



DREAMS OF

*Gold*

*A Gold Rush Romance*

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# **Dreams of Gold**

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by

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## Chapter One

Henry limped through the blazing heat and choking dust toward the small farmhouse, pain shooting up from his injured ankle and coursing through his body at every step. He studied the house and property, evaluating the situation. Adding together the small new row of grapevines, the plot of strawberries, and the worn look of the wooden home and small barn, he concluded that the family living there were most likely poor, but managing to survive and even attempting to improve their situation. The honest-living type of folk who would take in a stranger without question, and too far away from town to make mention of it until after the stranger was healed and gone.

Hopefully the perfect place to hide out for a few days while the heat was on and his hurts mended.

He dragged himself up the porch steps, wincing as he went. His ankle was swollen and so painful he was sure it was broken, or sprained at the very least. Pain had shot through him when he fell from that damnable horse, and it had yet to subside. At least he had been lucky enough to get free before the horse ran out into the open, or he would have been back in lock-up in the twinkling of an eye, and he only just got out.

It wouldn't do to get taken in for a little thing like stealing a horse when he had thousands of dollars of gold hidden away nearby, but he had been desperate to get out of that town and to his drop point just as fast as he could—the only way was to get himself a horse. What did the law expect him to do when they tossed him back on the street without as much as a dollar to his name?

With Old Man Warner waiting for him, speed was important. But he'd been foolhardy in his hurry, and now he was injured and helpless.

Henry finally reached the front door, his entire leg throbbing from the effort. He knocked, hoping he would be met with a sympathetic face.

The door opened a crack, showing only a slice of a dark female face, the expression suspicious. The deep yet feminine voice drifted out of the opening, heavy with curiosity and distrust. "Yes? Why are you here? I have nothing for you."

Not exactly the reception he had hoped.

If he could get her to believe his story and help take care of him, he would be able to find his way out of the predicament he had placed himself in. If this woman closed the door on him, or even worse, went for the sheriff, he would be out of luck.

At this point, his odds were not looking very good.

Henry allowed the magnitude of his pain to show on his face, which was not very hard to do—it really did hurt like hell. When he spoke, his voice was soft, his accent slightly southern. Something about a southern accent seemed to put women at ease—it gave him an air of the genteel, he supposed. Whatever the reason, it had gotten him out of scrapes before. Now, if he could only say the right words. "I am so very sorry to intrude, ma'am, but my horse bucked me and I fell, hurting my ankle. I would appreciate

it mightily if you could find it in your heart to allow me to set and rest a spell until it feels a bit better.”

He wanted to go on, to push her into agreement, but he could see by her expression that she was shrewd, and too much talk might put her hackles up. He waited, looking as pained and helpless as he felt.

She hesitated for a moment and his heart began to sink, but then she nodded and opened the door. The suspicion in her voice was replaced with concern. “Come in. Sit. Are you very hurt?”

Relief flooded through him as he limped inside the main room of the small farmhouse. He was not entirely out of harm’s way, but he was a good deal closer. Dropping into the closest seat there was, a rocking chair, he put his leg up on the footrest. He had been careful not to put much weight on his swollen ankle, but it still felt as if it was being stabbed with needles after his efforts to approach this woman’s house.

Even through the fog of pain and his other worries, his mind evaluated the room and occupant with sharp accuracy, a habit he had learned over the years. The place was clean and tidy but a bit shabby, as was the owner. Her dress was faded and he could see spots that had been mended. It still managed to cling to her body in a manner he found pleasing, however.

Henry took a closer look at her. She was pretty in an unusual way, with long thick hair the color of coal and dark eyes to match. Her face was clever, her lips full and sensual. She was slender, but seemed strong and powerful in spite of it. More than anything, there was an intensity about her that was nearly hypnotic, pulling his attention and sending fire through his veins.

He blinked rapidly, trying to take his attention away from her. He had been locked up for a few months and had not had a chance to find a willing woman to satisfy his desires, so that must be the reason for the strength of his attraction. In normal circumstances, he doubted he would have looked twice at this woman. She appeared far too moral for him to consider.

He would need to wait some time yet before finding an outlet for those urges. Healing and hiding were his top two priorities, and then he had to get to that gold. There was no room left for an intriguing woman.

Henry forced his mind back to assessing the situation. He guessed that she lived here alone, based on her living conditions and the skepticism and caution she showed when answering the door. There was nothing worth taking, but he knew it was better that way; the temptation of easy money to help him on his way would just make him feel more anxious, and he felt that plenty enough as it was. Better to have some decisions out of his hands.

Then he noticed that she was watching him, waiting for an answer. “I believe I broke it, ma’am. I’ll need to wrap it and keep off it for some time, if you would be so kind as to allow my intrusion on your hospitality. My horse spooked at the sight of a rattler and took off, leaving me aching not too far from here. I think he’ll wander back to find me in a day or two, and by then I should be strong enough to ride.”

Would she believe his story and let him wait for his horse to return? If he could buy a couple of days' rest, maybe he would be able to get out of this unscathed. He studied the woman before him while she studied him right back. He hoped to gain some insight that might help him convince her, but her face was closed, her eyes boring into his. It was difficult not to stare into them, try to mine their depths for information they refused to share. His heart thumped a little harder than it should have in the circumstance.

After a few moments, the woman's expression softened into one of concern, and he knew she was hooked. She said, "You can stay. The ankle looks bad, but I will do what I can for you."

He gave her his most charming smile. "Thank you kindly, ma'am. I cannot tell you how much this means to me. I promise I will be out of your way just as soon as I can."

The woman shrugged and smiled back, and he felt that pull again. He would certainly need to keep that little problem under control.

She said, "I enjoy company. Not many people come here. Let me find something to wrap your ankle."

She walked to the kitchen on the far side of the small room, opened a cupboard, and was back with a piece of cloth in seconds. Tearing it into strips, she began tying pieces around his swollen ankle so tight that it made him inhale sharply.

"I am sorry sir. Bandaging it will help. While I work, you speak. It will take your mind off the pain. What is your name? Where were you going?"

Henry gritted his teeth, but he managed to get out a few sentences, though he was too distracted to come up with a very good lie. "Name's Frank. Frank Hodges. I've been working out in Shasta for the past few months, working in law. I was just taking a trip out of town to relax for a spell."

She nodded. "People will be worried about you?"

He shook his head. "I have no wife or family who will fret about my whereabouts."

It was technically true, though he was sure there were a few people anxious to find him.

The woman shook her head, clicking her tongue with compassion as she continued her ministrations. It made him feel very uncomfortable for some reason.

He hoped she wouldn't ask him any more questions. His brain was having difficulty coming up with satisfactory lies—probably something to do with his injury. He wasn't sure he could keep up the conversation, whatever the reason. It was best to change the topic.

"I feel like I should know about my savior, yet you haven't even told me your name," he prompted.

If she was as chatty as some of the women he had come across in his travels, he could think and perhaps come up with some sort of a plan while she talked.

Her eyes were focused on his leg as she continued to tie the fabric, making knots so tiny and delicate it hardly seemed possible, but she smiled again. He was amazed at how her smile transformed her, making her face anything but plain. Stunning was a better word, but Henry pushed it out of his mind the moment it appeared. His situation was bad

enough already.

“My name is Guadalupe.”

She stopped there, surprising Henry. He had never known a woman who was so concise and not readily forthcoming with additional information. He considered the slight accent that curled around the edges of each word she spoke. Maybe she was so succinct because she was uncomfortable using English, though she seemed plenty versed in the language. He could not decide what to make of this female. He tried again. “You don’t live here all alone, do you?”

He regretted the question before he had even finished asking it. Her face fell, showing deeply-harbored sadness. In a flash, though, it was gone and she showed no emotion. Except her eyes; her eyes were the only place where the pain shone through. “I live alone, yes. I have for quite some time.”

He felt compelled to ask more questions, discover the truth about her and what had happened to cause so much pain, but he quelled the sympathy. She was a means to an end. It would not do to get too attached. There was too much at stake, and he had made enough bad choices before now; he couldn’t add anything else.

Guadalupe pressed her hands on his ankle—most likely to check the bandages or the swelling, but to Henry, they seemed to have their own power to soothe. Her cool touch radiated through his. Then she stood and moved into the kitchen once again. He looked down at his ankle, still throbbing but wrapped neatly and resting on cushions Guadalupe had placed under it at some point during her care.

“It is not broken,” she said to him over her shoulder, “but you have sprained it, certainly. You must stay off it for a few days.”

Henry berated himself for his stupid rash decision to steal a horse. He knew better than to do something of that sort. Hell, he had been locked up enough to keep his nose clean until he was out of town.

He couldn’t even quite explain what had prompted the thievery. He was just so anxious to get out of town, away from the dark confinement of the cell, get back under the wide open sky. To begin his plan to get away from California, from his life.

Although he had been in jail before, he could never get used to the closed-in walls, the lack of light and fresh air, and he didn’t ever want to do that again. Thinking about it made breathing difficult, even in this cozy house with the sun streaming through the windows. He wished he was back outside, his ankle be damned.

