

River of Fire

Chapter 1

Drawing herself up to her full five foot two inch height, Victoria Winters rose from her desk. She wore matronly clothing and kept her auburn hair in a bun, hoping to look older than her nineteen years. Inching her way to the back of the schoolroom, she watched him. The week before, the children had decorated the walls with handmade ornaments. Pretending to admire these, she watched Billy out of the corner of her eye. She stopped at the one made out of pinecones. Amanda Berry had created it from the tree in the middle of the schoolyard. She worked her way to the back of the one-room schoolhouse where she could view the children's slates.

He was cheating again! Why? He was such a good student, one of her best. At least he was until the last few weeks. He was looking at Julie Rhoad's slate. His head moved down the page as he wrote the answer to question number five. Ray's higher arithmetic book lay open on his lap.

Coming up the aisle, she stopped directly behind him, peering over his shoulder. Victoria saw that he was indeed cheating.

"William Hayman!" the teacher said, her voice sounding like a pistol shot. Billy jumped up and knocked the slate off his desk onto the floor where it shattered. The book slid off his legs onto the floor, its pages open, fluttering like a wounded bird.

The pieces of the slate skidded across the bare pine boards. Leaving the pieces lay, she placed her hands on the small boy's shoulders and brought him to his feet. Guiding him to her desk, she felt the small boy tremble. Tears leaked from Billy's eyes and wetted his cheeks.

The rest of the class stared. They had never known this teacher to punish a student severely. In fact, Victoria used the paddle only as a last resort. The three times she had, there were tears in her eyes. One of the older recipients said it felt more like a love tap. She had no intention of using it again.

"Return to your work," Victoria said, instructing the rest of the class as she glanced at the wall clock. "You have five more minutes to finish your test."

Sitting down, she positioned the ten-year-old child in front of her. The little boy's face was pale, his hands shaking.

"Billy, why were you cheating?" Victoria asked. "You're one of my best students."

He wanted to tell her about Whitey and his friends. They terrified him. Their threats were real. Other boys had crossed Whitey and his cronies and had suffered the consequences. The only way out was to lie.

"I ain't cheatin," Billy said.

Victoria didn't bother to correct his English nor was she willing to be drawn into an argument.

"I know what I saw," she said, her heart breaking. "You will stay one hour after the other students are dismissed. Also, you will not participate in the Christmas Pageant."

"That's not fair!" Billy shouted. "I'm Joseph."

The other students looked up from their work.

"Would you prefer I expel you for the year?"

The small boy shuddered. If his father found out he had been kicked out for cheating, he would be more severe than Miss Winters. Big tears squeezed out of the corners of Billy's eyes and ran down his cheeks.

Victoria's heart ached for him.

"Billy, I'm not trying to be mean but I can't let you get away with doing wrong."

She hugged him to her chest as his breathing became more ragged. She could feel his tears dampening her shoulder. When his tears stopped, she released him. Victoria smiled at him.

"Please clean up your broken slate," she said, handing him an extra one she kept in her desk.

"Do I still have to stay after school?" he asked.

"Yes. It will give you a chance to retake your test."

Sullenly, Billy returned to his desk. Picking up the broken pieces of the slate, he placed them in the wastebasket. Returning to his seat, his head slumped on his desk.

Later, with no one to help him, Billy knew he had failed the test. Checking the wrong answers, Victoria shook her head. What had gotten into that boy?

After an hour, she let him go. He seemed reluctant to leave the schoolyard. Several times Victoria looked out the window and saw him dawdling around the trees. She was about to put on

her wrap and check on him when he walked down the lane. Even then, his feet seemed to be dragging.

Leaving the schoolroom, she entered the living quarters at the rear of the schoolhouse. The little room was cramped with not much more than a bed, a dresser and a small eating table. The small wood stove in the corner was cool to the touch. She left it that way for the time being. Dark snow clouds rode the western horizon; already a few flakes were beginning to fall. It would be a perfect night for the Christmas play.

Walking with his head down against the wind, Billy never saw the three boys lurking behind the old hollow tree ready to pounce on him. He couldn't tell the teacher about the threats. She was so good to him but what would they do if they thought he had told her about them.

A shadow loomed over him. Fear shot through him and settled in his heart. His breathing increased, the air from his lungs coming out in a plume of white smoke.

"What ya doin' squirt, makin' googoo eyes at the teacher?" Joe 'Whitey' Sanders sneered, stepping from behind a tree.

