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~ CHAPTER 1 ~

Night of Fear



In the dark of night, Libby Norstad suddenly woke up. *Where am I?* She wondered as she struggled to think. *What woke me?*

A dream? A nightmare? Whatever the cause, Libby shivered with fear.

Soon after midnight her father's steamboat had left Galena, Illinois, heading up the Mississippi River. But now Libby felt no movement, heard no engines or slap of paddle wheels against the water.

It's quiet. Too quiet. Even the night air felt heavy and strange.

Then from near at hand the ship's bell broke the silence. As rapid strokes rang out, then stopped, Libby knew it was a signal.

What's wrong? she wondered. *What happened? Where's Pa?*

With a trembling heart, she leaped up and changed into her dress. As she stepped onto the deck outside her room, the cold fingers of fog seemed to clutch her.

Libby gasped. Without thinking, she stretched out her hands to feel the way. As she peered into the darkness, she could not see even eight feet ahead.

“Pa!” she cried in terror. “Where are you?”

Her hand against the outer wall of her room, Libby crept forward. When she reached her father’s cabin at the front of the *Christina*, it was empty. Feeling as if she were sleepwalking, Libby turned around and started back.

Silly! she told herself, ashamed of her fear. *I’m on my father’s boat. Why am I afraid?*

But the bell rang again, cutting through the ragged edges of her nerves. Forcing herself to be calm, she headed for the stairway.

In the four years after her mother’s death, Libby had stayed with her aunt in a Chicago mansion. For the past five months Libby had been with her father. In that August of 1857, she was still learning to face the dangers of living on a steamboat.

I want to be strong, she thought. *But I just feel scared!*

When Libby reached the deck below, it was even darker. Usually filled with first-class passengers, the boiler deck was just above the large boilers that heated water and created steam to run the engines. With not one person in sight, the deck was strangely quiet. Libby had only one thought—to find Pa, her friend Caleb Whitney, or someone who would help her feel safe.

Instead, Libby found the railing and followed it toward the front of the boat. Through the murky darkness she saw someone standing at the bow. Libby’s heart leaped with relief. *Anika Berg!*

The young woman’s long black hair was pulled up to fall in loose curls at the back of her head. During the past week the teacher had helped Libby and her friends in a time of danger. Working with the Underground Railroad, the secret plan

that helped slaves escape to freedom, Annika had given them a place to stay. In a few short days Libby had grown to love her.

As Libby took another step, Annika heard her and turned. “Come enjoy the view with me!”

Libby giggled. “What a view! Solid fog!” For the first time since waking up, she felt better.

Annika stood at the railing, peering down. “I’ve been trying to see if the ropes are out. We must be tied up along the riverbank. Right?”

Libby nodded. She could barely see the line, or rope, between the boat and the small willows along the river’s west bank.

Annika faced her. “We’re here because the pilot can’t see, your father can’t see—”

“Yes.” Not wanting to talk about her fears, Libby tried to cut Annika off. But Libby’s thoughts leaped on. *We’re here so we don’t run into a sandbar. So the sharp roots of a tree caught in the river bottom don’t pierce our hull. So we don’t run into another boat. Or another—*

“Are we far enough out of the channel?” Annika echoed Libby’s thoughts. “Could a boat crash into us?”

Libby’s hands knotted. It was her biggest fear. *If I don’t admit it, maybe it won’t happen.*

Now she wished it were Caleb talking to Annika. Though he and Libby were now the same age, Caleb would soon be fifteen. He also managed to answer questions better. A conductor for the Underground Railroad since the age of nine, Caleb had years of practice in being questioned by people not as nice as Annika.

The teacher met Libby’s gaze. “If a captain thinks he needs to keep going—”

The ship's bell broke into her words. Then Libby remembered. On a steamboat tied up in fog, its crew rang the bell rapidly for five seconds out of every minute.

When the bell was quiet, Annika waited for Libby's answer. "The lines hold us as close to the shore as we can be without hurting the paddle wheel on this side," she said. "We can't get any farther out of the channel. We're long and wide, and the stern drifts out with the current."

"And a boat that doesn't wait for the fog to lift can run into us?" Annika's blue eyes were dark with concern. "Why doesn't your father just tell people to go on shore?"

In that moment Libby felt impatient with Annika's questions. Then Libby remembered that Annika was used to taking care of people—children in her classroom and fugitive slaves. Annika was used to thinking ahead.

Just the same, Libby felt she had to defend her father. Because of her, Annika and Pa had gotten off to a bad start. *I want Annika to think the best of him. To see Pa as a hero.*

"If we stay on the boat, there's a danger that something might happen," Libby said. "But we hope it won't. If we go on shore in the dark, it's pretty sure we won't like what we find."

