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≈ CHAPTER 1 ≈

Darker than Night



A lantern hung near the gangplank, casting a glow over the *Christina's* deck. Libby Norstad's deep brown eyes sparkled in its light. "We got away!" she whispered to Caleb. "We really got away!"

To Libby it seemed a miracle. For the past two days and nights, they had faced constant danger.

Caleb Whitney's blond hair fell over his forehead, nearly reaching his eyes. He grinned at Libby, then glanced up at the hills of Burlington, Iowa. The steamboat owned by Libby's father lay at the landing. While deckhands brought in the gangplank, Caleb kept watch.

Now, late at night, the streets looked empty, yet Libby knew that Caleb was searching for someone. Near the riverfront, the windows of tall warehouses seemed like dark eyes staring down at them.

With three quick blasts of the whistle, the *Christina* put out into the Mississippi River. As the strip of water between the land and boat grew wide, Libby felt relieved. In spite of all kinds of danger, they had escaped!

Just then Libby felt a movement behind her. As she turned, she saw Jordan Parker creeping forward without a sound.

When he drew close to the lantern, he stopped, as if afraid to enter the circle of light.

A fugitive slave, Jordan had managed to get away from his master, a cruel slave trader named Riggs. Like Caleb, Jordan also stared up at the city. On the streets above them no one stirred. Then a dark shape stepped out from the shadow of a warehouse.

Jordan moaned. "It's Riggs!"

With one quick movement, Caleb lifted the glass of the lantern and blew out the flame. Libby dropped down on her hands and knees, but it was too late.

"Riggs knows," she whispered as Caleb joined her behind piles of freight. "He saw you."

"He saw you too," Caleb warned, his voice low.

A feeling of dread tightened Libby's stomach. "What should we do?"

Caleb shushed her. "Sound carries on water."

A short distance out from shore, the *Christina* started to turn. As her bow swung around to face downstream, Libby stared at the man next to the warehouse. Then the center of the boat blocked her view.

"How long was Riggs there?" she whispered. "How much did he see?"

"Too much," Caleb told her. At fourteen, almost fifteen, he was nearly a year older than Libby. Now Caleb led her and Jordan to a place at the front of the boat where no one could hear them talk.

When the boys dropped down on crates, Libby found a nail keg to sit on. "You're sure it was Riggs?" she asked. It had been too dark to see the man's face, and she wanted to believe

they were wrong. According to Caleb, Riggs was the cruelest man he knew.

“It were Riggs, all right.” Jordan’s voice held no doubt. “He gots one shape—and I knows it!”

“But he could have stayed hidden,” Libby answered. “Why did he step out so we could see him?”

“That man *wants* us to know he’s on our trail,” Jordan said. “He wants to scare us any way he can.”

In the darkness Libby shivered. As long as the slave trader searched for him, Jordan would never be safe. Libby didn’t like being frightened by the sight of Riggs, but deep inside she trembled just thinking about him.

Then she remembered. “Jordan, you weren’t in the light. Maybe Riggs doesn’t know that you’re with us.”

Jordan sighed. “I wish you was right, Libby. That man Riggs is like a bloodhound on my trail. When he sniffs out Caleb, he sniffs out me.”

Since the age of nine, Caleb had worked on the Underground Railroad, the secret plan to help runaway slaves reach freedom. Once fugitives started on that route, they usually kept moving if it was safe. Instead, for special reasons Jordan would stay on the *Christina*.

“What’s wrong?” Caleb asked Libby, as though sensing her worry.

“N-n-nothing!” Libby hated the sound of her voice. “Nothing at all!” If she told Caleb what bothered her, he would think she was a scaredy-cat. Instead, Libby tried to push her fear away. *I want to have courage*, she thought. *Courage like Caleb and Jordan*.

On that March night in 1857, Libby knew the penalty for

someone who helped runaway slaves on their race to freedom. Because of fugitive slave laws, slave hunters could follow fugitives into the Northwest Territory and free states. There they could gather a posse and bring runaways back to their owners.

