, Thomas. It is the world stumbling into darkness and calling the fall a march."

"Is slavery not darkness too?" Thomas asked before caution could stop him. The question surprised them both. He looked toward the barn, then back at his father. "I heard men on the

levee shouting about the Union, but I keep thinking of people held in bondage and sold like timber contracts. If a house is built on that wickedness, can peace mean standing aside while it burns someone else?"

Isaac's hand came down on Thomas's shoulder, heavy and trembling. It was not anger first; Thomas felt that at once. It was fear. "Do not dress killing in the language of mercy," Isaac said. "Thee knows better. The Light within a man is not defended by taking the life of another child of God. If we answer evil with the bayonet, we do not purify the world. We only prove that the world has taught us its own accounting."

Then Isaac was quiet for a long moment, and when he spoke again the anger had gone out of him. "But do not think thee has caught thy father in a corner, either. Friends were writing against the traffic in men when the King still governed these colonies. Thy grandmother carried a family north out of Missouri in a wagon with a false floor and never once said a word of it at meeting, and she did it without a musket in the house. We have never stood aside from slavery, Thomas. We have stood against it for a hundred years, and we are standing against it yet. The question is not whether the wickedness is real. The question is what a man is permitted to become while he opposes it."

"A hundred years," Thomas repeated. The number sat badly in his mouth. "And there are four million of them this morning, Father. However many Grandmother carried, the wagon was not big enough. Thee says the question is what I am permitted to become. I am asking thee what they are permitted to become, and how long they are asked to wait on our conscience."

Thomas swallowed hard. "Billy says if loyal men do not go, the rebellion wins. Sam is already half mad with enlistment. Even Elijah looked at me as if he were waiting to see whether I

would choose the plow or the world. And Cathy..." He stopped, hating the way her name changed the air in his own mouth. "Cathy believes William will need steady men beside him."

Isaac's grip tightened, then softened. "Ah," he said quietly. "So the war has learned thy secret before thy father did."

Thomas looked away, heat rising in his face. "It is not only her."

"Then name what it is," Isaac said. His voice was softer now, and that softness cut deeper than rebuke. "Name it plainly, son, before other men name it for thee. Is it duty? Is it pity for the enslaved? Is it shame before the town? Is it the smile of a girl above thy conscience?"

Thomas opened his mouth and found no clean answer waiting there. The questions had tangled together until each pulled the others tighter: bondage, Union, Billy's confidence, Sam's laughter, Cathy's trusting eyes, the town's sudden hunger for courage, and the old Quaker command that no man could purchase righteousness with blood.

Isaac let his hand fall from Thomas's shoulder and turned toward the split wood. For a moment he seemed older than he had that morning. "The Barlow house will stand on peace," he said. "If the town mocks us, we endure. If the merchants close their ledgers, we endure. But if my only son takes up the sword because the crowd has shouted louder than the still voice of God, then the war has already entered this house before a single cannon ever reaches Minnesota."

Thomas stood with the newspaper crumpling slowly in his fist. He wanted to answer that he would never kill, that his father's faith still held him, that the cheers on the levee had not moved him. But he had seen the headlines, and he had heard the way Winona cheered when Billy lifted the paper. He had felt, for one dangerous instant, the shape of a life larger than the fields beneath the bluff. Unable to trust his own voice, he retreated toward the kitchen.

Martha Barlow was waiting by the table, her apron dusted with flour and both hands resting flat against the worn boards. She had heard every word through the open window. Her face did not accuse him. That was almost worse.

“Thy father speaks from fear for thy soul, Tom, not from anger,” she said, her voice a soft anchor against the rising storm outside. She stepped closer, her thumbs gently wiping a smudge of river soot from his cheek. “But I see the restlessness in thee. I have seen it since before the river thawed.”

“The town will hate us if we stay behind, Mother,” Thomas whispered, his defenses slipping in her presence. “Alexander Miller is already calling people cowards. Sam is going. If I don’t go, who am I? Just a boy hiding behind his father’s plow?”

Martha sighed, carrying the weight of generations of Quaker women who had watched the world fracture around them. She took his large, calloused hands in her smaller ones. “The world measures a man by his noise, Tom—by the uniform he wears and the flags he waves. But the Light within thee does not need a trumpet.”

She looked deeply into his eyes, reading the muddle and the unspoken longing for the Sterling girl that he tried so hard to conceal. Her heart broke for the chasm she knew was opening. “If thee goes into that fire, the world will change thee. It will harden the parts of thee that are gentle. I fear... I fear the boy who goes to war will not be the boy who returns to these bluffs.”

“I have to know what is out there,” Thomas insisted softly, unable to look her in the eye. “I have to know who I am.”

Martha’s eyes pooled with unshed tears, but her grip on his hands remained steady and warm. “Thee is my son, Thomas W. Barlow. No matter what name they write on those

enlistment rolls, thee belongs to the Lord and this house. If thee leaves, my prayers will walk every mile of the dirt with thee. But do not mistake the cheers of Winona for the voice of God.”

The sunset of Friday, April 19, 1861, bled a bruised violet to the west, but inside the parlor of the Harriet Street estate, the air felt trapped in the suffocating heat of an impending storm.

* * *

Catherine Sterling stood by the tall cedar windows, her fingers methodically smoothing the lace trim of her dark wool traveling dress. Below on the levee, the steam whistle of the *War Eagle* let out a long, mechanical shriek that vibrated through the floorboards.

“Cathy, look—they’re lighting the tar barrels out on Third Street,” Sarah Miller said, pressing both hands to the window glass as if she could pull the whole town closer by force of will. “Uncle Alexander says the Huff’s Hotel lobby will be packed clear to the stair rail by eight. Sam says he means to sign so fast the recruiting officer will have to chase his name across the page. He also says if Mother hides his Sunday boots, he will march barefoot for the Union and call it Roman virtue.”

Catherine did not turn from the glass. She watched a column of gray smoke rise from the levee docks, thinking of her brother William’s pristine, tailored blue lieutenant’s coat currently hanging over the study chair downstairs. “A roll is easily signed, Sarah. It’s the miles after the ink dries that worry me. Billy has been commanding ledger books, not men.”

“Oh, Billy will be magnificent, and you know it,” Sarah insisted, stepping up beside Cathy with nervous brightness. “And Sam—well, Sam has already practiced saluting with Father’s hoe handle and nearly knocked a pie off the pantry shelf. He told Mother he would cut a

rebel flagstaff in two before the summer corn is high, though Mother said she would prefer he first learn to cut kindling without waking the hens.”

Catherine’s gaze drifted past the docks, her eyes tracking the dark, jagged silhouette of Sugar Loaf Bluff where the road traveled out toward the Barlow farm. “Not everyone is moving, Sarah. Isaac Barlow was down at the market yesterday. He stood by his vegetable cart in absolute silence while your uncle Alexander called him a copperhead to his face. The people wouldn’t even buy his onions.”

Sarah’s brightness faltered, then sharpened into the fierce partisanship already moving through Winona like spring floodwater. “Uncle Alexander is too rough with his tongue, but Sam is going to risk his life for the Union. If Thomas Barlow stays behind his father’s plow while my brother marches, people *will* talk. They already are. I don’t like the cruelty of it, Cathy, but I don’t know how a town keeps cheering once it starts asking who stayed home.”

“Tom is no coward,” Catherine said softly, her throat tightening as she recalled the slight, wounded smile he had given her when she called him another brother only hours before. He had looked like a boy completely overwhelmed by the world’s noise. “He has a gentle heart, Sarah. A steady hand. Sometimes it takes more courage to stay behind when the crowd runs to war.”

“The crowd is running to save the Republic, Cathy,” Sarah said, softer now but no less certain. She pulled her shawl tight and looked back toward the tar barrels flaring on Third Street. “And if Tom Barlow is the friend you say he is, I hope he stands beside Sam and Billy tonight. I hope he proves the town wrong before the town decides what a coward looks like.”

Two miles south, where the road to Mankato cut through the damp limestone shadows of the bluffs, the only sound was the rhythmic, heavy crunch of two pairs of boots striking the river mud.

* * *

Sam Miller walked with a wide, bouncing stride, his wool cap pulled rakishly over one ear, a peeled hickory branch swinging wildly in his right hand like a wooden saber. Beside him, Thomas Barlow marched with his head down, his broad farm-boy shoulders rigid beneath his coarse wool coat, his hands buried deep in his pockets where his thumbs convulsively traced the edges of the folded newspaper Billy had pressed into his hands on the levee.

“By Jove, Tom, you’re walking like a man heading to a hanging instead of a rally,” Sam laughed, swinging his stick at a dry thistle stalk by the roadside, snapping it clean in two. “Listen to that wind! You can hear the brass band all the way from Johnson Street. The St. Paul boys brought a snare drum on the morning packet.”

“The wind carries a lot of noise, Sam,” Thomas muttered, his gray eyes fixed on the gray mud of the trail. “My father says a town that makes this much noise has forgotten the silence of the Lord.”

Sam’s laughter dropped away, replaced by the earnest, naive intensity of a farm boy who had spent his life dreaming of the world beyond the river. He dropped the stick and stepped closer to Thomas, his boots splashing into a pooled wagon rut. “Your old man is living in the old times, Tom. The world is fracturing right down the middle and we can’t just sit on the fence. The governor is asking for a thousand volunteers. A thousand! Think of the transports, Tom. Think of seeing Washington, or the blue water of the Chesapeake.”

“I don’t care about Washington,” Thomas said, his voice a low, dangerous rumble that caused Sam to pause. Thomas stopped in the middle of the road, the gray profile of Sugar Loaf Bluff looming behind him like a silent sentinel. “And I don’t care about the governor’s rolls. My

mother wept into her apron before I left the kitchen, Sam. My father told me if I take up the sword, I trade away my eternal soul.”

“And what do you trade away if you stay?” Sam asked fiercely, stepping directly into Thomas’s path, his jovial face suddenly tight with an unvarnished truth. “You think the town’s going to let you work your crop in peace? My uncle Alexander is already talking about a boycott at the grist mills. If you don’t sign tonight, Tom, they’ll brand your father’s barn with tar before the spring thaw is over. You’ll be trapped out here on eleven acres of stony dirt forever, hiding behind a plow while the rest of us are making history.”

Thomas looked down at his large, hardened hands – hands that knew how to split timber and guide a team of horses but had never held a weapon. “I don’t care about the history books, Sam.”

“Then think about the parlor on Harriet Street,” Sam whispered, his eyes narrowing as he hit the core of Thomas’s silent agony. “You think Cathy Sterling is going to look at a man who stayed behind while her brother went to the front? She’s a shipping king’s daughter, Tom. She looks out that window and expects greatness. Billy told me she’s the one who suggested your name to the recruitment committee. You know she expects you to watch his back out there.”

Cathy. Thomas stood still in the middle of the road. Behind them the brass band carried faintly over the shoulder of the bluff, and ahead the lamps of the town were already lit against the dusk.

“She’s expecting that?” Thomas asked softly.

“She’s countin’ on it, friend!” Sam said with positive assurance, his farm-boy smile returning as he clapped a heavy hand onto Thomas’s shoulder. “Come on, Quaker. Get moving. The candles are already lit at the Huff’s Hotel, and the ink is waiting.”

* * *

William Sterling stood halfway up the polished wooden steps, towering over the sea of upturned faces. His brand-new, tailored blue lieutenant's coat fit him flawlessly, the brass buttons catching the brilliant candle flames like golden sparks. His hand rested casually on the pommel of his officer's sword, but as the crowd fell into a hushed, expectant silence, he reached into his waistcoat and pulled out his watch. He snapped the casing open, glanced at the picture of Catherine inside, and clicked it shut with a sharp, resonant snap that echoed in the quiet hall.

"Men of Winona!" William's voice boomed, carrying the effortless, commanding charisma of a shipping prince born to rule the river. He took two steps down the stairs, his eyes sweeping across the lumberjacks, the teamsters, and the young farm boys who stared up at him. "The iron heel of treason has struck the flag at Fort Sumter! The American river – the very lifeblood that feeds our homes, our families, and our dreams – has been closed by the madness of a slaveholder's rebellion in New Orleans!"

Loud, enthusiastic cheers shook the plaster walls, but William raised his hand, commanding silence with a single gesture.

"We did not seek this war," William thundered, his face flushing with ambitious pride. "But by God, we shall be the ones to extinguish it! The Governor has called for a thousand brave souls to form the 1st Minnesota Infantry. I look out at this room, and I do not see shopkeepers or plowboys. I see the muscle of the frontier! I see the iron will that will march into Virginia and whip those rebels before the autumn harvest is brought to the levee!"

Sam Miller waved his wool cap wildly, letting out a booming “Huzzah!” that was instantly taken up by the entire room. The brass band at the back of the lobby struck up a raucous, thumping march tune, the snare drums vibrating through the floorboards.

“Let history write that when the Republic called, Winona answered first!” William shouted over the din, drawing his heavy steel sword and hoisting it high above his head, its polished blade flashing in the chandelier light. “For our homes, for our families, and for the Great Cause of the Union! March with me, Minnesota!”

The hotel lobby dissolved into a frantic, shouting sea of patriotic fervor as men surged toward the long oak recruitment table set against the far wall. Standing near the back of the crowd beside Catherine, Thomas watched Billy bask in the adoration of the town while Sam shoved forward, wool cap in hand, ready to put his name beneath the Sterling signature.

Thomas remained pressed near the wooden wall as the line of volunteers formed before the table. His conscience pulled one way and the cheers of the town pulled another. Violence was a sin, yet the language of duty and Union stirred something dangerous in him. If he stayed behind, his family would be branded as cowards and copperheads by men like Alexander Miller, and he would remain trapped on the farm beneath the question that had followed him for years—*Who are you?*

Then he saw her. Catherine stood near the staircase, flanked by her father’s business associates, her face flushed with patriotic pride as she watched Billy sign his name at the top of the roll. As if sensing Tom’s gaze, she turned and caught his eye through the crowded room. She smiled—that slight, warm, reassuring smile that always cleared the muddle from his thoughts—and nodded toward the enlistment table with absolute trust and expectation. To her, there was no question; Thomas would do his duty alongside William.

Thomas was moving before he had decided anything. The crowd closed warm and loud behind him, the brass band started up again near the door, and the floorboards gave slightly under his boots with the weight of all the men pressing toward the same table.

Thomas reached the table while the cheers still battered the hotel walls. The steel nib pen sat in a small crystal inkwell, its split tip gleaming like a tiny bayonet under the amber lamp flame. His mind was a chaotic battleground: Isaac's warning, Martha's tears, Sam's certainty, Billy's confidence, and Catherine's expectant smile all collided in the narrow space above the parchment.

"Thomas."

The sound of her voice strengthened him. Catherine stepped around the edge of the recruitment table, separating herself from the wealthy shipping merchants who clustered nearby. Her dark blue traveling dress brushed against the rough timber planks. She did not look at the recruitment officer, nor did she look at the cheering crowd; her hazel eyes were fixed entirely on Thomas's face with absolute, unblinking trust.

She reached out, her small, slender fingers wrapping around the turned-wood shaft of the steel nib pen. Dipping the point delicately into the black ink, she held it out to him across the parchment. The warmth of her hand was close enough for him to feel, a silent, powerful current that shattered his final anchor to the Quaker peace testimony.

"For the Union, Thomas," she whispered, her voice a soft, clear bell that cut straight through the low hum of the room. She offered him that tender and reassuring smile – the one that made the entire world make sense to him. "And for William. I know you will keep him safe and steady."

Thomas looked down at her hand, then up into her eyes. In the expectation written there, he saw the man she already believed him to be – constant, loyal, useful, and safe. He did not sign for glory. He did not sign because his conscience had made peace with war. He took the pen because he could not bear to fall short of the trust in Catherine Sterling’s face. With one dark stroke, he wrote his name: Thomas W. Barlow. As he laid the pen down, Catherine’s smile widened with immense pride. She lifted the pen from the parchment, set it carefully back in the crystal well, and turned to find her brother in the crowd.

Thomas pushed through the cheering crowd, his boots heavy on the floorboards. He walked past a beaming Sam Miller and stepped outside. The street was empty and cold after the heat of the lobby, and behind him the band had already started up again.

* * *

The ink on Thomas’s enlistment paper was barely dry when the reality of what he had done settled heavily in his chest. He walked back to the farm under a moonless, suffocatingly dark sky, the enlistment slip folded tightly in his waistcoat pocket like a hidden blade.

When he pushed open the front door, the house was silent except for the ticking of the grandfather clock. Isaac and Martha sat by the cold hearth. No candle burned; only the dim amber glow of dying embers touched their faces. Isaac looked up, his eyes taking in the rigid lines of his son’s posture.

“Thee has a strange scent, Tom,” Isaac said quietly, his voice dangerously even. “It smells of tobacco smoke, ink, and the madness of secular men.”

Thomas did not look away. He pulled the paper out and laid it on the heavy wooden table between them. “I signed the roll, Father. I am a volunteer in the First Minnesota.”

The silence that followed was suffocating. Martha let out a soft, fractured gasp and covered her mouth with her apron. Isaac did not move for what felt like an eternity. He stared at the paper, his jaw tightening until the muscles bunched like twisted rope. When he finally stood, he seemed to tower over the small kitchen, his chest heaving with grief and guilt.

“Then thee has chosen the path of Cain,” Isaac whispered, the words trembling with an awful, unyielding finality. “Thee has taken the Light given to thee by God and drowned it in the mud of man's vanity.”

“It is a righteous cause, Father...” Thomas began, but Isaac slammed his rough-skinned hand down on the table, shattering the quiet.

“There is no righteousness in blood!” Isaac roared, his eyes flashing. “Thee has traded thy eternal soul for the applause of a broken town! I will not have the tools of slaughter under this roof. If thee chooses the sword, thee chooses a house outside of this one. From this hour, thee is no son of mine until thee drops that weapon and begs the Almighty for forgiveness.” And Isaac turned his back to Thomas.

“Isaac, no!” Martha cried out, stepping between them, her hands clutching at her husband's wool shirt. “He is thy blood! He is thy only boy!”

“He has spilled his own blood before he has even left the state,” Isaac said, staring into the cold hearth. His voice dropped to a hollow whisper. “Let the dead bury their dead.”

Thomas looked at his mother. Martha was weeping silently, her hands trembling as she reached for him, but Thomas stepped backward out the door. He spent his final night in Winona sleeping in the cold hay of the barn, shivering under the weight of his father's banishment and his mother's distant, muffled sobs.

* * *

Departure morning arrived with a deafening fanfare. The levee was a sea of people, American flags waving wildly in the crisp river breeze, and brass bands drowning out the constant, thundering hiss of the steamboat War Eagle. There was a celebratory picnic for the volunteers with music, dancing and singing.

Thomas stood apart from the raucous celebration. His wool uniform felt stiff and entirely foreign against his skin, a heavy costume he didn't know how to wear. He searched the crowd, ignoring the cheering townspeople who suddenly treated him like a hero, until he finally spotted the Sterling family carriage.

William was already surrounded by an adoring crowd, his officer's sword catching the morning light as he laughed with Thaddeus Vance. But Catherine stood slightly back from the fray, her hands clasped in front of her dark blue dress. When she saw Tom, she stepped away from her father's business partners and walked toward him.

"Thomas," she said, her voice a soft, clear bell above the roar of the brass band. She looked up at him, her eyes searching his face. For a moment, her usual composure slipped, replaced by a sudden, sharp realization of the danger ahead. "You look so different in the blue. So... serious."

"The uniform doesn't fit right yet," Thomas said, managing a faint, awkward smile. His heart hammered against his ribs, louder than the steamboat's pistons. "Cathy, I... I wanted to say goodbye. My father won't be at the docks."

"I know," Cathy said softly, a look of profound sympathy crossing her face. She reached out and placed her small hand over his forearm. The warmth of her touch cut straight through the heavy wool of his sleeve. "Billy told me what happened at the farm. Oh Tom, I am so truly sorry."

But you *are* doing the honorable thing. You *are* standing up for the Republic. When the war is won, your father will see that *you fought for what was right!*”

Thomas looked down at her hand, wishing he could hold it, wishing he could tell her that the Republic was the furthest thing from his mind when he signed his name. “I don't care about the town, Cathy. I just... I promise I will watch over him. I won't let anything happen to him.”

Catherine's eyes filled with sudden, brilliant tears, and she offered him a warm, peaceful smile – the one that always made the chaotic world make sense to him. “I know you will, Thomas. You have always been our dearest friend.”

The word *friend*, it twisted like a knife in his chest, but he forced himself to nod.

Cathy reached into her reticule and pulled out a small, polished silver pocket match-case, placing it gently into his palm. “This is for you. To keep your tinder dry in the camps. Please come home to us, Thomas Barlow. Winona won't be the same without you.”

With that the two of them went to the picnic and speeches that were right along the levee. The brass horns of the Winona town band blared a raucous, slightly out-of-tune version of “The Girl I Left Behind Me,” the sound bouncing sharply off the limestone facade of the levee warehouses. The landing was a chaotic hive of civic pride and desperate packing. Long wooden tables had been hastily dragged onto the grass clearing just above the steamboat planks, overflowing with platters of fried chicken, cold clover-butter rolls, and jars of pickled preserves brought by the farm wagons.

Cathy moved off to talk with Sarah standing by Mr. Sterling's carriage. Tom moved to the absolute periphery of the celebration, his spine pinned against the rough timber of a freight crate. He looked entirely out of place. While Sam Miller was already spinning a young girl around by her elbows to the music, laughing until his face was flushed, Tom kept his hands

buried deep in his civilian pockets. His father's parting words – the terrifying silence that had settled over the farm kitchen when Tom announced his enlistment – sat on his chest like a physical weight.

“You look as though you're already on picket duty, Tom.” a soft voice drifted towards him. It was *the* voice, *her* voice.

The crowd seemed to part, the chaotic muddle of the brass horns fading into a dull hum as Cathy stepped out of the throng. She was radiant, her cheeks warmed by the spring air, her dark blue traveling dress swaying gracefully as she walked. She didn't look at the other suitors who had been clamoring for her attention near her father's carriage; her hazel eyes were fixed entirely on him.

“The music is a bit loud, Cathy,” Thomas managed, his voice catching in his throat as she stopped inches away. “I’m not much for a crowd.”

“Then don't look at the crowd,” Cathy said softly. She reached out, her small, gloved hands lifting from her sides. With a deliberate, unblinking trust that caused Tom's heart to hammer violently against his ribs, she placed her left hand flat against the coarse wool of his shoulder. Her right hand remained open, waiting. “Dance with me, Tom. Just once, before the steamer blows its whistle.”

Thomas hesitated for a single, agonizing heartbeat, his rough, calloused hand trembling slightly as he reached out to clasp her fingers. He stepped into the grass, his large farm boots moving with an awkward, heavy caution, terrified of stumbling or stepping on the hem of her dark blue linen gown.

For one turn of the waltz, the docks, the teamsters, and the waiting uniforms disappeared. There was only the warmth of Cathy's hand through his sleeve, the lavender at her collar, and the

bright blur of the bluffs beyond her shoulder. He knew he would remember that lavender fragrance long after the music stopped.

“You have steady hands, Tom,” she whispered, her eyes searching his face as they turned past the shadow of the *War Eagle's* great sidewheel. Her smile held a deep, profound affection – a look of absolute reliance. “I am glad you are going with Billy. Knowing you will be with him through all this makes the world feel a little less fractured.”

The word friend was left unvoiced, but the boundary of her platonic love was there, stitched invisibly into the very grace of her movement. Thomas forced himself to nod, tightening his grip on her fingers just enough to keep her steady as the band brought the tune to a crashing, triumphant finish. The crowd erupted into cheers, and Catherine stepped back, her smile warm and complete as she clutched her hands together. Thomas stood where she had left him with his palm still burning, and did not move until Sam came and took him by the elbow.

* * *

The heavy timber of the gangplank creaked beneath the boots of forty men, but Lieutenant William Sterling stood motionless at its apex, a solitary figure in tailored blue splitting the chaotic current of the crowd. He rested one hand on the cold brass hilt of his officer's sword, his gaze fixed past the shouting teamsters and the waving American flags, locking onto the far edge of the levee clearing.

There, spinning through the dust in a final waltz were Thomas Barlow and his sister, Catherine.

William's jaw tightened. From this height, elevated above the festival-like energy of the Winona send-off, the class divide between the two worlds stared him directly in the face.

Thomas, with his large farm-boy shoulders hidden inside a coarse civilian jacket, moved with a heavy, cautious rhythm that belonged to the soil. Catherine, fluid and radiant in her dark blue dress, tilted her head back, her slight, slender smile lifting to meet Thomas's eyes.

To the town, it was a beautiful vignette of patriotic affection – the shipping king's daughter blessing a local boy before he marched into history. To William, who had shielded his sister since their mother's passing, it felt like a crack in the absolute foundation of his home.

His right hand descended into his waistcoat pocket, his fingers wrapping around the smooth, polished metal casing of his most prized possession. With a sharp, practiced flick of his thumb, the pocket watch snapped open. The mechanical ticking of the internal gears was a tiny, fierce heartbeat against the booming bass notes of the town band.

He looked down at the interior lid. There, framed by the elegant engraving of his family name, was Catherine's miniature portrait, and beneath it, the words she had chosen: *My brother, my family, my home.*

William's eyes drifted back to the grass clearing. Thomas was holding her hand now, his calloused palm gripping her fingers with a quiet intensity that William had never noticed during their childhood summers. William checked the watch face. The black iron hands pointed to exactly twelve minutes before noon – twelve minutes before the *War Eagle's* whistle would signal the end of their old world and the resumption of the river's mechanical commerce.

William had put his own name at the top of that roll for the Republic, and for the seat in the legislature his father had laid out for him in the office above the levee, and he could have said as much to any man who asked him. He watched Thomas's hand close around his sister's fingers and found he had no such account to give for the Quaker boy. Whatever had brought Tom Barlow to the table at Huff's Hotel, it had not come up the river from Charleston.

With a heavy, resonant click, William slammed the watch casing shut, the sharp metallic sound severing the visual link between his sister and his friend. He slid the gold watch back against his ribs, his hand dropping to steady his sword hilt as the steamer's boiler let out a low, pressurized hiss. He would let Thomas have this final dance, and he would accept the protection of the steady farm hand when the ground got muddy on the battlefields. Then he turned his back on the clearing and went down into the hold, where the air was close and smelled of coal and wet rope, and he did not come up again until the boat had cleared the bend.

“By the jumping frog! The steamer's leaving, Tom! Move your boots!” Sam Miller yelled from the gangplank, waving his cap wildly.

Thomas took one final look at Catherine's face, fixing the curve of her smile in his memory, before turning toward the boat. When the *War Eagle* pulled away from the levee, churning the muddy waters of the Mississippi, he stood at the iron railing and watched Winona recede—the crowded planks, the waving flags, the bluffs fading into distance. His hand closed around the small match-case in his pocket. He kept his eye on Sugar Loaf until the bend in the river took it, and after that there was only water.

Chapter 4: Fort Snelling

The transition from the quiet bluffs of Winona to the raw, churned mud of Fort Snelling was a violent shock to Thomas's senses. Situated high on a limestone bluff overlooking the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers, the historic stone fort had been instantly transformed into a sprawling, chaotic city of canvas. Thousands of raw recruits from every corner of the young state – lumberjacks from the north woods, shopkeepers from St. Paul, and farm boys from the southern prairies – were shoved into the crucible of military life.

For Thomas, the hardest part was not the physical labor; his summers on the Barlow farm had given him lean muscle and an endurance that matched the toughest river men. The true hardship was the noise. Fort Snelling never slept. The air was a constant, deafening assault of shouted commands, the rhythmic thud of thousands of boots marching on hard-packed earth, the clatter of mess tins, and the sharp, terrifying crack of target practice down by the riverbanks.

The limestone cliffs of Fort Snelling baked under a relentless mid-May sun, turning the parade ground into a blinding bowl of dust and churned clay. One hundred and one raw recruits from the Winona Volunteers were now designated Company K of the new 1st Minnesota

Regiment. Company K now stood locked in a rigid battle line, their new wool uniforms stiff with sweat as Sergeant Donald “Mac” MacInnis drove them through the manual of arms.

“Dress that line! By God, you're soldiers now, not a flock of geese!”

The voice belonged to Sergeant Donald “Mac” MacInnis, a veteran lumberjack with shoulders like an anvil and a face carved out of Minnesota pine. MacInnis took an immediate, intense dislike to Thomas’s quiet hesitation. During their first week of manual drills, Thomas had frozen when handed a heavy Springfield rifle. The cold iron and walnut stock felt like a physical weight upon his soul, a tangible betrayal of the peace testimony his father had thundered into him since childhood.

“What's the matter, Barlow?” MacInnis barked, stepping close enough for Thomas to smell the bitter chicory coffee on his breath. “Is the piece too heavy for you? Or are you thinking about your plow?”

“No, Sergeant,” Thomas muttered, his eyes fixed straight ahead, refusing to look at him.

“Then shoulder it! If you can't handle a rifle, you're nothing but a target for the rebs!” MacInnis shoved the weapon hard against Thomas's chest. Thomas caught it by instinct, his fingers wrapping around the barrel. His stomach turned. He could still hear his father’s voice ringing in his ears: *“To take up arms is to forfeit thy own eternal soul.”*

It happened again the following week, and the week after that. MacInnis had learned exactly where the boy from the bluffs would falter, and he made a point of standing there when it came. By the third week of drill, half of Company K had begun to watch for it.

“Order... arms!”

The command from Sergeant Donald “Mac” MacInnis hit the ranks like a thunderclap. A ragged clatter of iron and walnut stocks echoed across the hard-packed earth.

“Miserable! Absolutely miserable!” MacInnis roared. His anvil-shaped shoulders bunched beneath his blue sergeant’s jacket as he strode down the line, his face, carved out of northern pine, inches from the men’s faces. He stopped dead in front of Thomas Barlow.

“Barlow! Drop that piece one more time like it’s a sack of wet turnips, and I’ll have you hauling timber to the riverbanks until your knees buckle!”

Thomas stood frozen, his gray eyes fixed straight ahead on the stone battlements of the old fort. The heavy rifle felt like an anvil in his hands, its cold iron barrel a physical curse against his skin. His fingers were locked, his muscles trembling from three hours of continuous manual drills.

“What’s the matter, Quaker?” MacInnis hissed, stepping so close Thomas could smell the bitter chicory coffee and trail grease on his breath. “Is the piece too heavy for your farm-boy wrists? Or are you still praying for the target’s soul before you pull the trigger? I’ll pack your boots with flinty gravel and make you do a jig, by Jove!”

“No, Sergeant,” Thomas muttered through a clenched jaw.

“Then shoulder it!” MacInnis ripped the rifle from Thomas’s grip and slammed it back against his chest with a violent, hollow crack. “You think the rebs are going to wait for you to make peace with your conscience? Out here, due process is a lead ball! I’m not going to say this again, decide here and now if you are a soldier of the Republic, or are a corpse. There is no middle ground here. Fit that butt plate into your shoulder and *hold the line!*”

Thomas gripped the walnut stock, his knuckles turning white as a sudden, dangerous heat surged through his veins. He didn’t raise his voice, but his farm-hardened frame straightened to its full height, his shadow falling across the shorter veteran. “The line will hold, Sergeant.”

MacInnis stared up into Thomas's cold gray eyes for a split second, a faint, grim glimmer of respect flaring behind his weathered eyelids before he turned away to bark at the next recruit. “Right face! Forward... march!”

* * *

While Thomas struggled beneath the psychological weight of the uniform, William Sterling thrived. William’s family privilege and natural, effortless charisma had quickly caught the attention of the regiment's officers. He had been appointed the company lieutenant almost immediately, his tailored blue coat fitting him with the grace of a man born to command. He moved through the camps with easy, ambitious confidence, frequently spending his evenings in the officers' quarters discussing strategy and political appointments.

Yet, despite his rising status, William did not forget his childhood friend. One evening, after a particularly grueling twelve-hour day of skirmish drills, William found Thomas sitting alone on a wooden crate near the edge of the shoreline, looking down at the dark, swirling waters of the Minnesota River merging with the Mississippi.

“You look like a man waiting for his own execution, Tom,” Billy said gently, stepping up beside him. He pulled his gold pocket watch from his waistcoat – the one Cathy had given him – and checked the time by the light of the campfire before snapping it shut. “MacInnis is hard on you, I know. But he’s trying to keep you and everyone else alive.”

“It's not Sergeant Mac,” Thomas said, his voice hollow. He pulled the small silver match-case Catherine had given him out of his pocket, turning it over and over in his palms. “It's the rifle. Every time I look down the sights, I feel like I'm looking into hell.”

William placed a heavy, reassuring hand on Thomas's shoulder. "You're overthinking it, Tom. We aren't going down there to murder men. We're going to save the Union. We're going to put down a rebellion and come home heroes. Think of Winona. Think of Cathy."

Cathy... Her name was a physical ache in Thomas's chest.

The friction, however, did not stay confined to the drill field or the abstract guilt of his conscience. It wore a face, and that face belonged to Corporal Thaddeus "Thad" Vance. A wealthy youth from an influential Minnesota political family, Vance was an arrogant young man who had used his uncle Dr. Harrison Vance's connections to secure a comfortable assignment as a company corporal in William's company. Thaddeus despised the unvarnished dirt of the camp, but he despised Barlow even more. To Thad, Barlow was a walking contradiction – a backwoods turnip-grower who somehow held the personal ear and protection of Lieutenant Sterling.

* * *

The Vance-Barlow rivalry boiled over during target practice on one sweltering May afternoon. The men stood in the dust, their shoulders bruised from the heavy recoil of black powder charges. Corporal Vance, having just pierced the center of a flour-sack target fifty yards out, stood leaning on his smoking Springfield, surrounded by a small circle of sycophants.

"Look at the Quaker," Vance sneered loudly, making sure his voice carried across the firing line to where Thomas was cleaning his barrel. "Barlow handles that piece like it's a venomous copperhead. Tell us, Barlow, do you pray for the target's soul before you pull the trigger, or do you just close your eyes and wish you were back home behind your mother's skirts?"

The surrounding men chuckled nervously, eyeing the corporal. Thomas kept his eyes down, his rag methodically working the ramrod, but his knuckles went white against the wood.

“Leave it, Vance,” Sam Miller warned, stepping between them, his farm-boy joviality vanishing. “He can out-work and out-march any man in this company, and you know it.”

“He can out-shirk them, too,” Vance shot back, moving around Sam until he was inches from Thomas’s face. He could smell the sweat and gun oil on Thomas, and it seemed to offend his sensibilities. “I heard about your old man, Barlow. Word travels down the river fast. A family of sniveling, scripture-quoting cowards. You only put on that blue coat so the town wouldn't tar and feather your father's barn. You don't belong here. You're a yellow streak down the middle of Company K.”

Thomas stopped cleaning the rifle. The insult to his family, even a father who had cast him out, sparked sudden, violent heat in his veins. He looked up, his gray eyes locking onto Vance's with a cold, terrifying intensity that made the city boy split-second hesitate. Thomas didn't yell; he didn't raise his fists. He simply stood up to his full height, his broad shoulders casting a shadow over the much shorter corporal.

“My father stands by his word, Vance,” Thomas said, his voice in a low, dangerous rumble that cut through the midday heat. “Which is more than can be said for a man who hides behind his uncle's medical apron to dodge the heavy details. If you think I'm a coward, take off that corporal's jacket and step behind the stables. Let's see how much your family's money helps you when eating dirt.” Thomas *instantly* regretted his threat of violence, the words of his father echoing in his head.

Vance's face flushed a deep, ugly crimson. His hand twitched toward the brass buckle of his belt, his eyes darting around to see if the officers were watching. He knew Thomas could snap him like a dry pine bough.

"You're a threat to the line, Barlow," Vance hissed, stepping back to preserve his dignity but keeping his voice laced with venom. "A man who hesitates with a weapon gets the comrade next to him killed. When the real Minié balls start flying, I'll be watching you. The first time you freeze, I'll make sure the provost marshal hears of it. Cowardice in the face of the enemy carries a rope, Quaker. Remember that."

* * *

The mail rider arrived the following morning, breaking the tense standoff that lingered through the tents like stagnant air. The company gathered around the mail wagon, shouting and laughing as names were called out. Both William and Thomas received letters addressed in Catherine's elegant, flowing script.

Thomas retreated to the relative privacy of the company stables to read his, desperate to escape Vance's lingering eyes. His hands shook as he broke the wax seal.

From: Cathy Sterling, Winona, Minnesota

To: Thomas Barlow, Fort Snelling, Minnesota

Date: May 10, 1861

Dear Thomas, the town feels terribly empty since the steamer carried you and William away. Father keeps checking the riverways, and the house is far too quiet without William's constant pacing. I think of our dance at the picnic often – it was the only moment of that frantic afternoon when everything seemed to stand still. Your mother came into the dry goods store

yesterday. I tried to speak with her, but she looked right through me and walked out. My heart breaks for the silence at your homestead. Please, Thomas, look after my brother. He has a grand heart but lacks your steady hands. Write to me when the drilling allows.

Your devoted friend, Cathy.

He read the words greedily, his eyes tracing the ink as if he could find a hidden meaning between the lines. She wrote of the quiet house and of seeing his mother, Martha, in the dry goods store – how Martha had looked right through her and walked out.

Thomas reread the letter and then closed his eyes, a bitter, agonizing wave of disappointment washing over him. The letter was beautiful, kind, and completely, devastatingly platonic. *“Please, Thomas, look after my brother. He has a grand heart but lacks your steady hands. Write to me when the drilling allows. Your devoted friend, Cathy.”*

He read it twice more, then folded it along its creases and put it in his waistcoat pocket beside the match-case, where the two of them together made a small hard square against his ribs.

“Hey, Barlow! Stop mooning over your mail! The company's falling in!” Vance’s sharp voice shattered the quiet of the stable, his shadow blocking the morning sun at the doorway. He smirked as he watched Thomas quickly fold the letter away. “What's the matter? Did your daddy write to tell you you're going to hell? Or is that a love letter from someone who realized you aren't man enough to hold a line?”

Thomas didn't answer. He carefully tucked Catherine's letter into his waistcoat pocket, right next to the match-case, and stepped out into the blazing sun, brushing past Vance's shoulder hard enough to send the corporal staggering a step sideways into the dirt.

The whistle blew, signaling the start of the afternoon regiment parade. As Thomas took his place in the ranks, his rifle balanced heavily on his shoulder, he looked across the parade

ground and saw William standing at the head of the company, his sword drawn, looking every bit the glorious savior Catherine expected him to be.

Thomas gripped the cold iron of his rifle, his eye tracking Vance a few paces down the rank. Then the company stepped off. He matched the cadence, and the dust rose past his knees, and he held the alignment for a full hour without once looking down at his hands.

When night fell at the fort, the deafening roar of the drill fields finally faded into the low, rhythmic hum of a thousand campfires flickering across the bluffs. The air turned crisp, carrying the scent of burning timber through the cool night sky.

Thomas sat alone on an overturned cracker box near the edge of the stable lines, a small tin of gun oil and a cleaning rag nearby. He methodically rubbed the iron barrel of his rifle, his movements detached and mechanical.

“You're gonna scrub the blueing right off that iron, Tom.”

Private James “Jimmy” Lewis stepped out of the shadows, balancing two steaming tin cups of parched-corn coffee. Jimmy had been studying philosophy at college when the war broke out, his thin, intellectual frame looking slightly swallowed by the heavy wool of his uniform. He handed a cup to Thomas and sat down on a pile of dry hay.

“It's the only way to keep the noise out of my head, Jimmy,” Thomas said quietly, taking the cup but keeping his eyes on the rifle stock. “MacInnis is right. Every time I look through these sights, I feel like I'm looking into hell.”

Jimmy took a slow sip of his coffee, looking out toward the dark horizon where the stars reflected off the river currents. “We all are, Tom. But hell isn't a place the rebs made for us in Virginia. Hell is just the gap between who we were on the levee and what the state requires us to become out here.”

Thomas paused, his oil rag resting on the breach block. “My father says taking up arms is a forfeit of the soul. He says there's no righteousness in blood.”

“Your father believes in an absolute design for the world,” Jimmy said, his voice carrying a calm, profound weight that eased the muddle in Tom's thoughts. “But history isn't built on absolutes, Tom. It's built on choices. We think we put on this blue wool uniform to save a flag or a Republic, but a man doesn't risk a Minié ball for an abstract map. He does it to protect the shape of his home. The sin isn't holding the weapon; the sin is forgetting what you're shielding with it.”

Thomas looked down into his black coffee, his hand drifting to the waistcoat pocket where the silver match-case lay cold against his ribs. For an instant, the campfire disappeared, replaced by the picnic waltz, the scent of lavender, and the smile that had drawn him away from his father's faith.

“I didn't sign the roll for the Republic, Jimmy,” Thomas whispered, the confession tearing from his throat before he could stop it. He looked up, his gray eyes wide with a desperate, heavy agony. “It was Cathy. Catherine Sterling. I've loved her since we were children on the planks, and I've never said the words aloud to a living soul. When she handed me that pen... I would have signed my name to a lease in the bottom of hell and my soul to the devil just to see her smile at me like that.”

Jimmy didn't laugh, nor did he offer the easy, romantic platitudes Sam Miller would have yelled. He simply looked at Tom with a deep, sorrowful understanding. “A dangerous anchor, Tom. To carry a woman's face into a slaughterhouse means you aren't fighting for a cause – you're fighting a myth. If you survive, you might find the war has changed the shape of your heart, ... or hers.”

“She looks at me like a brother, Jimmy,” Thomas said, his voice cracking as the raw truth settled heavily in his chest. “Like another Billy. I’m her ‘steady’ friend. But I need you to swear on your life – keep this between the tents. If William thinks I’m mooning over his sister instead of watching his line, it will break what's left of our friendship.”

Jimmy reached out, his hand resting flat against Tom’s broad shoulder, his grip steady and unblinking. “The secret stays in the grass, Tom. I swear it. But remember what I told you about the weapon. Don't let your devotion to Cathy turn the Quaker boy into the kind of soldier he would have feared. Watch your alignment, keep your tinder dry, and let's make sure we both live long enough to see the first smoke on the river again.”

Chapter 5: The Preparation

While the men of the First Minnesota drilled in the mud of Fort Snelling, the silence in Winona grew heavier with each passing day. The departure of the *War Eagle* had emptied the town of its youth, leaving the streets oddly quiet. For Catherine Sterling, the change was not merely atmospheric; it was structural.

Her father's health seemed a bit more frail with a constant nagging cough, especially during the morning hours. In front of her were the sprawling wooden ledgers of the Sterling shipping empire now sitting open on the desk in the study of the Harriet Street estate. Catherine now spent her mornings tracking timber rafts and calculating wheat shipments, her fingers frequently stained with black ink. Her transformation from a sheltered socialite into a pragmatic manager had begun out of necessity, but she took comfort in the grueling work. It was her only defense against the constant, gnawing anxiety that shadowed her thoughts.

On a late May afternoon, the mail steamer finally brought the first bundle of correspondence from the front lines.

Catherine sat down by the wide parlor window, the river breeze rustling the lace curtains. Two envelopes in her hands, both postmarked from Fort Snelling. One was thick, written on

expensive cream parchment in her brother William's bold, sweeping hand. The other was small, written on cheap camp stationery in the tight, meticulous script of Thomas Barlow.

She opened William's letter first.

Cathy,

This place is a grand spectacle! We are camped on the bluffs, and the sight of a thousand men moving in unison under the Union banner is enough to stir the dead. The officers have seen fit to grant me my commission early. I wear my sword now, sister, and I promise to wear it with honor. Thad Vance has been an invaluable asset in the camp, helping me navigate the political waters among the staff. Do not worry for us. The rebellion will be crushed before the autumn harvest, and we shall return to the levee as conquerors.

Your loving brother,

William

Catherine smiled, a familiar mixture of pride and sibling exasperation warming her chest. Billy was still hunting for his glory. She could picture him perfectly – pacing the camp, checking his pocket watch, and dreaming of future political positions.

She turned the watch over in her mind, then carefully set his letter aside and picked up Thomas's envelope. The texture of the paper was rough under her fingers. Breaking the wax seal, she began to read.

Dear Cathy,

The heat here is unlike anything on the Mississippi. We drill until our wool uniforms are stiff with salt. William is already a favorite among the officers; he wears his sword with the grace of a man born to command. I am glad the picnic dance stays with you. It stays with me, too. When the camp grows quiet at night and the other men are gambling or sleeping, I look at

the stars and wonder if you are looking at them from the veranda. My father's silence is a heavy load on me but hearing that you are thinking of me lightens that load. I pray this business is settled quickly so we may all return to Winona.

Yours always,

Thomas

She lowered the paper, her breath catching. Tom's words were gentle, but the feeling beneath them was unmistakable. The warmth she had felt moments before evaporated, replaced by a sudden, cold weight of unease.

...glad the picnic dance stays with you. It stays with me... I look at the stars and wonder if you are looking at them...

"Oh, Tom," she whispered to the empty room, her throat tightening with a mixture of sorrow and guilt.

She remembered the dance vividly – a frantic, sunlit afternoon when the town had cheered the boys off. She had danced with Thomas because he looked so terribly isolated, so completely overwhelmed by the noise of the recruitment rally. Or maybe because she felt a little bit sorry for him. To her, it had been an act of deep affection for a boy who was as familiar to her as her own reflection. She looked again at the cramped script, at the care he had taken spacing out the words about the stars, and at how long the letter must have taken him to write.

The paper had gone soft where his thumb had folded and refolded it. Catherine looked at the date at the top — three weeks old already — and thought of the ink drying under a canvas roof on a bluff above the Minnesota River, and of the steel nib pen she had dipped and put into his hand herself.

Catherine stood up, pacing the length of the parlor with both letters clutched against her dress. She loved Tom deeply, but not in the way his letter asked her to. He was her anchor. Her affection belonged to childhood winters, river errands, and the trust of a friend who had always steadied Billy. She could not turn that affection into romance by force of pity. Yet to write the truth plainly while he stood in uniform felt like cruelty, and to soften it too much felt like a lie.

She sat down at her father's heavy walnut desk and pulled a fresh sheet of paper toward her. She dipped her steel nib pen into the black ink, her hand trembling slightly. She had to write back. She had to keep him steady for William's sake, and for his own. But she had to draw a line – gently but firmly – before his longing consumed him entirely.

She began to write, her words deliberate, diplomatic, and carefully cloaked in the language of a devoted, invaluable friend.

Dear Thomas,

The morning packet boat arrived at the levee docks today, and among the heavy business manifests and salt vouchers, the clerk handed me your letter. You cannot imagine the relief that washed over our parlor when I saw your tight, steady hand on the envelope. With Father's coughing keeping the house so terribly anxious at night, your words from the bluffs were like a calm wind through an open window.

I must confess, Thomas, your description of the Fort Snelling drills sounds entirely exhausting. To think of you and William standing under that blistering sun for hours makes my own days with the shipping ledgers seem very light indeed. Sam's sister, Sarah, was visiting when the mail came, and she laughed aloud when I read her your complaints about Sergeant MacInnis. She says if anyone can out-work a stubborn drill sergeant, it is a Barlow boy who has spent his winters clearing timber.

But Thomas, as I sat by the wide veranda window this evening watching the stars, I found myself reading your lines a second time. You wrote about the quiet camps at night, and of looking up at those same stars wondering if my eyes were fixed upon them, too. Your words were so very gentle, Thomas, yet they left a strange, heavy quiet in my chest.

You spoke of the burden of your father's silence, and how hearing from me lightens that terrible pack. Please know that my thoughts and prayers walk every dusty mile of the drill field with you. You are an invaluable, dear companion to this house – truly. It is because of my affection for you that I worry the sudden madness of the camp, and the violent wrenching away from your quiet farm life has caused you to mistake your longing for home and the river for something else.

We are all being tested by this great crisis, Thomas. The old days on the levee planks are drifting behind us, and we must both keep our eyes fixed tightly on the great, righteous cause of our Republic. William writes that his commission is finalized, and he speaks so highly of your endurance. Please, Thomas, continue to watch over him as a true brother would. His ambitions are so very grand, but he lacks your quiet, steady hands. The river is exceptionally beautiful tonight, but the town feels entirely empty without its youth.

Write to me whenever the bugles allow. Your devoted and constant friend,

Cathy

* * *

By the time Catherine's reply began its journey toward Fort Snelling, Company K's drill-yard tensions had hardened into routine. MacInnis no longer mistook Thomas's hesitation for weakness, Sam no longer laughed when Vance invoked the Barlow name, and Vance had learned

that family influence could preserve his stripes but not command the company's respect. In the third week of June the order came down to strike the tents. The men rolled their blankets, drew sixty rounds apiece, and marched down off the limestone bluff to the boats.

