



THE LITTLE SPARROWS



THE ORPHAN

TRAIN TRILOGY

AL & JOANNA LACY

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*The*  
*Little*  
*Sparrows*

THE ORPHAN TRAINS TRILOGY

BOOK ONE

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Al & JoAnna Lacy

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This book is affectionately dedicated to  
Gail Messick of Montgomery, Alabama,  
a faithful fan who has shown us much love.

We love you too, Gail. God bless you!

1 CORINTHIANS 16:23

# Prologue

**I**n midnineteenth-century New York City, which had grown by leaps and bounds with immigrants from all over Europe coming by the thousands into the city, the streets were filled with destitute, vagrant children. For the most part, they were anywhere from two years of age up to fifteen or sixteen.

The city's politicians termed them "orphans," though a great number had living parents, or at least one living parent. The city's newspapers called them orphans, half-orphans, foundlings, street Arabs, waifs, and street urchins. Many of these children begged or stole while a few found jobs selling newspapers; sweeping stores, restaurants, and sidewalks; and peddling apples, oranges, and flowers on the street corners. Others sold matches and tooth-picks. Still others shined shoes. A few rummaged through trash cans for rags, boxes, or refuse paper to sell.

In 1852, New York City's mayor said there were some 30,000 of these orphans on the city's streets. Many of the ones who wandered the streets were ill clad, unwashed, and half-starved. Some actually died of starvation. They slept in boxes and trash bins in the alleys during the winter and many froze to death. In warm weather, some slept on park benches or on the grass in Central Park.

Some of the children were merely turned loose by the parents because the family had grown too large and they could not care for all their children. Many of the street waifs were runaways from parental abuse, parental immorality, and parental drunkenness.

In 1848, a young man named Charles Loring Brace, a native of Hartford, Connecticut, and graduate of Yale University, had come to New York to study for the ministry at Union Theological Seminary. He was also an author and spent a great deal of time working on his books, which slowed his work at the seminary. He still had not graduated by the spring of 1852 but something else was beginning to occupy his mind. He was horrified both by the vagrant children he saw on the streets daily and by the way the civil authorities treated them. The city's solution for years had been to sweep the wayfaring children into jails or run-down almshouses.

Brace believed the children should not be punished for their predicament but should be given a positive environment in which to live and grow up. In January 1853, after finishing the manuscript for a new book and submitting it to his New York publisher, Brace dropped out of seminary and met with a group of concerned pastors, bankers, businessmen, and lawyers—all who professed to be born-again Christians—and began the groundwork to establish an organization that would do something to help New York City's homeless children.

Because Brace was clearly a brilliant and dedicated young man, and because he was a rapidly rising literary figure on the New York scene, these men backed him in his desire. By March 1853, the Children's Aid Society was established. Brace was its leader, and the men who backed him helped raise funds from many kinds of businesses and people of wealth. This allowed Brace to take over the former Italian Opera House at the corner

of Astor Place and Lafayette Street in downtown Manhattan.

From the beginning, Brace and his colleagues attempted to find homes for individual children, but it was soon evident that the growing numbers of street waifs would have to be placed elsewhere. Brace came upon the idea of taking groups of these orphans in wagons to the rural areas in upstate New York and allowing farmers to simply pick out the ones they wanted for themselves and become their foster parents.

This plan indeed provided some homes for the street waifs, but not enough to meet the demand. By June 1854, Brace came to the conclusion that the children would have to be taken westward where there were larger rural areas. One of his colleagues in the Children's Aid Society had friends in Dowagiac, Michigan, who had learned of the Society's work and wrote to tell him they thought people of their area would be interested in taking some of the children into their homes under the foster plan.

Hence came the first orphan train. In mid-September 1854, under Charles Brace's instructions, Dowagiac's local newspaper carried an ad every day for two weeks, announcing that forty-five homeless boys and girls from the streets of New York City would arrive by train on October 1, and on the morning of October 2 could be seen at the town's meetinghouse. Bills were posted at the general store, cafés, restaurants, and the railroad station, asking families to provide foster homes for these orphans.

One of Brace's paid associates, E. P. Smith, was assigned to take the children on the train to Dowagiac, which is located in southwestern Michigan. Smith's wife accompanied him to chaperone the girls.

The meetinghouse was fairly packed as the children stood behind Smith while he spoke to the crowd. He explained the program, saying these unfortunate children were Christ's "little ones," who needed a chance in life. He told the crowd that kind



men and women who opened their homes to one or more of this ragged regiment would be expected to raise them as they would their own children, providing them with decent food and clothing and a good education. There would be no loss in their charity, Smith assured his audience. The boys would do whatever farm work or other kind that was expected of them, and the girls would do all types of housework.