The first time he had gone to jail was the worst, but not by much. He could still remember the fear that ran through him when the judge announced his sentence. Two years may not have seemed like much to hardened criminals, but he had been barely fifteen, hardly more than a boy. A boy that had done nothing wrong.

At least this last time he had deserved his punishment.

He never liked to think of those days so long ago, the hard years that ate away at him before he got wise to the way of the world. You had to be tough and ruthless to survive, he knew that now, but it took a long time for that truth to sink in.

He was grateful when Guadalupe walked back toward him, carrying a bowl of soup.

It would be good to take his mind off the dark thoughts that always crept in when he had too much time to himself. He needed this woman to distract him, to keep the walls from closing in. “Guadalupe,” he began, “Tell me more about yourself. Please.”

Guadalupe handed Frank the bowl of soup and sat in the chair near him as he began to eat. She was unsure what to make of the stranger sitting on the rocking chair in her home. His long brown hair nearly touched his shoulders, and his square jaw and dark green eyes kept drawing her own in a way that made her heart beat harder than it should have. His crooked grin and pleasant demeanor were even more charming, if somewhat false, but there was something else. Something strange about him. Behind the show of agreeability was a wall, and she could tell there were strong feelings hidden behind it, only showing in his amber eyes.

It was panic, she realized. He had the eyes of a caged animal that was on the brink of smashing itself into the bars, desperate to get away.

Her heart went out to him, just as it would to the animal straining against the pen. He had lied to her when he begged to come in, though about what and precisely why she could not tell, but that bothered her less than the truth in his eyes. She wanted to help free him from whatever was keeping him so scared, but she could not yet see how.

He had asked her to talk, though, so she did, hoping it would somehow be a salve to his wounds, even if it might open a few of hers in the process.

“I have lived here for eight years,” she began, placing one hand on top of the other to stop it from shaking as she thought over the past she tried so often to bury. “My husband bought this land for us when we married. It is not much, but it is home.”

The man said nothing, but she could see the question in his eyes. She continued. “I have been here alone almost a year. My husband died.”

It hurt less to say it than she thought it would. The last time she discussed the loss of her husband, when she was helping another injured stranger, it had still been too fresh, too new. Now, it was more like an old wound, nearly healed, though it was bound to leave a scar.

Frank bowed his head, but said nothing. His regret appeared genuine, which was strange. Many people had given her sympathy, but few had felt the pain. This man seemed to know what loss felt like. Her heart went out to him. What hurt in his past made him understand hers so well?

Before she could stop herself, her curiosity got the better of her. “You have experienced loss, too, I think.”

He nodded, but the pretense took back over, and she knew she had lost him again. He had been real and honest with her, if only for a moment and only in his expression. A sad smile touched his lips and he spoke, his voice once again tinged with that false accent he had used to beg for her aid. “Yes, ma’am. I had a lovely wife who died two years ago. She was a sweet little thing, far too young to go.”

Anger bubbled inside her, and her temper flared up, unbidden. How dare he lie to her about something like this? “You are lying! Do not lie to me, señor.”

She would have regretted her words, but the expression on his face made it clear she had discerned the truth. The shock was evident, and she felt a moment of triumph that cooled her frustration. She softened a little. “You do not need to explain yourself to me, sir, but do not lie to me. And stop using that ridiculous accent.”

The surprise on his face, his open-jawed astonishment, stayed frozen, his face unmoving. He seemed so dumbfounded it made her chuckle. As quickly as her anger had come it was gone, leaving only sympathy in its wake. “You can tell me the truth or not, as you wish.”

It took him several seconds to close his mouth and regain control of himself, but he looked abashed once he did, but he never dropped his eyes from hers. He was embarrassed, but not weak, she noted with satisfaction. Her stomach twisted pleasantly as she held his gaze.

After a long while, he spoke again, his voice flat and even, the accent gone. “I would rather not say.”

She nodded and rose to make herself a bowl of soup, finally tearing her eyes from his. “That is better.”

She forced herself not to look at him as she poured her meal, but when he spoke, his voice was incredulous. “You ain’t going to ask anything more?” he asked, his accent fully Californian now.

Guadalupe stifled another laugh. This man was so very confused by her, and she quite enjoyed it. She brought her bowl back to the chair near him instead of the table, trying to convince her body that she was only doing so to be polite, not because of any urge to be close to this stranger with the intriguing eyes. She sat, shrugging her shoulders in response to his question. “If you want to tell, you tell. Otherwise, it is your secret.”

Frank’s reactions brought Guadalupe back to her youth, when Fernando had first courted her. He had been surprised, too, until he had met her mother. She had been even more of a force than Guadalupe.

There was more that needed to be said to Frank, and now was the right time. “I can tell when you lie. Tell me the truth or nothing, understand?”

He studied her for a moment, then nodded.

“How you hurt your ankle. That was not the truth.”

The man leaned forward, rubbing at his temples, and she suddenly grew worried. The panicked animal was taking over, and if she was not careful he would storm out, no matter the pain or danger. She leaned over and put a comforting hand on his shoulder, startling him enough to make him look in her eyes, causing that enjoyable shock to shoot through her again. She smiled, and when she spoke, her voice was low and soothing. “It is not bad that I see through the lies. And I have no desire to know all your truths if you do not wish to tell them. You are safe here.”

The panic in his eyes died down as he stared at her, and she realized just how uncomfortable she felt under his gaze, touching him. She released her grip and leaned back, creating more distance between them, hoping it would calm the rush of sensation flowing through her. She spoke again, mostly to break the heavy silence that she could

feel settling in around her. “I save all the types of animals, too. The good ones and the ones who cause trouble sometimes. You are like them.”

He tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. “Are there any animals you don’t try to save?”

She thought for a moment. “Snakes. I do not help them. Too dangerous.”

His eyes grew sad. “What if I’m a snake?”

She didn’t know if she should laugh or reach out for him again. “You are no snake,” she responded.

He only shrugged.

## Chapter Two

This had to be one of the strangest experiences of his life, and he had gone through his share of those. He fancied himself a decent liar, but she had seen through it all. What was even more odd, she told him of her knowledge, but she in no way indicated that he should leave or that it even upset her to know nothing about him.

Who was this woman?

After trying to come to a conclusion but unable to make heads nor tails of her, he leaned back and watched as she sipped her soup. He needed to dig deeper into this, to know more about this woman.

The information would be helpful, he was sure. He asked, “What makes you so certain you understand me? People rarely do.”

Guadalupe shrugged, waving her spoon a little as she spoke. “When I was a girl, I helped my mama run a goods store. It was difficult, and sometimes people lied or treated my mother badly because she was a woman, but she had spirit and taught me everything she knew. I saw many people and learned much in those years.”

The need to know more tugged at him. “Why are you here then? Away from the store and your family?”

She hesitated, but continued. “I grew up in a busy town south of here. It was beautiful, but crowded. I married Fernando when I was eighteen. We dreamed of open skies and a quiet farm. My mother passed not long after, and then there was nothing holding us to Santa Barbara, so we sold the store and left. We made this our home.”

She stood up and lit a lamp, and he noticed for the first time that dusk had fallen. The sky outside had darkened while they talked. “You may sleep on the couch for the night. I will check your ankle in the morning.”

He nodded, pleased with the prospect of a night in this small farmhouse, which was an odd feeling for him. It was rare that he preferred a roof instead of the starry sky.

The walls were a little too close for comfort, as walls always were, but he had a reason to be glad of them. They would keep him safe for the time being. It had been a long time since he’d felt safe.

For now, he was content to stay here and learn more about this fascinating woman.

Henry stood up, testing his ankle. Any weight on it was painful, and he doubted he would be able to do much walking the next day. He hobbled to the old couch, covered with a faded Indian blanket, which he guessed was an attempt to hide its true threadbare state. He wondered if his ankle would be strong enough to allow him to leave tomorrow. Even if it caused him pain, it would be best to leave as quickly as he was able.

It was strange, but if he was honest with himself, he had no desire to go. Wanting to stay somewhere longer than necessary was an odd feeling, and he wasn’t sure what to make of it. She drew his attention like nobody he had ever met, and he was determined to follow the sensation. At least for the time being, until he had to run again.

Before Guadalupe closed the door to the bedroom, she had one last question for him. “You said your name was Frank. What is your name?”

He considered lying again, but knew there was a distinct possibility she would shove him out the door if he did, and he wasn’t ready to leave quite yet, for several reasons. “Henry,” he admitted.

She grinned and her face lit up, nearly taking his breath away. “Goodnight, Henry,” she responded with a nod, closing the door before he could respond.

He let out his breath, trying to slow his heartbeat.

Something about her, her forthright manner or her unapologetic strength or her illuminating smile, struck him to his core. Perhaps it was all three put together in one person. He had only just met her, yet she felt burnt into his flesh.

