



Miss Rachel turns from her customer at the ticket window and swiftly walks over to the telegraph machine. She listens carefully to the message being transmitted. When she receives the last of the message, she hastily writes it down and promptly returns to the ticket window. When the room is clear, Dad, Daniel and I gather close together to hear the information from the telegraph machine.

"That was Eddie, the dispatcher from the Boones Mill station," explains Miss Rachel. "He received a message from the dispatch in Wirtz just a few minutes ago. Those two men were just at the Wirtz station. They tried to steal coal from a couple of boys there just like they did here in Rocky Mount. They got away again and are now heading for Boones Mill. But Eddie says not to worry. He has called the authorities and they are on their way. When those two men get off the train in Boones Mill, they will have a big surprise waiting for them."

Dad thanks Miss Rachel for her help and the three of us tell her good-bye as we walk out the door.

We spend more time than we had expected in Rocky Mount, and Dad asks Daniel and me if we can skip our trip to the blacksmith's shop today. We really don't mind if we don't go to the shop. This way we will have an excuse to get out of the house another day and have one more adventure. Daniel and I jump into the back of the wagon and prepare ourselves for the long ride home.

It is early enough in the day that we will get home before dark. The snow is beginning to fall once more. This time the snow falls in lacy oversized flakes. Because the temperature has recently been warm, the snow is heavy and melts as soon as it hits the ground. It is beautiful as we travel alongside the railroad tracks and the creek beds. The mountains have taken on a bluish tone as the sky casts its vibrant color upon them. The air is crisp and clean, and the breeze gently caresses our cheeks as we proceed down the pathway in the direction of home.

Off in the distance, the sky is dark. The clouds look more like they are rainfilled rather

than full of snow. As we approach Union Hall on our way to Burnt Chimney, the wind begins to pick up speed and the heavy snow is now a mixture of snow and rain. By the time we get to the railroad station in Union Hall, the snow has completely turned to rain and is now coming down in steady sharp streaks like shards of glass.

I can see that Dad is having a difficult time driving the wagon through the rain-soaked path that leads to our house. The creek beds are swiftly filling up with water that is forcefully cutting its way downstream. The wheels of our wagon are clogged with mud and are having difficulty turning as the team of horses powerfully trudges onward through the treacherous terrain on its determined mission to plod home.

When we reach the top of the hill that sits high on a perch above our farmhouse, we have an overwhelming view of the flooded creek bed as it fiercely races down the hill like a fugitive in an unrelenting rainstorm. The creek sharply turns and winds around like a snake out of control as it slashes out a channel of water in the ground that will separate the wagon from our home in Burnt Chimney.

From where we sit, the rushing water does not seem to be very deep. The storm must have suddenly come up and the dried-up creek beds were unable to contain the water. Dad thinks for a moment and makes the choice to go down the hill and try to cross the newly-formed gully that is flowing in front of our house.

As we get closer to the ravine, I begin to feel afraid and, in a strange way, excited. Close up, the situation seems much worse than it did at the top of the hill. Still, Dad is ready to forge ahead into the fury of the water. I can feel my heart pounding in my chest as the horses step into the water. They are immediately covered in muddy water until only the tops of their heads can be seen. Dad immediately realizes that it is a mistake to try to cross the water now and tries to pull the horses out before it is too late.

The horses rear up when dad pulls on the reins and, instead of backing out of the gully, they take off in the other direction in a mad dash. This pulls the wagon into the gulch. Daniel and I grab onto a tree so that we won't be taken down with the wagon into the rushing water. Dad falls into the flowing stream and swims back to the tree.

He quickly climbs out and grabs Daniel, whom he takes to the edge of the creek and sets him down. Then, he comes back for me. I am bigger and stronger than Daniel so I can help Dad by pulling my own weight through the water.

After I am safely out of the water, Dad climbs out and heads straight for the horses and wagon. He turns back and says, "You two stay back until I tell you its safe."

Dad lies down by the edge of the creek and puts his hands into the water to find the reigns. He slowly pulls out the heavy leather straps that are saturated with water and covered in thick mud. He places the reigns over his shoulder.

Dad turns toward the house and starts to walk while holding onto the reigns with all of his strength. He pulls as hard as he can to lead the horses out of the water. The struggle is rough until we hear the sound of a loud snap. The leather straps break and the horses are free from the hitch of the wagon. They are unsteady as they climb out of the red, raging water. The once gallant team is now covered with mud and runs toward the barn in hopes of escaping an angry storm.

Dad, Daniel and I watch as the wagon floats awkwardly downstream on an unknown pathway. We watch as the wagon hits against the rocks and breaks into unrecognizable pieces. I keep thinking that the broken wagon is a symbol of our broken lives. I know that wagons and broken lives can be fixed. I also know that even though they can be repaired, they will never be the same again.

I look at Dad and he pretends not to be concerned about the wagon. I can also tell from the look in his eyes that the loss of the wagon is only going to make his difficult life even harder.

"We better get home," Dad looks at us and says. "Your mother will be worried. After the weather breaks and the ground dries out, Michael, we better come out here and gather up whatever is left of the wagon."

I look up at Dad and say, "Don't worry, I bet we'll be able to find most of what we need to build a new one. We'll have another one put together in no time. Daniel and I can cut and stack wood and it will be ready to load when the wagon is finished."

The three of us take one last look before we turn around and head back home. I put my hand on Dad's shoulder to reassure him that everything will be all right. It seems strange that I am trying to help Dad when he is always the one who has to help me. I am sure that Dad is thinking of how he will break the news to Mother. No one says a word on the way home about what happened and we don't blame Dad for anything either. We just feel badly that it happened.

There still remains the promise that tomorrow will be a better day.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A New Beginning

