

UPRIVER

written by Alexandria LaFaye ~ Illustrated by Peter Catalanotto

Chapter Two: Paid Ticket Home

a breakfast serials story

THE STORY SO FAR: *It's 1867 in the Dakota Territory. Eleven-year-old Iah Thomas just witnessed the kidnapping of a girl his age. Too terrified to try and help her, he is consumed by guilt.*

Mr. Cutter had me pinned to the counter like a bug as he said, "They found blood on the window sill, I hear."

Remembering that rough trade hurting Miss Vinca made me shrink up inside. Felt like I'd done her harm by doing nothing.

Uncle Emmett patted the flour Cutter'd ordered. "Well, I bet they'll find that girl safe as a baby in her bunting."

"What tells you that?"

"Faith." Uncle Emmet handed him the flour.

"Then you better hope those kidnappers are praying folk." Mr. Cutter laughed as he left.

The laughter made me feel cold inside, so I had to ask, "How you know she's safe?"

"Because I've met Garrett Hemshaw. He'd end his own life to keep his daughter from harm. He'll give up his water rights and let his cattle go without if it means saving her."

"Really?" I'd heard about the battles among ranchers for water, land, and cattle. Rumors of gold deposits on ranching land just made matters worse. I'd seen the damage these battles could do to a man first hand. Not a month ago, a fella walked in who'd been branded in the face for bringing his cattle onto another man's land. Ranchers had been known to even kill each other over such matters. I prayed Vinca's father could prevent such a thing from happening to her.

But before I could settle on the idea of her being safe, trouble walked in.

Saw right off that those boatmen had been sailing with death. The lot of them dragged their feet as if their bones had melted into lead. Their skin looked pale and waxy like the seal over a jar of preserves.

"Rough passage?" Uncle Emmett asked. "Need a doctor?"

"This old backwater town has a doc?" asked a fella with gloves hanging from his pocket.

"Yup."

"We had one, but he died." The young fella laughed.

"Quiet, Mike." A tall man with a drawn, bony face stepped up. "Had a bout of fever, lost some folks, but it's passed now. We're looking for supplies and a few hands." The pitch and roll of his gravelly voice said he hailed from Louisiana. New Orleans, maybe.

"You're turning about, then?" Uncle Emmett set his jaw. He'd been trying for weeks to find a crew fit to take me on for a trip back to St. Louie.

I'd come upriver last spring when Mama took sick. She'd sent me North so I'd stay sound. Now that she felt better, Uncle Emmett had to find me a way home. But it didn't seem right leaving before that girl Vinca could be found. Felt like seeing some fella light a fire, then walking away.

"No, sir," the tall man said, rubbing the blisters on his palm. "We're making the final run to Fort Union."



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I did want to see that old fort before they tore it down.
“Boy here, might be handy,” Uncle Emmett nodded toward me.

How handy could I be? Couldn’t even lift a finger to save a kidnapped girl.

“Could use us a run-about,” said the fella they called Mike.

“What’s your name, boy?” the tall man asked. With his ordering ways, I figured him for the pilot.

“Iah.”

“Speak up!” The pilot’s deep growl of a voice made me jump.

“I-ah!” I shouted. “Like Jere-mi-ah.”

“Your mama forget the rest of your name?” Mike asked. I felt like saying, “God forget to give you brains?” But I kept my lips shut.

“You know your boats, son?” the pilot asked.

“I know a kevel from a bull rail.”

Mike laughed. “They’re so hard to tell apart.”

“Hush.” The pilot pushed Mike aside to get a closer look at me.

“How’s his stomach?” he asked. “Won’t be hanging over the rail, will he?”

“That boy could swallow a bellyful of minnows and be steady,” Uncle Emmett said. “We came up on the *Holton*. Boy took to the water like he’d been born in a pilot house.”

The man in the back finally spoke. “If he doesn’t work out, Carroll, you can just drop him here in Boson’s Point on the way back down.”

Carroll, the pilot, nodded. Turning to Uncle Emmett, he said, “I’ll pay him \$10.00 for the trip.”

“Make it \$20.00.”

“For a boy?” Carroll barked.

Quiet fella in back said, “You have enough payroll to pay ten dead men. You can spare that for a boy.”

“Leave it to the Liberator to go defending some boy.” Mike rolled his eyes. I wondered what he meant.

Carroll mulled it over. “Fine. Where can we find more men?”

“The saloon’s a good place to start,” said Uncle Emmett.

“If you ask me, it’s the best place to stop!” Mike shouted.

Carroll pushed Mike back, saying, “Round up what we need.” Then he pointed to me. “Be to the docks by dawn. Ship’s the *Capitol*.”

“I could use a drink, Mr. Jack,” Mike said. But Carroll just walked off, with the quiet man following.

Mike turned to me, saying, “Don’t you worry, boy. I’ll be sure you earn your keep.” Then he set to collecting all they needed.

That Mike had me spooked, but Uncle Emmett swatted my thigh, saying, “Well, Iah, you’ll be heading home with money in your pocket.”

Mama always said, “If you catch one of God’s wishes, you don’t throw it back into the river.” Mama needed me home, and Uncle Emmett needed me to start bringing in some money to help make up back payments. Guilt or no guilt, I’d have to leave the finding of Vinca Hemshaw in the Lord’s hands and get back to the work He’d set me to, helping Mama.

Still, something about that crew didn’t set right. Couldn’t shake the coldness that crept down my back when I thought on facing more than the remnants of sickness and the risk of a tricky taskmaster like that Mr. Mike. Began to wonder just what else might be lying in wait on the *Capitol*

to be continued...

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