

Sudden Squall

Chapter Five Thad at the Wheel

Written by Avi
Illustrated by Lauren Castillo



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THE STORY SO FAR: When Captain Bates boards the disabled *Columbine*, Mr. Oliver goes to help. That means fourteen-year-old Thaddeus must momentarily take the wheel of the *Neptune*. Thad does have his younger sister, Abigail, to help, but the squall is growing fiercer, and the *Neptune* is having problems.

Thad was bewildered. Why were they not moving?

Instead of going forward, the *Neptune* rocked from side to side. Thad could hear the engine whine with the strain. Beneath him, the wet floor of the cabin trembled. As the paddle wheels tore at the water, his heart seemed to be pulling too. "Please, please," he whispered. "Go!"

"More power!" he shouted. "More power!" Abigail echoed into the tube.

The *Neptune* began to inch forward.

"You did it!" exclaimed Abigail. "She's in tow!"

The *Neptune* increased speed.

Thad took a deep breath. The rain was soaking him, making him cold. "Give one long and one short pull to the whistle cord," he called. "Means we've got someone in tow."

Abigail ran to the cord and yanked hard. The whistle shrilled.

"Now," Thad said, "one long pull. That'll tell everybody we're going straight on."

Abigail did what her brother bid.

"Do those two calls every few minutes."

"Okay."

As the *Neptune* moved steadily forward, Thad said, "Where's Oliver?"

"Don't know."

Puzzled, Thad continued to grip the wet steering wheel with both hands. As the rudder was pushed by increasingly powerful waves, the wheel kept trying to turn on its own. He tried to dry his hands on his overalls, but they were as wet as his hands.

"Awful rough," he said, straining to keep the boat on an even keel. "Not sure I'm strong enough to handle this much longer. That Oliver anywhere?"

"He's coming now."

Thad, much relieved, watched as Mr. Oliver hauled himself into the pilot's cabin. But instead of coming right to the wheel, the first mate stood where he was, one hand to a wall.



"That was great . . . Thad," he said, still not moving. "Perfect." To Thad, it seemed as if the man was having trouble speaking and standing.

"It was Abigail, too," he said.

"Sure."

A gust of wind shook the pilot-house. The *Neptune* rocked. Mr. Oliver used two hands to hold on.

"You going to take the wheel?" Thad asked, not sure what to do.

Mr. Oliver stared at him with glassy eyes.

"What's the matter?" Thad asked.

"I'm . . . feeling worse," said Mr. Oliver.

"Aren't you going to take the wheel?" Thad repeated.

"Guess I better," said Mr. Oliver. He lurched forward.

As the first mate put his hands to the wheel, Thad backed away.

"Can I do anything to help?" he asked.

"Be okay," said Mr. Oliver. Then, speaking with difficulty, he added, "We're going to be late. A bit. But can't very well leave a ship out here drifting, can we?"

"Nope," Thad agreed.

"Do a lot of damage," Mr. Oliver went on. There were pauses between his sentences.

"Boat adrift like that. Out of control. The old bull in a china shop. People could drown."

Thad, uneasy about Mr. Oliver, kept exchanging worried glances with Abigail. He looked

back. The rain had eased off, only to be replaced by a thickening mist. Many boats had anchored where they were. Sailing ships had lowered their sails.

Thad said, "Where we going to take the tow?"

"Pier Forty-two," said Mr. Oliver.

"The Hudson ferry terminal?" asked Thad.

"Yup," said Mr. Oliver.

"Good and wide." Then he added, "Don't worry . . . we'll get there."

Thad kept his eyes on the first mate. The man was gulping a lot. As the ship pitched and rolled, Mr. Oliver tried to smile.

"Hang on," he muttered.

Suddenly Thad saw Mr. Oliver's face turn ashen. He put a hand over his eyes. "Thad . . . I'm dizzy. Sick dizzy. Can't see straight." He staggered back from the wheel. "You have to take over." The next moment Mr. Oliver groaned, then climbed out of the pilothouse and down the ladder.

Horried, Thad stayed where he was. Unmanned, the rudder wheel began to turn of its own accord. Quickly, Thad leaped forward, grabbed it, and set it right.

"What are we going to do?" whispered a frightened Abigail.

Thad squeezed the wheel grips tightly and thought of his father's calmness. "How many times," he asked himself as much as Abigail, "have we gone



to the city?"

"A jillion, I guess," whispered his sister.

"And we just did the hard part, didn't we?"

"Well . . . not really," said Abigail.

Thad clenched his teeth. "Anyway, we know the way," he said, widening his stance to keep himself steady on the slippery deck. "We just need to keep it easy. And let everybody know we've got a ship in tow. Okay. Tell Mr. Pordine we need more power."

Abigail gave the whistle signals, then shouted into the tube, "Three strokes forward!"

"Good enough," said Mr. Pordine. "That you, Abigail? Thought Oliver was at the wheel."

"Mr. Oliver got sick," shouted Thad. "Went below. I'm staying at the wheel."

"Alone?"

"I'm with him," said Abigail.

"Glory be!" cried the engineer. "Can you kids handle it?"

"Have to!"

"Through the Van Kull Channel?"

"It's okay!" Thad shouted, even as he wondered if he could do it.

"Good luck!" Mr. Pordine called after a moment.

"Thanks."

Abigail sounded the whistle, one long and one short, followed by one long pull. "Thad!" she called nervously. "Van Kull Channel dead ahead!"

Thad, his mouth very dry, nodded. "Boat in tow," he muttered. "Straight forward." He gripped the wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white. "Wish I could see things better."

The whistle shrieked repeatedly.

"You can do it," Abigail called to him.

Shivering with wet and cold, all Thad could think was, *I hope so. I hope so.*

(To be continued.)

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