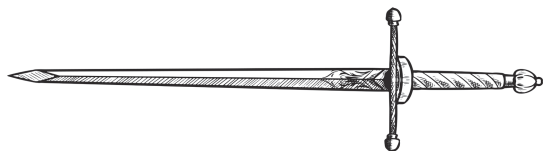


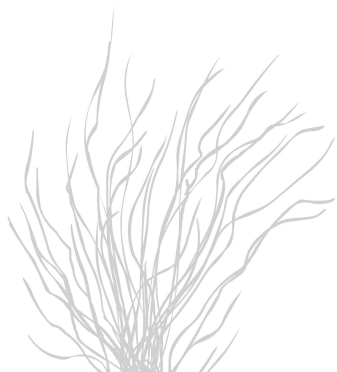
SALVACIÓN



SANDRA PROUDMAN



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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CHAPTER 1

The line of people waiting for un milagro stretched into the endless rolling green hills of the midsummer Alta California horizon. I watched from where Mamá and I sat outdoors on a couple of plain wooden chairs facing the newly empty stool at the front of la fila.

At midday, the sun shone directly on the spot Mamá had chosen for us upon our arrival in Coloma, a glade surrounded by tall pine trees, with a view of a calm river. We had set up halfway between our claim, where my brother and father mined sal negra, and the outskirts of town. Despite the sun shining on this spot for hours, it felt like bad luck to abandon it now.

In this place, Mamá had used sal negra on herself to reveal its magic to us, and it was here that Mamá and I—two women in flowing dresses, a barrel for sal behind us, a pail of it between us, our house visible off in the distance—had been healing the sick ever since.

“Loli, más sal,” Mamá said, patting me roughly on the

forearm, diverting my attention from the others. Her tone was firm but tired as always as she wiped beads of sweat from her wrinkled brow and underneath her straw bonnet.

I grunted, a bit tired myself after a late night out. Then I set my cross-stitch down on the rim of my chair, acting as if the heat of the day made it hard to breathe instead of how tight Mamá had made the bodice of my dress this morning. I hurried toward a barrel to the right of Mamá that had once contained liquor and now held magia. The more people who lined up, the shorter the rope of Mamá's temper. And she always hated when I paid them too much attention.

It was my parents' wish that I feign a lack of interest in sal—or in Mamá as a curandera generally. I was just a girl minding my needlework, no real threat to someone who might want to take the sal from us. My job was to survive. I was here with Mamá only because my parents didn't want me home alone. And they didn't want me helping at the mines either.

Of course, I paid close attention to every miracle Mamá performed, and in the darkness of night, in my own way, I did help.

When I returned to Mamá, old man Álvaro was next in line. I'd been following his story for three days as he advanced to the front. His journey here became all anyone seemed to talk about. Blind, el viejito had traveled 150 miles on foot, accompanied by two of his eight children, the ones now leading him forward to the vacant chair.

Voluminous clothing hung from their bodies in tatters, ruined materials of fine linen and cotton now the only evidence of noble blood. Faces covered in dirt and grime bore the same dark circles around the eyes. The siblings dragged their feet as

if hurting with every blistered step. Don Álvaro could barely walk *with* their aid. But they'd made it, survived the trek and endured the wait. Don Álvaro y familia had earned the right to the sal negra from our claim and to the miracle we shared with everyone who came to us.

Mamá welcomed the three travelers with her usual worn-out smile. She hadn't stopped working since we arrived in Coloma three months back, not even for a day. And she didn't eye the long line as I did or see how endless it was when every day brought more people. Three months ago, despite our own grueling trek, Mamá had been full of energy.

The line moved forward, and people in it continued to chatter away. There was a lull now—almost comforting, like the sound of grillos at night.

Before Mamá, the sal negra was going to be sold as black table salt, a minor commodity. Before Mamá, nobody had realized what it was they were really sent to find, what Abuelo had invested in because Mamá told him to. Despite the war, he dispatched dozens of men out here on his daughter's whim; he financed our entire voyage—and the venture had paid off. We were able to send word back to Abuelo that la magia was real. Mamá had been right.

Magia—for the very first time, evidence of real magic in our world.

And now . . . the plan was to mine as much sal negra as possible before the white man came to claim it for himself, the same way he had done with our lands. We'd lost the war. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. Abuelo urged us to hurry home before Alta California got too dangerous.

The dark circles around Mamá's eyes never disappeared, and

she was starting to develop a hunch from leaning over the sick and the injured all day. The sal negra she herself took never seemed to heal it. If she would only let me help, outside of bringing her more sal. But no.

Stay out of the way. That was all she wanted me to do—her and Papá, and sometimes I thought even my brother, Víctor. I had to pretend that I was weak and worthless and uninterested in anything besides elaborately designed vestidos like the one I wore today, expensive makeup, and trends: a true lady of Mexican nobleness who had been dragged into the wilderness.

At first, I didn't mind playing the part, because it had been true. I *was* brought to Coloma against my will. But every miracle I witnessed chipped away that side of me. In Sonora, I was a porcelain doll, but along the road, the glaze had cracked, and underneath it was something finer altogether—someone who actually cared about others, about everyone.

The siblings set el viejito on the stool in front of Mamá. She reached for don Álvaro's hand. The top of it was covered in lines and sunspots, while Mamá's fingertips were stained black from handling so much sal negra. The black salt might have healed any effects of overwork on her fingers, but the color never washed away no matter how many times she bathed in the river, no matter how often I caught her scrubbing them roughly with soap.

Despite the changes in her, Mamá was still the most beautiful woman in the world. Her pine-brown hair was tied back in a tight bun she smoothed with bandoline. Her features were still perfectly balanced, from the roundness of her cheeks to the curve of her nose. Her eyes wide, eyelashes long and glorious, she turned to me now, talking without speaking the way

mamás do. She wasn't tall, was in fact shorter than me by more than a foot, but her presence was godly and could not be ignored.

