

TRACIE PETERSON

LOVE on the SANTA FE

Beyond the Desert Sands



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Prologue



SILVER VEIL, NEW MEXICO TERRITORY
JUNE 1904

Isabella Garcia followed her father into his spacious library, never once stopping her pleading.

“Papi, you must hear me. I’m eighteen years old—old enough to make such a decision for myself. You know how much I hate this place. You forced me to leave the home I loved in California and dragged me here years ago. I have survived it only because you allowed me to spend this summer and last with Aunt Josephina back in California.”

Daniel Garcia fixed his daughter with a stern look. It was obvious he was already tired of this topic. “Be that as it may, Isabella, you cannot live with my sister. I will not allow it, and neither will Josephina. She understands the situation and knows that I want only the best for you.”

Isabella planted her hands on her hips. “How can this be best? You have forced me to endure this tiny silver-mining town that you created in the middle of the desert. I have lived here for eight years, and the only thing that has gotten me

through are the visits to Aunt Josephina back on the family estate.” She began to pace. “Honestly, I don’t know why you are being so pigheaded, Papi. I have been a dutiful daughter. I have done as you demanded. I endured being torn from my home—the only place I ever loved—and brought here. I have been obedient to my tutors and music teachers. I have done all that was asked of me, and now *I* ask for something, and you refuse. You are cruel and heartless.”

“I am neither, Isabella,” her father said, his tone betraying his exasperation. He sank into his desk chair and ran his hand through black hair that was turning gray much too quickly. “You aren’t even eighteen and hardly old enough to know what is best for your future. You have not yet reached your majority, and as such, you must live by my rules. I have tried to make your burden lighter by allowing you to spend summers with your aunt, but there is much here that you still need to learn.”

“Such as what?” She stepped closer to his desk. “And please don’t tell me how I need to know the people better and to serve them with greater respect. I care nothing for Silver Veil and the industry you’ve created. I love California. I love the beautiful people there and the parties and comforts that are at my fingertips. I love Aunt Josephina and the horse-breeding estate that my great-grandfather built. That is home to me now, as it was when I was a girl. Why are you determined to keep me from it?”

He sighed. “In time you will understand. Your mother and I need you here. We want you to know what it is to care for others. The people of Silver Veil are dependent upon us for their jobs, their homes, everything. You must learn to be a good caretaker.”

“I don’t wish to be their caretaker, Papi. I never asked for that job. I want to live in my ancestral home. It is my destiny—

my legacy from our ancestors—yet you act as though it is something shameful.”

“I never said it was shameful. But there is more to it than you seem to understand. When you have wealth and property, you owe a certain amount of your success to the people who help you—who work for you and with you. You act as though money comes up from the ground or rains down from the skies for the taking.” He smiled and shook his head. “My dear Isabella, you are a fortunate girl. You have been born to blessings, and as such, you must learn the value of blessing others.”

“Then let me bless them in California!” She raised her voice, then lowered it just as quickly. “Papi, I know I seem overly passionate, but that is because it means so much to me. The estate is where I belong. My friends are there. I have no friends here.”

“That is how you have chosen it to be. There are people here who would love to be your friend, but you pulled away and hid yourself here at the house or out riding your horse.”

“I didn’t want to make friends because . . . well, it hurt so much when you took me away from them in California. I don’t ever want to hurt that much again.”

Her father’s expression softened, and for a moment, Isabella thought she’d won him over.

But then he stood and fixed her with a look she knew well: He would hear nothing more about it. “The matter is closed. You will be allowed to spend the summer with my sister, but then you will return in the fall to help your mother as she works with the people of Silver Veil. This is my decision. If you refuse to do things my way, you will forfeit your summer in California.”

Isabella said nothing as he left the library. Her hands

gripped her skirts, and her mouth was clamped shut so tightly that her jaw ached. How could he be so heartless? He was impossible.

She wouldn't give up. She would ask again and again, until he let her return to California for good.

"You are a terrible father and a horrible man," she said, shaking her fist at the door.

"I think he's a rather good man."

