

The Last Train to Tombstone

David Evangelista

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Prologue

Arizona Territory, 1879

The desert didn't care for men's plans. It swallowed them whole — railroad spikes, cattle trails, even the bones of those who thought they could tame it.

Under the baking sun, a line of track stretched west, gleaming like a blade too long left in the fire. Somewhere beyond that horizon, dreams clashed like iron on iron — miners chasing silver, outlaws chasing shadows, and railroad men chasing something harder to pin down: control.

In a camp notched between wind-worn bluffs, a young boy watched smoke curl from the wreckage of what had once been a settlement. His hands were blistered, eyes red from smoke and grief. Beside him, his sister wept into the folds of a bloodied shawl.

The boy didn't cry.

He watched.

He remembered.

And deep in his chest, something began to smolder — quiet, but certain. The kind of fire that did not flicker with wind or water.

A month later, far to the east, a Pinkerton detective signed a letter under a false name. The ink bled slightly from the edge of his pen, and for a moment, he hesitated — just long enough to wonder

how many more lies would be required before the truth could do its work.

And in a parlor car headed west, a woman with green eyes and a heart full of questions traced the curve of a wine glass with her finger. She smiled, but the smile didn't reach her eyes. Not anymore.

The Southern Pacific kept its schedule.

But everything else was coming off the rails.

Chapter 1

A Soldier's Past

The world seemed to explode in a deafening roar as cannon fire ripped through the air, the ground quaking beneath Everett Forsythe's feet. Clad in Union blue, he crouched low, his rifle gripped tightly in hands slick with sweat and grime. The stench of gunpowder and blood hung heavy, a constant companion in the hellish landscape of the Civil War battlefield.

Everett's heart hammered in his chest; each beat a frenzied echo of chaos around him. Bullets whizzed past, close enough to feel their heat, as he peered over the edge of the trench, searching for a target. The faces of his comrades were grim, set in determined lines, each man acutely aware that any moment could be their last.

He spotted a Confederate soldier darting between trees, the grey of his uniform a stark contrast against the green. With practiced precision, Everett raised his rifle, took aim, and fired. The soldier crumpled to the ground, and a wave of grim satisfaction mixed with nausea washed over him. This was war—brutal, unforgiving, and relentless.

As the battle raged on, Everett moved with mechanical efficiency, his actions driven by survival instinct rather than thought. The cries of the wounded and the dying filled his ears, a haunting chorus that would follow him long after the guns fell silent.

When night finally descended, bringing a temporary lull in the fighting, Everett collapsed against a tree, his body exhausted, his uniform stained with a mix of mud and blood. He stared up at the stars, their calm light a stark contrast to the violence below. In these quiet moments, he allowed himself to think of home, of the rolling fields of Maryland, and of Ruth, the woman he had left behind to fight in this war.

But there was no room for softness on the battlefield. As dawn broke, signaling another day of carnage, Everett steeled himself, pushing aside thoughts of the future. There was only the present, a never-ending cycle of fighting, surviving, and waiting for an end that seemed increasingly elusive.

In the heart of the conflict, amidst the roar of cannons and the clash of steel, Everett Forsythe, the soldier, was forged. A man who had once known peace was now intimately acquainted with war's brutal reality. And though he fought valiantly, a part of him longed for the day when he could lay down his arms and return to a life not haunted by the specter of death.

The dawn's light brought little respite to the weary soldiers, as they gathered their meager belongings and prepared to march once more. Everett, his heart heavy with the weight of the previous day's losses, was summoned to the commanding officer's tent. The air was thick with tension as he stepped inside, saluting crisply.

"Sit down, Forsythe," the officer, a stern-faced man with deep lines etched into his weathered face, gestured to a makeshift stool. "I have some news. Our Lieutenant was killed in yesterday's skirmish. A sharpshooter's bullet found him."

Everett's throat tightened, the reality of war's indiscriminate cruelty hitting him anew. "Sir, he was a brave man. His leadership will be sorely missed."

