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~ CHAPTER 1 ~

The Swindler's Threat



A sharp wind rattled the windows, sounding just as angry as the voices. Libby Norstad's deep brown eyes held a question: *What's wrong?*

The sound came from somewhere outside the *Christina's* dining room. Pushing back her deep red hair, Libby listened. *Men's voices*, she decided. *Among them, Pa's.*

As she hurried out to the wide stairway at the front of the steamboat, the voices grew louder. At the bottom of the steps, Libby's father, the captain of the *Christina*, stood on the main deck. With him were two men.

"But Mr. Dexter is helping me," one of them said. From his accent Libby knew he was an immigrant.

The other man was well dressed, redfaced, and angry looking. Pa turned to him.

"Mr. Dexter?" The captain's quiet voice held a ring of steel that told Libby he was angry too. "Mr. Edward Dexter?"

Already a crowd had gathered around to listen. Feeling concerned for Pa, thirteen-year-old Libby sat down on the steps to watch.

"Your reputation has gone ahead of you, Mr. Dexter," Captain Norstad said. "Up and down the Mississippi River,

respectable captains have told you to get off their boat. And I'm telling you now!"

"No! No!" the immigrant cried. "Look what Mr. Dexter is doing for me!" As though unable to believe his good luck, he held up a well-stuffed sack.

"Mr. Iverson, when did you buy your land?" Captain Norstad asked.

The immigrant's face shone with pride. "For one year I have worked. I have cleared a field. I have planted corn. I have built a house—and a barn for my cow."

Digging into the sack, Mr. Iverson held up a fistful of paper money. "Now I will buy more land."

Captain Norstad took one bill, then two, then five or six. Turning them toward the light, he studied the bills carefully. "You are selling the farm you have?" he asked.

"If a man is willing to work, the streets of America are paved with gold! I will take this money and buy a bigger farm."

The captain's "No!" sounded like an explosion. "Look at this!" He held a dollar bill close to the immigrant's face. "Look at the name of the bank on this greenback! This is wildcat money!"

"Wildcat?" Mr. Iverson peered at the bill. "We have no wildcats on my farm."

"It's called wildcat money because it comes from a bad bank!"

Captain Norstad turned to Mr. Dexter. "You are offering him money printed by a bank with a reputation as awful as your own."

"No! No!" the immigrant exclaimed again. "Mr. Dexter is giving me twice as much money as I paid for my farm. A good return on my hard work, yah?"

"It is not a good return," the captain answered. "He is giving you money that is worth nothing!"

"You mean counterfeit?"

"Just about," the captain said. "The United States government doesn't print money now. It gives permission to state banks to print the money."

"So!" Mr. Iverson declared. "American money is good money."

"Sometimes good. Sometimes bad."

"Bad? If America says print the money, why bad?"

Captain Norstad sighed. "I wish I knew your language so I could explain better. If you take this money to a bank and say, 'I want to buy a new farm,' they would look at you and say, 'These paper bills are not worth a cent. The bank that printed this money has no gold in it.'"

"Yah?" Mr. Iverson looked even more confused. "I don't understand what you say."

"It's simple." Captain Norstad spoke slowly. "Edward Dexter is a swindler."

"Ha!" Dexter scoffed. "The captain wants to keep you from getting rich. This is between you and me."

With troubled eyes Mr. Iverson looked from one man to the other. In that third week of May, 1857, countless immigrants were traveling to their new homes in America. Often they found it hard to know whom they should trust.

Captain Norstad paid no attention to Dexter. "Do you have a wife?" the captain asked Mr. Iverson.

The immigrant nodded. "I go to meet her now. She is coming on train from the Old Country."

"Do you have children?"

"One girl and two boys. They will be proud of what their papa has done in America."

"No!" Captain Norstad shook his head. "They will think, 'An evil man made a fool of my papa.' Do you want your wife and your children to have no house?"