She startled and whirled around to see a man coming around the corner of one of the bookshelves. She didn't know who he was, but it was clear he'd overheard her conversation.

"And I think you are a rather rude one." As he drew near, she caught a whiff of his cologne. It was musky and sweet, not at all unpleasant, but she decided then and there that she hated it.

He gave her a lopsided smile. "I've been called worse."

"I'm sure you have. You are a terrible person to listen to a private conversation between a father and daughter."

"You are perhaps correct that I am rude—even terrible—for not making myself known. But you, on the other hand, are a spoiled, ungrateful child, and I hardly feel obligated to explain myself to you." He picked up his hat from a nearby table. "Now, I will excuse myself. Your father and I have business to discuss regarding the spur line into Silver Veil. I'm sure your little episode has probably made him forget, but I'm anxious to see our business concluded so I can return to, shall I say, a less confrontational atmosphere."

"You are incorrigible. I hope you do go quickly and never return, Mister . . ."

"Bailey. Aaron Bailey."

"Well, good riddance, Mr. Bailey. I hope never to see you

again.” She started to storm out of the room, then paused.
“And I hate your cologne!”

He chuckled. “Don’t you mean that you hate me?”

She narrowed her eyes and gave him a curt nod. “Yes! I do.”

1



CALIFORNIA **DECEMBER 1911**

Isabella looked from her aunt Josephina to Diego Morales, the man she loved. “I don’t want to go. Surely now that I’m twenty-five, I can tell my father no.”

“I don’t think that would be wise, my dear. He still pays all of your bills and controls the inheritance your grandparents left you.” Aunt Josephina smiled in her motherly fashion. “It will all work out for the best, you’ll see. I promised your father I would come for a visit once I have concluded some business matters here. We’ll soon be together again.”

“It’s just not fair. I wanted to spend Christmas with Diego.” Isabella smiled at the dark-haired man. He was ten years her senior and so suave and sophisticated. Just one look from him gave her a shiver of delight.

She’d had a crush on him since childhood but had known it was true love for the last five years. She anxiously anticipated a proposal and had thought perhaps it would come on Christmas Eve. Now, however, standing at the depot, awaiting the train that would take her to Silver Veil for Christmas, she was more than a little frustrated. Gone were the

dreams of a romantic evening by the fireplace with Diego on one knee, promising to love her forever. Her father certainly knew how to ruin her life and had been doing so since she was ten years old. Fifteen years later, Isabella had thought she'd found a way to control her own life and rid herself of her father's interference, but it seemed it was not to be.

Her aunt stepped forward as the train whistle sounded. "You'll be boarding soon. I just want to tell you how much I love you and shall miss you." She embraced Isabella and held her close. "I know we shall be together again, but I want you to remember that God often takes our lives in directions we did not anticipate. No matter what happens, I want you to remember that such a thing doesn't mean God no longer loves us or cares for us."

"What are you saying, Aunt?" Isabella glanced from her aunt to the approaching train. Her father had arranged a private car at the end of the train for her comfort. At least that was something. She didn't give Aunt Josephina a chance to reply. "Lupe, do you have our things?"

Her maid struggled forward, carrying several bags. "I do, miss. I have all but the trunks. The baggageman arranged for those. He said he would see them put on the private car."

"He'd better." Isabella left her aunt and went to Diego. "I wish you were going with me."

He smiled. "That would be quite the grand adventure, eh?"

She wanted to melt into the wooden depot platform. "I will miss you so much. I can't believe it will be six weeks before I see you again. That seems much too long."

"The time will pass more quickly than you realize." He touched his index finger to her chin. "Be brave, my dearest. I will be here waiting for you."

It wasn't a proposal, but it was something of a promise.

Isabella smiled and touched her fingers to his cheek. “You had better be,” she teased.

“Isabella, there are people watching.” Aunt Josephina was a stickler for proper etiquette and allowed no public displays of affection.

Pulling away from Diego was hard, but Isabella stepped back, knowing it was for the best. “I will return as soon as possible. Father wants me there for the celebration of statehood. I cannot say why, but New Mexico becoming a state is important to him, and he demands it be important to me.”