Leaning closer, Caleb peered into Libby's face. When she tried to hide her feelings, the light of the moon gave her away. "You're scared," Caleb said. "You're scared that Riggs will come on board and find Jordan."

"Well, doesn't that frighten you?" Libby asked.

"Nope," Caleb answered.

"What do you mean, *nope*? Pa is captain of this boat and owner too. Don't you care that he could be arrested for hiding a runaway slave?"

"Of course I care!"

"You don't sound like it!" Libby felt upset now. "You know what would happen if Riggs found Jordan on the *Christina*. It's the law of the land that Pa could be found guilty for hiding a fugitive. He'd have to pay a big fine!"

"Is that all you're worried about?" Caleb asked. "The fines? The money?"

Libby stared at him. "What if Pa can't pay the fines? He would lose the *Christina*!"

"Yup! He would." Caleb didn't sound too upset.

"What's worse, Pa could go to jail! Wouldn't you be scared if the captain were your father?"

Caleb sat with his back to the moon. Darkness shadowed his face, but Libby saw the shake of his head. "There's something that bothers me a whole lot more," he said.

"What's that?" Libby asked. More than once she had found it hard to understand this strange boy. "What could be

worse than Pa going to jail?”

Before Caleb could answer, Jordan leaped up. “Don’t you worry none,” he told Libby. “First stop we make, I leaves the boat.”

“No!” Caleb exclaimed. “Don’t listen to Libby! You can’t leave now!”

“Yes, I can. I ain’t goin’ to hurt Libby’s Pa.”

“That’s true,” Caleb answered. “You aren’t going to hurt Captain Norstad.”

“But you heard Libby.”

“Yup, I heard.” Caleb sounded angry. “And I won’t let you hurt her pa. I’ll keep hiding you for as long as you need to be hid.”

Jordan shook his head. “I was wrong to ask Captain Norstad if I could stay.”

“He gave his permission,” Caleb answered. “Remember?”

“I remembers. And he gave me a job.” Jordan’s shoulders shifted as though the idea of working for pay gave him pleasure.

“Don’t forget the reason Captain Norstad said you could stay.”

Jordan straightened. “Cause I wants to find my daddy. I wants to be my momma’s hands. Momma is mighty strong. But if she runs away, she ain’t got enough hands for my sisters and my brother.”

In the moonlight Jordan stood sure and tall. “Momma don’t know if I is dead or alive. She be moanin’ and weepin’ for me, and here I is—free as a bird from a cage!”

For the first time since seeing Riggs, Jordan’s gaze met Caleb’s. “When I leaves this boat, I is goin’ to the place where Momma lives. I is goin’ to help my momma and my sisters and

my brother escape!”

“You want to go there *now*?” Caleb stared at Jordan. “You can’t do that! On every tree and building, there are posters about you! Every slave catcher on earth wants to collect that big reward!”

But Jordan was wearing his proud look—the look that reminded Libby of royalty. With his head high, he spoke. “When I was just a little boy, my momma told me, ‘Jordan, you is goin’ to lead your people to the Promised Land. You is goin’ to take them to *freedom*!’”

“That’s right,” Caleb answered. “You *will* lead your people to freedom! But if you try now, you’ll lose *your* freedom.”

When Jordan blinked, Caleb rushed on. “Have you got a plan figured out? Do you know a way to disguise who you are?”

Jordan shook his head.

“Do you know how to get to where your mother is?”

Again Jordan shook his head. “I ain’t never seen where Momma lives now. When I gits there, I’ll know what to do.”

“Then let’s think of a way you can get there without being caught,” Caleb said.

Looking as though he didn’t want to listen, Jordan dropped back down on a crate. “We gots to figure out that plan real soon,” he said. “I ain’t goin’ to wait for something more to happen to Momma.”

As if Libby were no longer there, Caleb leaned forward, speaking to Jordan. “I want to help you find every member of your family. You tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.”

“I tell *you* what to do?” Again Jordan leaped to his feet. This time his eyes blazed. “You is foolin’ me, sure enough! There ain’t no slave boy that tells a white boy what to do!”