The officer nodded, his gaze meeting Everett's. "Indeed. And in light of that, we need someone to fill his position. Someone who's shown courage under fire, and a level head in the chaos. I'm promoting you to Lieutenant, effective immediately. You're to command your own company."

Everett's eyes widened in surprise. "Me, sir? There are others more experienced..."

The officer cut him off. "Experience is valuable, Forsythe, but it's not the only measure of a leader. You've demonstrated an ability to stay calm when all hell breaks loose, and your men respect you for it. That's what we need right now."

A mix of emotions surged within Everett—pride, fear, and an overwhelming sense of responsibility. "I understand, sir. I'll do everything I can to live up to that."

As he left the tent, the weight of his new rank settled on his shoulders. He approached his men, now his to lead. Their faces, a mix of youth and experience, turned to him expectantly.

"Men," Everett began, his voice steady, "we've been through hell together, and I'm proud to have stood by your side. I've been given the honor of leading you as your new Lieutenant. I don't take this lightly. I'll need your support, your strength, and your courage."

A young soldier, no more than seventeen, stepped forward. "Sir, we've seen you in action. We trust you. Just lead us, and we'll follow."

Everett met the boy's gaze, a sense of resolve settling in him. "Thank you. I promise to do my best for each and every one of you. We're more than just a company; we're a band of brothers. And together, we'll face whatever comes our way."

As they marched, Everett made it a point to engage with his men, sharing not just commands, but also listening to their stories, their fears, and their hopes. The older soldier, Samuel, now his second in command, walked beside him.

"Everett, you've got a good head on your shoulders. Just remember, these men are looking to you for direction, for hope. Show them that you believe in them, and they'll move mountains for you."

The march was arduous, the sun relentless. But Everett kept his company moving, his newfound resolve bolstering their spirits. They spoke of home, of loved ones, and of the dreams that awaited them beyond the battlefield.

As the sounds of battle drew closer, Everett gathered his company one last time. "We're heading into the storm, men. But we're going in together. Keep your wits about you, watch out for each other, and remember why we're fighting. For our families, for our future, for each other."

With a deep breath, Lieutenant Everett Forsythe led his men into the fray, his heart a blend of apprehension and unyielding determination. The battle ahead would be fierce, but he was no longer just a soldier; he was a leader, a beacon of hope for his company, and he would do everything within his power to guide them through the tempest of war.

As Lieutenant Everett Forsythe led his company into the heart of the battle, the air was thick with the sounds of war – gunfire, shouts, and the haunting echo of bugles cutting through the chaos. The ground beneath their feet trembled, not just from the artillery but from the sheer force of men determined to hold their ground.

The enemy lines were a blur of gray, moving like a relentless storm across the field. Everett's company, a patchwork of youth and experience, advanced with a unity forged in the fires of adversity. Each man knew the stakes; they were fighting not just for the land under their feet, but for the very idea of home and all it represented.

As they moved forward, the air was rent with the sharp cracks of rifles. Everett, leading from the front, felt the heat of battle sear through him. He fired, reloaded, and fired again, his actions mirroring those of his men. There was no room for doubt or hesitation. In the dance of death that unfolded, every step, every shot counted.

Suddenly, the line faltered. A young soldier, a boy really, with a shock of brown hair and wide, frightened eyes, stumbled and fell, a dark stain spreading across his chest. Everett was at his side in an instant, dropping to his knees in the mud.

"Stay with me, son," he urged, his voice a calm anchor in the storm. The boy's lips moved, a whisper lost in the roar of battle. With trembling hands, he reached into his jacket, pulling out a crumpled letter stained with his blood.

"For my family," he gasped, his fingers gripping Everett's with a desperate strength. "Promise me..."

Everett's heart clenched as he took the letter, nodding solemnly. "I promise, soldier. I'll make sure it gets to them." The boy's grip loosened, his eyes closing one final time as his body went limp. Everett's hands were stained with the blood of a life cut tragically short, a stark reminder of the cost of war.