Chapter 6: First Blood

The heat of a Virginia July was nothing like the crisp mornings of the Mississippi bluffs. It was a suffocating, dense humidity that sat like a wet wool blanket over the men of the 1st Minnesota Infantry Regiment. By 2:00 a.m. on Sunday, July 21, 1861, Company K – the Winona Volunteers – was already on its feet. They had spent the night shivering in the damp woods near Centreville, and now, under the cover of pitch darkness, the grueling flanking march toward a winding stream called Bull Run began.

By mid-afternoon, the grand illusion of a quick, glorious war vanished into a blinding veil of black powder smoke.

Colonel Willis A. Gorman's regiment had been marched double-quick over the Warrenton Turnpike and across Young's Branch, their lungs burning and canteens bone-dry. They were ordered to crest the sweltering plateau of Henry House Hill to support Captain James B. Ricketts's Battery I, 1st U.S. Artillery, whose guns were being torn apart by Confederate marksmen.

"Form a line of battle! On the right by file into line!"

The command was swallowed by the deafening roar of iron, but Thomas Barlow heard it. He moved like a machine, his boots slipping on the blood-soaked grass of the pasture. To his left, Sam Miller was shouting something, his eyes wide and wild, his face blackened by soot. To his right, Corporal Thad Vance stumbled, his fine St. Paul boots caked in mud, his arrogant bravado entirely gone as artillery shells burst in the air above them.

“Hold your fire! Hold your fire, Company K!”

The voice belonged to Captain Henry C. Lester, shouting furiously over the din. Through the dense curtains of smoke, a regiment of men wearing blue trousers and dark uniforms was marching steadily out of the woods directly toward Ricketts’s imperiled guns.

“They’re ours!” someone yelled from the center of the line. “Huzzah for the New York boys!”

“No, they aren’t!” Thomas screamed out, the truth hitting him with cold terror. “They are the rebs, you fool!”

He saw the distinct, fierce alignment of their bayonets and the cruel, unblinking focus of their advance. It was the 33rd Virginia Infantry, and they were leveling their muskets directly at the Minnesota regiment.

Before the command to fire could be given, the Virginia line erupted in a blinding flash of orange fire. The volley hit Company K like a physical hammer. The air was instantly filled with the horrific, tearing sound of lead ripping through flesh, the sharp screams of dying men, and the terrifying shrieks of artillery horses being disemboweled by iron canister shot. Men Thomas had known his entire life – boys he had traded wheat with at the Winona farmer's market – dropped into the trampled grass.

In the middle of the chaos, Lieutenant William Sterling was leading the counter-advance, his sword drawn, his face twisted in a mask of fierce, defiant determination. “Hold the line, Minnesota! For the Republic!”

A second Confederate volley crashed through the smoke. Thomas saw William jerk violently backward. A Minié ball tore through the lieutenant’s shoulder, spinning him around before he collapsed into the dirt, his sword flying from his grip.

“Lieutenant's down! The line is breaking!” Thad Vance shrieked, entirely abandoning his post. Vance scrambled backward into the brush, his rifle discarded in his blind panic.

The Union line fractured. Panicked soldiers from the 11th New York Zouaves and the Marine Battalion began running down the hill in a frantic, disorganized retreat. The order to fall back rippled through the smoke, but Thomas stood frozen, his eyes locked on William’s motionless body lying thirty yards away in the open field, directly in the path of the advancing Virginia infantry. If he didn’t do something quick, Billy would be at least captured, or worse.

The peace testimony of his father screamed in his ears. The rifle in his hands felt like a curse. But looking at William, the chaos in Thomas's mind instantly cleared, replaced by a desperate, iron-clad conviction. He didn't think of the Republic. He thought of Catherine’s face by the parlor window. He thought of his promise to keep her brother safe.

With a low, animal roar, Thomas broke cover. He ran straight into the crossfire, his boots kicking up clods of bloody earth. Minié balls snapped past his ears and hissed through the wool of his uniform, but he did not slow down.

He reached William just as the first Confederate skirmishers cleared the smoke. Dropping his rifle, Thomas seized William by the collar of his blood-drenched coat. William groaned, his eyes rolling back as his face went pale from shock and blood loss.

“I’ve got you, Billy,” Thomas grunted, his muscles straining as he hoisted the larger man onto his broad shoulders.

The weight was immense, but Thomas’s farm-hardened legs carried them back toward the low ground, retreating obliquely across the fields through a hail of lead. He carried William into a small pasture ravine where a makeshift ambulance line was desperately trying to load the wounded before the roads were completely choked.

“Get him in!” Thomas yelled at a panicked orderly, shoving William onto the wooden floorboards of a waiting wagon.

As the ambulance slammed forward into the retreating throng, Thomas turned back to look at the burning ridge of Henry House Hill. The battlefield was a slaughterhouse. The entire grand army of the North was in a full, cataclysmic rout.

Thomas knelt in the trampled grass, his chest heaving as he drew a ragged breath through the sulfurous air. He looked down at his hands; they were slick and stained dark with William's blood. He reached into his coat and felt the cold, hard edges of Catherine's silver match-case and her crumpled letter against his ribs.

He had saved her brother. He picked up a discarded rifle from the dirt, tore open a paper cartridge with his teeth, and rammed the lead ball down the iron barrel. The grains of powder were bitter on his tongue and he did not spit them out. Down the slope the ambulance had already been swallowed by the crowd on the road, and the smoke went on rising over the ruins of the Union line, and Thomas stood in the trampled grass holding a loaded weapon that belonged to a man who had not come back for it.

* * *

The retreat from Bull Run was a grueling test of endurance that stripped away the last remnants of parade-ground romanticism from the regiment. Through the torrential rains of July 22nd, Company K marched back towards Washington. The roads were a nightmarish bog of thick mud, abandoned supply wagons, and discarded weapons. When the exhausted, rain-drenched soldiers finally collapsed into their old camps at Alexandria, Virginia, they were no longer the untested volunteers who had left Fort Snelling; they were veterans who had seen the elephant.

In the somber days following the defeat, the regiment was forced to settle into the grueling, repetitive routine of camp life and reorganization.

The men now spent their mornings gathering outside the adjutant's tent, listening in hushed silence as the names of the dead, wounded, and missing from the Henry House Hill were read aloud.

Thomas did find time to write to Cathy immediately after the battle. He wasn't sure if he should, but he wanted to make sure she received kind words and to allay her worries about William. He almost confessed to her his long-held feelings but couldn't bring his pencil to write the words. For now, his feelings were only known to Jimmy. He drew in a deep breath, imagining the lavender fragrance from the long-ago dance. It was as if she was right next to him.

Cathy,

We have seen the elephant. Bull Run was a slaughterhouse. The noise – I have no words for the shrieking of the iron or the cries of the horses. William was struck in the shoulder during the retreat, but I managed to quickly get him to an ambulance before the panic completely choked the roads. Be assured, the wound is minor and he is mending at the hospital, though his pride has been terribly wounded. I hear he is going to get promoted.

I broke my vows, Cathy. I fired my rifle into the smoke. I do not know if I hit anyone, but the guilt of it sits on my chest like a stone. In the worst of the fire, when the lines broke, it was not the Union flag I pictured to keep me moving. It was your face. It is the only thing that keeps me whole out here.

Yours, Thomas

Indeed, Lt. William Sterling was recovering from his severe shoulder wound in a Washington hospital, when his battlefield bravery was recognized by the high command. He was promoted to Captain, but he would be away from the regiment convalescing.

Meanwhile, Corporal Thad Vance slinked back into camp three days after the battle, using his family's political connections to avoid a court-martial for cowardice. He avoided any discipline for his actions whereas any other soldier would easily be charged with cowardice in the face of the enemy. The mutual hatred between Vance and Thomas hardened into a cold, silent venom that poisoned the company tents.

* * *

The torrential rains, turned the camps at Alexandria into a miserable grid of gray canvas and knee-deep Virginia mud. The grand illusion of a ninety-day crusade had evaporated twenty-four hours earlier on the blood-soaked grass of Henry House Hill.

Thomas Barlow sat on the edge of his canvas cot, his uniform soaked through with a foul mixture of rainwater, sulfur soot, and the dried, brown stains of William Sterling's blood. He held an oil rag in his right hand, but his fingers were frozen. His gray eyes stared blankly at the tent floor, as if trapped in a cold, lifeless mausoleum.

James “Jimmy” Lewis stepped through the wet canvas flaps, balancing a tin plate containing two pieces of charred hardtack and a cup of muddy coffee. His intellectual face was smudged with black powder residue, his uniform trousers torn at the knee. He set the food on a wooden cracker box and knelt in front of Thomas.

“You haven’t unbuckled your cartridge box since we cleared the Long Bridge, Tom,” Jimmy said gently, his voice devoid of its usual academic cadence, replaced by the hollow fatigue of a boy who had looked into the slaughterhouse. “The wagon brought William’s things from the Washington hospital. His watch is safe. He’s going to live.”

Thomas didn’t look up. His voice came out in a low, terrifying rasp that barely carried over the steady drumming of the rain against the canvas. “I fired into the smoke, Jimmy.”

Jimmy paused, his hand hovering over the tin cup. “We all did, Tom. The 33rd Virginia was right on our flanks. If we hadn’t fired, Company K wouldn’t have made it back across Young’s Branch.”

“No,” Thomas whispered, finally lifting his head. His face was a pale, twisted mask of primal shock. “You don’t understand. When the New York boys broke and ran, and I saw the gray coats leveling their muskets at Billy... and the muddle in my head just stopped. I didn’t think about the Union. I didn’t think about my father’s peace testimony or the Light within. I tore the paper cartridge with my teeth, I rammed the lead down, and I aimed right at a man’s breast.”

He held up his hands. They were trembling violently, the skin raw and stained with trail grease.

“I wanted to kill them, Jimmy. For the first time in my life, I wanted to tear a man apart. My father was right. The second I pulled that brass trigger; I drowned everything gentle inside of me in the mud. I’m damned. I can feel the weight of it sitting right on my chest.”

Jimmy stared at his friend for a long moment. He didn't offer a shallow theological defense or a quote from the recruitment posters from Huff's Hotel. Instead, he reached out and firmly gripped Thomas's trembling wrists, forcing the Quaker boy to lock eyes with him.

"Listen to me, Tom," Jimmy said, his voice carrying a fierce, stubborn conviction. "A man who goes to war to find his soul is always going to find a graveyard instead. But you didn't pull that trigger out of hatred for the South. You ran straight into a crossfire of Minié balls and iron canister shot to drag William Sterling out of a ditch because you promised his sister you'd keep watch over him."

"I did it because I'm a coward," Thomas muttered, a bitter tear cutting a clean line through the soot on his cheek. "I did it because I couldn't bear the thought of returning to the Winona levee and seeing the trust die in Cathy's eyes."

"That isn't cowardice, Tom – that's the terrible architecture of the human heart," Jimmy said softly, releasing his grip and sliding back onto the dry hay. "History doesn't care about the purity of our motives out here. It only cares about the physical wall we build with our bodies to keep the madness from reaching the people we love. You broke your vows, sure. You traded your peace for William's life. But isn't that worth saving a brother's life? And if holding this stone-cold rifle in the dark is the price it takes to keep Catherine's world from shattering, then you *better* bear that cross like a soldier. You don't ever retreat into the darkness."

Thomas looked at the iron barrel of his Springfield resting against the tent pole, then reached into his waistcoat pocket, his fingers finding the cold, hard edges of the silver match-case Cathy had handed him at the gangplank. The memory of the picnic waltz felt incredibly distant, like a dream belonging to a boy who had died in the Virginia dust.

“Vance is telling the company I'm a threat to the line,” Thomas whispered, his jaw tightening as the cold machine of the soldier began to reassemble itself inside him. “He says a man who hesitates with a weapon gets his comrades killed.”

“Thad Vance spent the entire retreat hiding behind a supply wagon in Centreville,” Jimmy spat, his intellectual demeanor hardening into an uncharacteristic venom. “The men know who held the line when the colors wavered, Tom. Let Vance talk. His family's money can't buy back the bravado he lost on Henry House Hill.”

Jimmy pushed the tin cup of coffee closer to Tom's knees. “Eat something, Tom. Scrub the fouling out of your barrel, clean the blood off, and lock your secrets back between the tents. The high command says we're marching toward the Upper Potomac by morning. We have a long, dark road ahead of us, and I'm going to need your steady-sure hands if we're ever going to see the first smoke on the river again.”

Thomas stared at the coffee for a long moment, then slowly reached out, unbuckled his heavy leather cartridge box, and let it drop to the dirt floor with a dull, final thud. He took the cup, nodded in silent gratitude to the philosopher beside him, and drank it down to the grounds.

* * *

By August, the broad strategic focus of the war shifted. The Union high command realized that a single afternoon is not going to end the rebellion. To protect the capital and prepare for a massive, multi-pronged invasion of the South, the 1st Minnesota was assigned to the newly formed Army of the Potomac under General George B. McClellan.

In the late summer heat, the order finally came to strike their tents. The regiment was ordered to march northwest along the winding banks of the Potomac River toward Poolesville,

Maryland. The objective was to guard the river crossings and locks of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal against Confederate cavalry raiders probing the Maryland border.

The red clay road to Poolesville bounced a blistering August heat straight through the paper-thin soles of Company K's boots, baking the men inside their thick, dust-crusting blue wool. The march had dragged on for twelve hours, a grueling column of parched throats, aching collarbones, and the rhythmic, deadening clack-clack-clack of bayonets hitting canteen rings. Heads hung low, eyes squinted against the blinding Maryland sun, and the heavy silence of veterans still haunted by the Henry House Hill pasture sat over the ranks like a wet blanket.

Suddenly, a loud, sharp thwack broke the cadence.

Sam Miller had used his wooden cleaning rod to aggressively whack a low-hanging oak branch, sending a shower of dry leaves straight onto the pristine, custom-tailored cap of Corporal Thad Vance two paces ahead.

"Fire and furies, Vance! Get your piece up!" Sam whooped, his jovial farm-boy face splitting into a broad, grease-smeared grin despite the trail soot caking his cheeks. "I think that oak tree was a rebel skirmisher probing our flank! Didn't you see the fierce alignment of them twigs? I swear one of them acorns had a Virginia accent!"

A few men in the immediate file let out low, ragged chuckles, their shoulders dropping an inch from the tension. Vance whirled around, his face flushing a deep, ugly crimson as he brushed the leaves from his shoulders. "Keep your muzzle down, Miller. Some of us are trying to maintain a soldierly column while the peasant brigade plays the fool."

"Oooohhh, a soldierly column, is it?" Sam laughed, shifting the dead weight of his heavy rifle to his other shoulder with an effortless, farm-hardened stride. He nudged Thomas Barlow with his elbow. "Hey, Tom, did you hear about the St. Paul dandy who volunteered for the

cavalry because he heard the horses did all the marching? Word is, the first time his mount let out a trot, the poor lad screamed for his uncle to send an ambulance wagon because his military dignity was getting severely bruised by the saddle leather!”

The surrounding Winona boys erupted into a chorus of rough, sudden laughter. Even Jimmy Lewis, his intellectual brow furrowed from a headache, let out a faint, appreciative snort.

“I’ll have you on a tight detail for disrespect, Miller,” Vance hissed, though his eyes darted nervously to check if the company officers were watching his embarrassment.

“Detail? Why, Corporal, I love a detail!” Sam shot back, his voice rising cheerfully to carry down the length of the dusty column. “Just yesterday I was on the kitchen detail, and I asked the cook why the salt pork tasted exactly like the bottom of an old logging boot. You know what he told me? He said, ‘Miller, that pork is a highly strategic military secret. We boil it in river mud so that if the rebs ever capture our supply wagons, they’ll die of a broken heart before they can even digest our rations!’”

“It’s the maggots that give it the flavor, Sam,” a voice called out from the third file, prompting another wave of loud, genuine chuckles that seemed to lift the heavy trail dust from their lungs.

Sam clapped a heavy, sweat-slicked hand onto Thomas’s rigid shoulder, his farm-boy joviality acting like a physical wedge to pry his friend out of the dark, silent vault he had inhabited since Bull Run. “See there, Tom? The boys are waking up! I tell you, by the time we reach this Camp Stone place, I’m going to find us a Maryland farmer with a cellar full of sweet cider and a patch of watermelons that need a proper Union inspection. And if the farmer’s got a pretty daughter, I’ll let Jimmy here quote his college philosophy books at her until she hands over the keys to the springhouse.”

“Philosophy doesn't buy cider, Sam,” Jimmy Lewis noted dryly, a faint smile breaking through his trail grime.

“No, but your ugly face might frighten the cows into milking early! Haw, Haw, Haw!” Sam bellowed, swinging his cap wildly in the air as a refreshing evening breeze finally swept across the Maryland wheat fields ahead.

For the first time in twenty miles, the men of Company K lifted their heads, their boots striking the hard clay road with a lighter, faster cadence. Somewhere back in the fourth file a man began whistling, and by the next bend half the company had picked it up.

Moving to the rear of the column, Thad Vance – his corporal's stripes intact thanks to his uncle's letters – watched Thomas with a calculating, vengeful glare, waiting for the peasant from the bluffs to stumble under the blistering sun. But Thomas never gave him the opportunity.

As the sun began to set over the rolling Maryland hills, the regiment finally filed into a wide wheat field outside Poolesville, establishing what would become Camp Stone. Thomas collapsed onto the dry earth, his bones aching and his throat parched. He pulled out his pocket diary and a lead pencil; his fingers were stained with gun oil and trail dirt. He looked westward toward the fading orange light, thinking of the quiet Mississippi bluffs and the parlor window on Harriet Street. Then he put the pencil to the paper. He wrote the date, and beneath it her name, and then he sat a long while with the point resting where it was before the first line came.

Chapter 7: The Enduring Watch

The dry stalks of the Maryland wheat field rustled like parchment as the men of the 1st Minnesota Infantry established Camp Stone near Poolesville. For Thomas Barlow, the sprawling canvas city was a landscape of deep, structural isolation. His farm-hardened shoulders bore the weight of the company's heavy details without a murmur, yet his gray eyes remained fixed on the dark ribbon of the Potomac River, which separated the Union camps from the Confederate pickets probing the Virginia shoreline.

The routine at Camp Stone included mail from home. It had been a while, and Cathy sent Tom a letter. He was afraid to read it. He certainly did not wish to read it in front of anyone so he wandered away to a lone oak tree outside the camp. He carefully unsealed the letter and read the words from Cathy.

Dear Thomas,

God bless you. May God safely keep you for what you did for Billy. Our family owes you a debt we can never properly repay. But Tom, your letter troubled me deeply. You speak of my face in the dark, and of fighting for me rather than the Great Cause of our Republic. You are a dear, invaluable friend – like a second brother to me, truly – and I fear the madness of the battlefield has caused you to confuse your affection for home with something else. We must both

keep our eyes fixed on the preservation of the Union. Please continue to watch over Billy, as a true brother would.

Ever your friend, Cathy.

Thomas read it through under the oak, and then a second time, and then a third. He folded it back along its creases, put it inside his coat, and sat there a while longer before he walked down to the camp.

* * *

The relative quiet of the Upper Potomac was a thin veneer. By day, Thomas cleaned his rifle with a rhythmic, detached intensity. He had fired his weapon into the blinding black powder smoke of Henry House Hill. He had watched boys from the Winona market drop into the trampled grass. The memory sat on his chest like a wet millstone, a physical manifestation of the peace testimony he had broken.

“He's still mooning over his scripture or his diary,” Corporal Thad Vance sneered one evening, tossing a dry pine knot into the company fire. Vance had slinked back into camp days after the Bull Run rout, his corporal's stripes preserved entirely through his family's political maneuvers. “This backwoods turnip-grower thinks he's a veteran because he dragged the Lieutenant out of the brush. But he's still got the Quaker streak down his back.”

Thomas did not look up from his rifle barrel. Beside him, Sam Miller shifted his weight, his usual jovial farm-boy laugh entirely absent from the retreat. “Leave it, Vance,” Sam muttered. “He done his work. Which is more than can be said for them that spent the battle looking for their uncle's apron.”

The silent venom between the tents hardened on October 21, 1861, when General Charles P. Stone ordered a demonstration across the river. The 1st Minnesota moved down to Edwards Ferry under a hazy autumn sky, their boots churning the river mud as they briefly crossed a hundred men to the Virginia shore. After a brief 15-minute skirmish, the Winona men successfully drove off the Confederate pickets. But on the way back across the Potomac, several miles upriver, the disaster at Ball's Bluff erupted. Through the chill dusk air, Jimmy and Tom could hear the distant, terrifying roll of musketry and the frantic screams of Union soldiers driven over the steep hundred-foot cliffs into the freezing currents of the Potomac.

The cold river mist sat thick on the Potomac, deadening the distant, horrific echo of musketry traveling from the bluffs upriver. The flatboat creaked as the men of Company K threw their weight against the heavy wooden oars, their faces ghostly white in the fading October twilight. They had been on Virginia soil for barely fifteen minutes – long enough to drive off a few phantom pickets in the brush – and now they retreated toward the safety of the Maryland shore. The sound of gunfire and screams could be heard eerily coming from upstream causing the men to shudder more than usual in the cold October air.

Back on the Maryland side, Thomas Barlow leaned his forehead against the iron barrel of his rifle, his knuckles raw from the biting river wind. Beside him, Jimmy Lewis stared back at the dark Virginia tree line across the Potomac, his thin frame shivering beneath his damp wool coat. He just returned from reporting to regimental headquarters that Company K has driven off the pickets at Edwards Ferry and that they safely came back.

“Do you still hear that, Tom?” Jimmy whispered, his voice a low rasp that barely carried as he sat down next to Tom. “From up near the island. That’s not a skirmish. That was a slaughter.”

Tom didn't look up. His gray eyes were fixed on the muddy water pooled at his feet. "The wind carries a lot of death out here, Jimmy. It all sounds the same now."

"No, it doesn't, Tom" Jimmy said, his intellectual composure completely fractured by the dark. "I heard at regimental that up there on the cliffs, they had no boats. Men were jumping right off the bluff into the river just to escape the bayonets. They were drowning under the weight of their own packs and gear." He paused, wiping a spray of river soot from his cheek. "We crossed over, we drew our steel, and we came back without a scratch. Why them and not us?"

Thomas lifted his head, his face a cynical mask of veteran indifference. He reached into his coat, his fingers briefly pressing against the cold, hard outline of Catherine Sterling's match-case. "Because the river doesn't care about our righteousness, philosopher. It just moves on downstream. We got lucky today. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"It's not luck, Tom – it's an accusation," Jimmy muttered, pulling his collar tight against the rising frost. "We're going to have to pay for the safety we found on these flatboats today. Eventually, every man in this regiment is gonna have to pay for it before the winter ice sets in."

Stone's division suffered over a thousand casualties in the slaughterhouse of Ball's Bluff. The 1st Minnesota was only lightly engaged driving off a small group of Confederate pickets downstream from Ball's Bluff. Company K was untouched by casualties, only Private Lewis Mitchell of Company I (the Wabashaw Guards) was mortally wounded. He met his fate while on a scouting detail during the post-battle retreat. His sudden death cast a dark shadow over the entire regiment creating a sour mood of discontent.

Thomas helped to fortify the riverbank position, his fingers numbed by the rising frost, knowing that every mile traveled from Winona was drawing them deeper into the center of a national agony.

* * *

As winter locked the Potomac in sheets of gray ice, the regiment was moved to Harper's Ferry in February 1862. The dynamic of the company shifted drastically when William Sterling returned from the Washington hospital. His shattered shoulder was heavily bound beneath his blue uniform, but his ambitious eyes were fixed on the new commission waiting for him. He was promoted to Captain as Acting Regimental Adjutant of the 1st Minnesota, his tailored officer's coat fitting him with the grim dignity of a man who had paid for his promotion with blood.

On a biting March morning, Captain Sterling checked his gold pocket watch – the one containing Catherine's picture and the inscription "*My brother, my family, my home*" – and passed along Brigadier General Willis Gorman's command to all the company commanders to move forward. Captain Henry C. Lester, the commander of Company K, lined up his troops and barked the order to march. They marched into the small, hostile streets of Berryville, Virginia, driving out a token Confederate rearguard. In the abandoned print shop of the town, the regiment's seized the press office.

The air inside the abandoned brick office of the *Berryville Conservator* was thick with the sharp, acidic tang of printer's ink, lye, and centuries-old paper dust. Outside, the rain-soaked streets of the captured Virginia town were quiet, watched over by the pickets of the 1st Minnesota. Inside, the rhythmic, metallic clack-clack-clack of the iron printing press filled the small room as several regimental soldiers from Minnesota were professional typesetters. They

decided to have a little fun and methodically rolled out a mock, pro-Union edition of the Virginia newspaper.

Thomas Barlow sat on an overturned wooden crate near the back window, his rifle resting securely between his knees. His uniform coat was stiff with trail mud, his gray eyes watching the ink-stained fingers of his comrades. Beside him, Sam Miller leaned against a high composing table, turning a freshly printed sheet over in his large hands. The headline, dated March 13, 1862, gleamed in dark, wet black ink:

THE BERRYVILLE CONSERVATOR – REGENERATED.

“Listen to this, Tom,” Sam said, his usual loud, camp-fire chuckle dropping into a quiet, thoughtful murmur as his thumb traced the text. “According to this here paper, 'We are not here to wage a war of hatred or destruction upon your rebel homes, but to restore the legal and corporate order of the Union.' By Jove, the boys write real fine when they aren't cleaning their muskets.”

Jimmy Lewis stepped away from the main press, wiping a dark smudge of oil from his cheek with a wool rag. He adjusted his uniform collar, his thin, intellectual frame casting a long shadow across the rows of lead type. “It’s a clean argument, Sam. It frames the whole national agony as a constitutional contract dispute. Simple. Orderly.” He turned his gaze to Thomas, his voice dropping to a serious, universal weight. “But the people watching us from behind those locked shutters out on the street don't read contracts. They see the blue wool, and they see an invasion.”

Thomas ran a rough finger along the iron receiver of his rifle, his mind drifting back to the unyielding, unblinkingly fierce sermons his father had thundered into the Barlow farm kitchen. “My father always said you can’t print a lie dark enough to hide the truth of a weapon,

Jimmy. It doesn't matter what the boys write on those sheets. The mighty pen didn't clear this road. A regiment of cold steel bayonets did.”

Sam lowered the paper, his naive frontier joviality vanishing for a rare moment, replaced by the hardening reality of their long march from the Mississippi bluffs. “We didn't come here to tear them apart, Tom. We just wanted to settle the line. The town rally at Huff's Hotel felt so clear – flags waving, the brass band playing, everyone moving together. But out here... the air feels different. Every mile we march south, the ground feels less like our country and more like a graveyard waiting to happen.”

“That's because the romantic crusade Billy promised us doesn't exist, Sam,” Jimmy noted dryly, stepping closer and resting a calloused hand on the wooden frame of the press. “A nation doesn't fracture right down the middle and heal itself with a polite editorial. We are stepping into a machine that is going to demand everything we have before the line is drawn. It's going to change us. It's going to harden the parts of us that are gentle.”

Thomas looked out the window at the dark Virginia hills, his fingers instinctively checking his waistcoat pocket where Catherine's small silver match-case and her elegant letters sat against his ribs. He felt the cold, unyielding weight of the war machine assembling itself inside his own chest.

“Let it harden,” Thomas whispered, his jaw tightening until the muscles bunched like twisted rope beneath his weathered skin. “You said that to Elijah in the road the week Sumter fell, Sam. Neither of us knew what we were asking for. If the state requires us to be the iron that holds the line together, then we roll the press and we load the wagons. Just keep your tinder dry. Because when the real lead starts flying on the Peninsula, the history books won't care about what we printed in this room. They'll only count the men who are left standing on the planks.”

Sam Miller laughed out loud while he read the paper, but Thomas only saw the cold, unyielding hatred in the eyes of the local women watching from behind locked shutters. One of them pulled her shutter closed while he was still looking at her. Behind him the press went on clacking, printing a newspaper that not one soul in Berryville would ever read.

PART II: THE COST OF THE LINE (SPRING 1862–SUMMER 1863)

Chapter 8: Home Front Despair

In Winona, the spring thaw of 1862 brought no celebration to the levee docks. The Mississippi ran open again, packet boats crowded the planks, and the steam sawmills hammered timber for the Union war effort. Yet one wagon stood apart from the renewed commerce: Isaac Barlow's spring wheat remained untouched because the town had decided that a Quaker harvest carried the stain of disloyalty.

Inside the Front Street office of the Sterling Timber and Shipping Line, the air was thick with the scent of camphor and coal dust. The steady, mechanical thump-weld of the steam sawmills down on the levee vibrated straight through the floorboards, a relentless reminder that the war required raw muscle and material, no matter the cost to the town's domestic peace.

George Sterling sat buried beneath a mountain of heavy blankets by the office wood stove, his face the color of river frost. A sudden, violent fit of coughing seized his chest, and he pressed a stained silk handkerchief to his lips before looking up at Alexander Miller. The cynical foreman stood flat-footed in the center of the room, his large, coarse hands resting heavily on the iron rim of an overturned wheat barrel he had dragged inside.

"Listen to me, Alexander," George rasped, his voice a low, gravelly rumble that caught in his throat. "The spring thaw is open, and the packet boats are already shoring up to the planks.

This isn't 1861 anymore. The high command in Washington doesn't care about our local labor disputes – they want timber, and they want it processed at twice the volume of the winter ledger entries.”

“The men are doing the heavy hauling, Mr. Sterling,” Alexander sneered, a deep-seated prejudice flaring beneath his heavy gray mustache. He looked around the room, his eyes lingering on the empty desk where Catherine usually redrafted the shipping terms. “But the levee planks are tight. With our lads and my nephew Sam fighting the rebels for the Republic, the crews are angry. They don't take kindly to hauling cargo alongside those copperhead traitors.”

“Blood and thunder, Alexander, you leave the politics to the newspapers!” George thundered, though the exertion brought a dry, agonizing rattle back to his lungs. He leaned forward, his yellowed eyes narrowing with a ruthless, predatory intensity. “I don't care about the shape of a man's prayers when the transport ships are waiting. The St. Paul merchants are already trying to undercut our transit tariffs at the grist mills. We have a government logistics contract for three thousand bushels of spring wheat and fifty thousand feet of white pine. If those flatbed wagons don't move the moment the *War Eagle* drops her anchors, the high command freezes our transit permits from St. Paul all the way to Cairo, Illinois.”

“The wagons will move for our boys, sir,” Alexander muttered, his jaw tightening until the muscles bunched beneath his weathered skin. “But I’m telling you, the Barlow farm expects us to ship their grain? Not on my platform. I’ll bet my bottom dollar the men walk off the docks before they lift a single sack stamped with any Quaker name.”

“Then you tell them their seasonal wages depend on my signature!” George shot back, his hand trembling as he pointed a cold finger at the ledger. “The Sterling name belongs to the

contracts now, Alexander. You break any notion of a walkout before the evening packet arrives, or I'll find a foreman who has the stomach for what this commerce requires.”

* * *

Two blocks over on Market Street, the heavy dust of Market Square settled over the gravel clearing like a fine powder, but the atmosphere around the vegetable carts was entirely frozen.

Isaac Barlow stood motionless behind his modest timber-framed wagon, his large, farm-hardened hands resting flat against the rough wood of an empty turnip crate. He wore his unadorned gray Quaker coat despite the blistering sun, his chin held high, though his gray eyes were locked in a silent stare. The square was packed with townspeople – lumberjacks, teamsters, and housewives – but a wide, deliberate gap of ten feet separated his wagon from the rest of the market.

Josiah Chappel, the Lafayette Street blacksmith, stepped out of the crowd, his leather apron smudged with soot as he stopped just short of the timber curbs. He didn't carry his usual jovial greeting; his face was grim, his arms crossed tightly against his chest.

“Thy coins are legal tender, Isaac,” Chappel said, his voice dropping into forced emphasis to carry across the gravel. “But the community has no room for thy produce today. The grist mills have already closed their gates to thy spring wheat harvest.”

Isaac did not flinch, nor did he raise his voice to match the low murmur of agreement rippling through the dockworkers nearby. “The earth is the Lord’s, Josiah, and the fullness thereof,” Isaac said, his voice carrying the deep, serene cadence of the meetinghouse. “A contract

signed in ink by secular men at the Huff's Hotel does not alter the duty a man owes to God. The peace testimony is not a cloak we discard whenever the weather turns foul."

"The town sent its youth off to die while thy boy signed the roll just to hide behind a blue coat!" a teamster shouted from the third file of the crowd, his words laced with an unvarnished, bitter grief. "While our lads are bleeding in Virginia, thee sits safe behind thy plow and refuses to send a single hand to help the state! Thy wheat smells of cowardice and treason, old man!"

"My son Thomas chose his own path, and he carries his own blood on his hands this hour," Isaac whispered, the words trembling with an awful, unyielding finality that caused the surrounding crowd to pause. He looked directly into Chappel's eyes, his unblinking dignity an accusation. "But the Light within me does not allow for malice. If thee will not grind my grain, the wheat will rot in the barn bins as a judgment upon this house. I will take my team back to the bluffs, and I will pray that thy conscience finds peace."

Without another word, Isaac gripped the leather reins of his mule team, his boots heavy in the mud as he turned the wagon away from the market planks alone, entirely ostracized by the town that had once cheered his son to history.

* * *

The sun was dipping behind the jagged, limestone spine of Sugar Loaf Bluff, throwing long, skeletal shadows across the unplowed rows of the Barlow farm. The air had turned sharp and bitter, carrying the damp chill of the spring evening.

Martha Barlow stood on the timber porch of the homestead, her hands methodically drying themselves on her coarse apron. She had been listening for the familiar, slow creak of the wooden flatbed wagon for hours. When the mule team finally rounded the bend of the Mankato

road, her chest tightened. The mules moved with a heavy, dejected gait, and the wagon bed sat low – too low.

As Isaac guided the team into the barnyard, the amber twilight caught the white canvas tarps stretched tight across the back. They hadn't been touched. The sacks of spring wheat were stacked exactly as they had been loaded that morning, unground, unrefined, and entirely rejected.

Isaac did not call out to her. He climbed down from the bench with the stiff, mechanical movements of a man whose bones had grown old in a single afternoon. He didn't look at his wife as he unhitched the leather reins, his forehead pressing for a long moment against the damp flank of the lead mule.

Martha stepped off the porch, her boots striking the hard-packed dirt with a quiet, unhurried cadence. She did not weep, nor did she let out the frantic voices of the townswomen she had seen clustering around the telegraph office waiting for news from their boys. She walked straight to the side of the wagon, her small, calloused fingers lifting the edge of the canvas to look at the stenciled lettering on the burlap: T.W. BARLOW – WINONA.

“They shut the grist mill gates, then,” Martha said softly, her voice a calm, serene anchor against the cold wind howling off the bluffs.

“Amos turned the team around before the wheels even hit the loading planks,” Isaac confirmed in a dejected voice that shook with an awful weight. He finally lifted his head, his face a pale, weathered mask of deep grief.

“Alexander Miller was there with three teamsters from the timber docks. They called this harvest the bread of copperheads, Martha. They said any man who grinds our grain is an enemy to the state. The town... the town has closed its ledger to this house entirely.”

Isaac turned his back to her, staring blankly into the dark shadows of the barn where Thomas's old wood-axe still sat embedded in the chopping block. "It is a judgment, wife. The Lord has looked upon this roof and seen our boy's broken vows. Thomas took up the sword of Cain, and now the soil is cursed beneath our feet. Let the wheat rot in the bins. We are being punished for sins we cannot repent."

Martha's gray eyes flared with a quiet but strong intensity that shattered across the yard. She stepped directly into his space, her small frame straightening to its full height, her hands physically grabbing the lapels of his gray Quaker coat to force him to look down at her face.

"Thee will not speak of our boy as a curse, Isaac Barlow," Martha said, her carefully measured words dropping like heavy iron weights between them. Her voice was thin, but it carried the fierce, stubborn strength of a mother who had spent her winters mending the fences local agitators tore down by night. "Thomas is not Cain. He is a lad with a mixed-up head who was trapped between thy pride and the smiles of that Sterling girl. If he is bleeding on a battlefield this hour, he is doing what he thinks is righteous to keep the madness from reaching this porch."

She released her grip and whirled toward the wagon, her hands grabbing the heavy corner of a sixty-pound sack of wheat. With a raw, animal grunt of exertion that caused her lean shoulders to bunch beneath her shawl, she dragged the bag to the edge of the tailboard, letting it hit the dirt floor with a loud, hollow thud.

"Our meetinghouse stays silent because they all fear the town's anger," Martha thundered, a single, private tear faintly cutting through the flour dust caked on her cheek. "And thee wants to sit by a cold hearth and pray for a graveyard to hide thy secrets in? I will not have it, Isaac. Amos's ledger does not govern the Light within this house, and Alexander Miller's

dock hands do not own the breath in my lungs. If the grist mills will not take our grain, then we will use the hand-mortar in the kitchen. We will grind every bushel ourselves until our knuckles bleed and the skin splits on our palms.”

She picked up the fallen sack, balancing the rough burlap expertly against her hip, her chin held high against the dark profile of the bluff.

“We are going to sow the north pasture tomorrow, husband. And we are going to keep this homestead whole until the boy who left these bluffs walks back through that door. Now take the mules to the stable, clean the trail grease off thy face, and let us see if we can’t invent a way to live through the winter without the town’s blessing.”

Isaac stared at his wife, stunned into absolute silence by the unyielding ferocity in her eyes. For the first time since the *War Eagle* had carried their son away, the fog left his thoughts. He nodded once, a slow, submissive acknowledgement, and reached out his large hands to take the heavy load from her shoulders. He set the sack down and reached out to her hands, locking their fingers together in the freezing dark of the barnyard as they prepared to face their isolation as one.

* * *

Catherine Sterling stood by the wide parlor window of the Harriet Street estate, her fingers stained with the black ink of the family shipping ledgers. Her father, George Sterling, sat by the hearth, his chest heaving with a deep, systemic cough that grew more desperate with each passing week. The ruthless timber magnate was fading, his physical decline forcing Catherine to take full command of the sprawling operations on the levee. She no longer wore the bright,

unburdened dresses of a socialite; her dark blue linen gown was practical, its pockets stuffed with freight receipts and tallies of wheat shipments bound for the Union armies in the East.

Thomas's last letter lay open beside Catherine's shipping ledger, weighted flat with an inkwell so the river draft would not turn the page. She had answered it three weeks earlier with the gentlest boundary she could manage, and she had not moved it off the desk since.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the heavy clatter of boots on the veranda. Sarah Miller, her closest companion, pushed through the door without greeting. At eighteen, Sarah's youthful wonderment had vanished, replaced by a sharp, hollow grief. Her family had received word that Sam's regiment was being packed into crowded troop transports bound for the deadly swamps of the Virginia Peninsula.

"My uncle Alexander says the Barlows are still praying for the peace of the slaveholders," Sarah said, her voice thin and bitter as she dropped a bundle of wool bandages onto the parlor table. Her uncle, Alexander Miller, the foreman of the Sterling docks, had spearhead a cruel local boycott against Isaac Barlow's farm, branding the Quaker family as cowards and copperheads. "He says while Sam and William are bleeding in the mud, old Isaac is getting rich off the wheat market and refusing to send a single hand to help the state."

"Isaac Barlow stands by his faith, Sarah, and he is not getting rich with his small farm." Catherine said gently, though her own heart ached with the memory of Martha Barlow looking right through her in the dry goods store. "We cannot measure their courage by our noise."

"It is easy to have faith when your house isn't empty," Sarah shot back, her eyes pooling with sudden, angry tears before she turned back to the kitchen to help with the Sanitary Commission supplies.

Chapter 9: The Peninsula and the West Woods

The steel hull of the transport ship scraped heavily against the wooden piers of Fort Monroe as the 1st Minnesota stepped onto the tip of the Virginia Peninsula in April 1862. The vast stone fortress towered above the waters of Hampton Roads, but the regiment did not linger in its shadow. They were instantly sent marching northwest into a nightmare of gray mud, stagnant water, and toxic malaria that rose from the Virginia swamps.

They were on the wharf long enough to see who else was there. Beyond the commissary sheds, in the burned-out shell of Hampton village, a second town had grown up out of scrap lumber, sailcloth, and salvaged brick — hundreds of men, women, and children who had walked out of the Virginia counties and put themselves behind Federal guns. The army called them contraband, a word borrowed from the law of seizure, because the government had not yet decided what else to call a person who had freed himself without waiting to be freed. They cut the wood, dug the trenches, drove the teams, and washed the linen for the same army that could not settle on a name for them.

A gray-headed man named Ephraim was stacking commissary barrels beside the Minnesota files, working with the unhurried economy of somebody who had done heavy labor his whole life and expected to do it tomorrow. Sam asked him, in the frank way Sam asked

everyone everything, how far he had come. “Nansemond County,” the man said, without stopping his hands. “Nine nights walking. My wife and the two youngest are yonder in the brick row. My oldest boy is still on that farm, and I mean to be standing in this yard when he walks out of it.” Thomas asked him what he did when the Federal pickets first challenged him on the road. Ephraim looked at him then, a long, level look that took in the new wool coat and the rifle and the whole of him. “I told them I was property,” he said, “and I had come to be seized.”

Thomas thought about that for the whole first mile of the road, and for a good many miles after. He had stood in his father’s barnyard and asked whether slavery was not darkness too, and he had asked it the way a man argues a point — as something to be weighed against the peace testimony and set down again. Ephraim had not argued anything. He had walked nine nights through the pine woods and used the enemy’s own word for himself because it was the only word that would carry his family through the gate. Whatever else the Republic was buying with the Winona boys, Thomas thought, it was buying that brick row in the ruins of Hampton, and no ledger he had ever seen was ruled so a man could enter such a thing on either side of the page.

The rain had been falling since dawn, transforming the single, narrow road from Fort Monroe into a bottomless canal of red Virginia mud. The Winona Volunteers marched with their heads looking down at the ground, their wool uniforms soaked through until they weighed twice their issue, and their boots making a wet, rhythmic ‘schlock-schlock-schlock’ with every step. On their shoulders sat the dead weight of their shovels and pickaxes – the instruments of General McClellan's plan to dig to Richmond and victory.

Sam Miller suddenly lost his footing. His left boot disappeared up to the ankle in a soup of red clay, causing him to lurch sideways and plant the iron blade of his spade directly into the mud with a loud, squishing thunk.

“Fire and furies, boys, drop your anchors!” Sam whooped, his farm-boy grin breaking through the mask of wet grime on his face as he wrestled his foot free with a sound like a dying mule. “I’ve found it! I’ve officially located the bottom of the southern rebellion! It’s exactly twelve inches beneath the mud of this highway, and it’s trying to steal my socks!”

A few men in the file let out low, wet chuckles, their shoulders dropping an inch from the tension.

Thad Vance, marching just ahead with his civilian-bought oilskin cape pulled tight over his corporal stripes, didn't turn around. “Keep your mouth shut, Miller, and keep the file tight and close. Some of us are trying to maintain a soldierly cadence instead of playing the turnip-patch fool.”

“Oh, a soldierly cadence in three feet of river mud?” Sam laughed, wiping a spray of rainwater from his eyes as he balanced his shovel on his shoulder like a logging axe. He nudged Thomas Barlow with his elbow. “Hey, Tom, did you see the grand engineering notice the staff officers posted back at the fortress? They said we weren't being marched down here to fight the rebs at all. No, sir! President Lincoln looked at the maps and realized the state of Virginia was just entirely too high on one side, so he sent the 1st Minnesota down with spades to level the whole territory out so the St. Paul politicians could lay down a nice, flat horse-racing track!”

The surrounding Winona boys erupted into a sudden chorus of rough, splashing laughter that seemed to lift the heavy gray mist from their files.

“It’s a strategic *excavation*, Sam,” Jimmy Lewis called out from the third file, his intellectual brow squinting against the dripping rain. “McClellan believes the spade is mightier than the sword.”

“The spade is certainly heavier than the sword, philosopher!” Sam hollered back, his boots splashing cheerfully into a pooled wagon rut. “I asked the sergeant why the high command gave a farm boy like me a shovel instead of a proper piece of artillery. You know what MacInnis told me? He said, 'Miller, the Union army runs on strict scientific principles. We know you don't know how to shoot a rebel officer, but we are absolutely certain you know how to ditch a field of winter wheat before the frost hits! Now dig that trench until you reach the center of China!’”

“Did he say whether women Celestials like a volunteer in blue, Sam?” a voice shouted from the rear of the company, sparking another wave of loud, genuine chuckles that rippled down the column.

“They love 'em!” Sam shouted back, swinging his cap wildly in the rain. “But only if you can dig a ditch fast enough to keep your corporal from melting in a light summer shower!”

Tom Barlow looked down at his own spade, and a faint, rare smile broke through the trail grime before he could stop it. The march toward the Yorktown trenches was still a grinding descent into misery, but for the next mile, the Winona Volunteers moved forward with a lighter, faster cadence, their boots breaking the red Virginia mud with the rowdy strength of the river logging crews.

For Company K, the Peninsula Campaign was a slow, grinding descent into brutality. During the month-long Siege of Yorktown, they did not engage in grand charges; instead, they dug endless trenches under a relentless, dripping rain, their wool uniforms never truly drying.

The withdrawal of the Confederate army from the muddy, waterlogged trenches of Yorktown in early May did not bring rest to Company K; it brought a forced, exhausting pursuit through the toxic undergrowth of the Virginia Peninsula. The relentless rains of the tidewater spring had turned the bottomless roads into a sprawling bog of gray mud and stagnant, knee-deep

pools. Thomas Barlow marched with his head down, his broad farm-boy shoulders bearing the dead weight of his rifle, his cartridge box, and a wool blanket that had not been truly dry since April.

Around him, the proud hundred and one Winona Volunteers who had boarded the *War Eagle* were visibly wasting away from disease. The swamps were a silent killer, taking more men than rebel lead. Tom watched as the muscled lumberjacks of the company slowly succumbed to chronic diarrhea, malaria, and typhoid, their hollow eyes staring blankly from the canvas hospital tents.

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By late May, the division had finally come to within five miles of the church spires of Richmond. On the night of May 30, a violent, blinding thunderstorm struck the region, causing the Chickahominy River to rise in a roaring, treacherous flood that cut General McClellan's army completely in two. In the pitch black of the following afternoon, the 1st Minnesota was ordered to double-quick across Grapevine Bridge – a shaky, submerged corduroy structure that floated wildly on the rushing black waters. The sheer physical weight of the Minnesotans held the shifting pine logs down just long enough for the entire brigade to cross, saving the isolated Federal corps on the southern bank from total piecemeal destruction.

Plunging off the floating logs, they slogged straight towards a chaotic battle near a railway station called Fair Oaks. The air was a deafening, terrifying assault of musketry and the high-pitched, piercing shrieks of the Rebel Yell in the distance.

Minutes before the regiment was ordered to dress its line and advance into the thick brush, the company halted behind a low clay bank. Thomas knelt in the mud, methodically

checking the percussion cap on his cone. His gray eyes were dead and narrow, his conscience locked tight against the memories of the quiet farm kitchen under Sugar Loaf Bluff.

“Barlow.” A voice boomed behind him.

Thomas looked up. Sergeant Donald “Mac” MacInnis stood towering over him, his face, carved out of northern pine, caked in river residue and black powder grime. He didn't carry his drill-master swagger now; his sleeves were rolled up, his knuckles raw from hauling supply wagons through the swamp bogs. Jimmy Lewis sat a pace away, his thin frame shivering against the embankment, a damp book of philosophy tucked uselessly beneath his cartridge belt.

MacInnis spat a stream of dark tobacco juice into the mud and looked Thomas directly in the eye. “Get those spare paper cartridges distributed to the third file, Barlow. And make sure the boys keep their caps dry.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” Thomas promptly answered, his voice even and level.

MacInnis didn't move away immediately. He looked at Thomas's broad, untiring frame – the lean muscle that had cleared timber and dug trenches now serving as the physical anchor of the company details. “I watched you on the Grapevine logs last night, lad. When the St. Paul boys wavered and the horses went into the current, you didn't look back once. You kept your shoulder to the timber and held the bridge down for the whole line.”

Thomas kept his eyes fixed on his weapon. “The logs needed holding, Sergeant.”

“It's more than the logs,” MacInnis said, his voice dropping to a low, gravelly rasp that carried a deep, unvarnished sincerity. “The drilling at Fort Snelling... I was hard on you for your Quaker hesitation. I thought you had a yellow streak down your back. But by God, I was wrong. You've out-worked, out-marched, and out-stood every veteran lumberjack in this company since we hit the Peninsula. If every volunteer in this regiment carried themselves with your quiet

endurance, we'd be sleeping in the Richmond capitol tonight instead of rotting in this swamp. You're a true soldier of the line, Barlow. Remember that when the bugle blows."

As MacInnis stepped down the line to check the adjacent file, Jimmy Lewis let out a slow, ragged breath, his intellectual eyes fixed on the sulfur smoke rising above the oaks. "The sergeant has officially baptized you, Tom. He's wiped away the Quaker and given you the state's blessing."

