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~ CHAPTER 1 ~

Nighttime Surprises



A slender moon hung in the night sky as Libby Norstad gazed down from the hotel. In the river below, her father's steamboat lay next to the landing. Dark now except for a lantern near the gangplank, the *Christina* seemed to be asleep.

Then as Libby's eyes grew used to the darkness, a shadow separated from a building off to the right. A second shadow followed, and a third. Without making a sound, three men crept toward the river.

At a warehouse near the *Christina* they stopped. As silently as they came, the men crept around the building and disappeared.

A few minutes later the three men returned. This time they slipped into the deep shadows next to the warehouse. All during that March day in 1857 it had rained, and a large puddle lay between the tall building and the steamboat.

Trying to catch even one small movement, Libby peered into the night. Soon clouds blotted out what little moon there was, making it even more difficult to see.

Just then Libby heard voices from the sitting room next door. Her father was there, and her aunt. Libby strained to hear.

“She’s thirteen now. She needs a change in her life.” That was Pa, and Libby knew he was talking about her. But the rest of his words faded away.

Without making a sound, Libby slipped over to another window. There she was closer to the wall between her bedroom and the sitting room.

“Somehow that girl always manages to attract trouble!” That was Auntie Vi speaking.

Libby pressed her ear against the wall. At the same time she stared down at the warehouse. Not one movement gave away the three men.

Then from somewhere in the night a dog barked. In the next instant the men leaped from the shadows. Breaking into a run, they headed straight for the large puddle between them and the *Christina*. Long boards lay across the puddle, but the men sloshed through the water with bare feet.

In the same moment a boy raced across the *Christina*’s deck. When he reached the oil lantern, he blew out the flame. Sudden darkness hid the men.

Libby raised the window and leaned forward, straining to see. What had happened to the men? She felt sure they were trying to board her father’s boat.

As Libby wondered if she should warn him, the quiet night seemed to explode. Around the hotel the streets came alive. Instead of one dog barking, there were several.

Soon Libby heard dogs enter the street just below her window. Eight or ten men ran close behind with lanterns held high. In their light Libby saw leaping dogs. Yipping with excitement, they strained at their leashes. Bloodhounds!

The dogs sniffed along the side of the warehouse, then fol-

lowed the trail to the large puddle of water. At first the lead dog sniffed his way onto the boards. Seeming to find no scent, he went back to the edge of the puddle. This time he sniffed his way around it.

On the far side, the bloodhound barked again. As the other dogs joined him, their barking set up howls from dogs all over town.

Nose to the ground, the lead dog sniffed his way toward the *Christina*. At the edge of the riverbank he stopped. Looking up at the tall, heavy man who held his leash, the dog barked.

“Hey there!” the large man shouted. “You on the *Christina*!”

As the man held up his lantern, Libby saw that something had changed. The long plank from boat to shore was no longer in place.

When no one appeared, the man shouted again. “Hey there! I know you’re on board! C’mon out!”

Around him, the dogs set up an even greater racket. Then a lantern moved slowly across the forward deck. When the person with the lantern held it up, Libby recognized the boy she had seen only minutes before.

From near the railing he called down. “Can I help you?”

“Of course you can help me! Where are the men that boarded your boat?”

“You saw men?” the boy asked.

“Where is your captain?” the large man roared.

“He’ll be back soon, sir. Would you like to wait?”

“Where’s your first mate?”

“I can’t tell you, sir.”

“Then let us board!”

“I can’t let you board, sir. Not without the captain’s permission.”

“Then run out your gangplank! We’ll tell you whether someone went aboard!”

The boy stepped backward and set down the lantern. As Libby watched, a long plank dropped down between the boat and the shore.

Once again the boy held up the lantern, but he stayed at the top of the gangplank. Strong and confident looking, he guarded the deck, as though unwilling to let anyone step past him.

With the lead dog running ahead, the pack of dogs pushed forward. Nose to the wood, he sniffed up and down the plank. Finally he returned to his owner and sat down on his haunches.

Holding up his fist, the large man shook it at the boy on board. “I don’t know what you did!”

The boy seemed undisturbed. “Maybe you should look somewhere else,” he called down.

The man’s sudden growl sounded like a dog’s. Just the same, he turned away. When the bloodhounds sniffed their way back to the warehouse, the men followed.

As they disappeared around the end of the building, Libby heard voices in the sitting room. Quickly she tiptoed across the floor and knelt down at the door between the two rooms.