Rising, Everett's gaze swept over his company, his resolve hardening. They couldn't afford to lose more men to this relentless enemy. He signaled the bugler, the sharp notes piercing the air, rallying his men.

"Forward!" he shouted, his voice carrying over the din. "For our fallen, for our families, push forward!"

The company responded with a renewed vigor, their movements synchronized in a desperate ballet of survival. They advanced, shoulder to shoulder, a living wall of blue against the tide of gray. The flags of their regiment, tattered but still proud, waved above them, symbols of their unity and purpose.

The enemy's resistance was fierce, their gunfire a relentless hail that threatened to overwhelm. But Everett's company held fast, their determination unyielding. They moved like a single entity, each man covering the other, their rifles a continuous thunder that echoed across the battlefield.

In the midst of the chaos, Everett found himself face to face with a Confederate soldier, their eyes locking in a moment of shared humanity amidst the madness. But war left no room for mercy, and with a grimace, Everett pulled the trigger. The soldier fell, and Everett felt a pang of sorrow for the man who was, like him, just a pawn in a larger game.

The battle raged on, hours stretching into an eternity of blood and smoke. Everett's company pushed forward, inch by bloody inch, their faces smeared with dirt and sweat, their eyes burning with a mix of fatigue and fierce determination.

As the sun began to dip low on the horizon, casting long shadows across the battlefield, a final charge was called. Everett led the way, his voice a rallying cry that cut through the weariness of his men. They surged forward, a last burst of energy fueled by the thought of victory, of survival.

The enemy line broke under the onslaught, their resolve shattering like glass. Cheers erupted from Everett's company as they realized the battle was theirs. They had held their ground, paid the price in blood and tears, but they had emerged victorious.

As the dust settled and the sounds of battle faded, Everett walked among his men, offering words of comfort and gratitude. He saw the exhaustion etched into their faces, the relief in their eyes. They had fought bravely, each and every one of them.

That night, as they camped on the battlefield, the stars above seemed to shine a little brighter, a silent tribute to their courage. Everett sat alone for a moment, the letter from the fallen soldier in his hands. He whispered a prayer for the boy, for all the young lives cut short, and made a silent vow to honor their memory.

The battle was over, but the war was far from won. As he looked at the faces of his men, now more than just soldiers under his command, but brothers in arms, Everett knew that whatever lay ahead, they would face it together. They had proven their mettle on the battlefield, not just as fighters, but as men of honor and resilience. And come what may, they would continue to push forward, side by side, shoulder to shoulder.

The war dragged on, each battle blurring into the next, a seemingly endless cycle of violence and loss. Everett's company marched from town to town, liberating some, mourning losses in others. The cost was high, the toll on the men evident in their weary eyes and stoic faces.

One evening, as they camped near a recently liberated town, Everett gathered his men around a flickering campfire. The flames cast a warm glow on their faces, a brief respite from the cold reality of war.

"Tonight, we rest," Everett said, his voice carrying over the crackling fire. "Tomorrow, we march again. But for now, let's remember why we're fighting. For freedom, for our families, for each other."

A young soldier named Thomas, his face still bearing the traces of boyhood, spoke up. "Lieutenant, do you think it'll ever end? The fighting, I mean."

Everett met the boy's gaze, seeing the longing for peace in his eyes. "I believe it will, Thomas. War can't last forever. We just have to stay strong, stay together."

An older soldier, a grizzled veteran named Marcus, nodded in agreement. "The Lieutenant's right. We've seen dark days, but we've also seen what we can achieve when we stand united. Towns freed, families reunited. It's worth the fight."

The men nodded, a sense of camaraderie passing between them. They shared stories of home, of loved ones waiting for their return. Laughter mingled with the crackle of the fire, a brief escape from the harshness of their reality.

As the war neared its end, the battles became more intense, the stakes higher. Everett's company faced some of their toughest challenges yet, but they faced them together, a band of brothers forged in the crucible of conflict.

The news of General Robert E. Lee's surrender to Union General Ulysses S. Grant spread like wildfire through the ranks. Everett gathered his men, the gravity of the moment settling over them.