"No house?" Fear filled Mr. Iverson's eyes. "I have worked hard to make a home in America."

Captain Norstad pointed to Edward Dexter. "This man will rob you of your home."

"Yah?" Still Mr. Iverson looked uncertain. "You are telling me the truth?" Again the immigrant looked from one man to the other. "Who should I believe?"

"The captain doesn't want you to make a lot of money," Dexter said quickly.

"Yah, it is a lot of money," the immigrant answered. "I can do many things for my family with this much money." He stretched out his hand toward the swindler. "We shake on it."

But Captain Norstad stepped between the two men. "No, you won't. I will not let you shake on it."

At the top of Mr. Iverson's open trunk lay a large Bible. The captain pointed to it. "You believe the words of this book?"

"Yah, it is truth."

"If I put my hand on your Bible and say, 'This man is a swindler,' would you believe me?"

"You would make your words so strong?"

"May I?" Captain Norstad asked.

Mr. Iverson nodded. As if expecting Captain Norstad to be struck dead, the farmer stepped back.

With a careful touch Captain Norstad reached down. As his hand rested on the Bible, his face showed how much the

book meant to him. "I am telling you the truth," he said. "This man will cheat you of your land. His money is worthless."

"He is trying to make a fool of me?" the immigrant asked. "To take what I have?"

The captain nodded.

Still looking into Captain Norstad's eyes, Mr. Iverson reached down. With one quick movement, he put his hand over the captain's hand as it rested on the Bible. "I believe you." Without another word Mr. Iverson held out the bag filled with wildcat money.

His eyes blazing with anger, Edward Dexter snatched the bag. Holding up his clenched fist, he shook it at the captain. "If it's the last thing I do, I'll get even with you!"

Libby felt a chill down her spine. No doubt about it: Edward Dexter was a dangerous man. But her father acted as if he hadn't heard the swindler's threat.

"Pack your bags!" the captain said to Dexter. "In twenty minutes we'll reach Fairport, Iowa. You're getting off there."

"You can't do this to me!"

"I already have. Be here on the deck, or I'll send my crew after you. I'll stand at the gangplank till you get off this boat."

As though wondering if anyone would help him fight the captain, the swindler looked around. At the edge of the crowd stood Jordan Parker, a runaway slave who worked for Captain Norstad. For a moment the swindler's gaze rested on Jordan, as though memorizing every detail of his appearance.

Quietly Jordan edged back into the crowd, but Libby knew it was too late. *Dexter will remember*, she thought, the fear within her growing. *If he guessed that Jordan is a fugitive, Dexter will know there is a big reward on his head.*

Through fugitive slave laws, Congress had strengthened the right of slave owners to hunt down and capture fugitives, even in free northern states. Owners often hired slave catchers—rough, cruel men—to bring back runaways.

In that moment Libby remembered Jordan's family. If Dexter somehow discovered they were hiding on the boat, Pa could go to prison, or lose the *Christina*, or both.

Libby shivered. *Will Edward Dexter try to get money any way he can? Pa seems to think so.*

When the swindler stalked away, the crowd broke up. Libby ran down the steps to her father. Moving over to one side of the deck, Pa stood where he and Libby could talk without other people listening.

The knot of dread in Libby's stomach was growing. "What if Dexter finds a way to get even? He knows that the *Christina* stops at every town on the Mississippi River."

Pa sighed. "As captain, I could have arrested Dexter if he passed counterfeit money. But he did something legal, even though it's wrong."

As the *Christina* steamed toward the next town, Libby kept thinking about the swindler's clenched fist. "Dexter can wait for us. He knows where you'll be before you get there."

"Sometimes there's a cost to doing the right thing," Pa said.

"And a reward?" Libby didn't want to think about what might lie ahead.

"The reward of knowing you've done what's right. I run a family boat. I can't let someone do whatever he wants."

