

# ALVARADO GOLD

Victoria Pitts-Caine



I backed up against the doorway to my room, shaken. My insides quivered. I always thought I was tough enough to stand up to anyone. I'd just about proven myself wrong. If it hadn't been for Gary showing up when he did, I'd... Gary. I thought he'd betrayed me but yet he'd shown up as my rescue. First, I assumed it was a convenient set up between the two of them. But Donnie didn't appear to know him or, at least, pretended not to. It was going to take...what did Grandpa call it? A leap of faith. If I was going to let myself trust him, I needed to apologize.

"Are you all right?" Gary surveyed my torn shirt.

"Yeah. I think my shoulder is scraped up, that's all. Gary, I owe you an apology."

"It's okay, Addie." He came closer to me and looked at my shoulder. "You just wouldn't let me explain."

I moved back and resisted his touch. "We can't move this mountain all at once, Gary. There's a lot we don't know about each other. Everything moved too quickly. Then, I made a mess of it all."

Gary's lips softened into a sincere smile. I could have melted in his arms right then but this time it had to be right.

"What do you want, Addie? I'll give you the moon."

"Peace. That's what I want. All this precariousness between Donnie and the rest of us when all I wanted was to find my family. Then there is the gold and the problems it started. Susan sprained her ankle in a fall while we were in the cave. I can't help but think that's my fault, too."

"Addie. Don't take the whole world on your shoulders." He reached out and I let him draw me into the fold of his arms. He held me close. The smell of Brut and fabric softener filled my consciousness. I let my troubles fall away. I could have stayed there forever. *A time to keep silent.*



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by

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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## **Dedication**

First I'd like to thank God for the ability and courage to see this story from the beginning to end; my husband, Glen, and daughters, Heather and Holly, and their impelling force in my life and their encouragement when I wanted to give up; and last but certainly not least, a writing group that meets every Tuesday night in Fresno, California.

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I would like to extend a considerable measure of gratitude and heartfelt appreciation, to my mentor, Elnora King.







## Prologue

June 12, 1869

Holding the handle of the shovel in his gnarled hands, Pablo Escobar patted the smooth backside of the metal blade against the moist soil. He straightened and looked to the East as the first pale hint of light crept along the softly rolling hills of the Texas plains. After noting the landmarks, he penciled a quick note, folded it into an envelope and climbed aboard an old wooden wagon. Clicking his tongue against his cheek, he put the mules into motion for the seven mile trip back to town.

Not more than twenty minutes later, John Barnes stood on a flat piece of land just outside of Barnesville. He could see the church steeple and considered donating this land, too, for a cemetery. The town had started to grow. The homes were filled with thriving families. The many business operations he and his brothers had started and the hope of the future for the entire state of Texas drove the economy. This June morning he had come to this corner of land on Chambers Creek for another reason. He headed across the open ground toward a cave nestled into a granite overhang. Making the journey, he walked across his own grave. He would be the first one buried in the cemetery. His dream would be carried on by others. His secret known to only a few.

## Chapter One

“Wait.” I grabbed Eric’s arm.

My brother had chosen to go home the morning Grandpa’s will was to be read. Eric crossed the wooden porch and bounded down the steps of our grandparents’ home where five of their six grandchildren had spent the previous night. His hurried gait brought him closer to a waiting taxi.

“Don’t you want to go with us?”

“Why? Grandpa didn’t have anything,” he grumbled. “I have to get back to my job. Jobs are important, Addie.”

“Go ahead. Rub it in,” I growled. “Just leave. You obviously don’t care.”

I sat on the old, white porch swing attached to the overhang with two even sections of galvanized chain. Shoots of ivy coiled in among the links and wandered aimlessly toward the roof. The air was scented with roses and a burnt sugar smell emerged from the Katsura tree as a light breeze ruffled its leaves. I felt a familiar heaviness settling inside me. I’d hoped we’d do this together but, as usual, Eric proved me wrong. There was no reason to think the events surrounding Grandpa’s death would change anything. I often avoided Eric. Because of his overbearing personality and his self-appointed post as my guardian angel, our encounters usually ended in his tirades. Sharing some of those same personality traits myself, I didn’t want to listen.