"I don't want his blessing, Jimmy," Thomas whispered, his hand instinctively sliding into his waistcoat pocket to press against the cold, hard outline of Catherine Sterling's silver match-case. "He looks at me and sees a machine that doesn't tire. He thinks because I don't complain about the bogs, I've forgotten who I am." The words '*who are you*' keep pounding in his head.

"We've all forgotten, Tom," Jimmy said softly, pulling his collar tight against the rising mist as the distant roll of a Federal artillery battery began to vibrate through the clay bank beneath their knees. "Look at this ground. We crossed a floating bridge over a flooded river just to stand in a swamp and shoot men we don't know. History isn't a classroom anymore. It's an appetite. And it's eating up the Winona boys one by one."

Thomas stood and wrapped both hands around the cold barrel of his Springfield as the bugle signaled the advance. Fear still moved beneath his discipline, but it no longer controlled his hands. "Close up the files, Jimmy," he said. "Keep your muzzle down. Let's get through the trees together."

They plunged into the carnage of Fair Oaks. Thomas tore cartridges, rammed charges, and fired when the gray line appeared between the trees. Training controlled his hands, but fear and conscience remained close beneath the motions. Each volley made the next one easier, and that frightened him more than the Rebel yell or the bodies sinking into the swamp mud.

* * *

Then came the Seven Days. A week of relentless, bloody retreats as General Robert E. Lee hammered the Union flanks. At Savage's Station on June 29, General Edwin V. Sumner ordered to plug the gap against the South Carolina brigade of Joseph Kershaw. The regiment formed a desperate rearguard line along the Old Williamsburg Road, their volleys tearing into the advancing gray ranks in a frantic attempt to buy time for the army's supply trains. The 1st Minnesota tenaciously held its position until withdrawing at around 10:00 p.m. in the cover of a nighttime thunderstorm. Another 60 casualties to the regiment were the wounded were left behind in a field hospital where they ended up being captured by the enemy.

On the morning of June 30, the Minnesota men found themselves at the end of an all-night march across the White Oak Swamp. They were sent to Glendale and thrown into the battle to secure the crossroads. Trading heavy volleys with the rebel assaults, they held the line until midnight.

By July 1, they reached the high ground of Malvern Hill totally exhausted from the marching and the rear-guard actions. Held in reserve just behind the massed Federal artillery, Thomas lay flat in the clover as over fifty Union cannons shattered the Confederate infantry charges with a murderous fire of grape and canister. The hill was a literal slaughterhouse, the air vibrating with the horrific shriek of iron.

Company K had gone into the Yorktown trenches back in April with eighty men of the original hundred and one. Coming down off Malvern Hill, fewer than sixty answered the roll. Dysentery, typhoid, and chronic malaria had taken most of the rest.

By Harrison's Landing, half the Winona volunteers were gone. Disease had hollowed out the company as surely as rebel fire, and the survivors no longer spoke of glory. General McClellan reviewed the 1st Minnesota and called it one of the two model regiments in the army, but the compliment rang thin beside the tents of the sick and the graves left behind. The campaign had failed to take Richmond, and in its failure had revealed a new Confederate commander – General Robert E. Lee – who would not retreat from the war's terrible arithmetic.

Captain William Sterling spent his evenings in the tent of the division staff, his tailored coat pristine, while Thomas sat alone in the mire, his boots caked in Virginia clay. He had received Catherine's letter weeks before. He had read it until the ink ran from the damp, understanding its polite cruelty perfectly. He tucked it into his pocket next to the small silver match-case, his heart as cold and hardened as the iron barrel of his rifle.

Thomas found a quiet moment and decided to send Cathy a letter. He wrote it standing up, using the flat of his cartridge box for a desk, and finished it in less time than it took his coffee to cool.

Catherine,

The Peninsula has swallowed up half our boys. Disease takes more than Minié balls. William is a Captain now and spends his evenings with the regimental staff. We rarely speak, though he sent a pair of boots to my tent last week. I left them in the mud. I read your last letter until the ink ran from the damp. I understand your meaning perfectly. Forgive a foolish boy from the bluffs for forgetting his place. There is no confusion in my mind, nor has there been since we were children. But I will not speak of it again. The Union you love so dearly is costing us everything.

Enjoy the summer grain harvest. T.W.

* * *

The steady, rhythmic thud-thud-thud of the steam-powered sawmills across the levee vibrated straight through the floorboards of the Sterling offices, but inside, the air was entirely frozen.

Catherine Sterling sat at her father's heavy walnut desk, her fingers tightly pinning down the frayed edges of the Winona Republican. Beside her lay a sprawling company ledger, its white pages no longer filled with freight tallies of white pine or spring wheat, but with a handwritten roster of local names. Across the room, Sarah Miller sat by a small wooden stove, her hands moving with a frantic, mechanical speed as she knitted a pair of coarse gray wool socks for the Sanitary Commission.

"That makes forty-two, Sarah," Cathy said, her voice dropping into forced emphasis to fill the spaces between the sawmill thumps. She dipped her steel nib pen into the black ink, drawing a dark, final line through a name on the page. "Forty-two boys from this county who won't be returning to the planks before the autumn frost. Amos's youngest boy died of the swamp fever at Harrison's Landing. He was only seventeen."

Sarah didn't look up from her knitting needles, but her movements suddenly hitched, a single loop of gray yarn slipping from the steel point. She picked the stitch back up without a word and went on.

"Sam wrote to me about that fever, Cathy," Sarah whispered, her voice carrying a stark, unvarnished wisdom that she had carved entirely out of the letters tucked inside her apron pocket. She stopped her needles, her thumbs tracing the creased, grease-stained edges of a cheap camp envelope. "He says the Virginia mud doesn't just stick to your boots – it gets right inside

your lungs. He told me that during the long weeks at Yorktown, the boys would lie in the trenches under a dripping rain until their wool uniforms grew stiff with mold.”

She pulled the folded paper out, her eyes skipping down lines of Sam’s familiar, loopy handwriting.

“He tried to make a joke of it, of course,” Sarah said, a faint, fleeting ghost of a smile touching her lips before dying away. “He told me they were given heavy iron spades to dig their way straight to Richmond. He said he asked Tom Barlow if the women Celestials in China would appreciate a volunteer in blue wool if we dug too deep. But then... at the bottom of the page, the jokes stopped.”

Catherine lowered her pen, her hazel eyes fixing on her friend's pale face. “What did he say, Sarah?”

“He said Tom has turned into an absolute machine of iron,” Sarah said, her voice trembling slightly as she read the ink. “He says while the rest of the Winona boys are wasting away from the dysentery and the shaking ague, Tom never tires. He carries two men's gear on the road, he holds the floating log bridges down in the middle of flooded rivers, and Sergeant MacInnis told the whole company that Thomas is the only true soldier of the line they've got.”

Sarah lifted her gaze, her eyes locking onto Catherine's with a piercing, adult intensity that caused Catherine's throat to tighten.

“But Sam wrote that it frightens him to look at him now, Cathy. He says Tom hasn’t laughed since Yorktown. Not once, not at anything, and Sam has tried every trick he owns. He says he watched him eat a full ration standing up in the rain beside a man who had died in the night, and never once look down. And Sam asked me...” she looked down as she finished, “he asked me if you were still checking the veranda for the mail.”

Catherine turned her head back toward the window, her hand instinctively dropping into her apron pocket to trace the cold, metallic edges of the brass company seal stamp. The image of Tom spinning her through the dust to the blare of the brass horns flooded her senses – his rough, calloused hand holding hers with a desperate, unspoken need to be worthy of her world.

“I wrote to him, Sarah,” Catherine whispered, her chest drawing a tight, agonizing breath. “I drew a line. I told him he was like a second brother to this house. I thought... I thought it was the diplomatic thing to do. I thought it would keep him steady for William's sake.”

“Then you gave him a shield he didn’t want, Cathy,” Sarah said softly, setting her knitting down on the table with a slow, deliberate finality. “Sam says Tom carries your face into the smoke like a holy relic, but he isn’t fighting for the Republic or the Great Cause. He’s fighting the myth you made for him. And every time you write to him about being a brother, you are just ramming another ball down his barrel. If he survives the fire in the East, he won’t be the dear friend you’re counting on to keep William safe. Sam says the war is eating his soul.”

Catherine stood up and paced the length of the study while the heavy clatter of the sawmill gears echoed outside. On the desk behind her the ledger lay open to the day’s work — white pine, spring wheat, forty-two names — all of it entered in the same hand, in the same ink, on the same page.

Chapter 10: The Guns of August and September

The reprieve was brief. By late August, the regiment was rushed back up the Potomac by steamer, arriving just in time to serve as the rearguard for the broken forces retreating from the Second Battle of Bull Run.

The air hung like a heavy sheet of yellow dust over the war-torn landscape of northern Virginia. The 1st Minnesota Infantry was marching double-quick through the suffocating haze, their faces blackened with trail soot, their boots kicking up dry plumes of red clay. They were moving south-southwest toward the roaring, rhythmic rumble of heavy artillery echoing from the old Manassas plains – the catastrophic collapse of the Union Army of Virginia at the Second Battle of Bull Run.

The road was a scene of absolute chaos. Panicked Federal supply wagons, unhitched teamsters, and disorganized columns of retreating, weaponless soldiers surged backward past the Minnesota line, their eyes wide with the primal terror of defeat. But the 1st Minnesota did not break their files. Assigned to serve as the iron rearguard for the broken army, the thinned ranks of Company K marched with their teeth gritted and their bayonets drawn. Thomas Barlow kept his head down, his broad, farm-hardened shoulders effortlessly bearing the dead weight of his

rifle. Beside him, Sam Miller no longer cracked jokes about the salt pork; his jaw was set, his uniform caked in the dust of three states.

By nightfall, the frantic retreat had slowed to a grim, exhausted halt near Centreville. The air turned crisp, carrying the acrid, heavy stink of burning ammunition wagons and the sulfurous fog that drifted from the battlefields.

Thomas sat on a fallen pine log near the picket line, his oil rag methodically gliding down the iron receiver of his rifle. Jimmy Lewis slouched onto the dry pine needles beside him, cradling a dented tin cup of muddy water. His thin, intellectual face was drawn, his fingers shaking slightly from the long miles of the march.

“The great Union army is running backwards again, Tom,” Jimmy said softly, his voice dropping into that serious, universal cadence that always eased the muddle in Thomas's thoughts. “We spent three months bleeding in the Peninsula swamps just to march right back to the same dirt where we started last summer. It makes the whole national crusade look less like progress and more like a cruel, repetitive wheel.”

Tom didn't look up from his weapon. “The wheel doesn't care about our strategy, philosopher. It just grinds. My father always said when man relies on his own vanity to build a Republic, the foundation is bound to be washed away in blood.”

“Your father saw the world as a static ledger of sin and grace,” Jimmy noted, looking up through the pine branches at the fractured moon. “But this war isn't a ledger, Tom. It's a transformation. Look at the men in the tents tonight. We aren't the enthusiastic boys who cheered the *War Eagle* or typeset the *Berryville Conservator*. We've been stripped of the romance. We are becoming the very iron we carry.”

Tom paused, his calloused thumb tracing the edge of his waistcoat pocket where Catherine's letters sat like a heavy, cold anchor against his ribs. "And what happens to the parts of us that were gentle, Jimmy? Sam has taken to counting. He told his sister I haven't laughed since Yorktown, and he had the number ready when he wrote it. She wrote back that our letters are just fuel keeping a furnace hot."

"The gentleness has to be traded away to pay for the line, Tom," Jimmy said with a deep, sorrowful certainty, resting his hand flat against the rough wood of the log between them. "If we carry our old parlor virtues into battle, the crossfire will tear us apart before the first volley is fired. The sin isn't that you've hardened your heart; the sin would be leaving the line open for the madness to cross back over the Mississippi to Catherine's veranda. We bear this hardening so that her world doesn't have to."

Thomas looked down at his calloused hands, then slid his oil rag back into his kit box and buckled the flap. "Then let the wheel turn, Jimmy. Close your eyes, catch your breath, and let's make sure the war machine keeps us whole tomorrow."

* * *

The heavy canvas flaps of the brigade headquarters tent snapped violently in the damp, midnight wind howling across the Maryland hills. Inside, a single tallow candle guttered on the corner of a folding camp table, its greasy amber light flickering across a sprawling, ink-stained topographical map of a small creek called the Antietam.

Brigadier General Alfred Sully sat cross-legged on a wooden camp stool, a short, blackened briar pipe clenched between his teeth. His unbuttoned general's frock coat was stiff with trail dust and the gray mud of the Potomac watch. He didn't look up when the tent flaps

parted; his thumb methodically traced a contour line near a property marked David Miller's Cornfield.

"You're dragging your boots, Captain Sterling," Sully said, his voice a low, gravelly rumble that sounded like grinding river gravel. "The morning scouts report Lee's rearguard is already establishing batteries on the Sharpsburg ridge, and your files look more like a funeral procession than a vanguard."

Captain William Sterling stepped into the tent, removing his salt-encrusted officer's cap. His tailored blue coat, once the envy of the Winona levee, was frayed at the cuffs, the gold lace tarnished to a dull bronze by the Virginia swamps. He clutched his leather morning report against his ribs with a hand that shook slightly from pure, bone-deep exhaustion.

"The men have been marching double-quick for twelve hours on parched corn and mud, General," William said, his voice thinned by the hollow fatigue of an officer who had spent the evening counting empty canvas tents. "Company K is down to forty effective men. Forty. We left Fort Snelling with over a hundred of the finest frontier lumberjacks the state could muster."

Sully finally lifted his head, his sharp, dark eyes locking onto William's bloodless face through a haze of pungent tobacco smoke. He spat a stream of dark juice into a brass spittoon at his feet. "I know the tally, Captain. I led those boys through the Chickahominy bogs myself when I wore the colonel's eagles. I know the shape of the muscle we lost at Fair Oaks and Savage's Station."

"Then you know we cannot hold a standard horizontal line of battle if the Mississippians hit our flank in the brush," William insisted, stepping closer to the table, his hand instinctively dropping to check his watch before catching himself. He slammed the leather ledger flat onto the map between them. "Look at the muster, General! The ague and the shaking fever have taken

more of my Winona volunteers than Rebel iron. If you order the 1st Minnesota into the center of the next fight without reinforcements, you aren't asking us to hold a line – you're asking me to lead a slaughter.”

Sully didn't shout. He didn't slam his fist against the timber. Instead, he slowly took the pipe from his mouth, his weathered, frontier-hardened face twisting into a grim, unblinking mask of strategic calculation.

“This isn't the frontier territory anymore, Captain,” Sully said softly, his words dropping like iron weights into the quiet tent. “Out here, the high command doesn't measure a regiment by the comfort of its men or the wealth of their shipping names back home. McClellan needs a wall of blue wool to throw into Lee’s left flank, and the 1st Minnesota happens to be the sturdiest iron he’s got left in the II Corps. If I tell the general your regiment’s companies are too thin to fight, he’ll just replace us with a batch of raw Pennsylvania recruits who will break and run the second the first shell screams through the oaks.”

He stood up, his broad shoulders casting a massive, predatory shadow across the canvas walls as he leaned over the map, his pointer finger pinning the exact location of the West Woods. Captain Sterling knew what he said was true. Raw recruits would not stand a chance.

“Your company has forty men left, Sterling? Then those forty men will have to march with the strength of four hundred. You have that Quaker lad in your ranks – Barlow. My scouts tell me he hauled out a supply wagon out of a bottomless clay ditch near Centreville by his own broad shoulders while the teamsters were running for the brush. He didn't ask for a furlough, and he didn't check his watch for the history books.”

William's hand, already halfway to his waistcoat, stopped where it was. Sully stepped around the table, placing a heavy, rough hand flat against William's tarnished shoulder strap, his gaze piercing through the captain's aristocratic defenses.

"Go back to your regiment, Captain. Clean the fouling out of your barrels, close up your files, and tell your Winona boys that when we cross the Antietam creek tomorrow, the First Brigade dresses on their colors. I don't care about the Sterling shipping lines and I damn sure don't care about your quest for fame. The Republic requires the sacrifice of our finest blood to turn this wheel, and by God, we shall give it to them in the morning."

William stared at the general for a long, silent moment, the ambitious dreams of political prominence and easy martial glory he had harbored at the Huff's Hotel rally completely evaporating in the damp Maryland air. He picked up his leather report, placed his cap back over his brow, and gave a crisp, mechanical salute.

"The line will be dressed, General," William replied through a clenched jaw.

As he stepped back out into the torrential midnight wind, the canvas clicking shut behind him, William looked across the darkened camp toward the dying embers where Tom Barlow and Jimmy Lewis sat in the grass. He reached into his waistcoat and closed his hand around the cold, smooth casing of his pocket watch. He did not open it. He stood a while in the rain with his thumb resting on the catch, and then he walked back down the line toward his own tent.

* * *

The morning of September 17, 1862, broke with a heavy, golden mist over the winding waters of Antietam Creek. By 9:00 a.m., General John Sedgwick's division of the Second Corps was ordered forward in a massive, ill-fated counter assault against the Confederate left flank.

General Joseph Hooker's 5:30 a.m. assault was driven away and now Sumner's II Corps was ordered back into the fray. At 9:00 a.m., five thousand five hundred men marched so tightly together that the iron scabbards of the men in the front file clattered rhythmically against the cold bayonets of the men behind them.

Among General John Sedgwick's division was the 12th Pennsylvania Reserves on the left side of the division moved east to west from the relative cover of the East Woods. They stepped straight into the towering corn stalks of David Miller's Cornfield. The stalks were higher than the men's uniform caps, trapping the sulfur smoke until the air sat over the ranks like a heavy blanket.

A young lieutenant from Philadelphia led his company forward. He moved with a clean, unvarnished pride, completely unburdened by any distractions. Inside his blue coat, he carried a leather-bound book of poetry, a romantic token from his dear fiancé that sat directly against his chest. To him, the national agony was still an orderly affair – a grand constitutional argument that would surely be settled before the winter frost came. He could not see five feet into the dense, rustling stalks, yet he marched with his chin high, confident in the absolute architecture of the lines.

Then, right in the center of the field, the green wall vanished in a blinding flash of fire.

John Bell Hood's Texas Brigade rose up and unleashed a shattering volley of lead straight into the Pennsylvanians' breasts. The Texans surged forward through the smoke with their fierce, piercing shriek, their muskets leveling with absolute malice. The volume of fire was a literal scythe. It mowed down the towering corn stalks clear down to the roots as if a mechanical reaper had harvested the field, leaving a carpet of blue and gray debris in the dirt.

The regiment broke into a frantic, shouting chaos as the line disintegrated. But the young lieutenant refused to run. The cause he fought for meant more than any intrusion of fear to him.

He stood alone among the bloody, falling stalks, drawing his sword his father had proudly purchased for him at a shop in Philadelphia. His face was pale, his eyes wide with a sudden, terrifying realization of the world's noise, but he raised the polished blade and desperately shouted into the fog, trying to dress his broken line by the sheer weight of his own voice.

Then a sudden explosion of Rebel artillery canister shot ripped through the oaks above. The heavy iron ball struck him squarely in the center of his chest, tearing clean through his uniform coat and disintegrating the book of poetry beneath his ribs. He spun violently and collapsed headfirst, his sword flying from his grip into the cut bloody stalks of corn.

The battle lines swept over him, leaving him behind in the sweltering kiln of the cornfield. By the time the firing finally drifted toward the Dunker Church, the proud lieutenant was just another silent form baking under the Maryland sun, his face blackening with sulfur, his identity anchored only to a single silver ring on his finger.

Three days later, when the armies had moved on and the burial details were working the field in shifts, a young woman from the Pennsylvania relief wagons walked the cut rows with a folded list in her hand. She had come down from Harrisburg with a crate of lint bandages and a letter she had not yet found a way to send. She found him near the center of the field, past all recognizing, and she knelt in the trampled stalks a long while before she worked the engraved silver ring from his finger. She did not weep where the burial men could see her. She put the ring in her apron pocket, stood up, and went back down the row to find out who was still breathing.

On the extreme right side of Sedgwick's division the 1st Minnesota, only 435 men strong, marched on the extreme right of Brigadier General Willis A. Gorman's brigade, their blue line dressing perfectly on the regimental colors.

They swept through the shattered stalks of David Miller's Cornfield, where the ground was already blanketed with thousands of dead and dying men from the morning's early fighting. The carnage was indescribable, abandoned gear, shattered artillery wheels, and the wounded and dead. The air was thick with the sulfurous stink of black powder and the constant, deafening roar of over five hundred cannons. Trying not to look down at the butchered remnants of Hooker's I Corps, the regiment moved with a steady, veteran pace and entered the dense, leafy shade of the West Woods.

As General Sully said, the 1st Minnesota Infantry held the post of honor on the extreme right of General Gorman's Brigade. They marched out of the corn stalks of David Miller's Cornfield, their boots slipping on the bloody ground and the company leaping over the dead and wounded to keep the cadence. Thomas Barlow did not look down, no one did. His broad farm-boy shoulders effortlessly bore the thirty-four pounds of his gear, his gray eyes narrowed against the blinding white glare of the sun through the smoke. Beside him, Sam Miller marched with his jaw set, his usual frontier grin completely burned away by the trail dust of the Hagerstown Pike.

"Diverge to the right! Watch the alignment on the colors!"

The command came from behind the file. Captain William Sterling, acting as the regimental adjutant, was on foot. A section of Confederate shell had torn his fine bay horse apart near the pike fence twenty minutes prior, and his tailored blue officer's coat was now caked in red dirt and bits of horse flesh. His shattered shoulder from Bull Run throbbed with a white heat under his wool strap, but he drove himself forward with his sword drawn, his face pales. Out of

reflex, his left hand dipped into his waistcoat to check his watch – the tiny heartbeat of home – before he caught himself and shoved it back against his ribs. There was no time for this now.

The regiment plunged over a terrace into the damp, leafy shadows of the West Woods. The floor of the woods was a treacherous maze of gray stone outcroppings and sunken sinkholes. The Winona Volunteers dressed its line against a low ridge, their heavy rifles leveling over the rock as they opened a cool, deliberate fire into the scattered gray lines retreating across the open fields toward the Dunker Church.

Thomas moved like a machine. He tore the paper cartridge with his teeth, poured the black powder, and rammed the lead ball home with a sharp, rhythmic thwack-clink of the rod. He did not look at the targets. He counted what was left in his cartridge box and did not look at anything else.

“By Jove, Tom, we've got 'em turning!” Sam yelled through the roar, his face black with soot as he capsized his canteen for a dry swallow.

But the line didn't hold. Sumner advanced without a single skirmisher to guard his flanks, and the trap sprung with an absolute, cataclysmic violence.

From the blind ridges to the south, William Barksdale's Mississippi Brigade and Joseph Kershaw's South Carolinians slammed directly into the exposed left flank of Sedgwick's division. The roar that followed was not a volley; it was a continuous, tearing shriek of lead that hit the three packed Federal lines like a physical hammer. The second and third lines, trapped in the limestone depressions, could not form a front without firing into the backs of the Minnesota men. The entire left of the division disintegrated into a screaming mass of blue wool and smoke.

The 82nd New York on their immediate left gave way entirely, leaving a yawning, bloody gap. Some of the Minnesotans began to face about, thinking a general retreat had been ordered through the trees.

“Hold the right! Face the colors, Company K!” William Sterling thundered, running straight into the crossfire behind the stone outcropping. He used the flat of his heavy sword to physically drive three fleeing New York stragglers back toward the rock wall, forcing them into a makeshift defensive line to cover the company's bleeding flank. His voice had lost its parade-ground elegance; it was a raw, animal bark. For a split second, his eyes met Tom's through the fog of the gunpowder – the shipping prince and the Quaker boy, bound by the same desperate promise.

Because the 1st Minnesota held their ground behind the stone ledges longer than any other regiment, the Confederate fire converged upon them with absolute malice. The volume of fire was an incredible, a deadly storm. The Winona boys brought down three separate Confederate flags, their bullets cutting a rebel flagstaff clean in two, but still, their position was a slaughterhouse.

A sudden, blinding flash of Confederate canister shot ripped through the oak leaves. The iron ball struck Sam Miller squarely in the center of his chest. The jovial, naive farm boy – Tom's best friend – was torn apart instantly beside him, his wool cap flying into the blood-soaked weeds.

“Sam!” Tom's scream was completely swallowed by the din.

He reached out, his hand catching the sleeve of Sam's jacket, but there was nothing left to pull back behind the ridge. The wet, terrifying splatter of his childhood friend's blood soaked through Thomas's blue wool, leaving dark, permanent stains across his coat. The muddle in his

head went dead and cold. He picked up his Springfield, his gray eyes tracking a gray coat through the smoke, and pulled the trigger with a fierce, unblinking hatred.

General Sully finally gave the order to fall back by the right flank to escape complete encirclement. Covered by William's desperate defensive alignment, the remnants of Company K retreated, halting every ten paces to face the enemy and preserve the eagle colors.

* * *

That night, Thomas tried to count what remained. Of the 435 men the 1st Minnesota carried into the West Woods, 122 had been killed, wounded, or reported missing in less than an hour. Company K, which had entered the campaign with about forty men fit for duty, could now assemble only around twenty. The figures would change as missing soldiers returned and wounded men were located, but the line before him was less than one-fifth the size of the 101 Winona volunteers who had formed at Fort Snelling. After twelve hours of combat and 23,000 casualties, the Battle of Antietam became the bloodiest day in American history.

Thomas sat in the dark of the West Woods property. He pulled out his pocket diary, his fingers trembling so violently that the lead pencil nearly snapped against the paper. He did not write to Catherine. He could no longer send his words to face her polite cruelty. Instead, he stared into the dark where Sam's body lay, his soul entirely hollowed out, knowing that the quiet Quaker boy who had left the Winona bluffs was buried forever beneath the blood-stained soil of Maryland.

The next morning, a sulfurous fog of Antietam had barely drifted from the blood-soaked floor of the West Woods when Captain William Sterling stumbled into the makeshift casualty collection point. His officer's coat, once tailored and immaculate, was caked in Maryland clay

and splattered with the gore of his company. He clutched his watch, his talisman – the physical anchor to his sister and his home – with a hand that shook so violently he could barely snap the casing shut.

When William saw Tom sitting on an overturned cracker box, methodically scrubbing Sam Miller's blood from his rifle, the captain's carefully polished martial composure completely shattered. Sam had been the town's golden boy, the joyous scout who had first shouted "First Smoke" from the Winona levee to signal the start of the war. Now, he was a mangled casualty left behind in the trampled clover of the West Woods.

"He's gone, Tom," Billy murmured, his voice dropping its authoritative parade-ground volume, replaced by the hollow panic of a boy from the bluffs. "Sam... I didn't see the flankers. I was checking the alignment with the company from St. Paul, and then the canister hit."

Tom did not look up. He simply ran his oil rag down the iron barrel of his Springfield. "You were looking for your glory, Billy," Thomas muttered, his voice a low, dangerous rumble that cut deeper than any Confederate Minié ball. "You were checking your watch for the history books while the Barksdale's Mississippians tore Sam apart right next to me."

William recoiled as if struck. He stood there with his mouth open and nothing in it, and after a moment he took his hand off the watch and let it drop to his side. Thomas did not look up. He turned the rifle over on his knee and started down the other side of the barrel with the rag, and the rasp of the cloth on the iron went on and on until William finally walked back across the blood-stained clearing alone.

Chapter 11: Trouble at Home

While the remnants of the 1st Minnesota buried their dead in the Maryland trenches, a different kind of violence was being systematically unleashed against the Barlow family back in Winona. Alexander Miller, the cynical foreman of the Sterling timber docks, used his nephew Sam's horrific death as a blunt weapon to drive the pacifist Quakers into complete economic ruin.

Alexander did not strike with fists; he used his structural authority over the river commerce. He began by approaching Josiah Chappel, the proprietor of the Lafayette Street blacksmith shop, and A.J. Smith, the town barber, orchestrating a formal, public boycott. The death of his nephew was devastating to him. He spent endless hours consoling his sister about the loss of Sam. He raised that boy on the levees as assuredly as if he was his own son.

"Every bushel of wheat grown by old Isaac Barlow smells of cowardice and copperhead treason," Alexander boomed across the levee docks, his words deliberately calculated to stir the bitter grief of a town missing its sons. "While our boys are being torn apart by rebel canister, the Barlows sit safe behind their plows, refusing to lift a finger for the Republic. Any man who buys their corn or shoes their horses is an enemy to the Union."

The escalation was swift and devastating...

* * *

Alexander Miller's boots struck the raised timber planks of the Sterling loading platform. The damp morning autumn air smelled of river mud and freshly sawed white pine from the mill. Around him stood three members of the Winona Farmer's Market committee, their woolen caps pulled low, their faces grimed with trail soot. Alexander didn't look down at the men; he kept his hands resting flat on the iron rim of an overturned wheat barrel. Alexander had a singular purpose to this meeting and went straight to the point.

"I will say this once, and then the evening packet comes in and I stop talking," Alexander said, his voice carrying easily over the roar of the machinery. "Last season I asked you to keep the Barlow wagon off the square. You did it, and the sky did not fall. Now I am telling you the permit comes off the book for good. Sam is in a grave in the West Woods and there is no season coming that changes that. Let the Quaker hawk his onions on the Stockton road where the crows can appreciate his pacifism. If his cart touches Market Square, every Sterling wagon rolls past your stalls without slowing down."

The chairman shifted his weight, his eyes darting between the other members of the committee and the second-story window of the Sterling office where Catherine's shadow was visible against the glass. "The bylaws require due process, Alexander. Isaac has held a seasonal permit since the territory was surveyed."

"Due process is a Minié ball in Maryland, hoss," Alexander hissed, leaning over the barrel until his face was inches from the chairman's. "Here and now, the ledger is locked. The permit comes off the book tonight, and it does not come back next season, nor the one after that."

Two hours later, the air inside the brick office of the Winona Grist Mill was suffocating. Amos, the head miller, stood with his hands buried deep in the pockets of his white flour-dusted apron, his face pale as Alexander slammed a heavy leather manifest onto the walnut desk between them.

“Listen carefully, Amos. Autumn is here and soon so will the freeze, and the railroads eastward out of La Crosse are demanding every grain of wheat this county can grind,” Alexander stated, his voice dropping into a cold, flat rumble that cut straight through the low hum of the millstones. “But you have two flatbed wagons sitting in your yard right now, piled high with burlap sacks stamped with the name Barlow.”

“Isaac’s wheat is clean, Alexander,” Amos muttered, his jaw tightening nervously as he looked out the window at the loading docks. “The grain is dry. If I turn his harvest away, the crop will rot in his barn bins.”

“Let it rot until the maggots give it flavor!” Alexander roared, striking the table with a fist that caused the inkwell to rattle. “I run the logistics contracts for the Sterling empire on this river. If you drop your stones for a family that prays for the peace of slaveholders, I’ll freeze every transit permit you need to move your flour down to the levee planks. Not a single grain of Barlow wheat gets ground in this town. You tell the old fanatic to haul his sacks back to the bluffs and watch the mold take them.”

* * *

Later that afternoon, Martha Barlow stood before the counter of the dry goods store, her gray bonnet immaculate, her aged hands resting flat and still against the worn timber planks.

The merchant behind the desk refused to look up and lock eyes with her. He kept his gaze fixed on a shelf of tin lanterns, his fingers convulsively tracing the edges of his seasonal ledger. Two of Alexander Miller's dock hands menacingly stood near the doorway, their arms crossed, their shadows long and menacing under the amber glare of the single tallow lamp.

"Martha. I cannot mark the book for thee today," the merchant whispered, his throat tightening as the dock hands shifted their weight behind him. "The line of seasonal credit is closed to your homestead. Alexander..., um, Mr. Miller says the store's alignment must dress on the loyal families first."

Martha did not flinch, nor did she let out a fractured sigh. She slowly reached into the practical apron pocket of her dark linen gown and pulled out three silver half-dollars – scarce, hard coin scavenged from her mother's old tea tin. The sharp, resonant clink of the metal against the wooden counter echoed in the quiet shop.

"The Light within me does not require thy ledger, Friend," Martha said, her voice carrying the deep, serene cadence of the meetinghouse that always forced secular men to look down. "But the law of this state requires thee to accept legal tender for the basic necessities of life. I will have the salt pork, and I will take the tallow for our lamps."

The merchant's hands trembled as he accepts the cash and returns change in coin, completely subdued by her steady, unblinking dignity. He hastily shoved the wrapped provisions across the planks, his face flushing with a sudden, burning shame as Martha took the bundle, nodded with quiet grace, and walked out into the cold Winona night alone – entirely blockaded by the town's malice, yet refusing to grant them the spectacle of her defeat.

Alexander Miller's blockade cut deep. The family carriage had been vandalized with the word COPPERHEAD smeared in river tar across the wooden panels, and the local well-digger

had refused to repair their cracked pump. Yet, Martha refused to grant the town the spectacle of her defeat. Every Tuesday morning, she dressed in her finest, unadorned gray Quaker bonnet and walked the two miles into Winona, her chin held high against the cold stares of her neighbors.

* * *

The air inside George Sterling's second-story study was thick with the suffocating odors of menthol, camphor, and dying embers. The great timber magnate sat buried beneath a mountain of heavy wool blankets, his eyes sunken and yellowed, his chest rattling violently with every ragged breath.

Catherine Sterling slammed the heavy leather ledger onto her father's walnut desk, the sharp crack shattering the quiet of the sickroom.

"Alexander Miller must be dismissed, Father. Today," Catherine demanded, her voice vibrating with an iron-willed authority that she had carved out of necessity over the past year. "He has crossed the line from labor management into outright criminal malice. He is using our company name, our wagons, and our influence on the levee to starve out the Barlow family."

George Sterling let out a weak, wet chuckle that instantly dissolved into an agonizing fit of coughing. He wiped a trace of dark phlegm from his lips with a silk handkerchief before looking up at his daughter. "Alexander... Alexander knows how to manage the men, Catherine. In the timber business... you need a wolf at the gate."

"He is not a wolf, he is a coward!" Catherine shot back, stepping closer to the bed, her face flushed with indignation. "He is hiding behind Sam's grave to settle a petty class grudge against Isaac Barlow. He openly defied my direct order on the docks yesterday. He told me

before the entire loading crew that I lacked the stomach for what this war requires, and that he answers only to you.”

The old man’s gaze sharpened, a faint flicker of his former ruthless persona flaring behind his failing eyes. “And he is right. Cathy, you are a creature of books and parlor rooms. You look out that window and see a grand, romantic Republic. But I built this business on the river. I know what moves these men. They are angry. Their sons are dying in the swamps while the Quakers sit on their gold and quote scripture. If I fire Alexander now, the dockworkers will walk off the levee before the spring logs arrive. The Sterling name will be dragged into the mud.”

“Then let it be dragged!” Catherine shouted, her usual diplomatic composure completely fracturing. “William is bleeding in Virginia, and Thomas Barlow is carrying his blood on his hands this very hour to protect your shipping lines! If we allow Alexander to destroy a family of peace in our name, then what exactly are our boys fighting to preserve? We are becoming the very tyranny we claim to be crushing!”

George Sterling stared at his daughter, stunned into a heavy silence by the sheer, unyielding ferocity in her eyes. For the first time, he did not see a sheltered socialite; he saw his own pragmatic, iron-willed blood looking back at him.

“You don’t understand the cost...” the old man whispered, his strength suddenly evaporating as he sank back into his pillows, his hand trembling as he reached for his medicine glass. “If the docks close... the army doesn’t get its timber. We lose the government contracts. Everything I built for you and William... gone.”

Catherine looked down at her father's frail, broken form for a long moment, at the medicine glass shaking against his knuckles. Then she turned away from the bed, her jaw tightening as she picked up the shipping ledger.

"You built an empire, Father, but you let a monster run the gates," Catherine said, her voice dropping to a cold, quiet rasp that filled the dark room. "If you will not break Alexander Miller, then I will. I am running the ledgers now, and I will freeze every asset and lumber contract he needs to operate until he either bows to this office or starves on the levee himself. The Sterling name belongs to the living now, not the dying."

Without waiting for his response, Catherine swept out of the room, the heavy oak door clicking shut behind her, leaving the timber magnate alone with his failing lungs and the ruins of his fading authority.

* * *

The afternoon sun beat down ruthlessly on the high clay banks of the Stockton road, baking the ruts into dangerous, bone-dry ridges. This was not the smooth, timber-planked thoroughfare of Winona's Front Street. It was an isolated, heavily rutted back trail used mostly by lumber teams and out-of-way farmers, miles from the bustling commerce of the levee.

Elijah Penrose sat atop his family's wooden flatbed wagon, his large, sun-browned hands loosely holding the leather reins of his team. His unadorned gray Quaker coat felt heavy in the dense humidity, but his thoughts were heavier. Ever since the *War Eagle* had carried Sam Miller and Thomas Barlow away, a suffocating silence had descended on the local meetinghouse. The elders preached compliance, quiet labor, and absolute distance from the town's martial madness.

They said Thomas had chosen the path of Cain by putting on the blue wool, and that the Barlow house must bear its cross alone.

Elijah had tried to keep his head down, to find peace in the simple, rhythmic turning of the soil on his family's land. But the shame of his own safety sat on his chest like a wet millstone.

As his wagon rounded a sharp bend beneath a limestone outcropping, Elijah pulled the reins, bringing his horses to a sudden, creaking halt.

A hundred yards ahead, parked precariously on the crumbling edge of a muddy ditch, was Isaac Barlow's modest vegetable cart. One of the old mule's iron shoes had split, and the animal hung its head, parched and lathered in white sweat. Behind the cart stood Isaac. The fifty-six-year-old Quaker looked entirely diminished, his broad farmer's shoulders permanently rounded under the weight of the town's economic blockade. His gray bonnet was stained with road dust, and his large, calloused hands held a single, bruised turnip out toward the empty, wind-swept road.

There was no one there to buy. No housewives, no teamsters, no merchants. Only the crows circling the dry thistle stalks by the wayside.

Elijah felt a sudden, sharp lance of agony pierce his chest. This was Isaac Barlow – the man who had stood as the absolute rock of their faith, a elder whose unyielding voice had once commanded the silence of the meetinghouse. Now, he was reduced to a phantom, hawking wilted greens to the gravel.

Elijah scrambled down from his wagon bench, his boots hitting the dry clay with a loud, frantic crunch as he sprinted toward the cart.

“Friend Isaac,” Elijah breathed, his voice trembling as he stopped beside the broken wheel. He looked into the elder’s face and was horrified by what he saw. Isaac’s eyes were wide, vacant, and fixed on the empty horizon, locked in the vault of despair that had taken him since the grist mills turned his wheat away.

Isaac did not turn his head. He kept his hand extended, his fingers convulsively tightening around the turnip. “A contract signed in ink at the Huff’s Hotel does not alter the law of the Lord, Thomas,” Isaac muttered, his voice a low, gravelly rasp that barely carried over the wind. He was speaking to the empty air, his muddled thoughts confusing Elijah with his banished son. “I told the blacksmith... the peace testimony cannot be discarded. But the people... the people wouldn’t even buy the onions. They said the bread smells of treason.”

“Isaac, it’s Elijah. Elijah Penrose,” the youth said fiercely, stepping directly into the old man’s line of sight, his hands reaching out to firmly grasp Isaac’s trembling wrists. The skin felt cold as river ice despite the heat. “Look at me, elder. The town isn’t here. Alexander Miller’s men aren’t watching this road.”

Isaac’s eyes blinked, the vacant, glassy stare fracturing for a split second as he looked at the boy. A sudden, heavy wave of realization washed over his weathered features, and his arm dropped heavily to his side, the turnip slipping from his fingers to rot in the red dirt.

“Elijah...” Isaac whispered, his chest heaving against his coarse shirt with a ragged, whistling gasp. “Thy father... thy father is a fortunate man. His house remains whole. But my barn... the wheat is turning black in the bins, Elijah. Amos closed the gates. The mold is taking the entire spring harvest, and I... I cannot find the words to reach the Almighty through the noise of this town.”

Elijah looked from the old man's bloodless face to the sacks of unsold produce in the cart, a dangerous, burning heat surging through his veins. He thought of the elders sitting in the meetinghouse not three miles from this ditch, and of how many First Days he had sat through that silence himself with his hands folded in his lap.

"Thee will not hawk thy crop on this ditch anymore, Isaac," Elijah said, his voice dropping its submissive, rule-following pitch, replaced by an iron-willed authority that surprised even himself. He whirled toward the broken cart and began hoisting the heavy crates of vegetables, expertly throwing them onto the back of his own flatbed wagon.

"Elijah, no," Isaac protested weakly, his hand reaching out to stop him. "If Alexander's dock hands see thy team aiding this house... thy father's credit will be frozen at the dry goods store by sunset. Thee must stay behind the plow in peace."

"There is no peace on these bluffs while Martha Barlow pays for salt pork in hard coin because her credit is destroyed!" Elijah shouted into the open sky, his face flushing with a fierce, adult indignation. He grabbed the old mule by the halter, guiding the limping animal behind his own wagon. "Let the elders call it a sin. If standing in the gap for a mother who is breaking her own back to plow a field alone makes me a coward in the ledger books, then I will bear that brand gladly."

He turned back to Isaac, offering the old man a steady, unblinking hand to help him up onto the wooden bench.

"We are going back to thy farm, Isaac. We are going to unload this harvest into thy cellar, and when the midnight bugles blow in the town, I am going to bring my family's team to grind thy wheat if I must turn the millstones with my own broad shoulders. Thomas is facing the

cannon in the East, and by God, he won't find an empty house if he survives to see the first smoke on the river again.”

Isaac looked at the youth's calloused palm, the unyielding firmness of mind written in Elijah's eyes finally breaking the cloud in his thoughts. He reached out, his hand locking into the boy's fingers with a desperate, silent gratitude, and allowed himself to be pulled out of the isolated ditch, leaving the ruins of the town's judgment behind them in the dust.

* * *

The Sterling business office was located at the corner of Front Street and Center Street. Over the last several days, from the office window, Catherine Sterling watched her foreman's ruthless campaign with a growing sense of horror. She saw Alexander continue his cruel eviction of Martha Barlow from the public street—a woman refusing to give up, but looking increasingly frail, her face lined with the double burden of her son's banishment and the town's cold exclusion.

What finally moved her was not the eviction but the sound of it. Through the open sash Catherine heard Alexander's voice carry the length of the block, and underneath it the small, level answer of a woman who would not raise hers. She set down her pen. The ledger stayed open on the desk with the ink still wet in the freight column, and she was already reaching for the door.

In a controlled rage, Catherine flew from her desk and ran outside to intervene. She ordered Alexander to cease his harassment of the Barlow farm, but the cynical foreman flatly refused to take her orders looking at her with deep-seated resentment.

“Your father is failing, Miss Catherine, and it's *my* labor keeping these timber rafts moving for the war effort,” Alexander sneered, leaning over the walnut desk. “You may have the education, but you don't have the stomach for what this war requires. My sister's boy is dead in the West Woods because of scripture-quoting cowards. I will see the Barlows driven off these bluffs, and you and your brother's uniform won't save them.”

Resigned, Catherine returned to the office. She sat alone in the quiet study with the ledger open in front of her and the pen dry in her hand, and outside the window Alexander went on giving orders to the loading crews until the evening packet came in.

* * *

That night, after bringing Isaac and the damaged cart home from the Stockton road, Elijah returned with his family's wagon. He unloaded seed grain, salt pork, and tools for the broken fences while Martha watched from the porch. He came in daylight enough for the Barlows to eat and after dark enough that his father's credit would hold. He would remain a pacifist, but he would no longer mistake silence for peace.

Chapter 12: State of Confusion

The winter of 1862–1863 turned the Rappahannock River into a ribbon of dull gray ice. Camped near Falmouth, Virginia, the remnants of the 1st Minnesota Infantry were huddled in miserable, mud-walled huts, their spirits shattered by the catastrophic slaughterhouse of the Battle of Fredericksburg. The air was a stagnant soup of wood smoke, rotten salt pork, and the constant, hacking cough of dying men.

Inside his shelter-half, Thomas Barlow sat alone on a rotting log, his wool uniform stiff with trail grease and the dried brown stains of Sam Miller's blood. He held Catherine Sterling's letter in his hand. The paper was worn, its edges frayed from hundreds of times his thumb had traced her elegant, flowing script until the black ink ran from the Virginia damp.

You are a dear, invaluable friend – like a second brother to me, truly...

Her words burned like a hot knife in his chest, breaking the final anchor holding his mind to the quiet bluffs of Winona. He pulled his pocket diary from his waistcoat and dipped a lead pencil into his canteen to darken the graphite. He began to write, his hand remarkably steady despite the violent shivering of the men in the neighboring tents.

Cathy,

I write this in my book because I dare not send it to face your polite cruelty again. We fought at Antietam in September. That creek ran red. Sam Miller, who grew up on the eleven acres at the end of Mankato Street, was torn apart by canister shot beside me. I am a dead man walking, Cathy. My family thinks me damned, my hands are stained with blood, and the girl I gave my soul to regards me as a brother. If I die in this terrible country, William will find this book. I want you to know that I never cared for glory. I came here because I wanted to become a man and find my path.

This is my sin, and I pay for it every hour.

Thomas.

He stopped writing, his gray eyes tracking Captain William Sterling through the open flap of the tent. William was walking toward the officers' quarters, his tailored perfect blue coat, his gold watch glinting in the pale winter sun. They rarely speak now.

Billy had sent a pair of fine boots to Tom's tent the week before – a silent, aristocratic offering of gratitude for saving his life at Bull Run – but Tom had left them to rot in the Falmouth mud. He didn't want Billy's charity, and he didn't want his gratitude. He only wanted the clutter in his mind to stop.

Thomas had no one he could call a friend, save one. Jimmy was the only exception to his self-imposed isolation, and their talk in the dark outside the huts was the one hour of the day he did not spend cleaning something.

Thomas returned to the diary, and on a new page, drafted a short poem. The words flew onto the page. It reached deep within his soul searching for answers but not finding any.

State of Confusion - by Thomas Barlow, December 1862

I look to the West and all I can see is nothing.

I wonder if it's best and yet I need to see something.

All my life is shattered like a broken mirror.

It reflects a hundred images clearer.

A knife sharp, my dreams so near wander farther

From me...

I look to the East and all I see is destruction.

See the harvest feast without a sane conversation.

I can't hear, the voices speak but make no sound.

I can't see, the bright light on me shining down.

I can't feel, my heart is gone and can't be found

At all...

I look to myself and all I see is confusion.

Clock upon the shelf ticking the minute's illusion.

Time's run out, no place to run, no place to hide.

Only doubt, confusion growing like the tide.

No way out, the desperation is inside

Of us...

It's time, yes, it's time

To change my course, my direction.

Hopelessly wondering what life has for me,

It's only a state of confusion...

Thomas closed the pocket diary, reached into his pocket, and pulled out the small silver match-case Catherine had given him on the levee docks. He struck a match against the polished silver, watching the tiny orange flame flicker against the freezing dark of the hut.

The flame took hold of the wood and burned down slowly toward his fingers. In its light he could see the closed diary on his knee, the frozen mud of the floor, and the rifle standing against the tent pole where he had left it. He held the match until the heat reached his knuckles.

He blew the match out, the acrid scent of sulfur filling the small tent. Thomas carefully tucked the pocket diary against his ribs, right next to the cold match-case, his eyes narrowing as the distant bugle sounded for evening dress parade. He picked up his rifle, stepped out into the freezing mud of Falmouth, and took his place in the line.

* * *

After closing the diary, Thomas returned to the winter routine that had sustained him since Antietam: oil the rifle, ignore the fine boots William had left beside his cot, and keep Sam's ghost at the edge of the firelight. On December 11, the routine broke. Burnside ordered the army across the Rappahannock, and Thomas joined the ranks at the riverbank as Confederate sharpshooters fired from the brick houses of Fredericksburg into the engineers struggling to anchor the pontoon bridges.

On December 13, the regiment faced the true terror of the position. Held in a supporting line just below the infamous stone wall, Thomas lay flat in the freezing mud as division after division of Federal infantry charged across the open, frost-bitten plain. From the ridge above, Confederate artillery ripped the lines apart with a continuous, rhythmic roar of canister and grape shot. The air vibrated with a terrifying, mechanical scream of iron. Thomas watched as the belly

of the plain was carpeted in blue wool, the wounded freezing to death where they fell as darkness finally closed the combat. The 1st Minnesota lost few men compared to the thousands who fell around them. In the morning the details went out to bring in what could be carried, and Thomas worked his section of the plain until noon without speaking to anyone, and when he came back he ate his ration and cleaned his rifle in the same order he cleaned it every day.

On the first day of January, the adjutants read the President's proclamation to the assembled companies in a cold drizzle, and the Falmouth camps came apart over it before the paper was folded. A sergeant from a Pennsylvania regiment down the line announced to anyone who would listen that he had enlisted for the Union and not for the Negro, and that he would take his discharge before he would take that order. Others cheered until the officers quieted them. Most of the 1st Minnesota stood in the mud and said nothing at all, which Jimmy Lewis observed was the only honest response available to men who had just watched fourteen thousand of their countrymen fall in front of a stone wall for a war that had, until that morning, officially been about a map.