Henry ran his fingers through his hair, trying to gain control of himself. He had far too much to do to allow his focus to waver simply because of an intriguing woman and a bum ankle. He thought of Old Man Warner and his responsibilities. Henry was the only one who knew of the goods’ whereabouts, and if he didn’t get it to Warner quick, there was far more than his ankle at stake.

He stretched his body out on the couch, his tall frame slightly too long for a comfortable rest. His mind whispered that her bed was likely long enough for him to sleep perfectly well. He allowed a quiet groan of frustration escape his lips. This was not the time or place to get warm on a girl. He resolved to leave the next day, no matter how his ankle felt.

He slept badly, however, and the next morning he awoke from his restless sleep to throbbing pain arcing through his entire body. His entire leg hurt so much that shifting it even slightly was nearly unbearable.

His heart jumped happily as he admitted defeat. But only one more day.

When she left her room, Guadalupe was glad to see that her wounded visitor was awake, but the strained look on his face made it evident that he was in a great deal of pain. She had expected as much, based on the severity of his injury, but it made the sight no less distressing.

For a moment the night before, as she had undressed in her bedroom, she considered offering him use of the bed, but it seemed too intimate for someone she had just met, and the desire to be beside him was much stronger than she was comfortable admitting. No, it was best to let him sleep on the couch.

But now the pain in his face made her regret the decision, whatever consequences it might have brought with it. She wanted to take his mind off the pain, distract him somehow. “Good morning, Henry. Shall I make breakfast?” she asked, her tone as light and friendly as she could make it.

He smiled at her, but it had a tight edge to it. “I would appreciate that; thank you, ma’am.”

With a wave of her hand, she responded, “You must stop calling me ma’am. My name is Guadalupe.”

His cheek quirked up into a crooked smile, much more genuine than the first. “Guadalupe.”

Her heart missed a beat as she absorbed the sound of his voice rolling over her, his liquid brown eyes staring into hers, but she tried to take her emotions in hand immediately. He was handsome, but not somebody she could ever allow herself to swoon over. His lies made it clear he was hiding plenty from her. He had given her a false name, for heaven’s sake. If she was smart, she would ask him to leave immediately and latch the door tight behind him.

Instead, she smiled back. “Thank you, Henry. Now I will get you some food. Stay there and do not attempt to get up,” she said, her voice a little sharper than necessary.

He crossed his arms behind his head and leaned back, looking so utterly carefree that it was difficult for her to keep from laughing outright. “Wouldn’t think of it,” he said, his eyes wide and innocent.

It had been a long time since she had enjoyed herself quite so much.

She nodded, managing to contain the smile that threatened at the corners of her mouth, and walked into the small kitchen area, grabbing a loaf of bread and a knife. “I have had experience with injured men resting on my couch before, and it seems they always want to be up and doing things,” she explained.

She looked over her shoulder at him, and was surprised at his expression. Henry’s eyes were narrowed and he appeared intrigued, possibly even jealous. The thought of him feeling jealousy sent a thrill through her that she quickly suppressed. She began cutting thick slices of bread and cheese. It wasn’t much, but she had little else, except the stew they had eaten the night before, still on the stove, and that would be their dinner.

After a short silence, he said, “That is a strange happenstance. How many men have appeared wounded on your porch?”

His voice was casual, but his curiosity was clear. She liked his interest in the men who had stayed at her house, and that bothered her. She had just met him, after all.

She forced her own voice to match his casual tone, but knew it sounded just as false as his had. “I misspoke, perhaps. There has been only one other injured stranger here, several months ago. He stayed for nearly a week, always wanting to help. It was impossible to get him to rest and heal.”

Henry’s eyebrows rose. “A week, huh? He must’ve either been very hurt or very enamored of you to stay here that long.”

Her laugh echoed through the small space as she brought the simple meal to him and sat in a nearby chair to eat her own. She couldn’t help it—he sounded so anxious. Once she caught her breath, she explained, “He had a gunshot wound and a broken leg, so he *was* quite hurt, but he would have left before that. He had a woman in Shasta to return to. But I had no horse and the post does not come often, so he needed to wait. It almost drove him *loco*.”

He chewed, trying to swallow the hunk of bread in his mouth so he could speak again. He seemed almost frantic to get his words out as quickly as possible. After nearly choking on a piece far too large to swallow, he asked, “The only way out of here is by

post? When will they be coming next?"

She was unsure if he was anxious to leave or excited at the prospect of staying. Whatever the reason, the answer seemed very important to him. She hoped he wished for the latter. It was good to have company. She chose not to analyze why.

She disliked the answer she needed to give. "They will be here in two days, but it is not necessary to wait for them. I have a horse now."

His face drooped a little, causing her stomach to turn. He wanted to stay.

"But your foot is very injured," she reminded him. "You should not ride unless it is an emergency."

He nodded and took another bite, his chewing slow and thoughtful. For a time, neither of them spoke. They finished eating in silence.

The moment her bread and cheese were gone, she stood, relieved for an opportunity to get out of the house and away from the intriguing man spread across her couch. The air felt too close for comfort when she sat near him. As she walked to the door, she began chattering to fill the silence. "I must work in the garden and feed the chickens. You shall stay and rest. Sleep if you can. I will bring in water soon so you can wash, and be in at noon to—"

"Guadalupe," he said, cutting her litany short.

She stopped and turned toward him. He had shifted so he was sitting up, and his eyes gazed directly into hers, sending shivers rushing through her. It had been a very long time since anyone looked at her with such intensity, and it warmed the pit of her stomach. She waited, silent, for him to say whatever had caused him to speak in the first place.

"I—" he cleared his throat, then began again, his voice quiet. "Thank you, for helping me. I don't want to be of any trouble, so I promise I will—"

"It is no trouble, Henry. I am glad you are here."

She walked outside quickly before he could finish the sentence she had cut short. She knew what he was going to say. He was about to promise to leave soon, and that was not what she wanted. She could not explain why, even to herself, but this man captivated her, pulled at her.

And she wanted him to stay.

After Guadalupe was out the door, Henry leaned back on the couch, his heart beating fast and hard. He hardly knew her. How did she do this to him?

The more pressing question for him, though, was how to make it stop. If he just wanted to bed her, that might have been simple enough if she felt the same, but there was something more to it. She was fascinating, and he was somehow sure that a night with her would only make matters worse. He would need to leave as soon as he could, for more reasons than just the gold hidden on the side of Mount Shasta.

What if Warner sent people looking for him, and what if they found him here? He was well aware that they would harm Guadalupe if they thought she might be standing in the way of their money. He had learned that lesson the hard way long ago.

The picture of his mother crying out in pain flashed into his brain, unwelcome and

unbidden.

Henry closed his eyes, willing the bad memories away. If he could just do this last job, get this final payload to Warner, perhaps he could get away clean. After that, he could try and start a new life far away from California and from the lawmen and criminals who had run his life for so long.

The thought of leaving California had filled him with hope for so long that it was strange to feel a small twinge of sadness as he considered it. It was new and strange, and he hoped fervently that it would disappear in time. He knew why it was there, and it concerned him.

Guadalupe was in California.

Guadalupe was surprised at how quickly the day passed. She walked in and out often to check on her patient, bringing a large bucket of water so he had a chance to refresh himself. She had no razor for him to use, but the shadow across his jaw only made him more handsome, appear more deliciously dangerous, and it delighted her.

Thinking of him that way would only hurt her in the end, she knew. He seemed to be healing, but something had changed since the morning, since he had gazed at her with such power. He was more distant, more reserved. He was still charming, but it was obvious he did not want to get too attached, as if he was already planning his departure.

That was for the best. After all, caring for someone, especially a person who would be leaving in a few short days, could only lead to heartbreak. No, it was better not to become too close.

As the evening wore on, though, she wished for something more than the reserved silence that grew between them as he stared at the ceiling from his prone position on the couch and she knitted in the nearby chair. After an hour, when dusk had turned to night outside, she could stand it no longer. She put down her needles with a clink, causing him to turn his eyes in her direction, their gaze wary and careful.

She stood. "We should play a game, Henry. I am bored with this knitting and you have been staring at the ceiling for too long. You will play, yes?"

He sat up, groaning a little as he moved his injured ankle. "What did you have in mind?"

"I have cards. You must know how to play poker?"

His half-smile appeared again, and the honesty in it eased her soul a little. He said, "I've played a fair amount. Are you sure you want to play something of that sort with a gambling fellow like me? We could play gin or something if you would prefer."

She shook her head as she went to a small drawer and retrieved a pack of playing cards. "We will play poker, I think."

Before he could attempt to stand and walk over to the table, Guadalupe had dragged it over to the couch. It was small and light enough for her to move across the wooden slats of the floor with little effort. The couch was low, making Henry appear comically short, but it would do well enough. She sat in another seat and began shuffling the cards, enjoying the feel of them in her hands.

Fernando had loved to play poker and other games, but the distance to town made it impossible for him to play at the tables there except on rare occasions. Instead, they would often stay up late playing. It warmed her heart to hear the snap of the cards as they came together, but she found it strange to realize she only thought back to that time with fondness, but the hurt and deep longing for it had gone.

