

CHAPTER 1

0855 Hours
May 8, 1965
The Citadel
McAlister Field House
Charleston, SC

Cadet Captain – Regimental Adjutant Tyler “Ty” Matthew Carter ran across the Citadel campus, his white service cap gripped in his right hand, pumping his arms hard to go faster. He was late...really late. While getting dressed, he popped two gold buttons off the front of his gray wool coat and had to sew them back on. He had trouble threading the needle and poked his finger with every stitch.

Graduation would start in a few minutes. The command staff might not let him go through the ceremony if he wasn't there for the processional into the building by the First-Class cadets. His father would skin him alive if he missed this day for something so trivial. The lecture would be about how he should have been prepared for this. How could he predict broken threads on a couple of buttons?

Ty came to a sliding stop at the McAlister Field House. A long gray line of cadets snaked from the front door onto the sidewalk and grass. It was just beginning to move. He took his place in line, trying to catch his breath as he tucked his cover under his arm.

Major Graham, the 1st Battalion TAC (Tactical Officer), glared at him as he passed through the open doors into the field house.

“You're damn lucky, Carter,” Major Graham said gruffly, tapping the face of his watch. “Just two more seconds.”

Ty grinned at him, slipping on his white gloves. Major Graham was a great advisor but as strict as freezing cold molasses about the regulations.

Bleachers full of people encircled the basketball court. Folding chairs with a gray carpeted aisle down the center were lined up perfectly on the highly polished wooden floor.

After getting to his chair, Ty looked up into the stands, trying to spot his parents. That was an impossible task in the large audience assembled for the commencement.

As the distinguished guests spoke in front of the assembled masses, Ty relaxed. His time would come soon.

“Tyler Matthew Carter, Magna cum laude, CAA life member, Army commissionee,” the announcer said.

Ty crossed the stage, accepted his diploma from the superintendent, General Kendrick, USMC, and shook his hand. Once the photographer took their picture, Ty returned to his chair. Only a few more minutes remained. The clock hands kept turning until the last man received his diploma and gave the closing remarks.

Standing with his classmates, Ty placed his rolled diploma on his chair and picked up his glowing white uniform cover. Anticipation grew inside him as General Kendrick stepped to the front of the stage.

Ty worked hard for his rank, volunteering for every detail that placed his name in front of the command staff. He never wanted to disappoint his father. That would feel like he'd been stabbed

through the heart. All Ty ever wanted was a father's pride in his accomplishments, even if he decided on a path someday divergent to being a United States Army officer.

He wondered what his father's reaction would be to that decision. Would he get mad? Would he give his blessing? Would he demand Ty join the family business? While Ty loved to eat, he wasn't interested in the day-to-day operations of the hospitality industry or managing one of his father's restaurants. That sounded so boring. Now, being a police officer, that was an option if the Army didn't work out. He would be serving his community.

Sweat ran down his back under the double-breasted gray wool full dress uniform coat, soaking the waistband of his white pants. He was hot from the uniform and nervous with anticipation. Even though the official commissioning ceremony and officers' oath were yesterday, making him a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army, the long tail of the red sash around his waist vibrated as his excitement reached a crescendo. He'd dreamed about this day for the last four years. The graduation ceremony marked the end of this journey and the start of a new one.

He glanced at his classmates, tensed and ready around him, waiting for the words marking the last thing they would do as cadets of The Citadel. He had thirty days leave, and then, having branched infantry, he had to report to the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell.

Airborne was a stepping stone to what he really wanted...to join the Special Forces. A dream that began in 1962 when President Kennedy publicly called the green beret "A symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction in the fight for freedom." The only problem with that dream—was he good enough to pass selection training and the qualification course to earn the right to wear that coveted green beret?

The Special Forces only accepted the very best soldiers in the United States Army, but did he fit that standard? The physical standards of the Citadel were nowhere near those of the Special Forces. He might be a stud here, playing collegiate baseball and passing every fitness standard with the highest marks possible, but a complete failure at Fort Bragg.

"Wait for it." General Kendrick placed both hands on the top of the wooden podium. "Ladies and gentlemen, there will be no procession for there remains one event to conclude this ceremony. It is my honor and my utmost pleasure to give this final order for this academic year. Class of 1965." He paused for several seconds, adding to the tension. "Dismissed!"

Ty screamed and jumped, tossing his white service cap as far as he could into the air. It disappeared into the mass of identical white ones rising above him. When a service cap came down in front of him, he caught it in one hand. He wanted to keep it as a memento. The roar of his classmates and applause from the audience was deafening.