As the children stood in line to be inspected, the applicants moved past them slowly, looking them over with care and engaging them in conversation. E. P. Smith and his wife looked at the quality and cleanliness of the prospective foster parents and asked them about their financial condition, property, vocation, and church attendance. If they were satisfied with what they heard, and saw no evidence that they were lying, they let them choose the child or children they desired.

When the applicants had chosen the children they wanted, thirty-seven had homes. The remaining eight were taken back to New York and placed in already overcrowded orphanages. Charles Brace was so encouraged by the high percentage of the children who had been taken into the homes, that he soon launched into a campaign to take children both from off the streets and from the orphanages, put them on trains, and take them west where there were farms and ranches aplenty.

When the railroad companies saw what Brace's Children's Aid Society was doing, they contacted him and offered generous discounts on tickets, and each railroad company offered special coaches, which would carry only the orphans and their chaperones.

For the next seventy-five years—until the last orphan train carried the waifs to Texas in 1929—the Children's Aid Society had placed some 250,000 children in homes in every western state and territory except Arizona. Upon Brace's death in 1890,

his son, Charles Loring Brace Jr., took over the Society.

In 1910, a survey concluded that 87 percent of the children shipped to the West on the orphan trains up to that time had grown into credible members of western society. Eight percent had been returned to New York City, and 5 percent had either disappeared, were imprisoned for crimes committed, or had died.

It is to the credit of Charles Loring Brace's dream, labor, and leadership in the orphan train system that two of the orphans grew up to become state governors, several became mayors, one became a Supreme Court justice, two became congressmen, thirty-five became lawyers, and nineteen became physicians. Others became successful gospel preachers, lawmen, farmers, ranchers, businessmen, wives, and mothers—those who made up a great part of society in the West.

Until well into the twentieth century, Brace's influence was felt by virtually every program established to help homeless and needy children. Even today, the philosophical foundations he forged have left him—in the minds of many—the preeminent figure in American child welfare history.

# Chapter One

**I**t was early April 1874, in southeastern Wyoming on a bright sunny Saturday morning. The prairie was golden with sunlight beneath an azure sky. White clouds rode the high wind, patching the land with drifting shadows. The air was clear and crisp, and from the *Circle C* ranch where rancher Sam Claiborne and his wife, Emma, stood on the front porch of their two-story white frame house looking westward, their range of vision extended all the way to the majestic Rocky Mountains some fifty miles away. The lofty peaks were still snow packed and filled the horizon. The Claibornes were looking for movement on the prairie, but the only movement in sight was a bald eagle winging its way southward on the airwaves.

The lanky rancher, who would turn thirty-five on his next birthday, sighed. “Honey, I can’t wait any longer. I’ve got to get into Cheyenne for my appointment with Lyle Wilson. The bank closes at noon on Saturdays and I don’t want to be late.”

Emma, who was a year younger than her husband, said, “Go ahead and saddle Midnight, dear. I’ll keep watch.”

Sam nodded. “Okay. Be back shortly.”

Emma observed her husband’s form as he hurried around the house, then a small frown lined her brow and a shadow flicked

across her blue eyes as she looked toward the west once again. She knew how much her child enjoyed riding and racing her bay mare across the prairie, but of late she had found herself ill at ease each time.

She whispered a prayer toward heaven, asking the Lord to bring both girls back safely. Betty Houston was Jody's best friend and a fine Christian girl. The girls were excellent riders, but out there on the prairie a lot of things could happen.

Emma took her eyes off the prairie for a moment to look around the ranch. She and Sam had worked hard over the years to make the *Circle C* what it was today. And even now, from sunup till sundown, their days were filled with chores and work of various sorts. Sundays always brought a nice break, with church services morning and evening, which invariably were a blessing.

Emma smiled to herself as she scanned the five hundred acres she could see from the porch, and thought how all the work was worth it. *After all*, she mused, *good hard work never hurt anyone.*

Two weeks ago, she and Sam, along with Jody's help, had put a fresh coat of paint on the house. Now it stood gleaming in the sunshine. Dark green shutters adorned each open window, making pretty frames for the lace curtains fluttering in the morning breeze. The grass around the house was beginning to put on its spring greenery, and the tulips and the daffodils made a bright-colored border around the front porch.