"Men, the war is over," he announced, his voice steady but filled with emotion. "General Lee has surrendered. It's time to go home."

A cheer erupted from the soldiers, a release of years of pent-up tension and fear. They hugged, slapped each other's backs, and let out whoops of joy. The euphoria was palpable, a stark contrast to the somber moments they had shared in the trenches.

Everett watched his men celebrate, a smile tugging at his lips. He felt a sense of pride and relief, knowing they had played a part in ending this bloody chapter in their nation's history.

That night, they shared one last drink together, a toast to their survival, to their fallen comrades, and to the future. Everett raised his glass, his eyes meeting those of his men.

"To you, my brothers in arms," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "For your bravery, your sacrifice, and your unwavering spirit. May we never forget what we've endured, and may we find peace in the days to come."

The men echoed his toast, their voices a chorus of hope and resilience. They drank, savoring the moment of unity and the promise of a return to a life free from the horrors of war.

As they prepared to depart for their homes, Everett felt a bittersweet ache in his heart. He had led these men through the darkest of times, and now, as they stood on the threshold of peace, he knew their paths would diverge. But the bonds forged in the fires of war would remain, unbreakable and enduring.

With a final salute, Lieutenant Everett Forsythe bid farewell to his company, each man a living testament to the cost and the triumph of their shared journey. As he turned to leave, he carried with him the memories of their camaraderie, the weight of their sacrifices, and the hope for a future forged in the crucible of their collective courage.

The war's end had unleashed a torrent of emotions in Everett Forsythe, but none as potent as the longing to return to his Maryland home. With each step northward, memories of the battles fought and the comrades lost weighed heavily on his mind, tempered only by the anticipation of reuniting with Ruth.

The journey was a solitary one at first, the landscape rolling by in a blur of greens and browns. But as Everett moved closer to the Mason-Dixon Line, he encountered other weary soldiers, each carrying their own stories of survival and loss. They traveled together, a makeshift band of brothers, their shared experiences forming an unspoken bond.

In the evenings, they would gather around campfires, the flickering flames casting long shadows on their faces. As they shared rations and stories, Everett found himself opening up about his life before the war, about the farm that had been in his family for generations, and about Ruth, whose letters had been a beacon of hope in the darkest times.

Ruth Ellen Whitmore had been born in the gentle hills outside Sharpsburg, Maryland, to parents who understood the value of steady hands and unshaken faith. Her father, Elias Whitmore, ran a small saddlery on the edge of town—a simple shop where leather belts, riding tack, and harnesses hung from the rafters like drying fruit. He worked with a precision that turned utility into something near art. Her mother, Miriam, kept a modest herb garden and served as the town's unofficial midwife and healer. Folks came to her for poultices and prayers in equal measure, and few left disappointed.

From her parents, Ruth inherited both tenderness and steel. She knew the language of horses before she could recite a Psalm, and she could stitch a torn bridle just as quick as she could recite the book of Ruth—which she did often, with a quiet smile and a knowing gleam in her green eyes.

She first saw Everett Forsythe on a Sunday morning in the late spring of 1859. It was the annual church social at St. Peter's Chapel, held under the swaying shade of sycamores near the Potomac River. He was a tall figure in clean-pressed clothes, standing near the baptistry with a plate of peach cobbler in hand, talking with an older deacon. Ruth had been carrying a basket of fresh rolls to the table when Everett turned and tipped his hat.

"You'll forgive me," he said, "but I'd wager those rolls smell better than any sermon I've heard in the last year."

She smiled politely. "Then you must not have been listening close enough, Mr...?"

"Forsythe. Everett Forsythe."

They talked longer than was proper, and neither one of them seemed to mind.

By the time war erupted like a fault line in the nation's spine, Ruth and Everett were promised to each other. Their wedding was postponed when Everett enlisted with the Union. He left the next morning with a quiet goodbye, a drawn breath, and a pressed kiss that lingered longer than it should have. Ruth stood on the porch and watched until he disappeared into the line of blue along the horizon.