Thomas walked back to his hut and sat a long while with his hands on his knees. He did not feel the thing the newspapers would surely call exultation. He thought of a gray-headed man stacking barrels on the wharf at Fort Monroe, telling three Minnesota farm boys that he had presented himself as property in order to stop being one, and he understood that the paper read out in the drizzle had done nothing for the man's oldest son, who was still on that farm in Nansemond County and would stay there until somebody with a rifle came far enough south to change it. That was the whole of it. The proclamation had not ended anything; it had only finally said out loud what the war would have to be for, and it had handed the saying of it to men standing in the mud at Falmouth. His father had asked him to name plainly what he was fighting

for. Nearly two years late, in a frozen camp above the Rappahannock, Thomas found that he could.

While the Rappahannock ran gray with winter ice, a separate, silent devastation settled over the homes along the Mississippi.

* * *

At the Harriet Street estate, the long-dreaded reckoning arrived. George Sterling's systemic cough had turned into a wet, agonizing rattle that filled the second-story study. Catherine sat by his bedside, holding a cooling glass of camphor water as her father's breathing grew increasingly shallow. The ruthless timber magnate, who had built an empire by demanding absolute loyalty from the river, was down to his final hours.

He reached out a frail, yellowed hand, his fingers curling around Catherine's wrist with a desperate strength. "The contracts... Catherine," he rasped, his eyes bulging as he fought for oxygen. "Do not let... Alexander... break the line... Keep the wheels turning..."

Before the sentence could finish, a violent fit of coughing seized his chest, followed by a sudden, terrifying stillness. The timber king of Winona was dead, leaving his nineteen-year-old daughter completely alone at the head of a sprawling, predatory shipping empire. There was no time for Catherine to weep. Before her father's body was even cold beneath the frozen soil of the town cemetery, Alexander Miller was already at the levee docks, attempting to leverage the grief of his nephew Sam's death to seize control of the business. Only the taste of bitter revenge against the Sterling family satisfied his anger.

The silence inside the Barlow farm was even more absolute. Isaac Barlow's spirit had broken long before his body failed. The systematic boycott organized by Mr. Miller had left their

harvest wheat to rot in the barn bins, unground and unsellable. To Isaac, the rotting grain was a physical manifestation of God's judgment upon his house for Thomas's enlistment. He was being punished for sins he could not repent. He retreated into penitential prayers, sitting by the cold hearth for hours without speaking.

Finally, on an early December night as the season's first snowstorm howled against the limestone bluffs, Martha Barlow went to wake her husband from his knees. His forehead was pressed against the rough timber of the kitchen table. When she touched his shoulder, his body was already stiff and cold. Death had arrived with the storm bringing a massive stroke caused by the stress and isolation, his final breath spent in silent condemnation of the war that had taken his only child.

Martha buried her husband herself, using a pickaxe to break through hardened frost behind the barn. No one from the town came to help. No one from the Quaker meetinghouse dared brave the cold stares of Alexander Miller's dockworkers. When the task was done, Martha stood alone in the howling wind, her gray bonnet caked in snow, her house empty, and her heart anchored only by the faint hope that her son might yet survive the storm of death in the East.

Three weeks later, on the first day of January, Elijah Penrose came up the Mankato road on foot because the drifts had closed the wagon track. He had been down at the Daily Republican board, where a crowd stood in the cold reading the President's proclamation off the slate, and he carried it up the bluff the way a boy carries something he does not yet know the weight of. Martha heard him out on the porch step without interrupting. Then she went inside, set the kettle on, and stood a long while with her back to him and both hands flat on the kitchen table where her husband had died on his knees.

“Thee will hear men in this town say the President has changed the war,” Martha said at last. “He has not. He has only written down what was true before any of us drew breath. My husband’s mother carried a family out of Missouri in a wagon with a false floor and never spoke of it at meeting once in forty years, and she did it with no musket in the house and no proclamation in her hand. Friends have held that testimony since before this state had a name. I will not stand in my own kitchen and pretend a paper from Washington has taught me the wickedness of it.” She turned around then, and her gray eyes were dry. “But I will say this, and thee may carry it to the elders if thee likes. For two years the men on those planks have called my son a coward and my husband a copperhead, and not one of them could tell thee what this war was for. Now the government has told them plainly, and I expect a good many will like it a great deal less than they liked their cheering. My Thomas is standing in the mud of Virginia this hour under the same order. His father cast him out for taking up the sword against the very evil his own mother spent her life carrying children away from, and Isaac never once let himself see the shape of that. I loved my husband, Elijah. I buried him with my own hands behind the barn. But the Light does not excuse a man from looking at a thing merely because looking is a grief to him.”

* * *

It was an extremely cold winter but the work at the mills kept receiving raw goods and winter wheat thanks to the new Winona and St. Peter Railroad spur line to Stockton. Once the mills processed the lumber and wheat, winter logistics required ice sleds to haul the cargo over the thick ice of the Mississippi River to the Wisconsin side and then southward to La Crosse and the railroads eastward. It was grueling work, but the Union needed these goods for the war.

But with the spring thaw, the steamboat traffic returned. The *War Eagle* returned, dropped off, and picked up passengers and cargo. She was on a never-ending mission, constantly moving up and down the river between St. Paul and Galena along with all her stops on the way. She was alive, yet not alive. She was the one constant, unchanging, dependable friend everyone counted on being there.

The wind blowing off the Mississippi River carried the sharp, clean scent of thawed northern pine. On the timber planks of the levee docks below the Sterling office windows, however, the air felt thick and heavy with hostility.

Alexander Miller stood at the center of a semi-circle of loading crews, his large, calloused hands resting flat on the iron rim of an overturned wheat barrel. He had just ordered the teamsters to unhitch the team of horses from a line of flatbed wagons piled high with grain sacks. Some of the sacks were stamped with the name Barlow.

“I told you boys once, and I'll say it until hell freezes over,” Alexander’s voice boomed, carrying easily over the mechanical thump of the nearby steam sawmill. “We don't lift, we don't haul, and we don't ship for traitors. Old Isaac Barlow might be rotting in his grave under the bluff now, but his money still smells of copperhead treason. With my nephew Sam buried in the West Woods at Sharpsburg, the Barlow farm expects me to move their wheat? Not on this levee.”

A low murmur of agreement rippled through the dock hands. Men with shoulders thickened by river labor nodded, their faces grimed with trail soot and river grease.

“Then *you* can explain to the Army why their rations are sitting in the mud instead of feeding our gallant boys in the field, Mr. Miller.” a voice from the crowd shouted.

The crowd of workers shifted, their boots scraping against the timber as Catherine Sterling stepped through the crowd. She was not wearing the soft, silk-trimmed gowns of a Harriet Street socialite. Her dark blue linen dress was practical, its hem caked with river sediment, her fingers stained with the black ink of the ledger she held clamped against her ribs.

Alexander did not move from his barrel. He looked down at the nineteen-year-old woman, with a slow, contemptuous sneer flaring beneath his heavy gray mustache. “This is river business, Miss Catherine. Your father might have left you his house, but he didn't leave you the skin it takes to run these docks. Go back to your parlor room. The men and I are settling a debt for the boys we sent off with cheers.”

“You are settling a petty, malicious grudge,” Catherine said, her voice remarkably level, though a dangerous, icy heat burned in her chest. She stepped directly into his space, forcing the larger man to straighten up to look down at her. “How *dare* you use my family’s name, my father’s wagons, and my brother's uniform to starve a simple poor widow who is currently breaking her own back to plow a field alone.”

“Martha Barlow chose her side when she let her boy sign the roll just to hide their family’s cowardice,” Alexander spat, leaning over the barrel until his face was inches from hers, his breath sour with tobacco. “You think because you can run a pen through a ledger that you own the muscle on these planks? I run these crews. If I tell them to walk off the levee, the Sterling shipping empire stops before the evening packet arrives. Your father knew that. He knew when to let a wolf manage the gate.”

“My father is buried, Alexander,” Catherine shot back, her words dropping like iron weights onto the wooden planks. “And the wolf at his gate has grown old and foolish. You claim to speak for the dead? You claim to strike for the memory of Sam?”

She opened the heavy leather ledger with a sharp, violent snap of her wrist, her thumb pinning a page covered in fresh, wet tallies.

“Look at this line, Mr. Miller,” pausing for a moment to let his eyes look down at her ledger, “That is a government logistics contract for three thousand bushels of hard spring wheat, bound for the Army of the Potomac. If those wagons do not move, the Union high command freezes every asset, every lumber mill, and every transit permit bearing the Sterling name. If you call a walkout today, these men won't just be hurting some small Quaker family – these men will be blacklisted from every port from St. Paul to New Orleans.”

The dockworkers shifted uncomfortably, their eyes darting from Alexander's flushed face to the cold, unblinking authority in Catherine's hazel eyes. The threat of losing their seasonal wages under the shadow of a wartime blacklist was a physical hammer.

“You wouldn't dare pull down your own father's lines,” Alexander whispered, his bravado suddenly fracturing into desperate and defensive anger.

“Try me, Alexander,” Catherine said, her voice dropping to a low, quiet rasp that filled the sudden silence of the loading platform. She methodically continued, “I'm running the ledger now. And I'm running the business now. If you and your families want to purchase food and provisions at the city merchant with your pay, it requires *my* signature. No one else. You openly defied me yesterday. You told the loading crew I lacked the stomach for what this war requires.”

She reached into her practical apron pocket, pulled out a dark brass company seal stamp, and laid it flat on top of the wheat barrel between them.

“The wagons move within the hour, or you are dismissed from these docks without reference, without back-pay, and with a circular letter sent to every timber mill on the Mississippi branding you as a saboteur of military supplies. Choose your path, foreman. But do

not mistake my brother's absence for my weakness. The Sterling name belongs to the living now, and I will see this grain shipped if I must drive the team myself.”

Alexander stared down at the seal, his jaw tightening until the muscles bunched like twisted rope under his weathered skin. He looked around at the crew, but the men had already stepped back, their hands instinctively reaching for their hooks and leather reins, completely subdued by the iron-willed pragmatism of the woman who stood before them.

Without a word, the foreman slammed his fist against the barrel rim, turned his back on her, and barked a furious command to the teamsters. “Hitch 'em back up! Move the Barlow grain! Move it now!”

Catherine stood immovable as the wagons began to creak forward, the heavy iron wheels groaning under the weight of the harvest. She did not smile, nor did she watch Alexander slink back toward the shadows of the sawmill. She simply closed her ledger, tucked the cold ink-stained book against her ribs, placed the seal in her pocket, and walked back toward the company office. Halfway across the planks she stopped and opened her hand. The brass had printed the Sterling crest into her palm, deep enough that she could still read it backward.

Chapter 13: The Enduring Core

As the spring thaw of 1863 cleared the ice from the Mississippi, Catherine Sterling did not retreat into mourning; she struck back with a ruthless, calculated precision that stunned the river commerce.

Using the authority of the sprawling wooden ledgers her father had left behind, she launched a massive expansion of the Sterling shipping business. She secured exclusive Union Army logistics contracts, transforming the Winona levee into a highly mechanized, twenty-four-hour wartime operation. Giant steam-powered sawmills tore through northern pine rafts at twice their pre-war speed, and thousands of bushels of government-contracted wheat were funneled directly into the hulls of newly built packet boats.

Catherine reflected on the spring thaw back in 1861. Over two long, terrible years have gone by. She has lost her father, and her brother was in constant danger. She needed to reach out to her dearest Thomas. Putting ink to paper, she wrote:

Dear Thomas,

I have not heard from you in months, and William's letters say you have grown terribly distant from the rest of the Winona company. I worry I was too harsh in my writing after Bull Run. If I hurt you, Thomas, please forgive me. The world is changing so fast. I am running the

shipping docks now – Father’s lungs finally gave out in December, and I must keep the business afloat. On occasion, I see your mother from a distance; she looks so frail. The papers say a great battle is looming somewhere in the East. Rumors fly up and down the river every day. Please write to me, Thomas. Just a postscript to say you are alive. I still need my true friend.

With eternal hope, Cathy.

* * *

When Alexander Miller attempted to spark a walkout among the loading crews, Catherine personally walked down to the mud of the docks. She did not appeal to their patriotism; she froze the credit lines of every merchant who supported Miller's boycott and threatened to blackball any laborer who refused to handle the grain. By May, Alexander was completely broken, reduced to a toothless foreman who answered directly to the woman he had once dismissed as a parlor socialite.

Yet, while Catherine's ledgers grew thick with profit, the human cost of her expansion was paid in the fields next door.

For Martha Barlow, the spring planting was a nightmare of physical agony. With Isaac dead and Thomas fighting in Virginia, she had to break the hard flinty soil beneath Sugar Loaf Bluff alone. Her hands were constantly blistered and cracked from the rough handles of the plow, her lean frame wasting away under the weight of manual labor meant for three men.

Every midnight, Elijah Penrose would slip across the property line with his family's flatbed wagon, throwing sacks of seed corn into her barn and repairing the fences that local agitators continued to tear down by day. "The meetinghouse says I am a coward for helping thee, Martha," Elijah whispered one evening, his face pale with exhaustion. "But I see the shame of

our silence. Thomas is facing the cannon, and the least I can do is keep his mother from starvation.”

* * *

In June 1863, the strategic chessboard of the war shifted violently north. General Robert E. Lee bypassed the Union positions at Falmouth, launching his second invasion of the North through the Shenandoah Valley and into the rich, unpicked fields of Pennsylvania. The 1st Minnesota saw little action at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, and the regiment now was numbering 262 combat-ready troops ready for the next move on the chessboard.

The Army of the Potomac, now under the command of General George Meade, was ordered to pursue them double-quick.

For the 1st Minnesota Infantry, the march north was a brutal test of veteran endurance. Packed inside their heavy, salt-encrusted wool uniforms, the men covered over thirty miles a day under a blistering, cloudless summer sun. Dust rose from the red clay roads in suffocating plumes, clogging their throats and turning their sweat into a dark, grimy paste. Men dropped from heat exhaustion along the waysides, their tongues swollen, but Thomas Barlow kept his head down and his feet moving. His shoulders, hardened by years of clearing the Barlow timber, bore the dead weight of his cartridge box and musket without a single complaint.

Beside him, the remnants of the Winona Volunteers marched in grim, mechanical silence. The company was under the leadership of Captain Joseph Periam now and had only thirty-three men ready for action. A tiny fraction of the proud hundred and one who had boarded the *War Eagle* two years before. The jovial talk of the old Winona volunteers had been completely

burned away. Sam was gone now, and his quick wit and calming humor have long since faded away.

Captain William Sterling was assigned to the staff of Colonel Colvill as an acting regimental adjutant. His duties were to run messages and orders from the colonel to the different companies. William rode near the rear with the colonel, his face pale and drawn, his hand frequently dropping to check his watch – not out of vanity, but out of a desperate, clawing need to remember that a world outside of the dust and the blood still existed.

* * *

By July 1, the distant, unmistakable rumble of heavy artillery began to vibrate through the Pennsylvania air. The battle had been joined at a crossroads town called Gettysburg.

The 1st Minnesota was hurried forward through the night, their boots pounding against the dark roads as they pressed toward the sound of the guns. They arrived on the field around 5:45 a.m. on the morning of July 2, taking up a reserve position near the center of the Union line on Cemetery Ridge. Thomas knelt in the dry grass, his hand instinctively checking the waistcoat pocket where Catherine's small silver match-case sat against his ribs. He looked down at the iron trigger of his Springfield, knowing with absolute clarity that the long road from the Mississippi River bluffs had finally brought them to the center of the world's reckoning.

The dawn on Thursday, July 2, 1863, crept over the low ground behind Cemetery Ridge not with a burst of light, but in a heavy, humid gray mist that smelled of dew, wet leather, and the faint, lingering sulfur of the previous day's cavalry skirmishes.

Thomas Barlow sat on a broken fence rail near the wood line. His fingers methodically ran a piece of oiled flannel down the cleaning rod of his Springfield. His left eye was bloodshot

from the dust of the Pipe Creek march, his broad farm-boy shoulders rigid beneath his salt-crusted coat. Beside him, Private Jimmy Lewis was leaning against an oak trunk, a dented tin cup of coffee balanced between his knees.

Thomas stopped his hand. His gray eyes stared blankly into the white fog rising from the low pasture where the Third Corps skirmishers were already letting out sporadic, distant cracks of musketry.

“I saw the kitchen table last night, Jimmy,” Thomas whispered, his voice a low, gravelly rasp that barely carried through the mist. “In the dream, it was winter under the bluffs. The snow was piled high against the barn door. My father was sitting by the hearth, but he didn't have his spectacles, and he didn't have his Bible. He just sat there in the dark, pointing a finger at my chest. And when I looked down, my blue wool coat was gone. I was wearing an iron shroud, Jimmy. It was pinned to my ribs with three steel bayonets, and every time I tried to draw a breath, the metal tightened until the confusion in my head just... went cold. I fear I'm not leaving this ridge today. This is the end of the line for me.”

Jimmy didn't move. He took a slow, deliberate sip of his bitter coffee, his intellectual brow furrowed as he watched the distant flash of a Federal battery deploying near the Taneytown Road.

“Your father isn't pointing a finger at you from the grave, Tom,” Jimmy said quietly, his voice carrying that calm, academic weight that always acted like a wedge to pry Thomas out of his dark, silent vaults. “You aren't dreaming of judgment; you're dreaming of an anchor. You've spent two years treating your guilt like a building – a house of flinty dirt and broken vows you think you have to live in until a Minié ball releases you. You think an iron shroud is your fate,

but it's just the only costume your mind can find to hide from the choices you made back at the levee."

Jimmy set the tin cup down in the wet clover and stepped closer, his hand resting flat and steady against the rough wood of the fence rail between them.

"You think this crossroads is a graveyard waiting to happen because you've forgotten the purpose of the head on your shoulders and the need in your heart for living. Tom, when I was at college, before the smoke carried us away, I was studying about another Thomas. He's long gone now but had some quite profound words that fit our situation perfectly. He wrote about the virtue of fortitude – of courage – in the Second Part of the Second Part, in *Summa Theologica*." Jimmy stated as he began his deep conversation with Tom.

Jimmy continued, "Thomas said true bravery isn't the loud shouting of the recruitment rallies or the ambitious pride Captain Billy waves from his saddle. Aquinas wrote that the highest act of courage isn't to attack, but to *endure* – to hold firm against a terrifying reality without letting the interior soul dissolve into hopelessness. You think you're damned because you fired into the smoke at Bull Run, but you weren't choosing blood, Tom. You were choosing to be the wall that kept the madness from crossing back over the river."

Thomas looked up, his eyes narrowing as a sudden, sharp breeze from the south ripped a gap in the valley fog, revealing the distant, dark tree lines of Seminary Ridge. "The wall is thin today, philosopher. We are so few now since we left Winona. Aquinas didn't have to face a thousand-yard-long line of rebel brigade steel with just thirty-three plowboys. I didn't study philosophy, but I can do the math."

"No, but he knew the weight of the dark," Jimmy insisted, his voice rising until it cut straight through Thomas's fatalism. "A man can be brave for ten minutes with a bayonet in his

hands. Standing in a line for two years, burying your friends by companies, and answering the roll again the next morning — that is the harder thing, and it is the thing you have already been doing. You have not fought like a coward, Tom, and you have not fought like a reckless man either. You have endured. We have endured.”

“And it is not only Aquinas,” Jimmy went on. “Remember the whale book I read to you while we froze in the Falmouth mud? Melville wrote about the deep, cataclysmic spaces of the world, where a man can be physically broken and stripped of everything he owns. But he said there is a boundary the storm cannot cross. No matter how low a man is brought, that immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves — that certain, spontaneous, sovereign dignity — remains completely untouched. That is what I mean by the knotted core.”

Jimmy reached out, his calloused hand wrapping tightly around Thomas’s forearm, forcing the Quaker boy to lock eyes with him through the humid dawn light.

“The state doesn't own your soul, Tom, and your father’s ghost doesn't own your grave. You didn't sign that roll at Huff's Hotel for an abstract Republic, and you certainly didn't do it to become a monster despite the blood on your coat. You did it because Catherine Sterling expected a man of steady hands to stand in the gap. If you go on the field today thinking of the ‘iron shroud’, the crossfire will tear you apart before you can even tear a cartridge. But if you stand on this ridge as that untouchable, sovereign dignity – as a soldier who endures simply to keep the line whole for the living – then the cannon fire can’t touch the part of you that is righteous.”

Jimmy paused for a moment, looked hard at his brother in arms with empathy, and finished his wise words with “Clean your gun, Tom. Lock your secrets back between the tents, and let’s make sure we hold the timber down when the bugles blow.”

Tom stared hard at his friend's hand for a long, silent moment. He didn't reply. He simply nodded, slid his cleaning rod back beneath his rifle barrel with a sharp, resonant metallic click, and stood up to face the sweltering July heat.

Jimmy picked his cup out of the wet clover and drank what was left of the coffee, which had gone cold in the mist. Down in the low pasture the skirmishers had started up again, a crack and then two more, spaced like a man knocking. He sat and listened to it until the bugle called the regiment into line.

Chapter 14: Gettysburg

The air on Cemetery Ridge did not move. It pressed against Thomas Barlow's face with sulfur, heat, and the raw terror of men trying not to look toward the broken Union left. Somewhere beyond the smoke, General Sickles's line had come apart in the Peach Orchard and the Wheatfield. Thomas could not see the whole disaster; he could only feel its shape in the panicked riders cutting across the ridge, in the shouts for reserves, and in the red-gray mass of Alabamians surging through the low ground toward the gap.

By 4:00 p.m., the southern left flank of the Union army was totally dissolved, and now a red wave of Cadmus Wilcox's Alabamians – over sixteen hundred men flushed with the scent of victory – was surging toward the undefended center of the Federal line.

Tom Barlow stood tall in the ranks of the 1st Minnesota, his fingers clamped around the walnut stock of his Springfield rifle. He ran his thumb across the cold iron of the trigger, his gray eyes narrowed to slits through the dense, yellowish curtains of black powder smoke. Around him stood the remnants of his company – thirty-three Winona boys where one hundred and one had once crowded the *War Eagle's* railing. The whole regiment fit too easily inside his glance now, two hundred and sixty-two soldiers drawn thin across the ridge like a blue thread about to be cut.

To Thomas's left, Captain Joseph Periam paced the thin line of Company K. Periam's dress coat was caked in trail dirt, his officer's sash frayed, but his voice carried the steady, unblinking focus of a man who knew he was looking into his own grave. "Dress on the center, boys," Periam muttered, his hand resting on his sword hilt. "Keep your eyes on the colors. Don't let the line belly out."

Directly behind Periam stood Captain William Sterling. As the acting regimental adjutant, William had ridden his fine bay mount through the blistering dust of the Maryland roads, but now his horse was tethered in the safety of the rear trees. He stood on foot, his tailored blue coat splattered with dirt and sweat, his hand convulsively checking his gold pocket watch – the physical anchor containing Catherine's picture. The watch casing clicked shut with a sharp, tiny ping that was instantly swallowed by the deafening roar of over one hundred cannons echoing down the valley. Billy's face was entirely bloodless. The ambitious dreams of political prominence and martial glory that had driven him from the Winona levee had evaporated, replaced by the grim, desperate reality of a meat grinder that cared nothing for his family name.

From the ridge, none of it looked like strategy. It looked like a hole opening in the Union center and a handful of Minnesotans being pointed toward it. The officers might later speak of minutes bought and reserves gathered, but Thomas only saw the gap, the smoke, and the men beside him waiting for an order that could not possibly mean survival.

Suddenly, a horse slammed to a violent halt behind the line. Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, his white shirt torn and stained with black powder, glared down at Colonel William Colvill and pointed toward the rebel colors surging through the smoke.

"Colonel, do you see those colors?" Hancock roared, his voice cutting through the din like a trumpet. "Take them!"

Colonel Colvill did not hesitate. He drew his heavy sword, its steel catching the harsh July sun. “1st Minnesota! Forward, double-quick! March!”

“Fix bayonets!” Captain Periam screamed.

The metallic rattle of two hundred and sixty-two steel bayonets locking into place hummed through the ranks. Thomas reached back, drew his blade, and rammed it home on his muzzle. Then the regiment surged forward. Thirty-three men of Company K marched out of the grass, their boots striking the hard-packed earth in perfect synchronization with the rest of the ten lean companies.

His mind narrowed to the work before him: hold the alignment, keep pace with the colors, and do not leave a gap for the men beside him. His father’s peace testimony remained part of him, wounded but not erased. Catherine’s match-case pressed against his ribs, yet it was no longer the only reason he moved. Jimmy’s words returned instead: endurance was the choice to stand before terror without surrendering the soul to it.

Then Colvill yelled, “Charge!” his voice cracking.

But in stark contrast to the infamous “Rebel Yell” of the southerners, the proud Minnesota men advanced in dead and terrifying *total silence*.

The regiment did not cheer. No whoop rose from their throats, no brave words of encouragement or motivation passed between the lines. Thomas heard only the hard slap of boots breaking loose from the ridge grass, the metallic clatter of bayonets, and the terrible absence of the yells coming from their own line.

Two hundred and sixty-two men broke into a full run down the center of the ridge and crossed three hundred yards of open ground. They did not stop to fire. Every man in the ranks understood the arithmetic Hancock had done: a regiment thrown forward to delay Wilcox long

enough for the reserves to come up. If they failed, the center was turned and the army broke. If they succeeded, the line held — and most of them would not be standing to see it.

The storm of lead slammed into the regiment like a sledgehammer. Thomas saw Captain Joseph Periam jerk violently forward, a Minié ball tearing through his throat before he collapsed headfirst into the trampled clover. Beside him, eight other Winona boys dropped in a single, sickening heartbeat, their screams completely drowned out by the shriek of incoming iron canister shot.

“Keep the line closed! Close up!” William Sterling screamed, rushing forward from his staff position to fill the gap left by Periam. His sword was raised, his eyes wide with a frantic, defiant determination.

Before William could take a third step, a second rebel volley crashed through the smoke. An iron ball struck William squarely in the thigh, spinning him violently around. He collapsed into the dirt with a ragged gasp, his officer's sword flying from his grip, his gold talisman tearing free from his waistcoat and skittering through the grass.

Thomas did not slow down. He bounded over William's writhing body, his farm-hardened legs carrying him directly toward the center of the charging line. To his right, Sergeant Donald “Mac” MacInnis, the veteran lumberjack who had carried the regimental colors through the Peninsula and the West Woods, stumbled. A Minié ball shattered MacInnis's knee, dropping him to his joints. The large regimental flag – the great blue silk banner bearing the eagle – tilted dangerously toward the blood-soaked mud.

“The flag's down! The colors are down!” someone yelled through the blinding smoke.

The advance wavered for a fraction of a second. If the colors fell, the regiment would dissolve. Thomas dropped his rifle into the dirt. With a desperate lunge, he threw his broad

shoulders into the crossfire, his hands catching the polished ashen flagstaff just inches before it struck the earth. He hoisted it upward, the great banner snapping in the wind.

“Minnesota! With me!” Thomas roared, his voice rising above the din of the carnage.

Holding the staff with an iron grip, his gray eyes locked onto the center of the Alabama line, Thomas carried the colors into the sweltering mouth of the Confederate brigade. He did not look back for the thirty-three Winona men. He did not look down at William bleeding in the dirt. The flag snapped above him, heavy as a judgment, and in the flash of its silk he saw Catherine’s face by the parlor window. If he could keep it standing, if the banner did not touch the mud, then somewhere beyond the smoke and distance she would have to speak his name.

Thomas ran straight toward the wall of gray. A Confederate officer came at him through the smoke, sword lifted, his face twisted with disbelief that anyone would charge so small a line into so much fire. Then the world burst white. The blast hurled Thomas backward. Iron tore through the left side of his face, hot and wet and blinding, and another ball punched into his shoulder. He hit the ground beside the officer, both of them dropped in the same torn patch of grass.

Looking upward at the partly clouded sky, he saw the sun had broken through the clouds. The stillness around him was strange. He thought how badly he wanted to write one last letter to Cathy. He composed it in his mind as he faded into unconsciousness.

Cathy –

If you are reading this, the regiment is gone, and I am likely gone with it. They sent us down the slope against more men than I could count. William fell early with a ball through his thigh. When the colors dipped, I took them. I held them for the Union and for Billy, but you know

*there is more truth than that in me. I held them because I wanted one thing from this world
before it closed: to know that my name had crossed your lips.*

Then darkness fell over him like heavy tent canvas collapsing on whoever was inside it.
The smell of copper, sulfur and gentle lavender perfume lingered briefly. Then he peacefully
closed his eyes and smelled nothing more.

Chapter 15: The Aftermath

The twilight that settled over Cemetery Ridge on the evening of July 2, 1863, was an unnatural, violet bruise choking on black powder smoke. Below the ridge the pasture was torn blue coats, broken muskets, and men calling for water in voices that no longer sounded human.

A makeshift stretcher-bearer detail, their aprons caked in dark, sticky gore, moved across the pasture by the dim light of lanterns. The air was a thick soup of sulfur and the high-pitched, agonizing groans of dying men. Private Davy Todd, a fourteen-year-old drummer boy who had dropped his sticks to haul water, stumbled through the trampled clover.

“Over here!” Davy shouted, his voice cracking with terror. “I found the Adjutant!”

Captain William Sterling lay twisted in a low pasture ravine, his hands convulsively clutching his shattered thigh. The Minié ball had torn clean through the muscle, and his face was the color of river frost. A few feet away in the mud lay his talisman – the casing cracked, the glass shattered across the picture of Catherine.

Dr. Harrison Vance, an exhausted Union surgeon who had pushed his amputation table into a canvas tent city on Jacob Schwartz’s Farm just behind the ridge, knelt in the dirt beside William. A young nurse came down the ravine behind him with a lantern and held it steady over the wound without being asked. “Closer, Miss Patterson,” Vance muttered, and she moved the

light closer. Vance did not use gentle hands; he slit William's tailored blue trouser leg with a curved knife.

“Get a tourniquet on him,” Vance barked to a panicked orderly.

“What about the boy next to him, Doctor?” Davy asked, pointing a trembling hand toward a large, motionless form buried beneath the blood-soaked silk of the regimental colors.

Thomas Barlow lay on his back in the churned mud, the regimental colors tangled across his chest and one outflung arm. Blood soaked the left side of his face where shrapnel had destroyed his eye and fractured his jaw. A second wound tore through his shoulder, and a jagged fragment had punched through his upper chest, flattening the silver match-case Catherine had given him into a piece of mangled metal.

Dr. Vance barely glanced down, his fingers already slippery with William's blood. “Leave him for the burial details, boy. His chest is holed. I have to save the ones who have a chance to being saved.”

As the stretchers carried a semi-conscious William toward the rear, Thomas was left behind in the dark, his shallow breathing completely masked by the deafening evening artillery duel that shook the Pennsylvania hills at the end of the second day of July 1863. The litter details worked only as far forward as the ravine. Beyond it, the low ground where the regiment had made its charge lay out past the Union batteries, in the open pasture between the two armies, and no party went onto it after dark. Confederate skirmishers held the far edge of the swale through the night, and by first light the guns on both ridges had the whole field registered. The wounded of the 1st Minnesota would keep where they had fallen until somebody won the ground.

* * *

By 1:00 p.m. on Friday, July 3, the silence that had settled over the lines was shattered by the largest artillery bombardment yet seen in the war. Over one hundred and fifty Confederate cannons opened fire on the Union center, preparing the way for Pickett's Charge.

Through the smoky fog, a Confederate grand assault materialized: thirteen thousand men marching in a magnificent, terrifying mile-wide line across the open fields.

"Hold your fire, Minnesota!" shouted an unknown officer out of Jimmy's view. Out of the thirty-three Winona Volunteers who had charged the day before, Jimmy Lewis was standing with the eight other remaining men of the company.

When the charging rebel line hit the stone wall, the combat turned into a primal, claustrophobic melee of clubbed muskets and bayonets. Armistead's brigade breached the angle just yards away from Jimmy. He rose from the dirt like a resurrected specter, swinging his rifle like a logging axe. His mind was numb, he felt no pain and his actions were pure instinct to survive at the wall. To endure.

As the Union lines successfully closed the breach and broke the rebel high-water mark, Jimmy sat down where he stood, exhausted. Was it luck? Was it destiny? Was it divine providence? All he knew was that he lived while most of his comrades have been taken away from his life. No more Captain Periam, no more Private Winters, no more Sergeant "Mac", no more Thad to annoy everyone, no more Sam to cheer us up. No more Tom.

Private Jimmy Lewis, who miraculously survived both yesterday's charge and this afternoon's melee unscathed stood up and decided to walk back to where he saw Tom die. He wanted to dig up some of dirt from the spot where Tom fell and take it back to Cathy in Winona. He pictured himself handing her all that was left of this Quaker boy on her elegant veranda.

As he looked around the area where the regiment had smashed into the Alabama brigade the day before, he recognized the pocket diary of his friend and retrieved it from ground littered with the wounded, the dying, and the dead. He did not see Tom lying anywhere among the casualties.

It was the end of the 1st Minnesota regiment as a fighting unit. Some of the wounded would die of their injuries later. Others would be hospitalized and require long rehabilitation. And then others like Capt. Joseph Periam, Sgt. Donald MacInnis, and Private Henry Winters would be buried on this now sacred and hallowed ground.

But for those last few remaining alive in Company K, no one was able to account for Thomas and he was presumed dead.

PART III: THE ORPHANED WIDOWS (SUMMER 1863-AUTUMN 1864)

Chapter 16: The Bulletin Board

The mid-July humidity in Winona sat over the Mississippi River like a wet cot blanket. The celebrated “First Smoke” excitement of April had long since vanished, replaced by an electric, terrifying dread that lingered around every telegraph wire entering the city.

Catherine Sterling stood at the center of a mostly silent crowd outside *The Winona Daily Republican* print shop on the southwest corner of Third and Center Street. The bustling mechanized shipping docks located nearby were completely idle; the teamsters had unhitched their horses, and the sawmills were quiet. Hundreds of townspeople – lumberjacks, shopkeepers, and farming families from the surrounding bluffs – packed the brick square to hear any news about their loved, their eyes fixed on the public boards flanked by two home-guard sentries.

The people of Winona had learned to receive war news this way since 1861: first rumor, then telegraph, then the names. *The Winona Daily Republican* had become the town’s grim clearinghouse, and today its telegraph would decide which households broke. Daniel Sinclair served as editor in chief and Walter Dye ran the commercial and financial side of the newspaper.

The brass telegraph key in the corner of *The Winona Daily Republican* office sounded like a rattle snake.

Since dawn on July 14, 1863, the instrument had been chattering a mad, erratic morse code that vibrated through the floorboards of the Third and Center Street print shop. The room was suffocatingly hot, thick with the heavy, chemical stench of whale-oil lamps, fresh lye, and the pungent, vinegar tang of damp black printer's ink.

"Quiet! Everyone pipe down!" Walter Dye, the business manager, roared, slamming a heavy iron locking-quoin onto a wooden composing table.

The room fell into a tense, breathless silence, save for the rhythmic, deafening thwack-thump of the manual hand-press in the back room and the frantic scratching of the telegraph operator's pencil. The operator, a pale youth named Herman whose own cousin was in Company K, sat with his head tilted aggressively toward the sounder, his shirt collar unbuttoned and soaked with sweat. His hand shook as he dragged the lead pencil across cheap, gray scrap paper, translating the electrical pulses into English.

"It's the Second Corps," the operator whispered, his voice cracking. "Hancock... Cemetery Ridge. It's...it's the Minnesota casualty list."

The print shop instantly dissolved into practiced chaos. Tear the strip, cross out the battle language, find the names, get them onto the board before the crowd outside had time to hope.

"Boy! Get the grease-ink off your fingers and get over here!" the managing editor barked, ripping the first strip of translated paper from the telegraph desk before the ink on the pencil was even dry. He didn't have time to write a polite editorial. With a thick grease pencil, the editor crossed out tactical descriptions of the battle and isolated the starkest, raw facts:

1ST MINNESOTA ENGAGED. HEAVY LOSSES.

He shoved the scrap into the hands of the shivering printer's devil – a fourteen-year-old boy caked in soot. "Take this to the board, Toby! Write it large, and don't worry about your spelling! Move!"

The boy snatched a block of white chalk, threw open the heavy oak street doors, and tumbled out onto the veranda. Outside, hundreds of Winona citizens stood packed shoulder-to-shoulder in the damp river humidity, their faces pale, upturned, and terrifyingly silent. Toby's hands trembled so violently that the chalk snapped clean in two against the giant slate board pinned to the brick wall. He wedged the broken piece between his soot-grimed fingers and began to scrape out the letters, the harsh scratching of the stone echoing over the weeping of the women standing nearby.

Inside, the machinery of print was moving at a desperate, violent pace.

"Rouse the typesetters!" the editor yelled, his voice raw from the sulfur smoke drifting through his memory. "Clear the front-page forms from the bed! Dump the timber manifests and the grain advertisements! We are type setting names until the lead runs dry!"

Four typesetters descended upon the wooden type-cases like starving wolves. Their fingers flew with a blinding, mechanical muscle memory, pulling individual lead-alloy letters from the boxes – C-A-P-T-A-I-N-J-O-S-E-P-H-P-E-R-I-A-M – and dropping them backward into their iron composing sticks. A typesetter dropped a lowercase 'm,' and the tiny metal piece let out a sharp clink as it vanished into the floor cracks.

"Leave it! Keep setting!" the foreman bellowed, throwing a fresh galley tray onto the stone block. "The wire is still running and it has not reached the bottom of the regiment yet, and the evening packet boat won't wait for a clean layout!"

The telegraph key let out another violent burst of sound – a long, agonizing series of dots and dashes. The operator froze, his pencil hovering an inch above the pad. He read the signals, his chest hitching as the machine spelled out the letters.

“Mr. Dye...” the boy choked out, looking back toward the manager’s desk with wide, hollow eyes. “Look who it is. They have him listed among the dead from the second day.”

Walter Dye looked up from the iron chase he was locking down. His jaw tightened until the muscles bunched beneath his beard like twisted hemp. He reached over, snatched the strip of paper from the boy's desk before the operator could break down, and pinned it directly to the head typesetter’s frame.

“Set it,” Dye said, his voice dropping into a cold, flat rumble that cut straight through the mechanical din of the shop. “Put his name at the bottom of the column. And tell the pressmen to double the ink on the rollers. If we are going to break the heart of this town by sunset, let the print be dark enough so they don't have to squint to see who we lost.”

The words on the board revealed the worst to everyone.

GETTYSBURG - JULY 2nd & 3rd, 1863

1ST MINNESOTA ENGAGED. HEAVY LOSSES.

The brave and valiant men of the 1st Minnesota Regiment engaged the rebel enemy in the rolling fields of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. May their heroism forever live in our memories.

THE 1ST MINNESOTA – COMPANY K CASUALTY LIST

CAPTAIN JOSEPH PERIAM - *Killed in Action, July 2nd.*

PRIVATE HENRY C. WINTERS - *Killed in Action, July 2nd.*

PRIVATE CHARLEY GODDARD - *Wounded, July 2nd.*

CAPTAIN WILLIAM STERLING - *Wounded, leg amputation, July 2nd.*

SERGEANT DONALD MACINNIS- *Killed in Action, July 2nd.*

PRIVATE CHARLES OAKES - *Killed in Action, July 2nd.*

CORPORAL THADDEUS VANCE - *Killed in Action, July 2nd.*

“Billy,” Catherine whispered. The air left her lungs. Her fingers clamped around the leather binding of her shipping ledger until the spine cracked, and her other hand closed on the cold brass company seal in her apron pocket.

Then, at the bottom of the list, the chalk delivered the final wound:

PRIVATE THOMAS BARLOW - *Killed in action, July 2nd.*

Martha Barlow stood alone at the edge of the crowd. She did not bend, did not cry out, and did not look at the board again. Her eyes found Catherine through the stunned faces between them, and in that single look Catherine saw Isaac’s grave, the ruined harvest, and the son Martha had lost twice – first to the war, and now to the chalk.

Catherine’s ledger fell open in the dirt at her feet, the pages taking up the damp. She did not reach for it. She was thinking of a sentence she had written in her own hand more than a year before — *like a second brother to me, truly* — and of how easily it had gone into the envelope.

Catherine crossed the square to Martha, and the two women folded into each other without a word, shaking beneath a grief the town could no longer pretend belonged only to someone else.

Chapter 17: Shouting the Ghost

Captain William Sterling lay propped against a mound of straw sacks, his face the hollow gray color of river sludge. He was being treated in a makeshift hospital on the farm property of Jacob Schwartz. There were over 3,200 Union and Confederate wounded being treated there.

Captain Sterling tailored officer's frock coat he had worn into Cemetery Ridge had been sliced to ribbons by a surgeon's knife; in its place was a blood-stained linen smock. His left leg was gone, amputated three inches above the knee on the evening of July 2.

A nurse came down the aisle with a tin basin and changed the dressing on the stump without waiting to be asked, her hands quick and entirely unsentimental. William read the name inked at the top of the ward roster tucked under her arm — *M. Patterson, Ward 4* — and asked her what he had asked every orderly and steward who passed his cot: whether any of the Minnesota men had come through. She told him the near wards were sorted and listed twice over. The far wards were not. There were men lying in them yet who had come off that ridge with nothing on them to say who they were, and who would carry whatever name the first steward wrote on the slate. Then she moved down to the next cot, and William lay back against the straw sacks and made himself believe nothing at all.

The tent flaps parted with a wet slap, and Private Jimmy Lewis stepped out of the sulfurous twilight. Jimmy's thin, intellectual frame looked loose inside his mud-crusting blue wool. He carried his rifle slung upside down to keep the rain from the barrel, but in his left hand, he held a small, water-logged leather booklet. It was Thomas Barlow's pocket diary, its covers warped by sweat and heavily stained with the reddened clay of Pickett's Charge.

Jimmy did not offer a military salute. He simply stepped up to the edge of the straw mattress, his eyes dead and unblinking as he looked down at his captain.

"The boys from the burial details are still working, Captain," Jimmy said, his voice dropping into that flat, universal rasp of a soldier who had survived the high-water mark. "They found this in the dirt near the angle. It must've gotten kicked loose from Tom's coat when the Virginia infantry breached the stone wall."

William's hand trembled as he reached out, his fingers closing around the cold, damp leather. He recognized the meticulous, tight pencil script on the frayed edge of the leaves.

"Where is he, Jimmy? Have they brought him to the tents?"

"No," Jimmy whispered, his face tightening as he turned back toward the pouring rain outside. "No one saw him crawl out of the smoke after the melee at the clump of trees. The new regimental adjutant is placing his name at the bottom of the slate today. He's gone, Billy. I'm giving you the book because... because I reckon' Cathy shouldn't have to read it first."

Without waiting for a response, Jimmy slouched back outside, leaving the shipping prince alone with his missing limb and the ruins of his friend's final thoughts.

William immediately began reading the diary. It went all the way back to Ft. Snelling when Company K was formed up into a fighting unit. It talked of Bull Run, Ball's Bluff, Berryville. It showed Tom's change as the unit fought at Yorktown and Seven Days. It talked

about the heartache and pain Tom struggled with over Cathy. It showed his change after Antietam, Fredericksburg, and even up to the morning of July 2nd. of this terrible battle in Gettysburg.

He read the entry from the morning of July 2 three times. Then he turned back to the first page and started again at Fort Snelling, and when he reached that same morning the second time he closed the book and lay a long while with it flat on his chest.

William sat in the stifling heat and unimaginable stench, with phantom pain radiating from his missing foot through his hip like hot iron. His hand shook so violently that the graphite nearly snapped as he took a scrap of paper and began a letter he had never expected to write: a confession to his sister, full of regret, remorse, and the truth of Gettysburg and the bloodiest three days they had experienced.

* * *

Two weeks had passed since the telegraph wires broke the heart of Winona. Since that dark Tuesday morning on July 14, the town had taken on the forlorn, restrained appearance of perpetual mourning. The vibrant frontier energy was gone, replaced by a quiet so absolute that the rhythmic, mechanical thud-thump of the steam sawmills sounded like a collective, rhythmic heartbeat of grief. The wire had been merciful only in its speed; the mails from the East crawled behind it, and the letters written on the field at Gettysburg did not reach the levee until the final packet of the month.

Inside the Sterling offices on Front Street, Catherine Sterling sat motionless at her father's heavy walnut desk. A brilliant, unshielded column of summer sun sliced through the windows, illuminating the black ink stains on her fingers and a single, unopened envelope resting

on the green blotter. The paper was thick and addressed in her brother William's bold but fractured script.

She dreaded opening it. For days, her mind had been trapped in a frantic loop, haunted by the polite, courteous letters she had written to Thomas Barlow over the last two years – the letters where she had drawn a cold line and called him a “second brother.”

With a slow, agonizing breath, Catherine slipped a silver letter opener beneath the dark wax seal. She unfolded the paper, her hazel eyes tracking the uneven lines:

From: Captain William Sterling, Adjutant, 1st Minnesota Infantry

To: Catherine Sterling, Harriet Street Estate, Winona, Minnesota

Date: July 14, 1863

Dear Cathy,

The telegraph wires will have already broken the hearts in our town before my ink reaches you, but I write this letter from a canvas cot at Gettysburg so that you might know the absolute truth of what we did here.

We have fought the great battle, sister. On the afternoon of July 2nd, the entire left of our army dissolved in the peach orchard, and a great red wave of Alabamians came surging through the low ground toward the undefended center of our line. There were only two hundred and sixty-two of us left on Cemetery Ridge. General Hancock rode straight over to Colonel Colvill and pointed to the surging rebel flags. He did not ask us to hold a position, Cathy – he ordered us to charge forward into the gates of hell and die so that the Republic might buy fifteen minutes of time for him to bring up the reserves.

We went down that slope in perfect, terrifying silence. No cheers, no shouting. Just the crunch of our boots against the clover. Captain Periam fell in the first volley, his throat torn

open by lead, and I ran forward to fill the gap in Company K. But the crossfire was a literal slaughterhouse. A Minié ball struck my thigh. My sword flew from my grip, and my gold watch – the one you gave me – was smashed.

As I lay bleeding in the trampled grass, I saw the regimental colors wavering. Sergeant MacInnis was hit in the knee, and the great blue silk banner began to tilt toward the mud. But our dearest Tom did not let it drop.

He moved from the front line and threw his shoulders straight into the fire, catching the flagstaff inches before it hit the ground. He hoisted it high, Cathy. I heard his voice rise above the din of battle – he yelled for Minnesota to follow him and carried those colors straight into the mouth of the enemy. He moved like a machine of iron. That was the last image my eyes received before the shock took over me. As you already know, Cathy, he is listed with the dead now. Presumed killed from that gallant charge.

Jimmy Lewis found his pocket diary gave it to me this morning. I read the lines he wrote and my heart breaks for the cultured cruelty we gave him. He did not charge the rebs for the Republic. He held our flag so high that when the lists reached Winona, you would have to say his name aloud. Do not ever let the town call him a coward again!

As for me, the surgeons have taken my left leg. The bone was not shattered, but the rot had begun in the damp tents, and Dr. Vance sawed it off before the fever could take my life. Do not weep for the limb, Cathy. They have carved away my flesh, but they have not touched my will to return home. I am still a Sterling, and I am still the brother who promised to protect you. Manage the shipping ledgers, keep the sawmills moving, and watch over Martha Barlow on her farm. I am coming home as soon as I can. The old world we lived in is buried beneath this Pennsylvania dirt, but we will continue.

Your constant brother, William

Catherine folded the letter slowly along the creases her brother's hands had already put in it. Outside the window a teamster was backing a wagon down to the water, and the sawmills went on with their thumping, and the whole enormous machinery of the town she now ran carried on turning as though the page in her hands weighed nothing at all.

Her face wet with a torrent of sudden, burning tears, Catherine shoved the letter into her apron pocket. She stood up, her jaw tightening as the pragmatic, iron-willed blood of her father took over.

She swept out of the office and marched straight up Center Street, her boots striking the wooden sidewalks with a furious, unyielding cadence. She ignored the townspeople who turned to watch her, navigating past the freight crates blocking the path until she threw open the heavy oak doors of The Winona Daily Republican on the corner of Third and Center.

Daniel Sinclair looked up from a fresh layout sheet, his ink-stained fingers freezing in surprise.

"Mister Sinclair," Catherine demanded, slamming her hand flat against his composing table, her voice a low, clear bell that cut through the low rumble of the manual hand-press. "My brother, Captain Sterling, has sent this letter from the front." She pulled the parchment from her apron and pressed it into his hand. "I insist that you print every word of it. I want the entire town to read the truth of what happened on that ridge."

