

CANTRELL SISTERS  
MAIL ORDER BRIDES  
#3

*Grace  
Like a Whisper*

A NOVEL

EDNA LEE ALLEN

Grace Like a  
Whisper

Edna Lee Allen

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

**Grace Like a Whisper**

**COPYRIGHT 2019 by Edna Lee Allen**

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: [titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com](mailto:titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com)

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated are taken from the King James translation, public domain.

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC  
[www.pelicanbookgroup.com](http://www.pelicanbookgroup.com) PO Box 1738 \*Aztec, NM \* 87410

White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2019

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0226-1

**Published in the United States of America**

## *Dedication*

To my sister Dawn and her loving husband Brent



*The Cantrell Sisters*

Joy like no Other  
Mercy like a River  
Grace like a Whisper





# 1

*September, 1871*

Jedidiah Green never expected that amount of commotion. Loud chatter and shuffling feet echoed across the large opera house in Wellington, Texas. More noise and chaos than a small-town fellow was accustomed to. And especially since Jed liked nothing shy of simple solitude.

A lady in a brown, pleated dress struggled to assemble fifty or more confused and frightened waif-like “street urchins.” Ugly words, but that was how the editorials in the *Sheldon Tribune* had described the pitiable orphans who’d just stepped off the early morning train.

Advertisements posted around town encouraged families to show brotherly affection to the needy, but Jed wasn’t convinced that’s why some of them arrived. Most of the folks lived some distance away from town and rarely set foot there.

A group of men in worn overalls and dusty work boots boasted about getting a free farm hand at the price of an extra mouth to feed. Clusters of unruly citizens in the balcony voiced outrage that filth from New York would be allowed to litter the honorable state of Texas. Jed recognized one or two of the protesters but refused to look at them. A downright

shameful side of his town.

Reluctant children filed into the room, the boys dressed in new tan trousers and white shirts and the girls in gray dresses. They walked across the stage as if being sentenced to a crime they had committed but now wished they hadn't.

Jed's throat constricted.

A curious spectator brushed past Jed to get a closer look and snickered to another man next to him. "Look at the one with the red hair and the big ears."

A middle-aged couple, arm-in-arm, directed a girl with long, thick, wavy hair and gangly arms to turn around. Without speaking, the man pointed to the right side of the platform. The girl's knees shook as she walked the width of the room. The woman turned abruptly to him. "I think she'd look nice with her hair in braids. And she has such a pretty face." She leaned closer. "She doesn't look as rough as the others. Let's take her."

"I don't care how she looks." His voice became gruffer than necessary. "It's the laundry, cookin', and cleanin' you ought to be concerned about."

The woman motioned the girl to step forward. "Can you iron, child? And mend with needle and thread?"

The girl nodded. Her lips trembled.

Jed couldn't tell if she was worried she wouldn't be picked or worried she would be.

Another woman in a gray cape ran her fingers through a boy's dark locks. Her husband inched toward her. "Make sure to check that scalp good." Finally, she nodded. The man squeezed the boy's biceps and forearms, and then made him open his mouth while he poked a finger inside to examine the

child's teeth.

Another couple pushed past Jed.

Two boys stood across the stage in the back. Their shoulders slumped as if not expecting to be chosen.

The older one's head lifted, and he looked right at Jed. His eyes appeared dark—like the bottom of a well. Jed sensed his pain plunged twice as deep. A younger boy huddled next to him, his face angled to the floor as if he couldn't wait for the torture to be over.

Remarkably, over the din of voices, Jed heard his name called. A well-dressed man in a black suit and felt hat hollered for him again. Jed lifted his hand to acknowledge the greeting. The gray-bearded man stepped toward him. A stocky, older lad trudged behind him, barely lifting his feet as though he walked in shackles.

"Jedidiah Green, I'm Howard Duffy from the Children's Aid Society." Mr. Duffy's firm handshake and broad smile reminded Jed of a salesman who'd come through his town as a child. He'd stop by the home, and his parents had a heck of a time getting rid of him. "I understood you made the trip all the way from Sheldon," the man said.

Mr. Duffy placed his hand on the boy's muscular shoulder. "Here's your future apprentice. Griffin is his name. I got your letter and delivered what you requested. He's not docile by any means, but he's strong. Although you'll have to feed him more than others his age." He chuckled. "But he'll make a fine bellow pumper and nail driver for your blacksmith shop."

