

TRACIE PETERSON

LOVE on the SANTA FE

Along the Rio Grande



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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Peterson, Tracie, author.

Title: Along the Rio Grande / Tracie Peterson.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, a division of
Baker Publishing Group, [2022] | Series: Love on the Santa Fe ; 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2021042632 | ISBN 9780764237294 (trade paperback) | ISBN
9780764237300 (cloth) | ISBN 9780764237317 (large print) | ISBN 9781493435968
(ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Romance fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3566.E7717 A797 2022 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021042632>

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Cover design by LOOK Design Studio

Cover photography by Aimee Christenson

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22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Dedicated to the men and women of
the Santa Fe Railway and all of its divisions.
With special thanks to those members of the
Horny Toad Division.

1



JULY 1899

SAN MARCIAL, NEW MEXICO TERRITORY

Susanna Ragsdale Jenkins stepped off the Santa Fe passenger train and sighed. The breeze outside was only mildly helpful. Inside the stuffy cars of the train, women had actually fainted from the heat. Susanna's mother had to be revived no fewer than ten times. Of course, that was typical for her overly dramatic mother. Gladys Ragsdale did love attention.

Susanna looked around as her father assisted Mother from the train. Her brother, Gary, was already hailing a porter for their bags. At eighteen, nothing seemed to deter him. He was energetic and impressionable, as well as foolish and thoughtless. He'd barely made it through school, and as the spoiled and pampered son of wealthy parents, no one really cared. Susanna had watched her parents try to manage him, but Gary had no respect for either of them. All they had taught him was how to live a life of privilege and the expectation that someone, somewhere, would provide the means for his desires. With that no longer the case, Gary had become even more headstrong and impatient. It was one of the reasons Susanna had agreed to accompany her family to New Mexico.

That, and she saw it as the easiest way to avoid the promise she'd made her dying husband.

She buried that thought deep as Gary approached.

"I'm going to see what kind of fun is to be had in this town." Beneath his stylish straw hat, his golden-brown hair was dripping sweat.

Susanna fixed him with a stern look and shook her head. "No, you will help Father get Mother settled at the hotel. Then you will make certain our bags are delivered to the hotel."

He looked at her for a moment as if trying to decide whether he'd go along with this new order. For a full minute, Susanna wondered if there was going to be trouble, but when Mother cried out and began to crumple to her knees, Gary went to help her.

What was Uncle Harrison thinking, sending a pair like her parents to manage a hotel in the middle-of-nowhere New Mexico? Susanna was appalled. San Marcial was a railroad town—a headquarters for the Rio Grande Division of the Santa Fe Railway.

"You have wasted your inheritance by investing in schemes that you were warned against. Time and again you put your family in a state of diminished financial security, always relying on me to straighten out the situation. Well, no more," Uncle Harrison had said on their last night in Topeka. *"I have no choice but to cut you off from further financial support and make you work for a living."*

Susanna could still hear her mother's shriek of distaste. *"I wasn't born to be married to a man who has to do physical labor! How embarrassing! Oh, the thought of it is enough to give me apoplexy."*

"Well, have your fits somewhere besides my hotel sitting room," Harrison Ragsdale had demanded.

Susanna had been invited to the meeting only because her uncle knew she could help keep some sense of order. Hav-

ing lived her first year of mourning with her in-laws, she had agreed to move with her parents to New Mexico and see them settled at the hotel her uncle had built. But her years living with her husband had helped her forget just how bad her family could be. Now that they were broke, it was bound to be even worse.

Susanna swept pieces of soot and ash from her black gown. She had already determined that this would be her last day of full mourning. It had been over a year, after all, and she hated black. The constant reminder of what she'd lost—what she would never have again.

“Where is this supposed hotel?” her mother asked as Father and Gary supported her on either side.

“Uncle Harrison said it was two blocks from the train. Easy walking.” Susanna motioned for the porter Gary had given up on securing.

A black man came to her immediately. “Yes, ma’am, how may I help you?”

“We’re the Ragsdale family, and I need to arrange for the delivery of our luggage. We are staying at the Grand Hotel. It’s new, and my family has come here to open it.”

