

## CHAPTER ONE



It was neither night nor day, but a sliver of space and time in between. A dull moon sank low in a pale Georgia sky. Flames darted from torches twenty feet above a stockade wall. The smell of smoldering campfires filled the air.

I gasped a quick breath, feeling suffocated by a blanket of woolly men crammed in tight all around me. My older brother, Simon, and I waited like slaughterhouse livestock for the prison gates to open.

My mouth felt dry as dirt. I tucked my fife deep into my haversack and gripped all ten of my fingers around the back of Simon's belt.

A lonely whistle howled in the distance. I cocked my head in the direction of the railroad tracks. *How would I escape from this prison? Would I ever see Father or Kentucky again?*

Iron wheels squealed and boxcars rattled. The train I had come in on with Simon and nearly three hundred other cap-

tered Union soldiers left the depot. My heart chugged slower at the sound of the departing engine. I wished I was still on it.

The rusty hinges of the stockade gates creaked open. "Forward march, Yanks." A Rebel guard waved a burning torch. "Get moving!"

"Stay close to me, Will!" Simon's strong grip grasped my wrist like a shackle.

The men surged forward.

I clasped my fingers even tighter around my brother's belt. Sucked into a swift current of moving men, I shuffled my boots fast. Not ten paces inside the gates, a voice yelled out of the darkness, "Fresh fish! Fresh Fish! Come and get 'em, boys!"

The tightly packed men that had been crammed in all round me now split into fragments. I tried to keep pace with Simon, but tripped, stumbled, and dropped to my knees. From behind me, strong hands ripped at my haversack.

I managed to stand on my feet. I whirled around and came face-to-face with a beast of a man with wild animal eyes. His face was smoked-tar-black. His hair and beard were like tangled vines in a thicket of thorns.

"Simon!" I shouted, and dodged the man's kick.

The man's fist then thumped my chest with hard knuckles. The blow forced me backward, bouncing me off the man behind me. I flopped to the ground with a thud, and raw wind heaved from my lungs. I flipped over on my stomach, gasping for air.

"Will!" Simon's voice murmured in my throbbing eardrums. I heard nearby screams, cursing cries, and moans. Strong, fast hands scoured my pockets. Face flat in the dirt, I closed my eyes tight and lay as still as a dead man.

When all the movement around me stopped, I cracked one eye open. The man with wild animal eyes was gone. I slowly

raised my head. My vision rippled as if I were looking up below the surface of shallow water. Suddenly, a huge barrel-chested man tugged on my haversack.

“No!” I crouched on my knees. “My fife!” Something smashed the side of my head. My vision squeezed closed and I stumbled into a dark tunnel.

“Will? Talk to me, Will.”

It was Simon’s soothing voice. The chattering of a hundred strange noises surrounded me. A foul dead-possum smell hung in the air.

I squinted open my gritty-feeling eyes. The sun scorched the inside of my skull. I strained to focus on Simon’s blurry face. Thin streams of smoke swirled from campfires. My stomach growled as if a hungry dog paced inside me.

“Simon?” I mumbled through dry blood caked on my lips. “The Rebel guards robbed us!” My throat burned. My head throbbed with an aching thump.

Shaking his head, Simon helped me sit up. “Wasn’t Rebs, Will. Our own kind did it; Union prisoners robbed us.”

“What?” My head thumped, thumped with sharp pain.

“They were Union soldiers gone bad.” Simon shook his head. “Men that have lost all their morals and code of conduct.”

I craned my stiff neck, suspiciously watching the men going about their business nearby us. These prisoners passed us without a second glance. I looked around and saw a wave of men stretched as far as I could possibly see. There wasn’t ten feet of open space between one man and another.

When my vision fully focused, I could see that these men looked like skeletons wearing tattered rags. Their sunken faces had barely enough skin to cover protruding, rotten teeth. Blotchy red sores and scabs covered their leathery skin. I was

in a *Death Camp*.

“Both our haversacks are gone. All our food and clothes.” Simon stood taller. “I whipped one thief real good and got my canteen and blanket back.”