*I couldn't ask for more*, Emma thought. *You've been so good to us, Lord.*

Some fifteen minutes after he had headed for the barn, Sam came around the corner of the house, leading his big black stallion. She glanced at him and shook her head. "No sign of them, yet. I hope nothing's wrong."

Sam pulled Midnight to a halt at the porch steps. "I'm sure

they're all right, honey. Sometimes those girls just get wound up while racing each other and forget about the time."

"Mm-hmm. I know."

Sam flipped the reins over Midnight's head, looping them over the saddle horn, then moved up the porch steps. He took Emma in his arms and kissed her. "I'll be back by one o'clock or so." He moved down the steps, took hold of the saddle horn, and lifted his foot to put it in the stirrup.

"Wait a minute, Sam. Here they come!"

He dropped the foot to earth and looked westward.

The *Circle C* was located some thirteen miles north of Cheyenne on the south bank of the Lodgepole River. Sam's eyes focused on the two riders as they galloped along the edge of the river toward the ranch, bent forward in their saddles, their long hair flowing in the wind.

He smiled when he saw that the bay mare carrying the girl with the dark hair was ahead by two lengths. Sam was proud of his twelve-year-old daughter, who had become an expert rider. He flicked a glance at Emma. "Honey, those girls sure love to race each other."

"That they do," she said, descending the porch steps. "Strange, isn't it? About half the time Jody and Queenie win, and half the time Betty and Millie come out ahead."

"Yeah. I think those two mares have a secret pact to make it work like that."

Emma laughed. "Know what? I believe you're right!"

Soon the bay mare thundered up and skidded to a halt a few seconds before the gray roan. Betty Houston, who was the same age as Jody Claiborne, said jokingly, "You and Queenie cheated, Jody!"

While the horses snorted, breathing hard from the race, Jody laughed. "And just how did we cheat?"

“Well, you and Queenie made Millie and me ride closer to the riverbank. The air is thicker close to the water, so it slowed Millie down.”

Sam and Emma both laughed at Betty’s good-natured reasoning. “She’s right, Jody!” Sam said. “You should’ve been the one riding closest to the river. It’s only fair that you give your best friend the advantage.”

Jody looked at her best friend. “Thanks Betty! I appreciate your letting Queenie run in the thin, dry air. Next time, it’ll be Millie’s turn.”

Everybody laughed, and Jody dismounted. “Daddy, I’m sorry if I held you up. We kind of let the time get away from us. But thanks for waiting for me. I sure want to ride to town with you.”

Sam smiled. “It’s all right, Jody. I thought you girls might be a while getting back, so I went ahead and saddled up Midnight. Soon as Queenie catches her breath, we’ll go.”

Betty ran her gaze over the three faces. “I’ll be going. See all of you later.”

“Thanks for letting me win,” Jody said, a wide grin spread over her pretty face.

Betty grinned back, wheeled her mare around, and trotted away.

Jody turned to her father. “Daddy, just give me two minutes to wash my face and get a drink of water, and I’ll be all set to go with you.”

“Sure. Go ahead, honey. Hurry, though. Remember I have an appointment with the bank president. I don’t want to be late.”

“Yes, sir!” she said. “Be right back.”

As Jody took the porch steps two at a time and plunged through the door, Sam took Emma in his arms and kissed her. “Thank you for giving me a daughter like that, sweet stuff. What a girl! She’s so much like her mother.”

Emma crinkled her nose. "My, hasn't God blessed you? Just think what a fortunate man you are to have two such marvelous women in your life."

"Don't I know it!"

Emma clipped his chin. "And don't you forget it!"

"Oh, how could I? How blessed I am!"

Sam stepped to Queenie, took hold of the reins, and said, "Hey, ol' gal, let's get you a drink of water."

He led her to the nearby watering trough and let her drink all she wanted. As he was leading her back to the front of the house, Jody came out the door and put her arms around her mother. She asked if there was anything else her mother needed from the general store other than what was on the list she had given her that morning.

Emma said there was nothing else. Jody told her she would see her later and moved up to her father. "Thank you for watering Queenie for me, Daddy, and thank you for waiting for me."

Emma looked on with pleasure as Sam kissed Jody's forehead and squeezed her tight. She was glad that Sam and his daughter were very close. It pleased her that they spent so much time together. Jody had made herself a tomboy, knowing her father very much wanted a son too. She worked with him on the ranch and helped with the chores. She also helped her mother with the cooking, washing, ironing, and the housework, which she enjoyed more.

Father and daughter mounted up and rode toward town, where he would take care of his banking business while she purchased a few things at the general store.

