

THE CANARY

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Chapter 1

MYRA

Myra almost made it to 'I do'. Almost.

"Sorry Jesus," she gagged. There was an offering basket close by that saved the pastor's robe from wearing her breakfast. Her mama held her hair, her papa held her shoulders, and her man held his breath.

"My God, that girl got in the family way fast," whispered Everett to himself as he stood on one side of his bride, while Myra's father stood on the other, facing the Methodist minister. Mr. Everett Gallaway was ten years Myra's senior, and had gone to school. He was so very handsome with his jet hair greased back. Myra thought if she had to settle, he'd do. Besides, you couldn't argue with a swelling belly. Not at her tender age of just turned thirteen.

"I do."

As soon as Junior was born, the young family took the long journey from Charleston to Galveston with a promise of a steady job for Everett. By 1889 the reconstruction increased rail travel seven fold. They were met at end of their trip by Myra's aunt and uncle, her father's brother, Harry Dickenson, and his wife Ada.

"Oh my darlings..." Aunt Ada bustled around them as they stood on the platform, waiting for the porter to bring their trunks. "Let me look at you. Give me that baby. You must be exhausted." Myra nodded. "Precious, you look just like your grandfather," Ada cooed to the baby. "Harry, look at this child. Isn't he just the spittin' image of your brother?"

"He's spittin' all right. Hand me that diaper." Uncle Harry grinned and took the cloth from an overwhelmed Myra. "You don't need worry about a thing, Niece. You are home now." He gave the burp mop to his wife, kissed Myra's cheek, and shook Everett's hand.

They stayed with Aunt Ada and Uncle Harry until the young father's first pay. Thanks to Uncle Harry's connections, Everett got a job at one of the counting houses on the wharves. There he was among many men who recorded the import and export of goods that the giant sailing ships carried. They worked six day a week, off only for the Sabbath.

Daddy's dowry rented them a three-room furnished shotgun. They put Junior in the kitchen by the stove to keep him warm and besides, way in the back they didn't hear him holler so much. Myra lost number two there. Later on they got a bungalow where she had the rest. Uncle Harry called it 'The Shoe', what with all five children.

You wouldn't think that Myra's next babies, Benjamin and Frank, were twins since they were so dissimilar. They even had different colored hair. Myra always felt that the way she carried them made some difference, but she had no words for the hair. Benjy met his mama first, all fat and attitude, with his black hair slicked back just like his daddy's. His cry was strong and Myra thought she was done. When Franky came instead of placenta, the entire room was shocked, including Dr. McKnight. He knew she was big, but damn...two? He was as surprised as anyone. This child looked like a wet cat, all scrawny and blue, with the littlest bit of red fuzz on his head. His cries were squawks, not squalls, and Myra instantly loved her least'n more than life itself.

She would feed them both at the same time, but made sure Franky got the fuller breast. He was not strong enough to suckle hard and the feedings took longer than his brother. Every once in a while Junior would toddle over for his share and he learned quickly to stand by the bigger baby to wait his turn. When Benjy was done, Junior would get a snack and a hug. Franky

seemed unaware of the brother switch and just kept right on nursing. Everett thought his milky mate was out of her mind, not using baby bottles and cow's milk, but didn't say anything. He knew that what happened in The Shoe was Myra's business and what happened in the counting house was his.

Old wives said nursing stops new babies. Theophilis and Nora Lee came in the next two years. By then Myra had weaned the first three and was wondering about old wives. She was nineteen years old with five children. Nursing stopped nothing. She hadn't even dried up between birthings. She thought about what other women did, turning away from their husbands and all, but in the business of being married, that was the best part. Half the time she was winkin' at Everett more than he was winkin' at her. The love in The Shoe could not to be denied. Now The Shoe was full.

Myra became a familiar sight at the docks. She often left her brood with Aunt Ada and carried a dinner hamper to the Mister. The excuse was food, but the reality was The Shoe was too tight. Five babies made Myra wish for no babies. That hour with the Mister somewhat restored her.