The orphan rested his hands on his hips and stared across the room without meeting Jed's gaze.

Jed looked him over. Griffin must've been nearly

six feet tall, only a few inches shorter than him. Hair the color of coarse sand had been parted down the middle and combed to the side, a hairstyle the boy had probably been coerced into getting before the train ride. He'd already scuffed his new britches, and his collared shirt remained unbuttoned at the top. A square jaw and sideburns set him apart from the younger orphans.

"With his age and size, why isn't he working already?" Jed asked. "This boy could earn his keep somewhere."

Mr. Duffy looked down and pressed his lips into a hard, thin line. "Truth be told, he's been in trouble with the law. A tad bit rebellious. An angry young man without proper guidance. His first placement didn't work out. He'll turn eighteen years of age in less than a year and won't be eligible for the train rides, so this here is a chance for this young boy. He's had a rough road in life. But I'm sure he can be tamed with care and discipline."

Griffin looked away as if uninterested.

Mr. Duffy continued. "I assure you, you'll be the envy of every farmer and rancher in Central Texas. I've had inquiries about him from other stops in Dowagiac, Michigan; Iowa City; and Kirksville, Missouri. But I saved him for you as promised."

Jed kept his eyes on the young man with the firmly set jaw. "Have you ever used a hammer, Son?"

"I've picked one up a time or two."

Mr. Duffy's face paled as if he might get sick.

A slight smile emerged. "Knocked out a window one time. And bashed the head of a rooster who wouldn't shut up. Does that count?"

Jed searched the crowd. He inclined his head

toward the stage. "What about them two over yonder?"

Mr. Duffy turned. "Where?"

"The boys in the back corner. Near the far end."

Mr. Duffy turned reluctantly, as if the conversation had strayed from his script. "Oh." He frowned as if he'd been reminded of a sad story. "Well, they haven't been so blessed. This is the fourth stop for both of them."

"Brothers?"

"I'd have to check their paperwork to be sure. But I imagine so. Never seen them apart since they were found huddled next to garbage pails outside a market in New York. We know a little bit about them, the younger one was a survivor of a fire. But neither go anywhere without the other, not even the latrine."

"They don't look alike." The small boy's hair was light blond, the closest Jed had ever seen to white. The other one had coal-black hair and thick eyebrows.

He spoke quickly as if the matter was of little importance. "Different fathers often account for that."

Jed folded his arms across his chest. "Who will take them?"

"Good Lord willing, two fine families. Doubt they'll be going to the same place, though. They're both frail. The younger one coughs a lot. Probably still some smoke in his lungs. His family burned to death leaving him as the only survivor. Got an ugly scar on the right side of his face and all down his arm." Mr. Duffy shook his head. "I hate to say it, but folks often see these types as more trouble than they're worth. Most families don't want another body to care for. They need healthy workers."

Something in his gut stirred. "What happens if

they aren't chosen?"

Mr. Duffy shrugged. "They'll get back on the train and do it again at the next stop. If they are still unplaced, they'll return to New York and stay in a local mission until the train departs again. Several churches in the area help the mission see they get fed."

"None of these children have any family?"

Mr. Duffy shook his head. "Their parents could be dead or they could've been abandoned. Things have been so bad, sometimes parents give up their children, especially if they have several. New York City is overpopulated with immigrants, Mr. Green. Men can't find work. Homeless, abandoned children run wild, stealing food and breaking into places to find shelter. The town crawls with hundreds of children just like these."

"Did these two boys tell you anything?"

Mr. Duffy shook his head as his words grew more hurried. "Not much. The younger one rarely speaks. And the older one does so only when confronted. The Children's Aid Society maintains records as best they know." He sighed, stepped back, and rubbed his forefinger across his chin. "Seems to me like I remember the dark-haired boy claimed his mother was alive, but a property owner said she had passed on. But I can't be too sure on that. I can look it up for you in the ledger if you like. First, your apprentice—"

"What's that boy holding in his hand?"

"A book. He reads it all the time. The same one. Now about—"

"Maybe that's the only one he's got." Jed spoke his thought aloud.

Mr. Duffy opened a leather satchel. "I've got the papers here for you to sign. And I'll need to see your

letters of recommendation from a pastor and a justice of the peace. According to the agreement, you must provide food, clothing, and shelter. When he's eighteen, which won't be too far off, you are no longer bound to see that he gets a common education. Since he will serve as your apprentice, I'm sure you can wheedle your way out of that. However, a hundred dollars should be given to him at the age of twenty-one." He leafed through several documents. "And of course, you are expected to treat him the same as any of your own children."

