



CANTRELL SISTERS
MAIL ORDER BRIDES
#2

*Mercy
Like a River*

A NOVEL

EDNA LEE ALLEN

Mercy like a River

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Dedication

To my loving husband, Larry

Cantrell Sisters Books

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

1

Jared Montrose stoked the fire wondering what his mail-order bride looked like. He sighed as he gazed at the heavens.

Stars shimmered like diamonds scattered on black silk, and a full moon hung in an endless, ebony sky.

The letter from his intended was tucked in his shirt pocket. He'd arrive tomorrow in Sheldon two hours before she stepped off the afternoon train. That would give him time to arrange for the justice of the peace to marry them. By then, his days as a lawman would be over. Hopefully, his heart would mend after he secured a wife to cook, clean, and maintain the home. And he'd go back to farming the land his father had given him.

Jared tugged the thin, woolen blanket over his shoulders to shield the evening air. A late spring breeze whispered across the open prairie and challenged the smoldering embers of his campfire. Dry twigs burned easily, releasing tendrils of smoke that curled upward.

He had sat alone one too many evenings, watching the sun cast its final rays in the western horizon. The Texas plains boasted magnificent sunsets, but when viewed without a loved one, the beauty lost its potency. At one time, the open prairie's gentle contour

stirred Jared's soul. But that allure had since diminished, and he had grown numb to what he once cherished.

He had seen enough killing in his young twenty-three years. As a boy, he'd dreamed of becoming sheriff. He would hunt down criminals, imprison offenders, and expose the corrupt. But the legal system had proven to be nothing more than a fallacy. The wealthy did what they wanted, often bribing their way past the law. Vigilantes bullied beyond the confines of jailhouse bars. And the weak and poor suffered at their expense. He'd tired of not doing enough; the good deeds he'd planted seemed to have never taken root.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the locket that dangled from its tarnished, metal chain. Only this and a few other small tokens remained, but her image seemed embedded in his mind forever. He carefully opened it.

Laura's hazel eyes sparkled. They had always reminded him of polished gold. His fingers ran along the edge of the locket. He imagined stroking the silky, brown locks that cascaded down her back. He stared at her angelic face until his eyelids grew heavy. Then he snapped the locket shut on the greatest love he'd ever known. If only erasing her memory could be that easy. No woman could replace Laura in his heart.

But maybe Mercy Cantrell could ease some of his burden for now.

2

The scuffed, silver badge lay in Jared's opened palm. He turned it over, slipping it through his fingers. He straightened, his spine as stiff and unbending as the determination in his heart.

Sheriff Roy Pryor sat across from him, his office cluttered with stacks of papers. A Colt revolver rested in the center of the desk. "You can't be serious." Sheriff Pryor narrowed his eyes.

"I'm afraid so."

"You're a fine lawman. You just need more time to adjust."

"I'm done." Jared shook his head. "I can't do this no more. I ain't got it in me."

"Oh, it's in you, all right," the sheriff grumbled. "I've known you since you were no higher than my waist. It's just buried underneath anger and stubbornness."

Maybe so.

"Look, Jared." The sheriff leaned forward. "I know you're hurting. We all grieved over what happened to Laura. But you're young. You'll move on."

Jared had heard the sentiment too many times. "Forgive me, but I think my pain is greater than yours."

Sheriff Pryor paused. "Jared, go home. Get some rest. Take a day or two if you need it. You'll feel better

and be back—”

“I can’t do that.” A ache jolted in his chest.

The sheriff leaned back in his chair. “What’re you gonna do to earn a living?”

“I’ll go back to the farm.”

“Your father’s land?”

“Yes.”

“Wheat?”

“Broomcorn.”

“Really? Not wheat like your father?”

“There’s other wheat farmers in the area, but the closest broomcorn farm is over a day’s ride from here. My father experimented with it, even grew a small section a couple of years before he died. I think I remember what he did.”

“How’re you gonna transport your crops?”

“Wagon, maybe train. Depends on who buys it. I might even learn the craft of brooming myself.”

“I can’t see you being content to work the ground. Justice has always been your passion.”

“Justice?” Jared tensed. “I don’t know the meaning of that word anymore.”

The sheriff nodded, his eyes sympathetic. “You ain’t fixin’ to go after him, are ya?”

“I wouldn’t know where to look.”

“I didn’t ask ya if you knew where he was. I asked if you were going after him.”

“Not at the moment.”

“That man was dangerous when he was sane. Now he’s pure evil. It’s best you just let things lie.”

Jared forced his jaw to relax but said nothing.

“You sure I can’t talk you out of quitting?”

“I’m sure.”

“It’ll get quiet farming all day and living by

yourself that far out of town."

Jared cleared the knot from his throat. "Got me a mail-order bride coming on the afternoon train."

Sheriff Pryor's eyes widened. "You got what?"

"I put an advertisement in a newspaper. When I delivered that prisoner last month over in Fort Worth, I found this special paper."

"Why'd you do something like that?"

"Because good women are scarce here in Sheldon. And I can't farm and tend to the house alone."

"Do you know anything about this young lady?"