A strong light glowed in her father's eyes. Looking at him, Libby felt proud of the kind of person he was. Yet, like a warning deep inside, Libby also felt uneasy about the swindler's threat.

While the *Christina* tied up at Fairport, Captain Norstad watched the stairs. Suddenly he spoke to Libby. "Quick! Move away so Dexter doesn't know you're my daughter."

As Libby joined the passengers waiting to leave, the swindler reached the bottom of the stairs. In each hand he held a carpetbag—a cloth bag with two handles. Acting as though he owned the boat, Edward Dexter walked around the people waiting in line.

When he reached the captain, the swindler tipped his hat and strolled down the gangplank.

Strange, Libby thought. *Dexter doesn't look angry.*

Pa looked as puzzled as Libby felt. As the swindler hurried away, Pa stared after him.

A short distance from the river, Dexter turned around to face the *Christina*. For a moment he stood there, as if studying every line of the beautiful white steamboat. Like a cat licking his whiskers, the swindler seemed pleased with himself.

As though it were still happening, Libby remembered the man shaking his clenched fist at Pa. Now the expression on Dexter's face frightened Libby even more.

≈ CHAPTER 2 ≈

Disaster!



Captain Norstad.” Caleb Whitney stood next to Libby’s pa and spoke in a low voice. “We’re ready for you.”

The darkness of night surrounded them, but Caleb’s blond hair looked as windswept as the day had been. Slender and strong, he had lived on the *Christina* since his grandmother became head pastry cook. Now Caleb’s blue eyes held a look that told Libby something important was about to happen.

Pa’s cabin boy, she thought. The person who is supposed to run Pa’s errands, see that his clothes are pressed, polish his shoes. Yet Caleb did much more than that.

In March when Libby came to live on the *Christina*, the fourteen-year-old boy had seemed a mystery to her. Then she discovered who Caleb really was. As a conductor in the Underground Railroad, he helped runaway slaves travel from one hiding place to the next. Since the age of nine, Caleb had worked for Pa in the secret plan that helped fugitives reach freedom.

The night before, Jordan’s mother, brother, and two sisters had slipped on board at Burlington, Iowa. Except for Jordan, who also worked as a cabin boy, Libby hadn’t seen any of the

family since. After continuing upriver, the *Christina* had made several long stops to unload and take on freight.

Now, with the moon high in the sky, the deck passengers had made their beds wherever they could find space on the main deck. Peace and quiet had settled over the boat. Caleb had picked his moment, and it was right.

With growing curiosity Libby followed him and Pa. Without making a sound, Caleb led them past the wide stairway at the front of the *Christina*. After a quick look around, he opened the door into the cargo space.

The large open room was filled with freight. Caleb closed the door behind Libby, then stood just inside, waiting and watching. As Libby peered into the darkness, Caleb lit a lantern and led them deeper into the room.

All around them boxes and barrels were piled high, making weird shapes in the half-light. To Libby's surprise Caleb passed the entrance to the secret hiding place. Then he turned sideways and slipped through a narrow opening between tall piles of freight. When Pa, then Libby, followed, she discovered a hidden space, like a small room without a ceiling.

Here, where there was more room than in the secret hiding place, Caleb set the lantern on the floor. Its flame lit the faces of the people who waited but left everything else in darkness.

Jordan Parker, the runaway slave, sat crosslegged with his little sister Rose in his lap. On either side of Jordan were his eight-year-old brother, Zack, and his eleven-year-old sister, Serena. As Pa and Caleb sat down, Libby found a place next to Serena, and the small circle was complete.

"Welcome aboard, Hattie," Pa said, and Libby felt sure he hadn't been able to talk with Jordan's mother before. "Your son

Jordan is a fine young man.”

With her gaze on the floor, the way she had been taught by her former masters, Hattie nodded her thanks.

Jordan had led his family on the dangerous trip out of slavery. Usually Caleb moved runaways on as soon as it was safe. Because Jordan meant a great deal to him, the captain cared even more than usual about what happened to Jordan's family.