Diego nodded but said nothing more. Isabella studied him for a long moment. He was tall and lean and wore a snug suit jacket that accented his broad shoulders and narrow hips. Most men wore boxier-cut coats, but Diego’s was especially tailored to fit him like a glove. Even the dusty-blue color was one that seemed designed for him alone. She’d never seen such a color on any other man.

The corner of his lip rose slightly as his gaze met hers. He no doubt knew that she was admiring him, and she knew he loved her attention. Isabella smiled and looked away. He was the handsomest man she had ever known, and she was delighted by the prospect of marrying him.

The steam train rolled past them, coming to a stop with the passenger cars lined up against the platform. The private car, however, was at the tail end, requiring Isabella and Lupe to descend the platform and walk to the back of the train.

“They could at least pull up far enough for our car to be at the platform,” Isabella said in disgust. She hated that she would have to risk her new wheat-colored silk traveling suit by walking along the tracks. She certainly didn’t want soot stains on the delicate, expensive material. She kissed her aunt. “I’ll return as soon as possible.”

Her aunt nodded but seemed to lack her usual enthusiasm.

“Remember, I shall come to be with you. I’m excited to see your father again. Your mother too.”

Isabella nodded.

The conductor approached. “Are you Miss Garcia?”

“I am.” She looked at the older man with a raised brow, questioning his interruption.

“I will escort you to your private car. Everything is in order and awaits you. I believe you will find yourself quite comfortable.”

“That remains to be seen, of course.” She looked at Diego. “I will eagerly count the days until we are together.”

“As will I, *mi amor*.”

She smiled and gave a slight nod, then looked at the conductor. “Please lead the way.”

He offered her his arm as they headed down the platform stairs toward the tracks. “The ground is a bit uneven.”

She took hold of him, carefully lifting her skirts to keep them from the ground. They reached the car, where a porter already waited with a small step to aid Isabella and Lupe in climbing onto the stairs of the train car. It was awkward, but there seemed to be no other choice.

Isabella mounted the stairs and made her way inside the private car. It was impressive, to say the least. Highly polished paneled wood lined the narrow corridor from the entrance into the grand salon, where expensive mahogany furnishings reflected the glow of lamplight. The shades and velvet draperies had been pulled to allow for absolute privacy—something Isabella appreciated greatly.

“There’s a pitcher of iced lemonade on the table,” the conductor declared. “A porter will look after you. He’ll check in with you every hour on the hour.”

“It’s all very lovely. I believe we shall be quite comfortable.”

The door behind her opened, but Isabella ignored it. No doubt it was the porter, just as the conductor had said.

But in a moment, everything changed. A scent filled the air. She knew that scent. Musky and sweet. It seemed to come with less-than-happy memories, but she couldn't place it. At least not until the man behind her spoke.

"Miss Garcia, it has been a long time."

She turned to find Aaron Bailey smiling at her. He was much handsomer than she remembered from their first encounter. His brown hair was parted on the side and slicked back. Had he always worn it thus? She tried to remember that day in the library. He'd seemed like such a boy then.

"Mr. Bailey, I believe."

"You believe correctly. I am your father's choice of escort for you." He gave her a crooked smile as if amused.

She refused to react. "I'm not sure why he felt the need to send you, Mr. Bailey, but since you are here, you might help Lupe with the bags." She nodded toward her maid.

Aaron didn't hesitate. "Here, let me take those, Lupe. They're much too heavy for one so small." He gave her a broad smile, which irritated Isabella. "Let me show you the bedrooms." He took the bags and moved across the room to a polished wooden door and opened it. "This is the larger of the two rooms, so I presume it will be taken by your mistress."

"Sí." Lupe nodded.

"The other room," he said, moving to the opposite end of the car, "will be yours. It's small but very cozy."

Lupe looked inside and smiled. "It is very nice."

"Which of the bags belongs to you?" he asked.

She pointed, and he placed the bag inside her room. Without further ado, he walked to the larger bedroom and deposited the other things. He approached Isabella just as the conductor announced they were departing the station.