“Yes, ma’am. We saw it bein’ built. Mighty fine place just over yonder.” He pointed to the northeast. There, clearly visible from the train station, was a large, white-washed two-story building with a huge sign that read *Grand Hotel*.

She studied it for a moment, then nodded. It looked just as Uncle Harrison had described. A regal, clean, and very welcoming sight.

She turned back to the porter and smiled. “Would you arrange for our things?” She reached into her purse, pulled out fifty cents, and handed it to him. “Have the baggageman bring them to the hotel’s front desk, please.”

He gave her a slight bow. “I’ll see to it.”

“Thank you.” She left him to manage the situation and

caught up with her folks and brother. “The bags are handled and should be delivered shortly. There is the hotel.”

“I cannot live in a hotel as the wife of a . . . *manager*,” her mother declared. “The shame is too great.”

“Mother, we’ve already discussed this in Topeka, on the train, and now upon our arrival. The fact of the matter is that you have no choice. Now, let us at least go and see what the accommodations are like.” Susanna looked at her father. Sweat poured from his head and had already soaked the neckline of his shirt. None of them looked like anything special. Just a bedraggled crew of travelers who had lost their way.

Susanna led their parade, crossing Railroad Avenue at Zimmerman Street and then walking up to First Street. She raised her parasol for the short walk. The sun was merciless, and she knew she would burn to a crisp otherwise. Her fair skin had always freckled easily, much to her mother’s disgust. A proper lady simply did not have freckles.

She reached the hotel well ahead of the others and tried the door. It was locked, and Father had both sets of keys. By the time her family joined her, Mother was sobbing softly into her handkerchief, and Gary was itching to take off and explore.

“I just want to see what’s available. We’re going to need food no matter what.” He started to leave, and Susanna called him back.

“We’ll eat at the Harvey House once we get settled. Stay here and help when the bags come. We don’t know what to expect. There will be plenty of time to explore later.”

Gary pulled off his hat, giving an exaggerated sigh. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. “You aren’t happy unless you’re bossing me around.”

Susanna ignored him. “Father, the door is locked, and you have the only keys. I suggest you give me one set so that we each have one, since I’m going to be helping you keep the front desk.” She closed her parasol and gave him a smile.

“Of course. Of course.”

Father produced the two keys and handed one to her. He didn't seem to know what to do with the other one. Susanna finally rolled her eyes and opened the door herself.

The smell of new paint wafted out the door as she walked inside. Everything was pristine and bright, painted in yellow with white trim. She made her way to the front desk. Uncle Harrison had told them they'd find the family living quarters behind it.

She tried the door to the right and found a closet with supplies and bedding. The door on the left, however, opened onto a living area.

“Here we are.” She looked around the room. There was ample space for two people, to be certain. Less for the four who had arrived.

“This will not do,” Mother declared. “There is only one large room that combines everything. We would have to have the cook in here, working in the kitchen, while we tried our best to relax . . . or worse, entertain.”

“Mother, I do not believe we have the budget either for a cook or to entertain.” Susanna knew this change of financial solvency had wounded her mother dearly. Gladys Ragsdale had always believed herself to be upper society, and the fact that her husband had lost all of their money was something she could not reconcile.

“You are determined to kill me.” Her mother collapsed onto a cushioned chair. “This isn't even comfortable, and this town is in the middle of nowhere. It feels like a furnace in here.”

“I'm sure once we get things organized,” Susanna's father began, “it will be better. The nights will cool off surprisingly fast. Everyone says so.”

Mother's disgruntled huff suggested otherwise. “We don't even have electricity.”

“But they are putting it in very soon.”

“There are two bedrooms in the back,” Gary announced. “They’re very small. Both have two little beds.”

“I told Uncle I would pay for a separate hotel room, but he wouldn’t hear of it.” Susanna began taking off her black gloves. “I’m to have room 101.”

“A room to yourself? How very spoiled.” Her mother’s tone was accusing.

“I suppose you and I could share one of these bedrooms and Father and Gary the other, but it’s hardly appropriate for Gary and me to share a room at our age.” Susanna wondered what her mother would say to that idea.

She didn’t have long to wait.