“We're close to a good place to let you off,” Captain Norstad said. “The Underground Railroad will help you across Illinois and Lake Michigan to Canada.”

Jordan's mother shook her head. “We ain't ready to go to Canada.” For a moment she looked at her children. “We wants to find my husband—their daddy.” Micah Parker had been sold away from the rest of the family, and none of them knew where he was.

“Where do you want to live while you're looking for him?” the captain asked Hattie. “Chicago? There's a large group of free blacks who would protect you. White people, too, who would help, and a detective named Allan Pinkerton.”

But Jordan answered for his mother. “Chicago be all the way across Illinois. We need to be where we can get word about my daddy.”

“We wants to live where people is moving around,” Hattie added. Though she looked at the floorboards instead of the captain, her voice was strong and sure, as if she had often thought about the problem.

Watching her, Libby realized how much Jordan was like his mother. Both were tall and slender, but the likeness was more than that. Both of them knew what they wanted in life. While still a young boy, Jordan had begun to dream about

bringing his family out of slavery.

“I is goin’ to git a job and keep my head down,” Hattie said now. “But when my head be down, I is goin’ to ask questions till I find my husband.”

“News goes up and down the river on boats,” Jordan said. “We wants to be close to the river.”

“But far enough away to be safe,” Captain Norstad answered. For a minute he was silent, as though thinking about every town up and down the Mississippi River. One by one he seemed to check them off in his mind. Finally he said, “Galena, Illinois.”

“Galena?” Hattie asked.

“In northwestern Illinois,” the captain said. “It’s only three or four miles up the Galena River, and the most important stop between St. Louis and St. Paul. There’s a group of free blacks there, and people coming and going—people you can ask about your husband.”

“Will my children be safe there?” In the flickering light Hattie looked at each one.

“I wish I could tell you they will be,” the captain said. “But they’ll be truly safe only in Canada. You understand about the fugitive slave laws?”

Hattie nodded. “Even in free states, I ain’t got no rights. Slave catchers can snatch my children away from me.”

Hattie’s gaze rested on her oldest son. During the past year, Jordan had been sold to a cruel master named Riggs. From this new owner, Jordan had made a life-or-death escape.

“I keep thinkin’ about Jordan,” Hattie went on. “That master of his said no slave ever got away from him alive.”

Libby looked across the circle to Caleb. More than once

they had talked about whether Riggs would make a special effort to capture Jordan for that very reason. Libby waited for Pa's answer.

"Riggs is a busy man—a rich man with many interests," he said. "I hope that he doesn't have time to chase around after one runaway. I hope he's forgotten Jordan by now."

But it's only two months since he escaped, Libby thought. Again she glanced at Caleb. This time their gaze met, as if he, too, wondered how long Riggs would remember. Not only had Riggs been Jordan's owner, but a cruel slave trader as well.

"Wherever you live, Jordan needs to be careful," Captain Norstad told Hattie. "I have friends in Galena, and I could help you find work. But I wish you'd think about a place farther away from where you were a slave—a place where life would be easier for you."

Once more looking at the floorboards, Hattie spoke softly. "Life ain't easy, Captain Norstad. It ain't easy for you or for me. You has made some hard choices, and my family be one of them."

The light of the lantern showed the strength in Hattie's face. "I thanks you for all you has done. For helpin' Jordan. For hidin' us. For helpin' me find work when I gits off the boat. But Captain Norstad—"

For the first time Hattie looked up. Wearing the proud look Libby had often seen in Jordan, Hattie sat tall and straight. "How can I be happy being free if my husband ain't?"

A smile flashed across the captain's face. "I suspect you're right, Hattie. When we reach Galena, I'll let you off there."

Inwardly Libby groaned. *I won't get to know Serena.* She would leave the boat before they even had a chance to talk.