“I just can’t seem to change Libby into what she should be.” That was Auntie Vi again.

Since the death of her mother four years before, Libby had lived with her aunt and uncle in a Chicago mansion. In that second week of March 1857, Libby and Auntie Vi had traveled to Burlington, Iowa, so that Libby could visit her father.

“How do you want to change her?” Captain Norstad asked.

“She can’t do *anything* right!” Auntie Vi answered. “She does like nice clothes, but—”

“She likes nice clothes, all right!” the captain agreed. “Libby told me that she didn’t like my uniform—that it’s too old-fashioned!”

“That sounds like Libby.” Her aunt sounded pleased. “She’s developed excellent taste. Whatever costs most, that’s what Libby chooses.”

“Does she now?” the captain asked. “Is that why she calls me *Faw-thur*, like some high society girl? The last time I saw Libby I was her pa.”

Trying to catch every word, Libby leaned closer. She’d have to remember to call her father Pa. In the darkness she bumped against the door. Scared by the light thud, she drew back. Had her aunt and father heard?

When they went on talking, Libby knew she was safe. Once more she put her ear to the keyhole.

“So what exactly is the problem?” Captain Norstad asked.

“Though she likes nice things, Libby acts like a tomboy. I was horrified when I caught her swimming! A proper young lady would never swim.”

“Unless her father showed her how.” Captain Norstad’s voice sounded dangerously low. “I taught Libby to swim, in case she fell off my boat.”

“But she embarrasses me in front of my friends!” Auntie Vi wailed. “I’m ready to give up on that girl!”

Give up on me? As though a knife pierced her heart, Libby felt the pain of those words. *Auntie Vi wants to give up on me?*

“Well, *I’m* not ready to give up,” the captain answered. “I’ll *never* give up on Libby!”

But Libby barely heard her father’s words. So upset that she forgot to be quiet, she again bumped against the door.

In the next instant Libby heard quick footsteps moving toward her. As she scrambled to get away, the door opened. Her father reached out and took her hand.

“We need to talk about something.” He drew her into the sitting room. “Sit down, Libby.”

“I want to stand, sir.” Whatever her punishment would be, Libby knew she couldn’t take it sitting down. “If you please, sir,” she added quickly.

Auntie Vi sat in a chair near the fireplace. In the lamp-light Libby saw her aunt’s eyes. She was not happy with the way things were going.

As though walking the deck of a steamboat, Captain Norstad took a turn around the room. Libby remembered what that meant. Her father had something important to say.

When he reached a window on the front side of the hotel, the captain paused. Holding aside the curtain, he looked down.

Did he see the men and dogs? Libby wondered as the curtain fell back over the window.

Then her father turned to her. With his black hair and captain’s uniform, he looked tall and distinguished. “Libby, I’ve made up my mind. I want you to live on the *Christina* with me.”

Libby’s heart leaped. *I’ll be with my father—my pa—again!* Never in her wildest imagination had she thought he would allow that.

But her aunt broke in. “A girl Libby’s age without her mother on a riverboat? That’s unthinkable!”

“Is it?” Captain Norstad asked. “Libby and I barely know each other anymore. I want to be part of her life, to help her grow up. I get lonesome for her.”

Pa is lonesome for me? Libby felt glad. More than once since the death of her mother, she had cried herself to sleep. She had felt lonely for both parents.

“It’s not safe for Libby to live on your boat!” Auntie Vi exclaimed.

“It wasn’t safe when she was eight or nine, but Libby is thirteen now. I’ll get her a dog.”

“A dog?” Libby asked, startled. She wasn’t sure about that. She’d seen a lot of dogs running around the streets of Chicago. Dogs that were dirty and mean and got into fights. “Are you sure I need a dog?”

“He’ll protect you.”

Suddenly Libby remembered something else. “I don’t have enough clothes along. How can I possibly live with only one trunkful?”

“You’ll manage!” Pa’s voice was gruff now, and Libby knew that no one would change his mind. For good or bad, she would live on the *Christina*.

Like a giant wave, the idea washed over her. Libby felt excited, but also scared. Often she’d heard people talk about the dangerous things that happened to steamboats. They exploded or caught fire. They struck the hidden roots of old trees and sank within minutes. Gamblers traveled on the boats—and thieves.