“This is uncalled for, Herbert. We cannot live this way. I won’t live this way!”

“And where will you go?” Father asked, finally reaching the end of his patience.

Everyone looked at Mother, which only increased her discomfort. She burst into tears and made a dash for one of the bedrooms.

“Oh, look, we have a private bath,” Gary announced, opening the final door.

“Yes, Uncle Harrison said there would be one,” Susanna replied. She set her purse and gloves aside and began to unpin her hat. With that accomplished, she put it with her other things and went to the windows. “We need to open these and get a bit of air in here. That’s bound to help our moods.”

The baggageman arrived, and Gary hurried off to help with that. Susanna raised the first window and moved on to the next.

“Your mother is very upset, and I cannot blame her,” Father said. “She had the best of everything in Topeka.”

“And perhaps one day she’ll have the best of everything again,” Susanna declared. “For now, however, we must be patient and work hard. She has never had to do that, and it will not come easy to her.”

Her father shook his head. “I was so sure of that investment. If I hadn’t been, I never would have risked the house and everything else. You must understand. It was a sure thing.”

Susanna straightened. “What I understand is that it *wasn’t* a sure thing. Had it been, you wouldn’t have lost everything and be standing here now in San Marcial, New Mexico.”

“No, that’s for sure. Your mother is right—it is a godforsaken place.”

“I don’t think so.”

Susanna moved on to the next window as Gary carried in the first three bags. They all belonged to her parents, as would most of the next ten. Mother had crammed as much of their Topeka life into those cases as she could, knowing that everything else would have to be sold to cover their embarrassing losses. Thankfully, Uncle Harrison was handling the sale of their things so that Mother needn’t be completely covered in shame.

“I should help Gary,” her father said, looking to Susanna as if she might correct him.

“Yes, I think that would be good, since most of the luggage belongs to you and Mother. You’ll need to give the baggage-man a gratuity.”

Her father grumbled something, but Susanna couldn’t make it out.

By the time Susanna had all the windows open, Gary and Father had moved all of the bags into the living quarters except the two small bags and large trunk that belonged to Susanna. Those they’d left by the front desk.

“Should we unpack?” Father asked, seeming confused.

“No,” Susanna said. “It’s getting late. I think we should gather Mother and go for dinner. Getting some food in our stomachs will help us think more clearly. Then we can decide what to do first.”

It was easier said than done. Mother wanted no part in leaving

the hotel, but at the same time, Susanna knew she was famished. They had enjoyed Harvey House food all along the railroad from Topeka. It had been the one thing with which Mother hadn't found fault. Each table was elegantly set with fine linen and crystal. The men were made to wear suit jackets in the dining rooms, and the service was that of an elegant restaurant, even in the smallest Kansas town.

When they finally had Mother on her feet and willing to walk to the Harvey House, Susanna was ready to be done with all of them. Their selfishness and unwillingness to take responsibility for their own actions was more than she could bear. She knew they were more than a little embarrassed at their reduced status, but it was ridiculous to pretend it was all a mistake. Susanna's father had been mismanaging his inheritance since it had been in his possession. He thought himself something of a grand entrepreneur—a financial baron who was able to turn pennies into dollars, lead into gold. But instead, all Susanna had seen was her father continually making poor choices that his brother had to cover and make good on. Now Uncle Harrison had put a stop to his protection and had given his brother an honest-to-goodness job running a hotel. It was quite the departure.

Susanna had no idea what had transpired between the brothers in discussion, but she knew her uncle had reached his limit of understanding and sympathy. He had called Susanna to a private meeting, where he talked to her at length about what had happened to her parents. Susanna had been living with her in-laws and knew very little. Her parents were never ones to discuss money.

News of her family's crisis, however, was rapidly spreading all over town. Her father had heavily invested in a railroad that turned out to be nothing but paper and the imagination of a conman who was now long gone. Father had given everything and was left with nothing. Even the deed to the house had been sold. Uncle Harrison had tried to advise him, as had others,

but Father wouldn't listen, and perhaps that was the reason her uncle was ready to wash his hands of the entire matter.