Sinclair stared at the mud-crusted pages, a look of pleased astonishment flaring across his weathered brow. "Miss Catherine, this is... it's a *profound* account. We can have it on the front page by tomorrow's packet."

“Then set it tonight, Mr. Sinclair, and do not soften a line of it,” she said, turning back toward the street. “I will return before the evening packet to read the proof myself.”

She exited the print shop, the hot July sun hitting her cheeks as she purposefully marched down 3rd Street and then turned left towards the levee down Market Street. She walked two blocks until she reached Market Square, where the farming families from the bluffs had backed their flatbed wagons against the timber curbs to sell their summer corn and early onions. Housewives and teamsters clustered around the crates, their voices a muted hum in the humid air.

Catherine stepped directly into the center of the packed gravel square. She clutched her hands tightly against her dress, her chest heaving as she faced the stares of her neighbors.

“Everyone listen to me!” Catherine sobbed, her voice rising loud, distinct, and terrifyingly clear above the heat of the square. She looked toward the distant, jagged shadow of Sugar Loaf Bluff, shouting into the open sky as if she could reach across a thousand miles of dirt. “I am shouting his name for everyone to hear! Thomas Barlow held the line and saved our colors! My dear, poor Tom!”

The square stilled. Catherine turned and walked back toward the Sterling office alone, her fingers tight around the brass company seal in her pocket, and not one person in the market said a word to her as she passed.

* * *

The echoes of Catherine’s voice still hung in the humid air of the market as she stepped on the gravel of the street. Her chest heaved, her face hot and wet with a torrent of tears she

could no longer control. The townspeople stood frozen around their dry-goods crates, their eyes wide with a mixture of shock and burning shame.

Sarah Miller stepped quickly into the gap, her small hand reaching out to grab Catherine's elbow, her fingers sinking hard into the damp linen of her friend's sleeve to anchor her against the stares of the crowd.

"Cathy, stop... oh, please stop," Sarah whispered fiercely, her voice cracking with an adult intensity that she had carved entirely out of the letters tucked inside her apron. "The home-guard sentries are watching the corner. My uncle Alexander... if he hears you shouting his name like that in front of the merchants, he'll have the flatbed wagons locked up before the evening packet even drops anchor."

Catherine didn't pull away. She whirled toward Sarah, her hazel eyes narrowing with a fierce, unblinking authority that she had inherited straight from her father's ruthless ledger mind. She reached into her pocket, her fingers convulsively tightening around the dark brass company seal until the metal edges cut into her palm.

"He wouldn't dare lock the gates, Sarah!" Catherine sobbed. "Let him freeze every asset bearing the Sterling name from here to St. Paul. Billy is lying on a canvas cot in Pennsylvania with his leg gone, and Thomas is face-down in the clover because I spent two years asking him to be brave for us. I will shout his name until this town understands what its cheers required."

Sarah looked down at the mud where Catherine's shipping ledger had fallen, its spine cracked wide across the fresh, wet tallies of military supplies. A single tear faintly cut through the trail soot on the nineteen-year-old's cheek.

"I know the cost, Cathy," Sarah whispered. "Sam is buried in the West Woods at Sharpsburg, and every cheer we gave the *War Eagle* still burns in my throat. Let the paper print

the truth tomorrow. But don't give Alexander the pleasure of watching you break on these planks."

Catherine stared at her friend, the pragmatic, iron-willed blood of her father reassembling itself inside her chest as the raw truth of Sarah's words settled into her mind. She nodded once, a slow, submissive acknowledgment, and reached down to pluck the ink-stained book from the gravel, tucking the secrets of the dead back against her ribs as they prepared to face the town's judgment together.

Two miles south, the long, skeletal shadows of Sugar Loaf Bluff had completely swallowed the unplowed rows of the Barlow farm. The air had turned sharp and bitter, carrying the damp chill of the river valley through the open doorway of the timber-framed barn.

Martha Barlow stood motionless beside the wooden flatbed wagon, her aged hands resting flat and still against a seventy-pound sack of seed corn Elijah Penrose had just hoisted from his bench. She didn't weep, nor did she let out a fractured sigh; her gray bonnet was immaculate, her face lined with the double burden of her husband's recent grave and her son's final listing on the slate.

Elijah stepped out of the shadows, his large, farm-hardened hands trembling as he rested the iron rim of an empty turnip crate against the wagon curbs. His unadorned gray Quaker coat was stiff with road dust, his dark eyes wide and vacant, locked in that terrifying, cold vault of a boy who had just looked into the secular world's malice.

"Martha," Elijah breathed, his voice dropping into a frantic, uneven cadence that shattered the quiet of the yard. "I was down by the grist mills earlier. I was trying to trade some

seasonal carrots, and... and the people were clustering around the Daily Republican board near Center Street.”

Martha did not look up from the burlap sack, her fingers trace-following the stenciled lettering of her son's name: T.W. BARLOW – WINONA.

“The telegraph key has finished its chattering for me, Elijah,” Martha said, her voice a calm, serene anchor against the cold wind howling off the bluffs. “The list is complete.”

“Aye,” Elijah said fiercely, stepping directly into her space, his hands physically grabbing the tail of her wool shawl to force her to lock eyes with him through the amber twilight. “The Sterling girl... Catherine. She marched straight into the center of the packed gravel square, right in front of Alexander Miller’s dock hands and all the teamsters from the timber line. She clutched her hands together and she shouted Thomas’s name aloud for the whole territory to hear.”

Martha’s thumbs hitched against the rough hemp of the bag, her gray eyes flaring with a quiet, sudden intensity that broke across the yard. “And what did the shipping king’s daughter tell those evil secular men, lad?”

“She told them Thomas held the line,” Elijah cried. “She told them he saved the eagle colors at Cemetery Ridge and that Captain William lived long enough to be carried from the field because Tom threw himself forward into the crossfire. She screamed it into the sky, Martha. She called him her dear, poor Tom, and she ordered Sinclair to print William’s letter so the town would have to read the truth.”

Elijah released his grip, his head hanging low with the shame of his own safety by staying home. “The elders... the elders say Thomas chose the path of Cain when he put on that blue wool uniform, and that the Barlow house must bear its cross alone in the silence of the Lord.

But when Catherine shouted his name... the market went completely dead, Martha. The teamsters dropped their hooks. Amos turned his head away from the loading planks. They can't call him a copperhead anymore. The girl broke their cruel judgment right in the dust."

Martha Barlow slowly let go of the burlap sack. Her small frame straightened to its full height against the dark profile of the bluff, her calloused hands reaching out to firmly wrap around the youth's trembling wrists, her skin burning warm against his shivering frame.

"The town measures a man by his noise, Elijah," Martha said softly, her carefully measured words carrying the deep, serene strength of a mother who had spent her winters mending the fences local agitators tore down by night. "And my husband Isaac... he spent his final hours praying for a graveyard to hide our boy's broken vows from his own pride. But the Light within Thomas didn't need a trumpet." She squeezed Elijah's wrists, her unblinking dignity an absolute accusation against the silence of the meetinghouse.

"Let Daniel Sinclair roll his press tomorrow and let the print be as dark as the ink allows. Catherine Sterling has finally said his name aloud because of her own, but her tears won't change the shape of the soil. Thomas is not a ghost in an adjutant's ledger, Elijah. He is my only boy, and he is gone. With thee's help, we are going to sow the north pasture tomorrow. And we are going to keep this homestead whole. Now clean the trail grease off thy face and let us see have an evening supper and give humble thanks to the Lord."

Chapter 18: Blood and Stitches

There were more than sixty different field hospital sites scattered across the ridges and low pastures of Gettysburg, with nearly seven thousand Confederate and over fourteen thousand Union wounded soldiers trapped inside a sprawling metropolis of canvas. The heavy roofs of the temporary tents buckled under the weight of a sudden, hot Pennsylvania rain, but inside the narrow aisles, the air remained entirely frozen by the overpowering, sickening odors of gangrene, damp lime, and vinegar lye.

The ground in front of Cemetery Ridge did not belong to the Union army again until the afternoon of July 3, when Pickett's assault broke against the stone wall and what was left of it went back across the fields. The men of the 1st Minnesota had gone down on that pasture more than a day earlier and had lain there through a night, a morning, and two hours of the heaviest bombardment of the war. Only when the firing died did a burial detail move methodically across the churned clover, their job included searching the pockets of the fallen for pocket testaments or letters before the bodies were carried to the open pits behind the stables.

Thomas Barlow lay face-up in the trampled clover where he had fallen the previous afternoon, his face blackened by black powder soot, his left eye destroyed, and his chest wound

clotted with a thick paste of dirt and gray uniform wool. A day and a night in the open had cracked his lips white and drawn the flesh tight over his cheekbones. A young orderly, balancing a wooden identification slate, reached down and checked Tom's wrist, almost marking him for the pits until Marie Patterson passed with a tin water pail.

“Move your hands, orderly,” Marie barked, noticing the faintest, rhythmic flutter of a pulse against the hollow of Thomas's throat. “He’s still breathing.”

“He's holed through the lung, Nurse,” the orderly protested, wiping a spray of blood from his apron. “He’s a lost case. We need to clear this ridge before the flies take the field.”

“Then he can finish dying under a roof of canvas instead of under the flies,” Marie answered fiercely. “Lift him carefully onto the litter.”

The transition from the blinding fire of Cemetery Ridge to the suffocating dark of the hospital camp was a swirling vortex of sensory horror. For weeks, Thomas Barlow’s conscious mind remained entirely absent, replaced by a frantic, fevered loop that always dragged him back to the Mississippi riverbank. In his delirium, the heavy, sweet stench of rotting flesh that filled the tent didn't belong to the dying men on the cots around him; it was the thick, boiling scent of river mud and northern pine rafts baking under an April sun.

“Cathy!” his mind would scream into the void, the syllable a dry, desperate friction against his fractured jaw.

He could see her perfectly through the haze of his fever, standing by the tall cedar windows on Harriet Street, her dark blue traveling dress swaying gracefully as she turned to offer him that soothing smile – the one that had broken his connection to his father’s faith. He would reach for her across the canvas, his fingers clawing frantically at the grease-stained linen sheets,

trying to locate the cold, polished steel of the silver match-case she had placed in his hand. He needed the match. He needed to strike it to clear the blinding confusion from his thoughts.

But every time his fingers closed on nothing, a stern, commanding voice would cut straight through the fog. It wasn't Cathy's soft, clear bell of a voice; it was low, sharp, and carried an unyielding weight that anchored him to the hard timber of his cot.

"Drink this. Cathy isn't here."

Marie Patterson's words pierced his delirium like a blast of iron canister. As the sweltering August heat settled over the field hospital, turning the damp canvas walls of Ward 4 into a suffocating kiln, Tom lay trapped behind his sightless left eye. He couldn't see Marie's face clearly, but he could hear the steady, mechanical sound of her scissors cutting away filthy bandages, and he could smell the sharp vinegar she used to wash his throat.

* * *

Near the end of August, the late-afternoon rain finally stopped, leaving the canvas walls sagging with moisture. Thomas lay pinned to his mattress, the swelling on his face having receded into a tight, puckered canyon of skin that pulled his mouth into a permanent, cynical sneer. His left arm lay stretched out on a rough pine plank braced against the cot frame, heavily bound in layers of gray lint that were slowly turning a dull, weeping yellow.

Dr. Harrison Vance stood at the foot of the mattress, his shirtsleeves rolled up and his linen apron caked in a dark glaze of dried bone-saw grime. He reached down, his fingers sinking aggressively into the soft flesh of Thomas's bicep, pushing until the soldier's jaw tensed with a low, involuntary rattle of pain.

“The skin is turning the color of river clay, Marie,” Vance muttered, his voice dropping into that flat, clinical logic of a triage surgeon who measured life by the efficiency of a saw blade. “The shrapnel took the muscle clean off the bone at the shoulder, and the drainage is turning sour. If we don’t take the arm off at the socket before the morning light, the rot will enter his chest cavity, and we’ll be hauling him to the dead-house line before the weekend frost.”

Marie Patterson did not look up from her lint roll. She stood firmly on the opposite side of the plank, her hands physically shielding the bound arm from the surgeon’s silver forceps.

“The limb still has warmth, Doctor, and the pulse at his wrist is as steady as your own,” Marie said, her voice carrying that unyielding, fierce authority that always acted like a wedge in the ward. “He didn’t hold the regimental colors through fifteen minutes of Wilcox’s canister fire just to have his flesh carved away like a side of salt pork because you’re short on patience and cots.”

“He’s a private from a backwoods territory, Nurse,” Vance hissed, leaning over the frame. “He’s got a hole in his chest, a fractured jaw, and one eye missing. He’s already reduced to a ruin. A man can’t plow a field or guide a timber raft with a stiffened, withered wing that leaks bile every time the humidity changes. I have twenty raw Pennsylvania recruits sitting on supply wagons outside who need these mattresses. Let me do the clean work, take the arm, and clear the file.”

“He isn’t a file, and he isn’t a ruin until he says so,” Marie shot back, her dark eyes flaring under her white cap. “I spent a week throwing dirt over boys at the Antietam who surrendered to your clean work because they believed the noise in their heads was too loud to live through. This one held the line when the entire brigade disintegrated around him. He has survived too much to

be whittled down to a torso without absolute necessity. Go on back to your bone-saws in the operating tent, Harrison, and leave the living to me.”

Dr. Vance let out a weak, irritated snort, his administrative pride fracturing against the sheer, unblinking intensity of her gaze. He turned his back to the cot, spat a stream of dark tobacco juice onto the mud floor, and strode out into the rain-drenched lane.

The tent flaps clicked shut behind him.

* * *

A low, gravelly rasp tore from the cot mattress. Thomas had opened his single gray eye, his pupil clouded with the yellow fog of the camp fever. His chest heaved against the tightly bound dressings, each shallow breath a physical friction against his ribs.

“Let him... take it, Marie,” Thomas whispered, his voice cracking with a raw, desperate fatalism. “The doc’s right. The plow’s broken anyway. My father... he cast me out before the river even thawed in ‘61. My friend Sam’s dead and buried in the West Woods... and Cathy... Cathy looks at me like a ghost she’s already forgotten on her porch. It don’t... nothing matters none anymore. Just let the iron finish it.”

Marie did not flinch, nor did she show pity. She dropped her linen roll into the tin basin with a sharp, resonant clink that shattered the quiet of the ward. Leaning over the low wooden frame of the cot, she brought her face inches from his scarred cheek, her dark eyes locking onto his single clear pupil with an absolute intensity that seemed to pin him to the straw. She reached down, her rough fingers wrapping tightly around his good, calloused wrist, her skin burning hot against his shivering frame.

“It matters because one day you may want to hold something besides grief,” Marie said. “You spent two years making a shrine out of a girl who gave you a match-case and a brother’s blessing. That sorrow brought you here, and now it has done all it can do. The war has taken enough from you. I did not drag you from a bloody field so you could surrender to a memory.”

She squeezed his wrist, her grip unyielding, forcing the fatalistic fog to recede from his thoughts.

“You are going to keep that arm, Quaker, and you are going to learn to draw a full breath against the pain of every stitch in your ribs. You are going to fight this fever until your boots hit the dirt road again, if only to find out who the soldier is beneath the uniform they gave you. Now take the broth, shut your mouth, and don't you ever speak of giving up to me again.”

Thomas stared up at her through his single eye. He didn’t answer. But his knuckles relaxed against the linen sheets, and his fingers curled back to catch the warmth of her hand.

Marie did not pull away. She sat back on her low wooden stool, her fingers methodically smoothing the edges of her stained apron, her eyes drifting toward the open tent flap where the gray mist hung over the oak openings.

“I know the road you’re walking, Tom,” Marie said softly, her voice dropping into that flat, universal weight that cut straight through his lingering delirium. “Not quite a year ago, I wasn't wearing this gray apron. I was standing on a ridge near Sharpsburg, looking down at a creek called Antietam. My fiancé, Robert, was a lieutenant in the 12th Pennsylvania. He carried a leather-bound book of poetry in his overcoat and told me the war was just some constitutional argument that would be settled before the winter frost.”

“When the Texans charged into the cornfield, Robert didn't run. He stood in the stalks and tried to hold the line with a sword his father bought for him. They found his body three days

later. A piece of iron canister shot tore through his chest, right where his poetry book was. He was dead and his face was so blackened by the sulfur smoke that I could only identify him by his engraved silver ring. My Robert died for a myth they printed in the papers. It wasn't anyone's grand plan – my plan was to marry Robert, but now I am just an orphaned widow.”

“So stop hunting for a hole in the ground to put yourself in, Quaker. If the old world we lived in is buried beneath this dirt, then we don't owe the dead our surrender. We hold the line for the person sitting on the next cot. We endure to simply prove to the surgeons that the muscle hasn't gone cold. Grab hold of my hand, Tom Barlow. Learn to draw a full breath against the pain, and let's see if we can't invent a way to live through the morning.”

Thomas looked up at her white nurse's cap and found he had nothing to put beside what she had told him. Outside the tent the rain kept on against the canvas, and somewhere down the row a boy was calling for water in a voice that had not stopped since dark.

He closed his fingers around Marie's and held on.

When she spoke of the cornfield at Sharpsburg, Toms's mind didn't drift back to the Cathy on Harriet Street. Instead, it forced him to relive the day in the West Woods. As Marie described her fiancé, Robert – standing in the stalks with a Philadelphia sword, his chest torn open by iron shot where his poetry book sat – Tom didn't see a stranger. He saw Sam Miller. He saw Sam's wool cap flying into the blood-soaked weeds; he felt the wet, terrifying splatter of his childhood friend's blood soaking into his own blue uniform coat.

A poetry book, Tom thought, his shattered jaw tensing beneath the damp compress. Robert died for a book. Sam died for a cause. And I... I lost my soul for a waltz on a grass clearing.

The realization hit him like a physical blow. For two years, he had carried Cathy's face into the smoke like a holy relic, believing his unrequited love was a grand, tragic performance that kept him separate from the secular madness of the war. He had used her platonic letters as a shield to block out his father's condemnation and the screams of the men he fired at through the fog.

* * *

Vance went out into the rain and did not go straight back to the operating tent. He stopped at the end of the lane under the dripping edge of the canvas and stood there a while with his hands hanging at his sides. Then he went back down the row and looked a second time at a Wisconsin boy he had marked that morning for the pits, and found a pulse in the wrist, and swore once, quietly, and called for an orderly.

* * *

It was a daily ritual for Marie. There were so many patients now that she was responsible for, keeping her endlessly busy. She went down the rows in the same order every morning, and she did not hurry past the cots of the men who were not going to leave them, and she never once told a boy he would be walking by Christmas when he would not.

Thomas watched her work down the length of the cot, tucking the linen under at the corners with the flat, unhurried economy of a woman who had done it four hundred times and would do it four hundred more before the tents came down.

“Tell me then, what is left, Marie?” Thomas muttered, his voice trembling as a sharp lance of physical pain shot through his bound ribs. “If the cause is a lie, and the home we left is empty, what am I holding the line for?”

Marie picked up the wooden spoon, dipped it into the bowl of parched-corn broth, and held it to his dry lips.

“You hold it for the man laying on this cot,” Marie said fiercely, a single, private tear faintly trailing through the dust on her cheek before she brushed it away. “Thomas Aquinas wrote that the highest act of courage isn't to attack, but to endure – to hold firm against a terrifying reality without letting your interior soul dissolve into hopelessness. You traded your peace for William's life at Bull Run, and you held that flag at Cemetery Ridge so Cathy would have to say your name. You did that, and now it's done. It's over. The state doesn't own your soul, and your father's ghost doesn't own your grave.”

“Drink the broth, Tom,” Marie continued. “Learn to draw a full breath against the pain. I didn't drag you out of the burial pit to let you surrender to a ghost. You are going to live, if only to find out who the soldier is beneath those scars.”

Thomas stared at her for a long, silent moment. He swallowed the broth, his jaw tensing, and for the first time since boarding the *War Eagle*, his eyes did not wander westward. He looked at the white nurse's cap before him, anchored firmly to the soft blonde hair and the steady hands of the woman who had refused to let him die in the dark.

It was the second time in this war that Aquinas had been handed to him — once on a fence rail in the fog before the charge, and now here, by a woman who had never met Jimmy Lewis and never would.

Cathy had never wanted his blood on her ledgers. She had wanted a brother to watch over her Billy, and she had written it plainly in every letter she sent, and he had read straight past it every time.

“No person is guilty of the shape of their heart,” Marie whispered into the dark of the ward.

He watched her a long while after she moved off down the row, tracking the silhouette of her cap between the cots. She had lost her world at Antietam, yet she didn’t sit in the dirt mourning over a ghost. She stood in the stench of the wounded, the dying, and the dead with her hands covered in lye, demanding that he choose the path of living.

That night for the first time, Thomas didn't dream of the veranda window. He drew a ragged, agonizing breath through his bound ribs, welcoming the sharp pain of the stitch. He didn't want to die for Cathy anymore. He wanted to live, if only to reveal the soldier in the scarred blue woolen coat concealed in the battle smoke of a distant hidden field. Those words remained in his head... “who are you,” ... And he was determined to find out.

* * *

The daily ritual continued into September. Marie Patterson would sit on her low wooden stool consoling patients one by one. Her gray nurse's apron was damp at the knees, her small hands resting flat and still against the coarse linen of her lap. She wasn't rolling lint or pinning compresses now; she simply sat in the stifling, sour heat of the ward, her dark eyes fixed on the empty space between the cots.

“Tom, I don’t know if I told your this, but Robert’s father didn't send his body back to Philadelphia,” Marie said softly, her voice dropping into that flat, universal rasp that always

acted like a wedge to pry Thomas out of his crypt. “His family couldn't bear the cost of a private transport wagon, so they left him in the trench behind the cornfield. Later they sent me his silver ring in a dry-goods envelope, along with a well-meaning letter from the church telling me to find comfort in the Great Cause of the Union.”

Thomas shifted slightly on his straw mattress, his single gray eye tracking the sharp, resolute profile of her chin. His bound chest tightened, the physical pain of his shrapnel stitch a dull ache against his ribs. “Did you... did you not go back to them, Marie? To his folks?”

Marie let out a short, hollow rattle that passed for a laugh, though her lips didn't curve. She reached down, her thumb methodically tracing the faint, faded ink stain on her cuff that had survived a dozen scrubblings with lye.

“There was nothing to go back to, Tom,” she whispered, her words dropping like iron weights into the quiet space between the tents. “My own father passed from the shaking ague when the bogs flooded back in '59, and my mother's house was sold to pay the timber leases before Lincoln even called for the first seventy-five thousand volunteers. Robert was my anchor. He was the only person who looked at me and saw a woman instead of a pair of hands to clear the laundry tubs.”

She turned her head slowly, her gaze locking onto Thomas's scarred face with an unblinking, terrifying intensity that made the veteran soldier pause.

“Do you know what it is to stand on the riverbank and realize your horizon has been wiped completely clean? I'm a nineteen-year-old orphaned widow, Tom.”

Marie stood up, her small frame casting a long, slender shadow across the row of cots as she leaned over the wooden frame of his bed.

“An orphan has no past, Tom. No kitchen table to look back on for a scripture or a mother’s grace. And a widow has no future. No partner to guide a team of horses with or build a barn. I am stranded here because there isn’t a square inch of soil left in this whole fractured Republic where my name means anything to a living soul.”

Thomas listened to her say it and did not try to answer. She had loved a man who loved her back, and the world had not paused a single hour for either of them; it had gone on ticking, the way the watch in Billy’s waistcoat went on ticking through every mile of Virginia. He reached out his rough, calloused hand, his fingers trembling slightly as he left his palm open on the edge of the pine plank.

“Then... we are two of a kind, Marie,” Thomas muttered, his voice a low, gravelly rumble that cut through the steady drumming of the rain. “My father died in his boots while cursing my uniform, and the girl I gave my soul to thinks of me only as a second brother sent to shield her actual one. I have no house out West, and I have no faith left under the bluffs.”

Marie stared down at his open palm for a long, silent minute, her breathing a fractured struggle against the tight apron strings. She didn’t offer a polite word of comfort, and she didn’t weep. With a slow, deliberate release, she placed her small hand flat into his calloused fingers, her grip tightening until the knuckles went white.

“Then we are two of a kind,” Marie said, and her fingers closed the rest of the way around his. She did not let go. “I have said my piece about graveyards once already, Tom Barlow, and I will not spend breath saying it twice. Tomorrow you will draw a full breath against the stitch. The day after, you will draw two. That is the whole of the plan I have, and it is the one that kept me alive after Sharpsburg.”

Thomas closed his fingers around hers, closed his weary eyes and fell asleep. His dreams were calm and peaceful yet again.

Chapter 19: Two Hearts in the Ward

Marie walked him out of the ward for the first time on the third afternoon of September, her hand under his good elbow and his own palm flat against the canvas for the first twenty yards. The lanes between the tents had been corduroyed with fence rails against the mud. Everywhere Thomas looked, the work of the place was being done by men and women who had come into the Union lines out of the Maryland and Virginia counties — hauling water in yoked buckets, splitting rails for the cook fires, scrubbing lye through linen that would be bloody again by morning, and driving the dead-carts out to the pits behind the stables in a slow, unhurried procession that stopped for neither the rain nor the dark. The army fed them and, when a quartermaster remembered it, paid them.

He knew the gray head before he knew the face. The man was loading a cart at the end of the row, working with the same unhurried economy Thomas had watched on the wharf at Fort Monroe a year and a half before, and when he straightened and saw the one-eyed soldier standing in the lane, he set the tailgate down and looked for a long moment.

“Minnesota,” Ephraim said. “You were the one asked me a question.” Thomas found he could not remember what he had meant to say, so he asked the only thing he wanted to know, which was whether the oldest boy had ever walked out of Nansemond County. “March,”

Ephraim said. “Came up through the lines at Suffolk with two other men and found us at the fort in April. Then in June he went up to Philadelphia and put his name on a roll at Camp William Penn.” He said it evenly, the way he said everything. “They give him ten dollars a month and take three back for his coat. Your boys get thirteen and keep it. He signed anyhow. I stood in the yard and watched him do it.”

“My father put me out of the house for enlisting,” Thomas said. “He held that no man’s freedom is worth another man’s blood. He died last winter still holding it.” Ephraim took that without any visible offense, turning it over the way a man turns over a tool that belongs to somebody else. “Then your father and me want the same thing,” he said, “and couldn’t stand in one room to say so.” He lifted the tailgate and set the pin. “I don’t hold with what he done to you. But I know what it is to want a thing so bad you’d rather it come at no cost at all. It don’t come that way. It never has.” He put his shoulder to the cart, and the wheels came up out of the rut, and he went on down the lane toward the stables without looking back.

Marie came up beside him with the empty basin against her hip and watched the cart go. “Who was that?” Thomas kept his eye on the lane until the gray head passed behind the stable wall. “A man I met on a wharf,” he said. “He has a boy in the war.”

The September heat did not lift when night fell over the Schwartz Farm field hospital; it simply turned the damp canvas walls of Ward 4 into a thick suffocating humid smell. The sulfurous smoke of the long-shattered Gettysburg lines had finally washed out of the sky, replaced by the relentless, low drumming of a Pennsylvania rain that transformed the grass lanes between the hospital tents into a bottomless gray mire.

Thomas Barlow sat on the edge of his hospital cot, his broad shoulders rigid beneath a clean but coarse gray linen shirt. His left eye was gone, the scarred tissue red and angry where

the iron shrapnel ripped through his jaw. He still could feel every individual stitch in his ribs with every breath he drew – the ‘knotted core’ Jimmy Lewis had told him to find, now reduced to an absolute, physical ache.

To his right sat Private David “Davy” Todd. The fourteen-year-old drummer boy had not spoken a syllable since the afternoon of July 3. He sat huddled on his straw mattress, his knees pulled tightly against his chest, his small hands convulsively twisting a pair of splintered hickory drumsticks. His blue eyes were wide, vacant, and fixed entirely on the blank canvas wall across from him, locked in the terrifying, cold vault of a battle-induced catatonia.

To Tom’s left lay Private Rufus Desmond of the 33rd Virginia Infantry – the very regiment that had unleashed the devastating volley into Company K at the Henry House Hill two summers before. Desmond was a Patrick County boy who had been hired out to a tannery near Woodstock when the state seceded, and rather than walk two hundred miles home to enlist beside his own people, he had signed with the Shenandoah company mustering in the street outside the shop. His right hip was a patchwork of blood-crusted bandages where a Federal bayonet had opened him to the bone during the close night work on Culp’s Hill. His face was pale from loss of blood, yet his dark eyes held a strange, resolute optimism that defied the stench of the ward.

“That hip is foul, Marie. The rot is going to take him before the week is out.”

The voice came from the foot of the cots. Dr. Harrison Vance stood with his sleeves rolled up, his white apron caked in a dark, stiff glaze of dried gore. His fingers, slippery with carbolic grease, poked aggressively at the yellowing skin around Rufus Desmond’s hip wound. He looked up at Marie Patterson, his weathered face twisted into the cynical, clinical logic of a surgeon who had seen too many limbs drop into the amputation piles.

“He's a lost case, Nurse,” Vance muttered, wiping his curved knife on a stained rag. “We have twenty raw Pennsylvania recruits coming in from the convalescent station tonight who need these cots. Clear the Virginian rebel out. Move him to the dead-house line behind the stables so we can scrub the linen.”

Marie did not step back. She stood firmly between Dr. Vance and the rebel's cot, her fingers methodically pinning down the dry edges of a clean lint compress. Her sharp-witted face was drawn from long hours of bone-scraping details, but her dark eyes flared with an unblinking, fierce authority that caused the surgeon to pause.

“The Virginian continues to breathe, Doctor, and his pulse is as steady as your own,” Marie said, her voice dropping into that flat, universal rasp of a woman who had buried her own world at Antietam. “He isn't a lost case until I say so. If your clinical logic can't find the stitches it takes to sew up a wound on a man who refuses to surrender, then go back to your bone-saws in the tent next door and leave the ward to the living.”

Vance let out a weak, irritated snort, but the sheer, unyielding ferocity in her eyes subdued his administrative pride. He then backed away and left the ward.

Marie turned back to the Virginia soldier. Rufus Desmond let out a ragged, whistling gasp, his fingers clutching the rough timber frame of his cot as a sharp lance of pain shot through his hip. He looked up at her gray nurse's cap, a faint, mocking smile touching his pale lips despite his agony.

“You waste... your time on me, Yankee girl,” Desmond whispered, his voice a low, gravelly rasp that carried the deep, soft drawl of Stuart, Virginia. “The doctor... he's got the right of it. The iron entered too deep into me, I'm doomed. My people... they're out past the Potomac now anyway. Just let me... let me slide out into the grass.”

Marie knelt in the dirt beside his straw mattress, her hands wrapping tightly around his sweat-slicked wrist, forcing the rebel to lock eyes with her through the amber glare of the kerosene lamp.

“Listen to me, Virginian,” Marie said, her words dropping like iron weights into the quiet space between the cots. “A year ago this month, I stood in the cornfield at Sharpsburg, throwing dirt over a boy who looked just like you. He wore a blue coat, and he carried a book of poetry, and he asked me to let him slide into the grass because the confusion in his head was too heavy to bear. I let him go, Desmond. I let him surrender, and I’ve spent every hour since then rotting in the stench of these tents to pay for sins of silence.”

She leaned closer, her breath warm against his bloodless cheek, her grip on his wrist unyielding.

“I don't care about your Stuart home, and I damn sure don't care about the gray silk banner your brigade waved on our soil. But you showed me a picture of your sister this morning – the girl waiting for you on the porch. You told me you had the determination to walk back across the Potomac and get back to the rolling foothills of the Blue Ridge. If you give up now because some cynical surgeon wants your cot, then you are a coward, Rufus Desmond. You are just giving up. I demand that you tear that cartridge with your teeth, you hold the breath in your lungs, and you fight this fever until your boots hit the Virginia dirt again. Do you hear me?”

Desmond stared up at her through the fog of his fever, his jaw tightening until the muscles bunched like twisted rope beneath his stubble. The surrender vanished from his eyes, replaced by a raw, stubborn spark of life. He nodded once, a slow, agonizing movement, and closed his eyes to concentrate on the simple, brutal business of breathing.

Thomas watched her step back, her chest drawing a tight, fractured breath as she wiped a spray of river mist from her cheek. He turned his single gray eye toward the right, his gaze locking onto the silent, motionless drummer boy.

Davy Todd had not moved. His knuckles were white against the hickory sticks, his mind stranded on the sweltering ridge where the Alabamians had cut the regiment to pieces. He stared straight ahead with an unblinking, piercing, vacant stare that went beyond the canvas on the other side of the ward.

“The roll is called, the line is dressed, Davy,” Thomas said softly. His voice was a low, firm rumble, carrying the grim, automatic focus of a veteran who had held the colors at Cemetery Ridge. “The colonel says the manual drills are over. You can drop the sticks now, lad.”

The boy didn't blink. The mechanical ticking of a grandfather clock in the distant staff tent was the only sound.

Thomas reached into his gray linen pocket. His fingers searched for the small silver match-case Catherine had given him on the Winona levee, but his hand found only the empty, flattened metal fragment the shrapnel had left behind. He pulled it out anyway – a mangled, heat-blackened piece of silver that bore no resemblance to the beautiful vignette of home it had once been. He laid it flat on the wooden box between their cots.

“I know the noise you’re hiding from, Davy,” Thomas whispered, his voice catching as a stitch pulled against his chest wound. “When the cannons opened up, and the smoke was so thick you couldn't see the eagle on the flag... I felt the confusion take me, too. I saw my friend Sam get torn apart four inches from my face. I watched Captain Billy spin around in the clover with a ball through his thigh. I wanted to drop my Springfield, run away, and hide behind my mother's apron under Sugar Loaf Bluff.”

The drummer boy's thumbs hitched slightly, the splintered hickory sticks pausing their constant, micro-tremor against his knees.

"But Jimmy Lewis told me something before the bugles blew," Thomas continued, his gray eye tracking the boy's pale profile with an absolute, unblinking intensity. "He said true bravery isn't the shouting of the recruitment rallies or the ambitious pride the captains wave from their saddles. He said the highest act of courage is to endure – to be the 'knotted core' that refuses to let the interior soul dissolve into hopelessness. We didn't sign up to become ghosts, Davy."

Thomas reached out, his large, calloused hand gently but firmly covering the boy's tiny, frozen fingers. The warmth of his skin cut through the chill of the boy's shock.

"The regiments are thin today, lad. But the line will hold, Davy. We bought Hancock some time, and the reserves are up. The battle is won. You don't have to beat the advance anymore. The road is clear. Your mother is counting on your steady hands to help with the spring harvest."

For a long, agonizing minute, the silence inside the tent canvas was absolute, save for the steady drumming of the Pennsylvania rain.

Then, Davy's chest let out a long, fractured, shuddering gasp. His blue eyes blinked, the vacant, glassy stare suddenly shattering as the light of the living world rushed back into his pupils. He looked down at Tom's large hand covering his own, then up at the scarred, one-eyed face of the soldier beside him.

A single teardrop cut a clean line through the black powder soot caked on the fourteen-year-old's cheek. His fingers relaxed, and with a slow, trembling release, the splintered hickory drumsticks fell from his grip and clattered softly against the wooden floorboards of the ward.

“Tom...I, ...I want to go home...” the boy choked out, his voice a thin, fragile bell that had not been used in a month. “The colors... did we lose the flag?”

“We kept it, Davy,” Thomas said, his own throat tightening with a sudden, profound wave of relief that cleared the dark shadows from his memory. He offered the boy a reassuring smile, a real, human smile of compassion. “The flag is safe, and the line is dressed. Now take a deep breath against the pain and get some rest, Davy.”

Marie stood at the head of the row, her hands resting flat against her stained apron as she watched Tom pull the child back from the grave. She did not confess the sudden, aching love that flared in her breast, nor did she speak of the boundaries she knew she could not cross. She simply dipped a fresh cloth into the vinegar water, her eyes fixed on Thomas's profile, knowing with an absolute, bitter certainty that she was nursing him back to strength simply so he could carry his scars back to the river bluffs he would never leave behind.

* * *

In the operating tent next door, under the flickering glare of two suspended whale-oil lamps, Dr. Vance stood with his shirtsleeves rolled to his armpits. His linen apron was no longer white; it was stiffened by a dark, glistening glaze of dried and fresh blood.

Outside, the steady Pennsylvania rain was still beating a rhythmic, hollow tattoo against the heavy canvas. Inside, the only sounds were the scraping of boots in the mud, the wet slap of soiled sponges, and the rhythmic, guttural gasps of men pinned to the rough wooden tables.

“Take a break doctor, I can take over for you now,” Dr. Vance said to the doctor who just finished dressing an amputation. Dr. Vance stepped up to the table and shouted. “Bring in the next patient!”

The orderlies brought in the next soldier who had a bullet wound in his abdomen. The staff was actually amazed that the soldier, who had been waiting for days, was even still alive.

“Hold that lamp closer, Miller! I can't operate in a cave,” the doctor barked, his fingers buried deep in the torn abdomen of a young infantryman.

A hospital steward, his face pale beneath the lantern light, stepped forward. The light gleamed off the brass instruments neatly arranged on a nearby grease-stained cracker box: scalpels, curved needles, silk thread, and silver wire probes.

“Is the cone ready, Nurse?” Vance asked without looking up.

Nurse Elizabeth “Libby” Fellows pressed a cone of stiffened cloth, packed with a sponge soaked in liquid chloroform, over the soldier's nose and mouth. The boy's frantic, animal thrashing slowed as his eyes rolled back into a dull, unseeing glaze.

Dr. Vance used a pair of steel forceps to peel back the shredded uniform that had been driven straight into the wound by the lead projectile. He took a long, thin silver probe and slid it gently into the opening. It made a sickening, wet click against bone.

“Fire and furies,” Vance muttered, his jaw tightening until his beard bunched. “The Minié ball entered two inches to the left of the navel. It's ripped clean through the small intestines and shattered the lip of the pelvis. Look at the color of that tissue, Marie. The bile is loose in the cavity.”

“Can you stitch the bowel, Doctor?” Libby asked, her hands steady as she prepared a needle threaded with heavy black silk.

“Stitch it? With what, girl? Miracles?” Vance growled, withdrawing the probe with a wet hiss. “The ball didn't just pierce it; it pulverized it. In the old textbooks, they talk about an autoplasmic suture, but out here, a belly holed like this is a closed ledger. The inflammation will

take his mind by tomorrow morning, and the mortification will finish him before the weekend frost. He's a lost case. Don't waste any more chloroform."

Libby looked down at the boy's pale face, her thumbs gently smoothing a smudge of grease from his forehead. "Shall we move him to the dead-house line?"

"Aye. Wrap his blanket tight and give him a swallow of laudanum if he wakes in severe pain," Vance ordered, rinsing his bloody hands in a tin basin of stagnant, unsterile well water.

"Next man. Move your boots, stewards! The ambulances are stacking up at the road!"

Two burly medics hoisted a screaming sergeant onto the blood-slicked table. His left arm was a mangled ruin, the forearm twisted at an impossible angle where shrapnel had struck it.

"Libby, the chloroform cone – fresh drops, look sharp," Vance commanded. He reached into the tin basin and pulled out a long, heavy tenaculum and his prized capital amputation saw – a twelve-inch steel blade with a polished ebony handle.

The sergeant fought the cone for three ragged breaths before going limp.

"Miller, grip the wrist. Keep the extension tight," Vance directed the medic. "Libby, stand ready with the silk loops to catch the arteries."

Dr. Vance expertly sawed through the skin, muscle, and bones of the mangled arm. He did it as easily as sawing lumber like those Minnesota lumberjacks could. Instead of the dust of the wood flying in the air, it was blood and bone that misted around the saw blade. It was gruesome, but necessary. Once the limb was off, he quickly put a clean dressing over the stump and washed his hands for the next patient. There really was no time to waste, there were still uncountable wounded men waiting for their turn.

"Clear the table! Wipe the wood down!" Dr. Vance barked, his voice hoarse as the medics dragged the sergeant's severed arm toward the refuse pit outside the tent flap.

* * *

Sometime later in the early evening after long hours of sawing flesh and bone, two stewards hoisted the next patient onto the slick timber. It was a young volunteer, his face completely blackened by black powder burns and clotted blood. A jagged, red canyon ran along the left temple where a piece of shell shrapnel had struck his skull, depressing the bone plate straight into his brain. The boy's right arm twitched with a rhythmic spasms, his breathing a loud, stertorous snore.

"He's breathing sounds like a dyin' mule," the medic, Miller, muttered, wiping a spray of crimson from his cheek with a wool sleeve. "Is he another lost case, Doctor? The brains are weeping through the hair."

"No," Vance said, his eyes narrowing as he leaned close under the whale-oil lamp. "The dura mater isn't torn through yet. The bone is just pressing on the vault. If we lift the pressure, the twitching stops. If we leave it, the compression kills him before the midnight bugle. Bring me the trephine and the elevator."

Nurse Libby Fellows quickly brought forward a velvet-lined case containing the surgeon's most specialized tools: a T-shaped steel handle attached to a circular, hollow saw with sharp iron teeth – the trephine – along with a flat, curved steel lever known as the elevator.

"He's too far in shock for the chloroform, Libby," Vance noted, his calloused fingers probing the edges of the shattered skull. "His pulse is slow and heavy. Hold his chin tightly. Miller, pin his shoulders to the wood so he doesn't lurch when the iron bites."

Libby clutched the boy's head with an iron-willed grip, her thumbs resting flat against his uninjured cheek.

Dr. Vance took a scalpel and made a swift, triangular incision through the bloody scalp, peeling the flesh back to expose the white, glistening bone of the skull. The mud and grass from the battlefield had settled deep into the wound, and he used a small sponge soaked in vinegar water to scrub the surface clean.

“See there?” Vance pointed the tip of the scalpel toward a fine, dark fracture line surrounding a depressed saucer of bone. “I can't get the elevator beneath it without making a pilot hole in the healthy skull. Marie, hold the lantern closer.”

He carefully placed the center pin of the circular trephine saw flat against the solid bone just adjacent to the fracture. With an even, rhythmic wrist movement, he began to rotate the instrument. A harsh, grinding sound filled the suffocating tent as the iron teeth bit into the skull. Tiny, ivory-white flakes of bone dust sprayed onto Vance's blood-glazed apron.

“He's shifting, Doctor!” Miller warned, his muscles straining as the boy's torso heaved against the table.

“Hold him still, damn it!” Vance hissed, increasing the downward pressure on the handle. “I'm through the outer table of the bone. I can feel the change in the resistance. One more turn...”

With a sudden, soft give, the circular saw cut through the inner table of the skull. Vance carefully lifted the tool, pulling out a perfect, half-inch button of bone trapped within the circular teeth.

“The hole is clean,” Vance breathed, his forehead beaded with sweat. He dropped the trephine and snatched the flat steel elevator. He slid the thin instrument into the fresh hole, maneuvering the tip beneath the jagged, depressed edge of the fractured skull fragment.

“Steady now,” Vance muttered to himself.

With a slow, calculated pry of his wrist, Vance lifted. A sickening, wet suction sound echoed inside the tent canvas as the depressed bone popped back into its proper alignment.

Instantly, the violent, mechanical twitching in the boy's right arm stopped. His breathing lost its loud, stertorous rasp, smoothing out into a quiet, regular rhythm.

“There’s no two ways about it, the death snore's gone now,” Miller whispered, his eyes wide with genuine frontier wonderment.

“The brain has room to breathe again,” Libby said quietly, her dark eyes locking onto the boy’s pale profile with a deep, resolute relief.

“Aye, but the work isn't done,” Vance said, his clinical voice returning as he reached for a small silver wire brush to clear the remaining bone fragments. “Libby, flush the vault with the clean well water. Then give me the curved needle and the fine silk. We’ll flap the scalp back over the hole and suture it tight. If the camp fever doesn't rot the lining of his brain by Monday, this lad might have a chance to live long enough to see home again.”

Doctor Vance finished closing the wound, washed his hands, and wiped his brow. He needed to find some dinner and get some rest. There are more wounded waiting for him.

Chapter 20: The Hardening Ground

The transition from the suffocating kiln of Ward 4 tent to the open air of the Schwartz Farm field hospital was a violent shock to Thomas Barlow's remaining senses. The mid-August rain had finally stopped, leaving the sprawling city of canvas sagging under a thick, humid Pennsylvania mist that smelled of damp lime, pinewood lye, and the sharp, acidic tang of vinegar. High above the hospital city, the oak openings of the Gettysburg ridges stood as silent, scarred sentinels, but down in the narrow lanes between the tents, the world was a labyrinth of mud and raw torment.

For Tom, the rows of white canvas seemed entirely endless. Every flapping tent wall, every sudden clatter of a mess tin, and every low, guttural groan rising from the neighboring cots felt like a direct accusation. He stood on the damp earth outside the flap of Ward 4, his large, farm-hardened frame looking loose and broken inside a coarse gray linen shirt. His left eye was gone, the puckered, angry ridge of shrapnel tissue pulling his mouth into a tight, cynical sneer that felt completely foreign to his face. His chest was tightly bound in layers of stiff gray lint, and each shallow breath he drew was a physical friction against his fractured ribs – the "knotted core" Jimmy Lewis had told him to find, now reduced to a permanent lance of pain.

Marie Patterson walked beside him, her gray nurse's apron damp at the knees from a morning spent scrubbing the operating tables. She did not touch him. She did not offer the soft, trembling pity that a parlor socialite might have given. She walked with her hands folded flat against her lap, her dark eyes fixed on the gravel road ahead, her presence an immovable, unblinking anchor that simply refused to let him falter.

Thomas took three agonizing steps into the lane, his boots sinking into the gray mire. The disorder in his head flared with a sudden, blinding heat. The landscape of the hospital camp blurred, the white tents transforming in his mind into the towering corn stalks of David Miller's Cornfield. He could hear the terrifying, mechanical shriek of iron canister shot; he could feel the wet, heavy splatter of Sam Miller's blood soaking into his uniform blue wool.

His legs, which had effortlessly carried two men's gear across thirty miles of Maryland clay, suddenly turned to water. His breath caught in his throat with a ragged, whistling gasp, and his frame lurched sideways until his right shoulder slammed heavily against a rough split-rail fence post at the edge of the stable lines. His fingers clamped around the splintered wood, his knuckles turning white as his knees buckled. A low mournful groan escaped from his lips.

He hung there, his chest heaving, his single gray eye staring down at the mud in absolute, burning shame. Catching his breath, he turned to Marie.

"I can't do this, Marie," Thomas whispered, his voice a low, gravelly rasp that shook with a sudden, childlike defeat. "Look at me. I'm a useless private, and I can't even cross a ditch without my knees turning to jelly. Weeks ago... weeks ago I carried a company flag straight into the center of a rebel brigade. I never looked back. I held the flag high while the whole world was blowing apart around me... and now breaking my stride is a simple three-inch fence rail might as well be the tower of Ft. Snelling to me."

Marie stepped closer, her shadow falling over his rigid shoulders. She did not pull his hand from the rail, nor did her voice soften from its flat, total weight. She looked at his scarred cheek, her dark eyes burning with that fierce, stubborn spark of life that had pulled him from the collection pits.

“A fence post is no dishonor, Thomas Barlow,” Marie said sternly, her words dropping like iron weights into the damp grass between them. “At Cemetery Ridge, you were running into a meat grinder because some girl on a veranda expected a myth to hold the line for her shipping contracts. That’s easy work for the war machine. But out here on this gravel, you aren’t fighting for a flag or a brotherly blessing. This is hard work – it is *supposed* to be hard work. You are drawing a full breath against the pain of your own living flesh.”

Tom knew she had more to tell him, so he took the brief rest on the post to look at her pleasing face and generous eyes as she continued. “Tom, your human body is fighting a war to heal. This fight is yours and only yours. You decide whether to win or lose. It is all up to you. You are proving to the bone-saws that the muscle hasn’t gone cold. If it takes this splintered rail to keep you upright while you learn to walk like a man, then you hold onto it until the timber rots.”

Thomas stared down at the wood, the fatalistic fog in his thoughts receding under the sheer, unvarnished strength of her truth. He nodded once, a slow, painful movement, and allowed his grip to be secure. Marie turned her head toward the line of tents, her own jaw tightening as she fought her own silent battle against the dark.

* * *

The interior of the hospital dispensary tent was a small, suffocating vault of amber light and medicinal odors. Shelves of dark glass bottles – laudanum, camphor water, and liquid chloroform – gleamed under the flickering flame of a single whale-oil lamp.

Nurse Elizabeth “Libby” Fellows stood by a high wooden composing table, her white linen sleeves rolled to her elbows as she methodically sorted loops of black silk thread and clean lint compresses into a velvet-lined surgeon’s case. She didn’t look up when the canvas flaps parted with a wet slap, but her movements hitched slightly as Marie Patterson stepped into the tent, dragging a heavy wooden bucket of vinegar water behind her.

