

Rebecca Fjelland Davis
54601 185th Street
Good Thunder, MN 56037
Cell 507-382-8551
Home 507-278-4332
rfd@rebeccafjellanddavis.com

Slider's Son

Chapter One

Coal Trains

Curt jammed his woolen hat on his head, thrust his hands into his mittens and ran for the door. “Mom! I’m leaving now.”

“You be careful, Curty,” Mamie called from the kitchen. She stepped into the front hall and he turned his face toward her for a kiss. “Good luck,” she said. “Hope you get a lot.” She touched his cheek with the backs of her fingers. “You be safe now.”

“I will, Mom.” Curt pulled the front door closed behind him. More snow had fallen in the afternoon while he was at school. Now a foot and a half of the stuff lay all over the yards and fields around town. It also piled up against the door of the tool shed back of the house where he kept his sled. He took the shovel from beside the stoop and scooped away just enough snow from the tool shed door so that he could slip inside. He shoved the door open against the snow, until he could pull his sled outside. Then he pushed the door shut again with the heel of his shoe and took off at a run, dragging his sled by its rope.

Curt's sled was wooden with steel runners. With a little help from his father, he had fashioned a wooden box on top of the sled. He had begun with an apple crate, nailed and wired it in place, and added sideboards so the sled box was two feet high.

In the street, the snow was thick and icy underfoot. No one had cleared the new fallen snow, but horses, sleigh runners, and wagon wheels had packed it hard.

Curt trotted down the road, following the tracks, and he turned up Church Street, past the Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church. The sled felt light behind him, skimming along on the hard-packed snow. The Belltower on the Episcopal Church bonged once. 4:30. He had fifteen minutes to reach the water tower before the train did. He turned west down Main Street. Mr. Sims, the grocery man, was sweeping snow away from his front door.

“Halloo, Curty!” Sims called.

Curt waved and kept jogging. He passed Martin's Dry Goods, the Mandan Mercantile, and Cleaver's Butcher shop. Curt caught a whiff of fresh blood and sausage spices. His stomach growled, but he didn't have time to waste.

Where Main Street ended, Curt waded through the snow in the ditch and pulled his sled up the embankment to the railroad track.

Two boys with sleds made their way west, running and slipping in the snow on the railroad tracks ahead of Curt. “Hey Tom!” Curt yelled. “Orland! Wait up!”

Tom Swinlin and Orland Bjelland paused, looked over their shoulders and saw Curt. “Hurry up! We got a late start! Move your boots, slowpoke.”

Curt ran. He stumbled on the slick snow-covered railroad ties, but caught his balance. It took a few moments of running on the railroad ties to get the rhythm. Ties, the thick pieces of lumber holding up the iron rails, were all spaced evenly apart, and running on them took

concentration. Every stride needed to be exactly the same length so each footstep would fall on a tie, not in the snow piled between them. When Curt caught his rhythm, he flew along, his sled careening behind him.

Tom and Orland kept moving, but they slowed so he could catch them. Curt was huffing by the time he pulled up to the other boys, but when he did, all three trotted down the tracks together, every now and then slipping on an icy patch.

When they passed the last house on the outskirts of town and the last of the trees, the wind swept across the North Dakota prairie and straight into their faces. They put their heads down. The temperature was a few degrees above zero, but out here, it felt a lot colder. Almost a mile past the edge of town, the boys trotted up to the water tower, and they could see a small crowd of their friends, all with sleds gathered around the base of the tower, but no train in sight.

“There!” Joe Thompson yelled. He had climbed up the lowest rungs of the water tower struts and pointed toward the horizon. They all turned their heads. Half the sun glowed like a bubble of orange juice sitting on the western edge of the earth, stripes of pink and lavender streaked through the gray-blue above it. A column of smoke hung in front of the sunset, frozen in the cold air over the train track. A few seconds later, they could hear the distant chug.

Curt counted. Seven boys out here, plus Lorraine Woods. She ~~and Mary Turner~~ were the only girls who ever came on these missions. It was a boy’s job, but Lorraine had no brothers, and she was the oldest girl in her family, and the task fell to her. The other boys were in a half-circle around Lorraine, whose long brown braids hung down her back from under her wool cap. All the kids beat their hands against their thighs and blew into their mittens while they waited for the train.

Curt was glad his mom had insisted on double layers for his hat and mittens this year. “You’re a big boy, Curty,” She had said, holding the mitten to his gangly wrist to measure to the tip of his finger. “You’ll be doing a man’s work and you need to keep those hands warm.” Tonight was one of the nights his job mattered.