"She's from Kansas, and she's got two sisters riding on the train with her. One of them is getting married, and the other is taking over Mr. Keating's job as schoolmaster."

"Oh, I heard about that. He's traveling to Dallas to care for his sick mother. I hear the new school mistress is supposed to live with Widow Farley for the school year."

Jared nodded.

"Poor girl. I hope she survives. The widow should be pleasant, but that sister of hers is batty."

A smile, giving away his agreement, sneaked across Jared's face for the first time in many months.

"Well—I hope it works out for you. You know, sometimes these mail-order arrangements don't turn out so good."

"She's the oldest and comes from a small farm. Sounds like she knows the value of hard work."

"There's nothing I can say to make you change your mind?" A final plea was evident in his voice.

"I appreciate all you've done for me. You've taught me everything I know about the law, but I don't think so. I've thought about this for a good while. I just

can't be an effective deputy right now. I'd be doing myself and the citizens a disservice if I stayed."

Sheriff Pryor extended his hand. "I hope things work out for you. That young lady from Kansas is getting a fine husband."

Jared stood and turned the metal badge face up. A deep, bitter hurt slammed shut his memories of wanting nothing more than to be a lawman. He placed the badge in the sheriff's hand. A groan tugged his heart as the man he very much respected reluctantly accepted it.

"You can always come back, Jared. Anytime."

He nodded with a weak smile of gratitude. Then he tipped his hat and exited the office, the click of the door piercing his soul.

Jared hadn't taken more than two steps before a commotion outside Hawkins's Boarding House caught his attention.

Gerald Hawkins, his face as red as a ripe tomato, had hold of two young boys. The scruffy old man hollered and kicked up a dust storm as the skinny lads, dressed in tattered jeans and frayed cotton shirts, struggled to wiggle from his grasp.

The taller one broke loose but ran straight into Jared's gut.

Jared grabbed him. "Where you going, son?"

The boy responded with a grimace.

"Glad to see you, Deputy Montrose," the irate business owner said. "I just caught these two varmints stealing from me."

"Really? What'd they take?"

"They were in my kitchen helping themselves to my rolls and biscuits. Apparently, they sneaked in through the back door."

"Can't say as I blame them, Hawk. You have the best rolls in all of Central Texas."

The younger one hung his head, but the older boy fixed Jared with a wicked scowl. His deep-set eyes glared without fear.

Jared recognized the family trait of the poor, neglected children of his indigent and prideful neighbor. "Otis Dugen's boys causing quite a bit of commotion, I see."

"What if I am?" The older boy's tone was cold.

Jared's stomach knotted at the hate the child obviously couldn't keep bottled inside. The hostility probably covered a thick layer of shame that hurt all the way to the bone. Jared smoothed the top of the younger boy's hair. "Caleb, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why'd you steal from Mr. Hawkins?"

"Cause we was hungry."

"You don't have food at home?"

"No, sir."

"When was the last time you ate a good meal?"

"Nathan shot a squirrel the other day. And Mrs. Donovan brought over some stew one day last week. She set it on the porch while Pa was sleeping."

Hawkins planted his hands on his hips. "I know what you're getting at Deputy, but these boys shouldn't have been stealing."

"We didn't take nothing you weren't gonna throw away." Nathan Dugen spat the words. "They was scraps, leftovers on the plate. You wouldn't have noticed anything missing if you hadn't come in."

"But I caught you red-handed, didn't I?" Hawkins bent down to look Nathan in the eye. "You ought to be ashamed."

"That's enough, Hawk."

"Deputy, surely you ain't gonna let these two get away with this. These boys are thieves."

Jared reached into his pants pocket. "How much do you think these boys took you for?"

"The money ain't the issue."

"How much, Hawk?"

Hawkins folded his arms across his chest.

"A penny or two?" No reply. "A nickel?" Jared grabbed two coins and held them out.

The old man stood still.

Jared looked at the oldest boy, whose sulking expression had lessened somewhat. "Where's your sister, Nathan?"

"She's at home taking care of Pa."

"Is he feeling any better?"

Nathan shook his head. His frown deepened. Moisture formed in his eyes, and he looked away.

"He's awful sick," Caleb said. "He stays in bed most of the time now."

"How'd you get to town?"

"We walked," Nathan replied as if answering a stupid question. "We sneaked away to come fetch Doc Holt, but he wasn't in his office. So we was gonna wait."

"And you thought you'd find something to eat?"

The boys didn't answer.

Hawkins kept his lips pressed together as if it would kill him not to say something.

"Hold out your hand," Jared told the boys.

They both complied, opening their palms, eyes wide.

A nickel fell into Nathan's hand. "Go to the mercantile and buy a loaf of bread, and tell Walter to

throw in a few potatoes and carrots for the deputy. I'll settle with him later. Then take it home and give it to your pa. Tell him it's from me." Jared placed a penny in Caleb's hand. "And you pick out three lemon drops. One each for you and Nathan, and save the other for your sister."

Caleb's hand closed. His eyes sparkled as he looked at his older brother who seemed to approve.

Jared bent down to look both boys in the eye. "Now, you two go on. I'll find Dr. Holt and tell him your pa is real sick. But I can't have you stealing anymore. No matter how hungry."

