



Memphis, Tennessee
April 29, 1865

“**N**o!” Will’s eyes jerked open, and the swirl of water engulfing him vanished. Instead, rafters stretched out above him. His breaths came fast and shallow.

Hurried footsteps padded closer. A gentle hand restrained his shoulder. “Easy, soldier. You’re safe now.”

The woman’s gritty southern drawl sounded strange in his ears. He veered his head toward her and immediately regretted the action. A surge of pain shot through his already pounding head. He reached a hand up, fingering bandages rather than hair. “What happened?”

The short, squat woman leaned closer, her fleshy face framed by a loose chignon of auburn hair. Given her bloodied white smock, he presumed she was a nurse. “You don’t remember?”

Will scoured his mind for some recollection but came up lacking. He pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off the blur in his vision, as well as mounting confusion. “Not really. My mind’s awful foggy.”

“You’ve taken a nasty blow to the head. Your memory will

clear in time.” She straightened and patted his arm. “What’s your name, soldier?”

Though a simple request, he struggled to comply. “I ... I don’t remember.”

The nurse blinked, the creases above her nose deepening. “Where are you from?”

Will opened his mouth to answer but drew a blank. “I’m not sure.”

With a shake of her head, the woman rested her hands on her hips. “We’d best have the doctor take a look at you. I fear you may have a concussion. Have you no recollections at all?”

The more Will sought answers, the more his head ached. “Only darkness, being in water, and seeing a fiery boat and lots of debris.” His eyes glossed over from the memory. “Men were moaning in pain, and there were ... dead bodies floating all around.” Shaking off the morbid scene, he peered over at her. “I don’t know what, but something terrible happened.”

The nurse smoothed her soiled smock over her ample middle, her lips flattening in a thin line. “Two days ago, the steamboat you were on, the *Sultana*, exploded.”

“Two days ago?” He mumbled, then glanced at the caregiver. “Have I been asleep all that time?”

“More or less. You thrashed about from time to time but never fully awakened until now.”

Will tried to wrap his mind around the incident. “What caused the explosion?”

She checked the bandages on his chest and left arm. “Apparently, the boat was grossly overloaded, which strained the boiler engines. A majority of those on board didn’t survive. You were one of the fortunate ones. Rescuers discovered you unconscious, adrift on some debris, and brought you here.”

“Where’s *here*?”

“Gayoso Hospital. Memphis, Tennessee.”

“*Memphis*? What am I doing in Memphis?”

“From what I gather, the *Sultana* was traveling north from

Vicksburg. You must have boarded there with the other parolees.”

He swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry as cotton. Just what sort of man was he, to have been imprisoned? “Parolee?”

One of the nurse’s brows shot up. “You must have suffered quite a blow indeed not to recall a stint in one of our Confederate prisons.” She gestured to the room lined with patients and the dingy blue uniform jackets scattered about. “From what I hear, you Yankee prisoners were paroled and sent to Camp Fisk outside Vicksburg when the war ended. You were headed home when the explosion happened.” She bent lower, crossing her arms over her chest. “You do recall the war, don’t ya?”

Will closed his eyes, attempting to squeeze even one telling image into his thoughts. Though he had a sense the nurse’s words rang true, his wounded head and body hurt too much to concentrate. With a sigh, his eyelids bobbed open. “I’m sorry.”

The nurse rested a hand on his arm, her countenance softening. “Rest easy then while I fetch some broth. After two days without food, you must be famished.”

Indeed, he should be, but instead, his stomach bordered on nausea. He dampened parched lips, unwilling to refuse her kindness. “Thank you.”

A faint smile edged onto her mouth, then vanished just as quickly. She patted her skirt pockets as though in search of some forgotten object. Her creased brow relaxed as her hand apparently latched onto what she sought. With a satisfied nod, she drew the item out and shoved it toward him. “Perhaps this will help you remember. It was in your trousers when you arrived.”

Something weighty and smooth dropped into Will’s palm. He brought the object closer, squinting to clear his jumbled vision. *A pocket watch?* He turned it over in his hand, brushing his thumb over the emblem etched at its center. Though the brass timepiece felt strangely at home in his

hand, he had no recollection of owning one. “I don’t recognize it.”

The nurse’s lips lifted in a weak grin. “Well, perhaps in time. I’ll let the doctor know you’re awake and see to your dinner.”

As she strode away, Will popped the watch lid open. Moisture had gathered under the crystal, making the long, thin hands difficult to read. The lack of ticking, coupled with the motionless hands, likely meant the plunge in the water had rendered the watch useless. To be certain, he wound the crown a few half-turns and placed it near his ear.

Nothing.

As he started to close the ruined watch, he noticed a small word etched into the lid of the casing. Concentrating, he held it closer and squinted. His eyes widened as he made out the word Will, followed by a capital *E. Will*. Was that his name? And did his last name start with E? The name Will sounded as foreign to him as the nurse’s southern drawl.

The E could stand for any name. Edwards, Ellis, or Enos. None of which sounded familiar.

With a heavy sigh, he snapped the lid closed and stared up at the wooden rafters, his mind swirling. Who was he? Why couldn’t he remember?

Apparently, he’d been through a lot. He lifted his head high enough to see a blanket covering his lower half while much of his upper body was swathed in bandages. By the looks of him and the level of pain he was in, it was a wonder he’d survived.

The throbbing intensified and he closed his eyes, shutting out his ponderings as well. Maybe the nurse was right. He simply needed time to collect his senses. Yet, judging by what she’d said, he couldn’t help but wonder if some of what he’d been through would better remain forgotten.