Henry put his elbows on the table, looking wonderfully like a young boy at a table too large for him. “What are we going to play for? You can’t play poker without betting.”

She had no chips or anything of that sort, but she had something else in mind. “What if we play for information? After the hand, the winner may ask the loser a question and get an answer.”

The wall that had begun to disappear at her suggestion of cards encircled him again. She could see it in his face, and her spirits lowered. “No, that’s not a good idea,” he answered quietly.

She was disappointed, but she dismissed the feeling. Then she perked up as a new idea struck her. “I have whiskey. The loser must drink.”

He gave her the crooked smile she was rapidly finding warm and familiar, and the barricade behind his eyes seemed to lower a little.

She and Fernando had played for drinks on occasion. Those evenings always ended pleasantly enough, with them walking arm-in-arm to the bedroom, the cards forgotten.

The thought of her bedroom, and Henry sitting there at the table, sent her heart to thumping wildly, but she refused to allow the thought to entrench itself in her mind. That would not happen here, of course. They would simply be playing to relax and enjoy having company. Nothing more.

She brought two glasses and the large, full bottle of whiskey to the table. It had not been opened for a good long while, but she was glad it was in the cupboard now. She poured the dark liquid into the two tumblers as Henry dealt the cards.

Within a few minutes, they had the rules of the game worked out and settled in to play. Guadalupe was happy to see Henry open up as he drank and played the first few hands, becoming what she was sure was the real him.

He stared at her over his fan of cards, his eyes narrowed, his lips tilted into a tiny grin. “I’ll see your two sips and raise you an entire shot.”

Guadalupe tilted her head as she watched him glance at his cards, then quickly back at her. She said, “You think I am bluffing?”

His lopsided grin made her heart flutter. “Oh, I’m sure you’re bluffing. You ain’t the only person here who knows when other people lie.”

“And you think I have bad cards, Mr. Henry?”

“I know it.”

He sounded so confident. She shook her head, as if she was disappointed in him, but she was having difficulty keeping her face straight. “Then this might hurt. I call your bet. Three eights.”

He stared at the cards in amazement for several seconds, then tucked his cards neatly together and placed them face-down on the table. “How did you do that? I thought for

sure you had an ace high.”

She shrugged and reached for his cards. “What did you have?”

Putting his hand on top of his cards, he chuckled. “Oh no. I’m not giving you any more information than you already have.”

With that, he slid his cards back into the deck and picked up his tumbler.

After playing for nearly an hour, the whiskey was much depleted and the air had grown warm and pleasant. Guadalupe was the better player, but the alcohol had less effect on him than it did her, and she began having trouble seeing her cards.

She said, “I should not play or drink any more. I have had far too much.”

She dropped her cards onto the table and leaned back, and Henry followed suit. Her fingers tingled, and she suddenly felt the urge to run them through Henry’s hair and down his chest.

Her brain tried to remind her why those thoughts were bad, but through the fog of the alcohol, it wasn’t very convincing. Her fantasy was so very detailed, and the image was so vivid, that for a moment she was unsure if it could be simply her imagination. Henry stared at her, and the light in his eyes made the impulse even stronger. It was all she could do to keep her seat.

“Well, Lupe my girl,” he said, his voice deep and slightly husky, “It seems we are finished with cards. What would you like to do next?”

The voice in her head roared to life, answering his question in a way that made Guadalupe’s cheeks flush red and hot. She said nothing.

His smile faltered, as if he read her thoughts and was unnerved by them. Feeling suddenly uncomfortable, she turned from him and looked out the window at the coal-black sky. “It is late. I should go to bed.”

Her heart begged her to say “we,” not “I,” but she still had enough sense to realize the consequences of that. It would put her in danger of becoming too attached, and she couldn’t allow that. If she fell in love with him, it would only hurt her.

Guadalupe rose from her seat, but the abrupt movement after so much liquor made her sway off balance, nearly falling. Henry was beside her in an instant, his arm curled tight around her waist, holding her body up against his own. “Lupe, can you stand?”

The pet name, even though it was just a shortened version of her actual name, combined with the contact, made her stomach flip with anticipation and excitement. Her skin prickled with desire, every inch of her that pressed against him was on fire.

She looked up to see his face only inches away, his amber eyes looking at her with concern that melted her heart. She forced herself to break eye contact, but did nothing to move away. Breathing in the scent of him, musk and the liquor, she wavered as it weaved a dance inside her. Standing was the least of her worries.

At last, she murmured, “I am better now, Henry. Thank you.”

She didn’t move, waiting to see what action he would take next.

Would he move away or pull her closer? Her body screamed for him to tighten his grip. It was too late for distance and detachment. She was already falling even as she stood.

Henry shifted and his arm released the hold on her waist, but he continued to stand less than a foot from her. Guadalupe turned towards him and looked into his eyes again. They were so close. One step forward was all it would take to press her body against his.

Without thinking, she did just that. As if with one accord, he leaned down as she tilted her head up to him. Their lips met, sending fire through her. His arms enfolded her, tightening so there was not even a centimeter of space between them, her breasts smashed deliciously against his hard chest.

He groaned slightly and her lips parted, allowing his tongue to explore. Rivulets of sensation flowed through her. It had been so very long since she had been kissed, and never quite like this. She pressed harder against him, her tongue meeting his. She could feel his body hot and hard against her, and she yearned for it.

Her fingers began to fumble at the buttons of his shirt, frantic to get at the skin beneath.

Before she could get more than two buttons undone, though, he groaned again, louder, differently, and pulled himself away from her. He dropped onto the couch, his hands covering most of his face. When he spoke, his voice was husky. “We can’t. This isn’t right.”

Guadalupe felt as if a rope was tightening around her chest, squeezing her heart and lungs. Leaning against the table with both hands pressed hard against the wood, she breathed deeply, waiting for the sensations to pass. Regret and embarrassment flooded through her—regret that they had stopped, embarrassment that he didn’t desire her as she did him—and she straightened up and turned away from him, about to rush into her bedroom and out of his presence.

Before she could do so, however, he said her name and she stopped, waiting for his words, hoping he would say he wanted her. “Guadalupe, it would be inappropriate. Your reputation—“

Anger bubbled inside her as she heard the false tones in his voice. Her reputation had nothing to do with his decision to pull away from her. She turned to him, her eyes shooting daggers. “Henry, do not dare to lie to me. Either tell me why, truthfully, or say nothing.”

He was silent. She waited one last moment, then strode to her bedroom and closed the door, latching it behind her. She brushed away the smattering of tears on her cheeks and fell into bed, humiliated and alone.

## Chapter Three

Henry leaned back against the couch, trying to get his racing heart to calm. That had been one of the most difficult things he had ever done, and although he was sure it was the right choice, he felt horrible. He was almost glad she had latched the door, preventing him from running into the room and continuing the kiss. Almost.

He needed to keep his distance from this woman. If he could leave without creating ties to her or this place, she would be safe and he would be able to free himself at last from his life. He had believed before, but after that kiss he knew for sure, that a night with this woman would be more than just one night, and it would put them both in dangerous situations.

And it wouldn't be fair to her in the least. Hell, he was a criminal, a scofflaw. He had only been released from prison days ago.

He had made the best decision, for both of them. So why did he feel so damn terrible about it?

After a long while, Henry slept.

The next morning broke bright and beautiful, with warm air and a bird's warbling notes flowing through the open window beside his makeshift bed, but Henry could appreciate none of it. His eyes were bleary and his head pounded from the alcohol and his disturbed, agitated sleep. Even worse, his ankle was throbbing with pain much worse than the day before.

It seemed he had somehow twisted it again, most likely when rushing over to Guadalupe's side when she nearly fell. Or possibly during the flurry of activity after. In the moment he had not noticed, but now it was a hot ball of torture. It looked far worse, too, with red and purple blossoming from beneath the wrappings. He touched it tenderly, but stopped immediately. He would not be going anywhere this day, that much was certain.

Henry lay back, wishing Guadalupe would breeze into the room and alleviate some of his anguish simply with her presence. That seemed unlikely, though. She had been so angry when she stormed into her room. He dreaded the angry words, the demands for the truth, which he deserved.

So when she opened the door and bustled into the room, tidying up and inquiring as to how he slept as if nothing had occurred between them, he was more than a little astonished. He was also a little bothered by her behavior. Did she feel so little during those moments that they were easily forgettable? Dismissing them was not nearly as effortless for him as it appeared to be for her.

Before his brain could comprehend her behavior and formulate a response to her question, she turned to look at him, her face set and serious, and he felt strangely happy. She was going to drop the act and tell him the truth about her feelings of the previous

night. “Henry, last night—that should not have happened. It was the alcohol, and I apologize. While you are here, that mistake will not happen again. Will you accept my apology and pretend it did not occur?”

He nodded mechanically, but every part of him railed against her words. It was not just the alcohol, and he could never pretend it hadn’t happened. But perhaps it was, and perhaps it would be better if he did. He had reminded himself enough times of his necessary tasks and future plans, and none of them included becoming smitten with Guadalupe.