"Goodness, it's wonderful to see all of you." Myra would nod her way through the rows of accounting men. Their desks and the high backed stools were as tall as she was. Myra felt as though she was walking in a valley of flannel and suspenders. She always made sure she wore a fresh dress with bright colors and her brown, wavy hair was brushed and pulled back with a nice ribbon. She knew the smell of baby mess was not appetizing to anyone, including to her beloved Everett. He was such a good sport about all those stinks, but she wasn't about to wear them to his work.

The other accountants enjoyed her visits as much as the Mister did. She was a bright little flower that made the dinner hour quite pleasant. She started adding extra jumbles to the basket for the men. They all seemed to love that mixture of almonds, pecans, raisins and chocolate pieces all baked into one delicious desert.

"Missus Gallaway, your cookies are grand. Everett, you are one lucky husband."

Mister was proud he married such a good looking cook. Myra felt baking was a small price to pay to get away from diapers and squalling.

"Yes, sir, I am." He beamed. "My Myra is one fine wife, aren't you, honey?"

"Yes, sweetheart. Now eat your dinner. The young'uns will be fussin' soon."

Mister came in from work early one Tuesday afternoon, looking pale.

"Darling, why are you home?" Myra had just started the boil for the supper beans and rice. He ran past her, through the back door, toward the outhouse. "North, South," was all he said. She stirred the water, adding a big pinch of salt and a plop of bacon grease, glad her stomach felt settled. The North South disease was no fun.

Many minutes later, Myra realized he hadn't returned. Wiping her hands on her apron, she stepped out to the stoop. There was something in the air, an odd chill. She hugged herself as she called out. "Everett, are you still in the necessary?" Myra heard the strangest sound, a banging like a far off shutter caught in the wind. She felt her chest tighten. "Everett, do you need help?"

Silence filled the back yard, thicker than fog. Myra walked to the privy and pulled open the door. Her dear, dear husband was on the seat with his pants down, slumped sideways, covered with vomit. Stain was on the walls where he had tried to pound out a distress with his fist. His eyes were closed.

Her screams roused him enough to focus. "I don't think I can get to the house. My

bowels won't stop." Those words took all his energy and he convulsed, retching again. This time the vomit was tinged with blood. The diarrhea continued.

Myra ran to the shed, scrambled through the garden tools, and brought back the wheel barrow. She propped open the door with its front axle and entered the privy. The smell was overwhelming. Holding her breath, she pulled Everett to her, forcing him to rise. With his pants down and his shirt front foul, Myra locked her arms around his waist and waltzed him to the barrow. Holding him with her body, she hiked up his drawers and britches to preserve his dignity. Releasing him, he fell into the bed of the barrow, long legs over the sides. Everett appeared unconscious. Using all of her strength, she dragged him toward the back door. Halfway there, he messed his trousers. There was blood in that, too.

Grabbing a clean tablecloth from the clothes line, she covered him, hoping to hide his horror. Leaving him in the yard, she ran out front where she waved down the first man she saw. Myra's appearance shocked him. The dance with her husband had stained her dress and apron with his illness. Myra's gasping words confirmed her need and he readily agreed to help get Everett into the house. The stranger stayed with her until her husband was clean and put to bed wearing a fresh night shirt. The man insisted on washing his hands at the pump. Only then did he introduce himself.

"My name is Joseph Cohen. Rabbi Joe, they call me. I know your uncle Harry. Do you want me to get him for you?"

"Please. I'm too scared to leave Everett and the babies. Could you ask for my aunt Ada, too?"

"Of course, my dear." The kind man looked hard at her. "Keep your children away from their daddy. You need to wash yourself and change clothes while you can." He was very serious as he spoke. "I have seen this before. You must burn his clothes, your clothes, and that tablecloth. Don't let your children use the outhouse, just the privy closet inside."

Myra stared at him. "Cholera?"

"Probably."

By the time Uncle Harry and Aunt Ada arrived, Myra had scrubbed herself and put all soiled garments and the table cloth to flame in the fire pit. Ada took the children to her house where she kept them. Harry burned the wood of the outhouse, filled the hole, and dug a new pit. Several of Uncle Harry's Masonic Brothers wagoned over a newly built latrine. Thanks to continuous hand washing, no one else got sick, praise God. Harry and Myra tended Everett until he died, three days later. After the undertaker came, they burned everything he had soiled, including the bed ticking. Only then did the children come home.

