



August 28, 1865

(Four Months Later)

“Ticket, please.”

Sweaty palmed, Will handed the steward the note the hospital had provided, assuring free passage north as far as Evansville, Indiana.

The spindly crewman studied the handwritten note, then peered over at Will. “This is dated June. Why the delay?”

“I was injured aboard the *Sultana*. It’s taken me time to recuperate and find my bearings.”

“The *Sultana*, eh?” Something akin to compassion flickered in the steward’s close-set eyes. “You’re fortunate to be alive.”

“I’m aware of that, sir.”

The steward returned the paper to Will. “Let’s hope this voyage ends differently.”

With a nod, Will slipped the letter back into his pocket, shouldered his duffel bag, and stepped aboard the steamboat. Upon release from the hospital in June, he’d received a red union suit, a set of clothes, and \$13. Not much. But a start. A few odd

jobs over recent weeks had earned him enough to travel north in an attempt to find some answers.

A sense of lostness kneaded through him as he took in the array of passengers. All strangers. Despite the doctor and nurse's assurance his memory should return, months had passed with only vague snippets of what his life had once been. Restless nights filled with random, unsettling dreams hounded him relentlessly. Many bore nightmarish images that often woke him in a sweat. Other more pleasant visions ended too soon, taunting his inability to piece them together.

None had provoked a memory of who he was or where he was from. Did he have family awaiting his return? Parents? Siblings? Likely in his early twenties, might he have a sweetheart or even, perhaps, a wife? If so, by now, they'd probably given up hope of ever seeing him again. The thought of causing loved ones undue concern or heartbreak bothered him.

He fisted his hands. If only he knew where to begin.

Information he'd gleaned from other survivors revealed the vast majority of soldiers aboard the *Sultana* had originated from Indiana or Ohio. Such a sizeable area could take years to comb. Seeing as he'd been guaranteed passage to Evansville, he'd begin there, following every lead until he uncovered his roots. For lack of a better name, he'd taken on the surname Evans, after his destination. Will Evans was as good a name as any until his true identity came to light.

Music and laughter poured from within the heart of the steamboat, grating on Will's nerves. He wove along the deck, avoiding eye contact with those he met. Shamed by his inability to initiate even a simple conversation, he wandered the unfamiliar steamboat like a stray dog searching for a home. The rest of the *Sultana* survivors had departed months ago. Although they, too, had been strangers, at least Will and they had a shared experience to draw upon. But any attempt at small talk with these steamboat travelers was sure to end poorly.

Finding a vacant spot near the massive side paddlewheel, he

gazed over the vast Mississippi River. Despite the humid air, a cold chill worked through him at memory of the murky water that had encompassed him months earlier.

A memory he longed to forget but couldn't.

As the steamboat disembarked, he clutched the side rail, still unsteady on his feet from long weeks of recovery. The floorboard creaked beneath his boots, stirring a vague recollection, as did the uneven sway of the steamboat. The hum of the boiler engines and the sooty smell of coal pulled his attention to the stern and the enormous smokestacks billowing black smoke.

His breaths shallowed as his mind revisited the disturbing images of the fiery steamboat and piercing cries all around. His shoulders shook from the dread of repeating them.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.

The verse of Scripture coursed through his thoughts as clearly as if he'd had a Bible before him. Though the words should have brought reassurance, instead, they frustrated him. How could he recall the verse so plainly and not even remember his name? Why had he even survived the tragic incident? What sort of life could he have without purpose or identity? Utterly alone? Right now, God seemed as aloof as his past.

Will fingered the two-inch scar above his left ear. The slight bulge, devoid of hair, no longer pained him, but remained a vivid reminder of his lost self. He tugged his cap lower on his head and slid the pocket watch from his trousers. The ruined trinket remained his only link to his identity. Running his thumb over the smooth casing, he released a determined breath. No matter how long he had to search or how far he had to travel, he would not stop until he found home.

Gallagher Home near Elmira, New York
August 28, 1865

SOMETHING WAS UP.

Lydia Gallagher eyed her older brother Luke. He'd instigated this family gathering, and by the curious grin he and his sweetheart, Adelaide, were sharing, Lydia had an inkling why.

Intent on finishing their meal, her brother Drew, his wife, Caroline, and Mama seemed oblivious to the inconspicuous goings-on. Lydia's gaze slipped to the empty chair at the head of the table, and a twinge of regret rippled through her. She forced a grin. If Papa were here, he'd have noted the couple's silent exchange, winked at her, then made some off-handed remark to force their hand.

But the war between the states had stolen Papa away. By God's grace, Drew and Luke had both been spared. But her stomach had been in knots until their return, fearful the same fate might befall them. How blessed she and Mama were to have them home again ... and for them to have brought such fine ladies into their family. Who would have thought both brothers would fall for Southerners? And yet, over the past few months, Caroline and Adelaide had become like sisters to her.