As Sam and Jody rode into Cheyenne and were moving past the railroad station, they saw a train with several coal cars. The coal

was being unloaded into wagons owned by Cheyenne residents, town merchants, the town's blacksmith, and several ranchers and farmers.

Jody glanced at her father. "I guess we don't need coal this time, do we, Daddy?"

"No. We're set till the middle of next fall."

She ran her gaze over the coal cars. "Those Rocky Mountains must really be full of coal. They just keep digging more out all the time."

"Yes. When God created the earth, He knew that man would need the coal to heat his homes and business buildings; that the blacksmiths would need it to do their work, and the factories would need it for melting alloys of iron, carbon, and other elements to make steel."

"Well, I'm sure glad we have coal to heat our house in these cold Wyoming winters, Daddy. The Lord sure has been good to the people He put on this earth. I wish more of them would see how good the Father was to send His Son to provide them with salvation. But most of them seem to have no interest in Jesus. They want religion, but they don't want Him. Or they want to mix what He did at Calvary with human works, which is to say that what Jesus did when He shed His blood on the cross, died, and rose again was not enough to save lost sinners."

"You've got that right, sweetheart. Anything added to His finished work at Calvary is human works, and as you well know, the Bible says salvation is by grace, not of works, lest any man should boast."

"That's what my Sunday school teacher was saying last Sunday, Daddy. When human works are added to the gospel, it takes the glory from Jesus and puts it on those who do the works."

"Right. And because Jesus paid the full price for our sins on the cross, God the Father wants all the glory to go to His Son."



“And that’s the way it should be.”

“Amen, sweetheart.”

Soon Sam and Jody were in Cheyenne’s business section. As they drew near the general store, Jody said, “Daddy, I’ll be sitting on one of those benches in front of the store when you come back from the bank.”

“All right, honey. See you later.”

Jody veered Queenie toward the hitch rail in front of the store as her father headed for the next block where the Bank of Cheyenne was located.

She dismounted, patted Queenie’s long neck, and entered the general store.

Twenty minutes later, Jody came out of the store, packages in hand, talking to a teenage girl who was in her Sunday school class. The girl headed down the boardwalk, and Jody stepped into the street and drew up to her mare. She began placing the small packages into a canvas bag that was attached to the rear of her saddle. When she got to the last package, she reached inside and took out a long stick of licorice candy. Her favorite.

Jody’s mother always gave her permission to purchase a nickel’s worth of candy whenever she went to the general store for her. She patted the mare’s neck again. “Daddy will be back in a little while, Queenie.”

The mare bobbed her head and whinnied lightly as if she understood Jody’s words.

Jody went to one of the benches and sat down to wait for her father.

She relished every bite of her licorice stick. Since it was Saturday, farm and ranch families were in town for shopping, which made for a constant stream of people moving along the boardwalk. Jody sat in complete contentment, for people watching was one of her preferred pastimes. A few minutes had passed

when Jody looked up and saw Pastor Dan Forbes, his wife Clara, and their two sons coming down the boardwalk. Peter Forbes was Jody's age, and Paul was ten years old. Clara Forbes spotted Jody first, and pointed her out to the rest of the family. Jody put the licorice stick in her purse.

"Your parents in the general store, Jody?" asked the pastor.

"No, sir. Daddy's over at the bank doing business with Mr. Wilson. Mommy didn't come to town with us. I just finished a little grocery shopping for her."

"Oh, I see."

Clara smiled. "Well, it's nice of you to do the shopping for her, honey."

"I enjoy it."

Jody noticed Peter and Paul as they stepped across the boardwalk to the hitch rail and stroked Queenie's long face, speaking to her. Queenie nickered her own greeting.

The pastor looked at Jody. "Have you and Betty had a good race lately?"

"Oh yes. Just this morning, in fact."

"And who won?"

"I did."

"Well, that's good. The last time I asked about you girls racing was at church a couple of weeks ago. Betty had won."

Jody giggled. "Oh, we trade off as to who wins."

"Really? So you two plan on who's going to win before you race?"

"No. Millie and Queenie plan it out."

The pastor and his wife both laughed. "Come on, boys, we have to be going. We don't want to be late for your dentist appointment, Paul."

The boys left Queenie and moved back to the spot where their parents stood. Jody said, "Tell Dr. Miller hello for me, Paul."

Paul chuckled. "Tell you what, Jody—I'll stay here, and you go see Dr. Miller in my place. Tell him hello in person."

"Nice try," said Clara.

