

Sudden Squall

written by Avi - illustrated by Lauren Castillo

Chapter One: Thad's World

a breakfast serials story

The first thing Thaddeus Bates heard that spring morning in 1884 was, "Hoist your anchors, starfish!"

That's how Pa Bates—captain of the side-paddle steam freighter *Neptune*—always woke Thaddeus and his sister, Abigail.

Thad, in his upper bunk, opened his eyes. Abigail, in the lower bunk, yawned and said, "Guess what I dreamed? That we lived in a land house."

"What made you dream that?" asked Thad.

"Don't know. What's living on land like?"

"Can't remember much," said Thad. "Pa got the *Neptune* when I was four." He was fourteen now.

"I wasn't even born," said Abigail, eleven.

Their boat, the *Neptune*, carried vegetables six days a week from New Port, New Jersey, to New York City. The crew—first mate Mr. Oliver and engineer Mr. Pordine—lived on shore. But Pa, Thad, and Abigail lived on board.

The *Neptune* had four white-walled cabins with varnished wood and bright brass. There was a sleeping cabin for Captain Bates, a toilet head with tiny shower, and a kitchen galley, with sink, cook-stove, and food locker. Thad and Abigail shared a cabin with bunk beds so tight it was impossible to sit. There was barely enough room to stand. Clothing was stored in a closet opposite. The third wall had a hatchway that led to other cabins. In the fourth wall was a porthole.

The *Neptune* rocked. "Look and see if Mr. Oliver is finished," said Thad. The first mate was in charge of loading and unloading the boat.

Abigail peered through the porthole. "Still loading. And it looks squally."

"Bad?"

"Gray an' gusty. You know what Pa says, 'A spring storm can spring at you.'"

"What's the *Mermaid* doing?"

The *Mermaid*, the paddle freighter that shared the same dock, also carried vegetables to the city. The first freighter to reach Manhattan docks got the best prices.

"She's still loading," said Abigail.

"Hate it when she goes first," said Thad. "Pa gets upset."

The hatchway opened. Captain Bates looked in. "Hey, where's breakfast? It's chilly out here, and Mr. Oliver's peckish."

"We're coming," Thad said.

"Bout time," said the captain. "You know ship rules. You're supposed to be up half an hour before we pull out." He ducked away.

Abigail sighed. Small, and quick to move, she had bright eyes that gave her a merry look. "How come Pa has so many rules?"

"He likes a tight ship," said Thad.

"How come?"

"Don't know." Thad thought a moment. "Maybe having rules means being sure of things."

"What things?"

"Us. He's been like that since Ma died."

Thad dressed quickly. He was tall and wiry—a good



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foot taller than Abigail, his head crowned by glossy black hair. He moved toward the galley.

"Do we have to go to school?" Abigail called.

Thad paused at the hatchway. "You know Pa wants us to go."

"He only had three years of school 'fore he joined the navy."

"Those were war days," said Thad. "Go check on Mr. Oliver."

Abigail lingered. "Maybe with Mr. Oliver not feeling good Pa will let us stay on board."

"Pa will decide. Skedaddle!"

With Abigail gone, Thad busied himself in the galley making breakfast. He didn't mind doing little chores. They needed to be done. He just wished he was allowed to do some of the big ones.

Abigail returned. "Pa says hurry. Mr. Pordine's asking too."

"What about Mr. Oliver?"

"Don't feel like eating."

Thad filled two tin plates with thick bread slices and sizzling sausages. Abigail poured hot cups of black coffee.

Abigail took Mr. Pordine's breakfast to him. He was down in the engine room with the coal-stoked steam engine that drove the paddle wheels. Thad took Pa's breakfast to the pilot house—atop the family living quarters—where the steering wheel, speaking tube, and whistle cord were.

"Thanks," murmured the captain. He was intent on the bay and gray clouds.

"I suppose Abigail and I better head for school," said Thad.

"Hold on. Maybe not."

"Why?"

"Mr. Oliver's accounts get mucked when he's feeling poorly. Anyway, you keep better numbers."

"Pa," said Thad, "I can handle the wheel, too."

When Pa said nothing, Thad said, "Should Abigail go?"

"Suppose she better stay too," said Captain Bates. He stared out at the weather and then shook his head.

"Thad, being a captain is fine, for me. But I keep tellin' you: you're a whole lot smarter than I ever was. You're due for something better. That's what your mother wanted. I promised her you'd get schooling. Anyway, steering this tub in bad weather isn't fun."

Thad thought of objecting but held his tongue. He never won this argument. On one hand, his father would say how intelligent he was. Next moment he'd suggest Thad wasn't smart enough to pilot the boat.

Back in the galley, Thad and Abigail ate their breakfast.

"Thanks for getting me out of school," said Abigail, grinning.

"It was Pa. You do need schooling, you know."

Abigail laughed. "Pa's always saying you're the one that has to be something important."

"Maybe," said Thad.

"Always saying Ma wanted you to be something big. President, even. Long as it's not tied to water."

"Can't tie water," said Thad. "Anyway, I'm going to join the navy. Get on a really big boat. Be captain. Go 'round the world."

Abigail drained her milk and coffee, dropped the cup in the sink, then hurried out. At the hatchway she stuck out her tongue and called back: "Pa won't let you."

"Don't care!" Thad shouted.

While he cleaned up the galley, Thad thought: *Glad I got school smarts. So what? I can be a ship captain too.*

A whistle blast sounded. Thad understood: the *Mermaid* was leaving. That meant a race to the city. Thad hated racing. Pa would be tense.

He peered out the porthole. Looked like a squall coming. *Hope the storm holds off*, he thought, and wondered if it would.

to be continued...

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