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Montana Sky

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PART ONE



AUTUMN

The beautiful and death-struck year

—A. E. Housman

ONE



BEING DEAD DIDN'T MAKE JACK MERCY LESS OF A SON OF a bitch. One week of dead didn't offset sixty-eight years of living mean. Plenty of the people gathered by his grave would be happy to say so.

The fact was, funeral or no funeral, Bethanne Mosebly muttered those sentiments into her husband's ear as they stood in the high grass of the cemetery. She was there only out of affection for young Willa, and she had bent her husband's tired ear with that information as well all the way up from Ennis.

As a man who had listened to his wife's chatter for forty-six years, Bob Mosebly simply grunted, tuning her and the preacher's droning voice out.

Not that Bob had fond memories of Jack. He'd hated the old bastard, as did most every living soul in the state of Montana.

But dead was dead, Bob mused, and they had sure come out in droves to send the fucker on his way to hell.

This peaceful corner of Mercy Ranch, set in the shadows of the Big Belt Mountains, near the banks of the Missouri, was crowded now with ranchers and cowboys, merchants and politicians. Here where cattle grazed the hills and horses

danced in sunny pastures, generations of Mercys were buried under the billowing grass.

Jack was the latest. He'd ordered the glossy chestnut coffin himself, had it custom-made and inscribed in gold with the linked *M*s that made up the ranch's brand. The box was lined with white satin, and Jack was inside it now, wearing his best snakeskin boots, his oldest and most favored Stetson, and holding his bullwhip.

Jack had vowed to die the way he had lived. In nose-thumbing style.

Word was, Willa had already ordered the headstone, according to her father's instructions. It would be white marble—no ordinary granite for Jackson Mercy—and the sentiments inscribed on it were his own:

Here lies Jack Mercy.
He lived as he wanted, died the same way.
The hell with anybody who didn't like it.

The monument would be raised once the ground had settled, to join all the others that tipped and dotted the stony ground, from Jack Mercy's great-grandfather, Jebidiah Mercy, who had roamed the mountains and claimed the land, to the last of Jack's three wives—and the only one who'd died before he could divorce her.

Wasn't it interesting, Bob mused, that each of Mercy's wives had presented him with a daughter when he'd been hell-bent on having a son? Bob liked to think of it as God's little joke on a man who had stepped on backs—and hearts—to get what he wanted in every other area of his life.

He remembered each of Jack's wives well enough, though none of them had lasted long. Lookers every one, he thought now, and the girls they'd birthed weren't hard on the eyes either. Bethanne had been burning up the phone lines ever since word came along that Mercy's two oldest daughters were flying in for the funeral. Neither of them had set foot on Mercy land since before they could walk.

And they wouldn't have been welcome.

Only Willa had stayed. There'd been little Mercy could do about that, seeing as how her mother had died almost before the child had been weaned. Without any relations to dump the girl on, he'd passed the baby along to his housekeeper, and Bess had raised the girl as best she could.

Each of the women had a touch of Jack in her, Bob noted, scanning them from under the brim of his hat. The dark hair, the sharp chin. You could tell they were sisters, all right, even though they'd never set eyes on each other before. Time would tell how they would deal together, and time would tell if Willa had enough of Jack Mercy in her to run a ranch of twenty-five thousand acres.

She was thinking of the ranch, and the work that needed to be done. The morning was bright and clear, with the hills sporting color so bold and beautiful it almost hurt the eyes. The mountains and valley might have been painted fancy for fall, but the chinook wind had come in hot and dry and thick. Early October was warm enough for shirtsleeves, but that could change tomorrow. There'd already been snow in the high country, and she could see it, dribbling along the black and gray peaks, slyly coating the forests. Cattle needed to be rounded up, fences needed to be checked, repaired, checked again. Winter wheat had to be planted.

It was up to her now. It was all up to her. Jack Mercy was no longer Mercy Ranch, Willa reminded herself. She was.

She listened to the preacher speak of everlasting life, of forgiveness and the welcome of heaven. And thought that Jack Mercy would spit on anyone's welcome into a place other than his own. Montana had been his, this wide country of mountain and meadow, of eagle and wolf.