Lydia never wished to be apart from any of them again.

With a loud clearing of his throat, Luke leaned forward in his chair. "Uh, folks? Adelaide and I have something we'd like to share."

Clasping her hands together under her chin, Lydia held back a squeal. She'd known Adelaide was the girl for Luke since she'd come to live with them earlier that spring. After her devastating burns during the fall of Richmond.

When everyone stilled, Luke slipped an arm around Adelaide's shoulders, looking as though he might burst. She returned his warm smile, eyes filled with admiration. Blotches of red tainted Luke's cheeks as he turned his gaze on the rest of them. "There's no simpler way to say it. I've asked Adelaide to be my wife, and she's agreed!"

Joyful chatter erupted throughout the dining room, everyone talking at once like a barnyard of cackling chickens.

When the group quieted, Mama was the first to speak. “Your father would have been very pleased, as am I.” Her eyes grew misty as her gaze drifted to the far end of the table where Papa had sat. Though she rarely spoke of it, his passing had left a fearsome void in her heart.

As it had Lydia’s. She’d been twelve when the telegram arrived, relaying news of Papa’s death. It had taken her months to accept the fact he wasn’t coming home. How she missed his wit and amity.

Luke leaned to kiss Mama’s cheek. “Thank you.”

Sated with questions, Lydia refocused. “How soon will you marry? Have you decided upon a date?”

With a shake of his head, Luke eased back in his chair. “Not yet. We’ll need time to find a place to live.”

“Uh ... that may not be a problem.” Drew scratched his cheek and cut a glance at Caroline. At her discreet nod, he clasped her hand. “Caroline and I have an announcement as well.”

Lydia grinned. *A baby. It had to be.* But at their somber expressions, her smile faded.

“What announcement is that?” Mama’s unsettled tone hinted she’d noted their hesitancy as well.

Releasing a long breath, Drew swiped a crumb from the table. “That ... Luke and Adelaide can have the cottage house because we won’t be needing it much longer.”

Luke’s brow furrowed. “Then where will you and Caroline live?”

The conflicted expression on Drew’s face was telling. A hush fell over the gathering in eagerness for an explanation. At last, he met Mama’s gaze square on, a tinge of sadness in his eyes. “Washington.”

“Washington?” The word burst from Lydia like a cannon blast.

“What do you mean, son?” The slight quiver in her mother’s

voice was disturbing enough to incite Lydia to go and stand behind her, hand on her shoulder.

With a quiet cough, Drew leaned forward in his chair. “As you know, General Grant was recently promoted to General of the Army. I worked a special assignment for him during the war. Now he’s asked me to serve under him again ... on a more permanent basis.”

Mama’s tone deepened. “And you’ve accepted?”

Drew and Caroline exchanged glances ahead of Drew’s response. “The work suits me, and the move would give Caroline more opportunity to pursue her nursing. We’ve prayed about and discussed it, and ... feel it’s the right decision.”

All the air fled from Lydia’s lungs, her hopes of the family remaining together shattering like broken glass. “But you’ve been home such a short time. Washington is so far away. We’ll never see you.”

Drew offered a weak smile. “Course you will. We’ll only be a few hours away by train.” He turned to Luke. “Though I hate the thought of burdening Luke here with the brunt of the farm work. I promise I’ll do my best to take time off when I can to help with planting and harvest.”

The pledge did little to bolster the group’s dampened spirits. At last, Luke stretched out his arm. “A fella can’t ask for more than that. Congratulations, big brother. We hate to see you go, but the cottage house will sure ease our situation in finding a place to live.”

Drew stood and clasped his hand, the tension in his face ebbing. “Thanks, Luke. We were hoping you’d see it that way.”

Numb, Lydia wrapped an arm about her middle. She’d thought after returning from war, her brothers would never wish to leave again. And now, mere months later, Drew was going away. For good. Weren’t families supposed to stay together?

“How soon will you leave?” Though still somewhat strained, Mama’s voice was again calm.

Settling back in his seat, Drew appeared more at ease. “Not until the first of the year. We’ll leave shortly after Christmas.”

“Just the right amount of time to plan a wedding.” With a grin, Luke turned to Adelaide. “What do you say to a Christmas Eve wedding?”

Adelaide’s lips lifted. “I can’t think of a better time.”

Luke gave a brisk nod. “Christmas Eve it is, then. Come the new year, we’ll all make a fresh start. I, for one, can’t wait to see what the Lord has in store.”

Lydia gnawed at her lower lip. What did He have in store for her? Loneliness? Boredom?

She suppressed her growing angst. So much change at once. Just when she’d come to enjoy having everyone around, they were leaving, resurrecting all the scars of losing Papa.

In a few short months, she and Mama would be by themselves again in this big old farmhouse once so full of life. Her brothers were grown men now with lives of their own.

And it appeared there’d be no holding them back.