

UPRIVER

written by Alexandria LaFaye - Illustrated by Peter Catalanotto

Chapter One: Fear

a breakfast serials story

The year is 1867, and Iah Thomas, an eleven-year-old boy from St. Louis, is working at his uncle's trading post in the Dakota Territory while his mother recovers from an illness.

I was sleeping through a quiet Dakota night when a sound like a snag ripping through the hull of a boat pulled me clean out of bed. On a river that sound meant "head for the rails and be ready to swim ashore," so I scrambled for the

only window in the loft. Had my hands on the sill before my senses caught up with me and I realized the nearest boat sat at the dock across town. That didn't settle me none. Not with what I could see.

A man pulling a kicking girl past a broken shutter, with his hand over her mouth so she couldn't scream. The red hair flipping this way and that told me the man had his hands on Miss Vinca Hemshaw, the girl who stomped on my foot when she jumped off the Pick City stage that very morning.

I'd seen a body pulled out of house and home for having no rent money, furniture thrown into the street, wife screaming, kids crying. But nothing like this. The way that man yanked her into the dirt had a killing kind of edge to it. Swallowed the scream right out of my throat. Such a

yell might turn that man on me. He and the fella crawling out of a back window would be tying me up and carting me off just like that girl. I'd never see my mama again.

Still, I should've screamed. Could've gone out that window onto the woodpile and ran after them as they headed for the trees with that girl over one shoulder like a sack. But I only watched. Just sat there staring, praying someone'd hear the ruckus and come running. My Uncle Emmett

maybe. He had himself a gun. He could stop those men. If I could only scream. Send up the alarm. But my feet felt as good as nailed to the floor as I watched her white gown disappear into the blackness between the trees.

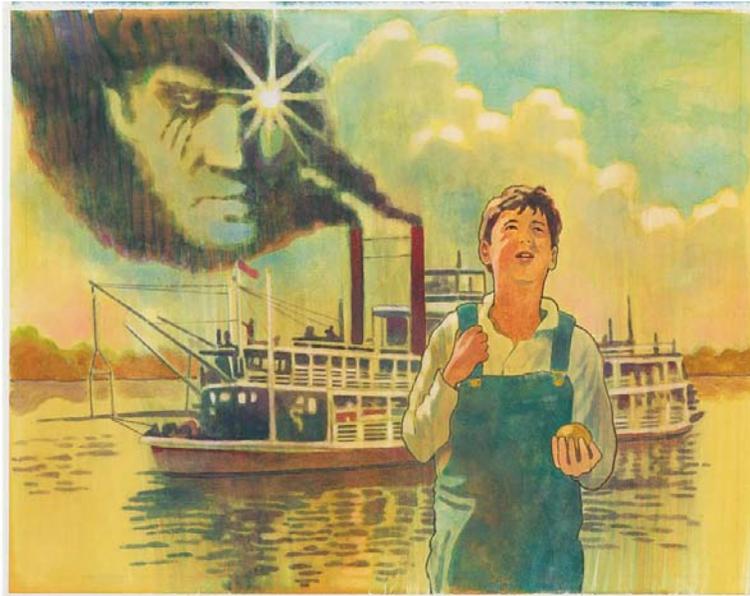
Vinca's Uncle Abel came barging through the back window, a gag still hanging around his neck, rubbing his rope-raw wrists as he tracked the kidnapers

toward the woods, his wife calling after him, "Abel, take a gun!"

He didn't turn back. He didn't worry after his own self, he just ran right into those trees, fighting to find his niece.

Not me. I did nothing but sit there listening to Vinca's Aunt Mava send up the alarm. Get people running.

Uncle Emmett tried to roust me with a shout from below, but when I didn't answer he didn't take the time to dally. I heard him stomp into his boots and pull his gun off the rack, then head out running.



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bawling. Near about had me wishing they'd carted me off into the woods instead of that girl Vinca.

Come dawn, when Uncle Emmett came back, I'd worked myself up so bad, had trouble moving. Sent Uncle Emmett to yelling, and he'd never so much as raised his voice to me. "Iah Thomas, get yourself down here!"

Tried to call back, but my voice had gone missing. "Iah!"

Found myself shaking as I backed down the ladder. "You sick, boy?" Uncle Emmett asked as I stepped onto the floor. He checked me for fever. "You look a fright. What is it?"

"I . . ."

He looked toward the Hemshaw place.

"You seen what happened, son?"

Started me crying again. All I could do was nod.

"What did you see?" Emmett had me by the arms, kind of squeezing me, half holding me together, half trying to push the words out.

"Just two men. Two regular men." Truth to tell, those men could've been President Johnson himself and I wouldn't have known the difference. Never paid any mind to their faces, just their hands, their rough could-put-a-hurt-on-you hands.

"Ain't there nothing you can remember? Their clothes? Color of their hair? Anything?"

Only thing my eyes could see was the way they put a hurt on that poor girl, but I did nothing. His words poured into my ears like hot metal, dripping down through my whole body, burning me clean to the bone. Couldn't even force a word out.

Closing his eyes, he shook his head and turned away. "Never known a boy who gets so froze up by fear."

"I'm sorry. Real sorry. I'll go looking for her. Tell

the Hemshaws what I saw. Anything."

Uncle Emmett dropped into a chair, exhausted. "Truth is, with how fast those fellas came and went, nobody could've stopped them. Had horses waiting for them in the woods. Went straight for Sandy Creek. Rode in it until you couldn't track them no more." He shook his head again. "Ain't that the way of it. Old Garrett Hemshaw's fighting a loosing battle. His brother says he got himself into a war over some water rights, so he sent his daughter here to keep her safe, but those men just tracked her straight to her very bed, now didn't they?"

Still frozen, I said nothing.

"Iah, if those fellas can track her clear across the Territory of Montana into Dakota country, they would've had that child even if you screamed your head plumb off."

He said it. *He* might even have believed it. But *I* sure didn't feel it. I followed him in to open up the trading post, praying for a way I could help that girl. That is, if she was even still alive to help.

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to be continued...

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