Who could blame him? Since they'd been boys, her father had the reputation of listening to no one. He loved to find what he thought to be lucrative deals, and from time to time they actually worked out. Of course, this only encouraged him to seek out more arrangements, and usually those fell apart. Still, he maintained a reputation of being a man capable of great risk.

Seated in the Harvey House, Susanna was relieved to feel that the temperatures were a bit cooler. She placed her order for iced tea and baked chicken and marveled at the efficiency of the Harvey House waitresses in their crisp uniforms of black and white.

It wasn't long before the table was filled with plates of steaming food and iced drinks. Gary dug right in to his heaping pile of potatoes and gravy. Mother gave a sniff. She sampled the tea and seemed to find it acceptable. And why not? As Susanna understood it, the coffee and tea were made from water that had been tanked in from Kansas City. Every Harvey House along the line made their coffee and tea this way so that no matter where a traveler happened upon the line, they would have the same quality and delicious taste.

Susanna felt the tension in her neck begin to ease as she thought of the possibility of a bath and a long sleep. She had been so busy the last two weeks, helping her family get ready for this move, and it seemed she hadn't had a moment to herself. The last year had been hard. Losing Mark to influenza was ever at the forefront of her thoughts. They had been the best of friends since grade school. Now he was gone, and while Susanna felt that she'd dealt with the first impositions of that loss, she was uncertain about her next stage of life. Mark had insisted she remarry, and she had promised him she would, even knowing she never could. The hole left in her heart wasn't likely to be filled by another man, and if it wasn't to be filled,

then why bother to marry at all? Still, she felt a sense of guilt, knowing she had given him her word.

“This beef is delicious,” her father declared. “This man Harvey knows what he’s doing when it comes to food. I wonder if he’s ever thought about expanding to other train lines. It seems foolish to stay with just the Santa Fe.”

Many of her father’s ventures had started with less, and Susanna moved the conversation to something else. “Do you recall when the first reservations at the hotel are slated to begin?”

Her father looked up and shook his head. “I can’t say that I do. Harrison wrote it all in the paperwork. I shall have to sit down with the books and papers and study them.”

“Well, I believe you said the first reservations were to begin Monday. That gives us just two days to make certain everything is in order.” Susanna cut into her chicken. It looked perfect.

“Two days to get that place into shape for a grand opening hardly seems enough time,” her mother said, lifting her chin defiantly. “I don’t see how we can be expected to manage. We’ll need to hire workers.”

“Mother, we are the workers.”

The older woman began tearing up again and dabbed her eyes with her linen napkin.

Susanna shook her head. “But we will be working together. Tomorrow is Saturday, and we will be able to divide up the work and see what is left to be done. It appears everything is in order. We shall have to make the beds and perhaps scout out some fresh flowers. I like the little arrangements they have here in the Harvey House. Perhaps we can ask where they’ve acquired them.”

Mother turned to her husband. “This is so unfair. Herbert, I cannot live in a hotel. I’m sorry. I simply cannot.”

“What do you suggest I do, my dear?” Father said with a sigh.

She straightened. “Buy me a house. At the very least, rent me one. I shall be completely at peace if you just manage that.”

Susanna's father looked at his wife and then back to his plate. "I'll do what I can, dear."



Herbert Ragsdale knew there was very little he could do to please his wife. She had already threatened to leave him for the comfort of friends. The entire situation was a mistake, and he'd made certain she knew that. Harrison was merely trying to impose his will on them, as he and Father had always done where Herbert was concerned. Surely this was all just a grand joke on Harrison's part to teach Herbert yet another lesson that he somehow believed had been missed.

Pushing a slice of the Harvey House's famous pie around his plate, Herbert found it difficult to look his family in the eye. Because what if it wasn't a grand scheme? What if he'd truly lost everything? What if Harrison wasn't just pretending that Herbert was broke?

Herbert had watched the bank officials post foreclosure signs on his property. He'd seen the auction people come and start categorizing his beloved furnishings. The bank manager himself had collected all of the jewelry he and Gladys owned. If this was just a scheme to shame his younger brother, Harrison had gone to complete extremes.

