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~ CHAPTER 1 ~

Run or Die!



Shhh!”

In the darkness of night the whisper came, a whisper so soft that at first Libby Norstad wondered if she had imagined it. Then on the night wind she heard it again.

“Shhh!”

A short distance ahead of Libby a thin, quick-moving man led the way—a free black who knew the hiding places well. From shadow to shadow he led the five of them. Using every patch of darkness—every bush, tree, wall, or fence—he protected them from curious eyes.

From her place near the end of the line, Libby counted. First their conductor—the man in the Underground Railroad who led fugitives from one safe place to the next. Then Jordan Parker, runaway slave. Behind him, Jordan’s daddy, tall even in the shadows, and newly escaped. A marked man, Micah Parker was wanted by slave hunters for the reward he would bring. Next came ten-year-old Peter Christopherson, then Libby, and last of all, walking quietly behind her, Caleb Whitney.

Springfield, Libby thought. *Springfield, Illinois. Where can Jordan and his daddy be safe?*

“Walk when I walk,” the conductor told them, his voice so low that Libby strained to hear. “Run when I run. Step only where I step.”

For an instant Jordan turned, and the moonlight caught his face. In spite of the danger, his eyes seemed lit from within, showing his pleasure. He was with his father again!

Then Jordan faced forward and moved ahead without a sound. As one person, he and his father followed behind the man who led fugitives to freedom.

Suddenly a dog barked, filling the night air with fear. From nearby another dog answered with a deeper growl.

For an instant the Underground Railroad conductor paused. From one person to the next his whisper moved back. “Now or never. Run or die.”

In the sliver of moonlight the conductor crouched. Under a row of bushes he went, and Jordan and his father followed. Behind them crept Peter Christopherson, youngest of all, yet full of courage. Ducking branches, Peter stayed low, keeping up with Jordan’s daddy.

Then Libby, down on her hands and knees in the dirt. Under the hedge she crept through a hole in a fence. Out on the other side, she ran toward a dog that growled deep in his throat.

As Libby drew closer, the dog leaped out to the end of his leash. Filled with terror, Libby raced past. Already those in front of her were shadows, far ahead, fleeing for their lives. Running after them, Libby heard only the soft pad of Caleb’s footsteps behind her.

Behind Caleb, the dog barked again. Now Libby knew him for what he was—a bloodhound trying to wake his owner.

Demanding that he be set free, the bloodhound was trained to track down runaway slaves, to keep them from reaching freedom.

A block farther on, a large barn loomed up in the darkness. For only a second the man in the lead paused. Then he pushed open a door—a yawning hole, dark and empty looking in the night. As their leader stood to one side, Jordan disappeared into the barn, followed by his father, Peter, Libby, and Caleb.

Inside was a deeper darkness. Waiting, Libby listened. So softly she almost missed it, the door closed behind them.

“Come,” said the quiet voice.

No lights yet, no sound other than his voice. Then a hand took Libby’s. As she grasped it, Libby felt Peter’s tug and knew she had become part of a chain. Pulled forward in the darkness, they walked faster now, sure of the person at the head of the line.

Moments later they stopped.

“Wait,” the man whispered. “Don’t move.”

With every sense alive Libby listened. From somewhere nearby she heard the snuffle of animals. Then a horse stamped his foot. Instead of seeing, Libby felt movement around her. *A livery stable?* she wondered. *A place for boarding or hiring out horses?* She felt sure it was.

Again a door closed. Another whisper, “Quiet! Be still!” The scratch of a match. Then the dim light of a kerosene lantern hanging from a nail on a huge beam.

Looking around, Libby saw that they were inside an inner room of the stable. Without being told, she knew that no light shone through the cracks to the outside windows. Along two

walls were mounds of hay where people could rest. A pail of water with a tin cup waited nearby.

As Caleb joined the men, Libby sat down on the hay next to Peter. Her heart still pounding, Libby thought back to their race through the darkness.