I picked up the pace, breathless—wishing I could shuck off my dress right here, and the high-heeled lace-up botas—and managed to lug another pail filled with sal negra, the fourth one since Mamá got started at sunrise. It was the last we'd have until Papá and Víctor returned with more. Back in Sonora, I would never have been expected to do physical labor like this. I'd been so different then. I *had* been a girl who was interested only in dresses and boys and makeup. That was all I ever knew.

Now I knew magia.

I set the pail down, careful not to spill a single grain of sal, then stood to one side, eager to get a closer look before Mamá waved me back to my chair. Mamá nodded to me, grunted an acknowledgment. A *gracias* never escaped her lips casually.

She scooped up some of the sal negra with a tiny spoon made of plata fina that was etched with lavish designs on its handle. She cupped her hand under the bowl of the spoon. Small blue flowers sprouted from the few grains that made it through her fingers and dropped to the soil at her feet. However careful she was, a small bed of flowers always grew around her from the day's work, making Mamá look like una reina hada, a fairy queen—a miracle in itself that never ceased to amaze me.

I wondered what magia would feel like at my own fingertips. But so far I hadn't needed to be healed, and Mamá conserved the sal—always said it was to be used only on those who truly needed it.

And because Mamá's father was financing the construction

of this whole town, because her father owned the mines and had gifted Mamá our claim, our family controlled the supply of sal negra. What the workers here mined outside of our personal claim was sent back to Abuelo, who was planning to make a fortune selling it to his closest friends. The only problem had been the outcome of the war and the new dangers we faced after losing it. Abuelo had given us two more months, then expected us back home. But I was not sure Mamá would be willing to leave this place.

Mamá focused fully on her work, added the spoonful of sal to a sterling silver cup that sat on her lap and held a single ounce of water. Over the last three months, I'd seen la magia work every single time, but the injuries it healed had been newer—a broken leg or brazo or a gash that had gotten infected and was covered in pus, sicknesses that had made grown-ups suddenly cough up sangre or nauseated them so much they couldn't even keep water in their bellies—nothing that wasn't a recent injury or sickness yet.

“Open your mouth,” Mamá said like a priest giving sacrament, and scooped one spoonful of the salted agua. Again, she cupped her hand underneath the spoon, kept the cup balanced on her lap. She held her breath as she moved it forward.

A single drop of water fell, una flor sprouting in the soil under Mamá in a blink as if it had always been there. Mamá eyed it, growled to herself, but kept going.

Don Alvaro opened his mouth wide and tilted his head up to the sky, as if the light of the sun could pierce the darkness he'd been living in for so long.

Every time someone received the sal, everyone else in line quieted, like they were dreading the possibility that la magia

would not work this time—or ever again. I myself didn't doubt la magia; I just wasn't completely sure of its strength. Restoring don Álvaro's eyesight wasn't healing so much as building something anew, two different things in my mind.

I focused on don Álvaro, even forgetting the pain of my cinched corset. Who could breathe at a time like this anyway?

I knew the following: A simple wound like an infected gash or a broken bone seemed to heal within ten seconds. A sickness affecting the entire body could take whole minutes. But I wasn't sure how long it might take for sal negra to heal someone injured so long ago.

For the sake of Mamá's good temperament, this *had* to work.

I waited next to them for several minutes. Under the relentless sun, sweat collected at my nape and I wiped it with the back of my hand.

"Nothing's happening," don Álvaro's daughter said, anxiety straining her voice. Her lips were chapped and cracked and bleeding. Her once surely beautiful dress barely held together—dirt caked along its bottom fringe; the fabric was ripped in places. It fit her too big across the shoulders, and I wasn't sure if that was because her frame had shrunk so much on the trek or the dress had originally belonged to someone else.

Her nervous face fell and she turned in the direction that they had come from—through the grassy fields, across the river, and over the mountain behind it, giant and ethereal. Then she pivoted to her brother, who had the same worn look and who was too slight to have helped much when carrying their father. He must have been only a few years older than me. In all this time, he hadn't said a word.

“It usually works faster than this, ¿no?”

“Paciencia, hermana,” he said now, asking her to be patient.

I wondered how much the pair must love their father to have made such a dangerous journey. They’d traveled the hardest route of all, up and then down the mountain, where one slip, one fall, one broken leg was too easy to come by; water was almost impossible to find; and bears roamed by the score, hungry.

At least it was midsummer; if it had been winter, they would surely have frozen to death. Yet even in the warmer season, many viajeros perished in the mountain passes. According to stories circulating in Coloma, pilgrims got sick from the water or too injured to continue; they got robbed by bad folks they’d met on the road and shot for good measure.

I’d been witness to all those things on the way from Sonora. We had started that journey with 160 in our group. Only fifty of us made it to Coloma. I couldn’t imagine making the return trip with nothing to show for having come all this way. They probably wouldn’t even try to go back home. And then what would happen to them?

Would Papá take them on as workers as he’d done with so many others?

As much as Coloma was a place of healing because of *sal negra*, with many new buildings going up in town as if the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo hadn’t just been signed, it would never feel like a permanent home to me. There were hardly any other kids here, hardly any women. It was a working town. People came and went—very few managed to endure Coloma for long.

Living where *magia* was born would always have its risks.

“Calma,” Mamá whispered, closely eyeing don Álvaro, who remained seated, rubbing at his hands, lips quivering as if he was afraid nothing would happen. Mamá took in a harrowing breath, frowning, seeming to will la magia to come forth with the power of her thoughts. Usually, a spoonful of agua de sal negra was enough to cure even the worst ailments. But don Álvaro’s daughter was right. La magia should have taken effect by now.