Whenever she heard those stories, Libby had worried

about her father. Now, living on the *Christina*, she would share that danger.

Then she remembered her aunt's words—words that hurt all the way through. Standing tall, Libby faced her father. "If I live on the *Christina*, I want a never-give-up family."

"What do you mean, Libby?" he asked.

Libby looked straight into his eyes. "I want a family that believes in me, even when I'm not perfect."

A sob rose in her throat, but Libby kept on. "A family that sticks together, even though it's hard."

Tears welled up in her eyes. Unwilling to have her aunt see her cry, Libby tried to blink back her tears. Instead they spilled over.

"That's the kind of family I want too," Pa said softly. "We can be that family for each other."

"With just two people?"

Pa nodded. "If we don't give up on each other."

Libby found it hard to believe. "You might not like how I act."

"You might not like what I ask you to do," Pa answered.

"But we can practice," Libby said.

"We'll practice hard." Her father had a twinkle in his eye. "Caleb and the other people who work on the *Christina* will be our larger family."

Captain Norstad glanced toward Auntie Vi. "I need to leave Burlington tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Libby asked. This time her scared feelings went right down to her toes. *What will my new life be like?*

≈ CHAPTER 2 ≈

The Mysterious Boxes



The next morning, standing outside the hotel where she and Auntie Vi had spent the night, Libby felt a tingle of excitement. *I'm beginning my new life! I wonder what adventures I'll have!*

Of all the steamboats at the landing, her father's paddleboat seemed the most beautiful. Even now, smoke billowed from the tall stacks. In the sunlight the railings and pilothouse shone.

Then Auntie Vi joined Libby, and they started down the street to the river. Libby studied the name on the wooden housing of the great side paddlewheel.

"Christina for my ma," she said. The four-deck-high steamboat was a proud reminder of the mother Libby still loved with all her heart.

"Christina was a red-haired beauty," Auntie Vi answered. She and Libby's mother had been sisters. "Deep red hair with gold highlights—the same color as yours. Same brown eyes too. Men for miles around wanted to marry her—"

"I know, I know," Libby broke in. She had heard the story at least a hundred times.

"Your mother could have married any wealthy man she chose," Auntie went on. "Why she picked your father I'll never know!"

Libby searched the sky behind the *Christina*. She felt as if a cloud had passed over the sun. To her surprise it still shone.

“Ma married Pa because she loved him.” Libby’s voice sounded sharp, even to her own ears. “And I love him too!”

“Love never pays the bills,” her aunt answered, as she always did. “If you find living on the boat too hard, your Uncle Alex and I will welcome you home.”

Libby didn’t want to think about returning to her aunt’s. Not now, anyway, when she looked forward to her new life. Instead, Libby remembered her aunt’s hurtful words. *She thinks I’m not worth anything. Maybe she’s right.*

Trying to push aside her nervousness, Libby slipped her hand between the folds of her full skirt. The white cloth of her new dress felt soft to her touch. With a toss of her head Libby set her face toward the *Christina*.

This is the first day of my new life! I won’t let anyone spoil it!

Picking up her pace, Libby walked as fast as she dared. In one more hour her aunt would go back to Chicago. *I only need to get through the next hour.*

Just then Libby hiccuped.

“Child!” her aunt exclaimed. “How can you get hiccups at a time like this?”

“I don’t know.” Libby wished she could push aside her nervousness. Not since she was nine years old had she been on a steamboat. In the midst of her next hiccup Libby swallowed hard.

Her aunt glared at her. “Breathe deep, and they’ll stop.”

As they reached the landing, Libby took a deep breath. Her father waited at the top of the gangplank, looking tall and handsome. Two men dressed in black suits, stiff white shirts, and bow ties stood next to him.

Auntie Vi stopped Libby. "Remember now," she said. "I've brought you up to be a proper young lady."

"Yes, Auntie." Libby hiccuped. "I'll do my best."

"Hold your breath!" her aunt exclaimed.

All the way up the gangplank Libby held her breath. At the top her father stretched out his hand.

"Welcome aboard, Libby!" He put his arm around her. "I'm glad we'll be together again."

Captain Norstad turned to the officers next to him. "This is the very special daughter I've been telling you about."

Libby tried to smile, but she needed to breathe. "I'm glad to meet you," she said quickly. Her words ended in a loud hiccup.