Five months before, in March 1857, Jordan Parker had escaped from slavery. Then less than two weeks ago, Jordan's father, Micah, also escaped, fleeing across the Mississippi River to the free state of Illinois.

Free, Libby thought. But not safe. Not even here in Springfield, the capital of Illinois.

Because of fugitive slave laws, slave hunters could follow runaways into free states. There, slave catchers could gather a posse to capture and bring runaways back to their owners. Since his escape, Jordan's father had been hiding from men who wanted the big reward he would bring.

Less than an hour before, in the Springfield house that had offered shelter, Libby and her friends were wakened.

"We're being watched," said the woman who had taken them in. "Jordan and his daddy need to leave while they can." In the darkness of that second week in August, her husband had discovered a man standing across the street, tucked close to a barn, but not out of sight.

Fumbling in the dark to pull together her few belongings, Libby had dressed quickly. In the kitchen she found one candle lit. Heavy curtains hid its flame from the outside world.

Jordan and Micah Parker were already waiting. Along with Caleb and Peter, Libby listened to the free black man give instructions. As a conductor, he helped fugitives in the Underground Railroad reach freedom.

“So far there’s only one man watching us,” he said. “Soon there will be three or four or five, perhaps a mob. Someone will come with a search warrant. We’ll sneak out on the other side of the house while we can.”

His gaze steady, the Underground Railroad conductor searched their eyes to be sure they understood. “Do exactly what I do. You must be quiet. You must obey me instantly.”

Libby glanced at Peter and held a finger across her lips to say “Shhh!” Peter nodded with understanding.

Moments later the conductor led them through the door on their race through the darkness. Now, only minutes after reaching the livery stable, that race seemed like a nightmare to Libby. Sitting on a pile of hay in the hidden room, she leaned forward to listen.

“You must leave Springfield right away,” the free black man told Jordan and Micah. Heads bent, voices low, they stood in a huddle beneath the hanging lantern.

“Me and Daddy needs to go to Chicago,” Jordan answered.

“Then I’ll see that you two get to the Junction at North Bloomington,” the man said. “Two railroad lines cross there. You can catch a train and be in Chicago in no time.”

Though the Underground Railroad conductor meant a real train, fugitives more often walked or traveled by other ways. The words *Underground Railroad* described the secret way that escaped slaves passed from one place of shelter to the next. Often these stations were about twelve miles apart, a good distance for horses needing to make a trip and return home before dawn.

“We’ll start now, and I’ll take you as far as I can,” the man said.

But Jordan looked concerned. “What about the money we found?” he asked Caleb.

Jordan’s church in Galena, Illinois, had worked hard to raise money to help fugitive slaves get across Lake Michigan to Canada. Soon after the members asked Jordan to carry the money to Chicago, it was stolen. After a long search, Libby, Jordan, and Peter found it, along with money stolen from Libby’s father. For safekeeping they had left it at the Springfield police station.

“I’ll get the money,” Caleb told Jordan.

“By wagon it takes me eight or nine hours if I don’t have trouble changing horses,” the conductor said. “If you take the morning train out of Springfield, you can meet Jordan and Micah in North Bloomington at about eleven o’clock. There’s more than one depot at the Junction. Look for them in the freight room of the St. Louis, Alton, and Chicago Railroad.”

“What if we need help?” Caleb asked. Since the age of nine, he had worked with Libby’s father as an Underground Railroad conductor. Now fourteen, almost fifteen, Caleb was used to figuring out ways to help fugitives travel from one safe place to the next.

“I have a friend in the baggage room of the depot who will help you,” the man answered. “If he’s not there, look for a signal. Find a safe house on your own.”

“A safe house?” Libby blurted out, even though she knew she should only listen.

“An Underground Railroad station. A place that hides fugitives until it’s safe for them to go on.”

Safe, Libby thought. Even the word sounded good.

“Move quickly now,” the conductor said, his voice low. “Don’t go close to the windows.”

The door he touched swung open on oiled hinges. Taking the lantern with him, the conductor moved into the main part of the stable.