“I will share your company here during the day and evening hours, but I have a berth in the next car for sleeping. It’s the last berth and gives me the ability to keep others from pestering you.”

“Yes, but who will keep *you* from pestering me, Mr. Bailey?” Isabella’s tone was sarcastic, but she didn’t care. Aaron Bailey was the last man in the world she wanted hanging around.

Outside, she could hear the conductor calling “all aboard,” and she went to take a seat on the plush throne chair by the window. She felt like a queen taking her place at court as Aaron gazed down at her. She pushed back the draperies and raised the shade.

“Comfortable?” he asked.

“Very.” She pulled off her gloves as the train gave a little jerk and began to move slowly away from the station. She waved to her aunt and Diego as her car passed the platform. If only Diego were the one accompanying her. If only it could be anyone but Aaron Bailey.



Aaron took a seat opposite Isabella while Lupe occupied herself with unpacking. The train picked up speed, and they soon left any hint of the city behind as the train moved out across vast open land of farms, ranches, and empty fields.

The job of escorting Isabella to Silver Veil wasn’t a task he had wanted. He worked for the Santa Fe Railroad, after all, not Daniel Garcia. But when her father asked him to do it, he’d been with the railroad superintendent, who had replied on Aaron’s behalf that he’d be happy to do the job and the Santa Fe would be happy to give him the loan of a spacious private car in which to afford Isabella the finest of comforts.

Daniel Garcia was important to the railroad. Not only for all the business he gave the railroad in Silver Veil and a dozen other locations, but also for the stock he held in the railroad. Garcia had made a name for himself and was highly esteemed by the men who controlled the Santa Fe. He was esteemed by others as well. Even the soon-to-be governor of the state and other politicians knew Garcia and respected his opinions and generosity to their projects.

Ever since meeting Daniel years ago, Aaron had admired and liked him as well. Daniel Garcia was smart and industrious, but it was more than that. He was a godly man who lived his faith. When someone was down on their luck, Garcia offered them help and employment. Aaron had seen him put former convicts to work and help them turn their lives around until they became respected members of the community. He was willing to take chances on people, even when everyone else had given up. Aaron had never known anyone with such a sense of kindness and encouragement. Many times he'd advised Aaron and helped see him through a difficult decision. It gave Aaron the utmost respect for him.

It seemed a pity his selfish, self-seeking daughter had to return at this time. For the last few years, she'd lived with her aunt, and although Aaron knew Garcia missed his child, at least there had been peace in the household. Now, Aaron could only imagine there would be change.

"I presume you work closely with my father," she said, breaking the silence, "or he'd never have sent you to protect me on this trip."

Aaron glanced up to find Isabella watching him intently. "I do. I work for the Santa Fe Railroad on the spur leases, and your father, as you probably know, has several. We've become good friends over the years."

"How nice for you both." She turned to look out the

window. “But I hardly need an escort. I’m an adult who is fully capable of seeing to my own safety. I even carry a gun.” She looked back at him with a slight smile. “Does that shock you?”

“Not in the least.”

She seemed to consider this, but he couldn’t tell if she was annoyed or content with his answer. “Well, just so you know.”

He chuckled without meaning to. “Is that some sort of warning?”

Her dark eyes narrowed. “Call it what you will.”

Aaron nodded and stretched out his legs to cross them at the ankles. He had been about to make a snide comment, then decided against it. He hadn’t come here to make war. It was only fair that he give her the benefit of the doubt. After all, seven and a half years was a long time—more than enough time to change from being selfish and mean-spirited to a woman of kindness and grace.

“Have you enjoyed your time in California? I recall that it was home to you at one point.”

She looked wary but nodded. “I grew up there on my great-grandfather’s estate. It has always been home to me, even after Father insisted on dragging us all to Silver Veil.”

“Silver Veil has become quite the town. You haven’t been home in nearly five years, as I understand it. A lot has changed there. Your father has been quite industrious.”

