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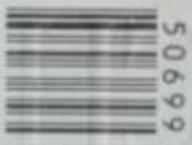
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AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL

When the moon was high in the sky, Fanny leaned into the crook of Ash's arm. "In my wildest dreams, I never thought I'd be sitting on the beach at Christmas staring at the sky full of stars. Do you know the words to the Christmas carols?"

Ash nodded. "Then let's sing," Fanny said, and they sat next to each other, their shoulders touching, their voices, one high and sweet, the other deep and sad, the gentle trade winds carrying the words out across the deep blue Pacific jewel. "Merry Christmas, Fanny," Ash said, hugging her.

"Merry Christmas, Ash." She took the lei she'd been working on and placed it around Ash's neck. "I love you," she said. "So, if at the end of the ten days you want to marry me, I'm going to say yes."

Ash was speechless. "But we . . . you said . . ."

"I'm ready now. Get ready to ravage and plunder me."

"Jesus, Fanny, it doesn't work that way. I mean . . . not here . . ."

"I've been living in this bathing suit for . . . this is the sixth day. I'm ready to take it off."

"And I thought girls from Pennsylvania were shy and . . ."

"We are. We also go after what we want. I want you." In the time it took her heart to beat twice, Fanny's one-piece yellow suit was on the sand. "Are you ready now?"

She was really doing this, she was seducing Ash Thornton. She was standing stark naked on a beach in Hawaii waiting for a man she barely knew to make love to her.

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For Doris and John Femesic, Rick too.

Part One

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Sallie Coleman

1923-1942

The old attorney stared out his grimy windows and winced. His secretary had cleaned those windows yesterday. He'd watched her swish her soapy rag over them, then polish them until he could see his reflection. Now, less than fifteen hours later, they were dirty and grimy as though they'd never been cleaned. He looked down at his desk and saw the same grainy granules of desert sand. Irritably, he blew at them and wasn't surprised when the offending sand refused to move. He told himself he was in the desert; sand was to be expected.

Alvin Waring, attorney-at-law, worried as he shuffled the two folders—one thick, one thin—from one side of his desk to the other. Waring knew exactly what was in each folder. If he were pressed, he could rattle off the contents without missing a heartbeat.

He saw her then, and he thought about waterfalls, summer blue skies, picnics and wildflowers. He wished, in that single second of time, for his youth. The two folders on his desk made perfect sense now. He stood, his old bones creaking as he walked around the side of his desk, held out his hand and touched hers, softer than any flower petal. She smiled, her summer blue eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Mr. Waring, I'm Sallie Coleman. I received your letter several days ago. I would have come yesterday, but I ... I had to . . . sort through some things. I don't have much money, Mr. Waring. I use all my available cash to pay for Cotton's funeral. I do have this," Sallie said as she withdrew a small burlap sack from her purse. "Cotton gave it to me the first day I started to work at the bingo palace. He said it was to be my nest egg if things didn't work out. I'm not sure how much it's worth. Cotton said it was seven ounces of pure gold."

"Nest eggs should not be touched. They're for the future." The

attorney cleared his throat as he handed back the sack of gold. He wondered what it would be like to walk with this young woman through a green meadow filled with daisies. In his bare feet. Holding her hand.

Sallie backed up a step, but didn't reach for the little sack. The summer blue eyes were questioning. "I don't understand. It could take me years to pay off. . . The gold would help me get to the end quicker. Did I say that right?"

"It makes no mind. There is no need for you to assume payment for Cotton Easter's bills. First, he didn't leave any bills. His estate would have paid for his funeral. There was ... is ... no need for you to assume the responsibility."

"Yes, Mr. Waring, there was a pure need for me to be doing that. Cotton was my friend. It was hard for

me here in the desert when I first got here. He helped me. He watched out for me. Cotton didn't let anyone bother me. He was a kind man, a good man. Sometimes . . . most times, he was down on his luck, but when he had money he always shared with me and a few others who were less fortunate. I don't regret paying for his funeral. If he didn't leave any bills, and you don't want my nest egg, why did you write me that letter asking me to come here?"

"Sit, Miss Coleman. I have some things to explain to you. I'm going to read you Cotton's last will and testament."

"Mercy, Mr. Waring, isn't a person's will a private thing? I don't know if Cotton would like you to be telling me his secret thoughts. Cotton always told me a man's life and his past belonged to him alone. He said that and a man's good name were all God gave him when he came into the world, and when he left this world, his name on his marker would be all that was left. Now that I told you that, Mr. Waring, I'll be getting back to work. I'm having his marker erected next Sunday afternoon. The preacher agreed to say a few words. I'm going to serve a meal at the palace for anyone who wants to come."

Alvin Waring couldn't believe what he was hearing. She was still-most to the door when he barked at her to come back and sit. He gentled his tone and smiled when she perched herself on the edge of the hard wooden chair. The summer blue eyes were frightened.

"Now, little lady, you just sit there and listen to me read you Cotton's last will and testament. Before I do that, I want to tell you about Cotton. If I don't, you won't understand the will. Cotton came here to the desert with his daddy many years ago. He was just

a small child at the time. His daddy was an educated man whose wife died before her time. With a small boy to raise, he decided to come here to seek his fortune the way his own father had done. He was very successful, almost as successful as his father. He sent Cotton back to Boston to get educated and the minute the boy finished his studies, he hightailed it right back here and took his place next to his daddy. The main reason his daddy came here was because his father had mined the Comstock Lode. That would be Cotton's granddaddy. The old gendeman left all he held dear to Cotton's father. And, there was a lot that he held dear. Cotton's daddy sold all the shares to the Comstock that his father left him at just the right time, and banked a fortune. Sold high, \$22,000 a share, and he owned thousands of shares. Cotton's daddy was a gambler and won acres and acres of land in poker games. He never touched that money. He struck it rich time and again. He had a big, old ugly Wells Fargo safe made special, and he kept his fortune in it. Didn't trust banks or the stock market. A wise man. He bought up half the desert for fifty cents an acre. He grubstaked many a man who later paid back double for the stake. In some cases the veins and mines found their way back to Cotton's daddy. When he died, his estate went to Cotton, who didn't give a whit about the money. Cotton wanted his own strike. He amassed his own fortune, and it all went into the Wells Fargo safe along with his daddy's money, and his grand-daddy's money. Make no mistake, Miss Coleman, Cotton knew exactly what was his, what was his granddaddy's, and what was his daddy's. I don't think he knew or even cared about the amount. I tried to tell him, but he simply wasn't interested. He wanted to be like all the other miners—spinning yams and drinking rotgut, loving women on the run, gambling, and hitting the mother lode. He craved respect, and you were the only person who gave it to him. Miss Coleman. He said you nursed him when he came down with pneumonia, and that you fed him when he was hungry. He said you washed his clothes once or twice and said you were—ah, what he said was . . . you were,