When the taxi turned the corner at the end of the block, I got up and went inside. Our grandfather’s house was a time capsule. The home’s interior reflected typical 1950 middle class Americana with the exception of two

rooms—Grandpa’s den with its thirty-inch color television and tweed recliner and Grandma’s antique filled living room. As I stood in the doorway, I remembered the living room had been off-limits when I was a kid.

“Look, but don’t touch, Addie,” Grandma said.

Since I was a tomboy by nature, I didn’t bother even looking. I did put a baseball through the window; and lucky for me, Grandpa came to my rescue. Grandma made me sit perfectly still in the middle of the living room floor fifteen minutes a day for the remainder of my visit, an eternity for a seven-year-old.

“We need to go, Addie.” Clay, Uncle Clayton’s only son, tapped me on the shoulder.

Our eyes locked and I could see a flicker of sadness in his. Was it the same sorrow I felt for the family connection we failed to share?

After Eric’s blunt departure, my cousins and I left for our meeting with David Darrow, Grandpa’s lawyer. Clay navigated the streets, double-parked and deposited his sisters and me in front of a large skyscraper in downtown Houston. We agreed to wait in the lobby while he garaged the van.

I reached the obsidian colored, double doors at the same time a tall, dark-haired man exited from the building. He and I collided and our collective load of papers littered the entry way.

I glared at him. “Ever hear of ladies first?”

“I’m sorry.” He smiled and handed me my stack of documents. “Here, these must be yours.” His bright, blue eyes turned violet as he looked down at me. “Addison Brown? Interesting name.”

Realizing my name was on one of the envelopes, I numbly mumbled, “Thanks.” I grabbed my stack from his hands, dismissed the event and entered the building.

Perched far above the busy streets in the twenty-two story high-rise, I sat across from three near strangers who were also my first cousins, Melissa Raye, Susan Westgate and Clay Barnes. *Exactly what am I doing there?* Except

for Melissa, I hardly knew these people. The relationship of Grandpa's three children was a mystery, at least to me.

Eric and I may fight because he wanted to dominate my life and I did not intend to let him. In spite of that, though, I knew if I ever needed him, he'd be there and I wasn't so sure my mother had the same familiarity with her brothers.

Like an exotic blend of aromatic tea, my family and their history was steeped in secrets and the resulting questions they generated. The only person with the answers, my grandfather, was gone. As he would say, "A full measure of confusion," laced my life. I'd waited too long to ask why my mother and her brothers were never part of each other's lives. I recalled them and their families in the shadows of my childhood. No one knew better than I, how the longing for family crept into the depths of my heart but I made a considerable effort to cloak my desires.

When David Darrow turned from the wall safe behind his over-sized, over-priced mahogany desk, I felt my world shift a little more off-center. It had been slowly sliding away from its focal point for some time. "Addison, since you're executrix, your grandfather wanted you to have this." Mr. Darrow, spoke slowly as he extended a square, tortoiseshell box. Its sides showed signs of the patina caused by the hands of many generations.

"What is it?"

He moved closer to the table and set the box in front of me. "There are some papers in there you should see. The box contains mostly old letters which were important to your grandfather." I instinctively reached for the top to open it. Mr. Darrow covered the lid with his large hand. "You don't need to look at them here but he requested you go over them together. *All* of you." He nodded at my cousins.

He made it sound as if we were close but the previous day at our grandfather's funeral was the first time we'd seen each other in years. Now, I sat alone at a small table

facing Mr. Darrow's desk. Mel, Clay and Susan had planted themselves together on a soft, buttery leather couch. They were smiling faces from Christmas cards and summer letters. We all looked enough alike to be brothers and sisters, not cousins, scattered, until yesterday.

