

Homeward Trails



Book Three

THE
SISTER'S
Search

Susan Page Davis



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July 1865

Near Columbus, Ohio

Black never suited Molly Weaver. She hated the mourning dresses she and her mother had worn for the past four weeks, ever since her father's death.

Black shoes and stockings she could stand, but not the black skirts and bodice, black gloves, black hat, even black-edged handkerchiefs. Besides all that, her mother had bought a few blacked-bordered envelopes for the letters announcing Pa's death. For a young woman who could shoot a Colt revolver and harness a team by herself, black was terribly staid. Boring, even. But for Pa, she would wear it. For now.

Mrs. Wilcox, a friend of her mother, stepped out into the aisle in front of them as they left the little clapboard church.

"Emma, I heard you've sold the house as well as the store."

"That's right," her mother said.

"My dear, what will you do now?" Mrs. Wilcox squeezed Ma's wrist, her face contorted with concern.

"Molly and I plan to join Andrew in Texas," Ma said with a fixed smile. She knew her friend well.

Surely enough, Mrs. Wilcox drew back in alarm. "Texas? I hear that's a wild place. Full of robbers and army deserters and—and—Confederate sympathizers." She spat out the last two words as if they were the worst thing you could call someone. Three months after the War Between the States ended, maybe it was.

Molly managed a tight smile when Mrs. Wilcox looked her way.

"We're eager to see Andrew again," Ma said. "He's bought some land down there."

"I hope you've given it considerable thought, and you won't leave real soon." Mrs. Wilcox peered closely at Ma.

"Actually, we don't plan to wait long. We'll be setting out within the week."

Mrs. Wilcox gasped and stood staring after them as Ma herded Molly among the lingerers toward the church door.

The pastor, in his own version of mourning clothes, stood on the top step outside, shaking hands with the members of his congregation as they filed out.

"Mrs. Weaver." He took Ma's hand, bestowing a gentle smile on her. "How are you?"

"Fine, Pastor."

"And Molly." He took Molly's hand briefly. "Have you heard from Andrew yet?"

Molly shook her head and looked away. Her brother Andrew should have received the black-bordered envelope by now. A week or more ago. But then, Mrs. Wilcox was right about some things. The mails to the western states were notoriously slow, unless your correspondent lived along the railway lines. And in Texas, what few railroads existed were in chaos, or so the newspaper had told them.

Still, was it unreasonable to think that Andrew would have received the dreary letter bearing the news of his father's death and hurried to the nearest post office to send a reply?

Ma let out a sigh. "Not yet," she told the minister. "We hope to hear something tomorrow."

"Of course. My prayers are with you."

Molly trudged down the steps in her mother's wake and headed beside her toward the road. Ma veered off into the graveyard beside the church, and Molly followed, tears forming in her eyes before they came anywhere near Pa's grave.

The modest headstone had been set only a few days ago. Simeon Weaver, 1815-1865.

Molly groped up her sleeve for her handkerchief with the somber tatted edging. Ma was crying, too, but her tears slipped out from beneath her closed eyelids and streamed down her cheeks. Ma's moving lips told Molly that she was praying.

Goodbye, Pa. She would probably never visit his grave again, at least not after this week. Ma would come every day until they left for Texas, and Molly would come with her if she could. She would never stop being thankful for her wonderful parents, and she could only imagine how empty Ma must feel. Their lives were shattered the day Pa died. Molly pulled in a deep breath.

Ma had her own kind of strength. She'd always held their family together and made a pleasant home for her, Andrew, and Pa. But in some ways, Ma was fragile too. Molly had heard her crying in the night several times since the funeral. She was determined to do whatever Ma needed done right now, and the first thing was a big challenge—a long, arduous journey.

Ma wiped her face, and they left the cemetery, headed for their little home. They must be completely removed from it by Friday. There was packing to do. Things to give away. Decisions to make. Molly was excited about their coming adventure, but the preparations involved a great deal of hard work.

"Andrew should have had time to answer." Molly wished her only sibling had been at home when the tragedy happened, or at least for Pa's funeral, but that was impossible. Andrew was at least a thousand miles away.

"We must be patient, dear."

Somehow, Ma didn't look horrible in the bleak mourning dress like Molly did. She looked delicate and brave at the same time. And she probably wouldn't discard her black clothing for at least a year. Not Molly. She planned to wear anything but black on their train trip.

Her eyes stung with tears as she remembered how happy Ma had been a month ago—so excited at Pa's news that he'd sold the mercantile and they could soon leave to join Andrew in Texas. They'd help him enlarge his little ranch house and stock his land with fine cattle. But Pa had dropped dead on his way to the bank the next morning.

They walked down the street and turned the corner.

"As soon as we hear from Andrew, we'll set out," Ma said confidently.

Molly threw her a sidelong glance. "What if we don't hear from him?"

Ma pulled in a deep breath and looked straight ahead. "I'm sure we will."

ON THURSDAY MORNING, Molly ran eagerly to the door to meet the postman.

"There you go, Miss Molly," the postman said with a smile, placing two envelopes in her hand.

She forced herself not to look at them while he was still standing there. "You know we won't be here after tomorrow?"

"Yes. You've left a forwarding address at the post office?"

"My mother has."

"Are you moving out of town?" he asked.

"We're going to join my brother in Texas."

"Oh! I wish you a good journey then."

"Thank you. We're going by train as far as Kansas City."

"That's quite a trip. How will you go on from there?"

"We're told there are stagecoaches."

The postman raised his eyebrows. "Have a safe journey."

"Thank you." She closed the door, trying not to think he'd sounded doubtful. She looked at the envelopes and walked into the kitchen.

Her mother stood at the table, adding a few final items to a box they would give a neighbor. "Was that the postman?"