Myra became the Widow Gallaway on Friday, her twentieth birthday. Everett left her five hungry mouths to feed and that was about all. With the help of Aunt Ada's recipes and the resilience of every woman in her bloodline, Myra went into the baking business. It was the one thing she knew how to do that could make some money. She kept Junior around for company and fetching. He had his mama's coloring, but his hair was straight like his daddy's. All the children needed barbering, but she made sure Junior was especially raggedy when she sent him to the corner store. That seemed to bring a cheaper bag of flour or a larger tin of lard. The boy had a tired, old man's look about him since his papa died, and that his face broke the shop man's heart. It worked every time, or so Myra thought, having no notion Uncle Harry made a gentlemen's arrangement for a family discount.

Myra started her selling with Mister's co-workers. Those treats she'd shared so generously from her husband's dinner basket were pleasantly remembered. Mrs. Myra Gallaway

reached almost four foot nine inches in her stocking feet and she wore very high-heeled buttoned shoes so she could trick people into believing she had stature. She thought she fooled them, but she fooled no one. Everybody knew this tiny bit of a woman needed taking care of, and so they bought.

“Jumbles, plunkets, crybabies,” she’d call as she walked the boardwalk to the office. At the office entrance the counting men would gather around Myra. Once inside, she’d sell her homemade cookies.

“Mrs. Gallaway, how are you? We sure are glad to see you.” The men tried to remember Mister but eventually gave up. Mister was well known for his sudden death and that was about it, and his tiny woman who needed taking care of. The men loved buying cakes to support Mrs. Gallaway’s dear children. Thinking about the tiny woman didn’t hurt, either. It seemed the whole town knew about all those crying babies and Myra’s struggles. How she did it, nobody knew.

“Your sweets look mighty fine. Y’all got any with plum jam in the middle?”

“My wife asked me to bring home the ones with raisins. Do you have any of those today?”

The room was a’buzz with chatter. No work was getting done. The office supervisor, Ike Jameson, sent Myra out to the docks with her basket after two days. She could sell to his men if there was anything left. He allowed the Widow Gallaway full access to the loading areas, requesting two cookies as passage. Myra was grateful and always gave him three, one for his Missus. Mr. Jameson ate them all as he smiled at the thought of his good deed. His wife, Julia, got his wages and , surely that was enough.

The women who walked the wharves were usually not selling baked goods. Their sassy sway described their livelihood, ‘though sometimes colored girls from the fancy restaurants and fine hotels would come in with the cooks to carry out the best fish from the mongers.

The Widow Gallaway wore respectability like an apron. In fact, her ankle-length apron was her advertisement. Aunt Ada had sewn several for her with deep pockets on the front. There she put the coins from her sales. She was a picture of propriety with her black bonnet, her basket of wares, and her starched white apron covering her widow’s weeds. As time passed, Myra learned to walk in such a way so the discrete jingle of coins could be heard as she stepped. This just might remind the sailors of her five poor, hungry babies.

Only whores were allowed on the ships, so Myra had to call out her presence on the docks louder than the noise of the working men.

“Jumbles. Plunkets. Crybabies.” She turned her call into a plea at the end by saying ‘cry’ just a bit more pathetic and a whine added to ‘babieees’. The wharf men and sailors would gather with their money and she would sell her sweets in nothing flat. How those men loved to look at a respectable widow. Myra would smile, lower her lashes and talk about her children. Sometimes she would speak all their names, listing out Junior, the twins Benjy and Franky, Theo, and Nora Lee. For most of the time, though, she just called them ‘Babies’. The stories really helped with the sales.

For a while Aunt Ada watched the children, but when that stopped, the children were put out daily to anyone who felt charitable. That didn’t last long. Charity comes with a price.

Myra became the talk of the neighborhood. Bless her heart for her situation, but enough was getting to be enough. What did she do out there on those wharves? Was she selling more than sweets? The tongues had begun and no respectable housewife was going to keep Myra’s children so she could walk the wharves, selling who-knows-what.