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~ CHAPTER 1 ~

Clink, Clank!



The moment the whistle sounded, Libby Norstad felt the excitement. From a deck high on the *Christina*, she stared upstream. *Adventure! That's what this is. Living on Pa's steamboat is an adventure! Every boy and girl I know would like to be where I am.*

As if something special were about to happen, Libby wished she could tell the boat to hurry. Then she remembered. Danger had chased them up the Mississippi River to Minnesota Territory. In the darkness of night they had slipped away from St. Paul. Was that same danger following them even now?

While the sun rose above the eastern bluffs, Libby's excitement changed to uneasiness. "When does adventure become trouble?" she asked her friend Caleb Whitney as he joined her at the railing.

Caleb snapped his fingers. "Just that quick!" he said.

At fourteen, almost fifteen, Caleb was a year older than Libby, but only an inch taller. His blond hair fell down over his forehead, nearly reaching his eyes. "Stillwater is next," he said. "You'll like it there."

Just then the *Christina's* whistle sounded again. Long and deep, the call broke the quiet of early morning. From shore a

man's big voice sang out, "Steamboat a-comin'!"

As the village of Stillwater came alive, people of all sizes and ages rushed toward the river. Boys and girls raced for a spot with the best view. Not far behind came mothers and fathers with younger children and babies in their arms. Everyone seemed to have one thought—reaching the riverfront before the steamboat tied up.

Soon only a narrow strip of water lay between the *Christina* and shore. As the crowd grew even larger, those in the back kept moving around, trying to see everything.

When a young boy called out from shore, Libby and Caleb waved to him. Soon the boy shouted a question. "Do you live on the boat?"

Caleb grinned down at him, enjoying the child's curiosity. "I'm a cabin boy," he shouted back. "Libby's father is the captain."

"Where did you come from?" a girl called.

"All the way from St. Louis. It's spring there. How come you don't have spring here?"

The grown-ups in the crowd laughed. Though it was the second week in May, 1857, the air was still cold. Everyone knew that Minnesota Territory had just come through one of the worst winters in its history.

"What's your cargo?" a man shouted.

"Cookstoves, sewing machines, and cloth for your ladies to make dresses," Caleb told them. "Axes, saws, and plows for you."

"And candy?" a small boy asked.

"Yup. Just the kind of candy you'll like."

As deckhands threw out the lines, eager people caught and

held them. When the gangplank went down, the deckhands raced to tie the ropes to posts on shore.

Just then Libby heard the clip-clop of horses coming closer and closer. Soon a team and wagon swung around a building near the waterfront. A tall blond boy sat on the high seat of the wagon. As his horses reached an open area, he called out, "Whoa!" Standing up, he leaped to the ground and tied a lead rope to the hitching rail.

When the boy reached the back of the crowd, he raised both arms and waved. "Hey, Caleb!" he shouted. "Over here!"

In the next moment Caleb spotted him. "Hi Nate! Wait for me! I'll be right down!"

Caleb turned to Libby. "I met Nate the last time I was in Stillwater. Want to come with us? He'll take us around."

Without waiting for Libby's answer, Caleb headed for the stairs. "Help me find Jordan so he can go too."

"Caleb?" Libby asked as she followed him down a flight of steps to the deck below. "Is it safe for Jordan to be seen in Stillwater?"

Only a short time before, Jordan Parker had run away from his master, a cruel slave trader named Riggs. Like Caleb, Jordan now worked for Libby's father as a cabin boy. Because of all that had happened on their trip up the Mississippi River, Jordan had become known to everyone on the boat.

Caleb turned back to Libby. "He's as safe here as anywhere outside of Canada."

Libby caught Caleb's hidden meaning. "That's not very safe," she said.

"You're right." Caleb's honest gaze met hers. "We can't ever forget the fugitive slave laws. Wherever we go there might be

someone who doesn't want Jordan to have his freedom. As long as even one person feels that way, Jordan will be in danger."