“My fife!” I jumped to my feet. I slapped my back searching for my haversack. “Where’s my haversack?”

Simon patted my shoulder. “I said it’s gone, Will.”

“No! It can’t be.” I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled around patting the ground with my palms trying desperately to stumble across my instrument.

The fife was my prized possession. It was no ordinary government issued instrument. It belonged to my great-grandfather during the Revolutionary War. Great-grandfather was only thirteen years old when he was a Fifer. Grandfather gave the fife to Father. Father gave it to me as a present three years ago on my eleventh birthday. I promised Father I would never lose it!

“Ain’t gonna make it,” a crackly voice said.

I raised my head. A man approached. At first I thought it was the barrel-chested man who had robbed me last night. No, that man had been well-fed. This fellow looked like a burnt-up cornstalk.

The cornstalk dropped his ragged trousers to his ankles and urinated next to Simon’s foot.

“Watch it!” Simon side-stepped the splash.

“By cracky, ya might make it,” the cornstalk said to Simon. “You’re a cannon-stuffed with powder. Look at the size of those shoulders. I betcha ya were born slinging an axe.”

I felt like a helpless child down on my knees. I stood up and eased closer to Simon, careful not to step on the soiled spot on the ground draining away from the cornstalk.

“Betcha a greenback he ain’t gonna make it.” The man pointed a crooked finger at me while he pulled up his trousers

with his other hand. I stepped behind Simon.

“He’ll make it,” Simon said.

“Well, he just might, if ya die first and I trade him to the Raiders as a slave.”

Simon lunged, grabbed the man by his collar with both hands, and jerked him three inches off the ground. Six-foot tall and as lean and sturdy as a musket stock, Simon was already taller than most men. “Stay away from my brother!”

The cornstalk’s eyes bugged out like a grasshopper’s.

“No, Simon.” I grabbed Simon’s elbows and pulled hard. “Let him go.”

Released from Simon’s grip, the man stepped back and rubbed his neck. Simon’s fingers left white marks on the man’s dirty skin. “You’ll make it, sure enough,” the man said, and stuck out his hand. “I’m Badger, Wisconsin Cavalry.”

Neither Simon nor I offered our hands.

I straightened my shoulders, lifted my chin, and looked him in the eye. “We’re the Taylors, Ninth Kentucky Volunteer Infantry.”

“Welcome to Andersonville Prison.” Badger smiled a tobacco-rotten grin. “Whatcha got the Raiders ain’t took?”

“Raiders?” Simon rubbed the back of his head.

“Thieves that whipped ya last night,” Badger said. “We call ‘em Raiders.”

Simon picked up his blue woolen blanket and lifted his wooden canteen.

“Trade ya a knife for that blanket.” Badger leaned closer.

“Not for trade.” Simon tucked the blanket tight under his arm.

“Blade comes mighty handy in here. Think it over, ya ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

“We’ll escape!” I said.

“Nobody escapes. Most men die in a week. If ya want to live, ya boys better listen to me.” Badger scratched his chin as if thinking hard. “Reckon ya could join the Tribe. We’re a pack of men who live with a big Indian. We call him Chief. We call ourselves the Tribe. We could use a couple of new fellas.”

I looked at Simon. He shrugged.

“Our camp’s over yonder, down Main Street.” Badger pointed to a road that cut through the center of the stockade. “Look for the big Indian. Ya can’t miss ‘em.”

He saluted us with a wide grin, abruptly did an about-face and lumbered away with widespread legs like he had a large chunk of saddle permanently wedged between his thighs.

“Walks like cavalry,” I said.

“Smells like cavalry, too.” Simon clipped his nose with two fingers. “I’ve smelled pack-mules better than him.”

I snorted, trying to blow clots of crusty blood from my nose holes. I rubbed the knot on the side of my head where the boot had landed. My ribs ached when I breathed too deep. I had to take short breaths. I felt pinned down and trapped in an airless boxcar. I wanted to search for my fife right away, but I was too tired, sore, and hungry to try.