

Homeward Trails



Book Two

THE
CORPORAL'S
Codebook

Susan Page Davis



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August 1845
Albany, New York

“I’m sorry we came all this way for nothing.” Charles Miller took his sister Amy’s arm. “Are you ready to go?”

Amy sighed and looked around at the room full of hopeful boys and stern-faced adults. “It’s all right, Charles. You didn’t know they wouldn’t have any girls. But I know Daniel wouldn’t like it if I came home with a boy. Especially not a half-grown boy who looks tough.” She shivered, surveying the candidates for adoption.

“I should have inquired further,” he said.

“No, you were busy with Papa’s funeral and the estate.”

He followed her gaze to a boy in trousers that were too short and a coarse cotton shirt two sizes too big. When he sensed them looking at him, the boy straightened and stared pleadingly into Amy’s eyes.

“That little boy looks different.”

Charles noted a fading bruise on the child’s left cheekbone. Their eyes met, and Charles pulled in a deep breath.

“Why don’t you get some tea? Let me have a few words with him.”

“I can’t take a boy.” Amy’s voice rose in a warning.

Charles patted her shoulder. “I know. But everyone’s ignoring him, and he looks as though he could use some attention.”

“Fine, then.” Amy glided away, and Charles ambled over to the boy.

“Hello, young fella.”

“Hello.”

“What’s your name?”

“Elijah, sir.” The boy swallowed hard. “But I’m willing to answer to another name.”

That struck Charles’s heart like a dart. “Come sit down, Elijah.” He led the boy to a bench near the wall. “How do you like it here?”

Elijah’s eyes flickered, but he said nothing.

“It’s all right to tell me,” Charles said. Still nothing. “I see you’ve got a bruise on your face. How did that happen?”

“I’m not from here,” the boy said quickly.

“Oh?”

He nodded. “They brought me here from White Plains. I don’t even know where we are.”

“We’re in Albany, son.”

Elijah blinked. “That’s the capital.”

“Right.” Charles couldn’t help smiling. “How old are you?”

“I think I’m six, sir. My birthday’s August first. Have we passed it?”

“Yes, a couple of weeks ago.”

Elijah nodded soberly. “I thought so, it being so hot for a while.”

He was very well-spoken for his age, Charles thought. “Why did they bring you here, son?”

“Nobody wanted me at the other orphanage. They brought a bunch of us boys up here so different people could look at us.”

“I see.” The advertisement had said boys suitable for farm

work. He'd been visiting his sister, and they'd thought they would chance it, since Amy hoped so badly for a girl. Charles looked the boy over. He was a bit small for his age, but he seemed bright and able to speak well for himself. "So, why were you in that other orphanage?"

Elijah pulled in a ragged breath then another.

"It's all right," Charles said gently. "You don't have to tell me."

"Please take me, sir."

His heart lurched and he looked around quickly, spotting Amy with a cup of tea in her hands, talking to a well-dressed couple near the refreshment table.

"Son, I can't do that. I'm sorry I got your hopes up. I brought my sister here—Mrs. Wells over there, in the black dress. She was hoping to find a baby girl here."

"They didn't bring any girls," Elijah said, his voice on the verge of cracking. "I had a baby sister, but they took her already. In White Plains."

"Who took her?" Charles could sense the boy's despair, and it squeezed his own heart.

"A man and a woman. I don't know their names. Mr. Cresswick said they'd take good care of her, but they wouldn't let me and Zeph say good-bye."

"Who's Zeph?"

"My brother. A man came wanting a boy that could work hard on a farm. Zeph tried to get him to take me too, but he said he could only feed one, and anyway, I was too small."

Charles sighed. "I'm sorry that happened to you. Do they take good care of you?"

Elijah's blue eyes darkened. "I can't speak about how things are here—unless it is to lie and say that all is well. Please, sir. I'm all alone now. And the other boys—" He gave a little sob.

The orphanage director strolled over and stood before them. "Well, Mr. Miller, find a boy you like the looks of?"

"Perhaps," Charles said. "I understand this boy hasn't been living here, but he's from White Plains."

The man shrugged. "From time to time we make a combined effort to find new homes for the children. It gets them in front of a new set of prospects."

And helps you unload some of the troublemakers no one has cottoned to yet, Charles thought.

"We're getting acquainted," he said, as pleasantly as he could manage.

"Then I'll leave you to it."

As the administrator nodded and moved away, Charles noted that Elijah exhaled, as though he'd been holding his breath.

"Elijah," he said softly, "this is very important to me, and I want you to be honest. Do the staff members ever punish you?"

The boy's eyes widened. "Every day, sir, if we do something wrong. If we are late for lessons or a meal, or if we don't finish a chore on time."

"I see. And how is this punishment administered?"

Elijah shuddered. "Most times with a stick. Or a strap. It depends. Mr. Cresswick favors a belt."

"Mm." Charles leaned close and saw that the bruise extended around the side of the boy's cheek and up toward his eye. "Did you get that here, or in White Plains?"