As the noise faded and his classmates dispersed in different directions, Ty grabbed his diploma from his chair and looked for his family in the stands. His baby sister, Betsey, suddenly appeared through the mass of gray wool coats. She grabbed him in an exuberant hug reminiscent of a football linebacker, almost knocking him off his feet. He couldn't believe his sixteen-year-old, five-foot-tall, ninety-five-pound baby sister could hit that hard.

"You did it," she screamed in his ear.

Ty caught his balance and looped his arms around her slender waist. "I sure did."

His parents, Herman and Joyce Carter, approached them. His mother dabbed her eyes with a white lace handkerchief. His father, also a graduate of The Citadel, looked ready to burst with pride. He wore his class A U.S. Army officer's uniform laden with medals and ribbons from his brave and honorable service with the 1st Armored Division during World War II.

Ty handed his service cap and diploma to his sister, snapped to attention, and saluted his father, looking him in the eyes since they were the same height, five-foot-ten. "Major Carter, sir!"

His father shook his head slightly before returning the salute, then extended his hand. “Congratulations, son.”

Before he could reply, his mother pushed through their clasped hands to hug him.

“I’m so proud of you,” she said, smoothing down an errant lock of his short, dark brown curly hair with her hand.

“Thanks, Mom.” Ty backed up when his mother released him, feeling the heat rise into his face. He hated it when she messed with his hair in public. “Let’s head out so I can change into my Army uniform and grab my stuff. Dad owes me a steak dinner.”

Ty took one last look at the field house that held so many memories then followed his family outside.

As they made their way across the post, Ty suddenly felt nostalgic. He’d spent four years of his life here. A new road lay ahead of him. One that could possibly take him to the battlefields of Vietnam. A country he had only recently learned even existed. And he could potentially die there. No, he couldn’t think about that now. Today was his day.

The thought still lingered in the back of his mind. He could die there. Was being an Army officer his dream or a continuation of his father’s?

Betsey and his mother went to the car in the parking lot to wait since only cadets, staff, and alumni were allowed in the cadet area. The four sets of Spanish Moorish-style four-story barracks that housed the corps of cadets each surrounded a separate red and white checkerboard assembly area known as the *quadrangle*. Every room along the outer walls had a covered walkway with multiple arches known as the *gallery* that separated the rooms from the quadrangle. Staircases in each corner led to all the floors.

In front of the entrances to the barracks was the twelve-acre Summerall Field, named for General Charles P. Summerall, the tenth president of the college. Every Friday, the regiment marched there in full dress uniform.

Ty and his father passed through the sallyport of Murray Barracks, home of the First Battalion, named for Charleston philanthropist Andrew Buist Murray, and paused. Ty had no idea how many hours he spent on that checkerboard either in daily formation or walking area punishment tours with his M1 rifle to erase his demerits.

“Still looks the same,” his father said.

“Yeah.” Ty headed to his room on the first floor.

As Ty buttoned the jacket of his new class A U.S. Army uniform with its sparkling single gold bars on the shoulder epaulets, he stared at his father’s uniform. His uniform paled compared to his father’s with only an Airborne Badge and the National Defense ribbon above the left pocket. His father had a Combat Infantry Badge and numerous ribbons in his “fruit salad,” including the Silver Star, Bronze Star, Purple Heart with a bronze oak leaf, Army Commendation with valor device, American Defense, American Campaign, European African Middle Eastern Campaign with five campaign stars, and the World War II Victory ribbons.

“Tyler, did you hear me?” his father asked, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, jaw clenched, and brow furrowed.

Ty shook his head, kicking himself mentally for his lapse of awareness. That was one of his father’s biggest pet peeves. He always said that not paying attention to your surroundings would get you killed in combat. “No, sir.”

“Dad, not sir, son,” his father chided in a low, somewhat humorous voice.

“Yes, Dad. What did you ask me?”

“Do you want to go anywhere on leave? I’ll pay for it. You earned a nice vacation for graduating in the top ten percent of your class.”

He thought for a moment. “No. I want to stay home, relax, take in a few movies, and sleep. Once I get to Fort Campbell, I probably won’t get a lot of recreational time for a while.” And he needed to gain more muscle mass. That meant running five miles every morning for stamina and going to the gym to lift weights every day. If he went on vacation, all he would do was drink beer, eat, lie by the pool to maintain his tan, and try to pick up a date for the evening. By the time he got to Fort Campbell, he’d be an out-of-shape, flabby mess.

“Good point.” Dad packed Ty’s discarded cadet uniform in the open duffle bag on the bare bunk mattress and latched it shut. “Then we had better get going before your mother kills us both for making her and your sister wait in the car.”

Ty placed his garrison cap on his head. “Yes, Dad.” *She would too. We wouldn’t hear the end of it for a week, and Betsey would keep reminding me. Every day.*