After a quick search for Jordan on the boiler deck, Libby followed Caleb down another stairway. There had been more than one fugitive slave law. As part of the Compromise of 1850, Congress had strengthened the right of a slave owner to hunt down and capture fugitives, even in free northern states. Owners often hired catchers—rough, cruel men—to bring back runaway slaves.

On the main deck Caleb turned into the large open room for storing cargo. As they found their way between boxes and barrels, Libby asked, "What if the wrong person figures out that Jordan is a fugitive?"

"Shhh!" Only crew members were here, but Caleb glanced around to make sure no one was listening. "There will always be people who want the big reward offered for Jordan. But he can't spend his whole life being scared."

As Caleb passed the opening to a secret hiding place, he didn't even glance that way. "We can't let anything stop Jordan now. He's figured out a perfect plan to rescue his family."

"A safe plan?" Libby asked.

"The safest that something so dangerous can be."

"Can I go along?" Libby asked. With every part of her being she wanted to help Jordan's family escape to freedom.

"Maybe," Caleb said.

Libby's heart leaped. *Caleb said maybe*. Since the age of nine, he had worked with the Underground Railroad—the secret plan that helped slaves escape to freedom. Always before when Libby asked if she could take part in the rescue, Caleb had said no. If he said *maybe*, he might mean *yes*!

But then Caleb told her, “It’s up to Jordan whether or not you go. It’s going to be a hard trip. We can’t give away even one secret.”

Lifting her head, Libby tossed her long hair. *So! I’ll prove that I can help rescue Jordan’s family. For a start, I’ll show Caleb and Jordan that I can keep a secret.*

When Libby and Caleb passed through another door, they found Jordan in the engine room. Tall and strong, the runaway slave was fifteen or sixteen years old.

Libby, Caleb, and Jordan hurried outside and down the gangplank. Along the riverfront, people greeted one another as if they had been separated for years.

Near Libby a little girl leaped into her daddy’s arms. An older man shook hands with someone who seemed to have been gone on business. A young woman gazed up into the eyes of a handsome young man. When he smiled down at her, Libby felt the quick stab of memory. *That’s the way Pa used to look at Ma.*

Libby pushed the thought away, not wanting loneliness for her mother to spoil the sunshine of the day. During the years after her mother died, Libby lived in Chicago with her aunt. Now Libby felt glad she could be with her Pa again.

When Libby and the boys reached Nate, he stood near his wagon, waiting for them. As Caleb introduced Libby and Jordan, Nate caught Libby’s last name.

“Your pa is the captain?” he asked. “Heard your whistle way out at our farm.” He turned to Caleb. “I knew you were back again.”

“By the sound of the whistle?” Libby felt pleased.

“Yup, clear and deep. I like your bell too. It’s one of the best on the river.”

Nate couldn't possibly have said anything nicer. Always Libby had been proud of the *Christina's* bell. More than once, her father had told Libby how it was made. When the bell was being cast, its makers threw silver dollars into the bronze to give a silvery tone.

"Pa sent me to pick up the plow we ordered from the general store," Nate explained. "We've got time before it's unloaded, don't we?"

Caleb nodded. "The freight we brought from St. Louis is down in the hold."

"Want a ride to see the town?" Nate grinned. "Of all the people in Stillwater *I'm* the very best one to take you around. I'll show you the most fun places in the whole St. Croix Valley."

The *Saint Kroy* River flowed between Minnesota Territory and the state of Wisconsin. The village of Stillwater was built at the head of the widening in the river called *Lake St. Croix*.

As Nate went forward to untie the lead rope, he walked around the horses, talking to both Tom and Bob and checking their harness. Then Nate and Jordan climbed up to the only seat, and Caleb helped Libby into the back of the wagon.

Because of the large wheels, the bed of the wagon was about three feet off the ground. Instead of sitting down, Libby and Caleb stood behind Nate and Jordan to see over the high sides of the wagon.

"Giddyup!" Nate called to Tom and Bob, and the horses moved out into the road.

A short distance from the waterfront, Nate turned onto a street with tall wooden buildings.