"Such as?"

Libby shrugged. "I can't see anything around us, I just know we're between towns, and there are islands in the river. If a riverboat captain finds a criminal on board and it's a long way to the next stop, the captain puts the man off on an island."

"Because it's a serious crime, and the captain has no choice?" Annika asked.

"If he knows his passengers might be harmed," Libby said. Annika's voice was filled with respect. "I had no idea a

riverboat captain has to deal with all that.”

Libby smiled. *Now I'm getting somewhere*, she thought smugly. *I'll make sure Annika likes Pa. But I'll be clever this time.* From past experience Libby knew she had to be careful. Annika had already made it clear that she didn't want anyone to think she was looking for a husband.

“I don't know what else we'd find,” Libby went on. “Some places there would be sink-down-deep mud, reeds, and tall grasses. Maybe floating bogs. Snakes.”

“Snakes?”

“Copperheads. Timber rattlesnakes. This time of year, they live along the river bottoms.”

“I see.”

“Even in the fog.” To Libby's surprise she already felt better. Annika could understand how Libby dreaded snakes and criminals and fog. *It would be nice having her around all the time.*

Now Libby knew just what to say. “Pa is a courageous man. A riverboat captain has to be very brave . . .”

Her eyes wide, Annika listened.

“And wise and good.” Libby spoke quickly to make sure she got it all in. “He cares about his passengers. That's what makes him a good family man, a good choice for anyone who marries him.”

Annika backed off. “Well,” she said, “as long as I know we're in good hands, I'll leave you now.”

Inwardly Libby groaned. *I did it again.* Libby wished she could bite off her tongue.

Instead she exclaimed, “No, don't go!” Already the fog seemed to close around her. Having Annika there pushed

aside Libby's fear. "I'll show you the lantern that tells other boats we're here."

Together they walked along the deck closest to the river channel. As they drew near the stern, the light of the lantern welcomed them. Yet the fog seemed even thicker than before.

"I wonder from how far away a pilot can see the light," Annika said.

Before she could answer, Libby heard the long, deep blast of a steamboat whistle. A whistle saying, "I'm coming! Get out of my way!"

Like a nightmare it was—a nightmare so real that Libby trembled. As the *Christina's* bell rang without stopping, Libby shouted into the fog, "Watch out! We're here!"

But the deep whistle sounded again, closer now. Then Libby heard the slap of paddle wheels against water. With Annika at the rail beside her, Libby peered into the night.

Moments later a deckhand on the other boat called to his pilot. The front of the steamboat loomed up out of the fog. Frantically, Libby waved her arms. "We're here! Watch out! We're here!"

Now Libby saw the railing along an upper deck, the men standing as lookouts. As a deckhand called another warning, Libby's heart leaped with fear. "Don't run into us!"

But the steamboat whistle cut through her words, and Libby knew. *No one can hear a word I'm saying!*

Filled with panic, she grabbed Annika's arm and yanked her away from the railing. "Run!"

With Annika close behind, Libby raced to the other side of

the boat. When Libby dropped down on her stomach, Annika fell to the deck beside her.

Hands over her head, face against the boards, Libby braced herself for the crash.

In that instant of waiting, she had one thought. *I don't want anything to happen to Annika!*

~ CHAPTER 2 ~

Secret Face



Seconds later, Libby felt a jolt run through the boat. Timbers snapped. Flying pieces landed with a thud. Frightened voices cried out. From the pens near the stern, cows bawled and sheep bleated.

In the wake of the other boat, the *Christina* rocked up and down. Riding wave after wave, she swung out against her lines. Then the slap of paddles and sound of engines moved farther and farther away.

On the boiler deck where Libby lay, first-class passengers spilled out of their rooms. From the main deck below, people called out in different languages. Still frozen by fright, Libby felt she could not move.

After what seemed like hours, she lifted her head. “Annika?”

The teacher lay with her head covered and face down.

“Annika?” Libby pushed herself up to a sitting position. “Are you okay?”

Annika sat up. “I’m fine, Libby.” Reaching out, she squeezed Libby’s hand. “It was a close call, wasn’t it?”

“I’m glad you ran.” Libby’s teeth chattered, and her body trembled. She was still shaking with fright when Caleb Whitney reached them.

“Libby!” Caleb knelt down on the deck beside her. “Are you hurt?”

Even in the fog and darkness, Libby could see Caleb’s blond hair and the worry in his blue eyes. Five years ago Pa had asked Caleb’s grandmother to be head pastry cook. Caleb had lived on board ever since.

“Were you here when the boat passed?” he asked.

Libby nodded, still too shaken to speak. Drawing a deep breath, she tried to hide how scared she felt. “One minute before, Annika and I stood at the railing, close to the stern. That’s where it hit, isn’t it?”

