

Whistles through the Rocks



CHAPTER ELEVEN

A New Beginning

This morning I wake up to the sun shining brightly through my bedroom window. The breeze that is blowing is warm and gentle. Many branches on the trees are red from showing signs of new buds that are about to open with innocent blossoms. Spring is upon us, bringing with it the hope of new beginnings. I wash my face and hands in the water basin and for the first time in many months I don't have to break the ice first. I can hear Daniel outside as they load up the wagon for another trip to Rocky Mount.

Dad and I have been working hard to get the new wagon finished. It seems like a lifetime ago since we stood by the creek and watched our old wagon break apart and wash away. Since that day there has never been a question in my mind that Dad needs my help. We've been working side by side every day to get the job completed, and finally after many great struggles and a great deal of effort, we finished last night. The wagon is now ready to go and Dad seems anxious to get to town.

I run downstairs and charge through breakfast like a soldier entering a battlefield. Once outside I notice that the flowers Mom planted last fall around the house are beginning to poke their tiny heads through the soil once again. The sky is a brilliant shade of blue and seems as wide as the ocean. The grass is no longer brown but instead coming alive with a new shade of green. A white-tailed deer with her two newborn young are frolicking along the edge of the field behind our barn. They jump and play happily without a care in the world. Dad has plowed the fields as far as the eye can see in meticulous rows of varying crops. David and Daniel are already sitting in the wagon. Dad has the horses hitched and they are all waiting for me to jump in so that we can go.

Dad and I made the wagon strong, and the ride is steady and calm. We approach the dry creek bed that runs along the backside of our house. I am sure that Dad and Daniel

remember the last time we crossed it, but no one speaks of it. We cross over an area that we filled with dirt and soon head up the familiar hill toward the train tracks that have been built alongside of the creek beds. Today we are peaceful. The sky is clear and there is no danger of a storm. It feels good to get away from the farmhouse after being cooped up for so long.

We make a quick stop at the Rocky Mount station. We stay only long enough to unload the wagon and to drop David off at work.

"I am sorry, boys," Dad says to Daniel and I. "There isn't time to pick up any coal today." He says a quick hello to Miss Rachel and we are on our way.

I can't imagine where Dad wants to go in such a big hurry. My question is answered when we pull up to the general store. At first, I didn't know why we were there until I remembered that Dad had secretly mail-ordered a telegraph machine for David. Dad runs inside and quickly returns with a package under his arm. I look over at Dad, who has a gleam in his eye, and silently nod. Dad gives me a wink and I instantly know that the package under his arm contains David's telegraph machine. Dad pulls on the reins and the horses begin our return trip back to Burnt Chimney.

We get home earlier than we usually do. Dad pulls up to the barn and hands the reins to me as he eagerly goes inside the house. I know he is excited about David's surprise and doesn't want to take the time right now to tend to the horses. Instead he leaves the responsibility to me. After the horses have been stalled and watered, Daniel and I join Dad inside.

We find Dad sitting comfortably at the kitchen table. The package's brown paper has been crumpled up into a ball on the floor and pieces of string lie beneath Dad's chair. The telegraph machine sits on the table where Dad can see it as he studies the instruction booklet. The booklet gives instructions on how to learn Morse code; however, Dad skips that part.

During the many trips to the Rocky Mount station delivering wood, Dad learned Morse code from Miss Rachel. All that Dad needs now is specific instructions on how to operate the telegraph machine. He wants to be prepared to teach David when he returns home from work tonight. Dad and Mom spend the rest of the afternoon practicing with the machine.

As the sun begins to fade, Mom explains to Dad that she has to stop now because it is time for her to finish making supper. She reaches down to the floor and picks up the paper and string. She carefully opens up the crumpled balls of paper and folds them into neat, flat sheets and places them inside the desk drawer. She walks into the kitchen and methodically winds the string around a ball of

string that she continuously collects and keeps on the kitchen counter. Then she heads to the sink, where she begins to cut up some vegetables to add to a pot of stew cooking on the wood-burning stove. Dad gathers up the telegraph machine and the box. He takes them into the bedroom where David won't be able to see them when he comes home from work. He heads back outside so that he can finish up a few more chores before it gets too dark to see anything. It appears as though Dad would also like to be outside when the train pulls into the station with his son David on it. He will want to watch as David gets off and walks down the hill toward home.

Up at the train tracks, black smoke is filling the once-clear blue sky. The train screeches its way into the station as it slows to a stop. David climbs down the steps of the train and onto the platform and begins his slow and mundane walk down the hill back home. Dad greets him with a smile and they both go inside for supper.

After we finish our dessert, Daniel and I go upstairs to our bedroom to give Dad and David some to themselves. Dad goes to his bedroom to retrieve the telegraph machine and places it on the table in front of David.

David's eyes widen with excitement and disbelief.

"I know how much you want to learn how to be a dispatcher, so I bought this machine for you," Dad explains to David with a smile on his face.

"Miss Rachel has been teaching Morse code to me during our trips to Rocky Mount. Now, I will be able to teach you at home so that you will be ready when a job opportunity presents itself. So, what do you think?"

David looks at Dad and is overwhelmed at the gesture. "I really don't know what to say Dad, except for thank you," he finally manages to say.

"That's all I need to hear, David," Dad replies as he gently looks into David's eyes.

Over the next few weeks, Dad and David place themselves into separate rooms and send messages back and forth. They also go to the Rocky Mount train station and listen to the telegraph dispatches. Soon David is eager for a job to become available. Until then, he will have to go on shoveling coal into the mouth of the locomotive. But now he can work with a renewed spirit and the hope of a better life some day.

NEXT WEEK ...

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Mud Hut Station