Not that he was smitten, of course. That was absurd. She was merely interesting, with captivating dark eyes and a body that called out to be caressed and a mind that demanded attention.

Even in his own head, he sounded idiotic. The sooner he left, the better. He looked down at his ankle again, wondering when the hell that would be. His expression must have caused her to follow his gaze, because after a moment of silence she exclaimed, “Your ankle! What did you do?”

As her nimble fingers began undoing the wrappings, he said, “I’m not exactly sure. I hurt it at some point last night, but I never felt anything until this morning. It could have been when you almost fell and I stood—“

He stopped talking and took in a quick hiss of breath as she tugged at one particular cloth piece, causing waves of pain to rush through him. When the strip pulled away, he could see why; his ankle had swollen during the night, and a portion of the cloth had been too tight, causing it to break through the skin. There was a thin bloody ring around his ankle that burned ferociously.

Guadalupe bounded out the door and was back moments later with a cloth wet from the pump outside. She pressed it against his skin, the cool wetness reducing the pain. She shook her head. “I am so sorry, Henry. This is my fault.”

He knitted his eyebrows, confused. “What is your fault?”

“This,” she answered, gesturing toward his wound. “If I had not been unsteady last night, or if I had not kissed you, this would never have happened.”

She seemed angry with herself, but he felt no such thing. He sat up, careful not to move his leg in the process, and pushed a hair behind her ear. He could not let her brand herself with this blame. “Lupe, you did nothing wrong. I will remember those moments forever.”

The moment he said it, he knew it was true, and he wanted to throw caution to the wind and kiss her again, and this time he would make no move to stop it. He began to lean forward, allowing his body to take over.

Before he could close the gap, however, she stood and rushed away from him, kindling a fire in the small Franklin stove in the corner of the kitchen. When she spoke, her voice was deeper than usual, but she was attempting to sound carefree. “I will cook eggs for breakfast. I do not get many from the chickens, but there will be enough, I think.”

He leaned back against the couch cushions again and gave an inaudible sigh. It was

better this way, he reminded himself yet again.

Another day passed with him trapped on the couch, and then a silent evening devoid of cards and alcohol. He tried to whittle some wood she brought him, but it only made him think of his mother, the little display she had of his creations, and he stopped. It was a stark reminder of why he could not pursue Guadalupe, and there was relief mingled with his regret when she retired for the evening.

The next day, his ankle appeared somewhat better, but Guadalupe still insisted he stay in bed and allow it to heal. He felt that he might go off his nut at any moment with nothing but his thoughts to occupy him. If he thought about Guadalupe, he was nearly driven to distraction. Every word that slid from her lips, every movement of her body, sent chills of desire through him, and it was all he could do to keep his hands off her.

And those were the good thoughts. There were worse ones, like the memories of his mother and of his first stint in jail, the two things that came to haunt him when he was quiet and inactive for too long.

He could still feel the fear as he was walked to his cell, the dank walls so near that it felt as if he would never see the wide blue sky again. The urge to scream that he was innocent, that it wasn't him, still came back to him even after so much time had passed.

His skin crawled, and his lungs felt like they couldn't get enough air. He needed to do something or the memories might drown him.

Guadalupe stood outside the door to her home, trying to think of something else to do outside, but finally she admitted defeat. She had tried to stay away from the house as much as she possibly could, keeping her distance from Henry while he healed. It would be best for both of them, she had decided, that she should spend as little time around him as she could manage. It would prevent any more pain on her part and awkward refusals for him. Because she knew that if she was not careful, she would throw herself at him once again, and that was something she could not risk.

But she needed to go in and complete her other tasks for the day, or there would be no supper for either of them and no bread tomorrow. She gathered her willpower and walked in, hoping he was asleep or distracted enough with something that he would pay her no mind.

The moment Guadalupe's eyes adjusted to the dim light, she could see that something was very wrong with Henry, and she stopped in her tracks. He was pale, his jaw clenched as if he was in pain. "Henry? What is wrong?"

He turned his gaze toward her, his eyes anguished. "I can't be inside any more. I just can't. Will you help me?"

She would have scoffed at his boyish inability to stay still, but the torment on his face told her it was much bigger than that. She hurried to him as he sat up and shifted his feet to the floor. She knelt and put his arm around her shoulders, ignoring the way her stomach twisted at their closeness. "Lean on me. I will help you keep the weight off your foot."

As one, they stood, and he hobbled out the front door with her assistance. She helped

him sit on the edge of the porch, his feet swinging in the air a few inches above the ground, and then she sat beside him. Watching him gave her goose bumps as he stared up at the blue sky and the few clouds floating past, taking deep breaths as if he had been breathing stale air for years and this was his first real taste of fresh oxygen.

“Henry, what is wrong? If you tell me, I may be able to help.”

He shook his head, looking miserable. She leaned close and continued, “If I cannot help, I would like to at least listen. Perhaps sharing your burden will make it lighter.”

He shook his head again, and this time she was surprised at the frustration and anger in his face. “If I told you, it would only make things worse.”

Her patience grew short. Why was he letting himself suffer like this when she was right there? “How can it make things worse? I am smart. Tell me something. Anything.”

His words burst out of him, a torrent of aggravation and pain. “You want to know the truth? I think you are the most captivating woman I have ever met, and the moment you find out I’m a thief and a jailbird, you’ll never speak to me again, and what then? I’m right back where I was, but now I have to leave, and I don’t want to leave.”

His words petered out, as if he realized what he had said and was waiting for her reaction. She smiled and nudged him lightly with her shoulder. “Finally, you tell the truth.”

He looked so taken aback that she had to laugh. “Henry, you are a good person. I can see that, and I trust my instincts. If you are a thief, I believe you have reasons.”

Henry slumped forward, looking defeated, and Guadalupe’s heart went out to him.

He spoke, slow and quiet. “When I was sixteen, I was locked up for a robbery I never committed. I was a good kid, but I must have looked enough like the fellow that did it, because there were witnesses and a judge who were all convinced it was me. I was in there for two years.”

He looked so utterly lost that Guadalupe moved another inch closer—now they were pressed against each other—and wrapped an arm around him, trying to give him strength. After a short pause, he continued, “After I got out, nobody would hire me. While I was put away, my ma barely survived on the small amount my pop left her. She had no way to support both of us, so I needed to do something to make some money or we would be left penniless on the streets.”

Another pause. Guadalupe took his hand in her own and squeezed it. He said, “I took up with a man I heard about in prison. I had no choice. He’s been my employer since then. I’m not proud of the things I had to do, but this is who I am. The prison, that judge, they made me this way, and I can’t change back. If I ever want to get out of this life, I need to get Warner his gold and high-tail it East with what little I have and become somebody else. Even then, I don’t know if I can become something better than I am. Something other than a snake.”

Guadalupe squeezed his hand harder, her irritation showing in her expression. He looked at her, his face shamed and guilty, but she hardly noticed. She was gazing out into the distance, her anger directed at the cruel man who had hurt Henry so badly. She said, “You are no snake. Your story makes that clear. It sounds to me like this other man, this

Warner, should be the one in jail.”

He sighed. “You don’t understand, Lupe. He’s dangerous, but there’s more to it than that. He’s also rich and clever and damn near impossible to lock up. Just my being here has put you at some risk, and for that I apologize.”

Guadalupe waved away his apology. “My life had been much too dull until you arrived. I am not worried about you causing trouble.”

Henry groaned deep in his throat, a reaction that surprised Guadalupe, until she saw the distress written on his forehead, his gaze trained on the small dirt road leading to her house. “Trouble’s here,” he said through gritted teeth.

Two men were riding up to the house, and even at that distance she could see both had hard, mean faces. She still had her arm around Henry, and she could feel him tensing against her. For a moment, she considered getting Frank’s shotgun, but the men seemed to be armed, and she doubted she was good enough of a shot to stop them both. There had to be some other way to protect herself and Henry from these men.

She whispered to him, her voice only just audible, “Do not worry. I will help.”

He shook his head. “No, Mike and Bradley are killers. You should go inside. I’ll take care of this. If I leave with them—” his voice caught in his throat as he looked into her eyes “—I will never forget you or the kindness you have shown me. Thank you, Lupe.”

He pushed a few loose strands of her long ebony hair out of her face. “You go inside now,” he said.

She stood up, regretfully moving from his side. Instead of turning to the door, however, she bounded down the steps and directly toward the approaching men, hoping her plan would work.

## Chapter Four

Fear gripped Henry's heart as he watched her step into the bright sunlight. The two horses slowed, and he knew it was too late for him to do anything to stop her. She was right alongside the horses now—any indication that this was unplanned could be deadly for her.

He strained to hear the conversation, trying to look as neutral as possible, but the sound of his heart pounded in his ears and it was all he could do to keep from calling out to her.

Guadalupe, head held high and voice as casual as you please, said, "He was hoping you would find him here. How did you know where to look?"