Marie didn’t speak. She sat down on a low three-legged stool near the supply boxes, her hands resting flat against her stained gray apron, her breathing a fractured struggle against her own exhaustion.

Libby set down a pair of silver bone-forceps with a sharp, resonant metallic clink that shattered the quiet of the tent. She turned her gaze slowly toward her friend, her dark eyes narrowing with a deep, realistic understanding that she had carved out of two years of endless amputations.

“You’re wasting more than your patience on that Minnesota private, Marie,” Libby said quietly, her voice carrying the blunt, unvarnished pragmatism of a veteran surgical nurse. “I watched you out by the stable lines just now. You stand over his cot like he’s the only soldier left breathing in this entire valley of bones. You openly defied Dr. Vance when he wanted to take his arm at the socket, *and* ...I have seen you spend your evenings saving blocks of white sugar for his chicory coffee.”

Marie kept her eyes fixed on the dark floorboards. “The private has a name, Libby. It’s Thomas.”

“His name is just a file in the Adjutant’s ledger, and you know it,” Libby replied in a matter-of-fact voice, stepping around the table until her white cap was inches from Marie’s profile. “He is a volunteer who took a piece of shrapnel through his face while holding a silly blue silk banner. His left eye is gone, his jaw is fractured, and his heart is permanently anchored to some wealthy family a thousand miles away on the Mississippi River. And every time he opens his mouth in his delirium, he doesn’t call for you, Marie. He cries out for Cathy.”

Marie’s thumbs twitched against her apron, her knuckles turning white as a sudden, aching heat flared in her chest. “No person is guilty of the shape of their heart, Libby. He cries out because he carried a woman’s face into the slaughterhouse for the simple reason it was the only shield he had against his father’s Quaker silence. Don’t worry, I’m not building a shrine for him.”

“But aren’t you?” Libby’s voice dropped into a soft, piercing intensity that cut straight through Marie’s defenses. “Marie, just look at yourself. You haven’t unbuckled your apron strings since the ambulances stacked up on the turnpike. Your poor Robert died in Sharpsburg, and you’ve spent the last year treating your own grief like a graveyard you can’t leave behind. You are no different than him! You look at this Quaker lad, and you see your own ruined ground looking back at you. You even told me once that you feel like an orphaned widow – whatever that means. Listen to me, you are nursing him back to life with a desperate, clawing hunger... *but you are forgetting the math of this war.*”

Libby reached out, her rough fingers gently lifting Marie’s chin to force the younger nurse to look eyes with her.

“Look at me, he is measuring his recovery entirely by his distance west, Marie. From the cot to the fence rail, from the fence rail to the road, and from the road in his imagination straight

back to the levee in Winona. You are curing his fever and saving his arm simply so he can put on a clean coat and walk away from you forever. You gave him your absolute center, and he is going to leave you stranded here with nothing but an empty cot and a handful of soiled dressings. Stop it, Marie! Protect your own spirit before this crossfire shreds you up.”

Marie stared at her friend for a long, agonizing minute, a single, private tear faintly trailing through the dust caked on her cheek before she brushed it away with her shoulder sleeve. Her jaw tightened until the muscles bunched beneath her pale skin.

“The Minié balls were already disintegrated in the ground under my feet at Antietam, Libby,” Marie whispered, her voice dropping to that flat, steady tone that filled the small dispensary. “I *am* an orphaned widow, and my name means nothing to a living soul in this whole fractured Republic. If the only thing I have left to do in this world is to help a stubborn plowboy until he can walk away, then I will bear that cross gladly. I don't owe the dead my surrender, and I damn sure don't owe them my silence. Now give me the fresh silk thread. Ward 4 is waiting.”

* * *

When night fell over the Schwartz Farm field hospital, the rain returned in full force, drumming a relentless, hollow tattoo against the heavy roofs of the tents. The air inside Ward 4 was filled with the suffocating, thick smells of vomiting, filthy dressings, gangrene, piss, vinegar, damp blankets, and the amber smoke of a single kerosene lamp flickering on an overturned cracker box.

Thomas Barlow sat upright on the edge of his cot, his back pinned against the rough pine frame. His hand reached into his gray linen pocket, his calloused fingers instinctively searching for the cold, polished metal of Catherine's silver match-case, but finding only the empty,

flattened fragment the iron shrapnel had left behind. He looked down at the empty wooden box between his bed and Davy Todd's cot. The fourteen-year-old drummer boy was sleeping peacefully now, his splintered hickory sticks resting quietly on the floorboards, his mind finally pulled back from the cold vault of the ridge.

The canvas flaps parted, and Marie Patterson stepped into the narrow aisle, carrying a small tin plate of parched-corn broth. Her dark hair was damp from the lane, her eyes tired but unblinking as she stopped beside his frame.

Thomas did not look at the broth. He lifted his head, his single gray eye catching her gaze under the amber lamp flame, the chaotic muddle in his brain completely gone, replaced by a cold, honest alignment of duty.

"Marie," Thomas muttered, his shattered jaw tensing beneath his dressings. "I need... I need you to find me a scrap of paper. And a lead pencil, if the stewards have any left in the office."

Marie paused, her hands freezing on the rim of the tin plate. The words hit the quiet of the ward like a sudden crack of musketry. For the first time since he had been hauled out of the bloody collection pits on July 2nd, Thomas was not only looking westward with a vacant, fevered loop in his eyes, he was asking for an instrument of ink – the very thing that had bound him to the war machine at the Huff's Hotel rally.

"The Adjutant's clerks are tight with the stationery, Tom," Marie said softly, her voice dropping into that serious, universal weight. She stepped closer, her dark eyes searching the scarred side of his face. She feared he wanted to reach for something that wasn't there. "Who is the letter for? Is it for your mother, Martha, under the bluffs? She deserves to hear from you and know you are still alive."

“No, it’s not for my dear Mother. It’s for...” Thomas whispered, his chest drawing a tight, fractured breath against the pain of his shrapnel stitch. He looked down at his large, rough right hand – the steady farm hand Cathy had counted on to keep her brother safe.

“Look, I need to write it all down, Marie. Not for the Republic, and not for her veranda. I need to put pencil to paper because my hands are shaking too badly to keep the names locked between these tents anymore. I need to write... because you told me I had to find out who the soldier is beneath these scars. I need to shape my fragmented confession, Marie. I want to write the truth about the waltz, and the father who refused me, and the myth I carried in that charge. If I don't write it down now, this iron shroud will choke me as it tightens around my ribs forever.”

Marie stood motionless under the flickering whale-oil lamps, looking down at his open, calloused palm. Libby’s warning about the math of the war and his inevitable journey westward was still going in her ears. She let it go on saying itself. She did not step back, and she did not take his hand yet either.

She set the tin plate down on the cracker box, reached into the practical pocket of her gray linen apron, and pulled out a small booklet of blank camp stationery and a short piece of dark graphite lead.

“The lead is short, Tom,” Marie whispered gently, her dark eyes shining with a stubborn, primal pride as she placed the paper into his calloused fingers. “But the line is dressed, and the road is clear. You hold the pencil steady, Tom Barlow, and you write down every single secret until the muddle stops. I’ll be sitting right here on the stool to make sure your tinder stays dry through the morning.”

Thomas closed his fingers around the graphite, his broad shoulders relaxing for the first time since boarding the War Eagle, and began working the point of it sharp against the edge of the cot frame.

* * *

In a low pasture ravine less than a half mile north of Ward 4, Captain William Sterling lay propped against a mound of coarse straw sacks inside a damp shelter. His tailored blue officer's frock coat – the one he had proudly paraded down the Winona levee planks in 1861 – had been sliced to ribbons by a surgeon's curved knife. In its place was a blood-stained linen smock that hung loose over his chest. His left leg was gone, amputated three inches above the knee on the evening of July 2nd. William sat motionless, his face a hollow gray color. The phantom pain in his missing foot radiated through his hip, a constant, sickening throb that he could neither escape nor ignore.

With a shaking hand, he reached into the pocket of his discarded waistcoat and pulled out his gold pocket watch – the physical anchor Catherine had given him back on the Mississippi. The crystal was shattered across her portrait, and the internal iron gears had completely locked at exactly twelve minutes before noon on the day of the charge. It no longer ticked. It could not be fixed and would never run again. The tiny heartbeat of his home had stopped somewhere in the grass below Cemetery Ridge.

The canvas flaps of the shelter snapped violently in the wind as Private Jimmy Lewis slouched inside. Jimmy's intellectual frame looked gaunt, his uniform trousers torn at the knee, his face permanently grimed with the sulfur soot of the high-water mark. He set down a dented tin plate of salt pork rations and sat on an overturned cracker box near William's cot.

"The hospital orderlies are clearing the third file of cots today, Captain," Jimmy said, his voice dropping into that flat, universal rasp of a soldier who had looked too deeply into the meat grinder. "Dr. Vance says your leg is mending clean enough, though the rot is still a threat if the humidity holds. They're talking about moving you to a convalescent transport wagon bound for Washington by the weekend."

William didn't look at the food. He kept his eyes fixed on the empty space where his leg should have been, his fingers convulsively tracing the cracked casing of his watch.

"I can't feel the floorboards, Jimmy," William whispered, his voice losing every ounce of its authoritative, shipping-prince charisma. "In my mind, my boot is still pressed into the stirrup of my bay horse. I can feel the leather reins in my fingers. But when I reach down to check the alignment... there is nothing but air and raw stitches."

Jimmy pulled a worn-out leather booklet from his coat – Tom Barlow's pocket diary, its covers warped from sweat, heavily stained with dried blood and the reddened clay of Cemetery Ridge. He laid it flat on the straw beside William's hand.

"A man doesn't rebuild his alignment by staring at a phantom limb, Billy," Jimmy said quietly, using his captain's childhood name for the first time since they left Fort Snelling. "I read the muster roles at regimental headquarters this morning. Out of the one hundred and one Winona Volunteers who boarded the *War Eagle* with us, exactly nine of us stood at the stone wall on July 3rd. The others are either face-down in the clover or rotting in Vance's amputation piles."

William's fingers closed around the cold, damp leather of Tom's diary. "Tom... did they ever find his body, Jimmy? Has his name been moved to the burial trench?"

"The new regimental adjutant has him listed under the dead, presumed killed in the charge," Jimmy whispered, his face tightening as he looked out at the pouring rain. "No one saw him crawl out of the smoke after he took the colors from the sergeant's hands. He went straight into the crossfire to hold the blue silk banner high, Billy. He did it because your sister expected him to. He paid for your life with his own tortured soul, and he did it for a fable we printed in the papers."

William clutched the diary against his ribs, a ragged, choking sob tearing from his throat. He had let Tom Barlow become his anchor without ever once saying so — not to Tom, not to Cathy, not to anyone — and now the saying of it had nowhere left to go.

"Captain, you should eat and get some rest," Jimmy murmured, "Tomorrow I'll come back with some newspapers and books for you. In the meantime, take care."

* * *

A quarter-mile away, inside the suffocating, humid depths of Ward 4 at the Schwartz Farm field hospital, the silence was broken only by the rhythmic, steady drumming of the rain against the heavy canvas roof.

Thomas Barlow sat upright on the edge of his hospital cot. The small, water-logged booklet of blank camp stationery rested on his knees, his large, calloused right hand trembling so violently that the short piece of dark graphite lead nearly slipped from his fingers. His left eye was a jagged, closed canyon of scar tissue, and his fractured jaw ached with a dull, white heat as he tried to form the words.

Marie Patterson sat on a low three-legged stool beside his straw mattress, her hands resting flat against her gray linen apron. She held her own ink-stained fingers still, her dark eyes

locked onto his profile with an absolute, unblinking intensity that seemed to pin him to the living world.

Tom spent an agonizingly long time trying to put lead to paper. Every time he put the pencil to the page, his mind would flash, his heart burn, and his hands quiver uncontrollably.

"My hand... I can't hold it, Marie," Thomas muttered, his wounded voice a low, gravelly scratch of friction against his teeth. "The commotion in my head seems to be gone, but the fingers won't take the lead. Please help me write it down. Write it exactly as I say."

Marie took the pencil from his hand, her rough fingers brushing against his tough skin. She opened the dry pages of the camp stationery and waited, her chest drawing a tight, fractured breath.

"And to whom are we addressing, Tom?" she asked softly, her voice carrying that steady and calm weight that instantly cleared the confusion from his thoughts. "Is it for the veranda on Harriet Street?"

"Marie, please write her name," Thomas whispered, his single gray eye staring straight ahead at the blank canvas wall. "Write Cathy. Not Catherine. And do not seal the envelope. This is a letter that belongs to the grass, not for the mail rider. I'm not mailing this yet, but I need to get it down on paper."

Marie gently placed the lead to the paper so as not to break the lead. She held back her own tears thinking about the letters from her fiancé from long ago. And the returned letters she wrote back to him. With her script tight, neat, and unhurried, Tom began to slowly and methodically dictate the fragments of his unsent confession:

Cathy -

I write these words down because I know the telegraph wires have already broken the peace of the town. I want you to know the truth before the romance of our sacrifice gets printed in the columns.

I did not sign the roll at Huff's Hotel to save the Republic, Cathy, nor did I care about the great, righteous cause of the Union that you wrote of in your letters. That was a lie I wore like a heavy blue coat. When the lines broke at Bull Run, and when Sam Miller was torn apart by canister shot right next to my shoulder at Antietam, it was not the American flag I pictured to keep my feet moving through the slaughter.

It was your face. It was the fragrance of lavender on your collar from the picnic dance.

Marie's hand hitched slightly on the paper, the lead scoring a dark, heavy line beneath the word lavender, but she did not stop writing. Her dark eyes remained fixed on the page, her jaw setting into a tight line of private endurance.

But I understand your meaning perfectly now. You drew your line, and you called me an invaluable friend – a second brother sent to protect your actual family. You gave me a silver match-case to keep my tinder dry, but you gave me a purpose I did not want. You used your polite, cultured cruelty to keep me steady for William's sake, entirely unaware that your selfish expectation was the very thing ramming the lead and cartridge down my barrel.

I held that flag at Cemetery Ridge until the shrapnel took my eye and broke my jaw. I ran into that crossfire of two thousand rebel muskets, Cathy, but I didn't do it for glory. I did it simply so that when the casualty lists reached the Winona levee planks, you would finally be forced to say my name aloud to the market square. I traded my eternal soul and broke my father's faith just to buy a few seconds of your grief.

Thomas paused, a sharp lance of physical pain shooting through his bound ribs as he drew a ragged breath. He turned his single eye away from the canvas wall, his gaze locking onto Marie's white nurse's cap, her blonde hair shining in the light of the amber lamp flame. And for the first time since boarding the War Eagle, he did not have to look west to know where he was.

"Stop there, Marie," Thomas whispered softly, his hand reaching out to gently but firmly cover her fingers on the paper. Her fingers went still beneath his, and she did not pull them away. "Do not write any more about the river."

Marie looked up from the script, her breathing a fractured struggle against her apron strings, her grip tightening around his calloused fingers until their knuckles went white. "Why stop, Tom? You haven't finished telling her how you died for her world."

"Because the boy who loved her died on that ridge already, Marie," Thomas said, a real, human smile of compassion finally breaking through the puckered scar on his cheek. He looked deeply into her eyes, anchored to the woman who had refused to let him surrender to a ghost. "She cannot force a heart to love what it does not, and I cannot continue to build a shrine out of old letters and broken beliefs. The state doesn't own my grave, and Catherine Sterling doesn't own my soul. Tear this page out, Marie. Keep it in your apron. Let the dead letters stay in Pennsylvania, and let's see if we can't learn to draw a full breath for the living instead."

Marie did not pull her hand away. She slowly tore the paper from the booklet with a sharp, resonant rip, folding the graphite lines into her practical linen pocket next to her own quiet sacrifices. Then she sat back on her low stool and kept hold of his hand. Neither of them said anything more. The rain went on drumming against the canvas above the cots until the orderly came down the row and carried the last lamp out of the ward.

Chapter 21: The Living Line

The early October frost had begun to silver the canvas roofs of Camp Letterman when Thomas Barlow finally stood without the pine planks at his back. The summer fever had burned itself out of the ward, leaving the air sharp with Pennsylvania hemlock and free of the sulfurous rot that had hung over the cots since July.

For the first time in three months, Thomas drew a full breath without the shrapnel stitch hammering at his ribs. His left jaw had hardened into a pale seam, his sightless eye lay hidden beneath a black patch, and his bad arm still hung stiffly from the socket. But when he crossed the gravel lane between the tents, his boots broke the frozen crust with the steady rhythm of a man who had reclaimed enough of his body to leave.

Near the dispensary table behind Ward 4, Nurse Libby Fellows stepped directly into Thomas's path, a heavy wooden tray of carbolic wash balanced expertly against her apron. She didn't offer a pleasantry; her dark eyes were narrow, caked with the fatigue of the endless surgeries, and entirely devoid of the romantic illusions the recruitment bands played at the hotels.

"You're walking real steady today, Barlow," Libby said, her voice dropping into a low, forced whisper to keep the text from carrying into the neighboring canvas. "The surgeons say

your muster papers are already being signed at regimental headquarters. You've beaten the bone-saws, and you've saved your wing."

Thomas adjusted the low brim of his civilian cap, his single gray eye locking onto her profile. "The muscle's back, Libby. I reckon I can handle the team again."

"The team isn't what concerns me, Quaker," Libby spoke, stepping closer until the scent of raw lye and vinegar on her collar overpowered the autumn wind. "I watched you out by the stable rails with Marie yesterday. You think because she's sharp-witted and holds her head high when Dr. Vance is barking that she's made of the same iron as your Springfield barrel. But she isn't. She is fragile, Tom. She's spent every hour since July pouring her own life into your cot simply to keep your secrets dry. She gave you her absolute center because your ruined ground looked exactly like hers. If you march out of this valley with your eyes fixed entirely on the Mississippi veranda, you are going to leave her stranded here with an empty mattress and a handful of soiled lint. Watch your step, soldier. The war has taken her past, and if you aren't careful, your departure will shred whatever future she's got left inside her apron."

* * *

The following morning, the administrative chill inside the brick office near the Gettysburg railway spur was absolute. A solitary Federal adjutant sat behind a walnut plank table, his fingers stained with black ink, his administrative ledger open across a row of circular official stamps. He didn't look up when Thomas stepped into the clearing; he simply pulled a thin slip of blue parchment from a dry-goods crate and flattened it with his palm.

"Private Thomas W. Barlow, Company K, 1st Minnesota Infantry," the clerk read mechanically, his voice devoid of any parade-ground cadence. "In accordance with the findings

of the medical board at Camp Letterman, you are hereby declared unfit for further active duty by reason of wounds received in action on July 2nd at Cemetery Ridge. Honorably discharged from the service of the United States.”

The heavy brass seal struck the blue paper with a sharp, resonant thump-ping that echoed in the quiet room. The clerk shoved the discharge across the planks. “Take your back-pay at the transport wagon, Private. The state has released your ledger. You are no longer a target for the line.”

Thomas took the parchment, the paper crisp and cold between his calloused fingers. He didn't feel a sudden burst of martial pride or the celebratory excitement he had witnessed on the Winona levee. He folded the slip tightly, slid it into the inner waistcoat pocket of his gray linen shirt – right next to the flattened, mangled silver fragment of Catherine’s match-case – and stepped back out into the pale October light, knowing the uniform had officially let him go.

The twilight that settled over Ward 4 was a pale, violet sheet when Thomas pushed through the canvas flaps. Marie Patterson stood by the empty cracker box near his old cot, methodically smoothing the edges of a clean linen sheet. She didn't have her lint rolls or her vinegar wash out; her small hands were still, resting flat against her gray apron strings.

“The adjutant’s wagons are loading at the York Pike, Marie,” Thomas said quietly, his wounded voice a low, gravelly rasp that carried the absolute weight of his decision. “The papers are signed. I have my release and I leave in the morning.”

Marie froze, her back to him, her fingers clamping onto the rough pine frame of the cot until her knuckles went white beneath the amber glare of the kerosene lamp. She didn't turn around immediately. Her breathing became a fractured, visible struggle against the tight string of her collar.

“The rail cars are crowded today, Tom,” Marie whispered, her voice was pleading and not dropping into that flat, universal tone she normally used. “The convalescents from the Pennsylvania line are taking most of the platforms. Dr. Vance says you could stay in the ward another week... to let the drainage finish its work.”

“The drainage is dry, Marie,” Thomas said softly, stepping closer until his boots stopped just short of her shadow. “I have to go back to the river. I have to return to Winona. My mother, Martha... she is working the flinty soil alone beneath the bluffs, and the town has closed its grist mill gates to our homestead. Elijah Penrose is helping by night, but he has his own land to plow. The Barlow house is empty, and I am the only child left to stand on that porch.”

Marie finally whirled to face him, her white nurse’s cap tilting back as her dark eyes locked onto his puckered scar with an unblinking, agonizing ferocity. A single, private tear cut a clean line through the dust caked on her cheek, her face pale, her usual pragmatic composure completely fracturing before him.

“And what about the line here, Thomas?” Marie cried out, her voice rising in a thin, fragile bell of raw grief that shattered the quiet of the empty cots. “You spent two years making a holy relic out of a girl who gave you a brother’s blessing, and you ran straight into a crossfire of sixteen hundred muskets just to buy a few seconds of her tears in the market square! I dragged you out of the dead-house line, Tom! I fought the bone-saws for your flesh, and I sat on this three-legged stool through every midnight fever to make sure you found the knotted core Jimmy told you to look for! You told me yesterday that we were two of a kind – that we were orphaned widows stranded in a fractured Republic – and now you take your blue discharge and you walk straight back to the planks that broke your father’s heart?”

She reached out, her small, rough hands violently catching the lapels of his gray linen shirt, her thumbs pressing against his chest wound until her whole frame trembled against his rigid shoulders.

“Don't you leave me stranded in this graveyard, Quaker,” Marie sobbed, her forehead dropping against his coarse wool collar as her defenses evaporated entirely. “Robert’s ring is in my pocket, and his poetry book is disintegrated in the Sharpsburg stalks. My horizon is wiped clean, Tom. I have no past, and I have no partner to build a barn with. If you march west today, you are taking the only living muscle I’ve got left to look at in this whole terrible country.”

Thomas did not pull away, nor did his single gray eye wander toward the horizon. With a slow, calculated warmth, his large, calloused right hand came up, his fingers gently but firmly wrapping around her wrists to ease her frantic grip. He held her hands flat against his chest, right over the steady, rhythmic expansion of his lungs.

“The boy who loved the myth is buried beneath the stone wall, Marie,” Thomas whispered, a real, human smile of deep compassion finally breaking through his scarred jaw. “I am not returning to Winona for Catherine’s veranda, and I am damn sure not doing it for the history books. I am going back to clear the weeds, to grind the black wheat by my own broad shoulders, and to prove to my father’s ghost that the soil can still bear a harvest without a sin attached to it. But the letter I asked you to write – the unsent confession – it stays right here in your linen pocket. It belongs to the Pennsylvania grass.”

He squeezed her fingers, his grip an absolute anchor that pulled her back from the vault of her own despair.

“The road is clear, Marie, but the door is opened east now, not west. I am going to build that barn under the bluffs, and I am going to keep the homestead whole through the winter. But

when the spring thaw comes, and the first smoke returns to the Mississippi... my eyes are going to be looking straight back toward this valley. You hold onto that graphite pencil, Marie Patterson. Keep your tinder dry and let us see if we can't invent a way to live through the morning apart, until the line brings us back together on the planks."

Marie stared up into his single clear eye, the raw weight of his sincerity finally subduing her frantic grief. She let out a long, shuddering sigh, her hands relaxing inside his fingers as she slowly nodded her submission to the living world. She didn't say the words she wanted to say, but as Thomas turned to pick up his civilian pack, she closed her hand around the folded graphite script in her pocket and let him get as far as the tent flap before she followed him out.

* * *

The morning after Thomas spoke with Marie, he was up early and dressed into his coarse gray civilian trousers, his boots laced tight to his ankles. He had a straw slouch hat to help shade his scarred face. His pack sat buckled at his feet. His left eye remained hidden beneath the black cloth patch, and his fractured jaw throbbed with a dull, white heat against the damp chill, but his posture was straight and rigid. He was a machine waiting for the morning whistle to signal the transport wagons.

Marie Patterson stepped through the canvas flaps, her boots making a soft, crunching sound in the dirt. She wasn't carrying a tin water pail or a basin of vinegar wash. Instead, she bore a heavy, dark blue wool overcoat – a clean, non-issue piece scavenged from the quartermaster's dry-goods crates – and a small, leather-bound pocket Bible whose edges were slightly gilded with tarnished gold leaf.

She stopped at the foot of his mattress, her dark eyes wide and unblinking under her white nurse's cap. She looked at his scarred cheek, the words she had harbored since August rising in her throat like a physical wave. She wanted to tell him that her horizon didn't have to stay wiped clean. She wanted to tell him that she loved the quiet, unyielding strength of the soldier beneath the uniform, and that if he stayed, they could build a house out of their shared, ruined ground. The words were right there, hovering on her lips in the quiet of the ward.

But she looked at his single gray eye, tracking its steady, unswerving focus toward the west wall of the canvas, and her throat tightened with a sudden, freezing certainty. He was a man who had already crossed his river.

"The wind is turning from the north, Tom," Marie said, her voice dropping into that flat, universal rasp, choking down the confession before it could shatter across the tent. She held out the blue coat, her fingers trembling slightly as she pressed the heavy wool against his broad shoulders. "The quartermaster was going to scrap this, but its lining is thick. And take this..." She slipped the small Bible into his calloused right hand, her thumb tracing the smooth leather casing. "The print is small, but the pages are dry. Pennsylvania winters are kinder than Minnesota springs, Quaker. You'll need the weight of them when the ice breaks on the river planks."

Thomas looked down at the dark book, then up into her pale, resolute face. He didn't reach for his waistcoat pocket where Cathy's dead letters sat, nor did his mind drift back to the waltz on the grass clearing. With a slow, calculated warmth, he stood up to his full height, his large, farm-hardened right hand coming up to gently clasp her fingers over the leather binding.

"Thank you, Marie," Thomas whispered, his voice a low, gravelly rumble that carried a deep, profound tenderness – a look of absolute reliance and gratitude that cut into her chest like a

fresh surgical incision. It was a beautiful, sincere warmth, but it was entirely untouched by the desperate, clawing hunger of desire he had written into his unsent confession for the girl under the bluffs. He looked at her as a soldier looks at the comrade who held the floating logs down in the middle of a flood. “You’ve given me more than my arm, and you’ve given me more than my breath. You gave me a door to walk through when the muddle was choking my soul. I promise I will put lead to paper the moment my boots hit the Mankato road line. I’ll write to you, Marie. Every single secret.”

Marie did not pull her hand away. She let him keep it as long as he wanted it, and when he let go she stood and went to fetch the basin. She simply managed a faint, submissive nod, her jaw setting into a tight line of private endurance. “Keep your tinder dry, Tom Barlow. Don't you let the town's noise take the core.” She wanted to say one more thing, but it couldn’t escape her lips.

Slowly, she reached into her practical linen pocket, her fingers closing tightly around the folded graphite script of his unsent confession – the dead lines belonging to the Pennsylvania grass. She turned her back to the cot, her small frame finally loosening as a single, violent sob tore from her throat. She clutched her apron strings, allowing herself one brief, private moment of fracturing grief in the empty lane, letting the tears fall through the flour dust caked on her cheeks until her chest went cold and hollowed out.

Then, she wiped her face with her wool sleeve, smoothed her stained gray apron, pinned her white cap back over her brow, and stepped back out through the canvas flaps into the freezing mist, ready to handle the morning ambulances that were already stacking up along the turnpike outside. As she walked away, Tom spoke softly, “Spring comes, Marie.”

Chapter 22: The Enduring Courage

By the time Thomas Barlow's transport wagon disappeared beyond the York Pike, Camp Letterman had already begun closing around the absence he left behind.

The morning sun over the Jacob Schwartz farm broke through a low blanket of slate-gray clouds, casting a cold, metallic glare across the mud-slicked orchard lane. The frantic bustle of the corps hospital had slowed to a grim, administrative crawl; ambulance wagons stood axle-deep in the clay, their drivers waiting for the final evacuation orders to the Gettysburg railway spur.

Inside the drafty timber barn, Captain William Sterling sat propped against a mound of coarse straw sacks. His left trouser leg was pinned back neatly with a rusted blanket pin, ending in a blunt, tightly bound bundle of white linen three inches above his missing knee. On his lap lay Tom Barlow's water-logged pocket diary. His fingers trace-followed the blurred graphite lines, his jaw tightening until the muscles bunched beneath his beard.

The heavy barn door creaked open, throwing a column of pale October light across the floorboards. Private Jimmy Lewis stepped inside, his thin, intellectual frame looking gaunt and loose inside his mud-crusted blue wool coat. He carried his Springfield rifle slung upside down

to keep the rising frost from the muzzle, his cartridge box buckled tight over his ribs. He stopped at the edge of the straw mattress, his eyes dead and narrow with the unblinking clarity of a veteran who had stood at the stone wall.

“The wagons for the Washington transport are lining up near the pike, Captain,” Jimmy said, his voice dropping into that flat, universal rasp of the line. “Dr. Vance says your stump is mending clean enough for the rail cars.”

William didn't look up from the diary pages. His left hand dipped into his waistcoat pocket, his fingers automatically searching for his gold pocket watch before remembering it lay smashed in the Cemetery Ridge clover.

“I’ve been reading his lines, Jimmy,” William whispered, his voice gone quiet in a way it never once was on the levee. “He talks about the picnic waltz. He talks about the fragrance of lavender on Cathy’s collar... and how he felt like a dead man walking every hour he carried her face into the bogs. I was checking the company alignment, Jimmy. I was hunting for my promotion while the Alabamians were tearing his soul apart right next to my saddle.”

Jimmy shifted the weight of his rifle, his calloused thumb resting flat against the leather sling. “The promotion’s paid for, Billy. The state doesn't refund the coin once the ledger's locked.”

William finally lifted his head, his yellowed eyes looking up at the private through a haze of barn dust. “The regimental clerk says you’re turning back south, Lewis. The brigade is moving toward the Rappahannock watch again, and Company K has exactly eight effective men left to muster. Why aren't you looking for a clerk's detail in Washington? Your college books could buy you a safe desk at the department.”

Jimmy let out a slow, ragged breath, his intellectual brow furrowed as he looked through the barn slats at the distant ridges.

“Thomas Aquinas wrote that the hardest test of fortitude isn't the charge, Captain. He said the chief act of courage is endurance – the permanent firmness of the mind to stand before a terrifying reality without letting the interior soul dissolve into hopelessness. The regiment is thin, sure. But the line doesn't close just because the Winona boys are mostly buried in the pasture. If I drop my piece now to hide behind an adjutant's inkwell, then Sam Miller's ghost has no wall left to shield him from the dark.”

He stepped closer, extending his rough, grease-stained right hand down toward the straw. “My enlistment runs out when the spring logs hit the levee in '64, Billy,” Jimmy said, his voice carrying a sudden, deep universal weight. “I'm turning back to Virginia to finish the tally. But when the bugles finally blow the recall, and the first smoke returns to the Mississippi... I expect to find you sitting on that Front Street veranda. Not as a captain hunting for a political seat, and not as a ruin staring at a phantom foot. I want to see you running those timber ledgers with the steady, clean hands Tom Barlow traded his own flesh to give you.”

William reached up, his fingers locking into Jimmy's calloused palm with a desperate, crushing strength that caused the leather binding of the diary to crack between his ribs. “I'll be on the planks, Jimmy,” William swore through a clenched jaw, a single, private tear cutting through the gray silt on his cheek. “I'll keep the sawmills moving, and I'll watch over Martha's farm until the water itself doesn't care about our flags anymore. You keep your tinder dry in the bogs, philosopher. Don't you let them take the knotted core.”

Jimmy nodded once, a slow, submissive movement, released his grip, and shouldered his rifle. He turned and walked out into the cold October wind without looking back, his boots striking the mud with the rowdy, untiring rhythm of the river logging crews.

* * *

The late-afternoon chill inside the Ward 4 dispensary tent was thick with the suffocating odors of carbolic oil, liquid chloroform, and damp lime. A single tallow candle guttered on the corner of an overturned cracker box, casting elongated, jittery shadows across the rows of empty glass jars and stained linen rollers.

Marie Patterson stood by the wooden supply table, her hands methodically unbuckling the brass clasp of her gray nurse's apron. She didn't have her lint compresses or her vinegar wash out; her face was bloodless, her dark hair pulled tight beneath her white cap, her movements mechanical and detached.

The canvas flaps parted with a sharp slap, and Dr. Harrison Vance stepped into the tent, his shirtsleeves rolled to his elbows, his apron caked in a stiff glaze of dried amputation grime. He carried a fresh stack of casualty manifests from the administrative office, throwing them onto the table with a loud, hollow thud.

"The ambulances from the Bristoe station are coming down the turnpike by midnight, Marie," Vance barked, his voice hoarse from hours of bone-saw work in the operating tent. "I need twenty cots in Ward 4 scrubbed down with the lye wash before the rain takes the road. Move your boots, girl."

Marie did not reach for the bucket. She slowly folded the gray linen apron into a tight, neat square, setting it flat on top of the walnut ledger planks.

“I cannot wash the linens tonight, Doctor,” Marie said, her voice dropping into that flat, universal rasp that filled the quiet space. “And I cannot be a nurse in this valley any longer. My discharge is written, and my trunk is packed near the stable lines.”

Vance froze, his curved silver forceps hovering an inch above his instrument case. He whirled to face her, his single gray eye narrowing with a sudden, furious administrative pride. “What kind of madness is this? The high command is launching a winter campaign across the river, the wards are bursting with lockjaw and the shaking ague, and you want to drop your shears because the humidity's getting tight?”

“The humidity has nothing to do with it, Harrison,” Marie said softly, her dark eyes locking onto his face with an absolute, unblinking intensity. “The war has taken everything gentle inside my chest. I spent last winter throwing dirt over my fiancé Robert at the Antietam, and I’ve spent every hour since July scraping the bone-shards out of boys who died while quoting the recruitment posters. I dragged Thomas Barlow out of a burial trench simply because his ruined ground looked exactly like my own. I saved his arm, I cured his camp fever, and I copied down his unsent confession into my pocket... and this morning he took his blue papers and walked straight back to his mother's plow without a single look behind him.”

She clutched her hands together against her dress, her chin held high against the flickering candle flame. “I am an orphaned widow, Doctor. My horizon is wiped completely clean, and I have no muscle left to spend on a machine that turns young men into files and torments them for the history books. If I stay in these tents another week, the stench of the gangrene will become the only language my throat remembers.”

Dr. Vance let out a weak, irritated snort, but he did not pick up his capital amputation saw. He stepped closer, his large, rough hand – slippery with carbolic grease – resting flat

against the wooden table between them, his weathered face twisting into a grim, uncharacteristic look of deep empathy.

“Listen to me, Marie,” Vance said, his voice dropping its authoritative, gruff pitch, replaced by the raw sincerity of a surgeon who measured life by the millimeter. “Medical science is a cold affair. I can cut a leg off in three minutes with an ebony handle, and I can lift a depressed skull fracture with a steel trephine until the death snore stops. That is human work. Anyone with a steady wrist and a sharp blade can do it.”

He leaned over the table, his gaze piercing through her defenses with absolute conviction. “But you... you aren't just a pair of hands to boil the instruments, girl. You have a unique gift for healing – a humane mercy that this slaughterhouse cannot manufacture. I watched you in Ward 4 last month. I told you the Confederate from Stuart was a closed ledger – that the mortification had already taken his hip. But you knelt in the dirt, you gripped his wrist, and you forced his interior soul to find the determination to breathe against the pain of his own living flesh. He's walking on a crutch toward the Potomac today because you refused to grant the graveyard his silence.”

He reached out, his rough fingers gently tapping the folded gray apron on the ledger, and continued, “And what about that drummer boy, Davy Todd? He sat on that mattress for thirty days, his mind stranded on the sweltering ridge, frozen in a catatonic stare. My textbooks have no medicine for a child whose spirit has been shattered by iron canister. But you stood over his cot, you gave that Quaker lad the graphite lead to shape his confession, and you let them pull each other out of the pit by the sheer weight of your own steady truth. That isn't triage, Marie. That is a miracle of inspiration. If you take your trunk and retreat to some quiet kitchen in

Pennsylvania, you aren't saving your spirit – you are just leaving the next file of wounded boys to die in the dark because a cynical old bone-saw like me didn't know how to reach their hearts.”

Marie stared down at the dark floorboards, her breathing a fractured struggle against her own apron strings, her chest drawing a tight, agonizing breath as Vance's words cut deeper than any rebel iron. The image of Tom Barlow spinning her through the dust to the blare of the horns faded, replaced by the raw, monstrous reality of the ambulance wagons currently groaning down the York Pike.

“The lead is short, Doctor,” Marie whispered, her dark eyes pooling with sudden, brilliant tears that she refused to let fall. “And the crossfire is so very loud.”

“Then we double the ink on the rollers, Nurse,” Vance said softly, an unblinking firmness written in his single eye as he pushed the gray linen apron back into her hands. “We don't owe the dead our surrender, and we damn sure don't owe them our silence. Tie the strings back on, Marie Patterson. Learn to draw a full breath against the fatigue, and let's see if we can't invent a way to keep the muscle warm through the morning.”

Marie looked at the apron, then up at the surgeon's face. She didn't smile, but her calloused fingers slowly took the gray linen, her jaw tightening as she prepared to hold the line for the living who were waiting in the mud outside.

PART IV: THE FINAL JOURNEY (AUTUMN 1863-SPRING 1864)

Chapter 23: The Migration to Home

The morning air out of the Jacob Schwartz farm carried the first true teeth of a Pennsylvania autumn. It was early September 1863, and the fields that had baked under a suffocating kiln of black powder and summer fever were now silvered with a biting, clean frost. The rain had stopped, leaving the deep clay ruts of the York Pike frozen into dangerous, bone-shaking ridges.

Before the ambulance wagon came round, Thomas went down the lane to the wood pile and asked Ephraim for the boy's name. He wanted something he could ask after, he said, if the war ever put him near anybody who would know. Ephraim gave it to him plainly — Isaiah, of the Third United States Colored Troops, sent down to the sea islands below Charleston in August — and then said it a second time, slower, the way a man did when he had learned that a name spoken aloud to a stranger was a kind of insurance against being lost. Thomas wrote it on the back of his hospital pass, underneath his own name, and told him where a letter should be sent if there was ever anything to send. Winona, Minnesota. Under the bluff. Ask anybody on the levee.

Thomas Barlow sat upright in the bed of a high-wheeled army supply wagon, his spine pinned against a rough white-oak slat. His coarse gray civilian trousers were tucked into his worn boots, and the dark blue overcoat Marie Patterson had scavenged for him hung heavy over his

broad, lean shoulders. His sightless left eye remained permanently hidden beneath a scrap of black cloth patch, and his fractured jaw throbbed with a dull, white heat against the chill. But his right eye was wide, clear, and fixed on the dark ribbon of the road. He was no longer a private of Company K; the blue discharge slip lay crisp and cold inside his inner waistcoat pocket, right next to the flattened, heat-blackened fragment of Catherine Sterling's match-case. The state had released his ledger. He was a man remade out of iron and scars, traveling home to the Mississippi bluffs.

The wagon was crowded with five other convalescents – shattered infantrymen from the Pennsylvania line whose faces held the shock of battle interminably burned into their minds. They did not speak. The only sounds were the heavy, dejected splash of the mule team's hooves, the rhythmic creak of the wooden axles, and the sporadic, distant whistle of the locomotive engines echoing from the rail lines down valley.

Five miles east of the battlefield, where the pike sloped downward into a dense thicket of scrub oak, the lead mule let out a sharp snort and lurched sideways into a pooled rut. The sudden, violent jolt sent a lance of physical agony straight through Thomas's bound ribs, forcing a ragged gasp from his teeth.

* * *

As the driver barked a string of levee-style profanity at the team, a low, hesitant rustle broke the quiet of the brush.

Out of the thistle stalks crept a dog. She was a medium-sized creature, her coat a patchwork of liver and white coloring. She stopped at the edge of the ditch, her amber eyes wide, fearful, and tracking the heavy wooden wheels of the cart.

“Get on out of here, brute!” the driver hollered, swinging the tail of his leather reins toward the ditch.

The dog did not run. Instead, her nose twitched aggressively against the cold wind. She took two tentative, splashing steps into the mud, her gaze shifting past the driver and locking directly onto Thomas Barlow’s scarred face.

With a sudden, desperate agility, she bounded onto the hub of the rear wheel, her front paws scrambling over the tailboard until she tumbled directly into the bed of the wagon, landing with a soft thud against Tom’s good right boot.

“Drown the beast!” a Pennsylvania soldier muttered, shifting his bandaged leg away. “She’s full of camp ticks.”

But the dog did not look at the Pennsylvanian. She dragged her belly to the edge of Tom’s heavy blue overcoat. She smelled him – not with the casual curiosity of a town pet, but with a deep, frantic recognition. He smelled of things she knew too well: she was sure the smell was of her master, long missing over the weeks. It was his smell, but it wasn’t him.

She pressed her head flat against his knee, her tail letting out a slow, tentative thump against the oak planks. She looked up at him with an absolute, unblinking reliance that caused Thomas’s throat to tighten.

“Well, look at you,” Tom murmured in a gravelly rasp that sounded like grinding river gravel. His large, rough right hand trembled slightly as he reached down, his fingers tracing the soft skin behind her notched ear. “You’ve seen the elephant too, haven’t you, girl?”

The dog let out a long, deep sigh, her front paws curling over his ankle, her eyes closing as she surrendered her entire weight to his frame. From that moment, the alignment was fixed.

She did not care about his missing eye, his gravel voice, or his cynical sneer; she had found her master, and the long road west no longer belonged to a solitary ghost.

By noon, the wagon rattled into Hanover Junction. The small station was a chaotic hive of wartime transit – a sprawling grid of iron tracks, soot-stained water tanks, and columns of blue-coated infantrymen waiting for troop transports. Thomas climbed down from the bench, his stiff left arm tucked against his ribs, his right hand firmly holding a piece of coarse hemp rope he had knotted around the dog's neck. She walked precisely at his heel, her tail lifted, her body shielding his scarred flank from the jostling crowds.

* * *

They boarded a crowded civilian passenger car bound for Harrisburg. The car was a suffocating soup of coal smoke, wet wool, and the frantic chatter of merchants and families traveling on war business. The dog curled herself into a tight ball beneath the wooden bench, her chin resting flat on Tom's boot, her eyes never leaving his face as the iron wheels clattered violently against the rails.

When the train finally ground to a halt at the rail hub of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the noise hit Thomas like a physical hammer, overwhelming the both of them.

The state capital was a city transformed by the machinery of mobilization. The air was a thick, yellow fog of anthracite smoke from the nearby iron foundries, mixed with the pungent stench of horse grease and the fresh cedar scent of newly built military barracks. Thousands of people surged across the platforms – provost marshals checking travel passes, weeping women carrying carpetbags, and rows of raw recruits marching to the thud of a snare drum.

Thomas had to wait until tomorrow before the Pennsylvania Railroad train west would roll into the station. He did not want to sit inside the suffocating, soot-choked waiting rooms where the clerks were shouting manifests. Tightening his grip on the hemp rope, he stepped out of the depot and into the bustling streets of Harrisburg, the brindle dog trotting steady beside him.

They wandered past the giant brick facade of the Capitol buildings, where the union flags flew high against the gray autumn sky. The city was alive with a friction that Tom had never felt on the quiet levee planks of Winona. He watched the heavy dray wagons – their iron-tired wheels screaming against the stone curbs – piled high with salt pork barrels and crates of freshly manufactured Springfield rifles bound for the front lines.

He stopped near a street corner where a newsboy was shouting the latest headlines from the Harrisburg Telegraph. The dog sat instantly at his knee, her notched ear cocked toward the sound of a passing brass band whose horns blared a raucous march tune.

But looking out at the city now through his single gray eye, the confusion was dead and cold. He looked down at the field spaniel dog, whose amber eyes were fixed entirely on his face with a safe dignity.

“We are a long way from home, girl,” Thomas whispered softly.

The dog let out a sharp, happy bark, her tail thumping against the brick sidewalk. Thomas turned his back on the monuments of the capital and began the slow, steady walk back toward the western platforms. He passed by a leather goods shop and stopped inside to get a strap of leather for a dog lead. Continuing through the streets of Harrisburg, the two of them heard the locomotive whistle let out a long, pressurized shriek across the river planks. Tom Barlow knew

he was no longer marching under old myths and memories. He had his discharge, he had his core, and beside him walked the first true friend since Sam.

* * *

The heavy oak doors of the United States Army General Hospital at Armory Square in Washington, D.C., held back the chill air of an October morning in 1863. Located on the intersection of 6th Street SW and B Street SW, it was less than a half mile from the unfinished dome of the Capitol. Inside the whitewashed hospital ward, the sharp, medicinal smells of carbolic acid and vinegar hung thick in the air.

Captain William Sterling sat motionless in a polished mahogany wheelchair near the tall arched windows. His tailored blue officer's frock coat – the very one he had paraded down the Winona levee planks in 1861 – was pristine once more, the tarnished gold lace meticulously scrubbed by hospital staff. But his left trouser leg was pinned back neatly with a rusted blanket pin, ending in a blunt, tightly bound bundle of white linen three inches above his missing knee. His face held a sunken pallor, and his right hand convulsively traced the cracked casing of his gold pocket watch – the broken talisman containing Cathy's picture, its gears frozen permanently at twelve minutes before noon.

The clatter of boots on the polished floorboards broke the quiet of the ward.

A formal delegation of high-ranking Union officers and civilian dignitaries stepped into the clearing. Leading the file was Brigadier General Solomon Meredith, his sash immaculate, flanked by two stern-faced colonels from the War Department staff. Walking beside them, his linen collar stiff and his brow furrowed with political gravitas, was Minnesota's congressional representative, Cyrus Aldrich.

William gripped the mahogany armrests, his broad shoulders tensing as he made a mechanical effort to straighten his spine. He did not have his officer's sword; it had been left behind in the trampled clover of Cemetery Ridge.

“At ease, Captain Sterling,” General Meredith said, his booming voice dropping into a low, respectful pitch that carried across the rows of white cots. He stopped at the foot of the wheelchair, a leather-bound presentation case held flat between his large hands. “The War Department does not require a hero of the II Corps to stand before his superiors.”

“Thank you, General,” William whispered, his voice losing its old, boastful parade-ground volume, replaced by the flat, universal fatigue of a soldier who had looked too deeply into the meat grinder.

Representative Aldrich stepped forward, his eyes tracking the pinned-back trouser leg before locking onto William's bloodless face. He reached out, his hand wrapping around William's right palm in a firm, political grip.

“The citizens of Minnesota look to Cemetery Ridge with a heavy, breaking heart, Captain,” Aldrich said, his voice carrying the practiced charisma of the St. Paul halls. “But by God, they look with pride. When General Hancock pointed to the surging rebel flags and ordered the 1st Minnesota forward, he threw the finest muscle our state had into the center of the world's reckoning. Your tactical bravery in filling the gap after Captain Periam fell saved the Union alignment. The state will not forget your sacrifice.”

“The alignment was bought with flesh, sir,” William noted dryly, his yellowed eyes narrowing as he thought of Tom Barlow catching the falling blue silk colors through the smoke. “Only nine men stood at the stonewall the next morning. The glory belongs to them not me.”

General Meredith opened the velvet-lined presentation case, revealing the gleaming bronze profiles of the Army Civil War Campaign Medal and the coveted Kearny Cross, awarded for meritorious valor in the face of the enemy. He leaned down, his fingers delicately pinning the ribbons directly onto the left breast of William's pristine coat, right above the tarnished brass buttons.

"The high command does not hand out these bronze tokens haphazardly, nor do they promote officers to brevet ranks, *Lieutenant Colonel* Sterling" Meredith said sternly, his gaze piercing through William's aristocratic defenses. "You held your forty Winona volunteers together under a continuous crossfire of sixteen hundred muskets. You took a lead ball through your thigh while driving stragglers back to the stone outcroppings. This commendation is the Army's absolute, permanent rank and mark of your fortitude."

The General stepped back, bringing his hand up to the brim of his cap in a crisp, unblinking military salute. The two colonels followed his motion in perfect synchronization.

William looked down at the bronze medals resting against his ribs, then reached back into his waistcoat, his fingers tracing the cold leather binding of the pocket diary Jimmy Lewis had salvaged from the bloody dirt. The medal was heavy, but the words Tom Barlow had written in the dark were heavier.

He raised his right hand, returning the salute with a slow, mechanical precision that filled the quiet ward. Cathy would be pleased. Their father would have been proud.

"Your discharge papers are finalized, Lieutenant Colonel Sterling," Representative Aldrich said, placing a thin slip of blue government parchment onto the wheelchair tray. "The state has released you from your regimental duty. Your transport wagon to the New Jersey rail

spur is waiting at the gate. Go on home to the Mississippi bluffs, William. Winona is waiting for its prince.”