Paul made a mock scowl. "I don't want to go to the dentist, Mom."

"Nobody does," said Clara. "But with all of us it's necessary from time to time."

The pastor told Jody he would see her and her parents at church tomorrow, and he and his family walked away.

Jody sat down on the bench again, took her licorice stick out of her purse, and went back to her people watching.

A short time later, she saw her father riding down the street toward her. As he pulled up to the hitch rail, he looked at her and smiled. "Get your shopping done, honey?"

"Sure did," she said, putting the last piece of licorice in her mouth and rising from the bench. "I already loaded the sacks into the canvas bag." She ducked under the hitch rail and mounted Queenie. "Pastor Forbes and his family came by, Daddy. Paul has an appointment with the dentist."

Sam screwed up his face. "I'm glad we have dentists in this world, but I sure don't like to go to them."

"I never met anyone who likes to go to the dentist."

As father and daughter headed north on Main Street, they soon found themselves drawing near the railroad station. They saw that the coal train was gone and a passenger train stood in its place.

Jody's attention was drawn to a long line of children who were standing on the depot platform next to the train. Men and women were talking to them. "Daddy, look! It's one of the orphan trains."

"Sure enough. I read the announcement about this train in the *Cheyenne Sentinel* last week. It told that the train would be in

today for prospective foster parents to pick and choose the orphans as they wished.”

“I’ve heard you and Mommy talk about the orphan trains at times, Daddy, but I never understood about these foster parents. Do they adopt them legally after a while?”

“Well, from what I’ve read, most of them remain foster parents, even though the plan is to raise them until they are adults. But some do adopt them right away. They simply go to a local judge to get it done.”

“Well, Daddy, here’s your chance to get that boy you’ve always wanted!”

Sam laughed. “Tell you what, Jody Ann Claiborne, since you’re such a tomboy, that’s enough! I don’t need a boy.”

“Then I guess I’m not going to be replaced.”

“You’re sure not!”

“Daddy...”

“Yes?”

“Could we go in there to the depot and just watch for a few minutes?”

“Why, sure. Since my meeting with Mr. Wilson was shorter than expected, we have time.”

They left their horses at hitching posts in the depot’s parking lot and moved up to the platform beside the train. Jody’s eyes were wide as she beheld the scene from close up. She quickly counted sixty-three children in the line. Adults were moving slowly along the line, looking them over, and talking to them.

The children ranged in age from about four or five to their mid-teens. The boys were dressed in black or gray suits with white shirts and neckties, and the girls were in red or blue dresses that were all styled similarly. The hems of the dresses came down to the tops of their black lace-up boots.

Jody noticed similar expressions on the pinched faces of both

boys and girls. The apprehension they felt showed in their eyes, and it was obvious that turmoil was racing through their hearts as they stood as spectacles on display before the adults. They fidgeted and continuously watched the faces of the adults who were taking measure of them.

Young as they were, some of the children looked beaten down with wary eyes that appeared much too old for their age. Some of the older boys tried to mask their fear with a facade of bravery while the older girls often glanced at each other, eyes round and huge as they felt the gaze of the scrutinizing adults on them.

Jody's tender heart went out to them and her green eyes filled with tears. She looked up at her father. "Daddy, what will happen if the train arrives at its destination on the West Coast and no one takes them?"

"Well, sweetheart, from what I've read about it in the newspapers, the children that are not chosen are taken back to the Children's Aid Society in New York. Some of them are so discouraged that they go back to the streets. Others wait till they can get on another orphan train and try again."

"Do the ones who are chosen always get into good homes?"

Sam shook his head. "Unfortunately, no. Though the Children's Aid Society people don't like it, many of the boys and girls are chosen just to be made into servants and field hands. And some of those are abused. It's so sad. If this is a typical group, some of those you see right here are not actually orphans, but have run away from homes in New York City where they were mistreated and abused. And then they end up in homes just like the kind they had run away from."

Jody wiped tears from her eyes. "That's awful, Daddy."

"Yes, but thank the Lord, the majority of the children do find good homes where they are loved and given the care they deserve. I'll tell you, sweetie, life on those New York streets is appalling

and very dangerous. At least those who are chosen—even if it is to be servants and field hands—will have food and clothing supplied, a warm, comfortable bed at night, and many of them will be sent to school.”

Jody ran her misty eyes over the line of children. “Daddy, I wish we could take them all home with us.”

Sam put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to his side. “I do too, darlin’. I do too. But we can’t.”

“I know, Daddy, but it doesn’t keep me from wishing.”