As Libby followed, she looked first for the windows. In spite of the well-kept appearance of the rest of the livery stable, the window glass was coated with a heavy layer of dirt, cobwebs, and bits of hay. Libby suspected that they had not been washed for years, probably for a good reason.

Staying low, Jordan and Micah Parker moved swiftly through the dimly lit area of the barn. Two strong, sleek horses were already hitched to a farm wagon. Libby had no doubt why they were chosen. When their long legs stretched out, they probably outdistanced any horse that tried to follow.

The wagon to which the horses were hitched was unlike anything Libby had ever seen. Jordan and Micah crawled into a false bottom beneath the usual boards in the wagon bed. Stretched out, they lay side by side in the small area.

The driver shut them in, then motioned for Libby, Caleb, and Peter to climb into the back of the wagon. When he clucked to the horses, they walked ahead, then stopped while the man shut the doors of the stable. Moments later he leaped up to the high seat, took the reins, and clucked again. The horses moved out in a slow walk that made less noise than a trot.

They had traveled only a short distance when Libby heard dogs bark again. As her heart leaped into her throat, Caleb shook his head and whispered, “Don’t worry.”

Just then Libby noticed Peter’s expression. He sat without moving, staring into the night. He always watched closely,

picking up even small facial expressions that helped him understand what was happening. Yet because Peter was deaf, he had not heard the dogs.

Does that make him less afraid? Libby wondered. Reaching out, she touched his hand and found it cold in spite of the warm night. Perhaps not hearing made scary things even more frightening. Libby pointed to the slate Peter carried in a bag over his shoulder, as though to promise, "I'll explain soon."

A short time later, the driver stopped the horses near some trees. "Do you know where you are?" he whispered.

On their knees, Libby, Caleb, and Peter looked over the high sides of the wagon. Down the block lay a depot with a large sign that said *Springfield*. Tracks ran along one side of the building, then disappeared into the darkness.

Again the Underground Railroad conductor whispered, "You're on your own now. The good Lord go with you."

Caleb stretched out his hand. "Thanks for everything."

When Libby, Caleb, and Peter jumped down from the end of the wagon, the driver barely lifted the reins and the horses responded. As the wagon rolled away, Caleb pointed to the trees. Without a sound he led them into the shadows, then stopped. When he leaned against a tree, his tall slender body seemed to blend with the bark.

To Libby it felt as if Caleb waited forever. As the hours stretched long, she grew more and more restless. But Caleb stood without moving. Libby had no doubt that he waited to be sure they brought no trouble on the Underground Railroad conductor and his family. Together they watched to see if anyone had followed them from the livery stable.

Following Caleb's lead, Peter stood next to him. With the

same blond hair and blue eyes, he looked like Caleb's younger brother.

Finally in the gray light before dawn, Caleb took Peter's slate. After losing his hearing through brain fever, Peter had learned sign language at the school for the deaf in Jacksonville, Illinois. Now Libby and Caleb were learning sign language from him. The slate helped them explain things they didn't know how to sign.

Using the shortcut words he and Peter had worked out between them, Caleb explained about Jordan and his daddy. Then he pointed to the depot and wrote, "Telegram. Libby's pa."

Along the street no one moved. In the half-light Libby heard only the twittering of birds. Then Caleb slung his knapsack onto his back, and Peter did the same.

"Let's go." For the first time all night, Caleb spoke aloud.

Just hearing his voice made Libby feel better. Anxious to get moving, she tossed her head and her long auburn hair swung about the knapsack on her back. Libby thought about what was inside—a change of clothes, needle and thread, sewing scissors, packets of food, drawing paper and pencils. *Am I ready for whatever lies ahead?*

Then Libby knew. *If I'm not, there's no turning back. No second chance.*

~ CHAPTER 2 ~

Peter's Fear



Caleb, Libby, and Peter stepped out. Their watchfulness while racing through the darkness, then waiting for dawn, had been worth it. They seemed to have succeeded in getting away from any slave catcher who might follow them to find Jordan and Micah Parker.

