

Sisters *of*
Mercy Flats

LORI COPELAND



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SISTERS OF MERCY FLATS

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To Kathleen Kerr

One



July 1863
Houston, Texas

Best lookin' herd of beef I've seen this side of the Colorado!" A.J. Donovan knocked the dust from his hat and then pitched it onto the bar. "Texas Longhorns are a scroungy-looking lot, but this herd is prime hoof."

A three-bladed overhead fan in The Silver Slipper labored to stir the midday heat as Donovan signaled to the bartender for another shot. Turning to the cowboy standing next to him, he asked, "Got any idea who owns the herd?"

Ealy Moore turned his eyes to the ceiling pensively. "Nope."

The bartender eyed the cattleman as he set a shot glass of whiskey in front of him. "You in the market for beef, stranger?"

"I'd be interested in buying that particular herd," A.J. admitted. Tossing the drink down, he motioned for another one. "I've been on the trail for over a month now and I'm dry as a tick feather."

"Don't guess it would be too hard to find out who owns the cows." The bartender lifted the bottle to refill the glass. "My guess is they

belong to one of those drovers who were in here round about noon. They were bragging about bringing in a big herd.”

“Know where the men went?”

“Said they were going over to the hotel for a bath and a shave and then they were gonna get skunk drunk—” The man’s voice faded when a shadow fell across the doorway of the bar.

The room’s occupants glanced up to see three nuns standing in the entryway, their hands resting lightly on the heavy gold crosses that hung around their necks.

The men gaped at the sight. A reverent hush had suddenly enveloped the room. The sisters were young and exceptionally comely. Not remarkable, but it was noteworthy to find such rare, wholesome beauty hidden beneath dark habits.

The women remained in the doorway, their gazes moving slowly about the room, pausing momentarily on the table where four men with cigarettes dangling from the corners of their mouths were engaged in a game of jacks high. When they spotted the women they quickly folded their hands and crushed their smokes. Overhead a fly droned.

Moving with somber dignity the women glided across the room, their black habits brushing quietly along the wooden floor. The watering hole was near empty this afternoon. The earlier drinkers had gone about their business, and the evening crowd wouldn’t be in for a while.

The air in the room was close; silence stretched. Others around the bar stood, glasses posed in midair, watching as the women approached.

Pausing in front of A.J., the middle sister spoke. “I understand you are interested in purchasing our cattle.” Her soft voice was peaceful, befitting her calling.

A.J. straightened. “Er...those your longhorns, ma’am?”

The sister smiled. “Are you an interested buyer?”

“Well...yes ma’am. I’d be real interested, Sister...”

Sister’s eyes lowered submissively. “Sister Anne-Marie.”

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am...er, Sister.” He hurriedly wiped

the dust from his hand and then extended it to her. “A.J. Donavan’s the name, cattle’s my game.”

Sister’s head lowered. “Mr. Donavan.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Sister. You say you want to sell your herd? That’s mighty fine beef.”

Sister Anne-Marie lifted mournful eyes—a most uncommon shade of jade green. One man murmured. Exquisite. The term fit; still, it fell short of the breathtaking beauty that lay in the emerald pools.

“The cattle are a gift to our mission,” Sister Anne-Marie explained, her hand waving graciously to include the other two women.

“A gift, you say?” Surprise lit his craggy features, apparently astounded that women would be in charge of the sizable herd.

The sisters bowed their heads, murmuring softly in unison, “Praise be to God,” Sister Anne-Marie continued. “If it were not for the kindness shown by others, our mission could not survive.”

The bartender leaned closer. “What mission is that, Sisters?”

“Our Lady of Perpetual Grace.”

He frowned, shaking his head. “Don’t believe I’ve ever heard of it.”

“It is but a small, modest mission,” the nun conceded.

A.J. frowned. “I don’t understand, Sister. If the cattle are a gift—”

“A gift we cannot keep,” Sister Anne-Marie acknowledged. “We have no means to care for such a large herd. Our order is small, and our funds are meager. With the help of some very kind hombres, Sister Amelia, Sister Abigail, and I have managed to bring the herd here to sell. The money we receive from the cattle sale will help see us through the coming winter.”

A.J. shifted to face the other two sisters. They nodded gravely.

“They’re mighty fine-looking animals,” he admitted. “How many head you got there? Twenty-five, twenty-six hundred?”

“No sir. Only twenty-four hundred thirty-three head,” Sister Anne-Marie said. “We began the journey with twenty-five hundred, but we suffered losses along the way.”

Sister Abigail reached to lay her hand upon Anne-Marie’s arm.

“Still, we have been most fortunate. The Lord has smiled upon us, for we only lost sixty-seven head in all.”

Sister Anne-Marie nodded, clearly repentant. “Of course, Sister. We have been most blessed.”

“You must have had good grass and water along the way. The cattle appear to be well fed,” A.J. noted.

“The Lord smiled on us, Mr. Donavan.”

“Well, ladies,” the cattle baron nodded, “if you’re willing to sell the longhorns at market price—”

“Oh no, sir.” Sister Anne-Marie held up a hand to stop him. “We couldn’t do that.”

“Now ma’am, as fine as those cattle are I’d have to think about paying above market price.” His expression said that he wasn’t about to be fleeced, even by a nun. “You got a mighty fine herd, but I couldn’t pay above three dollars a head.”

“Kind sir, it would only be fair if we sold the cattle for a dollar a head below market price,” the nun insisted.

“A dollar *below* market price?”

