



CANTRELL SISTERS
MAIL ORDER BRIDES
#1

*Joy
Like no Other*

A NOVEL

EDNA LEE ALLEN

Joy Like No
Other

Edna Lee Allen

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JOY LIKE NO OTHER

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Dedication

To all of my teachers who inspired my passion for learning.

Cantrell Sisters Books

Joy Like No Other
Mercy Like a River
Grace Like a Whisper

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April 1872

Joy struggled to wrench away from the man, whose arms encircled her like iron bars. Her body stiffened, and she gagged from the putrid stench of alcohol on his breath. Lewd words hissed in her ear. She mustered all of her strength and pushed against her stepfather's chest, but she couldn't untangle from his grasp.

His rough, filthy hand covered her mouth, stifling her scream. "You're not getting away this time!"

Joy didn't plead for him to stop. Begging always intensified his mean streak. Joy caught a glimpse of movement.

Her older sister, cast iron skillet held high, tiptoed behind Zebulon.

Joy jerked her head away just as Mercy slammed the pan down on the old man's head.

He fell to the floor.

Grace ran in from outside, carrying a basket of string beans.

"Come!" Mercy grabbed their hands.

The basket of beans tumbled to the ground.

The girls lifted their skirts and dashed across the yard from the shabby farmhouse to the barn, the sanctuary they escaped to from these drunken rages. They skittered up the ladder to the hayloft.

Grace cried out as her foot slipped on a broken rung.

Joy grabbed her hand and pulled her up.

Mercy made it to the top and pulled the ladder up.

The three girls collapsed in the far corner of the hayloft.

Grace sobbed.

"Did he hurt you?" Mercy's face was set like stone.

Joy shook her head. She brushed a hand across her tear-stained cheek and breathed deep to stop the trembling. "What will we do?"

"I wish I knew. Papa's only been dead a few months and Delma married that awful drunk." Mercy paced across the boarded floor.

"Our lives are ruined." Grace's voice was shaky.

"Zebulon's drinking is getting worse." Mercy twisted a piece of hay. "Did you hear that argument they had last night?"

"Of course. The way they carried on, you could have heard them in the next county. Delma accused him of stealing money from her purse to buy liquor," Grace's tone was barely above a whisper.

"It was bad enough when Mama died and Papa married Delma. She doesn't love us, and she works us like slaves." Mercy was angry.

"Not that Papa didn't work hard, too." Joy sniffed. "It's probably what killed him. But we three girls can't run a farm and take care of the housework."

"Mornings aren't so bad since Zebulon just sleeps. But you know how he is when he wakes up and starts drinking. And today, I could tell he would be worse than usual. The only thing that man is good for is making trouble." Grace's eyes filled with fresh tears.

"I don't think Delma knew what she was doing

when she married him. I really do believe she expected him to be a help." Mercy kneeled down and put her arm around Grace.

"Did you hear what he said?" Grace's voice was hushed, as if speaking it aloud would make it happen. "I heard him tell her they should sell the farm and move to Colorado."

"And he said they should leave us here. We would be without a home. What will happen then?" Joy's stomach tightened with fear.

"The land will be sold, and we can do nothing about it legally." Worry spread across Mercy's face. "We have no rights to it."

"I thought it couldn't get worse." Joy let her head fall back.

"Then we'll just have to leave." Mercy stood, her voice firm. She stared through the loft window, resolution hardening her face. "We have to go, and now is the time to do it. We've got our egg money, don't we?"

"That's not much." Joy pulled a piece of hay from underneath her dress and flicked it over the edge. "Where will we go?"

"It will have to be enough," Mercy said. "At least it's safely hidden."

Their hiding place was a loose board in the wall behind the headboard of their bed. The only reason Delma hadn't found it is that she never came up the ladder to the loft bedroom the girls shared.

"The three of us can't get anywhere on that." Joy searched her sister's face.

"I keep hearing Papa's words, 'Look to God, and He'll take care of your needs.' I think he said that because he knew he couldn't always be around to help

us. But God will never leave us."

"And what will we do to earn a living?"

"I've been praying," Mercy said. "I believe God is giving us a way out."

"Whatever you're thinking, we'll stay together, right?" Grace's voice sounded small.

"Yes, I've planned it that way."

"Zebulon scares me more and more every day, but this farm is all we know. None of us have ever lived any place else." Joy raised a trembling hand.

"And Delma would probably find us and drag us by the hair all the way back home."

"That's why we need to leave Kansas. We'll go far enough where they can't find us." Mercy pushed back a wooden crate, lifted several newspapers, and spread them out in front of her sisters. "I found these several weeks ago on the floor of the mercantile while we were delivering eggs. Someone had tossed them away."

Grace picked up one of the papers and read the front page. "The Matrimonial News?"