"I can't believe it!" Libby exclaimed. "Jordan and his daddy are safely on their way in the wagon. We can walk down the street without wondering if someone will know that they're fugitives."

Libby took a deep breath, just enjoying the fresh air, still cool with the morning. Thinking about how everything had suddenly turned out all right, she laughed aloud. "Not only are Jordan and his daddy together. We have the stolen money!"

But Caleb was more cautious. "You mean we know where the money is. We don't have it in the right places. The money from Jordan's church isn't safe till he turns it over to John Jones in Chicago. And we still need to get your pa's money to Galena by August fifteenth."

Libby knew exactly what Caleb was saying. Galena was in the northwest corner of Illinois, while they were still near the center of the state. For two weeks they had tried to stay ahead

of the clock to find money stolen from Libby's father, who was captain of the steamboat *Christina*. But now Libby felt impatient with Caleb. She didn't want anything to spoil her excitement about all the good things that had happened.

Though only a few inches taller than Libby, Caleb walked faster. Just then he reached for Peter's slate. While still walking, Caleb tried to write. Finally he gave up and stopped long enough to scribble, "I hope we hear from Libby's pa. That would make it much easier to find each other."

Holding up one hand, Peter wiggled his fingers. "See?" Because he could hear until he was seven, Peter knew how to speak. "It'd be easier if you learned to spell with your fingers. You can talk even when you walk."

Caleb grinned, returned the slate, and set out again. With Libby and Peter half running to keep up with Caleb's strides, they hurried the rest of the way to the Springfield train depot.

Libby's thoughts leaped ahead, even more quickly than her feet. "Can you imagine what Pa will think when he hears our story?" she asked Caleb. "I can't wait to give him the stolen money and see him pay off that loan!"

Caleb's blue eyes held a warning. "If we don't find your pa, he won't get to Galena by Saturday. He'll lose the *Christina*!"

Again Libby pushed aside Caleb's words. "That's five days. Pa will make it in time. I know he will. We'll find him. We'll give him the money, and everything will be all right."

"If nothing else goes wrong."

Like a clanging bell, Libby heard the words in her mind. *If nothing else goes wrong*. She remembered the fugitive slave laws and the danger to Jordan and his father. She remembered all that had kept them from finding the money before now.

Then she pushed her anxious thoughts away. Today, after their long struggle, the sun was shining. Jordan and his daddy were safe. Today only good things could happen.

Inside the depot they found a man using a telegraph. As he jiggled a lever, Libby heard short and long clicks and knew he was sending Morse code. To her it seemed a miracle that a message could fly over a line of wire stretched between two cities.

Eleven days before, when Libby, Caleb, Jordan, and Peter left the *Christina* at Alton, Illinois, Libby's father, Captain Norstad, continued down the Mississippi River to St. Louis. Before separating, they had agreed to use the Alton train depot as a place to leave messages. Only yesterday Libby and Caleb had telegraphed Libby's father to tell him they were in Springfield.

As the telegraph operator looked up, Libby asked, "Any message from my pa?"

"Here you are!" The telegraph operator handed Libby a piece of paper. Eagerly she read it:

GLAD FOR GOOD NEWS STOP
MEET IN QUINCY AUGUST 12 STOP

Libby stared at the message, then showed it to Caleb and Peter. "If Pa is glad for our good news, why does he say stop?" she asked Caleb.

"Stop means the end of the sentence," Caleb told her. "It's like a period. Your pa wants us to meet him at Quincy, Illinois, on Wednesday, August twelfth."

"Two days from now." Libby looked forward to seeing her

father. She wrote to Peter. "We can meet Pa in time."

But Caleb's eyes had that uneasy look again. He turned back to the telegraph operator. "The next train to the Junction at North Bloomington. When does it leave?"

