

Chapter 1

Drawing herself up to her full five-foot-two-inch height, Victoria Winters stood up from her desk. Hoping to look older and more mature than her 19 years, the slender teacher wore a drab, matronly frock, its lace collar so high it chafed her chin, and kept her long, wavy, auburn hair tied in a severe bun. Inching her way to the back of the schoolroom, she watched Billy Hayman lean to his left and crane his neck. He was so engrossed in his deception that he was oblivious to her presence. The week before, the children had decorated the walls with handmade ornaments. Pretending to be admiring them, she watched him out of the corner of her eye.

Miss Winters worked her way to the back of the one-room schoolhouse where she had a clear view of the children's slates. He was cheating again! Why? He was such a good student, one of her best. At least he had been up until the last few weeks. But there he was, so busy looking at Julie Rhoads' slate he wasn't even aware of the teacher's proximity. Billy's head moved back and forth as he copied Julie's answer to question five onto his slate. Bolder still, his arithmetic book lay open on his lap.

Striding up the aisle, Victoria stopped directly behind him and peered over his shoulder. There was no question that he was cheating. "William Hayman!" the teacher exclaimed, her voice sounding like a pistol shot. Billy jumped, knocking the slate off his desk onto the floor, where it shattered. The open book slid off his legs, its pages fluttering like a wounded bird.

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

The rest of the class stared. They had hardly 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 offenders said the blows felt more like a love taps. She had no intention of using the paddle now.

"Return to your work," Victoria instructed the class as she glanced at the wall clock. "You have five minutes to finish."

Sitting down, she positioned the 10-year-old in front of her. The 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, and he was so worried about them he was having trouble concentrating on his studies. Other boys had crossed Whitey and his gang and suffered the consequences. The only way out was to lie. "I ain't cheatin'," he answered.

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 ain't fair!" the 10-year-old howled. "I'm Joseph!" The other students looked up from their work.

"Lower your voice, Billy. Would you rather I expel you for the year?"

The boy shuddered. If he got kicked out of school for cheating, his father would be more severe than Miss Winters. He looked down as big tears squeezed out of the corners of his tightly shut 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 wrongdoing." She hugged him to her chest as his breathing became more ragged. She could feel his tears dampening her shoulder. When the sobbing stopped, she released him. Victoria smiled at him. "Please clean up the broken slate," she said gently, handing him an extra one she kept in her desk.

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

"Yes. You'll use the time retake the test."

Sullenly, Billy shuffled back to his desk. Picking up the broken pieces of slate, he carried them to the wastebasket. Returning to his seat, he laid his head on the desk. Later, with no one to help him, Billy knew he failed the test. Checking the incorrect answers, Victoria shook her head. What had gotten into this boy?

After an hour, she let him go. He seemed oddly reluctant to leave the school room. When he finally did, Victoria watched through the window and saw him dawdling among the trees ringing the schoolyard. She was about to put on her wrap and go outside to check on him when he started walking down the lane. Even then, his feet seemed to be dragging.

Leaving the school room, Victoria entered her 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 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 lowered against the wind, Billy never saw the three boys lurking behind the old hollow tree waiting to pounce. He couldn't tell the teacher about the threats. She was so good to him he was sure she would try to help. But what would they do if they thought he had snitched on them?

A shadow suddenly loomed over him. Fear shot through him and gripped his heart. His breathing quickened, the air from his lungs colliding with the cold in plumes of white vapor.

"Whaddaya doin', squirt, makin' goo-goo eyes at the teacher?" Joe 'Whitey' Sanders sneered as he stepped from behind the tree.

The flat-faced 15-year-old towered over Billy. Whitey worked at his father's blacksmith shop, bulking up his already stocky frame with massive muscle. When Whitey was 10, his father, Otto, brought him into the shop and ordered him to close his eyes. He pressed a red-hot rod to the boy'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 be nicknamed Whitey. Never a sweet child, the back-breaking labor in the blacksmith shop only made Whitey surlier and more ill-tempered. Even the older boys steered clear of him.

"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.

Cousins to Whitey, the tow-headed twins Rudy and George Fairfax flanked Billy to discourage him from bolting. While they didn't always agree with Whitey's bullishness, he was family. Their fear of him was an effective motivator as well.

Grinding his teeth, Whitey advanced on the 10-year-old. Billy was sure he caught a fleeting glance of a wild dog. "Now gimme them coins you took from her desk."

"I aint no thief." Billy said defiantly. "I didn't steal nothin' from her."

"You're a liar. Gimme that money." Whitey closed in, about to put the boy in a headlock. 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. Then the three of them rifled through Billy's clothes, but found nothing.

"You bring me them coins and the money in your daddy's jar, too," Whitey growled in the trembling boy's face.

"I can't. He's saving it for spring seed," Billy whined, horrified to feel wetness in the front of his pants.

"Will ya look at that? Little baby wet himself," Whitey jeered. "Maybe your momma'll let you wear a diaper to school tomorrow." Billy hung his head, fear and shame shaking his body. Tears dripped off his chin onto the freshly-fallen snow. "Pull his coat and shirt up over his head," Whitey barked at the twins.

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

"Shut up! Stick his shirttail in his mouth," Whitey ordered. Mutely, the twins obeyed, neither one daring to defy him. He could just as easily turn on them. Rearing back, Whitey brought the switch down again. Billy bit down on the rough material of his homespun shirt. He tried to hold on, but on the tenth blow, he passed out, hanging limp in their grasp.

Releasing Billy's arm, George screamed, "Stop! Stop, you've killed him!"

"Naw," Whitey said. "He's fakin'."

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

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

"Cowards!" Whitey called after them.

The twins disappeared over a small rise. Kneeling beside Billy, Whitey rubbed snow in his face. "Don't hit me again," the boy moaned. "I'll get the jar for you."

"You better," Whitey said, his face inches from Billy's. "And iff'en you tell on me; I'll whip you harder next time and I'll get your momma too. You hear me?"

"Yes," Billy whispered.

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

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

Jenny Hayman was taking loaves of bread from the oven. She wasn't worried about Billy's lateness. Many times, before he stayed after to help Miss Winters clean the school room. Jenny cut off a thick heel of one loaf, buttered it heavily and put it in a pan on the stove. That'll keep it warm 'til he gets home, she thought, humming to herself. She always fixed Billy a snack 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 that strange as Billy always came in through the kitchen, especially on baking day, she called out. "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 his bedroom."

Wincing at the searing pain, Billy peeled off his bloody shirt. He balled it up and shoved it under the bed. 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?" Tears sprang to his eyes and his thick hands clenched 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 ordered.

His father would be furious with her but Billy had no choice. "Teacher," he murmured. "Teacher did it."