Caleb nodded. “How did you get here?”

Libby forced herself to smile. “We ran.”

“Are you all right, Annika?” Caleb asked as he helped her up.

“Thanks to Libby.” Annika pushed back the hair that had fallen over her eyes.

Libby was angry now. “How could any steamboat captain keep running with the fog the way it is?”

“He must have a very good reason.” Caleb studied her face. “You really are scared, aren’t you?”

Libby swallowed hard. “The deckers—the passengers on the main deck. Even if the boat didn’t hit them directly—” Libby stopped, afraid to put her thoughts into words.

“I know.” Caleb’s voice was too quiet. “I was there when the boat hit. There’s more than a hundred people on that deck. The jolt could have knocked a lot of them into the water. As far as I can tell, no one fell in.”

As Caleb gave Libby a hand up, her gaze met his. “You’re just as scared as I am,” she said.

“Not quite.” Caleb’s face held no fear, but Libby knew her

friend well. When Caleb helped runaway slaves, he couldn't take the risk of one wrong expression. For a fugitive it might mean the difference between life and death. Caleb had learned to hide his feelings.

"Pa?" Libby asked, still shivering.

"I haven't seen him yet." Pulling off his jacket, Caleb gave it to Libby.

She was glad for its warmth. "It was so hot today, it's hard to believe it's cold now."

"That's what brings fog," Caleb reminded her. "The river is still warm. If a wind comes up or the sun burns off the fog, your pa will go on."

In spite of Caleb's jacket, Libby shivered again. Then she felt glad. "Pa runs a good ship, doesn't he?"

Caleb's grin was real now. "The best. I don't want anything to hurt him."

His words were so similar to what Libby had thought about Annika that it gave her a strange feeling. Having something happen to his passengers would hurt Pa very much. Whoever they were, whether rich or poor, slave or free, he cared about them.

As the *Christina's* bell rang again, the high notes of a fiddle pierced the fog and darkness. The happy sound set Libby's feet moving. "Let's go see who's playing. Maybe we'll find Jordan and Peter."

On their way to find the fiddler, they returned to the stern to see what had happened. On the channel side of the boat, a long piece of railing was splintered. At the place where Libby and Annika had stood, the railing was torn away, leaving a large hole in the deck.

Annika took one look and quietly said, "Thank you, Libby." Gazing up at the nighttime sky, she spoke again. "Thank You, Lord."

A moment later Pa found them. In his captain's uniform he looked tall and handsome. Yet what meant the most to Libby was the kind of father her pa was. For as long as she could remember, Libby had been proud of him.

Seeing her there, Pa looked relieved. *He's checking on me*, Libby thought, feeling warm inside. *He cares about me*.

Then Pa's gaze passed on to Annika. "Good to see you, Miss Berg. You're all right?"

Annika smiled. "I'm fine, Captain Norstad."

Libby felt pleased that Pa was concerned about Annika too. After their bad start, maybe they would be good friends.

"Thanks to Libby, I'm fine," Annika added. When she told the story, Pa's face turned white.

"And this is where you stood?" Pa motioned to the hole in the deck. "Come here, Libby. Let me give you a big hug." As Pa's arms went around her, Libby felt safe again.

A moment later the ship's carpenter and his crew joined them. "We have a lot to be grateful for," Pa told them. "No one was hurt, and the damage could have been much worse. Block it off here so no one falls over. Then go down and work on the main deck."

Leaving Pa behind, Libby, Caleb, and Annika took the stairs in the middle of the *Christina* to see the rest of the damage. On the main deck, the passing boat had ripped open the animal pens. At least twenty feet of the guard, the part of the boat that extended out over the hull, was torn away.

Near the stern an owner hung on to a rope around his

cow's neck. Another man worked to keep his sheep away from the edge. Libby knew it was a miracle that no one had been hurt.

The fiddler was still playing, and Libby, Caleb, and Annika followed the sound of his music. At the front of the boat they found Peter sitting at the top of the wide stairway overlooking the bow. Libby's Newfoundland, a great black dog named Samson, lay beside him.

Jordan Parker sat two steps below. A runaway slave, he had found safety on the *Christina* and stayed on to work for Pa. When Caleb sat down next to Jordan, Libby and Annika squeezed in beside Peter.

To Libby, Peter Christopherson seemed like the younger brother she had always wanted. An orphan who lost his hearing through illness, Peter had lived on the *Christina* for about a month. Now Libby felt so glad to see him that she gave him a quick hug. Peter looked surprised, then grinned.

"Are you okay?" Libby asked, using signs.