"It's published in Kansas City and sent to other states in the Midwest. I found several advertisements men have placed to find wives."

Joy gasped. Had it really come to this? "Mail-order brides?"

Grace's face contorted in utter shock. "We can't marry someone we don't even know!"

Joy scanned the pages of advertisements from people soliciting a spouse. She read excerpts while the others listened in silence. "Some of these men had wives die of cholera or rheumatic fever. This man's wife died in labor. Another has children who need tending. Others have never been married and want companionship."

"That's right." Mercy said. "Both women and men have written letters looking for a spouse. Some of them even sent a picture."

Grace bit her lip. "I'm not sure if this is a good idea. We could be split up and never see each other again."

Mercy's eyes glistened. "Not if we all go to the same place." She unfolded a small piece of paper tucked in with the others. "I also found this, and I thought of you." She handed it to Grace.

Grace examined the newspaper clipping. Her face softened and her eyes grew brighter. "An advertisement for a schoolmistress." She looked up. "But it's in Texas."

"And there are two men from the same area who placed advertisements in the Matrimonial News. There's a rancher who needs a bride for his son and a lawman who seeks a wife. Both live near Sheldon, Texas. I'm sorry that I only found two men from the same area. But Joy and I can marry the suitable men, and you can accept this job in the same town. I bet we'll all be within a day's ride of each other. It's just for one year while the schoolmaster takes care of a sick relative. If you aren't courting by the end of the school year, Joy or I will take you in."

The loft grew quiet for a long time.

Joy's mind whirled with fear and doubt, and the tendons in her neck stiffened.

Grace's mouth was tight and red.

Joy put her arm around Grace hoping to soften her hands that were knotted like ropes.

"I'd love to teach school, but what if we go some place and it's not any better than what we have here?" Grace asked.

"Maybe we should take the chance," Joy said. "You've always wanted to teach."

"We are taking risks every minute that we stay here." Mercy's expression was grim.

"I know you're right, but this scares me. We need to leave this awful place before someone gets hurt. Think what could've happened to me if Mercy hadn't been close by." Joy's voice broke. "If the two of you had been working in the field..."

Mercy placed her hand on Joy's.

Grace's body stiffened, and she pushed her shoulders back. "And we won't find husbands around here. Delma has made sure of that. She runs off any man who comes near the farm."

"Of course. She wants us around to help her with the chores and the farm." Mercy looked at each of them. "That's why we'll have to go elsewhere to find a home."

Joy shook her head, overwhelmed by Mercy's risky idea. "But we haven't met these men. How do we know what they're like?"

Mercy placed one hand on the newspaper. "We don't. We only have their advertisements."

They sat for a moment without speaking.

Joy drew up and rested her face on her knees. Never had she felt so helpless and afraid.

Mercy folded the newspapers. "I'll write to these two prospects and to the one about the school mistress and tell them we're coming. The letters will be mailed tomorrow when we walk to town."

A sharp gasp escaped from Grace. Her eyes widened. "What happens if they don't want us, or they've found somebody else?"

"It's a risk we must take. Every day we stay, we're

in danger from Zebulon." Mercy reminded them.

Joy nodded, the ugly reality finally settled in. "And what will happen if he sells the farm out from under us? We'll be without a home anyway."

"Can he really do that?" Grace asked. "Shouldn't it be ours? I mean, the land belonged to Mama and Papa first."

"But Papa willed it to Delma after their marriage," Mercy explained. "That's probably the only way he could secure a wife after Mama died. And we know how desperately he needed someone to care for us so he could work the farm. But it's hers now. And I have a feeling Zebulon will get his way about selling it."

Joy nodded. "He gets a few drinks in him, and he's just as mean to Delma as he is to us."

"I've been thinking about this for months, but the urgency is now clear. With the possibility of the farm being sold, the need to move swiftly has become obvious. Zebulon attacking Joy is the last straw," Mercy said with firm resolve.

Grace's eyebrows pinched together. "You mean you've been planning for us to become mail-order brides but said nothing to us?"

"Yes, it's the only solution that came to mind. Maybe I should have told you what I was thinking. I hoped some other solution would present itself. But it hasn't."

Joy looked at Grace and then back to Mercy. She needed time to think. Even though her life was in shambles, moving from the familiar terrified her.

Mercy squeezed Joy's hand. "We can't continue to live here any longer. We have to move on in order to make a better life for ourselves."

"Sometimes..." Joy felt her cheeks burn and

wondered if she could voice her thoughts.

"What?" Mercy asked.

"I don't know...sometimes I wonder what God is doing. We lost our mother, and then our father, and now things have only gotten steadily worse. I keep praying, but it doesn't seem to do any good."

Grace placed her hand on Joy's shoulder. "Of course our prayers are doing good."