A sense of dread washed over Herbert. Was it possible it was all real? Could Harrison really allow Herbert to lose all that he'd worked so hard to maintain? He put down his fork and noted that his wife was watching him apprehensively. Even Susanna and Gary had a look in their eyes that he couldn't quite identify. Was it betrayal? Did they feel he'd failed them? Surely not. How could they? He might have trusted the wrong person, but he had done nothing wrong. One of these days he would make the right investment and win them a fortune.

He forced a smile, but they only looked away.

Would they always believe he'd failed them? Curse Harrison for putting that idea in their minds, if so. This was all his brother's game. That was all it was. And the sooner Harrison showed up in San Marcial, the sooner Herbert would set him straight.



A week later, after a quiet but successful hotel opening, Susanna was determined to find her parents proper accommodations.

The townsfolk seemed enthusiastic about their new hotel, and so far there had been half a dozen guests with the promise of more. Susanna had even managed to get into something of a routine. Each morning she went to the rooms that had been vacated by guests. She opened the window to air out the room, then stripped the covers and hung them over the foot rail of the iron bed in order to air those as well. She then put the sheets and pillowcases into a pile for laundry. She dusted and swept and then moved on to the next room in order to let things settle before finally returning to make the beds with clean linen and close things back up. It seemed a good order in which to handle matters.

But even with this sense of accomplishment and organization, Susanna couldn't ignore that her mother had caused something of a personal riot in the family. Mother hated the hotel and simply would not live there a moment longer. She'd already gone to the train station four times to check the schedule for trains back to Topeka.

There were certain things her mother would complain about for a time and then let go, but Susanna knew the idea of a proper home wasn't one of them. Mother was impossible to please. She complained or cried from morning to night. Susanna had done her best to reason with her, but Mother wouldn't hear it.

She just kept on with the demand that someone needed to find her another place to live.

“I wasn’t born to this kind of life,” Mother would reiterate. “I cannot bear it. My constitution is such that I will surely die.”

Day after day she remained in her room, crying or raging. From time to time she came out long enough to make everyone miserable. Susanna found herself reaching a breaking point, even though she knew this was Uncle Harrison’s punishment for her parents.

She had brought a good amount of money with her, although she hadn’t yet had time to go to the bank. Between her mother’s fits and her father’s incompetency, Susanna found it necessary to do most of the chores to see the hotel properly run. Once Father was able to check in a guest and direct them to their room, he took over the front desk, but that didn’t help with the laundry and cleaning responsibilities, which her mother should have had to do. Mother, however, refused, leaving Susanna to work alone. She rarely addressed Susanna directly unless it was to nag and whine about their living accommodations or lack of luxury.

“This is completely uncalled for,” Mother announced as Susanna ironed sheets one day. “We are above this kind of thing. You must contact Harrison and demand what is rightfully yours,” she said when Father entered the room.

“Maybe you should contact him and tell him yourself,” Father replied, plopping onto the small sofa.

Mother began to cry again, and Susanna knew a great argument was soon to follow. Mother would tell Father he was a fool to allow his brother to do such an abominable thing to him. That a competent man wouldn’t let himself be pushed around.

Susanna focused on the ironing as her mother began her tirade. Father wasn’t truly a bad person. He was just unwise. He was fooled by his own sense of importance and supposed wisdom. Just as her mother had illusions of being an important

member of high society, her father firmly believed himself to be a financial master. This setback was just a minor inconvenience, and as soon as his brother was able to straighten things out in Topeka, all would be forgotten.

She sighed. Her parents had a strange inability to face reality. But, of course, others had aided in their delusion. Even Uncle Harrison admitted that much. That was, in fact, why he felt he must take a hard stand now. Otherwise, Gary would turn out to be no different.

Poor Gary. Susanna had tried to speak to him, but this situation had changed him. He was angry and disrespectful. He blamed Father for ruining his life and future plans. He had been bound for college in the fall, without direction or purpose. His grades were abominable, and had it not been for the promise of hefty donations by their father, Gary wouldn't have even qualified for attendance. Now, with the money gone and no donations forthcoming, Gary's invitation had been rescinded, and college was no longer an option.

Susanna really couldn't blame her brother for his anger. She was beginning to have plenty of her own. If she'd been smart, she would have remained in Topeka with her in-laws.