"Yes." Molly held out the envelopes.

Her mother took them the letters and gazed sadly down at them. "The one from the bank is no doubt a final statement. The other appears to be from Cousin Pearl in Brooklyn. Condolences, I'm sure."

Molly swallowed hard. "But nothing from Andrew."

"No."

"Ma, we have to be out tomorrow. What will we do?"

"We'll finish our packing tonight and go to the station in the morning, as planned. The sooner we begin our journey, the sooner we get to Texas."

"But ..." Molly reached for the back of a chair to steady herself. They'd discussed their options, and they'd prayed hard all week that they'd hear from Andrew. The letter hadn't come. She looked around. The man who'd bought the house had given them extra money for the furnishings. She and her mother were planning to stay in Texas, and they'd reduced their belongings to two trunks and two leather satchels.

"Come, let's check each room to be sure we haven't forgotten anything," Ma said. "I'll leave the key where I told Mr. Endicott he'd find it."

"But, Ma ..."

"We must trust the Lord, Molly. We must leave first thing in the morning to make our train. I'll dash off one last note to Andrew today, just in case we don't hear from him, and you can take it to the post office while I finish up here. And then I'll arrange for someone to come in the morning and take the trunks to the station for us." Ma frowned. "I doubt any message we

send Andrew now will reach him before we do, but at least we will have tried.”

Molly dutifully walked through the house, peering into each cupboard and under the beds. They’d sold or given away what personal belongings they weren’t taking with them. Everything left now would go to Mr. Endicott and his family. She hoped they enjoyed the house the way the Weavers had while their family was intact.

When she returned to the kitchen, Ma stood and handed her a sheet of paper. “You’ll have to get an envelope and a stamp at the post office. Mine are all packed in my trunk, and I hate to open it again.”

Molly took the paper and put on her shawl.

“Hurry back,” Ma said. “Mrs. Wilcox invited us to take dinner with them.”

“How will we get to the station tomorrow?” Molly asked.

“I’m sure we can ride in the freight wagon when they take the trunks.”

On her way to the post office, Molly passed the mercantile. She’d been so excited when Pa announced he’d sold it for a good price, and now they could take the money to Texas and help Andrew build up the ranch.

Her brother had told them in his letters that his ranch was a small one, but there was adjoining land he might be able to acquire later. Ma and Pa had talked about purchasing the land next to Andrew’s and combining it in one large ranch. He had only a small, two-room cabin, but they could build a new house nearby. It would be an adventure for the family. Molly could hardly wait to ride the range with him, tending to the cattle.

But now ...

Her heart was heavy as she entered the post office. If she knew all was well with Andrew, she would still be glad. But his last letter had arrived four weeks ago, and it was written before Andrew received the news of his father’s death.

What if he’d received the sorrowful news and left

immediately to support his mother? What if he was on his way back to Ohio? They could easily miss him.

Surely, as soon as he reached a town with telegraph wires, Andrew would send a telegram telling them to wait for him. But a month had passed, and they'd received no wire from him, though they'd sent several more letters in the interim. Nothing. When he wrote his last letter, Andrew hadn't known the mercantile was sold. He might think they wouldn't come for some time yet.

So now she and Ma were heading out into uncertainty.

Molly squared her shoulders and walked to the counter.

"OHIO, YOU SAY?" Ryland Atkins's pulse leaped. After two years of trying, was he finally finding a clue to Jane Cooper's whereabouts?

"Yes, just outside Columbus. I received a letter from Emma not two weeks ago saying her husband had passed away." The woman's eyes glistened. "I feel so bad for her. She has two grown children out there to support her, of course. Still, it must be hard. Emma said something about selling their store."

"They have a store out there?"

"Land, yes. Fifteen years or more now. Let me get you their address."

Mrs. Hillier came back a minute later with a scrap of paper in her hand. "I'm sorry you've been to all this trouble."

"It's all right," Ryland said. "I did ask all around their old neighborhood, but folks who remembered them didn't seem to know where they'd gone."

"And none of them knew Emma had a cousin living five miles away." Mrs. Hillier gave him a sad smile. "I hope she and the children are all right. That Molly was a right pert little thing. And Andrew—oh, he could get into mischief."

Ryland smiled. He had the Weavers' new address, and he had

names and information about the family. He could find them. He was sure he could.

“Thank you so much, Mrs. Hillier.”

He hurried to the nearest commercial street, swinging his trusty sword cane. A cab driver pulled his horse smartly to the curb when Ryland whistled.

“Take me to the nearest telegraph office, please.” He climbed into the cab, and the driver set the horse to moving.

Too bad he had no time to write to Abigail. Ryland smiled, thinking of the lovely young woman he’d left behind in Maine when he started out on this latest quest. Abigail Benson was no doubt sitting primly in her grandmother’s parlor doing needlework this afternoon. His chest tightened. He would write her a quick letter while he waited for his train west.

The driver stopped before a hotel.

“Telegraph office in the lobby, sir.”

“Thank you.” Ryland handed him some coins. “I’ll want to go to the railway depot next, if you’d like to wait while I send a wire.”

“I’ll be here, sir.”

Ryland nodded and strode into the hotel. He spotted the telegrapher’s grille right away. He’d become an expert at locating them in his travels over the last two years. Quickly he filled in the form with his employer’s address in Portland, Maine.

FOUND WEAVERS NEW ADDRESS. HEADING FOR OHIO.

He was thankful for the freedom with which Mr. Turner entrusted him. Ryland had plenty of funds at his disposal to buy the train ticket to Columbus. With any luck, he’d be speaking to Abby’s cousin Jane within a couple of days. He whistled as he rode in the cab toward the train station.