The flat-faced fifteen-year-old towered over little Billy. Whitey worked at his father's blacksmith shop which only added massive muscle to his already heavy frame. When he was ten, his father, Otto Sanders, had brought his son into the shop and ordered him to close his eyes. He then touched a red-hot rod to the child's arm. The child screamed in pain and surprise. When Joey's sobs stopped, Otto told him, "Let that be a lesson to you, boy. Always be careful around the forge." When the burn healed, it left a three-inch white scar, sealing his fate to the nickname, 'Whitey'. The back-breaking labor in his father's shop only gave him a sour attitude. Even the older boys stayed out of his way.

"I asked you a question, squirt," Whitey said, doubling his fist. "You tell her about me? You better not or ..." He waved his fist in the air. Billy shook his head emphatically.

On each side, the tow-headed twins, Rudy and George Fairfax, cousins to Whitey, flanked Billy. They didn't always agree with his actions, but he was family. They wouldn't admit it even to themselves, but they were afraid of him.

Grinding his teeth, Whitey advanced on the ten-year-old. Billy was sure he caught a fleeting glance of a wild dog. "Now give me the coins you took from her desk."

"I aint no thief." Billy said defiantly. "I'm not gonna steal from her."

"You're a liar. Give me that money." He advanced on the child.

Whirling on his heels, his short legs pumping, Billy ran for all he was worth.

"Get 'im!" Whitey yelled to the twins.

Rudy made a valiant effort to catch Billy, jumping over logs and splashing across the creek but in the end it was George's agility that won out. They brought him back to Whitey kicking and whimpering. They searched him but found nothing.

"You bring me them coins and also bring me the money in your daddy's jar," Whitey said.

"I can't. He's saving it for spring seed," Billy said as he felt wetness in the front of his pants.

"Will ya look at that? Little baby wet himself," Whitey sneered. "Maybe your momma'll let you wear a diaper to school tomorrow."

Billy hung his head in shame, fear shaking his body. Tears dripped off his chin onto the freshly-fallen snow.

"Pull his coat and shirt up over his head," Whitey ordered.

Grasping the young boy's arms, Rudy and George did as they were told, exposing Billy's bare back. Whitey reached behind the hollow tree. Suddenly there was a whooshing sound and fire bit into Billy's back. He jerked and screamed in pain. Rudy and George stared in horror at the angry red stripe running across the pale skin. Billy struggled to free himself. They had seen Whitey beat up kids before but this was different.

"Stuff the tail of his shirt in his mouth," Whitey said. They did as they were told, neither one wanting to defy him. He could just as easily turn on them.

Rearing back, Whitey brought the whip down again. Billy bit down on the rough material of his homespun shirt. He tried to hold on but at the tenth blow, he lost consciousness.

Letting go of Billy's arm, George screamed, "Stop! Stop, you've killed him."

"Naw," Whitey said. "He ain't dead."

"I'm gettin' outta here," Rudy said, taking to his heels.

"Me too," George agreed, following his brother. The boys ran down the snow-covered road leading to Pottsville.

"Cowards!" Whitey called after them.

Both boys disappeared over a small rise. Kneeling beside Billy, Whitey rubbed snow in the boy's face. Billy moaned.

"Don't hit me again; I'll get the jar for you."

"You better," Whitey said, his face inches from Billy's. "And iffen you tell on me, I'm gonna whip you harder next time and I'll get your mamma too. You hear me?"

"Yes," Billy whispered.

"What?" Whitey said, shoving his fist in Billy's face.

"Yes, I hear you" he shouted, using his last ounce of strength.

Jenny Hayman was taking fresh loaves of bread from the oven. She wasn't worried about Billy's tardiness. Many times before he had stayed behind to help Miss Winters clean the schoolhouse. She cut off a thick heel of a loaf, buttering it heavily, then putting it in a pan on the stove.

"That'll keep it warm 'til he gets home," she said, humming to herself. She always fixed a snack for Billy before he did his chores. She smiled, breathing in the aroma of the fresh baked bread. It made the house smell so nice.

She heard the front door open and close. Thinking it strange since Billy always came in the kitchen door, especially on baking day, she called out to him.

"Billy, is that you? I've got a slice of bread for you on the stove."

There was no answer, only the sound of the bedroom door closing.

Entering the kitchen, Owen Hayman asked, "Where's Billy? I saw him come in."

"I guess he's in the bedroom."

Billy peeled off his shirt, wincing at the pain. It was covered in blood; balling it up, he hid it in the corner of the room.

His father entered the bedroom without knocking.

"Son, when you feed the pigs tonight, I want"

Owen stopped in mid-sentence, his eyes drawn to the open wounds on Billy's back.

"What happened? Who did this to you?" his father demanded, his thick hands clenching into fists.

Billy's mind raced. He knew what Whitey was capable of. His father might stop him but if he didn't, Whitey would hurt his mom. He had to protect her.

"Billy, tell me now." Owen Hayman demanded.

His father would be mad at her but he had no choice.

"Teacher," Billy said. "Teacher did it."