



*In the*  
SHADOW  
*of the*  
RIVER

*a novel*

ANN H. GABHART

## Books by Ann H. Gabhart

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*In the*  
SHADOW  
*of the*  
RIVER

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To my family with love and gratitude  
for all the life scenes we have shared



All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts.

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

# Chapter 1

♦ JULY 15, 1881 ♦

JACCI REED'S MOTHER shook her awake, then put her fingers lightly over Jacci's lips.

"Shh. We have to get off the boat." Her mother's eyes were wide in the light of the lantern she held.

Jacci wanted to ask why, but instead she sat up and felt for her shoes with her toes.

Her mother shook her head and pulled her off the bed. "No time." But she didn't fuss when Jacci grabbed her sock doll.

Her mother left the lantern on the table without even blowing it out. At five, Jacci had been warned so often about a candle or lantern being upset and catching the boat on fire that now she feared the room might explode in flames before they got out of the door.

Her mother led Jacci out into the passageway. "Not a sound." She sounded scared.

Jacci's mother never got scared. She was always the one to

help Jacci not be afraid when thunder boomed over the river or floods made the steamboat bounce in funny ways. So now Jacci bit her lip and didn't cry out when her mother squeezed her hand so tight her fingers hurt. The fear coursed between their hands and Jacci's heart pounded up in her ears. Maybe the boat was on fire already and they would have to jump in the river to escape.

But she didn't smell smoke as she hurried to keep up with her mother's fast steps. Her nightgown flapped against her legs. Her mother never let her go out on the steamboat deck without putting on a dress. Ever.

She couldn't swim. Maybe she wouldn't have to. They were at the dock. She'd watched the crew tie up their steamboat earlier and listened to the roustabouts sing while they unloaded barrels and crates. She'd stayed hidden up on the top deck while the fancy men and women headed out down the gangplank. The women wore hats with ribbons and feathers. The men carried gold-knobbed canes.

Even better than that was the sound of a calliope drifting down the river that meant a showboat was on the way. When it docked right beside their boat, she clapped her hands. She never got to go to the shows, but she loved to watch the actors coming and going. Sometimes they played music and sang.

By the time the river swallowed up the sun, people were streaming up onto the boat to see the show. She did so wish she could be one of them, but her mother would never allow that. Instead she had found Jacci and made her go to bed.

Now as Mama hurried her up to the main deck, Jacci could hear music spilling out of the showboat. Lively music and then laughter.

Sometimes when she watched a showboat tied up next to their boat, she laughed too when she heard laughter, even though she had no idea what was funny. She didn't feel like doing that now. Not with her mother so afraid.

A man stepped out of the shadows in front of them. Her mother shoved Jacci behind her.

“You can’t get away.” The man’s voice was low, as if he didn’t want anyone but her mother to hear him. “Just let me have the kid and nobody will have to get hurt.”

“No. She’s mine.” Her mother’s voice sounded strained.

“That’s not what I’ve been told,” the man said.

“You’ve been told wrong.”

“Lisbeth says different.”

“Lisbeth?” Jacci’s mother breathed out the name as her whole body stiffened against Jacci. “You’re lying.”

Jacci peeked out from behind Mama’s skirts. She could see the man’s smile in the moonlight, and she wanted to jerk free from her mother and run hide. She knew plenty of great hiding places on their boat. But what if it really was on fire?

The man laughed. “I think we know who has been lying.”

He was barely taller than her mother and had on fancy passenger clothes. Not what the crewmen wore.

Her mother held Jacci behind her and jerked her small gun out of her pocket with her other hand. “Get out of the way.”

The man laughed. “What do you think you’re going to do with that?”

“Whatever I have to.” Mama’s voice sounded so cold, so wrong, that Jacci shivered.

The man rushed toward her mother and knocked the gun out of her hand. There was a flash of metal in his hand.

Her mother made a choked sound. “Run, Jacci.”

But Jacci couldn’t leave her mother. She dropped her doll and grabbed the gun off the deck. She’d seen men shoot at things on the riverbanks. She knew how they spread their feet to stand steady while they held their guns out in front of them. She did that now as the man pushed her mother away from him so hard she landed against the railing. Jacci pointed the gun at him and pulled back the trigger.

The gun made a popping sound, only a little louder than the plop of a fish jumping up from the river and falling back in. The man looked confused as he turned toward Jacci. Then, still staring at her, he sank to a sitting position on the deck, his hands pressed against his middle.

Jacci shook so much she couldn't hold on to the gun. It clattered to the deck once more. She looked at her mother doubled over against the rail. "Mama?"

As if the sound of Jacci's voice gave her strength, her mother straightened up. Her voice was weak but back to sounding like Mama. "Get the gun."

Jacci did as she was told while she tried not to look at the man still sitting there with that funny look on his face.

"Socks." Her doll had slid over close to the man. She hesitated, then took a step toward it.

"No." Her mother grabbed Jacci's shoulder to yank her back as the man lurched toward her. "I'll make you a new one."

The man said something as he fell back, but Jacci couldn't understand what it was. His voice sounded all bubbly and wrong. She wished the moon would go behind a cloud so she couldn't see his face.

Mama's hand was wet and sticky now and her grasp weak instead of hard the way it had been.

"Where are we going?" she asked as they went down the gangplank to the wooden dock and then onto the grass.

"The showboat."

Jacci wanted to be happy about that. She'd always wanted to go on a showboat and see what made people laugh. But now she wasn't sure she would ever laugh again. Her mother's breath was ragged, and when she stumbled over a rock, she groaned. Jacci put an arm around her to try to hold her up.

They went up the stage plank toward the music. Happy music. Horns and drums and a piano. Her mother's steps

slowed until she was barely moving. Jacci wanted to run, but she couldn't leave her mother.

"Do you still have the gun?" Mama said.

Jacci held it out.

"Throw it in the river."

When Jacci started to drop it over the side, her mother stopped her. "Not here. On the other side. Throw it as hard as you can." She pushed Jacci away from her and leaned on a post. "Don't let anybody see you. Be fast."

Applause and cheers came from inside the theater. Jacci ran through the shadows around the deck. She was scared to be away from Mama, but she had to do what she said. After she slung the gun into the river, she raced back to where her mother hung on to the post as if that was all that kept her from falling.

But when she saw Jacci, she pushed away from the post and they went past the empty ticket booth. A few people passed by them, but they were too busy laughing and talking to pay any attention to Jacci and her mother.

Inside a big room with rows and rows of seats, a crowd of people moved toward the front where men and women in frilly costumes smiled and waved from a stage. Some lanterns glowed bright there while others along the wall flickered with only enough light to see the way between the rows of seats. A man came toward them, stopping now and again to turn up the lantern flames.

Her mother followed the crowd toward the stage, but stopped when she got close to the man in the aisle. She called out to him. "We need to see Tyrone Chesser."

The man looked at her and then at Jacci. He took a step back. "Freaking fishworms. What's happened to you?"

Jacci looked down at her gown. It was red with blood.