forgive me, a lusty bed partner." Sallie blushed, but the summer blue eyes didn't waver. "Cotton left all of his holdings to you, Miss Coleman." "Me! Now, why would he do a thing like that, Mr. Waring?" "Because you accepted him for who he was, and he said you respected him and asked his advice. He said nobody else, man or woman, ever asked for his advice. You followed it, too. That was important to Cotton."

"But. .. but—"

"You're a very rich woman, Miss Coleman. It's a short will. I'll read it to you, and you can ask me questions, if you want, when I'm finished."

Sallie listened to the old attorney's quivering voice, understanding only one word: rich. Other people were rich. People like herself were never rich. If she were rich, she could go back to Texas and help her family. She would have to ask how much money that would take. She wished then that her life had been different. She wished she could read and write well. Cotton had helped her a little, but she'd been too ashamed and embarrassed to let him know how ignorant she was.

The attorney's voice trailed off. He was finished. She needed to pay attention. He had said she should ask questions. He was staring at her expectantly. "Mr. Waring, I'd like to help my parents out if that's possible. These past few years I've sent little bits of money back home, but there are quite a few young ones to take care of. How much do you think that will cost? If there's enough I'd like to maybe move my family to a little house with a yard for the children. Maybe buy a toy or two and a new outfit. Schooling too. My pa, he . . . how much will all that take?"

"Compared to what you have, what you're asking is a spit in the bucket. You're rich, Miss Coleman. Let me put it to you another way. Do you know how much a million dollars is?" Sallie's head bobbed up and down. In her life she'd never seen more than fifty dollars at a time. A million had to be a lot more than that. She wished she'd paid more attention to Cotton when he was doing numbers with her. All she wanted was to be able to count the money at the end of the day and know it was accurate.

"Then you multiply that by about fifty and that's what you're worth, possibly more, thanks to Cotton Easter. That doesn't count the property. Right now it's not worth much. Possibly someday it will be worth a fortune. Cotton's daddy thought so, and so did Cotton. My best advice to you is to take some of that money and buy up the rest of the desert and sit on it until the time is right to sell it. It's going for about sixty-five cents an acre. I can arrange all that for you if you want me to handle your affairs. If you have another attorney in mind, that's all right, too. I'll be sending you monthly reports on your finances, which pretty much stay the same since everything is locked up. After, I'd like us to sit down and talk about the stock market. Will you be wanting to move into the Easter

house? They gave it a name when Cotton was just a tad. His daddy called it Sunrise. You own the mountain it's sitting on." He dangled a set of clanking keys to make his point.

"What house is that, Mr. Waring?*" Sallie gasped.

"Cotton's daddy's house up on Sunrise Mountain. A fine house it is, too. Cotton's granddaddy had everything sent here from Boston. The finest finishing money could buy. Real plumbing. There's a well and an automobile. There's a couple who look after the place. You can live there if you like. It's yours."

A house called Sunrise. Sally wondered if she was dreaming. "How many rooms does it have?"

"Eleven. Four complete bathrooms. Beautiful gardens. Do you like flowers, Miss Coleman?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Waring, I love flowers. Do you?"

"Wildflowers especially. Bluebells, and those little upside-down bells, the yellow ones. My mother used to have a beautiful flower garden. Where do you live now, Miss Coleman?"

"In a boardinghouse. I have a big room. It has pretty wallpaper and white curtains on the windows. I can't open the windows, though, because of the grit and sand. I'd like to see those curtains move in the early morning breeze. Window screens are frightfully expensive."

"You don't have to worry about things being expensive anymore. If you don't mind me asking, Miss Coleman, what will you do? If you have a mind to tell me a little about your background, I might be able to help you. Plan your future, so to speak. Cotton trusted me. I'd like it if you would trust me, too."

Sallie sat back in the hard wooden chair and stared directly at the old attorney. She spoke haltingly at first, and then, as she grew more comfortable with the truth and shame, the words rushed out. "I'm one of eight children. I'm the oldest girl. The boys, they took off" as soon as they could. My pa, he drank too much. My mother took in washing and ironing. I helped. There was never enough food. I was never warm enough. I left when I was thirteen. I made my way here. I sang for my supper. Cotton said I sang like an angel. He loved to hear me sing. The miners gave me tips sometimes. Cotton was always generous. He didn't care that sometimes, when there was no money, that I would . . . take money for doing things that would shame my mother. That's just another way of saying I was . . . am . . . a whore. You didn't expect me to say that, did you, Mr. Waring?"

"No, I didn't. I'm not going to judge you, Miss Coleman."

"That's good, Mr. Waring. I won't judge you either. Now we can start out fair. I can read and write a little. Maybe I can get someone to teach me now. There was no time for school and no nice clothes back in Texas. The good ladies in town called us white trash. Nobody cared about us. I wanted better, the way my brothers wanted better. Someday I'm going to find them, and help them if I can. I'll be taking you up on the offer to move into that fine house. Do you know if the windows open?"