Caleb looked up a steep hill on their left. "There's Nelson's

Grade!” he exclaimed. “That’s where you took me before. Want to go again?”

Nate shook his head. “Someone just had a bad accident there. I’ll show you the view from a better hill.”

On Main Street the dirt road was filled with mud. As the horses picked their way around large holes, the wagon jerked and bounced in the ruts. Libby grabbed the high board sides and hung on.

“Have you lived here long?” she asked Nate.

“All my life.”

“You must know these hills really well,” Libby said.

“Yup. Lots of caves in ’em. There are caves even in the bluff surrounding Battle Hollow.”

“What’s Battle Hollow?” Libby was curious.

“I’ll show you. It’s a hollowed-out place with steep rock walls. There was a big battle there between the Sioux and Chipewewa Indians. That’s where the prison for Minnesota Territory is now.”

Soon Nate turned left onto a street with a gentle rise. A block farther on, the horses turned again, and the bed of the wagon took on a sharp slant. As Tom and Bob leaned into their harness, Libby shifted her feet to keep her balance.

The road ahead was long and steep and followed the edge of a straight-up-and-down bluff. On the right side, the ground dropped sharply away with only a few large rocks between the edge of the road and the drop-off. With most of the trees cut off the hillsides, Libby had a clear view in whatever direction she looked.

The higher they went, the greater the distance between the top and the bottom of the bluff. Seventy-five? One hundred

feet? Libby wasn't sure. She only knew that she felt scared just looking down.

Again Libby braced her feet and clung to the sides of the wagon. To her relief the boards were chest high, giving more protection than usual. But none of the boys seemed to share Libby's concern. She could only hope that Caleb didn't see how frightened she felt.

I never knew that heights would bother me so much, Libby thought. I'm glad we're going up, not down. Then she remembered. What goes up must come down.

Trying to take her mind off the steep drop, Libby asked Nate about the prison.

"Built from a quarry right here in Stillwater," Nate said proudly. "Trouble is, it doesn't keep prisoners in. Just last year eight of 'em escaped."

"Eight?" Jordan asked, as if thinking about his own escape. "How did they git out?"

"It ain't hard at all," Nate said. "One prisoner pried up the floor in a hall. Another lifted a cell door from its hinges. Still another used a burglar's bar."

"Smuggled in, I bet," Caleb said.

Nate's eyes were full of laughter. "Another prisoner sawed through iron window bars. And one guy picked the locks on his chains. Someone else dug a hole through the outside wall."

"There must be something really wrong," Caleb said.

Nate grinned. "To my way of thinking the warden just lets 'em go."

"Are you serious?" Libby asked. "How could someone who is supposed to keep prisoners locked up just let them go?"

Nate shrugged. "Some of the counties don't pay money to

feed their prisoners. We even had a lady escape.”

“Aw, c’mon,” Libby said, not sure what she should believe.

Nate held up his right hand. “The whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It’s as plain as the hair on your head who those prisoners are. Just last week I saw one of them.”

“On the loose?” Libby didn’t like the idea of an escaped prisoner running around. What if one of them tried to board the *Christina*?

But Nate seemed to have no such dread. “I saw the prisoner down by the river. Half of his hair was the way it should be.”

Libby’s giggle sounded more nervous than she would like. “What do you mean—half of his hair?” She felt sure that Nate was teasing them. “You’re making things up.”

“Nothing funny about it.” Nate looked offended now. “Half of his hair looked just like mine—about the same length. The other half of his head was shaved clean.”

Libby couldn’t even imagine it.

“Not one speck of hair on that side,” Nate said. “That’s how you know who a prisoner is.”

“Do they wear uniforms?” Caleb asked.

“Wel-l-l-l—” Nate thought about it. “They all wear the same thing—gray pants, a shirt, jacket, and cap. But the best way to recognize a prisoner is by his haircut.”

Libby’s knuckles were white now from holding the top board of the wagon. The sharp drop at the edge of the bluff was so close to the wheels that it made her nervous. If she had her way about things, she would get out of the wagon and walk.