Her father would be as miserable in heaven as he would in hell.

Her face remained calm as the fancy coffin was lowered into the newest scar in the earth. Her skin was pale gold, a legacy from her mother and her Blackfoot blood as much as the sun. Her eyes, nearly as black as the hair she'd hurriedly twisted into a braid for the funeral, remained fixed on the box that held her father's body. She hadn't worn a

hat, and the sun beamed like fire into her eyes. But she didn't let them tear.

She had a proud face, high cheekbones, a wide, haughty mouth, dark, exotic eyes with heavy lids and thick lashes. She'd broken her nose falling off an angry wild mustang when she was eight. Willa liked to think the slight left turn it took in the center of her face added character.

Character meant a great deal more to Willa Mercy than beauty. Men didn't respect beauty, she knew. They used it.

She stood very still, the wind picking up strands from her braid and teasing them into a dance. A woman of average height and tough, rangy build in an ill-fitting black dress and dainty black heels that had never been out of their box before that morning. A woman of twenty-four with work on her mind, and a raging, tearing grief in her heart.

She had, despite everything, loved Jack Mercy. And she said nothing, not one word, to the two women, the strangers who shared her blood and had come to see their father buried.

For a moment, just one moment, she let her gaze shift, let it rest on the grave of Mary Wolfchild Mercy. The mother she couldn't remember was buried under a soft mound of wildflowers that bloomed like jewels in the autumn sun. Adam's doing, she thought, and looked up and into the eyes of her half brother. He would know as no one else could that she had tears in her heart she could never let free.

When Adam took her hand, Willa linked fingers with his. In her mind, and heart, he was all the family she had now.

"He lived the life that satisfied him," Adam murmured. His voice was quiet, peaceful. If they had been alone Willa could have turned, rested her head on his shoulder, and found comfort.

"Yes, he did. And now it's done."

Adam glanced over at the two women, Jack Mercy's daughters, and thought something else was just beginning. "You have to speak with them, Willa."

"They're sleeping in my house, eating my food." Delib-

erately she looked back at her father's grave. "That's enough."

"They're your blood."

"No, Adam, you're my blood. They're nothing to me." She turned away from him and braced herself to receive the condolences.

NEIGHBORS BROUGHT FOOD FOR DEATH. THERE WAS NO stopping the bone-deep tradition, any more than Willa could have stopped Bess from cooking for three days straight to provide for what the housekeeper called the bereavement supper. And that was a double pile of horseshit in Willa's mind. There was no bereavement here. Curiosity, certainly. Many of the people who packed into the main house had been invited before. More, many more, had not. His death provided them entry, and they enjoyed it.

The main house was a showplace, Jack Mercy style. Once a cabin of log and mud had stood there, but that had been more than a hundred years before. Now there was a sprawling, rambling structure of stone and wood, of glistening glass. Rugs from all over the world spread over floors of gleaming pine or polished tile. Jack Mercy had liked to collect. When he'd become master of Mercy Ranch he had spent five years turning what had been a lovely home into his personal palace.

Rich lived rich, he liked to say.

So he had. Collecting paintings and sculpture, adding rooms where the art could be displayed. The entrance was a towering atrium, floored with tiles in jewel tones of sapphire and ruby in a repeating pattern of the Mercy Ranch brand. The staircase that swept to the second floor was polished oak, shiny as glass, with a newel post carved in the shape of a howling wolf.

People gathered there now, many of them goggling over it as they balanced their plates. Others crowded into the living room with its acre of slick floor and wide curve of sofa in cream-colored leather. On the smooth river rock of the wall-spanning fireplace hung a life-size painting of Jack Mercy astride a black stallion. His head was cocked, his hat

tipped back, a bullwhip curled in one hand. Many felt that those hard blue eyes damned them as they sat drinking his whiskey and toasting his death.