“I’m not returning as a prince, Mr. Aldrich,” William said softly, looking downward as his jaw tightening as the iron-willed pragmatism of his father's blood reassembled itself inside his chest.

With a final resonant click of his pocket watch casing, William unlocked his wheels, turned his back on the Washington dignitaries, and began the long, rolling journey toward the western platforms.

* * *

The next morning, the gray light of a Pennsylvania dawn broke over the Harrisburg depot through a thick, choking haze of locomotive soot and anthracite smoke. The platform was a chaotic bottleneck of wartime movement. Sentries with fixed bayonets stood at the gates, barking orders to control the surging crowd. By military decree, soldiers on furlough or transfer were granted first boarding, filing into the wooden cars with a heavy clatter of boots and gear. Once the blue ranks were packed into the forward cars, the gates were thrown open to the civilians, who scrambled frantically to find any remaining seats before the conductors could slide the heavy doors shut.

Thomas Barlow boarded a mid-train coach, his civilian pack slung over his good right shoulder, his left arm held stiffly against his ribs. The spaniel moved like a shadow at his heel, her new leash tucked firmly into his calloused hand. She did not whine or bark at the shouting teamsters; her amber eyes were fixed entirely on Tom’s face, her notched ear twitching at the hiss of the steam pistons below.

Tom found an empty compartment near the back of the car where two low-backed wooden benches faced each other – a standard four-seat arrangement. He slid into the corner by the soot-stained window, and the dog immediately curled herself into a tight, protective ball between his boots, her brindle chin resting flat against his leather soles.

As the locomotive let out a long shriek, a sudden wave of civilian passengers spilled into the aisle. Pushed along by the conductor's impatient shouts were a young man, a woman, and a small child. They were heavily encumbered by thick canvas sacks and a single wooden trunk bound with rough hemp rope.

The man, August Jereczek, wore the heavy, dark woolen clothing of a Baltic coaster, far too warm for a humid September morning. His sun-weathered face was tight with exhaustion, his jaw square and stoic under a heavy cap. His wife, Rozalijô, known with the Americanized name of Rose, carried their four-year-old daughter, Zofijô, or Sophia. Sophia's wide, curious blue eyes took in the crowded coach with a mix of wonder and absolute terror.

Seeing the empty benches across from Tom, August grunted in a deep, rhythmic Slavic tongue and gestured for his family to slide into the seats. Rose sat directly opposite Tom, smoothing her dark linen apron, while August hoisted their heavy canvas sack onto the floorboards between them. Little Sophia was sandwiched securely between her parents.

For a long mile out of the Harrisburg yards, the only sound inside the compartment was the violent, rhythmic clack-clack-clack of the iron wheels against the jointed rails.

Little Sophia did not look at the smoke drifting past the window. Her gaze was locked entirely on the floorboards. She was eyeing Tom's companion cautiously, her tiny fingers convulsively gripping her mother's sleeve, her lips parted as if she might let out a cry if the beast so much as twitched a paw.

The dog, sensing the child's gaze, merely lifted her head from Tom's boot, let out a slow, heavy sigh of veteran indifference, and rested her snout back on the leather.

Tom noticed the intense quiet of the family. He looked across the small gap, his single gray eye tracking the paper travel documents August held clamped between his large, calloused fingers. The man's thumbs were raw, his hands bearing the distinct, thick scars of a laborer who had spent his life handling raw timber or heavy sawmills.

Then, Tom's eye caught the bold, purple ink stamped across the top of their transit receipts: GALENA, ILLINOIS.

Tom's scarred face shifted, his mouth pulling into a slight, quiet look of recognition. He leaned forward slightly, his low, gravelly voice cutting through the mechanical roar of the train.

"You're heading for the riverboats in Galena," Tom said, pointing a rough finger toward the stamped paper. "That's my destination, too. I'm boarding the *War Eagle* there to go north."

August blinked, his face flushing with a sudden, anxious confusion. He looked at his wife, his throat tightening as he muttered a rapid string of words in a language Tom had never heard – Kashubian. "*Kùńc... nie wiém, co bënë gôdô,*" he whispered, his English failing him entirely under the stress of the crowded car. He tried to switch to a broken, heavily accented German he had learned under Prussian rule. "Galena... ja. Aber... mein Englisch ist... nicht gut."

Rozalijô placed a reassuring hand on her husband's arm, her expression softening as she looked across at Tom's scarred jaw and the black cloth patch covering his left eye. Unlike her husband, her English was much clearer, her voice carrying the elegant, deliberate cadence of a woman who had been well-educated before the Prussian laws had closed her home schools in Luzino, Poland.

“My husband does not speak the English well, sir,” Rose said, her voice a calm anchor against the noise of the train. “But you said the word... ‘Galena’? Yes, we have the ticket for the iron cars to Galena. From there, we are told a steamship takes us up the big water. To a place called Winona.”

The name hit Thomas like a gut punch. The little girl asked her mother a question in Kashubian, pointing at the scarred side of his face, and her mother hushed her and then answered it anyway.

“Winona,” Tom whispered, his gravel voice grinding from his broken jaw. “That’s my home. I was raised there. My name is Thomas Barlow, ...uh, Tom. You can call me Tom.”

Rozalijô’s eyes widened, a look of profound relief erasing the exhaustion from her brow. She immediately turned to her husband, her words flowing in a rapid, rhythmic Kashubian cadence as she translated the news. August’s stoic demeanor vanished instantly; his sun-weathered face split into a broad, grease-smeared grin, and he reached across the small gap, his large timber-cutter’s hand grabbing Tom’s right hand in a crushing, grateful grip.

“Winona!” August shouted over the clatter of the wheels, his German-accented tongue twisting the word with immense joy. “Mein Bruder... Franciszek... he work the lumber mill there! Good town! Good pine!”

Rozalijô provided formal introductions to Thomas, “Please allow me, I am Rozalijô – you may call me Rose. This is my husband, August. And this is our daughter Zofijô, Sophia, the name given to her when we arrived in New York.”

As August pumped Tom’s hand, Little Sophia’s caution finally broke. Seeing her father laughing with the scarred soldier, she leaned over her mother’s knee, her tiny hand reaching down an inch toward the floorboards.

“Māma... òbeńdrě, pies,” Sophia whispered, a look of pure, childlike wonderment replacing her fear as she pointed at the dog's notched ear. “Je òna... wòjennym psã, panie? Czi òna téż jidzie do Winóně?”

Rose smiled, translating her daughter's question with a soft chuckle. “Sophia wishes to know if your companion is friendly, Mr. Barlow. She has never seen a dog with a notch in her ear.”

“She’s a war veteran, just like me, little one,” Tom said softly, his right eye locking onto the child’s face with a deep, human compassion Marie Patterson would have recognized. He gently tugged the leash, encouraging the dog to sit up. The dog quickly nudged her snout straight into Sophia’s small, waiting palm, her tail letting out a slow, rhythmic thump-thump-thump against the wooden seat.

“Her name is Patty,” Thomas said softly, his voice clear and steady against the mechanical roar of the iron cars. He paused, a gentle look of memory softening his single eye.

Rose translated the name for her daughter with a soft, warm nod. “Patty,” Sophia repeated, her tongue twisting the English name with a delicate, childlike precision. “Pate.”

Hearing her new name, Patty lifted her snout from Tom's boot and pushed it squarely into Sophia’s small, waiting palm. The little girl let out a bright giggle, her fear evaporating entirely as her tiny fingers began to scratch the soft skin right behind the dog's notched ear.

August watched them from across the bench, his stoic face splitting into a broad, grease-smeared grin as he clapped his large timber-cutter’s hand against his knee. “Dobra skòra,” he grunted in Kashubian, looking at Tom with an absolute, unblinking respect. “Good dog, Thomas. Strong name for a veteran.”

Tom leaned back against the window and smiled as the farmlands of Pennsylvania passed by in the October air.

Chapter 24: The Meeting on the Levee

The civilian coach clicked and groaned its way west out of Chicago, cutting across the flatlands of northern Illinois. Inside the crowded compartment, the air was a thick soup of soot, smoke, and the heavy smell of fried dough from the station platforms.

Thomas Barlow sat with his forehead pressed against the soot-stained glass, his single gray eye watching the endless sea of brown corn stalks pass by. Patty lay wedged beneath his boots, napping and dreaming of chasing birds in the field. Her notched ear twitched from time to time when the iron wheels hit a joint in the rails.

Opposite him, the Jereczek family had begun to lose the rigid, terrified posture of newly landed strangers. Little Sophia had entirely abandoned her seat between her parents. She was sitting flat on the floorboards, her tiny fingers on Patty's fur stroking and tracing the patchwork of white and liver coloring of the field spaniel. Patty awoke and let out a long, contented sigh of indifference, her tail letting out a slow thump-thump-thump against the oak planks.

"She is not biting, Māma," Sophia whispered up to her mother in her rhythmic, soft Kashubian tongue. "*Òbeńdrë, Patty znaje mòje miono. Patty knows my name.*"

Rose smiled, her fingers deftly mending a tear in August's heavy wool cap with a needle and gray thread. She looked across the narrow gap at Tom's scarred jaw and the black patch covering his left eye.

"You have a very quiet way with the young ones, Mr. Tom," Rose said, her English carrying that elegant, deliberate cadence she had preserved from her school days in Luzino. "And with the beasts. August says back in the old country, a dog with a torn ear like that would be wild in the timber. But she looks at you like you are the only man left in the world."

Tom turned his head from the window, his gravelly voice grinding from his broken jaw. "We found each other on a hard road, Rose."

August looked up from his travel tags, his sun-weathered face splitting into a broad, grease-smeared grin at the mention of the road. He leaned forward, his massive timber-cutter's hands resting heavily on his knees. "Tom... ja. The iron cars... they are fast. In Prussia, the soldiers take the horse. Here... the iron horse screams." He let out a booming laugh that caused Sophia to giggle. "But the big river... Galena. When we see the boat?"

"By sunset tomorrow, August," Tom said, pointing out toward the horizon where the land began to roll into the rugged, limestone hills of the driftless region. "The tracks drop right into the Galena valley."

The transition from the iron cars to the riverfront docks of Galena, Illinois, was a sudden, sweeping relief. As the train ground to a shuddering halt along the Galena River, the suffocating smoke of the coal engines dissolved into a fresh, damp wind that smelled of river mud, green willow, and thawed northern pine. The western sky was a beautiful canvas of violet, reds, and oranges in the slow fading daylight.

And there, moored alongside the heavy timber wharf planks, sat the *War Eagle*.

She was a magnificent, floating palace of brilliant white wood. Her twin sidewheel houses rose tall and clean from the waterline, accented by the ornate, lace-like wood carvings the teamsters called steamboat gothic. A thin tiny trail of black smoke drifted lazily from her tall, double chimneys now that the crew finished banking the fires and bottling the boilers for the night layover.

August stopped dead on the wharf, his mouth parted beneath his cap, his eyes wide as he looked at the massive vessel. "Slap... wet catfish..." he muttered, proudly attempting the frontier idiom Sam Miller had left scattered across the territory. "Rose, look! The ship... she has houses on top of houses!"

"It is the *War Eagle*, August," Tom said, his hand firmly holding Patty's leather lead as the dog trotted steady beside him. "She's been running the river since before the war. She's the only dependable friend left on this water."

* * *

Early the next morning, they all gathered on the dock in front of the *War Eagle*. There was a visual explosion of busy excitement and preparation on the decks. Because the Jereczeks traveled on a tight budget with their single wooden trunk, they were assigned to the lower Main Deck among the "deck passengers". Tom, holding his blue veteran's discharge, could have claimed a seat near the Grand Salon above, but he chose to stay below with the family. He unslung his civilian pack near a pile of dry oak fuel wood, and Patty immediately claimed the space beneath his knees.

The steamer's whistle let out a long, pressurized screech and with a slow, heavy chugging of her great paddlewheels, the *War Eagle* backed out into the channel and turned her bow north toward Minnesota.

By the second night on the water, the boat had cleared the high bluffs of Prairie du Chien. The air turned sharp, carrying the scent of autumn frost across the dark, swirling current of the Upper Mississippi.

On the open guard rails of the main deck, away from the heat of the steam boilers, Tom sat on an overturned dry-goods crate. He wore his heavy overcoat pulled tight to his throat. Beside him, August was quietly smoking a short clay pipe, the amber embers illuminating the thick, Baltic lines of his face. Rose sat nearby, her wool shawl wrapped securely around little Sophia, who had fallen asleep with her cheek resting flat against Patty. The dog didn't move, her soft fur acting like a warm furnace.

Rose looked out at the dark, jagged silhouettes of the bluffs passing by under a fractured moon.

"Thomas," Rose said softly, her voice dropping below the steady, rhythmic slosh-thump of the paddlewheels. "Back in Luzino..., the elders would sit by the hearth and say that America was a land without a memory. They said the country soil was so young that the ground can't hold a memory. But this water... it feels thick and heavy, Tom."

Tom ran a rough finger along the leather binding of the Bible Marie had given him. He looked out at the black river, realizing that every mile the *War Eagle* pushed north was carrying him closer to his father's grave and the silent homestead under Sugar Loaf Bluff.

"The soil isn't young, Rose," Tom answered her, his gravel voice clear. "The river is thick because of the weight of the country – the death and dying from this Civil War."

August took the pipe from his mouth. He didn't understand every English word, but he put out his hand, and Thomas took it.

"Franciszek... my brother," August said, his rough German-accented tongue slow and deliberate. "He write me. He say in Winona, the big sawmills need the muscle. He say the Polish men... we build the houses. We build the church. But the pine... the white pine doesn't care about any King, Thomas."

He reached across the small gap, his large hand resting flat and heavy against Tom's good shoulder.

"We work the wood, Tom," August swore through a clenched jaw. "We grind the grain. You help my Sophia on the iron car. Now... we help your mother clear the north pasture."

Tom looked down at August's hand, then at Rose, whose eyes were shining with a stubborn, primal pride in the dark. He wasn't returning to Winona as a broken soldier. He was returning with neighbors and friends.

"Keep your tinder dry, August," Tom said softly, a real, human smile finally clearing the puckered scar on his cheek. He reached down and smoothed Patty's notched ear as the *War Eagle's* whistle let out another low alert into the night.

* * *

The wind blowing off the Mississippi River cut across the Winona levee with a sharp, clean velocity that tasted of northern pine ice. It was autumn, 1863, and the vibrant, mud-slicked frontier landing of Tom's childhood memory had been entirely swallowed by a roaring, twenty-four-hour engine of war logistics. Giant steam-powered sawmills along Front Street screamed through the pine logs, casting a thick cloud of sawdust and smoke across the sky. Piles of crates,

grain barrels, and heavy timber sheets bound for the Union war machine sat stacked ten feet high. Winona had changed as much as he had, maybe even more.

Tom stepped off the gangplank of the *War Eagle*, his boots striking the planks of the levee with a mechanical rhythm. He wore the dark blue overcoat Marie had given him, its non-issue lining keeping the biting wind from his body. His left eye remained permanently hidden beneath a black cloth patch, and his fractured jaw sat locked in that cynical soldier's sneer. In his right hand, he firmly held the fresh leather lead. Patty trotted at his heels looking around and up to Tom, wondering what this place was.

Beside him, the Jereczek family stepped into the chaos of the landing. August stood flat-footed, his mouth parted under his heavy Baltic cap as his eyes tracked the massive, spinning steam pulleys of the Sterling lumber docks. Little Sophia clutched her mother's dark linen apron, her wide blue eyes wide with wonderment as she looked around her new country, while Rose adjusted the rough twine binding their single wooden trunk.

"*Obeńdrě*, August..." Rose whispered in a rapid, stunned Kashubian cadence, pointing toward the high brick offices. "It is as the letters said. The mills do not sleep."

Tom stopped beside them, his single gray eye scanning the crowded platform. He didn't see a welcoming committee, and he didn't see his father's old vegetable cart. He saw only the unyielding architecture of a commerce built on the progress of war.

"Your brother Franciszek's should be down near the east end, August," Tom said, his gravelly voice cutting through the mechanical din. He pointed a rough finger toward the waterfront neighborhood the teamsters called Warsaw. "Follow Second Street past Vine Street. The Polish families have their houses clustered there. You'll be safe among your own folk."

August whirled around, his sun-weathered face turned into a broad grin. He reached out and gripped Tom's hand in a crushing, grateful motion. "*Dziękujã*, Tom... Thank you, soldier. You come to our neighborhood soon, yes? We cook the bread. We drink the cider."

"I will, August, take care." Tom promised softly, offering little Sophia a rare, human smile as the child gave Patty one final scratch behind her notched ear.

As the Jereczeks hoisted their canvas sacks and began their walk down Second Street, Tom turned his boots toward the center of the levee clearing. Patty moved like a shadow beside him, her tail lifted, her body shielding his left flank.

Tom saw her at the center of the loading platform.

She did not look like the sheltered socialite who had handed him the pen two summers ago. Her dark blue linen gown was practical, caked in mud, and her fingers stained with the black ink of the ledger she held against her ribs. Her hazel eyes were fixed on a line of teamsters who were wrestling a sixty-pound barrel of government-contracted wheat onto a flatbed wagon.

"I told you yesterday, Miller, the transit tariffs are final!" Catherine's voice rang out, a clear bell that could not be ignored. "If the wagons do not hit the La Crosse rail spur before the evening freeze, the high command blacklists this platform entirely. Now move the grain!"

Alexander Miller, his face flushed with a deep-seated resentment whirled away to bark at the loaders.

Catherine let out a slow, tired breath, her fingers tracing edges of her father's brass seal in her apron pocket. She turned her head toward the *War Eagle's* whistle, preparing to check the incoming freight manifests against her lists.

Then, her gaze stopped.

Through the haze of sawmill smoke and sawdust, a broad-shouldered private in a dark overcoat was walking directly toward her at the platform counter. He walked with a purposeful, yet cautious rhythm, but his left arm drooped from its socket and his face had a jagged scar on the left side. Beside him trotted a field spaniel.

The ledger slipped from Catherine's fingers, hitting the timber planks with a sharp crack that caused two nearby clerks to freeze in surprise.

"Thomas...?" she gasped. Her face went completely bloodless, her vision blurring as the reality crashed through her ribs.

To her, he was a ghost risen straight out of the river itself. The papers had listed him dead at Cemetery Ridge – William's letter had spoken of him as a sacrifice presumed killed while holding the blue silk colors. She shouted his name into the open sky to break the town's cruel judgment, believing he was buried beneath the Pennsylvania clover.

Now, he was standing five feet from her desk, very much alive, his single gray eye looking down at her ink-stained fingers.

"Hello, Cathy," Tom said quietly, the gravel coming from his broken jaw. He didn't reach out to her. He stood immovable, his blue discharge slip safe against his ribs, right next to the small leather Bible Marie Patterson had given him.

Catherine stumbled forward, her boots scraping the rough timber as she threw her small frame straight against his chest. Her arms wrapped frantically around his broad neck, her forehead dropping against his coarse overcoat collar with a torrent of sudden, burning tears. She shook in her sobs, her hands clutching at the heavy cloth.

"Oh, Tom... is it really you? I don't believe it, you're *alive*... you're *actually alive*," she sobbed into his coat, her voice a thin, fragile bell of raw relief. "William told me what you did

for our flag... what you did to save his life. Oh Tom, I am so sorry for the letters I sent... the cruelty of my words.”

Tom did not wrap his arms around her with the hunger of a lover claiming his prize. But he did allow her to press against him, welcoming the sharp pain of his shrapnel stitch. Then, his large right hand came up, wrapping around her wrists to ease her frantic grip.

He stepped backward an inch, breaking the embrace, and held her hands down by her waist.

Looking down into her eyes, Tom saw the truth written in the wet lines of her face. Her tears were magnificent, full of profound relief, a deep wave of personal guilt, and gratitude for a boy who had come back from the dead. But he saw there was no romance in her eyes, confirming the reality. She loved him deeply, completely, and permanently—but just as she always had since their childhood.

He held on a moment longer, and then he let go of her and stepped back, and it cost him nothing at all.

“Don't weep over the letters, Cathy,” Tom said softly. He gently released her wrists and reached down to pluck her shipping ledger from the gravel, smoothing the creased white pages and handed it back to her.

“You did what you had to do and what you thought was right,” Tom whispered, his single eye locking onto her face with an untouchable, sovereign dignity. “And I did what I had to do to find out who I was. The debt is settled, Cathy. The line is dressed.”

Patty let out a slow, heavy sigh of indifference at his heel, her tail letting out a slow thump-thump-thump against the timber curbs.

Catherine looked at his scarred face, his sincerity subduing her initial grief. She wiped her face with the sleeve of her dress, her chin lifting with that familiar undercurrent of pragmatic authority as she clutched her ledger close. She didn't understand the fullness of his release, but she felt the boundary of their old world shifting beneath their boots.

“William is coming home soon, Tom,” Catherine said, her voice steady as the business of the levee resumed its thundering pulse around them. “He’s a ... a Brevet Lieutenant Colonel now. But he lost his left leg.”

“I know,” Tom said, turning his face toward the road toward Sugar Loaf Bluff. “I’ll be here waiting. My mother Martha has the north pasture to sow, and I’ve got a lot of wheat to grind before the winter ice freezes the river.”

With a final nod of quiet grace, Thomas Barlow tightened his grip on Patty’s leather lead, turned his back on the Sterling docks, and began the long walk toward home alone, no longer a ghost, but a living man ready to carve a harvest out of his own true ground.

* * *

The humid air inside the second-story study of the Sterling Timber and Shipping Line felt thick, trapped between columns of dense autumn mist rising from the Mississippi and the cold, unyielding columns of figures in the shipping ledgers. It was early November 1863.

Catherine Sterling sat at her father’s walnut desk, her fingers smoothing the edges of a fresh manifest from the La Crosse rail spur. Her dark blue linen dress was practical and stained with black ink. Across the room, Sarah Miller stood near the tall cedar window, her hands clasped tightly against her shawl. At nineteen, the mischievous, wonder-filled girl who had once used colorful frontier idioms to chase the *War Eagle* was now completely hardened.

“The telegram from the La Crosse clerk says the evening packet drops anchor at noon tomorrow, Sarah,” Cathy said, her voice a soft, clear bell that carried the heavy weight of her father’s ledger mind. “Billy is on it. Representative Aldrich secured him a private berth among the officers.”

Sarah didn't turn from the glass. She watched a column of gray sawmill smoke drift over the levee planks. “A private berth won't bring back the leg, Cathy. My mother went to the dry goods store this morning to fetch some soft flannel for his cot. She said the ladies from the Sanitary Commission are trying to string up a Union banner near the depot curbs.”

“It must be a quiet gathering, Sarah,” Cathy insisted, leaning forward, her hazel eyes narrowing as she tapped her pen against the wood. “No brass bands. No raucous town cheers like the ones we made in '61. Billy’s pride is shattered. He is a Lieutenant Colonel with a pinned-back trouser leg.”

Sarah finally turned, her face pale, her dark eyes flashing with a sharp, adult intensity. “The town doesn't want a parade, Cathy. They’re too busy counting the forty-two boys who didn't return. But they still want to see him. If we hide him away, it looks like we are ashamed.”

Cathy closed the ledger with a sharp slap. She reached into her pocket, her fingers tracing the cold metal of the brass company seal, thinking of Tom’s scarred face and the quiet intense reunion on the docks a few weeks before. “There is no shame in a soldier’s scar, Sarah. But the celebration must be muted. We will meet Billy at the levee planks with just the family carriage and the neighborhood elders. I won't have him turned into a political portrait for Sinclair’s front pages.”

* * *

Down below the second-story floorboards, where the heavy steam pulleys of the sawmill shook the river mud, the air smelled of wet pine lye and stale tobacco.

Alexander Miller stood in the shadow of a ten-foot stack of white pine sheets, his large, rough hands resting flat on the iron rim of an overturned wheat barrel. His face was flushed a deep, angry crimson under his heavy cap, his jaw tightening until the muscles bunched like twisted rope under his gray mustache. Ever since Catherine had laid her company seal flat on his desk and broken his boycott with a wartime blacklist, a vengeful, toxic hatred had poisoned his chest. His sister's boy, Sam—the joyous scout of the levee—was rotting in a Maryland field, but the town was preparing to string up banners for William Sterling.

“A *Lieutenant Colonel*, they're calling him now,” Alexander hissed to the two dock hands who stood nearby, their hooks hanging loose from their leather belts. “Old George Sterling's boy goes down off to war, lets forty of our lumberjacks get torn apart by rebel canister in the West Woods, and the War Department hands him a cheap bronze Kearny Cross and a fancy wheelchair title.”

“The crews are grumbling, Mr. Miller,” a loader muttered, spitting a dark stream into the sawdust. “They say it ain't right to hold a town welcome while the Quaker farm is getting its grain shipped on our platforms.”

“It won't be right tomorrow, hoss,” Alexander growled, his yellowed eyes narrowing with a predatory intensity. “Catherine thinks she owns the muscle on these planks because she can run a pen through a ledger. But she don't know the language of this river. When that packet drops anchor tomorrow, we aren't going to strike the sawmill whistles, and we aren't going to let the teamsters drop their lines. I've ordered the flatbed wagons from Stockton to clog the main depot lane with raw pine logs before the noon bell rings. If the shipping prince wants to see his new

office, he can crawl over three tons of unground timber to get there. We'll see how much his bronze medals help him when his dandy wheelchair gets stuck in the wet shoreline clay."

He struck the iron rim of the barrel with his fist, the resonant clang swallowed by the machinery outside, his mind locked tight in a rage of bitter revenge as he prepared to shatter the peace of the colonel's return.

* * *

The road out of Winona toward the Mankato trail was a narrow, deeply rutted path of red clay that clung to the leather of Tom's boots with a heavy, familiar dampness. Ahead of him, the limestone spine of Sugar Loaf Bluff rose like a gray wall into the autumn mist, its silent profile unchanged by the two years of noise.

Tom walked with a slow, mechanical rhythm, kept warm from the north wind by the heavy blue overcoat Marie Patterson had given him. Beneath the black cloth patch over his left eye, the puckered shrapnel scars pulled on his thoughts.

Patty moved like a patchwork shadow at his right heel. Her liver-and-white tail gave a slow, rhythmic thump against his trousers every few paces. She didn't sniff the dry thistle stalks or wander into the brush; her amber eyes remained fixed on Tom's face, tracking the uneven movement of his broken jaw.

A sudden, sharp creak of dry axle-timber broke the silence of the ridge.

A wooden flatbed wagon, its sides caked in gray valley mud, was coming up from behind Tom. Sitting atop the bench, his hands loosely holding the leather reins of a two-mule team, was Elijah Penrose. He wore his unadorned gray Quaker coat despite the cold, his chin tucked low into his collar.

Seeing the solitary figure ahead in the road, Elijah pulled the lines, bringing the mules to a sliding, snorting halt three feet away. He scrambled down from the bench, his boots hitting the hard clay with a frantic crunch. He stopped dead, his hands dropping to his sides, his dark eyes wide and vacant with a sudden, absolute disbelief.

"Thomas...?" Elijah whispered, his voice cracking like a dry pine bough. He stepped closer, his fingers reaching out to touch the heavy wool of Tom's sleeve as if he expected his hand to pass straight through an apparition. "The meetinghouse... the elders... they wrote thy name upon the slate under the dead list in July. Sinclair's paper said the colors fell at Cemetery Ridge and thee was taken by the fire."

"The paper didn't get the tally right, Elijah," Tom said, his gravelly voice grinding heavily from his fractured jaw. He didn't raise his hand, but his single gray eye remained level and still. "I have my release papers. I'm just plain Tom again."

Elijah let out a ragged, shuddering breath, his hands physically grabbing Tom's good shoulder with a crushing strength that caused Tom's chest dressings to pull. "Thee is breathing... the Lord be praised, thee is actually breathing. But thy face, Tom... the world has taken a terrible tax from thee."

"My face is still warm enough," Tom muttered, shifting his pack slightly to ease the pressure on his fractured ribs. "How is my mother, Elijah? Is she on the porch?"

Elijah's face instantly lost its sudden brightness, the vacant, cold look of the town's blockades returning to his brow. He released his grip and turned his eyes toward the limping mules, his jaw tightening.

"She is in the field, Tom," Elijah said fiercely, his words dropping like iron weights into the road between them. "She has been breaking the hardened soil alone since the spring thaw."

Thy father Isaac... he passed from a massive stroke when the December snows hit the bluffs. The stress... the isolation broke his heart."

Tom's single eye narrowed, his fingers instinctively closing around the small leather Bible in his pocket. He didn't weep, nor did he let out a fractured sigh; the machine inside him simply locked another cartridge into place. "Amos closed the grist mill gates, then."

"Worse than closed, Tom," Elijah remarked, his voice dropping into a desperate, uneven cadence as they began to walk the team together toward the Barlow fence line. "Alexander Miller has used his nephew Sam's grave as a blunt weapon to ruin thy household. He orchestrates a formal boycott at the Market Square planks. He told the teamsters that any man who buys thy mother's turnips or shoes her stock is an enemy to the Republic. He even smeared the word Copperhead in river tar across thy family carriage panels."

The spaniel let out a low, defensive growl at Tom's heel, sensing the sudden, dangerous heat surging through her master's veins.

"Elijah," Tom said, his gravel voice in a forced rasp that cut straight through the wind. "Who is helping her?"

"I bring the seed corn by night, Tom," the youth confessed, his face flushing with an adult indignation. "The elders say I am a coward and a sinner for aiding a house that took up the sword of Cain. But I see the shame of our silence. The town's malice is a monster, Tom. Alexander's dock hands even menacingly stood near the doorway of the dry goods store last month, trying to freeze her seasonal credit for simple salt pork. But thy mother... she did not flinch. She paid them in hard coin and walked out alone, refusing to grant them the spectacle of her defeat."

Tom stopped at the wooden gate of the homestead, his hand resting flat against the splintered rail. His confused thoughts from the past were gone, replaced by the immovable fortitude Jimmy Lewis had described in the trenches. He looked across the unplowed rows of the north pasture toward the small timber-framed house beneath the bluffs.

"Thank thee, Elijah," Tom whispered through his tensed jaw. "The debt is written in my book. Go on back to thy family team now. I have some work to do in the dirt."

The silence around the Barlow porch was absolute, save for the rhythmic, dull thud-thunk of a single iron hoe striking the hard clay in the kitchen garden.

Martha Barlow stood motionless in the unplowed rows, her gray Quaker bonnet immaculate. Her frail frame was visibly wasted away under the double burden of her husband's fresh grave and the town's cold exclusion. Her small, calloused hands were blistered and raw from the rough wood of the handle, her breath coming in short, fractured gasps against the chill.

The gate creaked.

Martha did not look up immediately. She kept her eyes fixed on the hard ground, expecting another band of Alexander Miller's agitators or a messenger from the grist mills with another rejected manifest.

Then, Patty broke loose from the lead. The spaniel trotted steady into the garden, her tail wagging with a slow, cautious intelligence as she stopped just short of the iron hoe.

Martha froze. She looked down at the liver-and-white patch of fur, her thumbs hitching against the wood. Slowly, her head lifted, her gray eyes tracking the length of the leather lead until her gaze locked onto the broad-shouldered private standing at the edge of the patch.

He wore a dark non-issue overcoat that hung loose over his broken frame. The black patch covered his left eye, and the puckered ridge of shrapnel ran from his temple clean down to

his throat. He looked like a ruin, a fragment returned from a slaughterhouse a thousand miles away. But his single gray eye was clear, level, and filled with a serene, deep tenderness.

"Mother," Tom said softly. The gravel in his voice was thin, but it carried the unhurried cadence of the kitchen table they had shared before the river thawed.

Martha released the iron hoe, letting it hit the red dirt with a dull, final thud. She didn't let out a fractured cry, and she didn't call for a scripture to hide her secrets. With a raw, frantic grace, her small boots broke from the rows, her frame lunging forward until she threw herself straight into his chest.

Her arms wrapped violently around his neck, her small hands clutching at the heavy blue wool of his shoulders as if she could physically hold the pieces of his life together by force of will. Tom did not wrap his stiffened wing around her, but his good right arm came up, his broad hand wrapping tightly around her waist, lifting her slightly into the wind.

They folded into each other tightly, shaking beneath the weight of a grief the town could no longer reach. Martha's forehead pressed into his coarse collar, her hot, silent tears finally breaking through the flour dust caked on her cheeks, washing a clean line through the stains of her long isolation.

"Thomas... oh, my boy, my only boy," Martha sobbed against his chest, her voice a thin, clear bell that cut through the deep majesty of the bluffs. "Thee has come back to me. The Lord has delivered thee from the fire."

Tom squeezed her closer, welcoming the sharp pain of his shrapnel stitch against his ribs. Over the top of her gray bonnet he could see the north pasture, unbroken since the frost, the furrows from two seasons back still faintly legible beneath the thistle. "It'll want breaking before the ground hardens," he said. Martha did not let go of him. "It will keep till morning," she said.

Chapter 25: The Living and the Dead

The gray light of a November morning broke low over the Mississippi River, painting the hulls of the moored packet boats in a dull, colorless wash. Along the levee, the frost had turned the sawdust drifts into brittle crusts that crunched under the boots of the gathering dock hands.

The river was a wall of cold fog, but through the mist came the heavy, rhythmic chug-thump of the morning packet. She was carrying the wounded of the 1st Minnesota north, and word had already cleared the telegraph wires that Brevet Lieutenant Colonel William Sterling was on the passenger list.

Alexander Miller stood at the apex of the Front Street loading platform, his hands resting flat against the iron rim of his foreman's barrel. His gray mustache was stiff with breath-frost, and his eyes held the predatory, defensive glare of a man whose authority had been systematically stripped by a twenty-year-old girl with a shipping ledger.

Behind him, three flatbed logistics wagons—piled high with green, unground white pine logs—had been deliberately jack-knifed across the main depot lane. The massive timber sheets blocked the path completely, leaving a tight, muddy bottleneck between the levee planks and the clearing where the Sterling carriage would be waiting.

“Keep them teams right where they are, boys,” Alexander barked down to the teamsters, his voice a low, gravelly rumble. “If the colonel wants to parade his new Washington medals, he can find out what the river brine tastes like when you’re short a limb. We don’t strike the sawmill whistles for dandies, no siree.”

* * *

The packet boat’s gangplank hit the timber planks with a loud, hollow thud. A two private stewards stepped into the mist, guiding a polished mahogany wheelchair down the incline. William Sterling sat rigid in the seat, his tailored blue officer’s coat immaculate, the bronze profiles of the Kearny Cross and Campaign Medal pinning his left breast. But his left trouser leg was turned back neatly with a blanket pin, ending in nothing three inches above his missing knee. His face was the color of pale frost.

As the wheelchair cleared the landing planks, the wheels ground to a sudden, jarring halt against the first massive pine log blocking the lane. The stewards lurched forward, their boots slipping in the red river mud.

“The lane is obstructed, Colonel,” a steward muttered, looking up at the high loading platform where Alexander Miller stood immovable.

Alexander looked down from his barrel, a slow, contemptuous sneer flaring beneath his cap. “Welcome home William, as you can see, the docks are full of government timber today,” Alexander called out, loud enough for the gathering crowd of dock hands to hear. “The high war command wants commerce, not parades. If your fancy wheels can’t clear the raw logs, I reckon you’ll have to crawl over the white pine to reach your sister’s parlor.”

A heavy silence fell over the levee planks. The dock hands shifted their weight, their eyes darting from the amputee colonel to the foreman's unyielding stance. William's jaw tightened until the muscles bunched, his hand instinctively dropping toward his empty waistcoat pocket where his watch had once ticked. He was trapped, unable to move and completely humiliated before the town.

* * *

Thwack. The sound was sharp, resonant, and carried the effortless muscle memory of a frontier logging crew.

Out from the shadow of a freight crate stepped Thomas Barlow. He was not wearing a uniform; his coarse gray civilian trousers were tucked inside his boots, and the heavy blue overcoat Marie had given him hung square over his broad shoulders. His sightless left eye lay hidden beneath a black cloth patch, his scarred jaw set into an iron-hard alignment. In his right hand, he carried a heavy iron timber-peavey.

Without a glance at Alexander or the crowd, Tom stepped into the soft wet clay, slammed the forged iron hook of the peavey deep into the bark of the lead log. His farm-hardened legs dug deep into the mud, and with a raw, animal grunt of exertion, he rolled the three-ton white pine log clean out of the ruts. The timber rolled off into the ditch with a hollow, splashing crash.

Patty, his loyal field spaniel, sat on the levee looking down at her master. Her tail wagged furiously as she watched Tom move to the next obstruction. Within three more fluid, effortless movements, a lane was cleared. The bottleneck was broken.

Tom dropped the iron tool into the dirt and turned his single gray eye up toward the loading platform, locking onto Alexander Miller's flushed, furious face.

“The lane is cleared for the Colonel, Mr. Miller,” Tom said, his gravelly voice cutting through the sudden quiet of the landing.

Alexander stepped to the edge of the platform curb, his fists clenched. “You have no business on these planks anymore, Barlow!” the foreman shouted furiously, his voice cracking with a deep-seated resentment. “The state might give you a blue release paper because your poor wing went stiff. But we are still a loyal Union levee. We don’t break our commitments for men who let our own blood rot in a Maryland trench while they play hero!”

Tom did not raise his fists, but his frame straightened to its full height in the mud, his shadow falling across the carriage lane. He held the timber-peavey like a soldier at order arms.

“You speak of Sam’s blood because you think grief is a ledger entry, *Mister Alexander*,” Tom thundered, his low voice carrying a universal weight that forced the surrounding dock hands to look down. “You think because you raised him on these planks that you own the memory of his stride. But you weren’t in the West Woods facing hot lead when Barksdale’s Mississippians hit our left.”

Tom marched a step closer to Alexander. While still holding the timber-peavey, he continued forcibly with the pain in his jaw from speaking so much at once, “Sam Miller wasn’t a file, and he wasn’t a politician’s speech. When the bogs at Harrison’s Landing had half the company shaking with fever, and the St. Paul boys were ready to drop their spades in the mire, it wasn’t the Colonel’s commission or the Union banner that kept our feet moving. It was Sam. He whacked the oak branches to clear the dust from our lungs; he joked about the salt pork until the lumberjacks remembered how to laugh; he was the glue that held Company K together when the war machine was trying to grind us into the soil. Everyone on this levee loved him, Alexander.

We loved his indomitable spirit because it was the only thing gentle, the only thing decent that we had left inside ourselves.”

Tom pointed toward the western bluffs, still standing at order arms, and said, “Sam died standing in his file, facing the fire without a single word of hatred in his throat. He did his work. And to use his name to clog a road and humiliate a wounded veteran who faced the same fire and bled on the same pasture is an outright offense to the men of the regiment and this town that holds his memory in their hearts. The Sterlings owe you nothing, and your malice won't bring Sam's joy and laughter back. Now go saw your timber and clear the lane you damnable ass!”

Alexander Miller stared at Tom, his jaw tightening until the skin went white under his mustache. He looked around at the loading crew, but the teamsters had already turned away, completely subdued by the raw truth of the veteran's words. Without another syllable, the foreman turned and skulked into the dark shadows of the sawmill.

Tom walked to the side of the mahogany wheelchair. He did not offer a military salute, and he did not look at the bronze medals pinned to William's chest. He simply reached down, his large right hand checking the alignment of the wheel axle.

William looked up, his eyes searching the scar where Tom's left eye had been. “You're real steady with the timber, Tom,” William muttered a thin, fracture of gratitude for clearing the path. “The newspapers said the Adjutant's roster had you buried in Pennsylvania.”

“The papers don't always get the tally right, Billy,” Tom said softly, using their childhood name for the first instant since the Huff's Hotel rally. He reached into his coat, his fingers touching the crisp blue discharge parchment next to his ribs. “I've got my release. I'm just plain Tom Barlow again.”

William reached into his smock, his hand trembling as he clutched the edge of the water-logged pocket diary Jimmy Lewis had returned to him. “Cathy’s waiting at the Harriet Street gate, Tom. She’s got the parlor ready. Come up with the carriage. We need to... we need to talk.”

Tom looked toward the carriage where Catherine’s distant shadow was visible against the glass panels, then turned his gaze back to the east end of the levee.

“I’ll stop by the house later, Billy,” Tom said, his single eye locking onto his captain’s face with an untouchable, sovereign dignity that required no speech. “You take the carriage and have a long needed reunion. I promised to see some old friends on Vine Street.”

William looked at the spaniel at Tom’s heel, then down at the blue discharge slip in the private’s pocket. He was a man running his own true ground.

“Go on then, Tom, and we will talk soon” William whispered, a single tear cutting through the trail silt on his cheek. “Keep your tinder dry.”

* * *

The Harriet Street parlor was suffocatingly quiet, save for the heavy, rhythmic ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner. The lace curtains hung still against the tall cedar windows, shutting out the cold November fog that rolled off the Mississippi.

Lieutenant Colonel William Sterling sat in a polished mahogany wheelchair near the warm hearth fire, his tailored blue officer’s coat immaculate, the bronze profiles of his medals catching the faint amber light of a single oil lamp. His left trouser leg was turned back neatly with a rusted blanket pin, ending in a blunt, tightly bound bundle of linen three inches above his missing knee. On his lap lay Tom Barlow’s water-logged pocket diary, its leather covers warped and stained with Maryland clay.

Catherine stood by the window, her hands tightly smoothing the apron of her dark linen dress, her hazel eyes red-rimmed from the tears she had shed on the levee planks. Sarah Miller sat on a velvet settee opposite William, her fingers methodically tracing the frayed edge of a gray wool shawl. At nineteen, the mischievous, wonder-filled girl who had once chased the steamboat down Front Street had vanished; her shoulders were permanently rounded under the weight of the town's mounting grief.

William reached down, his fingers convulsively tracing the cracked casing of his gold pocket watch—the broken talisman containing Catherine's picture, its internal iron gears permanently locked at twelve minutes before noon. A constant reminder of the past.

"The wheels didn't feel right on the gravel, Cathy," William whispered, his voice low and flat, with nothing left in it of the young man who had promised this town a crusade. "When the stewards ground the chair to a halt against that first green pine log... I looked up at Alexander, and I saw the shape of his malice. He wanted to watch me crawl over the unground timber."

He lifted his head, his yellowed eyes looking toward his sister through the dim light. "But Tom... Tom was already there. He was standing in the mud with a timber-peavey, looking as though he had never left the Winona logging lines. He rolled those logs clean into the ditch by his own broad shoulders, and he did it with a stiffened wing and a black patch over his eye."

William's jaw tightened, a sudden, heavy wave of realization washing over his bloodless face. He clutched Tom's diary against his ribs, his chest heaving with a deep, systemic sorrow.

"I spent two years hunting for my promotion while the war was tearing his soul apart right next to my saddle," William murmured, his voice cracking with a raw, desperate remorse. "I thought... I thought I was the one leading the files. But Tom saved my life at Bull Run, he carried our flag straight into the crossfire at Cemetery Ridge, and this morning he broke the

town's cruel judgment right in the dust of the landing. But what haunts me, sister... what I cannot figure out in my untidy thoughts... is how did he know? How did Tom know that Alexander would try to embarrass me before the loading crews? He has been back from the Pennsylvania hospitals for barely three weeks. He has been hiding out on that farm under the bluffs, clearing the weeds alone. Someone had to give him the alignment."

Cathy turned from the glass, her eyes wide with a sudden, silent question as she looked toward the settee.

Sarah Miller did not flinch, nor did she let out a fractured sigh. She slowly stopped tracing her shawl, her aged hands resting flat and still against her linen lap. She lifted her gaze, her eyes locking onto William's tattered profile with an unblinking, adult intensity that caused the colonel to pause.

"It was me, Billy," Sarah confessed softly, her thin voice carrying a stark, unvarnished truth that filled the quiet parlor. "I told Elijah Penrose yesterday afternoon when he was hauling the seasonal carrots past our fence line. I knew he would tell Tom, but I didn't know what Tom was going to do."

Catherine stepped closer to the hearth, her breath catching. "Sarah... you knew what your uncle was planning?"

"I heard him talking to the teamsters behind the stables on Monday night," Sarah whispered, a single, private tear faintly cutting through the dust caked on her cheek before she brushed it away with her sleeve. "Uncle Alexander has been mad with the bitter grief since Sam was torn apart in the West Woods. He thinks because your father's name secured commissions and government lumber contracts, your family didn't pay the same taxes as the rest of the town.

He wanted to use Sam's memory to clog that road and turn your return into a political portrait of shame."

She looked directly into William's eyes, her unblinking dignity an absolute defense.

"I love my brother Sam, and my heart breaks every hour his voice stays missing from our kitchen. But I did not send him off with cheers in '61 just to let my uncle use his grave as a tool for hatred and malice on the docks. I told Elijah to let Tom know you were coming home this morning on the packet boat. I knew... I knew if anyone in this territory had the steady hands and the iron muscle to stand in the gap and break that logjam, it was Tom. I did it for Sam's memory, William. And I did it so this town wouldn't have the pleasure of watching you break before you even hit the house stairs."

William stared at the nineteen-year-old girl, completely subdued by the raw, stubborn strength of her words. He had stood on the steps of Huff's Hotel and promised this town a crusade, and she had just told him plainly what the promise had cost, and he found he had no answer prepared. He nodded once. His fingers relaxed against the broken watch casing in his pocket.

* * *

The east end of Winona's waterfront was a different world from the high commerce of Front Street. Here, along the unpaved ruts of Second Street near Vine, the air smelled of river willow, damp river mud, and the sweet scent of boiling cabbage rising from the chimney pipes of newly built timber shacks.

August Jereczek stood in the small gravel yard outside his brother Franciszek's home, his heavy woolen Baltic cap pulled low against the north wind. His massive hands were wet from

helping his brother unload their single wooden trunk from a local dray wagon. When he saw Thomas rounding the corner with Patty, steady at his heel, August's sun-weathered face split into a broad, grease-smeared grin.

"Tom! Soldier!" August called out, his deep voice carrying the heavy, rhythmic Slavic cadence of his home. He dropped a hemp rope and strode across the gravel, his hand extending in a crushing, grateful grip. "Franciszek... he have the cellar warm! Good bread! Good cabbage!"

Rose stepped out onto the low timber porch, her dark linen apron immaculate, her hands smoothing the wool shawl wrapped around little Sophia. The four-year-old girl instantly let go of her mother's skirts when she saw the spaniel. She tumbled down the wooden steps, her tiny fingers reaching out with pure childlike wonderment.

"Patty! Pate!" Sophia giggled, her tongue twisting the English name as the dog immediately nudged her snout into the child's small, open palm. Patty's tail wagged excitedly seeing the little girl again.

"She has not forgotten the iron cars, Mr. Tom," Rose said, her elegant, deliberate English smoothly rolling in the crisp morning air. She stepped down to the gate, her dark eyes looking at Tom's scarred cheek with an absolute, unblinking respect. "The neighborhood is very busy, but Franciszek says the Polish men are building the church soon. We have a place here."

"You'll be safe, Rose, the war is far away from here." Tom said, his gravelly voice even and clear.

"You must come inside and have lunch with us, Mr. Tom," Rose said, dragging him into the modest home of August's brother. They all gathered around the table, gave thanks and broke bread. The Catholic way of the family was foreign to Tom's Quaker way, but it was comforting. The Jereczek family felt almost like his own.

After the meal and light-hearted discussions of levee work and the plans for a grand church, Tom decided it was time to reluctantly leave.

He reached down, his fingers gently smoothing Patty's notched ear before handing the leather lead to little Sophia and said, "If you don't object, I'd like to leave Patty here with Sophia for the afternoon. They can play together while I take care of some errands. I'll be back on my way home later."

August clapped a heavy hand against Tom's good shoulder, his jaw tightening with that unvarnished, primal frontier resolve. "You go to your friends and neighbors now, Tom. Martha... she is a strong woman. But tomorrow... tomorrow August brings the team. We will clear the north pasture weeds together, yes? We grind the wheat until the millstones are clean."

"Aye, August. Tomorrow we sow," Tom said, a real, human smile finally clearing the puckered scar on his cheek.

With a final nod of quiet grace to Rose and a gentle wave to the child playing with Patty in the yard, Thomas Barlow turned his boots toward the center of town. He walked alone now, his stiff left arm tucked against his inner waistcoat pocket. Plain Tom Barlow was finally ready to face his own living ground. His next visit would be to Sarah, the sister of his dearest friend.

Chapter 26: No More Tears

The gate at the Miller cottage did not creak when Tom pushed it back. The frost had shrunk the hinges, but the path of wet gravel was clean, cleared of the deep leaves that had drifted into the culverts. Tom walked with a slow, heavy deliberation, his boots breaking the frozen crust of the road with the steady rhythm of a veteran who no longer hurried for a bugle.