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My thoughts floated to the service at the cemetery, we had stood silently at his graveside as the minister spoke of our grandfather. Fine man. Leader of the community. Worthy citizen.

"To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven," the pastor quoted from his well-worn Bible. "A time to be born and a time to die."

One by one, we waited to place red carnations on our grandfather's casket, mine devoid of leaves, as I'd nervously picked them off during the homily. The other spicy scented, crimson blossom in my hand was for the sixth cousin, whom I'd failed to locate. The spreading oak branches above us offered shade but the humid air surrounded us like a velvet bag with the drawstring closing at our throats. A breeze would have helped; however, I couldn't blame the weather on the inability to take a full breath. Empty. Because of choices made by our parents, we were separated. What had happened? Could this generation change things? Or would the emptiness remain and the secrets be kept? Had his passing brought us together for a reason?

The Barnes' cousins stood on one side of Grandfather's grave. They were Clayton's children. Uncle Clayton and Lyndie, his wife, were killed in a plane crash while visiting Europe.

Eric stood next to me across from them. He usually avoided such events and surprised me when he wanted to come. And last, but in my estimation not least, I stood, Addie Brown. We were Margaret's children. Our parents slipped from our lives too early. The year Eric joined a fledgling computer company and I started college, Dad died on an engineering job in South America, a

mountainside cave-in. In less than a few seconds, my father's life was engulfed; mine, too, it sometimes seemed. When the earth cracked and took him away, a fissure developed in my world and my landslide began. I became the caretaker for my frail mother. Two years later, she withered and died. The doctor said pneumonia but I think it was more like a broken heart. It was at that point Grandpa told me, "Listen. Honey, you've mourned long enough, put all that unhappiness behind you. It's your time to dance." But my own secret kept me from dancing.

After her death and my graduation from college, I became an associate at Docustore, where I worked in a unique, but underpaid, position reconditioning and restoring ancient Egyptian documents. I loved my job, but I couldn't see my future going anywhere, especially after I didn't take an employment offer in San Francisco. In a rare moment of impetuosity, I quit.

Exactly six weeks later, I'd had the end all of end all scenes with my boyfriend, Jim, and abruptly concluded our relationship. Something I should have done months earlier but I had too many unanswered questions. We'd long ago hit a snag on the river of romance when he told me his work was far more important than mine and he needed to stay grounded in San Jose.

Then, Grandfather died. I was numb. No job, no boyfriend and a mountain of guilt I hadn't spent more time with my beloved grandpa. A few more pebbles slid away.

The service ended as the soloist sang, "Shall We Gather at the River." I looked across the neatly trimmed carpet of green to tiny yellow rosebushes dotting the parkway, the same type of roses that grew in Grandpa's yard. Another mourner, a hundred yards away, looked in our direction. Then he stooped and brushed the leaves from a large, marble marker.

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"Ms. Brown?" David Darrow said, interrupting my thoughts. "Shall we continue?"

“Yes. Please read the will.” I was surprised to hear I was appointed executrix. I had thought it should have been the oldest, Clay but this was all a plan of our grandfather’s design. From our long conversations, he knew my work demanded careful restoration of something threatened by its fragility. At this moment nothing was more fragile than our family. He’d handed me the reins and I took them without hesitation.

The reading turned out as Eric expected, the house and its contents, a bank account with \$2,000, and the box David Darrow had placed in front of me. A box full of more secrets.

As the four of us rose to leave, I made one last query. “Are you aware there’s one more cousin, Mr. Darrow?” I looked at him hesitantly wondering if anyone else had found our missing link.

“Yes.” He answered slowly, “Your Uncle Joseph’s son, Donald.” He looked up, his hand still resting on the lid of the box. “I’ll set up a bank account and his part will be kept for him until he’s found.”

“Do you have any idea where he is?” Clay’s masculine voice resonated from the other side of the room. He startled me. Since we’d been introduced to the lawyer, none of my cousins had said a word.

“You looked for him, too?” I questioned Clay.