For Lily Mercy, the second daughter Jack had conceived and discarded, it was terrifying. The house, the people, the noise. The room the housekeeper had given her the day before when she'd arrived was so beautiful. So quiet, she thought now as she moved closer to the rail of the side porch. The lovely bed, the pretty golden wood against the silky wallpaper.

The solitude.

She wanted that now, so very much, as she looked out toward the mountains. Such mountains, she thought. So high, so rough. Nothing at all like the pretty little hills of her home in Virginia. And all the sky, the shuddering and endless blue of it curving down to more land than could possibly exist.

The plains, that wild roll of them, and the wind that seemed never to stop. And the colors, the golds and russets, the scarlets and bronzes of both hill and plain exploding with autumn.

And this valley, where the ranch spread in a spot of such impossible strength and beauty. She'd seen deer out the window that morning, drinking from a stream that glowed silver in the dawn. She'd heard horses, the voices of men, the crow of a rooster, and what she thought—hoped—might have been an eagle's cry.

She wondered whether, if she found the courage to walk into the forest that danced up those foothills, she would see the moose, the elk, the fox that she had read about so greedily on the flight west.

She wondered if she would be allowed to stay even another day—and where she would go, what she would do, if she was asked to leave.

She couldn't go back east, not yet. Self-consciously she fingered the yellowing bruise she'd tried to hide with makeup and sunglasses. Jesse had found her. She'd been so careful, but he'd found her, and the court orders hadn't stopped his fists. They never had. Divorce hadn't stopped

him, all the moving and the running hadn't stopped him.

But here, she thought, maybe here, thousands of miles away, in a country so huge, she could finally start again. Without fear.

The letter from the attorney informing her of Jack Mercy's death and requesting her to travel to Montana had been like a gift from God. Though her expenses had been paid, Lily had cashed in the first-class airfare and booked zigzagging flights across the country under three different names. She wanted desperately to believe Jesse Cooke couldn't find her here.

She was so tired of running, of being afraid.

She wondered if she could move to Billings or Helena and find a job. Any job. She wasn't without some skills. There was her teaching degree, and she knew how to use a keyboard. Maybe she could find a small apartment of her own, even just a room to start until she got on her feet again.

She could live here, she thought, staring out at the vast and terrifying and glorious space. Maybe she even belonged here.

She jumped when a hand touched her arm, barely stifled the scream as her heart leaped like a rabbit into her throat.

Not Jesse, she realized, feeling the fool. The man beside her was dark, where Jesse was blond. This man had bronzed skin and hair that streamed to his shoulders. Kind eyes, dark, very dark, in a face as beautiful as a painting.

But then Jesse was beautiful, too. She knew how cruel beauty could be.

"I'm sorry." Adam's voice was as soothing as it would have been if he'd frightened a puppy or a sick foal. "I didn't mean to startle you. Iced tea." He took her hand, noting the way it trembled, and wrapped it around the glass. "It's a dry day."

"Thank you. I didn't hear you come up behind me." In a habit she wasn't even aware of, Lily took a step aside, putting distance between them. Running room. "I was just . . . looking. It's so beautiful here."

"Yes, it is."

She sipped, cooling her dry throat, and ordered herself to

be calm and polite. People asked fewer questions when you were calm. "Do you live nearby?"

"Very." He smiled, stepped closer to the rail, and gestured east. He liked her voice, the slow, warm southern flavor of it. "The little white house on the other side of the horse barn."

"Yes, I saw it. You have blue shutters and a garden, and there was a little black dog sleeping in the yard." Lily remembered how homey it had looked, how much more welcoming than the grand house.

"That's Beans." Adam smiled again. "The dog. He has a fondness for refried beans. I'm Adam Wolfchild, Willa's brother."

"Oh." She studied the hand he offered for a moment, then ordered herself to take it. She could see the points of resemblance now, the high, slashing cheekbones, the eyes. "I didn't realize she had a—That would make us . . ."

"No." Her hand seemed very fragile, and he let it go gently. "You shared a father. Willa and I shared a mother."

"I see." And realizing that she'd given very little thought to the man they'd buried today, she felt ashamed. "Were you close, to him . . . your stepfather?"