Mamá was never one to yield, though. She’d felt a call to Coloma and followed it to find magic. Now she added another spoonful of sal negra to the silver cup. “Una más,” she said to don Álvaro, who consented without a single word.

Just as I was about to sit back down, one of don Álvaro’s eyes cleared, his irises becoming a wondrous shade of dark amber. The other cleared almost as rapidly, like a marble washed of dust.

Don Álvaro let out a cry. “¡Puedo ver! Te veo,” he said not to his daughter or son or to Mamá but to me. He was staring straight at me, weeping with joy. The viejito came over, took my hands in his, and warmth fluttered through my chest.

“Gracias—oh, muchísimas gracias.”

I wondered if he could also see the secrets I was keeping and the person I’d become behind the frivolous disguise.

“Hija, hijo,” don Álvaro said, placing a hand on each of their faces next. “You are beautiful, my children. Just the way I remember you from when you were small, running around in huaraches, chasing pollos on our rancho.”

All three of them hugged, laughed, and cried together. The people waiting clapped; some cheered or whistled. All had smiles on their faces, even those I knew to be in pain. It was

on days like these that I didn't mind that Mamá spent more time on this all-consuming duty than she did caring about me. What we were doing meant something to everybody who came to us for the miracle of *sal negra*.

Mamá watched the family, her hands clutching each other at her heart, that worn but honest grin on her face. Every time she healed someone, something came alive in her expression that I hadn't yet found the right word for. *Happiness* wasn't strong enough. *Pride* didn't fit. It made me happy that Mamá's life had some meaning here that it didn't in Sonora, where she'd been an outcast, a strange woman with a daughter and a son, who tried her hardest not to be perceived as such.

But I also feared that when the time came to leave Coloma, Mamá would refuse—for the miracle of *sal negra* was something wondrous. Abuelo had gifted her the town. Would three months turn into forever, or just until the Yankees came to tear *la magia* away from her—from *us*?

I wanted more than anything to bask in the moment together. Maybe that was why I did what I did—hoping to achieve with *sal negra* something I believed only Mamá and maybe a few others had realized so far. Mamá never cared what others thought of her. There was true freedom in that, something that I myself had started gaining along the way here from Sonora. And seeing don Álvaro with his children made me even freer.

“Thank you,” don Álvaro's daughter said.

“Muchísimas gracias,” the son added, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Mamá,” I said, signaling with my chin to the rest of the *agua de sal negra*.

She caught the hint in my voice, returned the spoon to the water, and gave don Álvaro's daughter a taste, then the son. The blemishes and scratches and bruises on their hard-traveled bodies vanished in a few blinks.

Before they took off and we moved on to the next person in line, I filled a tiny water sack with the rest of the agua, a present we never announced but secretly gave to everyone for the rough journey home.

"Gracias otra vez y bendiciones." The daughter hugged Mamá, giving her a few coins as she let go. Sometimes travelers paid us, but not always. When it did happen, Mamá never counted the money, but quickly tucked it into the pocket of her dress. We didn't sell the sal outright, because that would feel like taking advantage of a miracle meant for everyone, so the little money we got went toward bonuses for the miners.

Don Álvaro's daughter embraced me. I hugged her tightly back, smiling and still feeling a warmth inside that wasn't due to the heat of the day. There was bliss in the work we did, true humanity that made you feel whole.

Don Álvaro couldn't stop beholding everything in sight, his lips quirked upward, soaking in the beauty of a world that no matter how harsh its wilderness, was still a marvel. "Tantos colores. So many colors that I'd forgotten about. And look at those mountains. They're so green and tall."

"You climbed up and down through them," the son said.

"Two miracles in a week, then," don Álvaro responded, eyes still wide with amazement.

I turned from the line as don Álvaro and his kids went on their way. Something tightened at my center, and I didn't want

anyone to see me cry. Helping people with sal negra meant just as much to me as it did to Mamá. There was something divine about what was happening in Coloma, and we were in the middle of it all. We had the calling—we were the ones making miracles happen in real life.

Sal was a bendición y salvación—a salvation for so many. I hoped it always would be, but threats loomed on the horizon.

“Get out of my way,” a gruff voice said suddenly in English.

I wiped my tears, not liking the tone, and glared in the direction the words had come from.

The voice belonged to a tall blond man. He had a full mustache and couldn't have been older than Mamá. He wore a revolver at his hip and had lost his hat at some point, his hair half-flat and half-disheveled as if he'd recently been in a fight. He was riding a white horse with blood smeared across its belly and legs. There was blood on the white cotton shirt he wore, too, on the gray vest, and on his brown scarf.

When he got to don Álvaro and his family, the blond man brought the horse to a stop. “Move aside,” the man commanded when he was practically on top of them.

Don Álvaro stilled. As rumor had it, a horse had blinded him, and that was why he'd traveled to Coloma on foot. Now, face-to-face with another, he could not move.

The standoff made my mind fizz with an indescribable emotion akin to anger interwoven with sadness.

“Papá, vamos,” his daughter urged, pulling him away.

“I said move out of my way, old man.”

“Déjalos,” a woman from the line broke in.

My body tensed.

The rider didn't skip a beat. His lips pursed and his eyebrows

rose as he went for his revolver, unclipping it faster than I'd anticipated. He pointed it at the woman who had spoken up.

I'd been awed by magia just a moment ago, but now my mouth was flooded by a sourness that wouldn't go away until this man left. I started toward them, but Mamá caught my arm. I hadn't been this bold in Sonora. The road had done that to me, too, made me into someone who couldn't stand to see injustice and suffering.

"What do you want?" Mamá said in perfect English, her serious tone showing just how strong and in charge she was. She stepped in front of me.

