

# Whistles through the Rocks



## CHAPTER 1

# Coal Runners

I awaken this morning to the sound of the howling wind as it fiercely blows outside of my window. It is a wintry day in January. I share a bedroom with my brother Daniel, and this morning is unusually cold. I get up before he does. I have to break the ice in the washbasin so that I can get to the water underneath to wash my face and hands. I hurry to dress myself so that I can get Daniel up and get an early start to the day.

Today we have to finish our chores early and head straight for the railroad tracks. I have a hard time getting Daniel out of bed. He is still warm and comfortable long after I have gotten up and dressed.

Our old farmhouse is cold upstairs since the only heat is down in the kitchen. Mom and Dad don't have much money and can only afford to keep the stove in the kitchen going. They hope that soon we will be able to heat the rest of the house. But we are lucky to have food on the table these days. The war has cost Virginia folks a lot of money, and most families are left with very few resources. Our family is working hard to find ways to bring money into the house. That's the reason why Daniel and I are getting up early to get to the railroad tracks.

Now that the rails have come through, Dad is able to sell some of the lumber from our farm to provide firewood to fuel the locomotives. He saves as much wood as he can to sell to the railroad and tries not to use it to heat our home in Franklin County. Since Daniel and I are too young to work in the sawmill, we have another way to help out the family.

We hurriedly rush through our chores this morning so that we can get to the railroad tracks before the train comes through and before anyone else can gather coal. Most days the railroad cars are filled

to the top with coal and when the train goes too fast, some of the coal falls out onto the bank below the tracks. Daniel and I gather the fallen coal in old feed sacks and sell it to Jake, the local blacksmith.

Today we are lucky. No one is down at the tracks as the iron horse comes steaming down with its smoke billowing in the air, heading toward the Rocky Mount station. The engine is a magnificent sight as it pumps its wheels along the track in perfect alignment like an enormous marching band. Daniel and I can see our breath as we wait in anticipation for the train's arrival.

We have to wait a long time for the train in the frigid weather, and our feet and hands begin to get very cold. Mom has given each of us a loaf of bread, hot out of the oven, to eat if we get hungry. Daniel and I keep the loaves in our hands to keep them warm as long as the heat will last. We watch as the train wheels squeal around the bend to see if any coal has fallen. We can see that much coal has fallen and our journey to the railroad tracks is going to be a success.

After the train speeds on its way, we begin to gather the coal from the ground. Daniel and I are small and the coal is very heavy as we fill our feed sacks. Daniel cannot carry as much as I can since he is smaller and younger than I, but he does the best he can. We are both anxious to finish and return home quickly to our warm house in Burnt Chimney. Some days, when it is warmer outside, we take our time going back home. We like to go to visit Jake's



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shop right away to see how much money he will give us for what we have collected.

As the train passes by, I can't help thinking about my older brother David. David has a job on the train, stoking the fire to keep the engine going. It is hard work and David often comes home exhausted. I miss the days when he didn't have to work so hard. We used to spend hours playing ball together in the field behind our barn. Now, I hardly ever see David. There are days when I feel like I can't even remember what he looks like. Suddenly, I can hear Daniel calling. "Michael, stop! Wait!"

When I turn around, I can see Daniel struggling with his heavy sack of coal. He is running up the hill as fast as he can. Then, as I look more closely, I can see two large figures behind Daniel.

As Daniel struggles to climb the steep hill that leads to the road that will take us back home, his sack splits open. Large pieces of glistening, black coal tumble down the hill toward the two men standing at the bottom. Quickly the men bend down and pick up the pieces of coal and put them into sacks of their own.

Daniel decides to leave the rest of his coal and begins to run up to the top of the hill where I am standing ready to help him over a small brick wall that lines the pathway home. With a sick feeling in his stomach, Daniel begins to realize that all of his hard work today in the freezing cold weather was for nothing.

At the top of the hill Daniel asks, "Michael, who are these men and why are they chasing me?" I explain that these men are coal runners who chase people that are gathering coal so they can steal it and sell it themselves.

"Well, at least we still have your bag of coal, Michael," Daniel replies, as we walk down the road on our way back home. "At least we can take that to Jake's shop."

As Daniel and I begin to walk home, I can hear a strange sound coming from behind. When I turn around, I can see the coal runners coming. They are approaching rapidly. Daniel and I both know what they want, the other sack of coal. I grab Daniel's hand and we begin to run as fast as we can down the road. I can feel Daniel slowing down and when I look over at him, I can see that he is hurt.

As they get closer, I hear the voices of the coal runners say, 'Stop, you boys, and hand over the sack!' Then I can feel someone's hand as it grabs the back of my shirt collar.

**Next Week -  
Chapter Two:  
Railroad Pioneers**