He wore the dark blue overcoat Marie Patterson had given him, its thick lining a shield against the sharp November wind. Beneath his slouch hat, the black cloth patch hid his sightless left eye, and the puckered shrapnel ridge along his jaw line sat rigid in the pale morning light. Patty was not at his heel – he had left the field spaniel playing happily in the east-end yard with little Sophia Jereczek.

Sarah Miller stood on the small timber porch, her hands methodically drying themselves on her coarse linen apron. She did not say a word when she saw him clear the gate rails. At nineteen, her face held the stark, adult intensity of a woman who had spent two winters mending the garments of the dead for the Sanitary Commission.

Tom stopped at the bottom of the wooden steps and removed his hat with his good right hand. His voice, when it came, ground heavily against his fractured jaw.

"Sarah," Tom said quietly.

"Thomas," she answered, her gray eyes locking onto his scars with an unblinking, steady clarity. "Billy came back today. Cathy said the carriage lane was clear because a Barlow boy held the peavey."

"The lane needed clearing, Sarah," Tom muttered, shifting his pack slightly to ease the pressure against his bound ribs. He looked past her shoulder at the empty kitchen doorway, his single eye clouding with water. "I came here because I... I need to extend my thanks. Elijah told me about the plan thy uncle set up for the colonel. I want to sincerely thank thee for the respect and kindness to me."

Sarah stepped down one tread, her thumbs hitching against her apron strings. "Tom, I did it for Sam. And I did it so this town wouldn't have the spectacle of watching William Sterling break in the mud."

Tom looked down at his large fingers—hands that knew the friction of a Springfield rifle barrel all too well. "I carry the sorrow of losing him every hour, Sarah. Sam... Sam was the golden boy of our company. When the swamps of Virginia had half of us sickened, it was Sam who kept us going. He made us laugh until we remembered how to breathe."

He lifted his head, his single eye locking onto her face with a sovereign dignity.

"But I want thee to hear the absolute truth from my mouth, Sarah. I survived that slaughterhouse in the East because of Sam, not in spite of him. His joy was the only decent thing, the only gentle thing all of us had. When the canister shot hit him in the West Woods, he didn't scream, and he didn't curse. He stood tall in the line until the iron took him. I truly hold his memory safe in my heart, Sarah. Always."

Sarah's face finally fractured, a single teardrop cutting a clean line through the flour on her cheek. She clutched her hands tightly against her shawl, her chest drawing a tight, shuddering

breath. "Thank thee, Tom," she whispered. "The cottage... the kitchen has been so terribly quiet without his spirited joy."

Tom adjusted his hat over his brow, his jaw tensing as he prepared to release the final anchor of his old world. "There is one more thing I must say to thee. Before the smoke carried us away, the town thought I put on the uniform simply to hide behind my father's plow or to find a path to Cathy's heart. I just want thee to know here and now... I no longer carry any romantic feelings for her."

Sarah's eyes blinked, her tears pausing in surprise. "But Tom... the waltz on the levee clearing... all those letters..."

"The waltz belonged to a boy who did not know what he was asking for," Tom said softly, a real, human smile of deep compassion finally breaking through his puckered scar. "Cathy is a dear companion to me, she loves me as a brother, just as she always did. The dream was mine alone, and it died at Gettysburg. I am just plain Tom Barlow now, and I have a harvest to sow before the winter ice freezes the planks."

Sarah looked at him for a long, silent minute, the unyielding firmness of mind written in his single eye subduing her lingering sorrow. She nodded once—a slow, submissive acknowledgment—and reached out her small hand to briefly press his calloused fingers. "Go on home, Tom. Keep thy tinder dry. No more tears"

"Aye, no more tears..." Tom whispered.

* * *

August and Rose watched Sophia playing in the yard with Tom's spaniel. He leaned against the wooden railing, the scent of fresh-cut lumber and wild prairie grass hanging thick in the air. He watched Sophia run and tumble around a large Northern Red Oak with Patty, a rare, relaxed smile tugging at his lips.

Rose came out from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. She stepped up beside him, her eyes immediately finding her daughter.

"She looks happy here, August," Rose said softly, her voice carrying the gentle lilt of the old country, though her eyes were fixed firmly on the new one. "Truly happy."

August nodded, exhaling a long breath. "It is a good yard for a child. Safe."

"It is more than safe," Rose said, resting her hands on the railing. "It is the first time in my life I feel like I can breathe without looking over my shoulder. Back home, everything felt... heavy and restrictive, fearful not free. But here? Neighbors don't ask who your grandfather was before they offer to help you mend a fence."

August turned his head slightly to look at her. "You do not miss the valley? The familiar streets?"

"I miss the people we lost," Rose admitted, her expression turning tender. "But not the place. Look at this community. Last week, Mrs. Kowalski brought over a fresh loaf of rye just because she saw me hanging laundry in the rain. There is a kindness here that grows right out of the dirt."

She paused, observing Sophia and the spaniel chasing a squirrel around the oak tree, clapping her small hands in delight. She was giggling at the way Patty was jumping back and forth around the tree trying to keep up with the squirrel. The squirrel was playfully dodging,

hiding, and ultimately teasing the dog. Patty was flustered, but persistent. Rose's smile widened, though a deep gratitude softened her eyes.

"And we have Tom to thank for so much of it," she continued. "If he hadn't guided us, if he hadn't introduced us to everyone... I do not think my heart would have opened to this place so quickly. He is a rare man, August. A true friend."

"He is," August agreed, his posture softening. "Tom carries a heavy burden, but he never lets it crush his generosity. He gave us a foundation when we were just drifting."

"More than a foundation," Rose said, turning to face August fully. "He gave us a home. Every time I look at Sophia playing out there, free and laughing, I say a quiet thank you to God—and to Tom."

August reached out, placing his hand over hers on the railing. "Then we will make sure this home is always open to him, whenever he needs to find his own peace."

* * *

William sat at the heavy oak desk, looking through a stack of mail resting under the amber glow of an oil lamp. Most of it was standard business—circulars, receipts, and local circulars.

But a rough, dirt-smudged envelope caught his eye. It was addressed to him in a familiar, hurried hand, postmarked from the II Corps, Army of the Potomac.

With a tight knot forming in his chest, William picked up a brass letter opener and slid it through the crease. He unfolded the coarse paper, breathing a quiet sigh of relief as he recognized Jimmy's handwriting.

October 28, 1863

Dear William,

I write this to you from a temporary camp outside Warrenton, VA. The mud here is nearly up to our knees, and the frost at night makes sleep a luxury, but I hasten to write because I know the newspapers back home have likely frightened you all half to death again.

We took a terrible beating a couple of weeks ago. On the fourteenth of October, near a place called Bristoe Station, our remaining handful of the 1st Minnesota was thrown right to the front. General Warren had us deployed as skirmishers for the II Corps, acting as the buffer to hold back A.P. Hill's advancing rebels while the rest of the corps scrambled to find a defensive line.

It was desperate work. There are so few of us left after July that we felt entirely swallowed up by the smoke. We held them back just long enough, absorbing the brunt of their fire, before we were ordered to fall back behind the safety of a railroad embankment. The boys fought like devils, but the cost was high—the regiment lost twenty more men we could ill afford to spare.

But look to the grace of God, brother, for I am entirely uninjured. Not a scratch on me, though my coat has a new tear from a flying piece of grape shot. I am doing well, and my spirits are holding.

Tell me, how are things back home in Winona? Has the river frozen over yet? Are you healing well? Send me any news about our orphan town, for a taste of home is the only thing that keeps the hunger out of our stomach filled with lousy rations.

Your brother,

Jimmy

*William read the letter twice, his eyes lingering on the words *entirely uninjured*.*

“By jingo! Jimmy is the luckiest man I know,” he whispered to himself. Then, looking down at the empty page of parchment already resting on the desk, he took up his dipping pen, inked the nib, and began to write his reply.

November 20, 1863

Dear Jimmy,

Your letter arrived just as the first true snow began to blanket the bluffs. To hear that you survived the madness at Bristoe Station without injury is an answer to prayers we have offered up daily. The Winona papers did indeed carry news of the II Corps’ fighting at the railroad tracks, and we have all been holding our breath waiting for word from you.

The town is quiet, and the river is turning to jagged ice at the banks, but I must bypass the usual talk of harvests and weather, Jimmy, because I have news that will scarce seem believable to you on the page.

Tom is alive. He is back home, Jimmy. He arrived in Winona just a short while ago, walking among us like a ghost returned from the dead. We spent months mourning him, believing him lost to the slaughter at Gettysburg, but by some miracle, he survived the aftermath and has finally made his way back to the valley. He and I have yet to talk, I just briefly saw him at the levee. He spends time with the Jereczek family, helping them settle in.

To see him standing in the light of day has given us all a profound hope. If Tom can make it back from the brink, we know you can do the same. Hold fast, brother. Keep your head low beneath those Virginia embankments and know that your place at our table is waiting for you.

With affection and pride,

William

William blew gently on the ink to dry it, his heart lighter than it had been in months as he folded the page, ready to send a piece of a miracle down to the war-torn fields of Virginia. He truly believed the news would lift the regimental spirits knowing that Thomas Barlow still lived.

Chapter 27: The Plowing

The next morning broke over the Barlow farm not with the smoky glare of the summer campaigns, but in a crisp, brilliant silver frost that turned the unplowed rows of the north pasture into clean, glittering ridges. The air tasted of white pine ice and damp river limestone, entirely free of the deathly smells that lingered over the Pennsylvania hills far away.

Down by Burns Creek, the morning quiet was broken by a sudden, joyous splash.

Patty, was roaming completely free. The liver and white field spaniel was completely unburdened by the suffocating dark of the hospital tents in some far away place. She roamed freely across the bottomlands, her patchwork coat of liver and white a bright blur against the dry thistle stalks. Even though it was November, the sudden warmth of the morning sun had stirred the local wildlife into a frantic, late-season hustle.

A small brown Eastern Cottontail rabbit rustled through a clump of frozen clover near the water's edge. Patty froze, her notched ear cocking aggressively toward the sound, her tail trembling with pure, instinctual intelligence. With a sudden, joyous leap, she plunged through the brush, her paws scattering the white hoarfrost like a spray of diamonds into the wind. The rabbit bolted in a frantic zig-zag into the brush and vanished beneath a rotting pine log, and Patty let out a sharp, happy yip. She turned her snout immediately to chase a late-season blue jay that

chattered mockingly at her from a low-hanging willow branch for being too slow to catch the rabbit. She was alive, she was warm, and the bloody fields were a thousand miles behind her.

Up in the pasture, the work of the living had begun in earnest.

It was mid-November, the very edge of the season, and the high limestone ridges of Sugar Loaf Bluff stood dusted in a pale, brittle hoarfrost that turned the dry sumac branches into stalks of gray glass. Down in the bottomlands of the Barlow farm, the ground was right on the verge of the deep freeze—the iron lock that would shut down the territory until April.

There was no seed to put in. The work now was cutting the heavy, stubborn sod ahead of the snows and turning the deep clay ruts over so the frost could get into them, break down the stony clods, and kill the weed roots before the thaw.

Elijah Penrose stepped through the gate rails, leading his family's two-mule team into the north pasture. His unadorned gray Quaker coat was caked in trail grease, but his dark eyes were wide and steady. Behind the team came August Jereczek, his heavy Baltic wool cap pulled low, his large hands resting flat against the crossbar of a heavy, iron-toothed harrowing sled.

"Keep the extension tight, August!" Elijah called out, his voice carrying the serene, measured cadence of the meetinghouse, now turned into an authoritative field shout. "If the frost takes the ridge before we finish the second turn, the share won't bite an inch of this clay!"

"Ja, ja, I hold the drag flat!" August thundered back, his deep Slavic tongue rolling cheerfully in the crisp air as he threw his massive weight against the timber frame to keep the iron teeth from bouncing off the hardened tufts of wild rye.

A pace away, Tom Barlow stood with his dark overcoat discarded on the snake-rail fence. He wore only his gray civilian shirt, open at the throat, his chest drawing tight, shallow breaths against the raw ache of his shrapnel stitches. His left arm hung stiff and quiet against his ribs, but

his broad right hand expertly guided the heavy oak handles of his father's old breaking plow. He didn't have a weapon, and he didn't check a gold watch; his single gray eye was locked onto the center of the mule team's harness.

"*Dobra skòra!*" August hollered, pointing a thick finger toward the dark, wet ribbon of soil turning over behind Tom's blade. "Look at the black dirt, Tom! Clean turn! The winter freeze will make her soft like flour for the spring wheat!"

Martha Barlow stood on the timber porch of the homestead, her gray bonnet immaculate, her hands resting flat against her linen apron. Two seasons back she had broken this same ground alone with a mule and a split shoe, and no one on Front Street had lifted a finger. She watched the four of them work the north pasture and did not go back inside.

Tom dug his boots deep into the red clay as the team strained against the leather reins. The iron share bit, caught, and came up out of the furrow with a long curl of black earth turning over behind it. He set his shoulder against the handles and called the team forward, and they went on down the row toward the fence line.

* * *

The sprawling Sterling loading platform sat ten feet high with grain barrels and heavy timber sheets bound for the Union troops in the field.

At the apex of the platform stood Alexander Miller, his large hands resting flat against the iron rim of his foreman's barrel. His eyes scanning the loading crews with a lingering, spiteful glare.

The rhythmic clatter of boots on the wood caused Alexander to whirl around.

Catherine Sterling stepped onto the platform curb, her dark blue linen dress practical and caked in mud, the leather shipping ledger clamped tight against her ribs. Beside her was William. He sat upright and stiff in his polished mahogany wheelchair, his officer's frock coat pressed, his medals catching the glint of the autumn sun. His left trouser leg was turned back neatly with a blanket pin, ending in a blunt bundle of white linen three inches above his missing knee.

Alexander did not move from his barrel. He looked down at the amputee colonel and the young woman with a slow, contemptuous sneer. "The docks are full today, Colonel," Alexander called out, his voice a low, gravelly rumble. "We don't need an administrative parade blocking the teamsters."

"The teamsters are my business now, Alexander," William said, his voice lifting to its old, boastful parade-ground volume. He rolled his wheelchair forward until the iron rims stopped inches from the foreman's boots. "My sister Catherine has informed me of the systematic malice you've unleashed against some of the farms—how you used my own uniform and my childhood friend Sam's memory to clog the carriage lanes and starve a poor widow."

Alexander's face flushed a deep crimson. "*I* run these crews, Sterling! Your father hired me to keep them in line. He knows how to run a business, not this delicate little girl. If I tell them to walk off the levee—"

"The crews answer to the signature on their seasonal vouchers, Mr. Miller," Catherine jumped in, her voice cutting straight through the mechanical roar of the nearby steam sawmills. She pulled a dark brass company seal stamp from her apron pocket and laid it flat on top of the walnut ledger planks. "Your services are no longer required by the Sterling Timber and Shipping Line. You are dismissed from these docks, effective immediately, without references and without back-pay. Collect your private kit from the stables and get off my planks."

Alexander, his mouth dropping open, stared down at the brass seal. He looked around at the crew, but the dock hands had already stepped back, completely subdued by the iron-willed pragmatism of the siblings. Without another syllable, the broken foreman turned his back on them and skulked into the dark shadows of the river road never to be seen at the levee docks again.

An hour later, the atmosphere inside the second-story brick office was thick with the sharp tang of coal smoke and fresh ink.

Two federal government contractor representatives—men wearing heavy wool capes and carrying leather-bound War Department portfolios—sat across the walnut desk from William. Catherine stood by the wide window, her hazel eyes watching the War Eagle out on the water as her brother took full command of the logistics table.

"The high command in Washington is demanding twice the volume of white pine for the Virginia rails, Colonel Sterling," the lead representative said, tapping an official logistics manifest. "But the winter freeze is coming. Once the Mississippi locks tight with ice, your transport ships are useless. The St. Paul houses say the line stops until April."

"St. Paul doesn't understand the geography of this frontier, sir," William replied through a clenched jaw, a faint, grim glimmer of his father's predatory business intensity flaring behind his eyes. He leaned over a sprawling map of the riverways, his finger pinning a specific location on the Wisconsin shore.

"We are not stopping for the ice," William thundered, his clean, steady hands moving with absolute certainty. "The Winona and St. Peter Railroad spur line is already moving wheat down from the bluffs. The moment the deep freeze locks the channel, the Sterling Line is deploying a system of heavy ice sleds. We will haul the grain barrels and timber sheets directly

over the thick ice of the Mississippi to the Wisconsin side, bypassing the open water entirely to connect with the rail service down to La Crosse. We will keep your armies fed and your railroads moving through the worst of the winter frost, but it will require an amendment to the transit tariffs."

The representatives looked at each other, stunned by the sheer, audacious brilliance of the winter logistics plan. The lead man let out a low whistle and drew his steel nib pen. "Lieutenant Colonel, I believe your father trained a sharper strategist than the Department expected. Write the additional terms; the Union will own the contract."

* * *

By early evening, the chill inside the Harriet Street parlor had lifted, warmed by a roaring oak fire in the brick hearth. Catherine sat by the tea tray, her fingers tracing the polished rim of a porcelain cup as the heavy oak door creaked open.

Sarah Miller stepped into the room, removing her wool shawl with a slow, deliberate release. The hollow, suffocating grief that had permanently rounded her shoulders since Sam's death in the West Woods seemed to have loosened its grip. Her face was clear, her dark eyes reflecting the bright amber flame of the hearth.

"I went to the cottage on the ridge yesterday, Cathy," Sarah said softly, sitting on the velvet settee across from her friend. "I met with Thomas Barlow."

Catherine froze, her breath catching in her throat. "Tom... did he speak with you, Sarah? Is he... getting better?"

"He is mending, Cathy," Sarah said, a gentle, genuine look of relief softening her features. "His face is terribly scarred, and his jaw makes a gravelly scratch when he speaks, but

his single eye is level and still. He thanked me for breaking my uncle's treachery, and he spoke of Sam. He told me he survived that slaughterhouse in the East because of my brother's joy, not in spite of it. Hearing him say those words... it felt like a calm wind through an open window. I feel much more relaxed, truly. The disarray in my own head has stopped."

She lifted her head, looking at the tall cedar windows. A sudden, fleeting ghost of her old childhood brightness touched her lips, and she let out a soft, melodic chuckle.

"He even told me to let you know that has come out of his dream, Cathy," Sarah said, her voice dropping into a playful imitation of her brother's raucous frontier idioms. "He said you run these shipping ledgers with the iron mind of a timber king, and he's just a plain plowboy again. In fact, he told me that 'moonin' over a woman who treats you like a second brother is like trying to grease a mule's ankles with lard and throwing him to the river rats'—it's worse than a spring thaw taking the bridge before market day, and it gets you absolutely nothing but a severely bruised dignity!" Sarah burst into laughter at what she just said.

Catherine stared at her friend for a split second, the heavy weight of her guilt since 1861 suddenly disintegrating under the sheer absurdity of the joke.

Then a sudden, bright laugh escaped her throat—a real, human laugh that she had not used since the *War Eagle* carried the boys away from Winona. She clutched her hands together, her hazel eyes shining with a profound wave of relief as the ghosts of the past finally receded into the dark shadows of the bluffs. Plain Tom Barlow was whole, her brother William was home, and the living line had finally found a path to survive the winter together.

Chapter 28: The Endurance Rests

Cathy set down three mugs of steaming spiced cider on the low table, her face softening as she looked between her brother and Tom. She offered Tom a smile, squeezing his shoulder before slipping out of the room to check on the fresh loaves being baked in the oven, leaving the two men to the heavy, comfortable silence of the room.

Tom leaned forward, his hands cupped around the warm mug. The harsh winter had weathered him further, but the haunted, distant look that had dominated his eyes in November had begun to settle into a quiet resilience.

"The wind sounds like artillery tonight when it hits the eaves," Tom said softly.

William leaned back in his armchair, stoking the fire with a brass poker before setting it down. "It does. But thankfully, the walls are thick enough to keep it out." He looked closely at Tom. "You look better, Tom. Truly. The color is coming back to your face."

"The Jereczeks have kept me busy," Tom replied with a faint, genuine smile. "And Rose's cooking is hard to argue with. But it's more than that, William. For the first time since July... the noise in my head is starting to quiet down. I'm beginning to believe I'm actually home."

"William nodded slowly, his eyes shining with a deep, unspoken emotion. He reached over to the side table and picked up a freshly opened letter.

"Speaking of home," William said, tapping the parchment. "I received word from Jimmy this morning. The mail wagon barely made it through the drifts from the station.

"Tom looked up, his posture sharpening with immediate interest. "How is he? How are the boys handling the winter?"

"They're in winter quarters near Brandy Station," William explained, looking down at his brother's handwriting. "He says they've built little log huts and chinked them with mud to keep the Virginia frost out. It's freezing down there, and they're doing nothing but endless drilling and picket duty along the river, but he's safe. His spirits are high."

William paused, a profound smile breaking across his face. He looked directly at Tom.

"He says the waiting is almost over, Tom. Because the 1st was among the first to answer the call in '61, their three-year enlistment officially ends next month. In February, the regiment is packing up camp. They're coming home to Minnesota to be mustered out."

Tom froze, his hand tightening around his mug. He stared at William as the weight of those words sank in. February. The remaining handful of the legendary 1st Minnesota—the men he had marched with, bled with, and thought he had left behind in the smoke of Gettysburg—were finally laying down their arms.

"February," Tom whispered, a rush of emotion catching in his throat. He let out a long, shaky breath, and for the first time, a tear slipped down his weathered cheek. "They made it. Jimmy made it."

"They made it," William affirmed, his own voice thick with emotion. He reached across the small space between them and placed a firm, steady hand on Tom's forearm. "You both did. You went into the mouth of hell, Tom, and you brought each other through it, even when you didn't know it."

Tom looked down at William's hand, then up into the face of the friend who had kept his memory alive when everyone else thought he was a ghost. Tom laughed — once, short and surprised, as though the sound had gotten out before he could stop it — and Cathy put her hand over her mouth."

"I didn't think I'd ever find closure, William," Tom said, his voice cracking but clear. "I thought a piece of me was buried in that Pennsylvania dirt forever."

"Maybe a piece of you was, I know a piece of me was," William said gently. "But the man sitting in front of me is the one who matters. You're alive, Tom. And come spring, when Jimmy gets off that riverboat at the Winona levee, we're going to sit right here at this table, the three of us. The war will be behind us."

Tom raised his mug, his hand steady now, his eyes anchored firmly in the present. "To February. And to finally coming home."

"William struck his mug against Tom's. "To home."

Cathy returned with a plate of warm bread that blanketed the room with the smell of roasted grain and brown butter. She set the plate down and sat in the chair opposite Tom, noticing the deep lingering look of heavy reflection on his face with a tenderness that went beyond the fatigue of the war.

"You're far away tonight, Tom," Cathy said softly, folding her hands in her lap. "Even with the fire right in front of you."

Tom tracked the steam rising from his cider mug. He hesitated, his thumb rubbing the smooth ceramic. "I was just thinking about someone. Someone who... well, if it weren't for her, I wouldn't be sitting in this warm room tonight."

Cathy leaned forward, her expression turning deeply attentive. "A woman in Virginia?"

"In Pennsylvania," Tom corrected gently, a faint, sad smile touching his lips. "Her name is Marie. She's a nurse. Or she was when she found me. After the charge on the second day at Gettysburg, I was... I was given up for dead until she convinced the burial detail to take me to the hospital. I was completely torn to pieces, Cathy. I was left in a field hospital that looked more like a slaughterhouse than a place of healing."

He took a slow breath, the memory vivid but no longer causing his hands to shake.

"The doctors had given up on me. Marked me for the dead-pile. But Marie wouldn't have it. She was just a slip of a girl, but she had a stubbornness that could move mountains. She sat by my cot for three days straight, washing the fever from my forehead and forcing broth down my throat when I didn't have the strength to swallow.

"Cathy's eyes softened and she whispered. "My stars, Tom, *she saved your life.*"

"She gave me a second chance," Tom said, looking directly at Cathy. "When the infection took hold and I wanted nothing more than to just fade into the darkness, she'd shake my shoulder. She told me that people back home were praying for me. She made me fight."

"Did she know you loved her?" Cathy asked, her voice a gentle, intuitive whisper.

Tom looked back at the fire, the flames reflecting in his dark eyes. "I think she knew. We didn't have the words for it then—every day brought a new wagonload of wounded. But when the time came for me to finally clear out and make the journey back west, she kissed my cheek and told me to live well."

He paused, swallowing the lump in his throat. "I think about her every time the wind howls like this. I wonder if she's still out there in the cold, holding the hands of dying boys."

Cathy reached across the small table, her fingers gently brushing the back of Tom's hand. "She is a part of you now, Tom. Every good thing you do here, every fence you mend for the Jereczeks, and every day you live in peace... you're carrying her gift forward."

Tom nodded, a profound sense of relief washing over him as the uneven knock of William's step returned down the hallway, bringing the scent of crisp winter air with him. "I suppose I am, Cathy. I suppose I am. Please know that you are still dear to me, my sister."

* * *

It was a quiet walk up to the bluff. Patty dutifully followed Thomas up the trail, a trail well worn by Thomas since he returned. He found that sitting up on the bluff, day or night, just breathing the clean air and watching the world below was the peace that recharged his soul. Tonight's wind on the crest of Sugar Loaf Bluff did not carry the damp, sulfurous weight of the Virginia line or the choking, rotten stench of the Pennsylvania trenches.

Thomas Barlow sat on a smooth, ice-rimmed outcropping of rock, his gray wool civilian trousers tucked into his heavy leather boots. The overcoat Marie had given him was buttoned tight against his throat, a heavy woolen citadel that kept the cold from his ribs. Beneath the low brim of his slouch hat, the black cloth patch hid his sightless left eye, but his right eye was wide, clear, and fixed on the dark, massive ribbon of the river below.

Far beneath him, the lights of Winona flickered like dying campfires in the mist. The great steam sawmills along Front Street were quiet for the evening, their giant pulleys and saws banked until the morning bell. Out on the frozen expanse of the river, a line of heavy winter ice sleds moved like dark, slow beetles across the white channel, hauling timber sheets and grain barrels toward the Wisconsin shore and the rail spur to keep the Union logistics line moving

through the freeze. William was keeping his word. The shipping prince was running the ledgers with his clean, steady hands, while Alexander Miller's malice had been left to freeze in the dark.

Tom pulled a small, water-logged booklet of camp stationery from his waistcoat pocket. The confusion in his head had gone entirely dead and cold. He reached into his coat and felt the cold, flattened metal fragment of Catherine's match-case resting uselessly against his ribs. He did not look down at it. It was a relic of a dead dream, a piece of a fable he had left behind beneath the stone wall at Gettysburg. He had endured.

He dipped his short lead pencil into a small tin of lard to darken the graphite, laid the paper flat across his knee, and began to write. He did not write to the veranda on Harriet Street. He wrote straight into the east wind, his tight, meticulous script flowing with an untouchable, sovereign clarity:

Marie,

The frost has taken the bluffs tonight, and the ground has locked up tight until the spring thaw. Elijah Penrose and an immigrant I befriended named August Jereczek brought their teams to our north pasture yesterday, and together we turned the heavy clay over before the deep freeze could break our shares. We are preparing the soil for the spring wheat harvest, Marie. My mother Martha sat on the porch and watched us guide the plows. For the first time in two long years, the silence in our kitchen does not feel like an accusation.

I saw William and Catherine down at the levee planks when the packet boat brought the colonel home. The town wanted a parade, but the line we dressed was quiet. Alexander Miller tried to clog the carriage lane with raw timber to humiliate the wounded, but I took up the iron peavey and rolled his logs into the ditch. Catherine dismissed him from the docks in front of the

whole town at the levee. She runs those shipping ledgers now with the iron mind of her father, and she looks at me only as a dear companion—as a brother who came back from the dead.

The muddle in my mind has finally stopped, Marie. The shrine I built out of her letters and the picnic waltz was completely consumed beneath the crossfire on Cemetery Ridge. I do not feel the iron shroud tightening around my ribs anymore.

The pencil lead is short, but I am keeping my promise to thee. I sit on the limestone crest tonight, and my lonely eye does not wander westward. I look to the East, Marie. I look past the frozen river and the rail spurs, tracking the long, dark road straight back toward the Schwartz Farm valley. If the old world we lived in is buried beneath the Pennsylvania dirt, then we don't owe the dead. I am keeping my tinder dry under these bluffs, Marie Patterson, and I am building the barn with my own good right hand. But when the spring thaw comes, and the first smoke returns to the levee planks, I expect to see a white nurse's cap clearing the mist.

We will find out who the living are together.

Tom

He folded the blue parchment slip neatly, sliding it into his waistcoat pocket next to the small leather Bible Marie had given him at the transport wagons. He did not seal it with wax; it didn't require a ledger stamp.

At the bottom of the page he added one more thing. He asked her to put a question to the stewards who moved between the hospitals and the coast, and to any surgeon who had served on the sea islands, about a private named Isaiah in the Third United States Colored Troops, whose father had hauled the dead-carts at the Schwartz farm through the whole of that summer. He wrote that he did not expect an answer, and that she was not to spend much of herself looking for one. Then he read the sentence over twice and did not cross it out.

A soft, low panting sounded behind his heel, and Patty pushed her liver-and-white snout straight into his open palm, her notched ear warm against his skin. She had finished her late-season chase of the cottontails along Burns Creek, her fur thick and smelling of green cedar needles and frozen moss. Tom reached down, his fingers gently smoothing the soft hair behind her ear, and offered her a real, human smile of deep compassion."

Come on, girl," Tom whispered, his gravelly voice even and clear in the mountain quiet. "The kitchen fire is lit. Let's go on home and get some supper."

He stood up to his full height against the sky, unbuckled his civilian pack, and began a slow descent down the trail with the spaniel happily trotting beside him, leaving the ghosts of the past behind them.

Epilogue – First Smoke 1864

The middle of April 1864 brought a sudden, sweeping rush of warmth to the upper Mississippi valley, breaking the iron lock of the winter freeze in a single, roaring weekend. Great broken plates of winter ice drifted past the Winona levee planks with a solemn, grinding indifference, melting into the swift, brown current carrying the winter south.

The levee landing had become a visual explosion of civic pride and mechanized industry. The heavy ice sleds had been retired to the carriage houses, replaced once more by the frantic, twenty-four-hour bustle of the steam sawmills and the long lines of flatbed logistics wagons. The Winona and St. Peter Railroad spur line clattered continuously, funneling thousands of bushels of hard spring wheat straight down from the bluff farms to the waterfront bins.

At the apex of the Front Street platform stood Brevet Lieutenant Colonel William Sterling. He sat in his polished mahogany wheelchair, his unpinned blue officer's trousers resting flat over his stump, his gold pocket watch—unrepaired to keep the memory—snapping open with a sharp, resonant click. He checked the iron hands. It was exactly twelve minutes before noon. He looked down at the interior lid, where Catherine's miniature portrait remained clean and safe, then smiled up at the wide window of the brick office where his sister stood watching the water.

Beside William's chair stood Sarah Miller, her dark eyes clear and reflecting the brilliant spring light. The rounded, suffocating grief that had permanently shadowed her shoulders since the West Woods campaign had loosened its grip entirely. She carried a small bundle of account ribbons on her wrist, a bright, mischievous laugh escaping her lips as she watched a group of raw recruits try to salute a St. Paul freight agent near the mail wagons.

Suddenly, a loud, familiar shriek tore through the river mist.

"First Smoke!" a young printer's devil whooped from the Third Street corner, his voice windmilling across the gravel clearing. "The *War Eagle* is coming! The *War Eagle* is coming!"

The great white floating palace cleared the southern bend, her twin chimneys pouring a steady, magnificent column of black smoke against the pale blue sky, her massive paddlewheels churning the muddy current into a white froth.

As the gangplank hit the timber planks with a loud, hollow thud, a sea of passengers spilled onto the wharf—merchants, deckhands, and new immigrant families bound for the Warsaw neighborhood down Second Street.

Thomas Barlow stood at the edge of the levee, his civilian slouch hat pulled low to shade his scarred face. He wore his heavy gray overcoat unbuttoned now, his farm-hardened shoulders relaxed, his right hand firmly holding a fresh leather lead. Patty sat obediently at his heel, her tail letting out a slow, rhythmic thump-thump-thump against the wood planks, her eyes tracking the movement of the crowd with veteran indifference.

Through the parting throng of passengers stepped a young woman carrying a small wicker trunk. She did not wear the stiff, mold-crusted gray linen of the field wards; her traveling dress was simple, but her sharp-witted face was unmistakable under her bonnet. Her dark eyes

scanned the crowded platform, searching past the blue uniforms and the corporate shipping crates until they locked directly onto Thomas's black eye patch.

Marie Patterson stopped dead on the planks, her breath catching as a real, beautiful warmth erased the lingering fatigue of the East from her brow.

Tom didn't offer a dramatic shout, and he didn't run into the mud. He stepped forward with a slow, purposeful cadence, his boots hitting the planks with absolute, unblinking certainty. He stopped two feet from her trunk, his large right hand reaching out to lift his hat, his puckered scar tightening into a genuine, quiet look of welcome.

"The line is dressed, Marie," Tom said, his gravelly voice clear, steady, and resonant against the thundering pulse of the sawmills. "The north pasture's turning green, and the barn is waiting. Welcome to our home."

Marie did not flinch, and she did not look back toward the eastern rail lines. With a slow, deliberate release, she set her trunk down, her rough, healing fingers sliding flat into his calloused palm, her grip tightening until their knuckles went white beneath the Minnesota stars.

"Keep your tinder dry, Tom Barlow," Marie whispered gently yet fiercely, her dark eyes shining with that stubborn, untouchable core of life. "Let's see if we can't learn to draw a full breath together on this ground."

Before they turned up the levee, Marie set the wicker trunk down on the planks and took an envelope out of her coat. It had gone from a clerk's hand in South Carolina to a hospital steward at Beaufort, and from there north through four pairs of hands before it ever reached hers, and it had worn soft as cloth along the folds. Isaiah was living. His regiment had spent the winter on garrison duty in the sea islands, where the fever had taken more of them than the guns had, and they were drawing ten dollars a month still. Ephraim had gone south in February to be

somewhere near him. The last line had been set down by whoever was holding the pen, and it asked whether the Minnesota man had got home to his mother. Thomas read it twice, standing on the same timber planks where he had once heard a boy shout First Smoke across the water, and then folded it along the crease and put it inside his coat.

Patty let out a long, contented sigh at their boots, her tail thumping against the timber curbs as the *War Eagle* let out another low, pressurized hiss into the spring air. Thomas picked up the wicker trunk with his good arm. Then the three of them went up the levee together, into the noise of the town, where the wagons were already backing down to the water for the season's first cargo.

APPENDIX: THE PRIMARY LETTERS IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

Letter 1: After the Departure

From: Catherine Sterling, Winona, Minnesota

To: Thomas Barlow, Fort Snelling, Minnesota

Date: May 10, 1861

Dear Thomas, the town feels terribly empty since the steamer carried you and William away. Father keeps checking the riverways, and the house is far too quiet without William's constant pacing. I think of our dance at the picnic often – it was the only moment of that frantic afternoon when everything seemed to stand still. Your mother came into the dry goods store yesterday. I tried to speak with her, but she looked right through me and walked out. My heart breaks for the silence at your homestead. Please, Thomas, look after my brother. He has a grand heart but lacks your steady hands. Write to me when the drilling allows.

Your devoted friend, Cathy.

Letter 2: Before First Bull Run

From: Thomas Barlow, Near Washington, D.C.

To: Catherine Sterling, Winona, Minnesota

Date: July 12, 1861

Dear Cathy, the heat here is unlike anything on the Mississippi. We drill until our wool uniforms are stiff with salt. William is already a favorite among the officers; he wears his sword with the grace of a man born to command. I am glad the picnic dance stays with you. It stays with me, too. When the camp grows quiet at night and the other men are gambling or sleeping, I look at the stars and wonder if you are looking at them from the veranda. My father's silence is a heavy pack to carry but hearing that you think of me lightens the load. I pray this business is settled quickly so we may all return to Winona.

Yours always, Thomas.

Letter 3: The Gentle Boundary

From: Cathy Sterling, Winona, Minnesota

To: Thomas W. Barlow, Company K, 1st Minnesota Volunteers, Fort Snelling

Date: May 28, 1861

Dear Thomas,

The morning packet boat arrived at the levee docks today, and among the heavy business manifests and salt vouchers, the clerk handed me your letter. You cannot imagine the relief that washed over our parlor when I saw your tight, steady hand on the envelope. With Father's coughing keeping the house so terribly anxious at night, your words from the bluffs were like a calm wind through an open window.

I must confess, Thomas, your description of the Fort Snelling drills sounds entirely exhausting. To think of you and William standing under that blistering sun for hours makes my own days with the shipping ledgers seem very light indeed. Sam's sister, Sarah, was visiting when the mail came, and she laughed aloud when I read her your complaints about Sergeant MacInnis. She says if anyone can out-work a stubborn drill sergeant, it is a Barlow boy who has spent his winters clearing timber.

But Thomas, as I sat by the wide veranda window this evening watching the stars, I found myself reading your lines a second time. You wrote of the quiet camps at night, and of looking up at those same stars wondering if my eyes were fixed upon them, too. Your words were so very gentle, Thomas, yet they left a strange, heavy quiet in my chest.

You spoke of the burden of your father's silence, and how hearing from me lightens that terrible pack. Please know that my thoughts and prayers walk every dusty mile of the drill field with you. You are an invaluable, dear companion to this house – truly. It is because of my

affection for you that I worry the sudden madness of the camp, and the violent wrenching away from your quiet farm life, has caused you to mistake your longing for home and the river for something else.

We are all being tested by this great crisis, Thomas. The old days on the levee planks are drifting behind us, and we must both keep our eyes fixed tightly on the great, righteous cause of our Republic. William writes that his commission is finalized, and he speaks so highly of your endurance. Please, Thomas, continue to watch over him as a true brother would. His ambitions are so very grand, but he lacks your quiet, steady hands. The river is exceptionally beautiful tonight, but the town feels entirely empty without its youth. Write to me whenever the bugles allow.

Your devoted and constant friend,

Cathy

Letter 4: The Turning Point

From: Thomas Barlow, Camp near Alexandria, Virginia

To: Catherine Sterling, Winona, Minnesota

Date: July 25, 1861

Cathy, we have seen the elephant. Bull Run was a slaughterhouse. The noise – I have no words for the shrieking of the iron or the cries of the horses. William was struck in the shoulder during the retreat. I managed to get him into an ambulance before the panic completely choked the roads. He is mending in the hospital and will be fine, though his pride is terribly wounded. I broke my vows, Cathy. I fired my rifle into the smoke. I do not know if I hit a man, but the guilt of it sits on my chest like a stone. In the worst of the fire, when the line broke, it was not the Union flag I pictured to keep my feet moving. It was your face. It is the only thing that keeps me whole out here.

Yours, Thomas.

Letter 5: The Misunderstanding

From: Catherine Sterling, Winona, Minnesota

To: Thomas Barlow, In the Field, Virginia

Date: September 14, 1861

Dear Thomas,

God bless you. May God safely keep you for what you did for Billy. Our family owes you a debt we can never properly repay. But Tom, your letter troubled me deeply. You speak of my face in the dark, and of fighting for me rather than the Great Cause of our Republic. You are a dear, invaluable friend – like a second brother to me, truly – and I fear the madness of the battlefield has caused you to confuse your affection for home with something else. We must both keep our eyes fixed on the preservation of the Union. Please continue to watch over Billy, as a true brother would.

Ever your friend, Cathy.

Letter 6: The Hardening

From: Thomas Barlow, Camp near Harrison's Landing, Virginia

To: Catherine Sterling, Winona, Minnesota

Date: July 20, 1862

Catherine,

The Peninsula has swallowed up half our boys. Disease takes more than Minié balls. William is a Captain now and spends his evenings with the regimental staff. We rarely speak, though he sent a pair of boots to my tent last week. I left them in the mud. I read your last letter until the ink ran from the damp. I understand your meaning perfectly. Forgive a foolish boy from the bluffs for forgetting his place. There is no confusion in my mind, nor has there been since we were children. But I will not speak of it again. The Union you love so dearly is costing us everything.

Enjoy the summer grain harvest. T.W.

Letter 7: The Unsent Confession

From: Thomas Barlow's pocket diary, Camp near Falmouth, Virginia

To: Cathy Sterling, unmailed

Date: January 15, 1863

Cathy,

I write this in my book because I dare not send it to face your polite cruelty again. We fought at Antietam in September. That creek ran red. Sam Miller, who lived just a mile down from us on Burns Creek, was torn apart by canister shot beside me. I am a dead man walking, Cathy. My family thinks me damned, my hands are stained with blood, and the girl I gave my soul to regards me as a brother. If I die in this terrible country, William will find this book. I want you to know that I never cared for glory. I came here because I wanted to become a man and find my path.

This is my sin, and I pay for it every hour.

Thomas.

Letter 8: The Final Request

From: Cathy Sterling, Winona, Minnesota

To: Thomas Barlow, 1st Minnesota Volunteers, Army of the Potomac

Date: June 5, 1863

Dear Thomas,

I have not heard from you in months, and William's letters say you have grown terribly distant from the rest of the Winona company. I worry I was too harsh in my writing after Bull Run. If I hurt you, Thomas, please forgive me. The world is changing so fast. I am running the shipping docks now – Father's heart failed, and I must keep the business afloat. On occasion, I see your mother from a distance; she looks so frail. The papers say a great battle is looming somewhere in the East. Rumors fly up and down the river every day. Please write to me, Thomas. Just a postscript to say you are alive. I still need my true friend.

With eternal hope, Cathy

Letter 9: Written at Gettysburg, Unsent

From: Thomas Barlow, Cemetery Ridge, Gettysburg

To: Cathy Sterling, Winona, Minnesota

Date: July 3, 1863

Cathy –

If you are reading this, the regiment is gone, and I am dead. They asked us to charge into the whole confederate brigade yesterday. There were about 260 of us left against two or three confederate brigades. William fell early with a ball through his thigh. I took the colors when the sergeant dropped. I did not let them take the flag, Cathy. I held it for the Union. I held it for Billy. But mostly, I held it so that when the news reached the Winona levees, you would finally have to say my name aloud.

Never feel guilty. You cannot force a heart to love what it does not. I hope the river is beautiful tonight under the Minnesota stars.

Goodbye, Cathy.

Letter 10: William's Letter Home

From: Captain William Sterling, Adjutant, 1st Minnesota Infantry

To: Catherine Sterling, Harriet Street Estate, Winona, Minnesota

Date: July 14, 1863

Dear Cathy,

The telegraph wires will have already broken the hearts in our town before my ink reaches you, but I write this letter from a canvas cot at Gettysburg so that you might know the absolute truth of what we did here.

We have fought the great battle, sister. On the afternoon of July 2nd, the entire left of our army dissolved in the peach orchard, and a great red wave of Alabamians came surging through the low ground toward the undefended center of our line. There were only two hundred and sixty-two of us left on Cemetery Ridge. General Hancock rode straight over to Colonel Colvill and pointed to the surging rebel flags. He did not ask us to hold a position, Cathy – he ordered us to charge forward into the gates of hell and die so that the Republic might buy fifteen minutes of time for him to bring up the reserves.

We went down that slope in perfect, terrifying silence. No cheers, no shouting. Just the crunch of our boots against the clover. Captain Periam fell in the first volley, his throat torn open by lead, and I ran forward to fill the gap in Company K. But the crossfire was a literal slaughterhouse. A Minié ball struck my thigh. My sword flew from my grip, and my gold watch – the one you gave me – was smashed.

As I lay bleeding in the trampled grass, I saw the regimental colors wavering. Sergeant MacInnis was hit in the knee, and the great blue silk banner began to tilt toward the mud. But our dearest Tom did not let it drop.

He moved from the front line and threw his shoulders straight into the fire, catching the flagstaff inches before it hit the ground. He hoisted it high, Cathy. I heard his voice rise above the din of battle – he yelled for Minnesota to follow him and carried those colors straight into the mouth of the enemy. He moved like a machine of iron. That was the last image my eyes received before the shock took over me. As you already know, Cathy, he is listed with the dead now. Presumed killed from that gallant charge.

Jimmy Lewis found his pocket diary gave it to me this morning. I read the lines he wrote and my heart breaks for the cultured cruelty we gave him. He did not charge the rebels for the Republic. He held our flag so high that when the lists reached Winona, you would have to say his name aloud. Do not ever let the town call him a coward again!

As for me, the surgeons have taken my left leg. The bone was not shattered, but the rot had begun in the damp tents, and Dr. Vance sawed it off before the fever could take my life. Do not weep for the limb, Cathy. They have carved away my flesh, but they have not touched my will to return home. I am still a Sterling, and I am still the brother who promised to protect you. Manage the shipping ledgers, keep the sawmills moving, and watch over Martha Barlow on her farm. I am coming home as soon as I can. The old world we lived in is buried beneath this Pennsylvania dirt, but we will continue.

Your constant brother, William

Letter 11: Tom's Unsent Letter Home

From: Thomas Barlow, Private, Company K, 1st Minnesota Infantry

To: Catherine Sterling, Harriet Street Estate, Winona, Minnesota

Date: August 20, 1863

Cathy -

I write these words down because I know the telegraph wires have already broken the peace of the town. I want you to know the truth before the romance of our sacrifice gets printed in the columns.

I did not sign the roll at Huff's Hotel to save the Republic, Cathy, nor did I care about the great, righteous cause of the Union that you wrote of in your letters. That was a lie I wore like a heavy blue coat. When the lines broke at Bull Run, and when Sam Miller was torn apart by canister shot right next to my shoulder at Antietam, it was not the American flag I pictured to keep my feet moving through the slaughter.

It was your face. It was the fragrance of lavender on your collar from the picnic dance.

Marie's hand hitched slightly on the paper, the lead scoring a dark, heavy line beneath the word lavender, but she did not stop writing. Her dark eyes remained fixed on the page, her jaw setting into a tight line of private endurance.

But I understand your meaning perfectly now. You drew your line, and you called me an invaluable friend – a second brother sent to protect your actual family. You gave me a silver match-case to keep my tinder dry, but you gave me a purpose I did not want. You used your polite, cultured cruelty to keep me steady for William's sake, entirely unaware that your selfish expectation was the very thing ramming the lead and cartridge down my barrel.

I held that flag at Cemetery Ridge until the shrapnel took my eye and broke my jaw. I ran into that crossfire of two thousand rebel muskets, Cathy, but I didn't do it for glory. I did it simply so that when the casualty lists reached the Winona levee planks, you would finally be forced to say my name aloud to the market square. I traded my eternal soul and broke my father's faith just to buy few seconds of your grief.

Unsigned

Letter 12: Tom Calls for Marie

From: Thomas Barlow, Winona, Minnesota (late of Company K, 1st Minnesota Infantry)

To: Marie Patterson, Schwartz Farm Field Hospital, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Date: December 18, 1863

Marie,

The frost has taken the bluffs tonight, and the ground has locked up tight until the spring thaw. Elijah Penrose and an immigrant fellow named August Jereczek brought their teams to our north pasture yesterday, and we turned the heavy clay together before the deep freeze could break our shares. We are preparing the soil for the spring wheat harvest, Marie. My mother Martha sat on the porch and watched us guide the plows. For the first time in two long years, the silence in our kitchen does not feel like an accusation.

I saw William and Catherine down at the levee planks when the packet boat brought the colonel home. The town wanted a parade, but the line we dressed was quiet. Alexander Miller tried to clog the carriage lane with raw timber to humiliate the wounded, but I took up the iron peavey and rolled his logs into the ditch. Catherine dismissed him from the docks before the whole loading crew. She runs those shipping ledgers now with the iron mind of her father, and she looks at me only as a dear companion—as a brother who came back from the dead.

The muddle has stopped, Marie. The romantic shrine I built out of her old letters and the picnic waltz was completely consumed beneath the crossfire on Cemetery Ridge. I do not feel the iron shroud tightening around my ribs anymore when I draw a full breath against the shrapnel stitch.

The lead is short, but I am keeping my promise to thee. I sit on the limestone crest tonight, and my eye does not wander westward toward the history books. I look to the East, Marie. I look past the frozen river channel and the rail spurs, tracking the long, dark road straight back toward the Schwartz Farm valley. If the old world we lived in is buried beneath the Pennsylvania dirt, then we don't owe the dead our surrender. I am keeping my tinder dry under these bluffs, Marie Patterson, and I am building the barn with my own broad right hand. But when the spring thaw comes, and the first smoke returns to the levee planks, I expect to see a white nurse's cap clearing the mist.

We will find out who the living are together.

P.S. — There is one more thing, and I am ashamed how long it took me to write it down. Ask among the stewards who travel between the hospitals and the coast, and any surgeon who has served on the sea islands, after a private named Isaiah of the Third United States Colored Troops. His father hauled the dead-carts at the Schwartz farm the whole of that summer, and he asked me nothing, and I owe him an answer. Do not spend much of yourself looking.

Tom