The old attorney smiled. "I'll make sure they do. Miss Coleman, I have an idea. Do you think you could find someone to take your place at the bingo palace, for say, six months? Maybe a year. I know a lady in California who operates a finishing school for young ladies. If you're amenable, I can make arrangements for her to . . . to—"

"Polish me up?" Her tinkling laugh sent goose bumps up and down the attorney's arms. "I suppose so. But first I have to go back to Texas. Family needs to come first, Mr. Waring. When I get back, we can talk again. Where's that safe you spoke about? Do you give me the money or do I just open the safe and take it? Do I have to write everything down?"

"Miss Coleman, you can do whatever you want. When would you like to visit the house?"

"Today."

"It's a two-day trip on horseback. I can make arrangements to have you taken up tomorrow if that's all right with you. Here is the combination to the safe and the keys to the house. These past few years a lot of the funds were put in banks once I felt it was safe. This box sitting here has all the bankbooks. They're yours now. All you have to do is walk into any one of them, sign your name, and take as much money as you want. You're agreeable, then, to my purchasing more desert acreage?"

"If you feel it's a wise thing to do."

"I do."

"Then you have my permission, Mr. Waring."

"How do you feel now, Miss Coleman? I'm curious."

"Sad. Cotton was such a good friend to me. I cannot believe that he would leave me all this money. Is there something in particular he wants me to do? I guess what I'm saying is, why? Why me? He had friends. There must be family in Boston. Are you sure it is meant for me?"

"I'm sure." Waring rose, walked around the desk, and held out

his hand. He held her delicate hand a moment longer than necessary. "Enjoy your new fortune, Miss Coleman."

"I'll try, Mr. Waring."

Sallie held out her hands for the small wooden box containing the bankbooks.

Outside in the late morning sunshine, Sallie stared up and down the street. She wondered how things could look the same as they had looked an hour ago when she first walked up the steps to the attorney's office.

Sallie's eye traveled to the line of stores whose owners she knew by name. Toolie Simmons owned The Arcade where beer on draft was sold. The Rye & Thackery run by Russ Malloy, the Red Onion Club, The Gem Counter with the letter N backwards on the rough sign, and on to the Arizona Club, whose sign proudly proclaimed its whiskey was fully matured and reimported. Men sat in the small pools of shade on spindly chairs, tilted back at alarming angles, talking, smoking their cigars and pipes as they waited for the saloons to open at noon. Those men would work if there were work to be had. Maybe she could do something about that. Some of them waved to her, others tilted their straw hats in recognition.

"Gonna sing us a pretty song tonight. Miss Sallie?" one of the hard rock miners shouted.

"Not tonight, Zeke, I'm heading for Texas to see my family, and I have a lot to do. Soon, though. You just tell me what you want me to sing, and I'll do it just for you."

"Heard the Mercantile got some canned peaches yesterday, Miss Sallie."

"Thanks for telling me, Billy. Would you like some?"

"I purely would. Miss Sallie."

"I'll get some on my way back and drop them off. You gonna be at the Arizona Club?"

"Nope. Don't got a lick of money in my poke today. I'll be waiting right here for you."

SaiUie nodded as she skirted the barrels of hardware and produce outside the Mercantile Company. She smiled at Hiram Webster as he stopped sweeping the sand from in front of his doorstep to let her pass. "Good morning, Mr. Webster. It's a fine day, isn't it?"

" 'Tis that, Miss Salhe. Lots of blue sky today."

Sallie was convinced no one knew about her good fortune. As she

walked along she remembered the tents and the smell of frying onions that permeated the air the day she'd first arrived. The tents were all gone now, replaced with newer wooden buildings. It was still a rough town, a shoddy town, a man's town. She realized she could fancy up the town now if she wanted to. She could buy up whatever she wanted. She could knock down all the shabby buildings and start over. Cotton said if the price was right, a person could buy anything.

Sallie stepped aside as three ladies walking abreast passed her, straw baskets on their arms. They didn't acknowledge her in any way. Sallie smiled anyway, and said, "Good morning, ladies." The scene of sagebrush seemed to be all about her as she walked along, past the bakery, the icehouse, the pharmacy, and the milliner. A gust of sand swirled past her. She tried to dance away from the circular swirl that spiraled upward, but her shoes were covered with sand. She stomped her feet and shook the hem of her skirt.

"Momin', Miss Sallie. What brings you to this end of town? Can we do anything for you here at the Chamber of Commerce?"

"Yes, you can, Eli. How much do you think it would cost to plant cottonwoods up and down this fine street, on both sides?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'd like to donate them and pay for the labor to plant them in memory of my friend Cotton Easter. Maybe some benches under the trees for the ladies to sit on. I think they'll make the street real pretty."

"That they will. Miss Sallie. The town's coming back to life a lit-de at a time. I like that."

"I do, too, Eli."

Sallie fought the urge to dance her way down the street. It was a dream—but if it was a dream, what was she doing with the box in her hands? Well, there was one way to find out for certain. She stopped in a shop doorway, stuck her hand into the box, and withdrew one of the bankbooks. She looked at the name of the bank embossed in gold leaf on the front. Sallie retraced her steps, walked around the corner, and continued walking until she came to the bank. She entered, walked up to the bank teller

and handed him the small blue book. "I'd like . . . five hundred dollars, please."

Five minutes later, Sallie walked out of the bank in a daze, the five hundred dollars safe in her purse. It was real, it wasn't a dream. She tripped down the street, giddy with the knowledge that everything Alvin Waring had said was true.

The money secure in her purse and loose bills in the pocket of her dress, Sallie stopped first at the Mercantile Company for a bag of canned peaches that she immediately handed over to Billy along with ten dollars. She handed out money to all the hard rock miners, admonishing them to eat some good food and to take a bath before they spent the rest in the Red Onion.