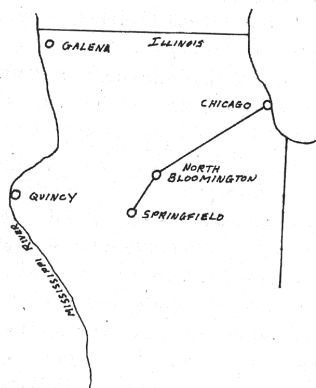
After several more questions, Caleb led Libby and Peter away from the telegraph operator. The depot had two waiting rooms. Both were filled with benches and looked much alike. However, one room was set aside for women and children. The other, for men and boys, had spittoons—small brass pots—for the men who chewed tobacco.

Instead of separating into two rooms, Libby and the boys went outside. Under the shelter of an overhanging roof, they sat down on crates ready to be shipped.

"What's wrong, Caleb?" Libby asked while eating breakfast.

Picking up a stick, Caleb started to draw in the dirt. "We're here," he said, making a round hole that he labeled *Springfield*. Making a second hole, Caleb marked it *North Bloomington*, then drew a line from Springfield.

From North Bloomington Caleb drew a longer line to Chicago. Then he marked the Mississippi River, Quincy, and Galena.



Peter understood. “From the Junction at North Bloomington, Jordan and his daddy will go to Chicago. We’ll take whatever trains we need to meet Libby’s pa in Quincy. But how will Jordan and his daddy stay safe?”

Safe. As much as Libby wanted to forget the word, she couldn’t. *All my life I’ve wanted to be safe,* she thought.

During the four years after her mother’s death, Libby lived with her Auntie Vi in Chicago. Since coming to be with her father on the *Christina*, Libby had learned a new meaning of the word *safe*. She and Pa and Caleb and his grandmother all worked to help runaway slaves be safe. Often Libby longed for a safe place for herself—a place where no danger could touch her or Pa or the people they loved.

Pulling forward a strand of her long auburn hair, Libby started twisting it around her finger. In the early morning sunlight her hair shone red gold. Libby felt proud of her hair and thankful that she had inherited the color from her mother. She also felt glad that she had the same brown eyes as both Pa and Ma. Even now, Libby missed her mother.

Sometimes it was just a fleeting thought—something such as the color of her hair that reminded Libby of days gone by. Other times she felt the deep ache of loneliness. *I wish I could ask Ma what it’s like to grow up—to be a girl ready to get married, to be a woman. That would feel safe, too, just talking with Ma.*

Libby’s Auntie Vi had worked hard, trying to turn Libby into a perfect lady. It wasn’t hard to remember what Auntie said about her. “*Somehow that girl always manages to attract trouble! I just want to give up on her!*”

Those hurtful words had given Libby a bigger wish. “I want

a never-give-up family,” she told Pa more than once. “A family that believes in me even when I’m not perfect.”

But now Libby felt proud. *Look at all I’ve done, helping with the Underground Railroad. Someday Auntie will know I’m a person she shouldn’t have given up on. I wish she could see me this minute!*

Just then Peter broke into Libby’s thoughts. “Let’s get the money so we’re ready to leave.” Without waiting another minute, Peter set out for the police station.

He looks the happiest I’ve ever seen him, Libby thought. Dexter, the man Peter dreaded, was behind bars here in Springfield.

Little more than twenty-four hours before, in the early hours of Sunday morning, Peter had stood up to Dexter, the thief who stole money from both Pa and Jordan. With courage Peter had revealed who Dexter was—a man who tried to teach him to steal.

But when Peter reached the door of the police station, he suddenly stopped. “I don’t want Dexter to see me,” he said. “He’s really upset with me.”

Libby couldn’t blame Peter for wanting to stay out of Dexter’s way. She dreaded even the thought of what an angry Dexter might do. In spite of the morning sunlight, Libby shivered.

Reaching around Peter, Caleb pulled open the door and walked in boldly. To Libby’s great relief she couldn’t see the jail cells from where they came in. Libby felt sure the cells were just beyond a closed door. But Peter kept glancing around, as though wondering if Dexter was looking over his shoulder.

