

# Whistles through the Rocks



## CHAPTER 4

# Train Wreck

The train is far off in the eerie distance when Daniel and I witness the cars as they begin to leave the rails and roll down the hill near the eastern end of the line. Smoke is pouring out of the stoves and the lights of the overturned railroad cars add to a confusing scene. My first instinct is to run immediately to where the train has wrecked.

Then I look at Daniel's bandaged knee and think better of it. I remember trying to find my way back home in the dark last night and decide to turn around and go into the house to get Dad.

When I go into the house, I find Dad trying to fix a broken chair in the kitchen. My brothers and I are sort of rough on furniture, and things often get broken. I begin to tell Dad about what has happened to the train when his eyes glance out of the window. It is as though the sound of my voice disappears when he sees the large, black puffs of smoke flowing from the direction of the train tracks.

Quickly he jumps up and puts on his coat. He turns and says, "Daniel, wait here with your mother. Michael, come with me."

"I knew that one day this would happen." Dad softly utters under his breath as we leave the house.

"The curve in the tracks at Mattox Cemetery is too sharp and difficult for the train to handle with all of the power behind it. Even the most skilled engineer has a difficult time getting around that bend," Dad explains as we begin to walk at an increasingly swifter pace toward the train.

The sun was just beginning to go down when Dad and I left the house. Now, it is completely dark and the night air is crisp and cold. I soon begin to feel tired. I don't think I have fully recovered from yesterday's events.

As the sharply cold air rushes over my forehead, it begins to hurt from the place where I hit it last night on the tree.

As we continue walking, I think about Daniel and Mom, who are warm and safe at home by the wood-burning stove. I wish I were there with them instead of out here in the cold with Dad. Just last night I was thinking that if I could get home safely, I would never go out at night in the freezing weather again. Here I am, one day later, doing what I said I would never do.

Dad has a determined look on his face as he and I get closer to the railroad tracks. I am feeling nervous and afraid. When I look down, I immediately notice the coal that has tumbled to the ground from the train car that now lay on its side at the top of the hill.

There is an abundance of coal, unlike the usual small pieces that fall from trains that pass through the Rocky Mount station on their way to Pittsylvania County. It is strange that I am wishing Daniel and I could gather the coal and take it to the blacksmith when a train has wrecked and passengers need help. However, that is what I usually do when I am around trains and, at this moment, I don't know what else to do.

Dad and I continue to walk to the top of the hill where the train is still spilling out



black billows of smoke into the night sky. I think about being on the train with John and remembering that it felt like being inside of a fire-breathing dragon. I am feeling the same way now as I see the smoke drifting out of the jaws of an iron giant.

In the darkness of a still night sky, Dad and I begin to see faces of several passengers. They are difficult to see since they are covered with soot and smoke from the coal stoves. The only other person that I know who looks the same as the passengers is my brother David when he comes home from work after stoking the fire to keep the train engine going.

The air is thick with smoke and it is hard to breathe as Dad and I help the passengers out of the train.

"There aren't many people on the train tonight." I say to Dad as I sit down to rest.

Dad looks up from helping one of the passengers and says, "The train must have been able to slow down before it went off of the tracks. The passengers do not seem to be too badly hurt, but they are quite shaken

from the spill."

"Do you think that they even know what happened?" I ask Dad.

"They may not, Michael," Dad replies. "The important thing now is to get them to a safe place for the night where someone can help them."

Soon many of our friends from neighboring farms come to help. Together, we manage to get everyone gathered up and begin a journey down the road. Dad knows of a place a few miles away where the train passengers can get some help.

"The sooner we get the passengers there the better," Dad says as we walk further down the road.

"Do you think everyone will be all right, Dad?" I ask.

"It is hard to say at this point," Dad says. "We will know more after we get further down the road."

Dad doesn't seem too interested in talking. I can see that he has many things on his mind and wants to concentrate on what he is doing.

Some of the men stay behind at the site of the train accident. They want to make sure that the smoldering coal from the stoves doesn't catch on fire. They also get underneath the side of one of the cars that lay on the ground. Together, they push the car from the Franklin and Pittsylvania railroad back to its upright position. It almost looks like they are helping a wounded wild animal get back on its feet so that it can walk back into the forest and rest until it heals.

After a long walk into the middle of a dark and tiresome night, we finally get to a friendly and familiar house. As soon as I see it, I know why Dad has brought us here. It is a place that has helped many people in need.

NEXT WEEK:

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Dr. Giles