Then the train whistle blasted through the early dusk. They beat their hands against their coats to keep the blood circulating. Lorraine hopped up and down. Like all the boys except Tom, whose dad was a lawyer, Lorraine wore only leather shoes—no boots—and the shoes weren’t new. There wasn’t money enough.

Again the shrill whistle rang, shattering the brittle frozen air. The kids scattered in a line along the tracks, spread out a train car’s length away from each other. The coal train steamed up toward them, pistons hammering the big steel wheels of the engine, and as the engine slowed, the engineer waved to the boys and pulled the whistle cord again. This close, the whistle was an iron shriek that blasted their eardrums. They all clapped their mittens over their ears. The force of the great black steam engine, with its roar and clang and whistle, and the shimmering heat it generated, punched a giant hole in the crystal North Dakota air.

The train brakes screamed and banged as the brakeman on top of the train, like a black paper cut-out against the sunset, jumped from car to car, turning brake wheels. The coal on the cars was dusted with snow, and the brakeman slipped twice as he jumped. Curt heard himself catch his breath, afraid the brakeman would go sliding off the coal car and land under the train’s great steel wheels. He wouldn’t be the first brakeman to be cut in two on a railroad rail.

But the brakeman caught his footing and kept his balance. The brakes shrieked, and the engine lurched to a stop beside the water tower.

The yard man came striding out of the darkness, from the station house. “You boys stay outa the way!” he yelled. He grabbed the thick rope attached to the arm that swung out over the train from the water tank. The train always stopped in Larkin to fill up on water, so the engine could generate enough steam to haul the coal the next leg of the journey across North Dakota, to Fargo, and then on to Minneapolis.

The moment the coal train came to a full stop, each boy charged the ladder on the car right in front of him.

Curt jumped and grabbed the third rung of the iron ladder that hung down the side of the third car. He swung his feet to catch the bottom rung and pulled himself up. He climbed, hand over hand, feet propelling him fast as a cat to the top of the coal-heaped car. Joe Thorson clamored up the ladder of the next car. When they reached the top, they started kicking raw coal—lignite chunks and slabs—off the top of the car to the ground below. The lignite shattered and cracked as it landed. Some of the slabs were so big they couldn’t be budged. Some, Curt shoved off with his mittens. The boys and Lorraine kicked and kicked and shoved. Landing on the frozen ground, the slabs of coal sounded like gunshots all up and down the tracks.

A whoosh from the engine sent a cloud of steam rolling over the boys. They ducked, even though the heat felt good. The yardman and the fireman from the train had opened the canvas spigot at the end of the water tower arm and cold water rushed into the hot boiler tank and the steam enveloped the whole train.

With as much lignite on the ground as they would be able to pile on their sleds, the boys climbed back down. In the steam, the iron ladders were slippery. Joe slipped off his bottom rung and fell face-down in the icy snow.

“You okay?” Tom hollered from the next coal car back.

“Yeah. Damnit.” Joe jumped up and brushed snow from the front of his trousers.

The brakeman, now on the ground, had lit a kerosene lamp and came walking along the train.

Curt jumped back, afraid the man would yell at them for stealing coal.

“You okay, kid?” the brakeman asked, holding up his lamp. Joe ducked his face away from the bright glare but not before Curt saw a glistening black eye and swollen cheek.

“Sheesh, kid, you get that shiner fallin’ off the train?” the brakeman said.

“Uh—“ Joe touched his face with his thin mitten. “Uh, yeah.”

“Turned black awful fast,” the brakeman said, “You be careful, kid. Looks to me like you got a little problem with the clumsies. Stay on your feet,” and went on down the length of the train, swinging his lantern.

Curt scooped coal and lignite chunks and slabs fast as he could into his sled box. The others were scooping coal, too. When he couldn’t pile any more on without it sliding off, Curt let his sled sit and stepped over to help Lorraine heap hers high.

“Thanks, Curtis,” she said, tossing a braid over her back, out of the way of her hands. She grabbed her sled rope. “I got it.”

When all the sleds were heaped, Curt took stock of what was left by the tracks. Enough for almost another sled-full. He’d come back, maybe, if somebody didn’t beat him to it.

The engine still hissed with the water pouring into its boiler tank as the boys and Lorraine grabbed the ropes for their sleds and started toward home. The engineer stood beside the tracks, sipping from a canteen. He nodded at the boys as they passed him. No jogging now. They strained with the weight of their sleds. At least the wind was at their backs.