"No one was." It was said simply and without bitterness. "You're uncomfortable here." He'd noticed her keeping to the edges of groups of people, shying away from contact as if the casual brush of shoulders might bruise her. Just as he'd noticed the marks of violence on her face that she tried to hide.

"I don't know anyone."

Wounded, Adam thought. He had always been drawn to the wounded. She was lovely, and injured. Dressed neatly in a quiet black suit and heels, she was only an inch or so shorter than his five ten and too thin for her height. Her hair was dark, with a sheen of red, and it fell in soft waves that reminded him of angel wings. He couldn't see her eyes behind the sunglasses, but he wondered about their color, and about what else he would read in them.

She had her father's chin, he noticed, but her mouth was soft and rather small, like a child's. There had been the faint

hint of a dimple beside it when she'd tried to smile at him. Her skin was creamy, very pale—a fragile contrast to the marks on it.

She was alone, he thought, and afraid. It might take him some time to soften Willa's heart toward this woman, this sister.

"I have to check on a horse," he began.

"Oh." It surprised her that she was disappointed. She had wanted to be alone. She was better when she was alone. "I won't keep you."

"Would you like to walk down? See some of the stock?"

"The horses? I—" Don't be a coward, she ordered herself. He isn't going to hurt you. "Yes, I'd like that. If I wouldn't be in your way."

"You wouldn't." Knowing she'd shy away, he didn't offer a hand or take her arm, but merely led the way down the stairs and across the rough dirt road.

SEVERAL PEOPLE SAW THEM GO. AND TONGUES WAGGED as tongues do. Lily Mercy was one of Jack's daughters, after all, though, as was pointed out, she hardly had a word to say for herself. Something that had never been Willa's problem—no, indeed. That was a girl who said plenty, whatever and whenever she wanted.

As for the other one—well, that was a different kettle of fish altogether. Snooty, she was, parading around in her fancy suit and looking down her nose. Anybody with eyes could see the way she'd stood at the gravesite, cold as ice. She was a picture, to be sure. Jack had sired fine-looking daughters, and that one, the oldest one, had his eyes. Hard and sharp and blue.

It was obvious she thought she was better than the rest of them with her California polish and her expensive shoes, but there were plenty who remembered her ma had been a Las Vegas showgirl with a big, braying laugh and a bawdy turn of phrase. Those who did remember had already decided they much preferred the mother to the daughter.

Tess Mercy could have cared less. She was here in this godforsaken outback only until the will could be read. She'd

take what was hers, which was less than the old bastard owed her, and shake the dust off her Ferragamos.

"I'll be back by Monday at the latest."

She carried the phone along as she paced about with quick, jerky motions, nervous energy searing the air around her. She'd closed the doors of what she supposed was a den, hoping to have at least a few moments of privacy. She had to work hard to ignore the mounted animal heads that populated the walls.

"The script's finished." She smiled a little, tunneled her fingers through the straightedge swing of dark hair that curved at her jaw. "Damn right it's brilliant, and it'll be in your hot little hands Monday. Don't hassle me, Ira," she warned her agent. "I'll get you the script, then you get me the deal. My cash flow's down to a dribble."

She shifted the phone and pursed her lips as she helped herself to a snifter of brandy from the decanter. She was still listening to the promises and pleas of Hollywood when she saw Lily and Adam stroll by the window.

Interesting, she thought, and sipped. The little mouse and the Noble Savage.

Tess had done some quick checking before she'd made the trip to Montana. She knew Adam Wolfchild was the son of Jack Mercy's third and final wife. That he'd been eight when his mother had married Mercy. Wolfchild was Blackfoot, or mostly. His mother had been part Indian. The man had spent twenty-five years on Mercy Ranch and had little more to show for it than a tiny house and a job tending horses.

Tess intended to have more.

As for Lily, all Tess had discovered was that she was divorced, childless, and moved around quite a bit. Probably because her husband had used her for a punching bag, Tess thought, and made herself clamp down on a stir of pity. She couldn't afford emotional attachments here. It was straight business.