"I don't have any."

Mr. Duffy gestured with his hand. "Well, if you did. Or how your parents treated you."

A knot tightened like a fist in Jed's gut.

"If at all possible, we like to place children with a married couple, but the society sees your situation is different, as Griffin will be learning a trade."

Jed looked over the stout eighteen-year-old orphan. His body towered in comparison to the two over yonder. The lad turned his head, spat on the floor, and then looked straight ahead with his jaw clenched. Jed needed the boy's strong arm, not his temperament. "If I decide not to take him, would he find a home elsewhere?"

Mr. Duffy's head lifted slowly. Then he narrowed his eyes. "Why would you want to do that?"

"You didn't answer my question."

The Children Aid Society worker straightened and met Jed's gaze squarely. "Seventeen-year-old lads are extremely difficult to place. Infants are, by far, the easiest." He spoke slower, emphasizing every word, and the enthusiastic salesman in him had lost its spark. Mr. Duffy removed a feather pen from his satchel and

extended it firmly toward Jedidiah.

Jed looked back at the two youngsters. All the compassion he'd felt over the last ten years could fit on the head of a pin. So why did he feel a stirring for two gaunt and homely young boys?

Jed brushed past Mr. Duffy's fine pen and meandered through the crowd.

"That man gonna take me or what?" Jed heard Griffin growl behind him.

"Mr. Green." Mr. Duffy's footsteps trailed behind him. "Mr. Green, I'm not sure what you're doing. You've come all the way from Sheldon. Are you not taking the boy you requested—the one I selected especially for you?"

Jed stepped along the lengthy line of children who all wore wary expressions. Two families quarreled over a tall, skinny girl. The poor thing shook as if she expected a beating.

He sidestepped dozens of other gawkers until he stopped in front of the two boys who hooked his attention. The younger boy backed away and peered at the ground as if he'd been caught doing something wrong. His fine, blond hair shimmered in sunlight glowing from the large window behind him. The older one lifted his chin and arched his neck to gaze at Jed.

Jed directed his attention to the older boy. "What's your name, Son?"

The older boy swallowed hard and then his lips parted. "Thomas." He turned toward his friend. "This is Josiah. He's not good with strangers." Jed nodded toward Josiah, whose eyes darted up and then back down.

"How old are you?"

"Eleven."

Jed's fingers brushed the crown of Josiah's head. "What about you, Josiah? How old are you?"

The blond-haired boy shifted slightly but didn't look at Jed. A moment passed and then the fingers of his small hand spread wide.

Jed nodded. "Five? You're five years old?"

Josiah extended his forefinger on the other hand, the scars Mr. Duffy mentioned now evident.

"He's six." Thomas spoke for his buddy.

Jed looked more closely. With a light touch of his hand, he turned the boy's face to the side. Melted abrasions, ugly and unmerciful, interrupted the smooth, flawless skin. Josiah hung his head.

Jed reached down to lift the book from Thomas's hands. The boy gripped it tighter before Jed took it, and something in Thomas's eyes darkened as it left his grasp. Jed ran his hand along the worn spine and faded cover. He opened it slowly. The cover had begun to separate from the binding, and the first few pages had fallen out. A hand-written message lay inside. Jed's heart swelled like a shallow spot in a creek after a hard rain. He read the signature. Sorry he had invaded the boy's privacy, he returned the book. Thomas tucked it quickly under his arm.

Jed shoved his hands into his front pockets. "Do you understand why you are here?"

"Yes, sir." The older boy peered at Mr. Duffy again. "They're trying to find people to take us in."

"Where are your parents?"

A shadow passed over Thomas's face. He looked down at his shoes, then scraped the sole across the wooden planks. Jed looked at Josiah. The boy's shoulders lifted reluctantly.

"I'm not sure," Thomas spoke solemnly.

Griffin stood off to the side. He folded his arms across his chest and sighed heavily as if bored.

Mr. Duffy stepped closer and spoke through clenched teeth. "Sir, we must move forward with this transaction. I have other people to meet with."

Jed inhaled deeply. He asked God if this desire inside him came from Him. Perhaps he was mistaken and he could go back to his original plan.