“I know what to do if I find a runaway slave,” Caleb said. “I know how to hide a fugitive who comes near the *Christina*. What you need to do will be a whole lot harder.”

Standing as still as a stone, Jordan seemed to consider Caleb’s words. Finally he turned. “You thinks I can lead my people to freedom?”

Caleb’s gaze held steady. “I *know* you can lead your people to freedom. If you’d like my help, you’ve got it.” As though wanting to shake on it, Caleb offered his hand.

Jordan stared down at Caleb’s hand, then looked up. “You *really* wants to help me?” he asked.

“I really want to help you,” Caleb said.

As if he had never before touched a white boy’s hand, Jordan hesitated. Then, seeming to make up his mind, he stretched out his own hand. Halfway between the two boys, their hands met.

Jordan grinned. “I hope you knows what you is doing.”

“First, we keep you safe,” Caleb promised. “Then we figure out a way to get to your family.”

In that moment Libby felt scared right down to her toes. Something important had been decided. Something that would change Jordan’s life, but also Caleb’s and hers. Even the thought of what might happen frightened Libby.

I wish I had their courage, she told herself again. Then she remembered the man on the Burlington street. It had been too dark to see the evil lines in his face. Yet a shiver of fear ran through Libby—a shiver so strong that she trembled.

With all her heart, she wanted Jordan’s mother and sisters and brother to reach freedom. With all her heart, she wanted Jordan to find the father who had been sold away from the

family. But Libby knew how dangerous it would be.

One idea haunted her. *How can we hide from Riggs wherever we go?*

As if knowing her thoughts, Caleb spoke. “We can be sure of one thing. Riggs will do everything he can to stop us. Wherever we are, he won’t be far behind!”

~ CHAPTER 2 ~

More Mystery



In spite of her fear, Libby remembered: Helping fugitive slaves was something she believed in. Before she could change her mind, Libby spoke up. “I want to help.”

“No!” Caleb’s answer sounded like an explosion.

Libby tossed her long hair. “I want to be a conductor on the Underground Railroad! I want to help runaway slaves reach freedom.”

“And I said *no*. You’re not getting into it!”

“You let me help the last time,” Libby pleaded. “I did what you wanted, and you know it!”

Caleb paid no attention. “We let you help because we didn’t have any choice. Just because you did something once doesn’t mean you’ll do it again!”

But Libby would not back down. “You think I’m a scaredy-cat, Caleb Whitney. I’m not! I’ll do what you tell me.”

“Good.” Caleb stood up. “Right now I’m telling you to keep out of Jordan’s business and keep out of mine. Then we’ll get along just fine.” Without another word he started away.

“Caleb?” Libby called after him, forgetting that someone might hear. “What could be worse than Pa going to jail?”

Caleb kept going. "C'mon, Jordan," he said.

"You tell me, Caleb Whitney!"

No answer came from the darkness. Already they were gone.

I'll show them! Libby told herself. With quick tugs she pulled off her shoes. Walking on silent cat feet, she hurried after the boys.

In the moonlight she watched them find a pathway between the freight and passengers crowding the main deck. At the door of the engine room, Caleb looked around.

Quickly Libby stepped back into a shadow. After a moment she peered out. Both boys were gone.

They're in the engine room, Libby thought, once again following without a sound. When she reached the door, she opened it quietly and stepped inside.

Off in the corner, a lantern glowed. Libby walked toward the light. Halfway across the room, she heard something behind her.

Stepping aside, she ducked into a hollow between machinery. For three or four minutes, she waited and saw no movement. At last she moved on again.

Suddenly a voice leaped out of the darkness. "Looking for something?"

Filled with terror, Libby yelled. "Caleb Whitney!"

Libby's heart pounded with fright. Turning around, she fled. As she passed out of the engine room, she slammed the door and raced for the stairway at the front of the boat.

The *Christina* was four decks high. From the main deck, Libby flew up a flight of stairs to the boiler deck, then up another stairway to the hurricane deck. From there it was only a few more steps to the texas deck and Libby's own room.

Standing outside the door, she drew a deep breath. “Caleb Whitney, how could you?” she exclaimed. “Just because you’re Pa’s cabin boy! Just because Pa trusts you more than most people! How can you be so mean?”