When the road finally leveled out, Libby felt relieved. At the top of the bluff Nate stopped the horses. At least he was right about one thing. There couldn’t be a better view anywhere.

Gazing upstream and down, Libby watched the sunlight dance upon the water. Here at the head of Lake St. Croix, masses of logs floated like large islands. On the far side of the lake, the sandstone bluffs of Wisconsin rose high and beautiful.

Libby caught her breath at the beauty. Far below, men hurried up and down the *Christina's* gangplank, unloading her cargo. Between the steamboat and Libby, houses clung to the steep hillside.

Like Libby, Caleb and Jordan studied the great stretch of water before them. It wasn't hard to guess what they were searching for—a steamboat that might bring news about the two-hundred-dollar reward offered for Jordan.

Moments later, as Libby feared, Caleb stretched out his arm, pointing downstream. "Steamboat a-comin'," he said.

Still far away, small plumes of black smoke rose from two tall stacks. It was a steamboat all right. Which one? And who was on board? People who had never heard of Jordan? Or his enemies?

When Caleb and Jordan looked at each other, Libby felt sure she knew what they were thinking. Only then did she realize how much she dreaded having the wrong person follow Jordan because he was a fugitive.

As Nate drove on, he stopped the horses on the bluff behind the territorial prison. Here too, the hill in front of them was stripped bare of trees. Libby looked down across the roofs of three-story high buildings that stretched away toward the river.

On the back and two sides the bluff formed a natural hollow around the prison. On Libby's left, the bluff was straight-up-and-down rock. Directly below her and the boys,

the steep hill slanted more gradually away. Between the bottom of the bluff and the buildings was a twelve-foot stone wall.

As Nate pointed toward the warden's house, a clank broke the stillness of the morning.

What is it? Libby gazed down into the hollow, trying to figure out where the sound came from. In the prison yard everything seemed to be as it had been.

Then Libby heard a second clank—the sound of metal against metal. This time she noticed a pipe railing around the top of the prison wall. Below where she stood something hung from the pipe.

Staring down, Libby decided it was a large hook. A rope hung from the hook, dropping inside the prison wall. While Libby watched, the rope stretched tight.

“Look!” she whispered to Caleb. The rope swayed now, swinging out away from the wall as if someone was climbing up. “A prisoner is trying to escape!”

In the next instant a hand reached up to where the rope showed above the wall. Another hand grasped the pipe, and a half-shaved head appeared.

≈ CHAPTER 2 ≈

Big Trouble!



As Libby and the boys watched, a man pulled himself up, then swung a leg over the wall.

“I bet the warden went to see the *Christina* come in,” Nate muttered.

For a moment the prisoner balanced on top of the wall. With quick movements he pulled up the rope, yanked the hook free, and dropped the rope to the ground outside the wall.

Leaning forward, Libby tried for a better look at his face. Just then the prisoner turned. As he grasped the pipe railing with both hands, Libby saw the bundle on his back. Swinging his legs free, the prisoner touched down on the steep hill close to the top of the wall.

As he picked up the rope, he glanced around, then up the bluff to where Libby and the boys waited in the wagon. Suddenly the man jerked back. As if trying to hide his face, he ducked his head. Grabbing bushes and weeds for a handhold, he crept along the side of the hill.

“We need to get help!” Caleb exclaimed.

“It’s a hard climb,” Nate said as if doubting the man could get out.

“Right here the hill is slanted enough for him to make it,”

Caleb answered. "He'll get away."

"Not if we hurry." In the narrow road Nate turned the horses sharply, then backed up. The moment Tom and Bob completed the turn, Nate slapped the reins across their backs.

"Giddyup!" he cried. As the horses swung around a curve, they picked up speed. Soon they reached the level ground at the top of the long steep hill. As Libby looked ahead, her fear of heights returned.

On her right, the ground at the side of the road rose upward. On her left, the bluff fell away to nothing. Remembering the frightening drop to the ground far below, Libby felt her stomach turn over. *If the harness holds. If nothing goes wrong—*

As they started down the long hill, Nate pulled back on the reins. When the horses slowed to a walk, Libby felt relieved. As if digging in their rear hooves, Tom and Bob held back the weight of the wagon.