Sallie opened the door to the bingo palace with her own key. In the bright sun filtering into the large room, it looked like a sleazy, smoky, rinky-dink parlor with rough furniture, a rickety bar, bare windows, a cashier's cage, and a small stage that doubled as the bingo stand, where the bingo numbers were called, and where she sang at the beginning and end of the evening. She walked around, touching the felt-covered poker tables at the far end of the room, sitting down and then getting up from the bingo benches. She straightened the stack of bingo cards into a neater pile. Maybe she should throw everything out and start from scratch. She sat down again and closed her eyes. How best to pretty things up? A real stage, small, with a red velvet curtain that opened and closed. Matching draperies over the windows that could be closed in the winter. Chandeliers over the tables for better lighting. Perhaps a spotlight for the stage. A new bar, the kind the Arizona Club had, shiny mahogany with a brass railing. Leather stools with brass trim to match the bar. A new floor with some sections of it carpeted. No more spittoons. Definitely a new front door with glass panels, maybe even colored glass. She'd have some trees planted around the building, flowers if they would grow. She walked over to the farthest corner of the room, where she sat when things were slow or when she just wanted time by herself. She sat down on a wobbly chair and leaned her arms on a table whose legs didn't match. She smiled when the table rocked back and forth the same way her chair did. Cotton said the man who made the chair and table had a crooked eye. She wondered if she would miss things the way they were now. Old things were comfortable. New things took some getting used to.

Sallie stared at the small stage where she called out the bingo numbers hour after hour. She was always happy when a grizzly miner won his four bits and whooped in delight, his dirty boots stomping on the floor, the other miners cheering him on.

The bingo palace didn't make a lot of money, barely enough to pay the winners and herself. The door opened at noon for her regular customers. By paying close attention she was able to tell which customers were hungry, which customers came to gamble, and

which ones just wanted to hear her sing. The hungry ones were her biggest problem. Jeb, the owner of the steak house, allowed her to run a tab for hard-boiled eggs and pickles that she handed out on a daily basis. Most days if she had thirty customers she was lucky. The three poker tables covered in green felt had dust all over them. Most of her customers didn't have enough money to start up a poker hand, and those that did had to extend credit and write IOUs. The bingo cards were safer. Often she sat at one of the tables with her customers, playing poker for dry beans. She always lost. On rare occasions when one of the miners had a little extra in his poke, he'd lay money on the bar for her. Right before she closed at midnight she'd slip that same money under Jeb's door to pay off her market

What she really loved about her customers was the fact that they did their best to act like gentlemen

when they came into the palace. They'd spruce up by sHcking their hsiir back, shaking the dust from their clothes and boots. Most times they washed their hands even though they didn't have enough money for a room and a hot tub. She could always tell when they trimmed their whiskers, and she'd always compliment them and tell them they looked like fashionable Boston gendemen. They'd cackle with glee and then she would laugh, too, when she was forced to admit she'd never seen a proper Boston gentleman.

Things were going to change now. For the first time in her young life, Sallie felt fear of the unknown. If only she weren't so ignorant of the world. There wasn't much she could do about the fear of the unknown. She could get some learning, though. She wished again for her brothers, Seth and Josh. If only she knew where they were. All in good time or, as Cotton said, Rome wasn't built in one day, whatever that meant.

In her room at the boardinghouse, with the door closed and locked, Sallie opened the wooden box. Sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed, she looked at all the bankbooks—red ones, blue ones, green ones, two brown ones. So many numbers. She tried to comprehend the number of zeros. Mr. Waring made it sound like she could buy the world. The world! She wept then at her ignorance.

When there were no more tears to shed, Sallie's thoughts turned to Cotton Easter, her benefactor. I don't understand, Cotton, if you had all that money, why did you live like you did? There were times when you were

hungry and didn't have the money to rent a room. You didn't have a dollar for a bath. Life could have been so much easier for you.

I wish you had let me know what you were planning. What should I do with all your money, Cotton? I never knew there was so much money in the world. You must want me to do something. What? She looked around, half-expecting to hear Cotton's voice. She flopped back against the ruffled pillows, the wooden box toppling over. She saw it then, the crinkled piece of white paper. A letter. Maybe it was for her, from Cotton. She crossed her fingers and then blessed herself. Please let it be printed letters. Please, God, let me be able to read the words. Don't let me be ignorant now. I need to know why Cotton was so good and kind to me. Please, God. I'll build a church. I swear to You I will. I'll call it S Cotton Easter. Cotton was a religious man. He prayed every day. He taught me a prayer. I promise I'll say it every day.

Sallie squeezed her eyes shut as her fingers played with the folds of the crinkled letter. When she was calm, she spread the single sheet on her lap. The block letters and simple language brought tears to her eyes.

DEAR SALUE,

IF YOU HAVE THIS LETTER LN HAND THEN YOU KNOW I DIED. I'M LEAVING YOU ALL I HAVE. I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU DO WITH IT. I MEAN THE MONEY. IT NEVER BROUGHT ME ANY HAPPINESS, BUT IT WILL ALLOW YOU TO BECOME A FLNE LADY. ALVIN WILL HELP YOU. HE'S A GOOD MAN AND YOU CAN TRUST HIM. SALLIE, YOU WILL BE THE RICHEST WOMAN LN THE STATE OF NEVADA. YOU JUST BE CAREFUL WHO YOU TRUST. DON'T EVER TELL ANYONE THE WAY LNTO THE SAFE. NOW YOU CAN STOP SLIDING INTO OTHER MEN'S BEDS. THERE'S NO NEED FOR YOU TO TELL ANYONE YOU DID THAT

REMEMBER WHAT I TOLD YOU. DON'T SHARE YOUR BUSINESS WITH OTHER PEOPLE. SOME THINGS NEED TO BE KEPT SECRET. I LOVE YOU, SALLIE. DON'T GO LAUGHING ON ME NOW. I KNOW I'M OLD ENOUGH TO BE YOUR PA OR YOUR GRANDDADDY. A MAN CAN'T HARDLY STOP WHAT HIS HEART FEELS. I DIDN'T EVEN WANT TO TRY. I WANT YOU TO BE

HAPPY, SALUE. YOU HAVE A GOOD, KIND HEART. SOMETIMES YOU ARE TOO GOOD. YOU TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AND WHEN YOU HAVE TIME, VISIT MY GRAVE AND TALK TO ME. I WON'T BE ABLE TO ANSWER YOU, BUT I'LL BE ABLE TO HEAR YOU. THAT'S ALL I ASK OF YOU, SALUE. I HOPE YOU FIND A GOOD MAN WHO WILL GIVE YOU CHILDREN AND WHO WILL LOVE YOU THE WAY YOU DESERVE TO BE LOVED. DON'T SHARE YOUR PAST, SALLIE, OR IT WILL COME BACK TO HAUNT YOU. I LOVE YOU, SALUE.