"On the way, sir. I took a few oats from the horses' pail." He ducked his head and stared at the floor.

"Why?" Charles asked.

"They hadn't fed us, sir."

"You were hungry enough to swipe a handful of the horses' feed?"

Elijah nodded, not looking at him.

"How long were you kept unfed?"

"All day, sir. The driver and the man they sent along with us had a lunch, but we boys had nothin'."

Charles leaped to his feet, and Elijah cringed back against the wall.

"I'm sorry," Charles said. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

Please wait here. I'll be back, but I must talk to the director for a moment."

The boy gazed up at him, fear in his glistening eyes. "Am I in trouble?"

Charles could barely hear the words.

"No, son. Not a bit of it. I am going to ask what it would take to adopt you. What do you say?"

Elijah's lower lip trembled. "I say thank you, sir! Even if he won't let you, thank you. I'll always remember your kindness."

Charles had a word with the director, who was eager to hustle him into his office to sign documents. He paused to speak to his sister.

"Don't let that boy out of your sight, Amy. He's going with us."

"What? Oh, no, Charles! I told you—"

"It's all right. If you and Daniel can't take him, I will. This shouldn't take long." He glanced at the sandwiches and tea cakes on the long table. All of the boys were avoiding the food, and he was sure they'd been told not to even think of going near it. "Do me a favor. Load up a plate and go share it with him while I take care of business."

She stared at him. "You're serious. All right, then. I hope Frances is more receptive than Daniel would be."

"HOW COULD YOU DO THIS?"

The woman's face contorted, and Elijah edged back against the closed door.

"Charles, we already have four children."

"Now, Fran, take it easy." Mr. Miller stepped forward and touched the woman's shoulder. "I couldn't leave him there. If you'd been in my place, you'd have done the same thing."

"I highly doubt it."

"It was awful, Frances." Mr. Miller had lowered his voice, but

Elijah could still hear him. “Those boys, they were desperate, all of them.”

Mrs. Miller pulled in a ragged breath and looked Elijah up and down. He tried not to shrink from her gaze.

“Couldn’t you at least have got a healthy one?”

“Believe me, this one’s the pick of the litter.” Mr. Miller turned to face Elijah and slipped his arm around his wife’s waist. “Some of them looked sick. One of them had his arm in a sling. Most of them had bruises.”

Elijah blinked, and the puffy skin around his left eye hurt. Exhausted, he leaned back against the hard door to keep from swaying on his feet.

“Mama?” A little girl with long, flowing hair tiptoed into the room. Her flannel nightgown brushed the floor as she moved. “Who’s that?” She stabbed a plump little finger toward him.

Her mother opened her mouth, but Mr. Miller was quicker.

“That’s your new brother, Jack.”

His wife glared at him.

“I have a new brother?” The little girl sounded babyish. She stepped toward him in her bare feet, her eyes wide.

“Caroline, go back to bed,” Mrs. Miller said.

“I want to see Papa and Jack.”

“Jack.” The woman’s frown deepened, making deep grooves in her cheeks on either side of her mouth. “Is that why you picked him? Because he had the same name as my poor, dead brother?”

“No, but ...” Mr. Miller and stooped and plucked the little girl up into his arms. “I thought we could call him Jack, in your Jack’s memory. I asked the kid, and he said it’s all right.”

Elijah would have agreed to anything if it meant getting away from the orphanage for good, and Jack sounded like a manly name. One that other boys would make less fun of than Elijah.

In some ways, he wanted to scream and kick and run away. If Mr. Miller gave him a new name, wouldn’t that make it harder for Zeph to find him, if he was able to try? On the way, he’d

toyed with the idea of escaping from the train and setting out on his own to find Zeph. The couple who took his brother away lived in Tarrytown, he knew that.

He might be able to get away from Mr. Miller when they got to the city and had to leave the train. He could somehow make his way to Tarrytown. He had an idea it wasn't too far from New York.

But Mr. Miller seemed like a kind person. He kept buying food at nearly every train stop and plying Elijah with sandwiches and fruit. If he ran away, he could be much worse off. When they stopped in New York and changed trains, Elijah didn't leave his side.

"Jack Miller," the man had said with a smile. "Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

Now Mrs. Miller was objecting to the name. Would she refuse to keep him because her husband had given him her dead brother's name? Elijah hoped not. He liked Mr. Miller. The house, what he'd seen of it, wasn't fancy, but it was as good as the one he'd grown up in. And the kitchen smelled good.

Mrs. Miller stood simmering for a long moment. Elijah could almost feel the heat peeling off her. Finally she reached for Caroline and shifted her onto her hip. "I'm going to put her back to bed. I don't know where he'll sleep."

She left the room, and Elijah darted a glance at Mr. Miller.

"Don't worry, son. You'll have a place to sleep." He looked around. "It may be on the floor near the stove for tonight, but I'll make sure you have a bed tomorrow. Stay here and I'll bring you a blanket and a pillow."

She doesn't want me, Elijah wanted to say, but he swallowed the words.