But adrenaline, like an arrow, shot up his spine. He had received his confirmation. "I'll take the two boys."

In unison, the boys' heads lifted and their eyes widened.

Mr. Duffy stepped deftly between Jed and the two younger orphans, his jaw still tight. "I gave you what you asked for, Mr. Green."

Jed glimpsed at Griffin, who had diverted his attention to the other side of the room. The boy didn't seem to care one way or the other. Or perhaps he just wanted Jed to think that.

Mr. Duffy lifted the papers he held in his hand. "You cannot take these two unless you fulfill our agreement for the older boy as well." He looked Jed square in the eye. A silent demand for an answer.

Jed's comfortable routine would soon become very unpredictable.

He prayed again that he wasn't making a huge mistake.

## 2

Grace awoke from a restless slumber. Early morning sunlight filtered into her bedroom and cast playful shadows from the leafy branches outside her window. This time tomorrow morning she would already be on her way to the schoolhouse for the first day. She pushed the sheets aside and tossed her legs over the edge of the bed. Her stomach fluttered. Perhaps chamomile tea with a drop of honey would calm her nerves.

A sound sleep came easily when her two older sisters did the worrying. But Grace's life had been turned upside-down before she arrived in Sheldon, and until recently she had never lived outside of their small farm in Grover, Kansas. Perhaps she should spend more time in prayer.

Not wanting to disturb her landlady, Edith, in the next room, she stepped softly across the plank floorboards. The old woman was an extremely light sleeper and almost always awakened when Grace got up during the night. Tepid water from the pitcher on the washstand felt cool against her cheeks. She patted her face dry.

Her gaze fell on the opened Bible on the bedside table. Her hand smoothed the worn, thin pages of her childhood keepsake. Her mother had left her that and a brooch. Both came from her maternal grandmother

who died before Grace was born. Grace picked up the precious book and nestled it against her chest.

She exhaled slowly and lay a hand across her chest to slow her quivering heart. Her new duty as schoolmistress both excited and frightened her. She loved children. Loved books. Loved learning. As a child, she would rather have had her nose in a book than play with a doll. And she loved working through a difficult task at her school desk and competing in spelling drills. The summers seemed much longer without such activities. If she rejoiced as her other classmates did on the last day, it was because she tried to fit in and wanted to be accepted. Yet, she wasn't.

And that had kept her in knots. A tingle raced through her as cool as a late fall Kansas stream. What if she failed? Could she survive more rejection?

~\*~

Jed never was much for talking. His father said getting him to say what was on his mind was like pulling tree roots out of the ground. Jed just didn't see the need to speak unless he had a purpose.

If his mother stood in the room with him now, she would pester him about speaking to the boys, asking questions, making them feel safe. He could almost hear her raspy voice. "Jedidiah, look at their faces. Why, they're half scared out of their skin. Get over there and let 'em know they're welcome."

The oats were fully cooked, but Jed kept stirring as he contemplated how he'd gotten himself into such a mess. His throat constricted. Small voices whispered

behind him. He turned and set the hot bowls in front of the boys who sat across from each other, their stomachs bound to be empty. Thomas straightened, and Josiah curled his small hand around a spoon.

“Not yet.” Jed sounded harsher than he’d meant.

Josiah released his spoon as if his hand had been slapped with a ruler.

Thomas studied Jed’s face. Then he reached across the table and placed Josiah’s spoon back in his bowl.

Jed peered into the bedroom. The bed tick he had pulled from underneath his bed nearly covered the floor. Griffin lay on his side on the hard planks with his face to the wall. Jed nudged the arch of Griffin’s foot with his boot toe. The lad didn’t flinch. A deep sleep would serve him well as Jed planned to work him hard. But a second shove and Griffin grunted. Another poke and he moved slightly. “Griffin.” Jed called.

The boy’s head lifted only long enough to scan the room. He spotted Jed, scowled, and then settled back to the hard surface.

“Breakfast is on the table.” Jed picked up the pillows off the floor and tossed them on the bed. “Take advantage. You won’t get another meal for the next six hours.”

Griffin straightened his legs, rolled over, and then stood. He brushed past Jed and pushed the front door open as it banged against the side of the house.

The younger boys looked back at him with tired, worried expressions.

Jed wondered what he should do next. Crisp morning air filtered in with a breeze. He propped the door open with a brick, pulled back a chair, and sat down.