Libby clapped her hands over her mouth. She wanted to run and hide. "I'm sorry," she apologized. Again she held her breath, this time so long that she felt like fainting. *How can I embarrass my father so?*

"Libby, stop it!" her aunt commanded. But Libby gasped with another great hiccup.

"We'll get you a glass of water." Captain Norstad sounded as if it wasn't at all unusual to have his family hiccup in front of his officers. "This is Mr. Osborne, the *Christina's* chief engineer."

Afraid to open her mouth, Libby nodded.

"And Mr. Bates, my first mate."

Mr. Bates was almost as tall as her father. When Libby hiccuped yet again, he pressed his thin lips together in a frown. It wasn't hard to tell what he thought of her.

By now a mask had settled over Auntie's face. From long experience Libby knew that she had shamed her aunt. But Captain Norstad didn't seem to notice.

"I'll show you Libby's room," he told Auntie Vi, as though nothing had happened. "You'll feel better if you see how I plan to take care of her."

He led them toward the wide stairs at the front of the steamboat. Libby hurried after him. The sooner they finished this, the quicker Auntie would be on her way.

The second level, or boiler deck, was above the large boilers that heated water and created steam to run the boat. Here Captain Norstad led Libby and her aunt through a large door.

A long, narrow room—the main cabin—stretched from one end of the boat to another. Waiters in white coats moved about, setting the tables for lunch. Her father asked one of the men for a glass of water for Libby. As though she hadn't had a sip in months, Libby swallowed the water in one gulp.

Outside the cabin again, Captain Norstad led them up another stairway. When they reached the hurricane deck, Libby walked over to the Burlington side of the boat. Directly below lay the landing. Beyond that was the warehouse where the three men had crept last night.

Again Libby wondered if her father had seen the running men and sniffing dogs. If he had, he gave no sign.

Just then Libby noticed that her aunt was out of breath. "Pa," she said quickly. "Auntie looks white."

Though Vi gasped for air, she held up her hand. "I'm fine—just fine."

From inside her sleeve, Auntie Vi pulled a lace handkerchief. As though using her last ounce of strength, she blotted her perspiring forehead.

But Libby knew what was wrong. To look thin and fashion-

able, Auntie laced her undergarments so tight that she couldn't breathe.

When Captain Norstad offered his arm, Auntie Vi took it. Walking slowly, he led her up the few steps to the texas deck. Named after the state recently added to the Union, the boxlike structure held rooms for some of the crew.

Captain Norstad had the best place of all—an apartment at the front of the texas. From the windows on the front and two sides of the boat, he could see everything that went on.

Above this room was the pilothouse, but Libby knew her father wouldn't take Auntie Vi up another flight of steps. Instead, he led her and Libby to the stateroom behind his.

As Captain Norstad opened the door, Mr. Bates hurried out. In both arms he carried clothes and blankets. As he glanced toward Libby, he scowled.

Strange, Libby thought. *I just met him, but he doesn't like me. I wonder why.*

Moments later she found out.

"I gave you the first mate's room," her father said. "I want you next to me."

So I get the second-best room on the boat, Libby told herself and felt glad.

After one peek through the window of Libby's room, her aunt turned away. In spite of the coolness of the March day, she glanced up at the sun.

"Why don't you look around?" Captain Norstad told Libby. "I'll take Vi down to the main deck."

By now Auntie's face had changed from white to red. Bringing out a small fan, she waved it back and forth.

Grateful to be alone, Libby walked into her stateroom.

About seven or eight feet wide and six feet long, it had one bed and a few coat hooks. Beneath a mirror, a small stand held a basin, a water pitcher, and a chamber pot.

From this place I'll see the world! Libby's excitement returned.

But as Libby turned around, her full skirt filled the entire area between her bed and the washstand. Where will I put my trunk? she wondered.

In Chicago Libby had lived in a mansion. Here, two doors led out of the tiny room, one on either side of the boat. Between those doors, the walls seemed to close in on Libby. *I could fit three of these rooms into my big room. And Auntie Vi always gave me whatever I wanted!*

Feeling she couldn't handle the small, narrow space, Libby rushed out. Like a chipmunk running for cover, she scurried into her father's cabin. Just looking at the larger room where he lived and worked made her feel better. At least she could turn around without her skirt touching something!

For a few minutes she stood there, drawing deep breaths. Not for anything would Libby admit how scared she felt. Scared of leaving her beautiful belongings in Chicago. Scared of all the changes in her life. Scared, most of all, by one thought. *People say it's really dangerous living on a steamboat!*

A short blast of the whistle broke into her thoughts. The signal for leaving Burlington! Libby yanked open the door.