The man smirked, scrunching his features. He lifted up his shirt. He'd been shot. I couldn't see his back, but I ventured that the only reason he was still alive was that the bullet had gone right through him. Still, the entrance wound was set in deep dark red stains, blood everywhere.

The people in line gasped. I'd seen so many injuries the past three months that more blood was just another part of the day. The man's presence, though, made the hair on my neck prickle. White men acted as if Alta California hadn't been part of México only a few weeks ago.

I exchanged a knowing look with Mamá. A dangerous situation such as this one hadn't happened all that many times, but there were a few encounters, more in recent weeks. We were ready.

Underneath my dress, strapped to my thigh, I had a pistol. So did Mamá, underneath the layers of *her* dress. I could shoot a squirrel through the eye from fifty yards out, Mamá farther yet. If the man tried anything to hurt us or the people in line, we were prepared to stop him.

At least I was.

The man leapt off his horse, made a fist with his free hand, and pressed it to the bleeding. “You the healer I heard so much about?”

Mamá moved slightly to her left so the skirt of her dress hid the pail of sal negra from view. He’d obviously heard rumors of magical healing salt and was here to find out if they were true. Someone had told him about us, and here he was.

Still, I didn’t blame Mamá for trying to conceal la magia. The sal negra was the last of our supply until Papá and Víctor arrived from the mine. If we lost it, we might not be able to help anyone else in line. This was one of the rare afternoons when murmurs of someone having passed away as they waited hadn’t reached us. I, for one, wanted to keep it that way.

“Hey, there is a line,” the woman called out again, this time in English.

The Yankee turned to her, still holding his revolver, and said, “You don’t want to test me today, lady.”

She backed away, knocking into a young man who yelled in pain as she fell on him. I moved toward the man with the gun, but once more Mamá took my arm.

A few others in line acted quickly to help. One gave the woman a hand up. Another checked on the young man. Everyone glowered.

I didn’t know what to do. Mamá obviously didn’t want me to get involved, and bloodshed was neither enticing nor a good omen for what we were trying to achieve here: a safe place for everyone who needed help, the sick and injured alike. Then again, Papá and Víctor weren’t due back till sunset. It was up

to Mamá and me to protect the people who came to be healed, who trusted us.

I reached for my pistol but stopped when Mamá spoke calmly to the interloper. “Señor,” she said, beckoning him forward and indicating the chair in front of her. “Let me see your wounds.”

My mouth was agape and my eyes burned in her direction, but Mamá ignored me.

The man beamed smugly to those in line, many of whom were in no position to take him on in a gunfight. All the people could do as he cut in front of them was look on with weariness and a type of rage that boils the blood.

The Yankee didn’t sit, instead lifted the blood-soaked shirt with one trembling hand. Even from this angle, the gunshot wound was visible as a crimson circle. I was surprised he could stand. He would likely die if he had to wait in line to reach us, but that was the way we did things: whoever arrived first was seen first, no matter their wealth or status. We were fair.

“I need you to fix me fast, and then I’ll mosey on out of here and you can continue your work in peace, do you reckon now?”

Mamá’s face remained stern. She nodded, smoothed out her dress. “Loli,” she called more softly this time, her voice soothing.

I gritted my teeth, feeling my pistol against my leg as I motioned the man over to the stool occupied moments before by don Álvaro, a kind soul. It was a silly thing to focus on, but it was what I thought about: How could this man and don Álvaro take up the same space in our world when only one of them was worthy of living in it? I understood his urgent need

for care, I did. But everyone else had waited. None had thought their own lives more valuable than the lives of others. This man, he was throwing his weight around only because he looked down on us. He was doing this only because he felt entitled.

But sal negra did not choose who to heal and who not to heal.

At least I didn't think so.

"Sit," I said sharply.

"I'm fine standing, little lady," he responded.

I didn't force him into the chair, but I did keep my eyes on the man. He was a cowboy, I supposed, a Yankee who had traveled here, maybe even to fight us in the war, who now thought that because his armies were victorious, he had the right to anything under the sun. I took notice of his gun belt, counted the twelve bullet loops that still held cartridges, marked how many bullets were missing. Had he shot them recently—all in a battle he'd just fought?

Wars and battles were so absurd. People were strange to think they could take and own land. People were likewise strange to think they could own and take lives so easily.

"I don't have all day," he said dryly, uncaring. Despite his wound, he stood like a mighty figure, as if he *should* tower over others, dominating them.

Mamá moved to prepare a salve of sal negra, unavoidably revealing the pail at her side. It had taken Víctor and Papá almost a week to fill a barrel. The man stared at the pail, unblinking, and licked his lips greedily. I tightened my hands into fists, set my jaw. I wanted to act . . . yet I knew it was better not to provoke the man into hurting someone—especially if that someone was Mamá.

The bullet to the abdomen would surely kill him if left untreated. Mamá added some sal negra to a silver bowl and stirred in a spoonful of bandoline. “Keep still now,” she said, and spread her ointment on the man’s torso, front and back. At least she didn’t do him the kindness of cleaning his wound beforehand.

It was hard to believe there was an entire sea of red inside every one of us.

The Yankee winced. “It’s cold,” he said, and then gave a sigh of relief. “God, I thought I was going to die.” His voice softened, and it was the first time the man sounded human—instead of like a monster that presumed itself immortal.

I didn’t expect a thank-you from this one, unlike others we had aided. I didn’t look for gratitude necessarily. But . . . I was losing so much through all of this: My mamá was wasting away. I wasn’t going to school anymore. I wasn’t doing anything except sitting in this chair most days and minding whatever Mamá told me. I was giving up everything, so, yes, I thought people should at least be thankful to Mamá.