YOUR FRIEND, COTTON EASTER

Sallie rolled over on the bed and burst into tears. "I never got a letter before," she whispered into her pillow. "I'll keep this letter forever and ever. I'll read it every day and I'll do what you say. I'll visit and we'll talk. I'll talk and you listen. That's what you said, Cotton. You have my promise that I won't . . . you know, do what you said." A moment later she was off the bed and out the door. She ran, skidding around the corners, not caring who saw her or what they thought. She had something to do. Something important. Later she could worry about acting like a lady.

When she arrived at the cemetery she was breathless and disheveled. Her eyes were frantic as she searched out the mound of dark earth that waited for the marker. When she saw the dried flower petals she knew she had the right grave. She'd spent the last of her money on the small bouquet. Now she could bring fresh flowers every day if she wanted to.

Sallie sat down on the hard ground. She brought her knees up to her chin and hugged them with her arms. "Cotton, it's me, Sallie. I got your letter today. It was in the box with all the bankbooks. It was real nice of you to leave me all your money. I'm going to take the train to Texas and visit my family. I took some of the money out of the bank. I'm going to buy my mama a nice little house and a new dress. I'll get things for the young ones, too, and maybe see about getting them some learning. I can't wait to see my mother's face when I walk in the door. She always said Seth would be the one to make a lot of money. Seth was the oldest I never knew him be-

cause he lit out before I was born. So did Josh. Ma was so proud of her two oldest sons. Every day she'd say they're coming back and will bring presents for everyone. They never did. Then Ma stopped talking about them. I don't even know what they look like, Cotton. Ma said they were the spittin' image of Pa. Maybe someday I can find them and help them out. It don't seem right that I don't know what my own brothers look like. All I can see, Cotton, is Ma's face. I know she was pretty when she was a young girl, but Pa, he drained the life out of her. I used to hear her cry at night, but she always had a smile on her face in the morning.

"I haven't seen that house up in the hills yet. It must be a beautiful place to be called Sunrise. Maybe Mama will want to come here and live with me. That would be okay, wouldn't it, Cotton? I'll get her a fancy chair so she can just sit and do nothing. I'll bring her flowers and give her steak to eat every day. I'm going to get her the prettiest dress in the whole world. Fancy shoes, too, and stockings. A pearl necklace, Cotton. I'll rub glycerine on her hands, file her fingernails, and maybe put some polish on

them. I don't know what I'll do about Pa. Maybe I'll just let him drink hisself to death. That seems to be the only thing that makes him happy.

"I'm going to buy a new dress. Cotton, for the trip. I want Ma to be proud of me when she sees me. I want to thank you for all this good. I promised God I was going to build a church and call it St. Cotton Easter. Maybe the preacher will let me sing on Sunday. I'd like that. I'll sing for you, Cotton. You look down on me, you hear. Do you have wings. Cotton? Jeb McGuire said angels have wings and they ring little bells. 'Course he was drunk when he said that. I like the way it sounds. I have so much to learn. Cotton. I don't hardly know nothing. I'm going to be twenty years old and I'm ignorant as some of them miners who never had any schoolin' at all.

"I know you wanted to be planted here, Cotton, but I been thinking. If I move into that house up in the hills, I won't be able to come here too much. I don't want you gettin' lonely here all by yourself I'd be Vkdlling to dig you up and take you up there. Mr. Waring said there's all kinds of flowers and garden I could make you a cemetery and talk to you every day. I want you to think about that, Cotton, and when I come back the next time, I want a sign that you think it's okay. If Jeb is right, ring your little bell. It's going to be a couple of weeks till I can come back here. I'll tell you all about my trip to Texas on the train. Maybe I'll have my whole family with me when

I come to visit next time. My mama will want to thank you personal like. She has manners, my mama does.

"I need to be going home now. I'll be here on Sunday when they put up your marker. I want you to know, Cotton, I paid for that with my own money, not yours. I don't like to say good-bye so I'll just say I'll be back. The sagebrush smells real sweet today. There aren't any clouds in the sky. It's dusty and dry." There was genuine concern in her voice when she said, "If there aren't any clouds in the sky what are you resting on?"

SaUie stood, smoothed down her dress, and did her best to tuck her flyaway blond ciu-ls back into place. She sniffed at the sagebrush-scented air before she waved her arm in a jaunty little salute of happiness.

Sallie climbed down fixjrn the wagon that was loaded with her personal possessions. She savored the moment by squeezing her eyes shut and then opening them slowly, drinking in the sight of her new home. In her life she had never dreamed such a place existed. The flower borders surrounding the house were every color of the rainbow. She bent down to touch the dark soil. It was moist to the touch and from somewhere she could hear water dripping. The lawn was springy underfoot and damp, greener than a carpet of emeralds. She looked to the left and then to the right, "Now I know why Cotton's granddaddy called this place Sunrise," she murmured.

She backed up until she was standing between a row of tall stately-looking trees that afforded her a better look at the house, which was now hers. Pristine white columns glistened in the sun. She thought about the tar paper shack she'd lived in with her family back in Texas, a shanty with no windows and door that had to be nailed shut and stuffed with rags in the winter. The door on this house was stout and beautiful, with tiny diamond-shaped panes of colored glass at the top. A heavy brass handle was just as shiny as the windows. But it was the heavy quarry stone in muted shades of gray and brown that brought a smile to her face. There would be no drafts in this house in the winter.