Libby drew a deep breath. “I will *never* follow you again!”

In that moment Libby realized she was talking out loud. She also understood something else. *That’s probably exactly what Caleb wants! That I don’t follow him!*

Lifting her head, Libby tossed her long hair again. *I’ll show him! Caleb is not going to scare me off!*

From the darkness Libby heard a soft woof. Ignoring Samson, her big Newfoundland dog, she took the stairs to the pilothouse two at a time. Samson followed close behind.

While a young girl, Libby had often visited this small room at the top of the steamboat. Then her mother died, and Libby had stayed with her aunt in Chicago during four long years. Only a few weeks ago, Libby had come to live with her father on the *Christina*.

As she opened the door to the pilothouse, Samson squeezed his way through. The pilot stood with his back to Libby at one side of the great wheel he used to steer the boat. Because of its size, part of the wheel went down through the floor.

Turning toward Libby, Mr. Fletcher lifted his hand in greeting. As he looked back to the river, Libby moved forward. Standing out of the way, she gazed down beyond the bow of the steamboat.

Ahead of them the great Mississippi River spread wide on both sides of the *Christina*. Libby breathed deeply and let the excitement she always felt flow into her. All her feeling for the river seemed to center here in the pilothouse.

For as long as Libby could remember, she had loved the mighty waters, the shape of trees along the shore, the islands midstream. Always she had liked to travel, to see new places and things. On the river there was always something exciting around every bend.

Yet Libby's fears also centered here in the pilothouse. Steamboats exploded, caught fire, struck the hidden roots of old trees, and sank within minutes. Whenever Libby heard about a steamboat accident, she felt unwilling to face the idea that something could hurt Pa. *No!* she told herself. *Nothing will happen to him!*

In spite of that fear, Libby liked being with her father on the *Christina*. She had pushed her worries aside, believing that Pa could keep her safe. Having Jordan on board would bring a new kind of danger.

Riggs will know where we are! Libby remembered again. *All he has to do is find the Christina going upriver or down. And sooner or later, we'll come into St. Louis where Riggs lives.*

Libby's stomach tightened into an uneasy knot. *When I know what Riggs might do, how can I possibly have courage?*

As though sensing Libby's thoughts, Samson pushed close. His wagging tail thumped against her leg. Bending down, Libby ran her fingers through his coat of long, black hair. When Samson's tongue reached out to lick her hand, Libby dropped to her knees and threw her arms around his neck.

When Libby stood up again, she felt strangely comforted. Yet the knot in her stomach was still there.



The next morning Libby entered the captain's cabin at the front of the texas deck. Each weekday she and Caleb met there

for their school lessons. On one side of the room was Pa's bed. The rest of the cabin served as a sitting room and place to bring guests.

Libby's father sat in his large rocking chair. On the floor next to him lay a pile of newspapers. Bold letters across the top page told Libby he was reading the *Daily Hawkeye & Telegraph*. He must have picked up the papers in Burlington.

"Hi, Pa," Libby said.

His long arm reached out, circling her waist. Yet to Libby's surprise, Pa's gaze never left the newspaper.

"Are you reading about Lake Pepin?" she asked.

Each spring steamboat captains waited eagerly for the ice to move out of the lake and the opening of riverboat traffic to St. Paul. That meant an exciting race between steamboats.

Captain Norstad shook his head. Still without looking up, he said, "Just catching up on the news."

Standing beside him, Libby watched her father. Even sitting down, he looked tall and slender. Except for the touch of white above his ears, his black hair was as dark as his captain's uniform. As he held up the newspaper, one of his hands trembled.

"What is it, Pa?" Libby asked.

When Captain Norstad put down the paper, he looked up at her. Tears stood in the dark brown eyes that were so much like Libby's.

Fear tightened her throat. "What's wrong, Pa?" Not since her mother died had she seen her father so upset.

Just then Caleb entered the room. After one look at the captain, he sat down at the table without speaking.