What followed were long years. The war stretched time like old wire, taut and trembling. At first, she kept herself busy tending the Forsythe farm—filling the role of daughter-in-law even though they'd not yet wed. Everett's father had passed two winters before, and his mother, Maribeth, was fading fast from a wasting sickness the doctors couldn't name. Ruth cared for her without complaint, washing sheets and spooning broth between parched lips, humming hymns into the quiet air when words failed. Maribeth died in the second year of the war, her fingers wrapped around Ruth's like a vine around a trellis.

Ruth buried her and sent word to Everett. No reply came.

The letters slowed as the war worsened. Some months she heard nothing. Others, only brief scrawls in Everett's hand—tired ink, folded twice, sometimes stained with blood. She read them by lanternlight, lips trembling over the words, memorizing every curl of his script. Once, she received a letter from another soldier entirely—someone named Samuel—telling her Everett had been wounded at Shiloh. The letter was brief and lacking detail. She stayed up all night praying in the dirt beside the hearth.

The war brought soldiers to her doorstep more than once. Confederate foragers took what they could—cornmeal, flour, dried pork. One night, three men knocked just before midnight. She met them with a lantern in one hand and her father's long hunting rifle in the other. They left empty-handed.

During the Battle of Antietam, the ground shook for three days straight. Gunfire echoed over the hills like a thunderstorm made of steel. The Forsythe homestead wasn't far from the fighting. Ruth tended to wounded men, both blue and gray, in the hayloft and cellar. She boiled linens until her hands blistered and buried two men behind the orchard, neither of whom lived long enough to tell her their names.

But she had not lost hope. Not entirely. She still kept Everett's letters tied in a ribbon, tucked in a small wooden box beneath her bed. Some nights she would untie the bundle, unfold the letters like prayers, and read them until sleep stole her grief.

One night, a young soldier named Jacob, who hailed from a small town in Virginia, asked Everett about farming. "What's it like, Lieutenant? Working the land, I mean. My pa was a farmer, but I never took to it. Always had my head in the clouds, dreaming of adventure."

Everett chuckled, the sound warm in the cool night air. "It's hard work, Jacob. But there's a satisfaction in it, too. Watching something grow from the soil, knowing you had a hand in it. It's a different kind of battle, one where you're fighting against the whims of nature instead of men."

The conversation turned to dreams of the future, each man painting a picture of the life he hoped to build. For some, it was a return to familiar routines; for others, a chance to start anew. For Everett, it was the promise of days spent working alongside Ruth, of children playing in the fields, of a peace hard-won and deeply cherished.

As the journey continued, the landscape began to change, the wilds giving way to more cultivated lands. Towns and villages, some scarred by the war, others seemingly untouched, dotted their path. In each place they stopped, the soldiers were met with a mix of curiosity and gratitude, their uniforms a reminder of the sacrifices made for the Union's preservation.

One particularly memorable encounter occurred in a small Pennsylvania town, where an elderly couple invited Everett and his companions for a meal. Over plates of hearty stew and fresh bread, the couple listened intently as the soldiers recounted their experiences. The old man, his eyes misty, spoke of his own time as a young soldier in the Mexican-American War, drawing parallels that spanned generations.

"It's the same, yet different," he mused. "War changes a man, no matter the era. But it's the coming home that truly tests the mettle. Remember that, young ones. Home is where the real battle begins, to rebuild, to heal, to find your place again."

Everett could feel a pang in his heart at those words, a mix of apprehension and resolve. He knew the road ahead would be challenging, but he also knew that with Ruth by his side, they could face anything.

The final leg of the journey was a solitary one, as Everett bid farewell to his fellow travelers, each man branching off toward his own destination. As he crossed into Maryland, the familiar sights and smells of his home state filled Everett with an overwhelming sense of relief and belonging. Yet, the joy of being back on familiar soil was tempered by the scars of war that marred the landscape. Fields once lush and vibrant were now patchy and neglected, the aftermath of conflict evident in the abandoned farmsteads and overgrown gardens.