Sallie meandered around the grounds. Benches circled trees, and stone ornaments of different animals dotted the little path that led nowhere. It was cool and dim, green and lush. She tried to imagine herself sitting in the gazebo with a frosty glass of lemonade, dressed

in a frilly pink afternoon dress, with a book in hand she couldn't read. She giggled. "Oh, Cotton, you should see me now."

She was at the front door now. Should she lift the heavy brass knocker? Should she fit the huge brass key into the lock? She was saved from making a decision when the heavy door creaked open. A plump woman, wearing a white apron and a braid of hair that circled her head like a halo, smiled. "Please, miss, come in. Joseph will see to your bags. I am Anna. I cook and clean. My husband tends the gardens and takes care of the animals. Come, come, let me show you your new home."

"Can you open the windows?" Sallie asked.

"But of course. Would you like me to open them for you?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, yes, I would. I want to see the curtains flutter in the breeze. Do all the windows have screens?"

"Yes. I do not open them because Joseph and I don't use the house. We live in one of the cottages in the back. Is there anything you'd like me to do for you now?"

"I'd like to see my room and maybe take a bath. If you don't mind, I'd like to walk through the house myself and look at things."

"It is your house, Miss Coleman. Do you have anything in particular that you'd like me to make for your dinner?"

"It doesn't matter. I do like pie, though. Sweet pie. Very sweet." She smiled wickedly and patted her hips. "I like gravy and potatoes. I like most anything."

"Joseph has a garden he tends. I can the vegetables for the winter. We have a wonderful cold cellar. The special room is in the back. Joseph has the key. He'll turn it over to you at supper. Is there anything else I can do for you? Would you like me to draw your bath?"

"No, thank you. I want to do all that myself. Later on we can discuss your . . . dudes."

Lordy, Lordy, Lordy, she was acting like a grand mistress. How wonderful it felt! She sobered almost immediately when she thought about how her mother waited on other people and wore herself down to nothing more than skin and bones. Sallie made a promise to herself that she would never take advantage of anyone who worked for her. Cotton always said you should treat people the way you yourself wanted to be treated. He was right. She'd learned so much from Cotton.

Sallie walked from room to room, her lips pursed in a round circle of approval. She didn't know how she knew, but she was sure that this house looked like houses in Boston. All of the shiny dark

furniture must have belonged to Cotton's grandmother or mother. The rugs were thin, colorfaded, with fringes around the edge. Some were round, most of them square. There were big ones and little ones.

Her mother was purely going to smile and smile when she described the brilliant bird in the center of one particular rug. But always, in each room, her gaze settled on the windows and the lace curtains.

She chose a room at the end of the long hallway that overlooked the lush green gardens. The small balcony leading off the dressing room made her squeal in delight. She loved the French doors and the fine wooden floors. The high four-poster with the three-step stool with its canopy of lace made her grin from ear to ear. "I can't hardly believe this," she whispered to herself. Two giant closets rested side by side on one wall. Plenty of room for her ricky-ticky saloon gowns and feather boas. A dresser with flowered marble drawer pulls on all nine drawers caused her to suck in her breath. She didn't have enough underwear to fill the deep cavities. She walked around the room, finally sitting down on a sky-blue satin chaise longue that looked like no one had ever sat in it. Well, she was going to sit in it every day.

Now it was time to open the windows. She pushed the lace curtains aside, stretched her arms to push and tug at the window, and reached down for the wooden screen. She waited for the lace curtains to billow inward. When nothing happened, Sallie rused the curtains. Still they didn't move inward. She was so disappointed she wanted to cry. She marched over to the bed and climbed up. She sat, determined to wait as long as she had to, until the curtains moved.

Maybe she should lie down and rest her eyes. Within minutes she was sound asleep. The afternoon passed quietly, and she woke when she felt a warm movement of air. She wiped the sleep from her eyes, uncertain if she was truly awake or not. A smile that rivaled the afternoon sunshine stretched across her face when she saw the lace curtains dance in the breeze. "Ohhhh," was all she could think of to say. "This is the happiest day of my life," she said aloud. "Thank you, Cotton, thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Sallie forgot about the step stool and slid off the bed, landing on her backside. She laughed then, peals of joy, as she kicked out with her legs, banging the heels of her shoes on the carpeted floor.

Time for her bath. She looked around for the doorway and saw her bags and boxes stacked neatly to the side. Anna must have un-

packed while she slept. The door to one of the closets was slightly ajar. The garish saloon dresses looked out of place. The feathered hair ornaments she wore with her colored boas rested on the top shelf. They, too, looked out of place. A warm flush crept up to her neck and cheeks. She checked the dresser and wasn't surprised to see that her worn underwear and stockings filled only half of one of the drawers. She wished she had been the one to unpack her belongings. The flush of shame and embarrassment that someone else had seen her threadbare underwear deepened. Her shoulders stiffened. Everything was clean and mended. There was no need for shame.

In the huge, galvanized tub full of bubbles, Sallie leaned back, one long soapy leg extended. She eyed the red polish on the tip of her toes. Decadent! "Who cares!" She scrubbed and rubbed with a cloth that was softer than feathers until her skin was red. The length of toweling was just as soft, and long and wide enough to wrap completely around herself. She loved the way it made her feel. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her blond hair curled in ringlets around her ears and neck. She smoothed it back until it was stuck against her head. When she wore her hair pulled back like this she looked older, more experienced. When her curls tumbled about her face she looked fifteen.

She thought about her mother again as she dressed. Her mother's hair was like her own, but dull and usually greasy. She wore it pulled back from her sweet face with a string. Sallie was going to buy her a pearl necklace and some earrings. She'd take some of the soap that smelled like roses and wash her mother's hair and fix it the way the ladies in town wore their hair. She knew how to do these things now. Her mother was going to be a queen, and her little sisters would be princesses. She could make it happen now that she had all the money in the world.

Tomorrow she was going back to town. Tonight, when she got ready to sleep in the high bed, she was going to make a list of things to do when she got there. She wasn't going to wait one minute longer than necessary before she returned to Texas to see her family.

