

Mary Randolph shifted her gaze from the muddy waters of the Mississippi River flowing under the steamboat to the scratched and gouged promenade deck rocking gently beneath her feet. In spite of the sun shining overhead, both were dull, lusterless. The same as she. Tears flooded her eyes. She blinked them away and squared her shoulders, refusing the thought, determined that no remnant of the past would cloud this first glimpse of her future.

The tempo of the engines driving the paddle wheels slowed. A raucous blast from the boat's whistle split the air. Mary gripped the rail with both hands and peered out at the city of St. Louis, thankful for the sudden downdraft of woodsmoke from the steamer's tall stacks that made her eyes smart and water, hiding any betraying glister left from the tears.

The Fair Weather gave another blast of her whistle, slipped into a berth and nosed up to the cobblestone-paved incline that ran back from the river's edge to level off in a street that formed the city's front door. Mary crowded closer to her brother in the sudden press of passengers along the rail and studied the area. Steamboats and other river craft of all descriptions lined the sloping bank, taking on or unloading cargo and passengers. Smokestacks belched plumes of acrid smoke into the warm, moist air. Whistles blew, announcing arrivals and departures. Ship's mates shouted orders to their crews. Chains rattled and ropes squeaked with tension as cargo was taken aboard or lowered to the dock. Hammers pounded as repairs were made. And beneath the din hummed the constant murmur of voices.

Mary blinked the moisture from her eyes and took a step back to use her brother as a wind break while she adjusted her hat. "I did not expect such a hustle and bustle of activity in a frontier city." She shook the long tails of the diaphanous fabric that wrapped around the base of the top hat to fall down her back, and moved forward again to stand at the rail. "There must be at least twenty or twenty-five steamboats docked along this shore, James."

"I make it closer to thirty, perhaps more. It's difficult to tell." James leaned out over the rail as far as he was able and looked up and down the shoreline. "There are so many smokestacks it looks like a forest growing out of the river." He pushed himself erect and placed his mouth close by her ear. "And only six of these steamers are ours—including this one. I shall write father of the stiff competition immediately."

Mary released her hold on the rail, stared at the flecks of peeling paint on her gloves and lowered her voice to match his. "Do you suppose father knew of the neglected, weather-beaten condition of the ships before he bought the line? If the Fair Weather is any indication, the vessels of the Mississippi and Missouri steamer line are in very poor condition."

"He knew. Wilson had all the information when he came to St. Louis to make the deal in father's stead." James leaned closer to her. "And father knows why. His agent reported someone has been letting the ships fall into disrepair while they skim off the profits. I am to discover the culprit."

Mary stopped brushing her hands together to rid her gloves of the paint specks and looked up at him. "So that is the reason for our secrecy?"

"Exactly." He turned his mouth back to her ear. "If anyone learns our father is the new owner, the thieves will cover their tracks and disappear. We must be cautious and trust no one with that information until I uncover the truth."

"You are warning me to silence?" Mary shot him a look of disbelief. "Surely you do not think anyone will learn our father purchased the line from me? Why, if I were a devout person I would be on my knees this very moment giving thanks to God. This is the perfect situation for me." Her face tightened. "Of course, if it were not for God I would not need father's anonymity." The words came hissing out in a bitter whisper. She pressed her trembling lips together and turned away from the flash of sympathy in her brother's eyes.

"Mary, listen—"

She shook her head. Wind gusted over the rail, snatched the long, flowing tails of fabric on her hat and whipped them forward again. She brushed the filmy fabric back from her face and swallowed the tears that threatened to expose her heart.

"Mr. Randolph?"

"Blast!" James sucked in air and held it. She glanced at him through her lowered lashes, saw his frown, and the threat of tears fled. A smile tugged at her lips. She, Sarah and James all used the "hold and count" to gain control when they were upset or annoyed. It was one of the gems of wisdom their mother taught them. Mother. Homesickness washed over her like the river water whispering along the shore.

"We will discuss this later." James hissed the words into her ear and turned. "I am James Randolph."

Mary watched a heavy-set man, garbed in a black suit, shoulder his way through the milling crowd of passengers to stand beside them. She straightened as the man peered at her, his gray eyes magnified by the wire-rimmed glasses perched on his slightly bulbous nose. He dipped his head in a polite bow and looked back at her brother. Surprise—no doubt at James's youth—flickered across his face, was quickly replaced by an expression of polite respect.

"Eli Goodwin at your service, Mr. Randolph. I am the bookkeeper of the Mississippi and Missouri steamer line. Captain Lewis sent word of your arrival, and I have come to escort you to the manager's residence. Mr. Thomas, the former manager, vacated the premises when he was dismissed from his position. You need not wait for your trunks. I have arranged for them to be delivered."

"How good of you, Mr. Goodwin. My sister and I have had a long journey and are most eager to get settled into our new home."

The man nodded. "I trust your accommodations aboard ship were comfortable and your journey a pleasant one. If you will follow me?" He turned toward the stairs leading down to the main deck.

James stepped back from the railing, creating a small space in the press of people. Mary gathered the long, full skirt of her dark-blue gown close and stepped into the void he had created. Urged forward by her brother's hand at the small of her back, she followed in Eli Goodwin's wake.

Samuel Benton stood at the edge of the river, narrowed his eyes and drifted his gaze over the Fair Weather's main deck. A few frowns, a few curt nods revealed his purpose in coming to the levee had been accomplished—the crew knew the law was present and watching them. Perhaps it would be enough to discourage anyone who might intend damage to the boat. Though it could be that danger no longer existed since the line had changed ownership.