Lily's mother had been a photographer who'd come to Montana to snap pictures of the real West. She'd snapped Jack Mercy—for all the good it had done her, Tess thought.

Then there was Willa. Tess's mouth tightened as she thought of Willa. The one who had stayed, the one the old bastard had kept.

Well, she owned the place now, Tess assumed, shrugging her shoulders. And she was welcome to it. No doubt she'd earned it. But Tess Mercy wasn't walking away without a nice chunk of change.

Looking out the window, she could see the plains in the distance, rolling, rolling endlessly, as empty as the moon. With a shudder, she turned her back on the view. Christ, she wanted Rodeo Drive.

"Monday, Ira," she snapped, annoyed with his voice buzzing in her ear. "Your office, twelve sharp. Then you can take me to lunch." With that as a good-bye, she replaced the receiver.

Three days, tops, she promised herself, and toasted an elk head with her brandy. Then she'd get the hell out of Dodge and back to civilization.

"I SHOULDN'T HAVE TO REMIND YOU THAT YOU GOT guests downstairs, Will." Bess Pringle stood with her hands on her bony hips and used the same tone she'd used when Willa was ten.

Willa jerked her jeans on—Bess didn't believe in little niceties like privacy and had barely knocked before striding into the bedroom. Willa responded just as she might have at ten. "Then don't." She sat down to pull on her boots.

"Rude is a four-letter word."

"So's work, but it still has to be done."

"And you've got enough hands around this place to see to it for one blessed day. You're not going off somewhere today, of all days. It ain't fittin'."

What was or wasn't fitting constituted the bulk of Bess's moral and social codes. She was a bird of a woman, all bone and teeth, though she could plow through a mountain of hotcakes like a starving field hand and had the sweet tooth of an eight-year-old. She was fifty-eight—and had changed the date on her birth certificate to prove it—and had a head

of flaming red hair she dyed in secret and kept pulled back in a don't-give-me-any-lip bun.

Her voice was as rough as pine bark and her face as smooth as a girl's, and surprisingly pretty with moss-green eyes and a pug Irish nose. Her hands were small and quick and able. And so was her temper.

With her fists still glued to her hips, she marched up to Willa and glared down. "You get your sassy self down those stairs and tend to your guests."

"I've got a ranch to run." Willa rose. It hardly mattered that in her boots she topped Bess by six inches. The balance of power had always tottered back and forth between them. "And they're not my guests. I'm not the one who wanted them here."

"They've come to pay respects. That's fittin'."

"They've come to gawk and prowl around the house. And it's time they left."

"Maybe some of them did." Bess jerked her head in a little nod. "But there's plenty more who are here for you."

"I don't want them." Willa turned away, picked up her hat, then simply stood staring out her window, crushing the brim in her hands. The window faced the mountains, the dark belt of trees, the peaks of the Big Belt that held all the beauty and mystery in the world. "I don't need them. I can't breathe with all these people hovering around."

Bess hesitated before laying a hand on Willa's shoulder. Jack Mercy hadn't wanted his daughter raised soft. No pampering, no spoiling, no cuddling. He'd made that clear while Willa had still been in diapers. So Bess had pampered and spoiled and cuddled only when she was certain she wouldn't be caught and sent away like one of Jack's wives.

"Honey, you got a right to grieve."

"He's dead and he's buried. Feeling sorry won't change it." But she lifted a hand, closed it over the small one on her shoulder. "He didn't even tell me he was sick, Bess. He couldn't even give me those last few weeks to try to take care of him, or to say good-bye."

"He was a proud man," Bess said, but she thought, Bastard. Selfish bastard. "It's better the cancer took him quick

rather than letting him linger. He would've hated that and it would've been harder on you."

"One way or the other, it's done." She smoothed the wide, circling brim of her hat, settled it on her head. "I've got animals and people depending on me. The hands need to see, right now, that I'm in charge. That Mercy Ranch is still being run by a Mercy."

"You do what you have to do, then." Years of experience had taught Bess that what was fitting didn't hold much water when it came to ranch business. "But you be back by suppertime. You're going to sit down and eat decent."