Everett's journey took him through towns and villages he had known as a boy, places where he had once roamed freely, exploring every nook and cranny with the boundless curiosity of youth. Now, as he passed through, he saw the toll the war had taken. Buildings bore the marks of cannon fire, and the faces of the people he encountered were etched with the weariness of those who had endured too much.

On his third day in Maryland, Everett came upon a small creek where he had often fished as a boy. The sight of the familiar bend in the stream, the sound of the water trickling over rocks, brought a flood of memories. He remembered lazy summer days spent with a line in the water, the thrill of a tug on the line, and the triumph of reeling in a catch. He remembered the simplicity of those days, a stark contrast to the complexity of the world he now faced as a man.

As he sat by the creek, his mind wandered to Ruth, to the life they had planned together. He imagined telling her about this moment, about the mix of nostalgia and sorrow he felt. He longed to share with her not just the joys of their future, but also the burdens of his past, to weave the tapestry of their lives together with threads of both happiness and hardship.

With a sigh, Everett rose to continue his journey. The pull of home was stronger than ever, a beacon guiding him through the remnants of a world forever changed. The scars of war were deep, but so too was his resolve to rebuild, to create a new life from the ashes of the old.

As he neared his farmhouse, the anticipation quickened his steps. The outline of the building, the fields that stretched out around it, the garden where Ruth spent her days — each detail was etched in his mind, a picture of the home he had longed for throughout the dark days of war.

He could almost see her there, in the garden, her hair catching the sunlight, her hands busy with the work she loved. The thought of finally being able to hold her, to look into her eyes and see the future they would build together, filled him with a sense of purpose and hope.

The journey had been long, the road marked with trials and tribulations, but Everett Forsythe was almost home. And as he took those final steps, the weight of his experiences, the memories of battles fought and comrades lost, seemed to lighten. For he knew that at the end of that road was not just a house, but a place where love and dreams awaited, where the promise of a new beginning shimmered on the horizon, ready to be embraced with open arms.

As the sun reached its zenith, casting a warm glow over the landscape, Everett Forsythe crested the final hill that stood between him and the home he had left behind. The familiar sight of his farmhouse, nestled amidst the fields, brought a lump to his throat. This was the place where he had left Ruth, the love of his life, to fight in a war that would change the course of history.

In the garden, Ruth was bent over her plants, her red hair glinting like fire in the midday sun. Time and solitude had etched lines of resilience on her face, and her green eyes, once bright with youthful dreams, now held a depth born of waiting and worry. Her frame was thin, a testament to the years spent tending to the homestead alone, each day a silent prayer for Everett's safe return. When the war finally ended, Ruth had lost much—her future mother-in-law, two cousins to the fighting, her own sense of peace. But she had not lost hope. Not entirely. She still kept Everett's letters tied in a ribbon, tucked in a small wooden box beneath her bed.

As Everett drew closer, Ruth straightened up, shielding her eyes against the sun to see the approaching figure. The uniform was familiar, but the face was still too far to discern. Her heart pounded, a mix of hope and fear gripping her.

It wasn't until he was just a few yards away that recognition dawned on her. "Everett?" she whispered, her voice barely audible, as if saying his name too loudly might shatter the moment.

Then, with a cry of disbelief and joy, she fell to her knees, tears streaming down her face. She had feared the worst, the absence of letters in the last four months, a silent torment that gnawed at her heart.

Everett quickened his pace, his own emotions overwhelming him as he dropped his pack and rushed to her side. He knelt in the dirt beside her, enveloping her in his arms. Their embrace was a collision of relief, love, and gratitude, a silent exchange of all the words that had gone unsaid, all the fears that had lingered in the shadows.

As they held each other, the world around them faded away. There were no more battles to fight, no more uncertainties to face. In that moment, there was only the profound grace of their reunion, the gratitude for a second chance at a life together.

Tears mingled with the soil beneath them, a testament to the journey they had both endured. But as they clung to each other, the promise of a new beginning took root, a vow to cherish each day, to rebuild what had been lost, and to never let go of the love that had brought them back together.