I glanced beyond the Yankee to those who were watching us. I saw silent anger in the people who waited, a hostility that didn’t leave their narrowed eyes. There were things besides a miracle that could quiet people—danger could too. He had just bypassed at least six dozen men, women, and even children, all because he was willing to take things by force and because people wouldn’t stand up to him when he did.

I didn’t like the Yankee. I didn’t want to help him. And it irritated me that Mamá wouldn’t give me the go-ahead and let me show this stranger the way out of Coloma. I’d seen her call on Papá to deal with an outsider once. If Papá or even Víctor were here, she would have signaled them to action.

She knew perfectly well that I could take care of myself, yet I was expected to fake helplessness, risking exposure only as a last resort. Even though I wanted nothing more than to be someone who would protect others, someone people would realize they couldn't take advantage of. If I hadn't been so constrained, this man wouldn't even have attempted to approach us. If he really was to shoot Mamá, he would likely shoot me next and then target however many others before anyone got a chance to use the *sal negra*. Was *that* the last resort?

When *la magia* stitched the man's skin back together, several of those at the head of the line gasped as usual. Even I let out a small hum, seeing the *sal negra* at work—though I didn't think this man deserved to be healed. *El milagro* never ceased to amaze me.

"Now, please let us continue to help the others." After dressing his exit wound, Mamá invited the man to leave by gesturing to his horse.

Instead of departing, the man pointed the revolver in Mamá's direction.

Terror of losing Mamá quickly became fury, and I couldn't hold myself back any longer. As I was raising the skirts of my dress to pull my weapon, my shoulder felt a reassuring squeeze.

"Loli," whispered my brother, appearing at my side, "let Papá handle it."

They were early. I wasn't sure if I was thankful for the assistance or disappointed that I wouldn't be the one to put a stop to the madness. I wanted to release all my anger. I wanted to protect Mamá the way I protected so many others. Since arriving here, all I had ever wanted was to keep Mamá safe.

Still, maybe Víctor was right. I licked at my lips, the taste

of sal spreading over my tongue. The air here always tasted of sal, which made me wonder whether we were healed just by breathing it in. Maybe that was why I'd felt so strong since arriving in Coloma.

I hadn't realized I was tensing my shoulders, gritting my teeth so hard that my mouth felt numb, until my brother arrived and I instantly relaxed.

"Give me the salt," the man said. Víctor, who was always so quiet, went unnoticed. We stood directly behind the man as he faced Mamá. "As much as I can carry—quickly!"

Otra mano landed on my shoulder, large and rough, as Papá walked past us to confront the Yankee. I smirked. The man was about to learn what kind of family he'd messed with.

He backed away a bit when Papá came into view. Papá, well-muscled and with a thick black beard, a black sombrero still on his head, was almost a foot taller than the stranger, after all. His face was covered in grime, too, which only made him look fiercer, intimidating to all those unacquainted with his kindness. Papá stood shielding Mamá, always her protector—always mine too. He'd saved me often enough during our journey from Sonora that I was fully aware I owed him my life twenty times over.

It was always like that: men stood their ground when up against the injured and infirm or against women whom they presumed weren't a threat. When a man as big and burly as Papá entered the picture, the bravado quickly changed.

"You—you stop right there or I will shoot you," said the Yankee, his tone serious, his expression calculated. He stood straighter now that his wounds had healed. "Stay right where you are. I have no qualms about shooting you. Not a one."

Papá studied the smaller man, gave a heavy sigh. Then, without a word, he pulled a pouch the size of a fist from his jacket and filled it with sal. He used his bare hands to do it, something that always rankled Mamá. This time, she didn't say a word, only nodded Papá on.

"Take this and be on your way," Papá said, tossing the purse over to the man, who caught it with one hand and brought it to his nose. I'd never thought sal negra smelled like anything other than salt, but perhaps it smelled like magia to some—like vanilla and pine needles and the hot summer breeze when night fell, mixed with the scent of the ocean.

The man had asked for all the sal he could carry. Would one small pouch satisfy him?

Apparently so. He put the purse in a vest pocket, eyeing Papá. "I didn't think I'd make it here. Thanks to you fine folks, now I plan to make myself right at home in Coloma. I'll be seeing you all, I'm sure."

The man reached to tip a hat, smirked when he realized it was missing. He backed off, slipped onto his horse in a fluid motion, and started away. The people in line cheered.

"We'll be with you all shortly," Mamá told them.

There was another cheer and sighs of relief.

"Are you all right?" Papá asked me. He searched my face and hugged me tight.

I couldn't help but grin widely. "You know I can take care of myself," I mumbled into him.

"I don't doubt that you could have, mi hija," he replied, softly nudging my cheek with his knuckles as he let go.

"Looks like we have a new devil in town, though," Víctor whispered. I flicked at Víctor's hat, which he took off to check

for any damage before molding it back into shape. His curls could barely be contained, much less flattened. He grinned and showed off his dimples, as if what had just happened were no big deal.

“He won’t bother us,” Papá promised, hugging Mamá, who held him tight. “Let’s just keep an eye open for him.”

“If he plans to stay,” Mamá began, “brandishing his gun every time he runs out of sal—or if he spreads news of a magical healing salt to his people—things might get complicated for us.”

“Oh, I doubt he’ll be in town for as long as he thinks,” I replied, exchanging a quick and knowing glance with Víctor, who had taken my needlework from my chair and now handed it to me. I clutched the fabric, furious, watching the blond man ride off with sal negra I was certain Víctor and I would be getting back by morning.

CHAPTER 2

La noche spread across the horizon—the Alta California mountains painted negras against it, the air drier than it had been along the coast of México in Sonora.