“We all have.” Mel spoke up as Susan solemnly nodded her head.

That simple statement made me realize we weren’t such strangers after all. We’d all looked for Donnie but finding him would be difficult. He’d struck out on his own and disappeared.

My thoughts drifted back to the funeral where I’d uncurled my fingers from the carnation that belonged to Donnie. I deposited it into the abyss. The act drove home the finality of Grandpa being gone and the realization I might not have the affinity I hungered for. But I had a family, it seemed, in these new faces staring at me. The landslide had stopped, for now.

## Chapter Two

While Clay slowly eased his van back onto the freeway, I took a few minutes to evaluate my cousins. My new family had adhered to me as easily as I did to them. Prying into history gave me a second sense to look beyond what was right in front of me. The four of us were alike in so many ways, yet so different. We were all hungry for one another and yet, until Grandpa's death brought us together, we hadn't explored the possibility of family unity.

Clay, who was well over six feet tall with dark, wavy hair and olive skin, had a macho quality about him. His attire was impeccable right down to Bacco Bucci slip-ons. Stress had pulled lines into Clay's face and his muscles sagged with the gravity of age but he was, in a rugged sort of way, good looking. He had a strong resemblance to my brother, Eric, who was slightly shorter than Clay, but even with the slender build inherited from our father's side of the family Eric had a lot of the Barnes' characteristics. I wondered if Donnie looked like either of them. Clay was a good man with a heart as big as they come.

All of us sported varying shades of brown hair. However, Susan's was highlighted with blonde. She was cute and bouncy. Her unruly, curly hair framed her face and her smile gave her an impish quality. Her suntanned, soccer-mom appearance gave her a straightforwardness which was contradictory to her reticent, quiet behavior. As the baby of the family, she was coddled by her siblings.

Mel, on the other hand, was pure business. If her hair wasn't twisted up in a bun, it was securely clipped at

her neckline. She'd worn a peach colored suit that morning which clearly spelled power. She knew what she was doing and where she was going. I also knew where she'd been and I admired what she'd made of herself. Mel could have been a cover model if she'd chosen to go that route and to earn a little extra while she was in college she'd registered with an agency. Her glamour and beauty brought her many print model offers during her years at the Kenan-Flagler Business School, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but she wanted a career in business, and not just any business, but one with her name on the door. She and I had corresponded over the past few years. I found her e-mail address shortly after my mother died and searched out Mel's real estate firm on the internet from the return address on the sympathy card. At first, we discussed the weather and what I was going to wear to the next museum opening. Then we got deeper into each other's lives, yet we never discussed why our families weren't connected. Why her father and my mother were never close. They had been once, though, I remembered.

Grandpa's box lay on my lap and I picked it up and shook it with the same enthusiasm as a child at a birthday party. The case, the color of cognac and chocolate, trimmed out in ivory at the lip, measured eight or ten inches square.

"Clay. Why don't we stop by Burger World on the way back to Grandpa's? We'll look at whatever is in this while we eat." I reached over and nudged his shoulder from the backseat.

He rolled his eyes. "Burgers? Please."

"Okay, it is either that or Chinese. Take your pick."

"All right. Hamburgers, it is but this is the only time."

"Excuse me," I laughed. "I forgot we have a great chef in our presence." He owned a restaurant at a resort in Arizona where he catered to the expensive tastes of the wealthy. My opinion was if you didn't need a couple of

napkins to keep the grease off your fingers, how good could it be?

Clay slowed down and turned into the fast food drive-through lane and while we waited in line, quickly jotted down our requests on the back of an envelop he retrieved from the dashboard. After he ordered, he said, "That reminds me. I'll stop by the market and get something for dinner."

"Let's look at the box first," Mel broke in. "We have lots of planning to do this afternoon. This week is going to be a short one."

Clay down-shifted his van and looked over in Mel's direction. "I'll do the yard work and you, Addie and Susan can do the house. Is that fair?"

"It is more than fair to me," I answered for her.