“Good morning!” The policeman who arrested Dexter greeted Libby and Peter like old friends. When Libby introduced

Caleb, the policeman stretched out his hand and shook it.

“So you’re all together again,” he said warmly. “Then I expect you want to travel on.”

From a nearby safe, the policeman took the two bags of money he had held for safekeeping. One bag was Jordan’s share—the money collected by his church in Galena. The other held the money stolen from Pa’s safe on the *Christina*. When the policeman set the two bags on a table, Libby realized they had a problem. “We can’t carry money like that.”

“I have a basket you can have,” he said. “It will look as if you’re carrying food for a picnic.”

Libby set Pa’s bag of money in the basket and covered it with food from her knapsack, then a towel offered by the policeman. Caleb divided Jordan’s share of the money three ways. He, Libby, and Peter stuffed the bills in their knapsacks.

As they started to leave, the policeman stopped them. “Just a minute. Your friend Allan Pinkerton left a message for you.” Taking an envelope from a drawer, the policeman handed it to Libby.

Libby started to tear the envelope open. She couldn’t imagine what the great detective wanted to tell her. Then she noticed how nervous Peter looked. He was glancing over his shoulder again. A line of sweat stood out on his upper lip.

Forgetting the message from Mr. Pinkerton, Libby turned back to the policeman. “How is your prisoner doing?”

“He had one visitor last night—a man I didn’t know. Seemed to be from out of town.”

By now Peter had edged over to the outside door, and Libby felt sure he wanted to leave. After thanking the policeman for all he had done, she and Caleb followed Peter outside.

When the sunlight caught Peter's hair, he seemed even more blond. But Libby also saw the scared look in his eyes. "What's the matter?" she asked him, using signs Peter had taught her.

As though not wanting to admit how frightened he felt, Peter straightened his shoulders. "When I told Dexter I didn't want to steal, he said, 'If you ever go against me, I'll get even.'"

Dexter had threatened Libby's pa the same way. Holding up a clenched fist, he shook it at Pa, saying, "*If it's the last thing I do, I'll get even with you!*" And Dexter *had* gotten even.

Trying to forget her own memories, Libby wrote on the slate. "You stood up to Dexter anyway. I was proud of you." Yet for that very reason Libby felt afraid.

Peter glanced up from the slate. "Dexter said he'd hunt me to the end of the earth to get even."

Libby couldn't ignore her own scary thoughts. *If Dexter ever got out of jail, what would he do to Peter?*

Again she tried to offer comfort. "Pa says that sometimes we have to pay a price for doing the right thing."

When the scared look in Peter's eyes didn't change, Libby felt sure she had said the wrong thing. Glancing up, she wondered if a cloud had passed over the sun. The morning sky was blue and clear with no clouds in sight. Just the same, Libby's uneasiness would not go away.

By the time they returned to the Springfield depot, a long line of passengers waited to board the train. Caleb hurried into the depot to telegraph Libby's father, telling him to send any message to the train depot at North Bloomington.

As Libby and Peter took their place in line, she noticed a tall, thin man board the railroad car. Libby poked Peter.

“Mr. Lincoln,” he said. “Remember how he carried important papers inside his hat? I wonder where he’s going?”

Moments after the conductor called his final “All a-boooooard!” Caleb caught up to them. Libby showed her pass to the conductor, then started up the steps. At the top she turned for one last look at Springfield. Though she had been in the city only a short time, she liked it there. She especially loved the big capitol building with its tall pillars and great dome.

As Peter and Caleb stepped up beside her, the train whistled twice. Railroad cars clanked together, then jerked.

Just then Libby saw a man running down the street. “Stop!” he cried. “Stop!”

With a *chug, chug, chug*, the train started to roll. Suddenly Libby saw who the man was. Grabbing Peter’s arm, she pointed. “The policeman!”

As the train picked up speed, the man waved frantically. “Dexter!” he called. “He escaped!”

“Escaped?” Caleb shouted.

“When I brought him breakfast, he was gone!”