The bigger one, Mike, answered. "We've been searching around here since he disappeared. Who the hell are you?"

"Watch your language, sir, if you don't mind. I'm his girl. He came to hide out here after he busted his ankle."

Henry's face was stoic, but his mind was a rattle of confused questions. How was she doing this? Did she just call herself his girl? Where did her accent go?

He wanted to go back in and lie down again. It was all just a bit too much.

He couldn't do that yet, though. Mike was riding closer to the house, taking a hard look at him. Henry nodded and shifted his pant leg so Mike could get a good look at his injured ankle.

Mike hopped off his horse and strode up to him. Henry wanted to shift away, but he held his place and stared back, hoping he looked confident. Mike reached the porch and knelt next to Henry's ankle. "How the hell did you do that?"

"Fell off a horse."

"Bad fall," he grunted.

Henry laughed, pretending a humor he didn't feel. Keep it light, keep it friendly, and Lupe would get out of this alive. "Yessir. About as bad as you could get."

Mike tilted his head toward Guadalupe chattering affably with Bradley, who was smiling down at her in a way that bothered Henry. He should have been happy the man wasn't scowling or pulling a gun on the two of them, but what right did he have to smile at Lupe like that?

With difficulty, Henry brought his attention back to Mike. "I was riding here to get a fresh horse from my—my girl," he explained, tripping over the unfamiliar phrase, "so I could head up to get Warner his money."

Mike chuckled, a wicked grin splitting across his face. "To get a horse, huh? Never heard it called that before."

Henry felt an urge to punch the man, but he stayed still. He couldn't risk Guadalupe's safety, no matter how much he wanted to wipe that smug knowing look off Mike's face.

Mike shrugged. "Well, we came to find you 'cause Warner was worried. He's mighty

anxious to get that cash. You need to get that horse and come with us.”

Before Henry could respond, Guadalupe broke into the conversation. She had moved closer, and apparently was listening to the last part of the exchange. “He ain’t going anywhere today, sir. His ankle is too hurt. He may pass out on the ride and fall, injuring himself further.”

Mike’s eyes squinted at her, and alarm bells started going off in Henry’s head. Mike was not a guy who let himself get pushed around. He spoke, his voice soft and polite, but there was an undertone that warned of danger. “When might he be ready, then, miss? Our employer is not a patient man.”

Guadalupe placed her hand on Mike’s arm, surprising both him and Henry, and when she answered, her voice was sweet but firm. “He can leave with you tomorrow. I understand this is important, but please give him one more day to heal before he must go gallivanting across the wilderness.”

Henry could see Mike’s jaw clench, then relax. The man nodded. “Tomorrow. We’ll come by around noon.”

Guadalupe smiled at him. “I will have a meal waiting for you, so you three may eat before you go.”

Mike tipped his hat at her, took one last look at Henry before nodding, and then he got on his horse, turning back the way he had come. Bradley followed after one last smile at Guadalupe.

Henry watched until the men were hidden by trees, then let his breath out in a long, deep sigh. “That was not a good idea, Lupe. They could have done something to you.”

She smirked, and he had the urge to grab her and pull her in for a long hard kiss. “I knew how to handle them. I was never in danger. Now it is time to prepare.”

“Prepare what? I will go with them tomorrow, just like you said, and you can go back to your life the way it was.”

She rolled her eyes at his response. “I do not want my life back the way it was.”

His stomach flipped once, twice. “Guadalupe...”

She continued as if he had not spoken. “Tomorrow they shall come for you, but the sheriff and his lawmen will be here to take them. If any others come, we will be able to handle those, as well. I know how to shoot a gun. Then, when you are healed, you can do as you please.”

He knew she wanted him to say that he would stay—it was clear as day in her eyes. But he could never expose her to that kind of danger, no matter how little she seemed to care. As long as Warner was still out there, she would not be safe if he stayed.

The silence dragged on for a few seconds, but he couldn’t think of what to say to break it. When she spoke again there was a slight pang in her voice that tore at him. “The postman should be here any minute. I will tell him to tell the sheriff of the plan. He will come tomorrow and catch the bad guys.”

She seemed so confident; it made his heart ache with fear for her.

Henry shook his head. “You can’t do that. This isn’t a storybook. They’ll get sprung from jail in no time, and then they will come back here for you.”

She shook her head. "If that happens, then I shall fight. I can defend myself."

He was about to protest, but she moved away and walked swiftly towards a coach that had just come into view, as if it she had wished for it and made it appear. He watched her skirt curl around her legs as she strode so full of confidence, her head held high, hair glinting in the sun. It made him more sure than ever that he could not stay. She was too wonderful to put in danger.

In a matter of seconds, she was at the side of the contraption and speaking in hushed tones. Then, just as quickly, the horses turned in a wide arc over the flat ground and retraced their steps.

When she returned to the porch and stood before his seat on the edge of the porch, her smile went straight to his heart. But it did nothing to soothe his nerves. "Lupe, this could end—"

"I know exactly how it can end. But it will be interesting, at least, and we might capture wicked men and help you have a free life. That seems worth the danger to me."

She grinned, her face proud and excited at the prospect of the adventure ahead.

He needed to kiss this extraordinary woman, needed to feel her mouth against his again, relive the moment that had been tugging at his brain since the other night.

His willpower broke, and he grasped her upper arms, pulling her against him. In an instant, the noise of his mind quieted. When their lips touched, his soul lifted.

This was what he had wanted, had craved for, all those dark days. Their drunken kiss before was wonderful, but this was even more. He had never known life could taste so sweet. Her lips parted, inviting him in, and the kiss deepened, intensified, until there was nothing but the two of them in that moment.

His hands moved to her waist, pulling her closer as his tongue explored her mouth. His fingers flitted across her body as if of their own accord, and his entire being strained for her, as if he was a drowning man who had just caught the tree branch that might save him from the current. His heart pounded hard and fast, his blood rushing so loudly he could hear it. He felt lightheaded, and he was happy for the first time in years.

One hand drifted up to her breasts, earning a satisfying shiver from her. His desire for her overwhelmed him even more as his fingers found the buttons that lined the front of her dress. He unfastened one, then the next, inching lower and lower, exposing golden skin. His breath was coming in short gasps as he nibbled at her lips, then trailed kisses slowly down to her neck.

She pulled away from him abruptly, leaving his lips and fingers touching nothing but air. She moved back, putting distance between them.

He took a deep, unsteady breath. How could he get so out of control? One look at her, her thin white shift peeking out from beneath her dress, answered his question.

He turned away, forcing his eyes to look at the ground, anything to avoid the beauty of her body or the reproach he was sure to find in her eyes. "I'm sorry about my behavior, Guadalupe."

He tried to calm his body and slow his racing heart, but the sound of her deep, gasping breaths was enticing and made the task nearly impossible. He wanted to press

her against him, make her gasp with sensation. He could hardly breathe at the thought.

Then she began to laugh, making him turn toward her. Her hair was mussed, her lips swollen, and she had done nothing to close the buttons trailing down her front, but what truly took him by surprise was her expression. An odd mixture of joy, amusement, and something else. Was it regret?

“Henry,” she started, and the warm tones of her voice rolled over him, setting his nerves afire. “I do not want to stop this. Your kiss is...”

She paused, thought for a moment, and he waited anxiously for the next word, his heart lifting. She continued, “I have no words to explain. Wonderful is not good enough. But I must take the horse and complete an errand.”

She moved toward him again, her face only an inch from his, and his heart stopped beating. Her voice was quiet and soft. “When I come back, we can continue where we left off?”

The words lifted at the end, as though she were asking him. He nodded, unable to think with her so close, and leaned forward, touching his lips to hers for another lingering kiss.

Then she was up and away from him, buttoning her dress as she walked toward the little barn, and his brain caught up. “Wait, Lupe!” She turned. “What errand?”

Her grin was mischievous. “You shall see.”

With that, she opened the barn and disappeared from view. Henry shook his head. This woman became more and more interesting.

Without her presence, the porch felt too cool for comfort, the sunlight dim. He looked up at the large mountain in the distance, the one where gold, tens of thousands of dollars’ worth, was hidden away. Perhaps there was a way to take some of it for Guadalupe without Old Man Warner discovering. Perhaps she would even go with him...

It was a grand idea, him and Lupe setting off East with piles of money, but something about it felt wrong. Not just the fact that the cash wasn’t his, though that was certainly true. He looked around at the barn, the corner of the garden he could just see from his vantage point, the slightly shabby porch. Truth was, he liked it here.

There was work to do to get it into proper shape, but he yearned to do it. He had been decent with a hammer before he was locked up, and the chance to fix things in the prison had been one of the few things that had saved him during his time. He had been granted the use of tools on occasion while he’d been locked up. Without that, he might have gone crazy.

He heard the clopping of the horse and looked up to see Guadalupe, hair smoothed back into a braid and glittering in the sun, walking to the house with a large grey mare. The horse seemed a little wild, but he saw the same wild streak in the woman walking next to it, and there was no doubt in his mind Lupe could take any challenge the horse might give.