"Sometimes I get weary. I see other people, like Mrs. Thompson and the Grayers and the McClintons. They have a home and a family. They look happy. Why did God bring Delma and Zebulon into our lives? It seems as if we don't deserve good parents, but I know we do." Joy's gut hardened, surprised at her honesty and ashamed to admit her inner struggles.

The wind whistled through the barn door stirring the leaves and hay to pile into the corner.

Mercy grabbed a handful of hay and tossed it across the wooden floor. "I feel that way at times and I've asked myself those same questions."

"You have?"

"It's never easy, but I remind myself that God's more powerful than our situation. No matter how horrible things are, God is bigger." Mercy grabbed each of their hands. "We need to work extra hard to get our chores finished within the next few hours. We'll stay clear of the house until Zebulon's drunkenness wears off. Hopefully, he won't remember how he landed on the floor. Delma should return from town soon, and we'll get a beating if we're caught being idle."

The three girls inched closer to make a tighter circle.

Grace's eyes glistened. "I'm glad we're sisters."

Joy smiled for the first time. "And friends, too."

Mercy led in prayer, and from the deepest parts within her, Joy rested her life in God's hands, believing He had good for her. Her heart clung to the love she had for each sister. She hoped to share their comfort and friendship for a long, long time.

Wagon wheels coming down the lane signaled Delma's arrival.

Grace's grip tightened around Joy's hand.

They would now return to their normal routine of hard work, hoping Delma would find Zebulon passed out and let him sleep until morning. Perhaps she'd assume the lump and bruise on his head came from the fall.

"Come on." Mercy set the ladder into place.

Each girl crawled down without a word.

Mercy walked toward the pasture.

Grace rushed across the yard to pick up the green beans that had fallen from her basket.

Joy's heart fluttered as she grabbed the hoe hanging on the barn wall and headed toward the field. She cherished Mercy's guidance, but she questioned whether she should marry a man she'd never met. Her faith had already begun to shake once again.

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A few miserable weeks later, the farmhouse door flew open with a loud bang.

Joy continued cutting the overgrown bramble bushes.

Zebulon stormed out kicking an empty pail in his path.

Delma scurried behind him, whining and hollering.

"Never mind where I'm going. I told you I'll be back later!" He gripped his jaw so tight he bared his teeth.

"But you're gone all the time," Delma pleaded. "I need you here on the farm. You're stronger than I am to work the oxen in the field."

"I'll do it later."

"It needs to be done during planting time. If we fail to get a decent crop like last year, then—"

Zebulon turned, inches from her face. He scowled at her but he pointed at Joy. "Then get that hussy and her two sisters to help you." The unscrupulous, contemptible man turned his back.

"Please!" Delma pulled on his sleeve.

His long arm met her cheek with a hard slap. Delma fell to the ground as Zebulon hurried toward the wagon without looking back. The horses kicked up a dusty trail as he left.

Joy dropped her garden tools and ran to her step-mother.

Delma's hand covered her face as she tried to push up from the hard ground.

"Are you all right?" Joy extended her hand.

Delma brushed back the tears with the sleeve of her working dress. "I'm fine," she growled, dusting herself off. "You realize this is your fault, don't you?"

"What?"

"You girls. You always manage to upset him. And where are they, by the way? Sittin' around doing nothing?"

"Have you ever known us to do that?" The warmth of anger flushed her cheeks.

"Don't get sassy with me, young lady. I'll get my switch out."

Joy gaped.

"Now where are those other two?" Delma snapped.

"Mercy's in the barn milking the cow, and Grace is in the kitchen, probably kneading bread for today's meal."

"And you're just standing here. Take the hoe and turn up the soil in the small garden, and pull some weeds while you're at it. If Zeb isn't back first thing tomorrow morning, we'll have to hitch the oxen and plow the ground ourselves." Delma stepped back and her lip curled up in disgust. "You girls ain't much help, but you're all I got."

Joy opened her mouth to disagree, but she closed it, biting her lip.

"Well, what're you waiting for?"

"You asked me earlier to trim the bramble bushes growing around the garden shed."

"So? Is it done?"

"Not yet--"

"Well, why not?"

Joy wished she had enough gumption to tackle the mean woman. Then a thought trickled across her mind. She straightened her posture. "Our scythe is dull. It'd go faster if it was sharpened."

"Well, you can't go into town to the blacksmith shop unless you're gonna walk and that'd take too long. And Zeb's probably headed to Tucker Brown's place to get drunk. Don't expect we'll see him anytime soon."

"I was thinking," Joy chose her words carefully. "I could ask Hector."

Delma scrutinized every inch of Joy's face as if looking for the slightest sign of deceit. "Hector, huh? Why'd you want to ask that heathen? You know he ain't been to church since his wife died? Man isn't going to heaven if you ask me."

