

Chapter 1

ROBBED AT THE END OF THE LINE

“Wanna see ’em dry-dock a riverboat?” Suddenly a big kid was standing beside me, grinning like a monkey. He wore a ragged shirt and frayed work pants held up by one suspender. Right behind him was another fellow in better clothes, but I remember the soles of his shoes flapped when he walked and he wore no socks.

“C’mon! It’s really amazing how they can pull a big boat up on dry ground with only a little donkey.” He started moving away.

I just shook my head. *No thanks.*

“He’s right, you know,” the other guy piped up. He was about a foot taller than me, probably two or three years older, too. “You’ll probably never get to see that operation again.”

By now I knew I should have run for it. I really didn’t intend to ask, but I wanted to know. “Why would they haul a steamboat out of the water?”

“Got to fix the leaks. Those ol’ boats hit snags and sandbars all the time. When they come into port, they have to fix ’em.”

“Let’s go. They must be halfway done by now.”

I couldn’t see any sign of a steamboat being pulled out of the river. They noticed I was looking around and the one named Butch explained, “It’s on the other side of that warehouse.”

They could see how suspicious I was.

1 “Robbed at the end of the line,” an excerpt (Chapter 1) of *AFOOT: A Tale of the Great Dakota Turkey Drive* by George Brandsberg. © 2006 by the author. All rights reserved.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Lots of people around. You’ll see,” the other one, Mike, said impatiently.

So we started walking toward the warehouse. They were hurrying me along, I thought because they were eager to see the dry-docking. As we got nearer the warehouse, it seemed quieter. Unlike the other warehouses where workmen and wagons were coming and going at a frantic pace, there was no one here. But just then, I didn’t realize what that meant.

A moment later, we walked briskly around the end of the building. Suddenly, Butch and Mike each took hold of my arms up high and dragged me inside. Swiftly, they jerked off my heavy wool coat and went through its pockets before I could protest.

Almost as quickly, Butch wrapped an arm around my neck and started choking me. Mike stepped toward me and I kicked him as hard as I could in one knee. He yelped with pain, grabbing it for a moment. But in no time, he recovered and went through my pants pockets, emptying them. My eleven dollars! Gone!

Mike pulled a big Barlow knife out of his own pocket, flipped it open, and waved it under my nose.

“I’m gonna stick ’im, especially for kicking me,” he said with a scary laugh. “Right in the guts.”

Butch held me tight, even though I tried to wrench free. “Aw, he ain’t worth killin’. Let’s get outta here!” Butch sounded a little frightened. Maybe he was afraid Mike really would stab me. I was so scared I couldn’t say anything, couldn’t even breathe.

Next thing I knew, Butch shoved me through a doorway into a dark room so that I landed on my hands and knees. It was tiny, like a closet. Before I had a chance to get up, Butch slammed the door shut. There was a snapping sound, like a latch or some kind of hook that locked me in.

Now I was furious, screaming at the two bullies for robbing me. Their laughter faded quickly as they ran off. My eyes were hot and wet with tears and I choked back a sob. *Thirteen is too old to be a crybaby*, I told myself. But I was mad as could be. Being locked in that dark room scared me, too. *What if I miss my boat?*

What a mess I’m in. Everything I’ve done since I escaped from

Uncle Asa has gone wrong. Lucinda was supposed to be at the Hubbard House Hotel in Sioux City, Iowa. Gone. Got a job at the Germania Hotel in Yankton, Dakota Territory. She was gone when I got there, too. Took a stage coach to Pierre, upriver.

For nearly three days I had ridden trains, crossing half of Illinois and all of Iowa. I had eaten alone. I was careful not to talk to anyone to make sure not one would know I was Joshua Greene from Kankakee, Illinois.

Though disappointed to the point of tears with the way things were turning out, I found the frontier town of Yankton fascinating. The streets were bustling with wagons being loaded or unloaded with freight. Carriages, buggies, and people on saddle horses wove their way through the wagons. Indoors, the stores and shops were filled with customers.

Besides a few elegantly dressed gentlemen and ladies in fine silk dresses, there were workmen in homespun, some men in buckskin shirts and pants and even an occasional Indian decked out in blankets and a mixture of their own garments and those gotten in the settlement. Someone said there was an encampment of Sioux at the edge of town with native goods to trade or sell.

The river front was equally busy. Six steamboats were moored, one unloading stacks of stiff buffalo hides. Workers swarmed over the other vessels, lugging aboard cases of canned or bottled food, machinery, crates of supplies bound for the Indian agencies, the gold camps, and military outposts in the wilderness.

There was so much to see that I know I must have been gawking like a country bumpkin. But, golly, it was *interesting*. It didn't really matter how amazed I looked. I know I must have looked even stranger wearing a big winter coat on a warm September day, but it was easier to keep it on my back than to carry it under my arm. Butch and Mike could have spotted me from a mile away. If I just hadn't let my guard down, I wouldn't have gotten robbed and trapped.

For a while I yelled for help, but no one came. Kicking at the door did no good. It was heavy and thick, letting in only a bit of light around the edges. By ramming it as hard as I could with my shoulder, I found that the crack of an opening got a little wider each time. My shoulder really hurt by the time the hook broke and the door flew open, sprawling

me in the dirt of the warehouse floor.

Running, I went back to the spot where I had met the thieves, but, of course, there was no sign of them. Then I looked for a policeman, but couldn't find one in the street. Suddenly, I realized, *I can't go to the police. Suppose Uncle Asa reported my running away to the law? Even though I'm five hundred miles from home, they might be looking for me.*

I felt awful. I had lost my coat. My money was gone. And the thought that the police might be looking for *me* really made me feel low. All of a sudden, the buzzing streets of Yankton were filled with menacing people who wanted to hurt me. A dangerous, frightening place. I just wanted to get out of there. Nervously, I hurried back to the waterfront and sat on the dock until the clerk called passengers aboard the *Key West*.

Somehow I had had the good sense to fold the slip of paper showing I'd paid my passage and tuck it inside the top of one of my socks. All I could afford was fare as a deck passenger—no bed, no private room, not even a hard wooden bench to sit on. But I figured anyone could survive three or four nights outside, especially with the warm Mackinaw coat I had. After booking passage on the riverboat, I had only two five-dollar gold pieces and a silver dollar left.

My valise with my other clothes was safely locked in the luggage room aboard the steamboat, so I hadn't been cleaned out completely. Still, I felt terrible. And really stupid for letting it happen. I found a place along the rail, as far away from anyone as I could get.

Soon, the pilot blew three short blasts with the whistle. A couple of deckhands pulled in the gangplank and cast off the mooring ropes. The boat backed away from the pier and began moving upriver. Now I came around on the right-hand side to watch the shore as we pulled out of Yankton. Soon I spied Mike and Butch on the bank, not thirty feet away.

One of them saw me, pointed directly at me, and started laughing. I was glad that no one else on the boat noticed them.