I gazed at the stars while I waited in an alley between the saloon and an inn, two of ten new buildings that would be opening soon. We already had a bathhouse and a cantina, which I watched now. I wasn't sure why Abuelo was still funding the construction of this town, as if he thought we could maintain control of it somehow. To me, he was just bracing for a battle I wanted my family to have no part in. Perhaps he only feared, as I did, that Mamá was planning never to leave. Our return day approached, with only a few weeks left if we were to travel before winter.

I'd left my dress at home, and I was no longer Lola de La Peña, but Salvación. I wore riding pants I'd borrowed from Víctor—black and tight, made of a rough material I relished

against my skin—and a long-sleeved black linen blouse that I'd taken from Mamá's closet back at our rancho in Sonora. Boots that were meant to get dirty. A black poblano hat I fell in love with that one of Papá's men had left behind before he returned to Sonora to send word to Abuelo we'd arrived in Coloma, which together with my makeshift mask covered half of my face.

This is what freedom felt like: no constraints, no one asking me to hold back, no expectations about my becoming a woman.

In my disguise I watched as a group of fifteen or so men laughed as they rode out into the night, taking the newest haul of sal negra to Abuelo, back in Sonora. Other than that, the night was quieter than usual, most men tired from either toiling in the mines or doing construction work.

My attention was drawn to someone exiting the cantina, itself also quieter than usual, the doors swinging on their creaky hinges. I double-checked that my thick black mask was tied securely, fully concealing Lady Lola de La Peña.

I'd been waiting on the Yankee since the time it took the moon to move the width of two of my fingers. Way past when I was supposed to be home and in bed, safe, the way Mamá and Papá preferred. But whereas my window had been on the second story of our hacienda back in Sonora, my window in Coloma was easy to climb out of whenever I went out at night as Salvación, the masked hero of Coloma.

Finally, my target showed. The man whose bullet wound Mamá had healed stumbled out of the cantina, swaying along with the warm summer breeze. He fell over into the dirt before slowly picking himself up. He was obviously very, very drunk.

Luckily, he was also alone. I'd anticipated that much. Not many white men arrived in Coloma and then decided it was wise to stay in town. After I had a nice chat with him, he'd leave it solito too.

Good riddance y adiós.

If he'd been a smarter man, maybe he would have thought to use some of the sal negra to sober up, the way Papá did when he felt like he'd had too many drinks to think straight. But then again anyone who had been on the brink of death was bound to have dark memories, so I wasn't quite sure sobering up was what he wanted at all. Sal negra couldn't take away memorias oscuras.

I wondered about him. Who was he, and how was he so vile?

He hummed as if celebrating his own cumpleaños and proceeded to relieve himself against the wall of the cantina. *Disgusting.* Then he started toward his horse, hitched just within the edge of the darkness of the inn that was under construction, less than fifty yards from me.

The pouch was tied to his belt at the hip. El fuego in my belly rose to my throat, and I couldn't help gritting my teeth. Sal negra was a miracle; this scoundrel wasn't worthy of it. I wanted to recover the sal negra as much as I wanted the man gone. He didn't deserve Mamá's help or Papá's mercy, not after threatening our family, our neighbors.

The man whistled a folk tune going around Coloma lately. I hated it as much as I hated him. The lyrics glorified warriors and the West and things far too dark for such a happy melody. I could accept that the history of civilization was murky and always had been. I'd learned as much from my tutors back in

Sonora: of land taken, diseases spread, death and endless death. Naturally, I feared our world might only get bleaker as reports of la magia continued to spread. If only I could keep some of the goodness alive. But Abuelo already had plans to sell the sal negra to his friends, to anyone with enough money.

I counted the days till Sonora, when danger would be a thing of the past. I hesitated. I wasn't convinced everyone deserved a second chance. Papá seemed always to be suggesting it to Mamá, who was as hard as a diamond. Papá was more like stone—strong and sure, but after enough water had run over it, a pile of sand.

Papá's chivalry angered me sometimes. He could have used his fists and his strength to force the man to leave Coloma. But instead, he had stood down.

For all the love that I had for Papá, compassion was his weakness—but it wouldn't be his downfall, or our family's, or the town of Coloma's.

I—Salvación—would not stand for it.

Once the man moved to untie his horse from the hitching post, I crept out of the shadows and brought my sword to the side of his face, careful not to injure his horse or frighten it away. I couldn't risk leaving the man stranded in town.

He moved for his revolver, and perhaps to mi buena suerte, he'd drunk enough to be slow on the draw.

"Drop your weapon," I said, smirking as I slid my blade along his cheek.

He hesitated. I couldn't see it in the dark, but I knew the cut was deep enough to draw blood.

The subtle thump of a weapon hitting the ground was a relief.

“Ahh, aaaah, okay, just take what you want from my pockets and leave me be.” His tone was mocking and let me know this man didn’t deserve to walk away. He was a cruel person, and I couldn’t let him stay. Not when I remembered him pointing his revolver at Mamá, how she’d stood there, willing to die for sal negra. Not when my one calling was also my way to finding the freedom Mamá enjoyed.

“Oh no, señor, you are the one who will leave today. May this serve as your only warning: untie the sal negra from your belt and leave Coloma right this moment, or on all that is holy, I will end your life.”

The warning had always worked. I watched men ride off on their horses, Víctor waiting for them on high ground with a rifle, hiding in the mountainside that faced the way out of town, to make sure they left without even a glance back.

They always stayed away. They always rode on.

Víctor had never used the rifle. And as much as I despised the blond man, I still hoped Víctor wouldn’t have to open fire.

“Oh, I see now.” The man sniffed, rubbed at his nose, and snorted. “You’re that vigilante everyone is mumbling about. What’s the name? Salvación? Haven’t stopped hearing the name since I arrived. People around these parts think you’re some kind of angel.”