Captain Norstad pushed back his chair and stood up. "How could they?" he asked. His tears were gone now, replaced

by anger. “How could the Supreme Court of the United States make such a decision?”

Pa waved a hand at the newspapers on the floor. “There are several articles about the Dred Scott decision. But look at this one!” He slid a paper across the table. “It explains how I feel.”

Filled with curiosity, Libby looked over Caleb’s shoulder, but she didn’t understand what the articles said. “What are they talking about?” she asked finally.

Captain Norstad explained. “Dred Scott is a slave who has lived in a free state and a free territory. Based on that, he asked for his freedom. The Supreme Court ruled that because he’s a slave, Dred Scott is not a citizen of the United States. According to them, he has never been free because he’s personal property.”

Captain Norstad shook his head in disbelief. When he sat down again, he showed Caleb the place where he had marked each newspaper. “We need to study all of this,” he said. “A lot of people are going to be upset about this ruling. It could lead our country to war.”

“To *war*?” Libby asked. War was even more frightful than her other fears. “How could America go to war?”

Just then Libby heard a soft thump outside the cabin. As she glanced toward a window, she wondered if she saw a quick movement. If someone had been there, he was already gone.

Maybe I imagined it, Libby thought and turned her attention back to Pa. With Libby and Caleb sitting at the large table, Captain Norstad began teaching the day’s lessons. Libby tried to keep her mind on what he said. Yet she saw when Jordan looked through the window in the upper half of the door. So did Pa.

“Come in,” he called.

With a captain's uniform over one arm, Jordan walked to a closet and hung up the jacket. Instead of leaving again, he found a broom and started to sweep. Often he turned his head as though listening to what the captain said.

Libby wondered about it. Both Jordan and Caleb worked as cabin boys. Had Jordan come in now because he wanted to know what was going on?

"I have a number of short trips delivering freight in Iowa and Illinois," the captain told Libby and Caleb as he gave them their assignment for the next day. "We'll go up and down this part of the river for a few weeks before returning to St. Louis. When we get there, I want you to visit the courtroom where Dred Scott made his first try for freedom."

When Captain Norstad went out, Libby and Caleb stayed to study. In the midst of her reading, Libby looked up. Still holding his broom, Jordan leaned over the table, looking down at the newspaper. From there he moved on to Pa's large map of the Mississippi River. With one finger Jordan traced the river downstream.

Soon Libby realized that Caleb was also watching Jordan. "Want to see where we are?" Caleb asked.

When Jordan nodded, Caleb turned the map to give him a better look. "Here's Burlington, Iowa, where we were last night. During the night, we passed Keokuk and Fort Madison, Iowa. In a few minutes, we'll come to Quincy on the Illinois side of the river."

Caleb's finger pointed to the opposite bank. "After that we'll stop at Hannibal, Missouri."

Jordan's gaze followed Caleb's finger as it moved on down to St. Louis. Finally Jordan grinned. "Now I wants to show you something."

Without another word, Caleb followed Jordan out of the cabin. When the door closed behind them, Libby leaped from her chair. Outside, the boys clattered down the stairs to the deck below. Libby waited as long as she dared, then followed them.

Soon Caleb and Jordan disappeared on what was called the boiler deck because it was just above the boilers. Looking this way and that, Libby tried to catch sight of the boys. *I've lost them!* she thought frantically.

Not knowing what else to do, she hurried toward the bow and down the steps to the main deck. There Libby caught sight of Caleb rounding a corner.

They're headed for the engine room again! Libby hurried after them. *What's going on there?*

Unwilling to be caught a second time, she passed into the cargo area at the center of the boat. From there, she entered the engine room by a different door.

Ahead of Libby lay one of the large boilers that heated water and created steam to run the *Christina*. Yet Libby saw only the men who usually worked there. *Strange*, she thought. *I was only a minute behind Caleb and Jordan.*

Wasting no time, Libby walked through the engine room to the other door. When she found it tightly closed, she felt confused. The room was noisy, yet she had heard no opening or closing of doors. *I'm sure that Caleb and Jordan came in here. Where did they go?*

Puzzled, Libby tried to think it through. *How did they manage to hide from me?*