She wrapped the reins around a post and approached Henry. He could feel his pulse speed up the nearer she came. “I will be away two hours or more,” she explained. “Will you wait inside and rest while I am gone?”

He agreed, ready to do anything she asked if it meant the possibility of another kiss, another opportunity to touch her. Kneeling close to him and helping him up, they got him back inside pressed close together. He moved toward the couch, but she turned and led him inside her room, settling him on the bed. His heart hammered at the prospect, and when she stood up and began to move away, his hand lingered on her waist. "Do I get a kiss goodbye?" he asked.

She smiled and pressed her lips to his for half a moment, and then she was gone. He leaned back and stretched out, wanting more, but content to wait.

She was gone for three hours. He spent the time alternately dreaming of improvements he could make to the house and reminding himself that it would never come to pass, excited at the prospect of her coming back to him in her bed and resolving that he should stop this before it became too serious.

After much thought, he convinced himself that he should enjoy this short time he had with her. It would be something he could hold inside him even during the darkest days, even if he was locked up or had to go on the run and never saw her again. At least he would have these memories.

As the third hour wound down, he wondered at the carefree feeling inside him. Usually, any length of time inside alone made him frustrated and brought back those haunting memories. Walls and roofs had become painful at some point. But this house, these walls, were starting to make him feel at home.

When the door opened, he sat up, watching through the door as she bustled about the small kitchen. She was beautiful, tall and regal and free. He waited.

She strode through the bedroom door laden with plates. "I forgot to start supper before I left. We only have bread and cheese for dinner."

His cheek pulled up as he suppressed a grin. Food was the last thing on his mind. Apparently she felt the same, because she set the plates on a small table and moved toward where he sat on the bed, her eyes boring into his. Her movements were uncertain, as if she was unsure if she was taking a liberty. He alleviated those worries by wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close, taking her lips.

The contact sent his desire, which had been simmering while she was gone, to boiling over. He shifted his weight, dragging her onto the bed and causing her to gasp. He pressed his forehead against hers and looked into her eyes. "You tell me if I get out of line, here."

She shook her head. "Just do not hurt your ankle anymore."

With that, she kissed him hard, sending his blood racing. He unbuttoned her dress and the light shift beneath it, and this time there was no pulling away. Instead, she helped him, undressing herself and then him, careful to not hurt his ankle, though the injury had fled his mind completely. It was too full of her.

Soon their clothes were all tossed to the floor, her body exposed to him, her dark eyes watching him expectantly.

He needed to touch her, feel her to be sure that she was there. His fingers grazed her

breasts, taking each of her hard nipples in his fingers. His hands were greeted with smooth skin and deep moans, and he explored all of her, feeling every inch, teasing and coaxing until she was gasping for breath, overcome by the sensations, and then he could wait no longer.

He moved until his body covered hers, their lips pressed tightly together as he enveloped himself in her. The moment stretched and he soaked it in, absorbing every second. No matter what happened the next day or the years after that, he would always have this. This dream come to life.

Guadalupe woke slowly, her body aching pleasantly and sunlight streaming through the windows. She could feel Henry pressed against her back, holding her tight to his chest, and the joy of the feeling washed through her. The experiences of the night before, the hours of exploration and ecstasy, were still fresh in her mind, and she reveled in them. She shifted closer to him, happy to stay in his arms for at least a short while longer. He tightened his hold. “Good morning, Lupe.”

“Good morning, Henry.”

She turned to look at him, and he raised his head up on one elbow. Her eyes traveled to his chest, which was calling out for her hands. He said, “I awoke a few minutes ago, and I thought of something important.”

She waited, wondering what he could have to say, her stomach turning to ice as her mind flitted through every possible terrible scenario it could invent.

He brushed her hair aside and pressed his hand to her cheek, and the ice melted. He said, “I don’t think I’ve told you how beautiful you are yet.”

She flushed, and her whole being warmed. She had never considered herself pretty, but his eyes on her showed the truth in his words, and it sent happiness flowing through her. His hand dropped lower, cupping her chin. “You are perfect, Guadalupe. I will never forget this night or you. You are so remarkable.”

Pain shot through her. He was saying goodbye. She had known he might not want to stay, but after that night together, how could he walk away?

Perhaps it wasn’t quite wonderful enough. Not enough to make him stay.

She sat up and moved to the far edge of the bed, gathering her clothing, not looking at him. “When will you be going?” she asked.

She tried to keep her voice light, but she was sure he could see through her. It tore her apart to think of it, but she needed to know.

He leaned back and sighed. “If your plan works and those two get arrested, I’ll need to convince them it was my doing and get out of here just as quick as I can. Maybe I’ll tell the sheriff where I’m heading first so they know where to follow me. They will get out at some point, and I don’t want them coming back for you, Lupe. You have put yourself in a dangerous spot.”

She nodded, but kept her back to him so he couldn’t see the tears in her eyes.

She felt him moving on the bed, sitting up. “Or…” his voice had a tinge of hope to it that lightened her heart. “Or you could come with me. I can’t say it will be easy, but

maybe that would be safer. And then we could be together. Give this a go, you know?"

A war started inside her, two opposing desires battling for prominence. "I love my home. I helped build this, worked for years. It is all I have."

She saw his body slump out of the corner of her eye. His voice was low and sorrowful. "I can't stay here and put you in danger."

She turned to him, knowing he would see the tears, not bothering to hide them. "Then we shall just have to enjoy this time. Last night meant more to me than you know. You have healed my heart, Henry. Thank you."

She didn't tell him it would break again when he left.

He leaned toward her, and she did the same. Their lips met for the briefest moment, and then she pulled back. It hurt too much to know what she was going to miss when he was gone. They both began to dress, and Henry pulled a pocket watch out of his clothes. "Lupe, what time did Mike say he was coming?"

The question sounded urgent, but it was impossible that it was anywhere near time for them to arrive. Henry must have simply forgotten. "Around noon. I said I would have a meal ready for them."

"Well, we best get some food cooked up. It's half past eleven."

The revelation startled her. "That cannot be right! I have never slept that late."

His grin was lopsided, but it was unable to completely hide the sorrow that lingered, just as it still lingered in her heart. "Our night was rather, um, busy," he said, and she blushed. "I have no idea when we fell asleep, but it must have been quite late, or early, depending on how you look at it."

Guadalupe rolled off the bed and completed her toilette as quickly as she could. "What if they come early? We must be ready. Do you need help dressing?"

He laughed, catching her off-guard. She turned to look at him; he was sitting on the bed, his clothes half-on, composed and relaxed. "Lupe, dear, of all the things to be worried about right now, whether or not I have my waistcoat on is hardly one of them. I doubt we will be having a pleasant luncheon with those two, but you can get something together to keep up the charade that this is a simple situation, and I will tend to my clothes and meet you in the sitting room."

His calm assurance, and his use of "dear" toward her for the first time, soothed her frayed nerves, even though she knew it was at least partly an act. If this went poorly, they could be in great danger and they both knew it. She smiled and nodded, then went into the kitchen to pull together a meal for the men.

Henry walked out of the bedroom. He was stepping on his right foot gingerly, but seemed to be in much less pain than he was the day before. She spoke to him over her shoulder, not wanting to look directly in his eyes—it hurt too much. "You look much better. Can you walk out to the porch and sit on one of the chairs? If the sheriff shows up, it would be best to keep the men outdoors, I think."

He agreed and made his way outside.

Guadalupe focused all her attention on cracking eggs and cutting an onion, determined to keep her mind away from Henry and their night together. It proved

impossible, however, and she found herself glad they had awoken so late. More hours that morning would only have made it hurt more as she waited for the time when Henry would disappear from her life.

In what felt like no time, she could hear the sound of horses clopping up to her small, beloved home, and she walked out to greet the men, giving Henry one last glance. His eyes burned into hers. She took strength from him. Her plan would work.

She hoped.

## Chapter Five

The two riders dipped their hats in Guadalupe's direction as they dismounted, wrapping their reins around the post near the front door. She grinned at them, hoping her anxiety was well-hidden. "Hello, gentlemen. Henry and I thought it would be best to eat out here before you go. It is a nice day, and the heat from my stove has made the kitchen so hot, I am afraid it would be uncomfortable."

They nodded and sat down in the empty chairs on either side of Henry, and she went back inside to gather dishes and the meal, praying her plan would succeed.

Henry felt more than a little nervous when the two hulking men flanked him, but he supposed they were just protecting their prime asset. After all, he was the one who knew where the gold was.

He hoped the sheriff would show up soon, before Guadalupe came back outside. He hated to think of her in danger if something went wrong. After a few tense seconds of silence, he could hear Lupe's stride as she walked to the door. It seemed he would need to find an excuse for her to stay inside while they waited for the expected lawmen.

The moment before she came into view, though, he realized something was very wrong. The way Mike and Bradley were sitting was off, somehow. As if they were waiting for the signal to spring into action.