The boys nodded in unison, Caleb's gesture accompanied by a smile.

"And I'll be by the house tomorrow or the next day to check on you and your pa. So don't get into any trouble, you hear?" Jared ruffled the top of each boy's head.

The boys went across the dusty street toward the mercantile. Nathan looked back over his shoulder. Jared tipped his hat to the stubborn lad. The boy nodded in return and then moved on.

"How's giving them money gonna help things, Deputy?" Hawk spit bitter words.

"I offered you the money, Hawk."

"That's not gonna solve the problem."

"No. It's not. At least not today."

"Then why'd you do it?"

"Have you ever went hungry? I mean really hungry? Like your empty stomach churned so bad it kept you awake at night?" Jared stepped closer. "Have you ever eaten rotten fruit knowing you'd get sick later but you couldn't stand to starve any longer?"

Hawkins didn't reply.

"Well, I've been that hungry. And it ain't fun. And those two boys behave remarkably well for the life they've been dealt."

"It ain't my fault their pa can't or won't take care of them."

"And it ain't theirs either, is it?" Jared met Hawkins' stare until the silence grew awkward. Then he turned to walk away.

"Hey," Hawkins called to him. "I noticed you ain't got your badge on. Why's that?"

"Go inside, Hawk, and keep that back door locked. The train is fixing to come this afternoon. You'll probably get some hungry boarders." Jared walked toward the end of town to wait for the train already whistling in the distance. He drew a deep breath, aware that his life was about to change.

3

Mercy Cantrell stood in the doorway of the train. Storefronts, gray and untouched, lined wooden walkways. She stepped off the stair, her boots hitting the dirt in a puff of brown.

Her two younger sisters trailed close behind.

Townsfolk hustled along the boardwalk, many casting curious glances their way. A short, dumpy man with a long, gray beard and a cane stopped to scrutinize them. He smiled, revealing two rows of uneven, yellow teeth, and then proceeded across the street.

Mercy set down her carpetbag then tightened the bonnet underneath her chin. She canvassed the sparse crowd searching for a man fitting the description in his letter.

"What do we do now?" her sister Grace asked.

"If Mr. Montrose isn't here soon, we'll go to the post office and wait with Joy. Her letter said someone should meet her there. But we'll keep a lookout—"

"Excuse me," A man's deep voice echoed over Mercy's shoulder. "I'm looking for Mercy Cantrell."

A tingle shot up Mercy's spine.

A tall man with broad shoulders looked down at her. His tan, broad-brimmed hat rested on top of dark hair. He was more handsome than she'd expected.

"I'm Mercy Cantrell, and these are my sisters,

Grace and Joy."

"Jared Montrose." He removed his hat and extended his hand, first to Mercy and then to her sisters.

She had no knowledge of this man other than he was twenty-three, a lawman, and desperately needed a wife. He could be insane or have an explosive temper.

"It's my pleasure to meet you, ma'am." His voice possessed an irresistible mixture of ruggedness and charm. "I'm supposed to deliver Grace to Elizabeth Farley's home. I understand she'll be living with her during the school term."

"That's correct, but my sister, Joy, needs to find the post office." Mercy breathed deep, determined to control her shaky voice. "She's to wait for someone there."

"It's across the street between the bank and the general mercantile." Jared nodded toward a building a short distance away.

Joy's eyes had already filled with tears.

Mercy wrapped her arms around her sister and held her close. "We can wait with you if you'd like." The day of separation was here, but it didn't lessen the knot in her stomach.

Jared looked down at his pocket watch. "I'm sorry," he said. "But I can't keep the justice of the peace waiting any longer. Perhaps she can come with us for now."

Joy shook her head and wiped her tear-stained cheeks. "I'll be fine. You two go on."

Grace and Joy embraced, sobbing, unmindful of the stares from passersby. They finally let go of each other.

Joy reached for Mercy again, her hug tightening as

they held one another.

"Take good care of yourself, Joy. Come see me at the schoolhouse when you get a chance," Grace whispered.

"Write as often as you can," Joy said.

Mercy's intended groom had already picked up Grace's carpetbag.

She reached for her own, but he beat her to it. He arched his eyebrows.

Mercy released her grip.

"We'll go to the judge first," Jared explained. "That way your sister can serve as a witness. Then we'll take her to the Farley residence."

Walking beside him, each step created more anxiety. A prayer escaped her lips as she asked God to intervene if she was making a mistake. Mr. Montrose seemed like a pleasant man, but could she make him happy? Would he always be good to her? She looked over her shoulder.

Joy was standing on a bench, her green eyes glued to them.

Mercy's heart shattered into a hundred tiny pieces. Forcing herself to turn around, she struggled to keep her tears at bay.

People strode past them. Onlookers nodded, many greeting the deputy. But all of their gazes seemed to follow her, from her bonnet to her laced-up leather boots.

Mr. Montrose...Jared...stopped in front of a small, white building. The paint had begun to peel off the sideboards and the porch needed to be swept. To the left of the door was a glass window with COURTHOUSE printed in black and gold letters. Jared rapped his knuckles on the door and then pushed it