"I bet he's got some tools to sharpen the scythe up real quick. I won't be gone that long. Then I'll come back and finish cutting those bushes."

Delma stepped forward and pulled down Joy's bonnet. Her pale gray eyes met Joy's as if in a trance. Without warning, she yanked Joy's long hair.

Joy squealed and dropped to her knees, her eyes tearing up from the pain.

The front door opened and footsteps sounded on the small porch.

Joy couldn't see Grace through the folds in Delma's working dress, but her sister was there.

Mercy stood in the barn entrance.

Delma bent down, her nose in Joy's face, and grabbed the ball of her hair tighter.

Joy reached behind her neck to lessen the pain. She didn't dare fight back, knowing the suffering would be over sooner if she cooperated and allowed Delma to continue with her rantings.

"If you think for a minute I'm gonna allow you to give that wretched old man even a crust of our bread, you've got another whippin' coming. I've caught you givin' to him before, and we don't have enough food on this farm to feed ourselves, let alone that spiteful man."

"I won't. I promise." Joy's voice broke, her spirit crushed. She hated bowing down to Delma's cruel temper. The silence that followed was just as painful as the jerk. How long would Delma keep breathing in her ear before she'd release her grip?

"Let her go." Mercy's firm voice echoed across the yard.

"Please stop, Delma." Grace's plea broke Joy's heart.

Delma tugged harder before she released Joy's hair. She faced Mercy and Grace.

Grace's gaze melted with worry as she wrung her hands on her flour-covered apron.

Mercy stood, brave as always, hands gripped on a raised shovel.

"What will you do with that? Zeb wouldn't—" Delma sneered.

"Don't imagine he's here since the wagon is gone. And when he comes back, I bet he'll be drunk. And that may not be until tomorrow," Mercy warned.

Delma snickered. "Still, I don't think you'd want me to tell him you've been misbehaving."

Mercy paused but kept the shovel held high. "Some things are worth a beating."

"Who her? She's worth a beating?" Delma scoffed and glanced at Joy.

"Better believe it." Mercy's lips pressed together. Then she motioned toward Grace. "Her, too."

Delma's lips pressed together to form a thin line as if she loathed defeat.

Joy stood and brushed the dirt from her dress. "I'm fine now." She walked back and picked up the scythe that lay by the bushes. "I'm heading over to Hector's place to see if he can sharpen this tool."

"You do that, young lady," Delma heckled. "And make sure you find me when you get back so I know how long you've been gone."

Joy glanced at her sisters, patting the part of her apron that concealed her inside pocket.

Mercy made the slightest nod, and then slowly walked back toward the barn, keeping her eye on Delma and holding the shovel upright.

"Hurry up, now!" Delma hollered.

Joy headed toward Hector's cabin. She ran along the worn path through the tall grass until she saw the top of the river rock chimney jutting into the horizon. His two hunting dogs, Copper and Moe, heard her before she saw them. They came from around the back of the house, greeting her with licks and yelps.

Hector stepped outside the wood shed, his husky voice scolding his two dogs. They obediently calmed down. Then he saw Joy in the distance. He pulled the pipe from his mouth. "What's the matter?"

Joy leaned against a large elm tree and tried to catch her breath. "Nothing's wrong. But I do need you to sharpen this scythe for me. And I have to talk to you about something."

He stepped forward and took the scythe from her

hands, looking it over carefully. "Where're the other two troublemakers?"

"They're at home working. I don't have much time. Delma said I can't stay long."

He put the pipe back in his mouth, walked into his shed, and returned with a whetstone in the other hand.

Joy wrung her hands nervously. "So, Hector, I need to talk to you."

"About what? I don't need anyone to talk to." He examined the scythe closely, running his finger close to the edge.

"First of all, that's not true, but I don't have time to argue."

Hector's eyebrows pinched together as he turned the tool over. "There's nothing wrong with this scythe. Looks plenty sharp to me. Is it not cutting well?"

She grabbed it from his hand. "It's cutting fine. I needed an excuse to get away. Hector, we need your help."

The wrinkles in his tired, worn face deepened with worry. "What'd he do now?"

"He...he...attacked me. But thankfully, my sisters were there." Joy pulled the two letters from her inside apron pocket. "We're worried, now more than ever." She handed the envelopes to him.

Hector puffed on his pipe and squatted on a stool on the front porch. "What's this?"

Joy sat near him on an overturned barrel. Knowing he couldn't read, she explained the plan. One of the dogs came back and nudged his nose along the sleeve of her dress. Joy scratched Moe behind the ears.

Hector heaved a deep sigh. "So you think you'll go through with this mail-order arrangement?"

"We have to get away from Delma and Zebulon,