"I'm okay," the blond ten-year-old answered in the way he had of always taking care of himself. Peter had learned sign language at the school for the deaf in Jacksonville, Illinois. Now Libby and the others were learning sign language from him.

Peter had learned to speak before he lost his hearing when seven years old. "You too?" he asked Libby.

She nodded but inside didn't feel so sure. Whenever her mind jumped back to those moments just before the other boat hit the *Christina*, she trembled. The sound of pounding hammers reminded Libby of her close escape.

On the main deck, a lantern hung just beyond the bottom

of the stairs. Its soft light pierced the before-dawn darkness and fog. The fiddler stood nearby, his bow dancing over the strings.

Around him the deck passengers sat on crates and barrels or stood wherever there was room. Crammed into whatever space they could find, the deckers tapped their toes in time to the music.

Annika tipped her head toward the fiddler and whispered, "He's really good."

Young and slender, the fiddler had dark hair that nearly reached his shoulders. He stood near an immigrant's trunk, but Libby wondered about it. *Is it his? Something doesn't quite fit.*

In a moment when the deckers moved back, giving more room, Libby stood up to see the fiddler better. Caleb and Jordan followed her, seeming as curious as Libby felt.

From her new place on the deck Libby could see the fiddler's mustache, straight nose, and high cheekbones. She could also see that his white shirt looked tattered. *Strange*, she thought. Deck passengers were usually short of money, but the immigrants among them worked hard and kept their clothes mended.

Maybe the fiddler doesn't know how to mend his clothes, Libby thought. *Maybe he's traveling alone.*

Libby's mind leaped to Pa. *Traveling alone. It's been years since Ma died. All that time Pa's been alone.*

Looking toward the steps, Libby saw her father. As he started down, he smiled at Annika, stopped for a moment to talk with Peter, then continued down the steps.

While the fiddler played on, Pa moved from one group of people to the next. Often he stopped to talk with an immigrant

family. More than once Pa pointed to a child, then to the edge of the deck. Each time Pa motioned as though to keep the child away, a father or mother nodded. Though Pa didn't speak their language, they seemed to understand.

At last Pa returned to the bottom of the stairs. Standing near the wall where the lantern hung, he watched and listened.

The fiddler's bow moved faster and faster, attacking the strings with short, quick movements. In the fog and darkness, his melodies reached out to the people who listened. Catching the rhythm of the music, they clapped along with him.

Then, as the fiddler played, he began to dance. Wherever they could, passengers pushed back more freight. In the small open space the fiddler stomped his feet, whirling about.

When a little girl stood up, people crowded back still farther, making room. Her bare feet flying across the boards, the girl twirled and turned. An even smaller boy climbed onto a crate and jumped up and down with the music.

As the fiddler stepped back out of the circle, his music swept on, light and free. Other dancers filled the space.

Clapping with the deckers, Caleb and Jordan stomped their feet and called out for more songs. Peter watched the two boys to catch the rhythm, then joined in the clapping.

Sometimes the fiddler plucked the strings. Other times he bowed two strings at once. From one happy song to the next he went, his music driving back the fog and darkness.

Looking around, Libby knew the night had changed. Already the deckers had left their terror behind. Though the fog still closed them in, the deck rocked with music and laughter.

Only once did Libby see the fiddler's gray-blue eyes. *He knows*, she thought. *He knows the music sends away their fear.*

Yet strangely, Libby felt uneasy about the man. *His face holds a secret. Who is he? Why is he here?*

Puzzled by her uneasiness, Libby kept watching the fiddler. *Why do I think he has a secret?*

Then she noticed something else. Though his tattered clothes made him seem poor, he hadn't put out a hat to collect money.

For some time Pa waited, as though not wanting to rob the deckers of their fun. When the fiddler stopped playing, the crowd cheered and clapped. Only then did Pa step forward.

"Please," Pa invited. "Will you play for my first-class passengers?"

When the man looked as if he didn't understand, Pa pointed to the fiddler and his fiddle. Then Pa pointed up the wide stairs to the large main cabin that served as the dining room.

The fiddler shook his head. "*Nein!*" It sounded as if he were saying *nine*, but Libby knew it was the German word for *no*.

"I would be greatly pleased if you would do this for me," Pa answered. "My passengers love fine music and would be honored to have you play."

The fiddler shook his head. "It is not *gut!*"

Hearing the word *good*, Libby listened to the man's accent. Though he used German words, Libby wondered if he came from Germany. For some reason the fiddler didn't sound quite like her German friend, Elsa.

"Come." Pa drew the fiddler away from the passengers who were listening. "I'm not asking you to play for nothing. I'll pay you for your concert."

For an instant the fiddler wavered, as though trying to make up his mind. Again Libby felt uneasy. *There's fear in his eyes, I wonder why.*