From my vantage point in the backseat, I surveyed the well-manicured lawns in the neighborhood. From my summer visits, a childhood snapshot developed. Grandpa's precision cut grass carpeted their front yard and Grandma's tiny yellow roses beckoned me as a seven-year-old as I hauled my suitcase up the walkway. I had felt so much love when I was here. Now secrecy defined my return. There were no secrets then.

"The yard's a mess. The next-door neighbor, Mrs. Jenkins, told me her two grandsons would be here for the summer starting tomorrow. Maybe we can get them to help you. Did Grandpa even have a working lawnmower?" My question went unanswered as we rounded the corner.

Once we were around the kitchen table, burgers and fries in hand, I opened the box. "A bunch of old letters." I let out a sigh of disappointment.

Susan looked anxiously at the pile in front of me. "Read them."

"Okay. I don't know where to start." I rummaged around in the box and retrieved one dated September 13, 1946. "This one is addressed to Grandpa from a Bud Barnes, Cleburne, Texas."

*Dear Addison:*

*It was good to see you yesterday at Mother's funeral. You asked me if I knew anything about Mom and Dad and the family history.*

*Mother's name was Annie Taylor. She married Harold Barnes in Texas on December 23, 1875. The Barnes family owned land around Alvarado. The cemetery is still there. Annie and Harold Barnes had ten children. I'm the oldest and your father the youngest.*

*Our grandfather, John Barnes, and his brothers took a herd of cattle to California in the summer of 1867. After being gone over two years, they buried their profit, mostly in gold bars. It was never found.*

*In 1889, the entire family including Grandfather Taylor made another trip to Seattle. I remember the trip well. At thirteen, I was thrilled to be considered old enough to ride with the men.*

*We came back to Texas, sailing from San Francisco. Your father was born in Barnesville in 1893. Mom and Dad remained there until their deaths.*

*Sincerely,*

*Uncle Bud*

"What gold?" Clay said.

"Is that the only part you heard?" I laughed. "Can you imagine being gone three years on a cattle drive?"

"What gold?" Clay repeated.

"I'm surprised you don't know the story. I've heard it all my life. Mom said your dad and Uncle Joseph went to look for it as well as Grandpa." Why did my family keep so many things concealed?

Mel motioned with one of her now limp fries. "What else is in that box?"

"Nothing much. More old letters. Here's one from my mom, a couple from your dad and even one from me. I must have been about six. Look at the printing."

Clay furrowed his brow and reached for the letter. "Why is the one letter so important Grandpa would have the box at the lawyer's?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's just family memorabilia. It gives us a little of our history. Oh, well." I shoved the container to the edge of the table. "Let's get our plan together for cleaning this place. Clay will do the yards. What about you, Mel? Any favorite place you want to tackle?"

"I'll do the general clean-up in the house. After we get out what we want, we might as well sell this place furnished instead of having two separate sales."

"Great idea. I'm glad you thought of it." Mel knew the logistics from her real estate background to make the sale work in our favor. "Okay, Susan, that leaves the attic for the two of us."

Clay positioned himself at the refrigerator, door open, making a list. "Hey, SusieQ. Let's go to the market. We can leave these two alone for a couple of hours. They seem to manage to talk about almost anything. Especially, things of no importance."

I bounced an empty Burger World bag off the back of Clay's head as he went out the kitchen door. I was truly amazed how quickly we'd become family. I did need to talk to Mel. I knew she'd heard the story of the gold before.

After the screen door banged shut, I leaned in closer. "Mel, what do you know about the gold?"

"Dad mentioned it, once. He and Uncle Joseph went out to Barnesville and looked for a while. They were in their early thirties. I thought it was just a lark. I urged Dad to tell me more but he changed the subject. Something about the trip bothered him."

"How come Clay and Susan don't remember your dad's trip?"

"Clay was in the army at the time and Susan was just a kid. I always hung around Dad, absorbed his every word. I never thought about it until now."

"Grandpa went to look for the gold, too. Do you think it's still there?"