Nate spoke to them now. "Good boys. Easy—that's the way."

Breathing deeply, Libby felt almost silly. *Here I was so scared for no reason at all.* For a moment she glanced toward the river, almost enjoying the view.

In the next instant everything changed. As the steep hill forced the harness forward, the wagon lurched. Libby rocked back. Tightening her grip, she clung to the high wooden sides of the wagon. Standing next to Libby, Caleb braced his feet and hung on.

Again the wagon lurched. Suddenly the horses started running.

"Whoa!" Nate called, pulling back on the reins. Instead, Tom and Bob picked up their speed.

“Whoa!” Nate cried again.

When Bob tossed his head, Libby saw the terror in his eyes. Fighting against the harness, Tom veered off to the right and the rising hill. Then Bob pulled left, and the wagon swayed. As the horses moved into a gallop, Libby’s heart pounded. The horses were running away!

“Whoa!” Leaning back, Nate pulled at the reins, but nothing happened. “Whoa!” he called again. Instead, the wheels went faster and faster.

Suddenly Jordan reached over, grabbing the reins. His hands next to Nate’s, they pulled together. With all their strength they hung on. But there was no stopping the horses. On the narrow road the wagon rocked dangerously.

Just then Jordan leaped from the high front seat. Hitting the ground in a ball, he rolled, picked himself up, and raced after the horses. But the wagon swung past him, so close that the rear wheel almost hit him.

Filled with terror, Libby stared down over the high wood sides. The boards that had seemed to protect her now made it impossible to leap.

Libby whirled around. When she tried to walk toward the open back end, she staggered. Unable to move against the slant of the wagon, she almost fell.

Her panic growing, Libby grabbed the sides of the wagon again. As she faced forward, Tom veered to the right. Bob again pulled left. Rocking from side to side, the wagon swung out of control. Moments later, the horses headed straight for a big rock on the edge of the bluff.

From next to Libby, Caleb shouted, “Get down!”

Instead, Libby froze, unable to let go. Grabbing her arm,

Caleb pushed her to the floor of the wagon. "Cover your head!"

Still frozen by terror, Libby had time for only one thought. *What will Pa do without me?*

In the next instant arms came down on top of her head. The wagon wobbled, then tipped. As a horse screamed, the wagon rolled on its side. With a great lurch and cracking wood, it slammed to a stop.

When a second horse snorted, Libby shuddered. Without moving, she tried to figure out where she was. *The steep road. The wagon. The runaway horses.*

Then she remembered. *Caleb told me to get down.*

As Libby stirred and tried to look up, she saw Caleb's arms protecting her head.

"You okay, Libby?" he asked. Moving slowly, he sat back on his heels.

Again Libby stirred. *Am I okay?* she wondered.

She wiggled her toes. Yes, she could feel them. Her legs, her arms, and her hands all seemed to work. But Libby felt dazed. Why was she kneeling on the side instead of the bottom of the wagon? The wagon tilted strangely too.

Still feeling odd, Libby looked up into Caleb's scared eyes. "Are *you* okay?" she asked.

Caleb nodded, but when Libby tried to move, he stopped her. "We're at the edge of the bluff," he warned. "There's only a rock holding us."

"One rock? A big one?" Again terror filled Libby, reaching through her dazed feelings.

"The horses headed straight for it," Caleb said. "Bob went to one side and Tom to the other. They broke the pole, and the wagon swung around."

“Out over the edge?” Libby could barely speak.

Caleb nodded. “Don’t move,” he warned again.

“Jordan?” Libby asked, remembering. Jordan had jumped free, trying to catch the horses.

“I can’t see him,” Caleb said. “I don’t dare look.”

“Nate?” Libby felt afraid to even breathe. As though able to see the steep drop below them, she remembered.

“I don’t know,” Caleb said.

Then Libby heard Jordan’s voice. “Hold still,” he warned as Caleb had.