When Pa stood up to leave, Libby wanted to take her time and talk to Serena. Yet Libby knew she had to be careful. The longer all of them stayed together, the bigger the risk that the wrong person would find them. Knowing that she had no choice but to follow Pa, Libby spoke softly.

“Goodbye, Serena. I hope I see you again.” Libby saw the glad light in Serena’s face.

“Goodbye, Miss Libby,” she said, her voice shy but clear.

Then Caleb picked up the lantern. Libby followed him and Pa through the darkness back through the cargo area to the front of the boat. There Caleb slipped away, and Pa and Libby started up the stairway to their rooms.

On the next deck up, a frightened-looking young man spoke to them. “I need to talk to you, Captain.”

Captain Norstad took one look at the mud clerk and said, “Let’s go to the office.”

Called the mud clerk because he often stood in the mud while collecting fares, the young man had not worked long for Pa. In the office he dropped into a chair as if no longer able to stand. Libby and Pa joined him at the table.

In the lamplight the clerk’s face looked pale. “I have bad news,” he began.

“What is it?” the captain asked as though anxious to get it over with.

The young man hesitated, as if dreading what he needed to say. “All the money you took in—” The clerk stopped as though afraid to go on.

“Yes?”

“The money we collected for freight—the money we got from passengers up and down the river—”

"Where is it?" the captain asked as if knowing where this was going to end.

The clerk's face was gray now. "I don't know."

"You don't *know*? I need that money for paying my crew. I need it for making payments on this boat."

"Yes, sir."

"If the money isn't here, what happened to it?" the captain asked. "The good money, I mean, that our senior clerk was so careful to take in?"

More than once Libby had seen the senior clerk check a book whenever there was a question about what was good money and what came from a wildcat bank. He had worked for Pa a long time and knew more than anyone about what bills were safe to accept.

"I put the money in the safe." The mud clerk stumbled on his words.

"And you closed the door?"

"I started to close the door." The clerk's face had changed again—pink now with embarrassment.

"You didn't lock the safe?" Captain Norstad's voice again held the steel that Libby knew was anger kept under control.

"No, sir."

"Let me guess," the captain answered. "A well-dressed man spoke to you, calling you away for some fool reason. You followed him. He gave you the slip. When you returned to the office, the safe was closed, even locked."

The clerk nodded.

"You thought, 'Hmmm. I locked the safe, after all.' When you opened the door, it was full of money. But just a minute ago, you took a better look."

When the clerk opened the safe, Libby saw two piles of bills. No doubt the small one was the money taken in since the swindler left the boat. With trembling hands the clerk lifted out the large pile of paper currency and set the bills in front of the captain.

Libby leaned forward to look. When she saw the name of the bank, tears welled up in her eyes. Even she knew that the money was worthless.

“Oh, Pa!” she wailed.

“Every bill?” the captain roared. “Every single bill is from this worthless bank?”

Twice the clerk tried to speak. When no sound came, he nodded.

“Do you know how much money was taken?” Pa asked.

The clerk knew. Moments before it was stolen, he had finished counting it.

“That is the money I cleared from all my trips since the opening of the season,” Captain Norstad said as though trying to explain to a young child. “With it I planned to pay my crew and make a big payment on the *Christina*. Do you understand what you have done?”

“No, sir,” the clerk said. “I mean, yes, sir.”

“When we reach Galena, I want you to get off,” the captain said, his voice stiff with anger. “I want you to find a job where you learn to handle responsibility. Until then don’t let me see your face.”

Without another word the clerk crept out of the office. The moment he left, Pa kicked the door shut behind him. Elbows on the table, he closed his eyes and covered them with his hands.

Watching Pa, Libby felt even more afraid. Like water

coming to a boil, her resentment changed into anger. Because of one man's carelessness and another man's theft, Pa's whole life had changed for the worse.

"The swindler got even," she said finally.

Without looking up, Pa nodded, as though unable to speak.