“I’m sure he has. It has always been his goal to see the town flourish. Silver Veil, along with other small mining towns, is all he cares about.”

So much for her having changed.

“Hardly.” Aaron couldn’t let her get away with that. “He cares deeply about you and your mother.”

“What would you know about that?”

Aaron straightened in his chair. “Your father and I have become quite close. Why do you suppose he would send me to bring you back? He trusts me and knows my heart in matters of importance. He’s been a good and godly mentor to me.”

“Have you no father of your own?”

“I do, but my parents are in Chicago, and your father is close at hand. I believe God knew I would need a friend and mentor and supplied one in your father.”

“And my father’s wealth isn’t a motivating aspect of the friendship?” Her tone was snide and dripped with unspoken accusation as she fixed him with a hard stare.

Aaron shook his head. “Given that my father could buy and sell your father many times over, and that I have an ample savings set up for me by my grandfather, I don’t believe the aspect of money ever entered my mind.”

She turned to look out the window once again. “You can hardly fault me for protecting my family.”

“No, I fault you for not caring enough even to know your family.”

Her head snapped back to meet his calm gaze. He had known she would react, and maybe he wanted her to. He had listened all these years to Daniel Garcia’s longing for a closer relationship with his only child, never speaking a word against her. Now seemed the perfect time to take her to task for her lacking. It was Aaron’s utmost desire to see that she had a change of heart before reaching Silver Veil. Daniel and Helena Garcia deserved better than the heartless, spoiled child they had raised.

“You have no right to speak to me that way. You don’t know me.”

“I know you better than you think. Your father has been quite forthright in sharing his heartache over you.”

“I’m sure he’s told you all sorts of horrible things about me.”

“I didn’t say that. In fact, he has only spoken good of you. You and your mother are the most important people in the world to him, and he loves you without reproach.”

His words seemed momentarily to silence Isabella, though she continued to fix him with a hard stare. Her harshness didn’t bother him in the least.

“I had hoped perhaps the years had changed you—grown you up to see the needs of others,” he said.

She opened her mouth to speak, then rolled her eyes and returned her gaze out the window.

Aaron found his irritation with her growing. “Your father isn’t healthy. He’s been sick for a long time—not that I expect you to know that—but lately it’s much worse. You rarely write to them, even though I know your mother sends letters weekly. And, of course, you haven’t been back to visit in some time.”

“He’s always ailed with one thing or another. It’s just his weak constitution. My mother said nothing about him being sicker. I think you must be mistaken.”

“She wouldn’t say such a thing in a letter. Your mother is a compassionate and loving woman. She wouldn’t want to worry you.”

“But you, on the other hand, don’t seem to mind at all.”

“I believe in telling the truth. Not only that, but it’s something I feel you should know.”

Isabella toyed with her gloves. “What is it you hope to accomplish, Mr. Bailey?” She met his eyes. “If it’s your desire to shame me, I refuse to be moved. I made my choice long ago, and I do not regret it. I love my parents, but I also love my aunt and my life in California. I see nothing to feel ashamed of or guilty for.”

“I’m sure you don’t.” He shook his head. “You see only what you want to see, Miss Garcia. I knew that even all those years ago, when you acted so heartlessly toward your father.”

“Me? Heartless? It was he who showed no compassion. He ripped me away from all I loved as a child. Took me from my friends and family. My beloved grandmother, and aunt, and so many others.” She grew thoughtful. “I was ten years old and didn’t understand why I had to leave all that I knew and loved. No one consulted me. No one asked me how I felt. He took us from our home and plopped us down in the middle of the desert, where there weren’t any other children or family members save him and my mother. I was afraid and alone.” She frowned. “But I don’t expect you to understand. You know so much more than anyone else about my family and about me. Go right on judging me to be a heartless woman, Mr. Bailey. I simply do not care what you think.”

She got to her feet and took an unsteady step against the rocking of the railcar. She grabbed the back of the chair even as Aaron reached up to offer her a hand. Of course, she wanted nothing to do with him and headed for the bedroom.

At the door, she turned. “I do care about one thing. I wish you would stop wearing that ghastly cologne. It gives me a headache.”