"Clear these people out of the house, and I will."

She started out, turning left toward the back stairs. They wound down the east wing of the house and allowed her to slip into the mudroom. Even there she could hear the beehive buzz of conversations from the other rooms, the occasional roll of laughter. Resenting all of it, she slammed out the door, then pulled up short when she saw the two men smoking companionably on the side porch.

Her gaze narrowed on the older man and the bottle of beer dangling from his fingers. "Enjoying yourself, Ham?"

Sarcasm from Willa didn't ruffle Hamilton Dawson. He'd put her up on her first pony, had wrapped her head after her first spill. He'd taught her how to use a rope, shoot a rifle, and dress a deer. Now he merely fit his cigarette into the little hole surrounded by grizzled hair and blew out a smoke ring.

"It's"—another smoke ring formed—"a pretty afternoon."

"I want the fence checked along the northwest boundary."

"Been done," he said placidly, and continued to lean on the rail, a short, stocky man on legs curved like a wishbone. He was ranch foreman and figured he knew what needed to be done as well as Willa did. "Got a crew out making repairs. Sent Brewster and Pickles up the high country. We lost a couple head up there. Looks like cougar." Another drag, another stream of smoke. "Brewster'll take care of it. Likes to shoot things."

"I want to talk to him when he gets back."

"I expect you will." He straightened up from the rail, adjusted his mud-colored dishrag of a hat. "It's weaning time."

"Yes, I know."

He expected she did, and nodded again. "I'll go check on the fence crew. Sorry about your pa, Will."

She knew those simple words tacked onto ranch business were more sincere and personal than the acres of flowers sent by strangers. "I'll ride out later."

He nodded, to her, to the man beside him, then hitched his bowlegged way toward his rig.

"How are you holding up, Will?"

She shrugged a shoulder, frustrated that she didn't know what to do next. "I want it to be tomorrow," she said. "Tomorrow'll be easier, don't you think, Nate?"

Because he didn't want to tell her the answer was no, he tipped back his beer. He was there for her, as a friend, a fellow rancher, a neighbor. He was also there as Jack Mercy's lawyer, and he knew that before too much more time passed he was going to shatter the woman standing beside him.

"Let's take a walk." He set the beer down on the rail, took Willa's arm. "My legs need stretching."

He had a lot of them. Nathan Torrence was a tall one. He'd hit six two at seventeen and had kept growing. Now, at thirty-three, he was six six and lanky with it. Hair the color of wheat straw curled under his hat. His eyes were as blue as the Montana sky in a face handsomely scored by wind and sun. At the end of long arms were big hands. At the end of long legs were big feet. Despite them, he was surprisingly graceful.

He looked like a cowboy, walked like a cowboy. His heart, when it came to matters of his family, his horses, and the poetry of Keats, was as soft as a down pillow. His mind, when it came to matters of law, of justice, of simple right and wrong, was as hard as granite.

He had a deep and long-standing affection for Willa

Mercy. And he hated that he had no choice but to put her through hell.

"I've never lost anybody close to me," Nate began. "I can't say I know how you feel."

Willa kept walking, past the cookhouse, the bunkhouse, by the chicken house where the hens were going broody. "He never let anyone get close to him. I don't know how I feel."

"The ranch . . ." This was dicey territory, and Nate negotiated carefully. "It's a lot to deal with."

"We've got good people, good stock, good land." It wasn't hard to smile up at Nate. It never was. "Good friends."

"You can call on me anytime, Will. Me or anyone in the county."

"I know that." She looked beyond him, to the paddocks, the corrals, the outbuildings, the houses, and farther, to where the land went into its long, endless roll to the bottom of the sky. "A Mercy has run this place for more than a hundred years. Raised cattle, planted grain, run horses. I know what needs to be done and how to do it. Nothing really changes."

Everything changes, Nate thought. And the world she was speaking of was about to take a sharp turn, thanks to the hard heart of a dead man. It was better to do it now, straight off, before she climbed onto a horse or into a rig and rode off.

"We'd best get to the reading of the will," he decided.