“Below market price,” she stated firmly, and Sister Abigail and Sister Amelia nodded in solemn agreement. “It is imperative that we sell the cattle and return to the mission as quickly as possible. The vaqueros who have so kindly helped us drive the cattle here have families who need tending, and the return trip is long and arduous. Even if we leave before sunset, we shall travel for days before we reach home again. Since it is we who find ourselves on the horns of this dilemma, it is hardly fair to ask you to pay market price.” Sister Anne-Marie glanced at Sister Abigail and Sister Amelia, who were again nodding in full agreement. “If you want the cattle, the herd is yours for a dollar a head below market price.”

A.J. turned to face the room. “You’re sure? A dollar a head below market? You all are witness to the offer?”

Men’s heads nodded in unison.

“We are quite certain,” Sister Anne-Marie said. “If we are able to

begin our return journey back to the mission within the hour, the sacrifice will be warranted.”

“Sister,” A.J. said, extending his hand, “you just got yourself a deal.”

Sister Anne-Marie smiled. “May God richly bless you, Mr. Donovan, as He has so richly blessed us.”

“If you’ll wait right here, it’ll only take me a minute to go to the bank and get your draft.”

“Cash,” the sister corrected. “Cash would be most suitable.”

“Cash it’ll be.” Reaching for his hat, A.J. motioned to the bartender. “Get the sisters a glass of sarsaparilla while they’re waiting.”

The women exchanged a glance, their eyes silently condoning the slight stimulation.



The clock on the wall slowly ticked away the minutes as the sisters sat at a table near the doorway, sipping their sarsaparilla. The men had drifted to one corner of the bar, obviously trying to look inconspicuous until Donovan returned with the money.

Exactly fifteen minutes from the time he left, A.J. reentered the bar. The sisters quietly rose when he hurried toward their table.

“Here you are.” He pressed a large brown envelope into Sister Anne-Marie’s hand. “You’ll find the full amount, plus an extra hundred.” He offered a benevolent smile. “A little something for the mission from me.”

“Bless you, Mr. Donovan. Bless you.” Sister Anne-Marie squeezed his hand and then carefully tucked the envelope beneath her robe. “If you will be so kind as to provide a piece of paper and pencil, I will write you a bill of sale.”

The bartender rummaged around and eventually came up with a label torn from a whiskey bottle.

“And something to write with?”

A piece of charcoal was located, and Sister Anne-Marie quickly wrote out the bill of sale on the back of the label, signing her name in bold letters.

“And now, gentlemen, if you will excuse us we must gather our men and be on our way.”

“Of course, Sister. Mighty good doin’ business with you.”

A.J. and the men stepped back as the three sisters floated across the room, the whispering hems of black habits disappearing out the door.

Breathing a sigh of relief, the men returned to the card game as A.J. stepped up to the bar.

“Well, Mr. Donavan, looks like you got yourself a real fine deal,” the barkeep congratulated as he filled A.J.’s glass.

“Yes, sir,” A.J. tucked the bill of sale away in his pocket. “It ain’t often a man falls into a herd of prime longhorns and comes out smelling like a rose. Hate to take advantage of the little women that way, but you saw what happened. It was all their idea.”

The two men chortled.

“Yea, it was their idea, all right. Two dollars a head. Mister, you just stole those cattle.”

“Yes, sir.” A.J. leaned back, grinning. “I surely did.”



Abigail McDougal stepped out of the bar, turning in unison with her sisters down the planked walkway, quickening her pace.

“Shoot! I thought we’d see some loose women,” Amelia complained.

“Really Amelia,” Anne-Marie chided. “You can think of the silliest things.”

“What’s silly about wanting to see a soiled dove? I’ve never been in a real saloon before, and from everything I’ve heard, that’s where they—”

“Will you pipe down? They can still hear us,” Abigail whispered, casting an uneasy glance over her shoulder.

“Will you stop being so bossy?”

“Will you both stop bickering!” Anne-Marie snapped. “Abby’s right. We’re not in the clear yet.”

Amelia lowered her voice. “All that money—how much did we make, Abigail?”

“I don’t know—the envelope looks pretty heavy. How much do you think, Anne-Marie?” She’d never been good with figures—especially in her head.

“Two thousand four hundred and thirty-three dollars times two.”

The sisters hurried along, their expressions studious as they multiplied beneath their breath.

“Four thousand eight hundred sixty-six dollars!” Amelia squealed and Abigail elbowed her into silence.

“*Nine* hundred sixty-six,” Anne-Marie corrected. “You forgot to add Mr. Donovan’s generous donation.”

The sisters solemnly returned the sign of the cross to two passing men when they cut across the street. Disappearing around the corner of the mercantile, they emerged a moment later on horseback.

Amelia gloated. “How lucky can we get? We happen to walk by a bar, overhear Donovan talking about that herd, and suddenly we’re rich!”

“How many times do I have to tell you, Amelia? Nothing just *happens* with us,” Anne-Marie corrected. “Because we work for a worthy cause, we are given certain opportunities we wouldn’t otherwise encounter.”

The sisters turned to look back at the bar, then at one another. Their eyes met and they snickered.

“Men. How gullible can they get?” Abigail sighed. She didn’t have much respect for the male gender and A.J. Donovan had once again proven what a dimwitted lot they were. Swayed by a pretty face and religious garb, most men would sell their grandmothers.

Amelia sobered. “Wonder who does own those cows?”

Shrugging, Anne-Marie visibly tightened the reins around her gloved hand. “Who cares? What I can tell you for certain is who doesn’t own the cattle.”

The sisters exchanged looks and grinning, they crowed in unison, “A.J. Donovan!”

Kicking their horses into a swift trot, the McDougal sisters rode out of town, considerably happier—and richer—than they’d been when they rode in an hour earlier.