With that, she was gone, and Aaron was left to sit and wonder if he had falsely judged her. He knew how much she’d hurt her parents, even if they didn’t talk about it. The effects were there, nevertheless. Perhaps, on Isabella’s part, it was unintentional. Maybe she was coping with her own pain as best she could and had no desire to hurt her folks.

But even if she hadn’t meant to hurt them, she had. Aaron couldn’t just forget that. Daniel Garcia was dying, and the only thing he wanted was to be reconciled to his daughter before he left this world. And Aaron meant to see

it happen. He owed it to Daniel, and he would do his best to see it through, no matter the cost to himself.



Isabella sat on the edge of her bed, considering all that Aaron Bailey had said. The scent of his cologne still hung in the air. She didn't really hate it. She hated what it represented—embarrassment that he'd overheard that argument so long ago, that he knew her heart then and even now.

She hadn't thought about her mother and father or their needs in some time. She hadn't wanted to know how they were doing or what projects they were working on. She hadn't wanted to care about them for fear of what that might mean to her.

"It's not because I'm selfish," she murmured to herself, unpinning her hat. It wasn't selfishness or a lack of caring that drove her. Although some—like Aaron—might suppose it to be so.

She put the hat on the small ledge at the foot of the bed. Her pent-up emotions threatened to spill over. Her eyes dampened. She wasn't a bad person. She wasn't.

Isabella had spent a good portion of her life putting up walls of protection—barriers that created strongholds so she could never be hurt again, like she was when her father took them away from California.

He had never understood her pain and suffering. He had never cared about her little-girl feelings. Losing her grandparents, her playmates, and her pets. Oh, how she had cried to lose her horse, Lucy, and her dog, Mini, who had just had puppies. She had cried in her grandmother's arms, begging her to make Papi change his mind. But he hadn't, and shortly after their departure, her beloved grandmother had died.

Grandfather died a year later, leaving only Aunt Josephina at the ranch. At least her aunt had felt sorry for Isabella and shipped Lucy to New Mexico to be with her.

Then, when Isabella was sixteen, her aunt had invited her to spend the summer in California. Isabella had been so grateful that someone cared about her longing to go home. Silver Veil had never been home, despite the beautiful house her father had built.

Her parents were less than enthusiastic but finally gave in. The woman who had tutored Isabella in music, Mrs. Sanborn, had acted as her escort and traveled with her to California, where she, too, had family. Mama and Papi hadn't even made the time to go with her, and for reasons she couldn't explain, that reopened old wounds.

Being back in California had thrilled Isabella, but things were never the same. She was eventually able to convince her father to let her live there full-time, but even Diego's growing interest didn't make things right. She blamed her father. It was his fault she no longer had her grandparents. His fault that nothing was the same. Why did everything and everyone she had ever loved have to be taken away from her? The things and people of the past were all gone. Her parents had changed, and so had she.

Some would argue that her feeling of losing her parents was by her own hand, but they were the cause of her pain, and she wanted as little to do with them as possible. They hadn't cared about her pain—had never even talked to her about why they had chosen to move to the desert. To Isabella it was clear that they simply didn't care about her feelings, so why should she care about theirs?

She unfastened the buttons of her jacket and eased out of it. The room was a little stuffy, even hot, yet there was no possibility of returning to the main salon without having to

deal with Aaron Bailey. She was determined not to do that. Instead, she set the jacket aside and stretched out atop the covers of the bed. With any luck, she might fall asleep and awaken to find this was all just a bad dream.

She smiled, imagining Christmas at the estate, with Aunt Josephina lighting candles on the tree while she and Diego took turns playing the piano. He would sing Christmas carols in his wonderful baritone voice, and Isabella and Auntie would join in. Before long, dinner would be announced, and they would go in and find the table decorated for the season, candles lit to reflect the green garland and gold ribbons that trimmed the room. There would be a veritable feast on the table, with silver, crystal, and china atop Aunt Josephina's best linens.

Isabella sighed. "It would have been so perfect."