

Sudden Squall

written by Avi ~ illustrated by Lauren Castillo

Chapter Two: Casting Off

a breakfast serials story

THE STORY SO FAR: It's 1884, and the *Neptune*, a side paddle freighter, is steaming for New York City. On board are fourteen-year-old Thaddeus and his younger sister, Abigail. Pa Bates—Captain Bates—is at the wheel. But a squall is coming on.

On the *Neptune*'s already crowded deck, Thad jotted down each farmer's name and what he brought in the accounts book as the bushels of lettuce, beans, peas, and potatoes were left. He'd make more notes when they delivered the goods to city buyers.

He wished they would get started. Located amidships, the tall black iron funnel was spewing black smoke. Mr. Pordine had the engine ready. The longer they waited, the more irritable his father would become.

Thad looked out into the bay. The *Mermaid* had pulled away from the dock. Her captain, Captain Stahl, using a megaphone, had taunted, "See you in the city!"

Up in the pilothouse, a frowning Captain Bates was observing the loading. His beard—shaped in homage to his hero, Abraham Lincoln—gave him a look of great dignity. But Thad could see he was unhappy that the *Mermaid* had gone.

Right then Thad didn't care. He was still thinking about his sister's remark, "Pa won't let you."

Pa had gone to sea as a cabin boy, in peacetime. The war changed everything. The navy needed men. Advancement was rapid. Pa moved up fast and was a first mate at the Battle of Vicksburg. By the time the Civil War was over, he was captain on a Monitor class ship.

For Ma, the navy meant war's awfulness. That's why—when she became ill—she made Pa promise that Thad

and Abigail would stay in school. When Ma died, Pa kept his word.

The last farmer left his bushels of beans. Now we can go, thought Thad.

To get to Manhattan, the *Neptune* steamed from Old Port, New Jersey, cruised briefly on the Atlantic Ocean, passed into New York's Lower Harbor, cut through the Narrows into Upper Harbor, then into the Hudson River, where they docked at Pier Sixty-Four in Manhattan. With the

Neptune powered by two large paddle wheels, one portside, one starboard, it took a bit more than an hour to sail the twenty miles.

"Pa," Thad called, "anything I can do to help?"

"Just get those numbers right."

"I'm trying, Pa!"

Upset, Thad gazed out into the bay. Its smell was strong, a mix of brine, fish, tar, oysters, and smoke. More than the usual number of ships, sail and steam, were afloat: ocean packets, harbor steamers like the *Neptune*, coastal steamers, even a huge, graceful clipper ship, plus plenty of small fishing and oyster boats. Smoke billowed from the steamers. Sails were taut. Thad supposed they were all trying to beat the weather.

Squalls could be severe.

It is all too frustrating, Thad thought. He just wanted to please his pa, convince him he could do lots of things—including being a good sailor. He already was a good student.

Abigail approached. "Mr. Oliver isn't doing well."

Thad looked around. The first mate was on the open deck, securing the cargo. A large, strong man with massive hands, Mr. Oliver's head was bald but he had a beard like his hero, President Ulysses Simpson Grant.



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Once the *Neptune* was underway, Mr. Oliver's job was to keep everything shipshape. When there was need, he'd spell Captain Bates at the wheel. Most times he scurried about like a skittish crab, but this morning he was listless. Occasionally he pulled out a red handkerchief and mopped his sweaty brow—and it wasn't warm out.

"Mr. Oliver!" Thad called. "What's wrong?"

Mr. Oliver looked around. "Stomach's acting up."

"Want us to do the casting off?" Thad asked.

Mr. Oliver shook his head. "You know your pa's rules."

Seeing Thad's face, he added, "Hey, I know you could do it." He turned toward Captain Bates and shouted, "Everything stowed proper, Captain!"

"Thad, you got it all down?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then let's cast off!"

Using a ladder, Thad and Abigail clambered into the pilothouse. Abigail took her usual place when they sailed, sitting on the forward window ledge, legs dangling out. From there she could see everything, and, when told, pulled the ship's whistle cord, something she dearly loved to do.

Thad stood next to his father. Sometimes the captain did let him steer. But only for short times. When Thad did take the wheel, Abigail called him "first mate Thad." Pa didn't like that, but Mr. Oliver, a stickler about boats, said Thad was a good sailor. That made Thad feel good. But his father never said anything like that—ever. And Thad's times at the wheel were brief.

"Give 'er a pull, Abigail," Captain Bates said now.

Abigail yanked the whistle cord. The steam-powered whistle sounded loudly, causing the screeching sea gulls to dip and turn overhead.

Captain Bates leaned toward the speaking tube—a brass tube that ran to the engine room below—and shouted, "Casting off, Mr. Pordine. Engine at four strokes. Shovel it on! We need to catch the *Mermaid*."

"Yes, sir!" came the squawky response.

Mr. Oliver threw off the ropes that held the *Neptune* to the dock. Black smoke poured from the funnel. The side paddles turned. The ship began to move. But the *Mermaid*

was already a hundred yards ahead.

Thad kept his eyes on Mr. Oliver. The first mate kept mopping his brow. Thad looked at his father. Captain Bates didn't appear concerned. He was scrutinizing the bay. The water surface was choppy than normal, with rolling waves and frothy whitecaps. The sky was gray, with a fairly stiff breeze blowing in from the east, hauling in darker clouds. Further out, Thad could see a soft gray wall of mist creeping in like an unrolling rug. The whitecaps on the water reminded him of whipped cream. But these waves weren't sweet. Not a real squall. Not yet.

"Thad," said his father, "go double-check your accounts."

Thad, feeling like he was being pushed away as usual, tried to protest: "But—"

"Thad, I'm captain here."

Reluctantly, Thad moved from the wheel.

to be continued...

2

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