Sallie felt every inch the grand lady when Anna served her supper in the dining room at the long table with the huge centerpiece of fresh flowers. The meal was hearty and heavy—thick steak, fried potatoes, gravy, sliced tomatoes, and bread spread with real butter.

She thought about the thin gruel and the hard bread spread with lard that she'd eaten when she lived in Texas. Well, that was never going to happen again. Never, ever. She dug into her rhubarb pie with a vengeance and asked for a second helping. When she was finished with her meal she asked for Joseph.

"Ma'am, how can I help you?" he asked respectfully.

"I want to go back to town tomorrow, early, before the sun comes up. I plan on . . . going to Texas. I'm not sure when I'll be back."

"Would you like me to take you in the automobile, ma'am?"

"Why, yes, I would purely love that. Where did Mr. Easter get an automobile?"

"Won it fair and square in a poker game. I learned to drive it all by myself. Mr. Easter didn't want no part of something on four wheels with an engine. He said it was the devil's own machine. I'll be ready at sunup."

"So will I," Sallie responded smartly. "How hard was it to learn, Joseph?"

"Not hard at all, ma'am. I could teach you when you get back. You need to practice so's you don't run into no trees and scrub along the way."

"You need to wear a hat, miss," Anna said. "Your hair will look like the end of a broom if you don't. Dust and sand get in your eyes. Joseph wears special spectacles when he drives that machine."

"Will you be wanting to see the secret room now?" The old man held out a key ring with a large brass key dangling from the end.

"Yes, I would, Joseph. Thank you for supper, Anna. It was real good, specially that pie. Who pays your wages, Anna?"

"Mr. Waring. He comes up here on the first of every month. In the winter he pays us for three or four months at a time. Will you be thinking of changing that, ma'am?"

"No. But, maybe he should be paying you more now that I'm going to live here and you will have more duties. I'll speak to him. If you want someone else to help you, I can ask in town."

"I would have no objection to someone helping out. Joseph and me, we ain't young'uns anymore. Our bones creak a bit. Whatever you think best, ma'am." Sallie nodded, and followed Joseph out of the dining room.

"This be the room, miss." Joseph held out the key and withdrew discreetly. Sallie waited until the old man was out of sight before she fit the key into the lock. The door swung open. She stepped into a huge, bare room with no windows. Sallie held the lamp high in order

to see better. Against the wall was the largest safe she'd ever seen. It went from floor to ceiling, an iron monster, shiny black with a huge silver eye in the middle and a thick iron handle.

It took Sallie six tries before she managed to open the safe. When she heard the final click on the dial she yanked at the handle. The heavy door refused to budge. She dug her heels into the carpeted floor and pulled backward until she thought her head was going to explode right off her neck. The door creaked open. With her back against the inside of the door, she shoved with her backside until there was enough room to look inside. For the first time in her life she grew faint. Six long shelves, maybe six feet long, were filled with small burlap sacks. Each appeared to be the same size and weight. She opened three of the sacks. Gold. A wooden box full of papers sat square in the middle of the third shelf. Directly underneath was a second wooden box, this one with a handle. Sallie removed the lid and stared down at thick stacks of money.

Sallie sat down on the floor and hugged her knees. She stared at the contents of the safe, wondering what she was meant to do with this fortune.

A long time later, when the lamp started to smoke, Sallie pushed the massive door closed, twirled the knob, and backed out of the room. Her footsteps were slushy as she made her way back to her room. Her shoulders slumped as she undressed and pulled on her nightgown. She wished suddenly that she could turn time backwards. She wished she'd never gone to Alvin Waring's office, wished Cotton were still alive, wished she were back at the bingo palace singing for her customers. In just three short days her life had been turned upside down. "I don't know what to do," she whispered into her pillow. "I understand. Cotton, this was a load on your shoulders, and that's why you didn't want it all. Maybe if you get more learning, it will be different. I don't think so, though. Is this what you meant when you said money was the root of all evil? Will I turn evil? I don't want to be evil. I just want to be me. The Lord must want me to be here. He must have placed His hand on your shoulder and told you to do this. I don't know why. Maybe I'll never know."

Sallie wept then, like the child she was. Eventually she slept, her pillow stained with tears.

The next four days passed like a whirlwind. Sallie shopped for new clothes, then purchased two valises and packed them with gifts for

her family. She spent hours with Alvin Waring signing papers, making arrangements for the church to be built. She carried her plans one step farther and asked to have a town house built for herself so she wouldn't have to go back and forth to the house on the mountain. The last order of business was instructing Alvin Waring to buy the bingo palace and remodel it.

Sunday found her at the cemetery along with Cotton's friends. The preacher said his few words, she said hers, and Alvin Waring made a small speech that dealt with life and death, the Lord, and anyone else whose name he could remember. The preacher blessed the marker as Sallie placed her bouquet of flowers at its base.

The bingo palace was opened for the luncheon spread that Sallie paid her old landlady to prepare. Sallie sang song after song until her throat was hoarse. When it was over, she helped clear away the debris. Then she closed the door and didn't look back. In two hours time she was going to step onto the train that would take her to Texas and the family she'd left behind.

The last thing she said to Alvin Waring was, "I would appreciate it if you would increase Anna and Joseph's wages. I'd like it very much if you could find someone else to help out. There's a young Chinese girl at the laundry house who might be interested in the job. Her name is Su Li. She has a sister and a brother. If I bring my family back here, I'm going to need lots of help. They work very hard at the laundry. Children shouldn't have to work that hard. If they're interested, tell them I'll pay them good wages and they won't have to work on Sundays."

"I'll speak with them. Miss Coleman. Have a safe trip. I hope everything turns out the way you want it to. Call on me when you return; I'm at your service."

"Thank you, Mr. Waring, for everything. I'd like it if you'd call me Sallie. You won't forget to call the Pinkertons and have them start a search for my brothers Seth and Josh. It's mighty important for me to find them so I can share my . . . just share."