I struggled to keep a grin from reaching my lips. I had to admit, the fact of my reputation was something I was proud of. Still, I managed to keep my focus, because the man didn’t seem afraid but rather determined that Salvación wasn’t going to ruin his day.

I made my voice deeper to sound older than my seventeen years, which wasn’t so difficult; Víctor and other kids had

always teased me for being so tall and curvy, but ever since I became Salvación, my height had worked in my favor.

“That’s right.”

“I don’t believe the stories. You’re made of flesh and blood, like me. You’re not an angel. And either way, I don’t think you’d actually kill a man. Aren’t you a lady? Lady Salvación? A woman who hunts the wicked, the rumors have said. But nobody believes a woman could really be behind all of this.”

The man seemed to know how his taunts were landing. Was he being this insulting just because he was drunk? Or was talking recklessly a natural trait of his? Everything he said was making me angry.

I’d been called “a lady” all my life outside my home: señorita Lola this and señorita Lola that. Back in Sonora, las monjas at school demanded that I talk, act, walk, eat, sew, cook, like a señorita. My tutors were just as adamant. But out here in Alta California, at least at night, at least while I was Salvación, I’d become the type of girl I wanted to be: free as the wind to be whomever I pleased, no rules holding me back. My whole body felt better when I was dressed as Salvación; even the knot at the back of my neck, always so painful in Sonora, was gone. The first time I realized this, I also understood I deserved to feel this way: completely unburdened.

Only Víctor and Papá would accept the real me now. I wasn’t anything like what people expected of a girl who had grown up in a wealthy family. I was Loli. Me. I wore pants even when I wasn’t outside, didn’t brush my hair, wore boots, and was good with a sword. I didn’t like the dresses I wore every day; I detested the heels that made my feet sore. Mamá made me keep them anyway, because she said that one day I’d

go back to the world of rules. I had to be ready for that or the world would eat me alive. She never said *we'd go back*.

This new world wasn't much different.

The man didn't flinch, didn't make a move to go, and still had the sal negra on him. It suddenly occurred to me that maybe he wouldn't comply. Maybe he'd be the first to stand up to Salvación, and then I'd have to see if I was so willing to rid Coloma of a dangerous character that I'd kill for it.

"Cállate and do as I say." In my panic, I pressed the blade deeper into his skin until he finally whimpered.

"Okay," he said, voice hurried. "I'll leave." The man gestured toward his revolver, asking permission to pick it up.

"Leave it behind." I took a step forward to kick the weapon away. "And you can drop the sal negra you're carrying right next to it."

"My revolver is an heirloom, given to me by my pop the last time I saw him. I don't reckon I want to leave it behind."

"I'm not giving you a choice," I said, emphatic. "You lost the right to your possessions when you stole those of others."

My heart raced as he moved toward the ground. I kept my eyes wide, so I wouldn't blink and miss a moment. He might attack me, perhaps be quicker than me, perhaps shoot me square in the chest. I'd seen men sober up swiftly when facing death. Víctor wouldn't come down from his hiding spot in the hillside fast enough to save me—he was more than a mile away.

No one would save me. I'd be stone-cold gone from el mundo and maybe on my way to becoming a real angel.

Was I ready for that? I'd thought I was prepared to die to keep Coloma safe. I'd thought as much when I first encountered the man. I'd thought it when I created Salvación. But

standing here with my heart beating so loudly I could hear it in my ears . . .

My pulse slowed down when he straightened. The Yankee took a last lingering look at his heirloom revolver as though carving it into memory. Or was he merely fuming over having to abandon it? He unknotted the small sack of sal negra from his belt and tossed it next to the revolver.

He mounted his horse, and I touched the middle of his back with the tip of my sword to stop him from suddenly attacking me. He shivered, straightened his back, and moved an inch forward to avoid my blade. His shoulders were tense, and I was glad. It meant he was afraid.

“Don’t look back as you ride off,” I whispered. Moments like these were a miracle. My hands were sweaty, my heartbeat fluttered nervously again, but my focus sharpened.

I slapped the horse on its side and watched the animal take off out of town.

The man peeked back against my warning, trying his best to see me, perhaps considering doubling back to fight me bare-handed. I’d already retreated into the darkness, heirloom revolver pointed in his direction and sal negra back in my possession, where it belonged. I watched him go, the town eerily quiet around him. I’d been so busy confronting the Yankee that I never checked to see if anyone else had come outside or spotted us.

I alone heard him say, “You’re going to regret this! I will be back for my heirloom, Lady Salvación. You sure better be watching your back.”

Others had given me the same warning. None had kept their word. And part of me knew he wouldn’t ever either.

Who wanted to fight an angel?

When the blond man was finally out of sight, I ran to Víctor's hiding spot on the way out of Coloma, keeping to the shadows that I knew so well. If anyone did see me, that would only add to the rumors: one more person in Coloma who had caught sight of Salvación. Still, I was willing to risk being seen in order to make certain the blond man had truly left.

Once I was on the open fields outside of town, I took off my mask, crossing the river on the newly constructed bridge. I hiked up the forest to Víctor, sly as a fox, *rapidá como una coneja*, enjoying the trees whispering around me and the night songs of crickets and frogs.

Víctor shifted his rifle as I came closer to where he crouched between two large boulders. From far away, he was just another rock among the foliage. No matter how quiet my approach, he always seemed to hear me at the last second. It was good practice, making sure nobody could sneak up on my brother. If I couldn't do it, there wasn't a person in the world who could.

He moved fast like a rattler: one second, he was still crouched, and the next, he had his rifle in front of him, his finger inching toward the trigger.

“¿Loli, eres tú?” He squinted in the dark. His whole body relaxed as I came closer. “I almost shot you this time.”