Barely moving her head, Libby looked around. This time she understood what she saw. The wagon lay on its side with ground beneath the smashed front boards. The back end of the wagon hung at a crazy angle over the edge of the bluff. The only way out was through the open top, which was half on and half off the bluff.

Between the broken front boards Libby could see Jordan. “We gots to unhitch the horses before they shake everything loose,” he said.

Jordan was gone then, and Libby heard him talking quietly, soothing the horses. Through the splintered wood she heard a second voice, then saw Nate working to free the horses. Tom stood on one side of the large rock, Bob on the other, only a few feet from the edge of the bluff.

“Nate jumped off too?” Libby asked.

“Or was thrown,” Caleb told her. “I don’t know which. I was just thinking about you.”

“And my head.” Libby tried to smile, but her lips felt stiff. “Thanks, Caleb. Are you sure *your* head is okay?”

“My head is okay,” Caleb said.

“And the rest of you?” Libby asked.

“We both got down in time. The high sides protected us.”

For what seemed forever they waited, neither of them moving. Now and then they heard a whinny, as though the horses were still terrified.

“What happened?” Libby finally asked. Her voice was soft, as if even the sound could break the wagon free.

“Something spooked the horses,” Caleb said. “Whatever it was, I knew Nate wouldn’t be able to stop them. And we wouldn’t be able to get out.”

Always Libby felt amazed at how quickly Caleb figured out what to do. “You knew all that in the midst of horses running away?” Then Libby remembered. “That man climbing over the wall. The escaped prisoner must have gotten away.”

“Afraid so,” Caleb answered.

“He scares me,” Libby said. “He really scares me.” Forgetting where she was, Libby moved. As the wagon shifted, her stomach bottomed out. Then the wagon settled again.

After what seemed like ages, Jordan dropped the end of a lead rope over what had been the side of the wagon. “You needs to hang on to this so we can help you out.”

Caleb gave the rope to Libby. “Tie it around under your arms.”

With shaking fingers Libby knotted the rope. When she was ready, Jordan spoke again.

“Take it slow and easy-like,” he said. “Me and Nate is holdin’ the rope, but you gots to crawl out.”

“You first, Libby,” Caleb said. “Stay on your hands and knees.”

The moment she moved, Jordan and Nate tightened the rope. As Libby crawled across the boards that had been the side

of the wagon, her full, ankle-length skirt caught on a splinter. When she freed the cloth, she moved into the opening. There she took one look down.

Only two feet beyond where she knelt, the ground dropped away to nothing. Far below, the houses seemed like tiny toy buildings.

Libby's muscles tightened. Forcing herself to move on, she set down her right hand. Just beyond her fingers, the ground crumbled, then gave way. When she heard pebbles land far below, Libby again froze.

"Keep movin'," Jordan told her. The rope tightened around her, but Libby could not pick up her hand.

"Put your right knee forward," Caleb said from behind. But fear held Libby as if the rope were pulling her back instead of forward.

His voice calm and steady, Caleb spoke again. "Put your right knee forward."

This time Libby could move.

"Bring up your left knee," Caleb told her.

Again Libby obeyed. Movement by movement, Caleb told her what to do.

"Keep going," Caleb encouraged her whenever she hesitated. "You're almost there."

At last Libby crawled around the front of the wagon to the solid ground where Jordan and Nate stood.

The moment Libby untied the rope, Jordan returned it to Caleb. Her knees still weak with fright, Libby sank down on safe ground. Her arms were shaking, and her teeth chattered with nervousness.

As soon as Caleb said he was ready, Jordan and Nate drew

the rope tight. Bracing their feet, they called to Caleb. “C’mon out!”

Through the broken pieces of wood at the front of the wagon, Libby saw Caleb’s head. The instant he moved, the wagon shifted. Pulling hard on the rope, Jordan and Nate stepped back.

Again Caleb edged forward. Again the wagon shifted. Dirt and small stones slid out from beneath the boards and rained down the side of the bluff.

Libby leaped to her feet. Filled with panic, she cried out, “Caleb!”