It was too late to say something, to stop Lupe from leaving the safety of the house. As soon as she appeared, the two men pulled out their guns as if by one accord, Mike's trained on him and Bradley's focused on Lupe. The fear in her eyes twisted Henry's heart. He hadn't even had time to get out of his chair to protect her, and now there was a gun leveled at her.

Anger roared through him, but he tried to stay calm for her sake. He would find a way out of this mess. He was about to speak, make an attempt at conciliation for at least long enough to come up with a plan or take one of their guns, but before he could make a move he heard another horse coming.

He looked at Mike in triumph, only to see the emotion mirrored in the other man's eyes. Foreboding washed through him.

Mike looked far too pleased with himself for that to be an unexpended noise.

Henry looked in the direction of the sound and immediately saw why. The bottom dropped out of his stomach as Old Man Warner broke through the trees, a rifle trained not on Henry, but on Lupe.

He stifled the despair that flowed through him. There had to be a way out of this. He just had no idea what it could possibly be.

Warner smiled at Henry, a brown, hateful smile. "Henry m'boy. You thought you could plan an ambush on my two men here and not get caught? What in the hell were you thinking? That I wouldn't find out? You know I have men everywhere. Some of

them even drive coaches for the post.”

Henry glared at the man in front of him. He was trapped and with no way out that he could see, but the important thing was to keep Lupe safe. He jerked his head toward her. “She had nothing to do with this. It was all my idea. She never even met me until I showed up a couple days ago. Let her go back inside and I will show you where the gold is.”

He knew that the minute they got the gold he would be dead, but that didn’t seem to matter very much anymore. What mattered was Lupe’s safety.

Warner seemed to consider it for a minute. Then he chuckled. “You know what? I think you’re sweet on this girl, so she’s going to stay just where she is for now. You deserve a little punishment for this defection, after all I did for you. Why, if it wasn’t for me, you would still be a little mama’s boy. I made you tough, gave you everything.”

Henry’s anger reached a boiling point. He clenched the arms of the chair he was sitting in, wishing his fingers were wrapped around the old man’s throat. “I know you killed her. She couldn’t tell me what happened, and it took me a long time to figure out that you were lying to me when you said the lawmen did it in their search for me. I don’t know how you fooled me for so long.”

Warner laughed, and Henry was so livid he could hardly think straight or listen to the man’s words. “That was so long ago, I nearly forgot. She cried, begged, but I had to do something to keep you. You seemed so innocent, a nice young boy, that I needed you for a bit longer. That look about you was an asset. Worked well enough, but now it seems it’s time to let you go.”

Henry still had no plan, but he knew he needed to keep Warner talking, if only to give him a chance to come up with something. “Is that everything? Is there anything else you did to ruin my life? I deserve to know, I think.”

He was grasping at straws, but Warner’s grin only widened. “Matter of fact, I don’t s’pose you ever figured out that I was the one to put you behind bars in the first place.”

Henry’s jaw dropped as he absorbed the words. How could that be true? He hadn’t even met Warner at that time. He stared at the old man who stood in front of him, glee spread across the worn face, and the only thing that stopped Henry from grabbing Mike’s gun and shooting him was the knowledge that Lupe would be dead before he fired.

Warner shrugged. “It wasn’t exactly part of the plan, m’boy, but I had an old friend who needed help staying out of jail, and we found someone that looked well enough like him to take his place, after money changed hands in a few key places. It was just bad luck for you. Worked out even better than I could have imagined once you got out, though. All in all, I’d say you were a great success. Now, you will show us where the money is, or you’ll die, and so will the girl.”

Henry wanted to spit on Warner’s bargain, tell the old man to go ahead and shoot him because he would never tell where the cash was hidden. But he had Lupe to think about. He stood up, hoping he could get the men away from Lupe without her coming to harm. “Let’s go, then.”

“Nobody’s going anywhere,” a deep strange voice shouted from the trees.

Five men appeared at the edge of the clearing, all with guns trained on the dangerous trio. The leader, a tall mustachioed man with the deep voice, continued. "Jerry Warner, Mike Cooper, and Bradley Rivers, you are under arrest. Put down your weapons."

Warner shifted his weight, and Henry saw what he was going to do a split-second before it happened. Henry jumped out of his chair, smashing into Lupe, dragging her out of Bradley's grasping hand.

He hoped beyond hope that he had made it to her before Warner's bullet could. They fell to the ground as the loud pops of gunshots went off around them. A searing pain engulfed Henry's arm.

He landed hard on the ground, his body slamming into the wood of the porch with a thump. Lupe was beside him, unmoving, and he scrambled as quickly as he could, covering her with his body.

Then, as quickly as it had begun, the gunfight was over. Relative silence reigned. Guadalupe was crumpled beneath him, her face turned away. She still hadn't moved.

His heart dropped like a stone. He had been too slow. The old man had taken the last good thing in his life.

Panic took hold. Even though his heart told him it was too late, he turned her face toward him, crying, "Lupe! Lupe, you can't die!"

She moved and her eyes fluttered open, and the band that had tightened around his lungs loosened, his heart returning to its proper place. He had a sudden urge to laugh. She was alive.

Guadalupe reached up and rubbed the back of her head. "I hit my head, but I think I'm not hurt. You are laying on me, though, so I am having trouble breathing."

He let out a shaky sigh of relief and rolled off her. He turned his head to survey the damage. The spot where Warner had been standing only seconds before was now occupied by only a crumpled heap on the ground. Mike and Bradley were both wounded, though neither seemed to be fatal. One lawman seemed shot, too, but he was still standing.

Only then did Henry remember the pain in his arm. He looked down to see blood blossoming from a small hole in his sleeve. Lupe's voice broke into his thoughts, shrill with worry. "Henry, your arm! You were shot!"

She immediately set about nursing him. He knew he should be in pain, but all he could do was smile. She was safe. He had his answers and could put the past to rest. Warner was gone. Whatever else happened, this was a good moment.

He was still confused on one point though. "How did the sheriff wind up here? The postman wouldn't have told Warner about the plan and then gone and told the sheriff, would he? That makes no sense."

Lupe looked up from her ministrations to grin at him. "I did not like the look on the postman's face when I told him of the trap. I know when people lie to me, you know. So I went on an errand to see the sheriff myself, just in case."

Henry shook his head. "You are the most wonderful, astonishing woman I have ever met. How can I possibly live without you?"

Sadness filled her eyes, as if she was imagining a world where they would not be together. Then she looked at him with resolve, and he waited with dread to see what kind of a decision she had made. She said, "I do not want us to separate, Henry. I shall go with you."

His blood pumped hard through him. She must truly love him to be willing to give up her home.

But he had no intention of making her do that. He said, "Now that Warner's gone, I was thinking we should stay here. How does that sound to you?"

She looked up at him, her eyes wide. "You will stay on this farm with me? Truly?"

"You can tell when I lie, remember? I will need some time to heal from this gunshot wound, and I would never be able to find a prettier nurse."

She smiled and grabbed his face, pulling him in for a kiss that set him on fire. Henry mentally evaluated his condition, deciding quickly that he was healthy enough for some physical activity. He encircled her waist with his arm.

But first, there were a few things to see to. He broke from her with regret, but kept his arm tight around her. "Sheriff!" he called out to the tall man with the bushy mustache.

The man walked over, his expression curious. Henry said, "There's a large store of gold hidden away on the side of Mount Shasta. I can write out some directions so you can send men for it. It should close the book on a few train and stagecoach robberies in these parts that Warner and his gang have perpetrated."

The sheriff nodded, his eyes narrowed. "I don't suppose you want to tell me how you came by this information?"

"Not particularly."

His mustache shifted as his lips curled into a smile. "Well enough. Anything else?"

Henry nodded. "Yes, actually. Could you get these men off this beautiful lady's land? We would like to eat lunch with some privacy, if you understand me," he said, dropping the sheriff a wink.

The sheriff guffawed and began rounding up the men. Guadalupe hit Henry lightly on his good arm, her face a fierce red. He'd never felt better in his life. He grinned at her and she chuckled, then helped him to his feet.

Before they went into the house, Henry thought of one last thing. He turned back to the group of men. "Sheriff!"

The man tilted his head, waiting for Henry to continue.

"I need you to send the priest out here tomorrow, please."

"You planning on dying, son? You weren't hit that bad."

Henry grinned. "No, sir. I'm planning on marrying this woman."

The sheriff smiled back and nodded, then tipped his hat to Guadalupe before turning back to his quarry.

Henry leaned close to Guadalupe, who had yet to say anything. "We can wait if you like and do a proper ceremony. I thought this would be a nice place to do it, but we don't have to."

She paused for a moment, and a horrible thought shot through him. What if she didn't

want to marry him at all?

Then she sighed, leaning into him, and his heart lightened. “Tomorrow is perfect.”

He let out his breath and kissed her hair. When he spoke again, his voice was a growl. “I hope you don’t expect me to wait until then to—“

She stopped his words with a deep kiss that told him everything he wanted to know.

And they walked back inside their home together, closing the door and latching it as the crowd of men departed.

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