I scoffed. “Who else would know you were up here?”

“I don't know—someone pissed off at you, someone who happened to run across me on their way into Coloma, someone who just spotted me at random?” He set the rifle aside and sat facing in the direction the man had gone. There was nothing to see out there, though—just stillness, just night, animals roaming around on four legs instead of two.

I sat next to him, leaned against his shoulder the way we'd done when we were little kids. "You mean pissed off at Salvación?"

His expression was far too serious. "I think we should stop this."

He moved to put on his sombrero. It was wide-brimmed and had been one of Papá's favorites. Víctor had been so happy the day Papá gave it to him. Even after it'd gotten trampled by horses and almost lost in two or three rivers on the way from Sonora to Coloma, the sombrero had made the journey with us. I imagined he even slept with it, and chuckled.

"I mean it, Loli. I'm not laughing."

"If we give up, who will keep Coloma safe?" I pulled a piece of cheese out of my pocket and unwrapped the slivers, handing half to Víctor, who gladly took them. The only thing bigger than Víctor's heart was his stomach, and food always settled his thoughts when he brought up quitting our vigilante mission.

"Let the grown-ups be in charge of protecting Coloma. Let Papá. He's the leader here," he mumbled through a mouthful. "That's their job."

"The grown-ups are too busy making Abuelo rich off sal negra to realize danger is already here." The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo changed everything for Alta California, yet no one was acting like it, only acting like we still had time when we didn't.

"You saw what Papá did today. He let the man go—a man who threatened to kill Mamá, me, and everything we're doing here. He let him go like nothing happened. No. Salvación is the answer, as she's always been."

“That’s exactly what I’m getting at,” Víctor said as he stood, shouldering the leather strap of his rifle. “Un día, soon enough, it won’t be *one* man against us.” He paused to point at the fields below. “It’ll be an army. Then what? You going to take them all on in the dead of night, your sword at all their backs? Salvación is a fairy tale that parents can tell their niños about. The reality is much different. You’re not an angel, Loli. And neither am I. We’re flesh and bone and everything that can die.”

I wasn’t sure what would happen in the future. But I knew that I didn’t necessarily want to go up against un ejército. I *was* one girl—one girl who wanted nothing more than to keep the people she cared about, and all of Coloma, from getting hurt and having to fight greedy Yankees for the sal negra. Abuelo was already greedy enough.

But sal negra was a miracle that also needed my protection.

Víctor bringing this up again was a stray bullet rattling inside of me. Could I stop? I wasn’t so sure, not when everything in my body told me I was meant to do this.

Wasn’t protecting magia worth my life in the end?

The blond man had made me doubt, though. I’d felt the same sense of facing death only a few times before, on the journey to Coloma. Yet even that journey, especially at the start, had been filled with food and the luxury that came with land and wealth and a good name.

“You remember the first day you saw the sal negra?” I asked as we started down the mountain, toward our casita at the edge of Coloma. I bit the side of my lip.

“How could I forget? I’d never seen someone with wounds like that.”

“The bear threw that man around like a rag doll, this way

and that, and he was battered almost beyond recognition. He could barely breathe. If he hadn't been one of the miners in Coloma, if he hadn't been near enough to Mamá, he'd be dead. But we'd arrived that same day. Mamá had just chosen the spot where she said she'd be healing the sick. She'd just gotten the sal negra from the mines, healing herself to show the others, and she helped them apply the sal on the man's skin without even gagging. She believed she was sent to Coloma for a reason, and she found her purpose here. The man was healed and survived." As I remembered the moment, pride overcame me. I smiled.

Víctor rubbed at his face as if he didn't want to hear any of this.

I continued, "Es magia, magic, a miracle: something strange and inexplicable that we are destined to be a part of. And you don't think magia is worth protecting? You think we should turn our back on destiny?"

He stopped, so I did too.

"No destiny is worth wasting your life," he replied. "You are my little sister, Loli de La Peña, and you're worth more than any miracle. And so is Mamá and so is Papá—I only wish you'd all see that. All I do is to protect you all. Trust that I'm protecting you now by putting an end to this."

I nudged him with my hip. "Stop with the dramatics! We're not going to get killed." I patted the pouch at my side, recognizing this was a losing conversation. "One injury, and I would just take some sal negra and be healed. Plus, sometime soon we'll go back to Sonora. Now, I'll race you home?"

He stared at me longer, his piercing gaze forcing me to look away first. Only when I did, he took my arm and pulled me

backward, sprinting toward home. I ran after him, yelling as the wind blew in my face. We moved in almost total darkness, but the route was familiar to us, so it didn't matter. I leapt over tree roots I knew like my own knuckles, dodged the boulders that sat on the mountain, grabbed on to the trees that lined the way downhill so I wouldn't slip at the drop-offs.

Víctor waited for me at the foot of the mountain, huffing and trying to catch his breath. He took off his sombrero again, pushed back his hair, then donned the hat. "Loser," he said, teasing.

I shoved him and he laughed as he fell. "You cheated!"

He moved to stand, still fighting to catch his breath. "I *won*."

I was about to knock him down again when a flicker of light caught my attention. I paused. Víctor noticed it as well. It was like a torch moving in the distance, a light dancing along the horizon that couldn't be an animal. It was moving too quickly.

"¿Qué es eso?" I pointed to the oncoming light, my nose twitching. It was a person. Had the Yankee already made good on his promise? Maybe he had another revolver stashed somewhere nearby and was back to take his revenge on Salvación.

The light drew closer, and then a horse came into view, small and fast, and I suddenly wished Papá were with us. The rider was not the blond man but someone in a dress lurching over the horse as if passed out, long hair down and flowing loose. Fingertips wrapped around a torch, but just barely.

And then the rider fell over, snuffing out the light.