When she hurried outside, she crashed into a boy. As a pail flew from his hand, water covered Libby from head to foot.

In horror she looked down. Dirty streaks of water covered her new white dress. More water dripped from her face.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?" she sputtered.

"Why don't *you* watch where *you're* going?" The boy's

blond hair fell over his forehead. Libby guessed that they were almost the same age.

Now his blue eyes glared at her. “What are you doing, snooping around here, anyway? That’s the captain’s room—off limits if you aren’t invited!”

Libby straightened. She was almost the same height as this good-looking boy. “I have a perfect right to be here,” she answered proudly. “I am Libby Norstad, the captain’s daughter.”

The boy stepped back in surprise. A red flush spread across his face.

Lifting her head, Libby tossed her long curls. “And who are you?”

“Caleb Whitney,” he told her. “Your father’s cabin boy.” He spoke politely, but the anger did not leave his eyes. “I beg your pardon,” he added, as though knowing he had no choice.

“I should hope so.” With all the dignity Libby could manage, she started away. But suddenly she hiccuped.

When Caleb snickered, Libby felt even more embarrassed. Then she knew what to do. Her head still high, she turned around. “I’ll speak to my father about you.”

Caleb’s grin faded. Standing with shoulders back, he answered, “Yes, miss.” But his voice didn’t sound as polite as his words.

Afraid she would hiccup again, Libby turned away and swept down the steps. Not until she reached the boiler deck did she remember.

With a shock she realized who the boy was. Last night she had seen him twice—both times on the main deck of the *Christina*.

Again she wondered what had happened to the men she

saw. "I'll ask Caleb," Libby decided. "He works for Pa. He'll have to tell me."

By the time she reached the main deck, the *Christina* had left Burlington. Libby found her father and aunt standing at the bow of the boat. Already the strip of water between boat and land had grown wide.

"Libby!" her aunt exclaimed. "Whatever happened to you?"

"I bumped into—" Libby started to put the blame on Caleb. Then she saw that her father was listening. His lips twitched, as if he wanted to laugh.

Libby didn't know what to do. *If I tell on Caleb, will he tell me about last night?*

In that instant she changed her words. "I came to say good-bye," Libby said instead.

Across the river from Burlington, Iowa, lay Gulfport, Illinois. As the *Christina* nosed into the landing, Libby saw railroad tracks and a waiting train.

"Don't forget," Auntie Vi told Libby. "You always have a home with us."

"I know," Libby answered softly. "Thanks for all you've done for me." As she leaned forward to kiss her aunt's cheek, Libby felt surprised at how hard it was to say goodbye. *Just because I'm scared! Just because Auntie's house seems so safe!*

Again the strange world along the Mississippi River seemed frightening. Yet Libby put on her best smile. Not for anything would she let Auntie know she had second thoughts about living on a steamboat.

Captain Norstad led Auntie Vi toward the train. From the bow of the *Christina*, Libby waved as if she didn't have a care in the world.

When the passengers had cleared the gangplank, deckhands started carrying barrels and crates. Two men slid a large wooden box across the deck. With each man taking a side, they picked up the box and carried it down the gangplank. As they set it in a wagon on the landing, the boy Libby had met came down the steps.

By the time the deckhands returned to the boat, Caleb had taken up a post near the gangplank. Slender and self-assured, he wore the white coat and black trousers of a cabin boy.

“Careful, careful,” he told the men as they picked up a second large box.

This one also seemed heavy. But it was Caleb who made Libby curious. Why was a cabin boy watching over the loading of freight?

In no time at all, the men had loaded the second box onto the wagon. As they slid a third box across the deck, the morning sun slanted against one side. The sun’s rays lit a large knot-hole in the wood.

Suddenly Libby grew watchful. *Did something move inside that box? Or was it my imagination?*

Again Caleb guided the deckhands. Whatever the box held, it was both heavy and valuable.

When the men drew close to the railing, they picked up the box. With the weight balanced between them, one man backed toward the gangplank. Suddenly he stumbled over a small barrel.

Losing his grip, he tumbled backward. As the box crashed to the deck, Libby heard a groan.

Wanting to see more, she hurried forward. Just as quickly, Caleb stepped between her and the box.