"I'll take care of it. . . Sallie. You take care of yourself."

"I will." The child in her bubbled over. "I can't wait to see my mother. I bought her all these fine things. I hope she likes them. She will, won't she, Mr. Waring?"

"Of course she will, child. I think, though, more than anything, she's going to be so happy to see you, she won't be thinking of fine presents. Your love and the fact that you're going back to help will be all she wants. Mark my word."

"*What does that mean, Mr. Waring, mark my word?"

"It means what I said is almost certainly true."

"Oh. Good-bye, Mr. Waring." She reached up on her toes to kiss the dry, withered cheek.

Alvin Waring stood for a long time watching the train chuff out of sight. If he'd been younger, he would have run after the train. He sighed. He had a long list of things to do for Sallie, and there was no time like the present to get started. It would be a labor of love.

Tears of happiness dripped down Sallie's cheeks. She didn't care. Pm coming, Mama. Pm going to make everything better for you. Pm coming, Mama.

She was going home.

There was nothing pretty about the barren town outside of Abilene, Texas. It was just as hot and dry

and miserable as it was the day she left six years ago with the medicine show. The only thing different, as far as Sallie could see, was that people were staring at her. When she'd gone through the town six years ago, no one had looked at her twice. She'd been one of those shiftless Colemans.

Sallie's shoulders stiffened, her head going up several degrees. She could stare them down today. She would stare them down. Six years ago she hadn't been able to do that. She paid the driver of the hackney and added a generous tip when he carried her bags into the town's only hotel.

Sallie walked over to the desk, aware that every eye in the lobby was on her. Not one person recognized her, she could tell. Well, they were going to recognize her in another second. She signed her name carefully and waited for the desk clerk to turn the registration book around to stare at her signature. Sallie smiled sweetly when the man's eyebrows shot upward, almost to his hairline. She fought the urge to laugh.

"Will you be staying with us long, Miss . . . ah . . . Coleman?"

"As long as it takes, sir."

"I see."

I see... it was something people said when they didn't know what

else to say. A devil perched itself on Sallie's shoulder. "What exactly do you see . . . sir?"

"I see . . . I—"

"I see," Sallie said. This time she did laugh. Cotton always said if you laughed, the world laughed with you. He also said if you cried, no one cared.

Sallie turned around to look at the people sitting in the lobby filled with dusty plants. All men, of course, with nothing to do but play checkers and gossip like old women. They were speculating about her. She knew the moment she was out of sight, the desk clerk would tell everyone she was Harry Coleman's daughter. Well, he could shout it from the housetops for all she cared. What she cared about right now was getting a bath and a clean change of clothes. Then, she was going to head toward the Emporium and buy out the store for her mother and sisters. The pretty flowered dress with the lace collar for her mother was already packed in her bag, along with the strand of pearls and the gold and pearl earrings. She'd thought of everything, lacy underwear, something her mother never owned in her life. Hose, soft leather shoes, and a pair of bedroom slippers that were buttery soft. She couldn't wait to see the smile on her mother's tired face when she told her that from this day on, she was going to become a lady and people would wait on her. From this day forward her mother wasn't going to lift even her little finger as far as work was concerned. She thought about her father for just a second. Well, he could come with them, or he could stay behind. It would be his decision.

"Please arrange for hot water. I'd like to take a bath as soon as possible."

"Bath time is six o'clock."

"For other people. I want mine now, sir." Sallie placed a bill on the counter and watched it disappear faster than a lightning streak. She smiled. "Is there someone to carry my bags?"

~~"Zeke, grab hold of the lady's bags and take them upstairs. The water will be up in twenty minutes."~~

It was almost noon when Sallie, clad in a pumpkin-colored dress with matching shoes and handbag, walked down the steps to the lobby. She posed a moment so the occupants could get a good look at her pretty dress.

Outside in the hot, June sunshine, Sallie paused for a moment to get her bearings. She saw the bakery and remembered how heavenly the smells were. She made a mental note to buy a big sack of

sweets for her mother. She'd eat some herself. She swore then that the money in her purse was starting to get hot. Time to spend it on her family. Lordy, Lordy, she could hardly wait.

Sallie was a shopkeeper's dream as she walked from one table to the next, picking, choosing, hoping she was getting the right sizes. The pile of merchandise on the counter mounted steadily. Toys, picture books, games, pencils, crayons, shoes, stockings, underwear, dresses, nightwear, sweaters. Bag of licorice, allnday suckers. In a separate pile she added toothbrushes, tooth powder, combs, brushes, sweet-smelling soap, and glycerine for her mother.

"While you wrap these things, I'm going over to the bakery. I'll need someone to take me to my parents' house. Can you arrange that? It's five miles or so. I'll pay for the trip. I'm not sure if we'll return with the driver or not."

"These things will be ready when you get back, miss. It's been a pleasure doing business with you. I have a man who will drive you. What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't," Sallie said as she sashayed out the door.

In the bakery SaUie bought three of everything. In the glass case to the far left, she noticed crocks of homemade butter and jaun. She bought two of each.

Now she was ready to go home. Ready to shower her fsmily with her own good fortune. This, she decided, was the second-best day of her whole life. She was a child again, clapping her hands, pounding her feet on the floor of the wagon she was riding in. She started to sing, her young voice pure and sweet. The driver smiled. Who was this young girl with the voice of an angel?

Sallie's happiness came to an abrupt stop when she saw the row of mean-looking shanties the tenant farmers lived in. Even from a distance they were a blight to the land. She counted down, one, two, three, four. Her home for thirteen years.

"It don't look like nobody lives here, miss. Are you sure this is the right place?"

"This is the right place." SaUie clenched her teeth. He was right; most of the shanties were leaning so far to the side, a good wind would topple them. The doors on most of them were missing, except for number four in the row.

She saw someone, on the side of the shanty. Her sister Peggy.

Sallie didn't wait for the driver of the wagon to rein in his horse. She pulled up her skirt and jumped

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