Sam scanned the deck again, paying particular attention to the firemen and engineer. He did not believe all of the disastrous mishaps aboard the three previously destroyed or heavily damaged boats of the Mississippi and Missouri Steamer Line were accidental. Boiler explosions and shipboard fires were common occurrences on the river, but not to so many boats of one line in such close succession. He had a hunch someone had helped the "accidents" along. And, after his talk with Thomas last week, it seemed possible the new owner of the line had a hand in it. It would not be the first time violence had been used to drive down the purchase price of a business. And the secrecy of the buyer's name was a possible indication of his involvement. As Thomas said, what other reason could the new owner have for keeping his identity hidden? Of course, that could be Thomas's anger at being replaced as manager of the line talking.

Sam frowned and raised his gaze to the steamboat's promenade. He would have a clearer picture of the situation after he talked with James Randolph, the man taking Thomas's place as manager of the M and M line. Randolph was somewhere in that milling throng of people and he wanted to meet him, talk with him, find out what sort of man he was. But first he wanted to talk with Captain Lewis and find out who, if any, of the crew Randolph may have talked with during the trip. And it would be interesting to know who Randolph would talk with on his first afternoon in town.

Passengers began to file down the Fair Weather's gangplank in a steady stream. Sam glanced their way, automatically checking faces for known criminals or gamblers with bad reputations. A flutter of blue on the promenade deck caught his attention. Coincidence? Or a signal? He looked up, saw a woman brush at the material adorning her hat. An innocent gesture, then. Still, his policeman's mind registered facts—the woman was taller than average, and thinner, with dark hair. Not particularly pretty—at least not in a conventional way. But there was something arresting about the woman, about the way she held herself.

He watched her wend her way toward the stairs leading down to the main deck, noting her graceful, but purposeful way of moving. There was nothing simpering or clingy about her. And he had a hunch she did not need the protection of the man guiding her through the crowd. She looked quite able to manage without an escort. The way she followed in the wake of that man in front of her, bespoke—

Goodwin! Why was he here? Where was Thomas?

Sam scowled. He had been wondering if Goodwin had a hand in the M and M steamer disasters. Maybe that woman's fussing with her hat was not innocent after all. He tracked the progress of the three of them with new purpose. Yes, the woman was definitely staying close to Goodwin. So the fellow with her must be the new manager. Thomas had not mentioned James Randolph was married. Sam shifted his focus to the man, catalogued facts. Tall, dark, well groomed. Fit, but on the slender side. He could not see his face. The three disappeared in the crush of people at the top of the stairs.

Sam pivoted and loped toward the gangplank. He would talk to Captain Lewis later. "Pardon me, sir." He gave a polite nod to the fellow coming off the gangplank, stepped in front of him and held out his hand to stop the couple beside him. "Pardon me, please." He hurried past them, leaned against a wagon loaded with firewood and riveted his attention on the flow of people. It would be interesting to see if anyone other than Goodwin disembarked with the Randolphs. Or if someone was waiting to meet them. Maybe Thomas had sent Goodwin aboard to find them.

Sam gave the area another quick scan, frowned. It was odd Thomas wouldn't meet his replacement. A tinge of unease reared. He quashed it. Thomas could be waiting at the office. Not the manager's cottage. That went with the post. Thomas had moved out of the house last week. He was at Emily Stanton's boardinghouse on Olive Street now. Or he could be angry enough he refused to meet Randolph and help him settle into his new position.

Three men and two more couples filed past. Sam glanced up. Eli Goodwin was at the top of the gangplank, the Randolphs at his heels. He studied James Randolph's face looking for clues to the man's character, trying to decipher if he was expecting to meet someone. Randolph was young, very young, for such a responsible position. He judged him to be no more than nineteen or twenty. Half Thomas's age. He shifted his gaze to take a quick look at Randolph's wife and peered straight into her eyes. Brown eyes. Not dark. Medium—like her hair. And challenging.

Sam stiffened, told himself to look away—knew it was already too late. She had spotted him studying her husband. He watched them descend, let Eli Goodwin pass and stepped around the wagon into the path of the young couple.

"Mr. Randolph?"

"Yes?" Samuel Benton stopped, looked up at him, dark-blue eyes posing a question.

"I am Samuel Benton, Captain of the St. Louis police." He glanced at Randolph's wife, saw the coolness in her eyes, gave her a polite nod and looked back. "I bid you and your wife welcome to our fair city." He offered his hand, received a firm handshake in return. "I will be calling on you tomorrow. There are a few rules, regulations and other matters about running a steamboat line in St. Louis I want to discuss with you."

James Randolph nodded. "I shall await your visit with you, Captain." He turned to the woman and grinned. "Come dearest, Mr. Goodwin is waiting to show us to our new home." He took hold of her elbow.

The woman laughed. Her countenance changed from cool and austere to fond and amused. Her lips, which had been pressed into a firm line of unyielding resolve, softened, wine-colored fullness. Honey-colored flecks sparkled warmth into her large, long-lashed brown eyes. Sam stared, taken aback. How had he thought her not particularly pretty? She was—

"Stop it, James. Captain Benton cannot know you are teasing."

Her voice was low-pitched for a woman's, soft and easy on his ears. A bit husky. Intriguing. She glanced up at him from beneath her top hat's stiff brim and discovered him looking at her. The warmth in her eyes cooled.

"You have erred in your conclusion, Captain Benton. I am not James's wife, I am his sister."

"Forgive me, Miss Randolph, I assumed—"

"There is no apology or explanation needed, Captain. This is a natural assumption and of no import. I merely wanted to correct your error." The river breeze blew the fabric adorning her hat into her face. She frowned and pushed it back, looked up at him again, all trace of warmth and humor gone. "Now, if you will excuse us—I am weary from the journey and anxious to reach our new home. And to remove this ridiculous hat."

Her coolness killed his smile. "Of course, forgive my poor manners in detaining you." He glanced over at her brother. "Until tomorrow, Mr. Randolph."