



A
Four-in-One
Harvey House
Brides Collection

Serving Up
LOVE

TRACIE PETERSON
KAREN WITEMEYER
REGINA JENNINGS
JEN TURANO


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A Flood of Love • TRACIE PETERSON

More Than a Pretty Face • KAREN WITEMEYER

Intrigue a la Mode • REGINA JENNINGS

Grand Encounters • JEN TURANO



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A Flood
of Love

Tracie Peterson





Chapter One



AUGUST 1929

Gretchen Gottsacker stepped from the train and looked around at the tiny town of San Marcial, New Mexico—pronounced *Mar-see-al* by those of Spanish descent and *Mar-shall* by the white settlers. Despite being named for a French saint, the town hugged the Rio Grande in the midst of arid sands and tamarisk brush. It was some of the most desolate land America had to offer, but amazingly there were small farms and a bustling economy here. The latter came courtesy of the Santa Fe Railway, which had built shops where extensive repair work could be done on just about any engine. There was also a roundhouse to turn the engines and, of course, the Harvey House—Gretchen’s destination.

At twenty-eight, she had worked for the Fred Harvey Company for ten years. It had never been a goal or ambition of hers to work as a waitress, serving alongside the Santa Fe. However, it gave her ample money to support herself, and promotions had lifted her to a status above that of a mere waitress. For a single woman, the money was too good to give up, even if the lifestyle was taxing at times.

She walked the short distance from the train station to the

two-story Harvey House along with the other passengers hoping to be served one of Fred Harvey's famous lunches. Since she wasn't expected until the evening train, Gretchen decided to eat before she made her presence known to the house manager.

Like all Harvey Houses, the tables were set impeccably with china, linen, and silver in the dining room, while the lunch counter offered simpler fare. In the dining room a man had to wear a jacket, but at the counter a fella—or lady—could take their meal as they were.

Although Gretchen's original destination had been the counter, a group of ladies from the train invited her to join their table. "We gals need to stick together," one overly painted matron declared. Gretchen nodded and claimed the chair beside her.

As the waitresses took their orders, coffee cups were arranged in a variety of poses to signal what beverages had been selected. It was yet another detail of the intricate system Fred Harvey had designed to keep passengers on the Santa Fe dining in style.

Gretchen asked for iced tea and placed her order for a ham sandwich before leaning back to observe the handling of the dining room. The Harvey Girls were good at their jobs. Their intense training saw to that, but often they got lazy if not firmly supervised. The girls at San Marcial apparently were proud of what they did and continued to uphold the high standards.

Gretchen had finished her sandwich and started on a piece of pie when the train's first warning gong sounded. Several passengers looked panicked until their waitress assured them they would not be left behind. By the time the second gong rang, many of the passengers had already headed back to the train. As the dining room emptied out, a couple of boys came in to start clearing the tables.

Gretchen left her huge slice of pie only half eaten and motioned one of the girls to her table. "Would you mind calling the manager for me?"

The redhead paled. “Is there a problem, miss?”

Gretchen smiled and shook her head. “No. I’m here to fill in for your house mother.”

The girl’s mouth dropped open, but she quickly regained her composure. “Oh, of course. I’ll fetch him right away, Miss Gottsacker.”

Gretchen smiled again. Apparently the staff was aware of her impending arrival.

It wasn’t but a moment before the manager appeared. “I understand you’re Miss Gottsacker.” He smiled. “I’m so glad to meet you. Did you have a pleasant lunch?”

“I did. I thought it best to come in early, unannounced, and observe the girls at work.”

“And did we pass inspection?”

Gretchen thought he actually looked a little anxious. “Yes. They are good at what they do, and they made the customers feel welcome. In fact, when one of the men dropped his bread on the floor, there was a Harvey Girl there immediately to clean up the mess while another filled his plate with more bread. He scarcely had time to notice anything had happened.”

“Wonderful. I’m glad to hear it. I’m actually delighted you’ve come early. Not only are we missing the house mother, but we’ve lost two girls. Both had family emergencies and had to leave town this morning. I know it’s asking a lot, but do you suppose you could fill in as waitress too?”

“Of course.” Gretchen dabbed her mouth with her napkin. “We do what we must. I’ll be ready for the evening passenger line.”

He smiled. “Thank you so much. Now, if you’re finished with your lunch, why don’t you let me show you around? I have your room ready.”

Gretchen folded her napkin. “Thank you.”

After an hour of touring the two-story building, the manager

ended the tour on the long veranda. “We have four trains a day but also get plenty of business because of the shops,” he told her. “Most of the men in this town work for Santa Fe, and they work hard. This is the Horney Toad Division, and everything that has ever happened to a railroad has happened here.”

The Santa Fe line between Albuquerque and El Paso was known as the Horney Toad Line, and its workers were Horney Toad men. They made it very clear that the spelling included the “e” because there were no other “e’s,” or *ease*, to be had on that rail line. When the corporate leaders wanted to grow a man and prove his worth, the Horney Toad Line was the training ground they sent him to. There was no stretch of railroad meaner, harder, or uglier. Gretchen had ridden the train from Albuquerque to El Paso, and she had to agree. The land was desolate, with miles of nothing stretching out on all sides. Despite the hardship, the Santa Fe line was one of the most important in the country.

The manager was well aware of this fact. “We are one of the premier shops for the railroad. We also have a large team of office workers, which means a good number of the Santa Fe management comes visiting. We never know who will show up.”

“I’m quite familiar with the line and the town,” Gretchen assured him. “In fact, I used to live here. And, in keeping with Mr. Harvey’s original standards, I shall treat each man, woman, and child as if they were the most important person in the world.”

He smiled. “What a relief to have not only a well-trained member of the company, but also someone already familiar with our town.”

That evening after the rush of the passenger train and cleanup, Gretchen decided to take a walk to reacquaint herself with the area and allow the stream of memories she had so long buried to run free. She had grown up in San Marcial, which was one of the reasons she’d been picked for this job. It certainly hadn’t

been her desire. She hadn't wanted to come back—not ever—yet here she was.

She walked down Main Street in what they called New Town and smiled at the greetings of several cowboys. There were quite a few people out enjoying the evening now that the sun had set. Someone had mentioned a bingo game at the Catholic church, but most of the men seemed bound for the pool hall. The heat during the day had been overwhelming, just as Gretchen remembered. But, as she also remembered, the evenings were pleasant and cooled off fast.

The town was larger now. There were far more businesses and places of entertainment than when she'd lived here. The Santa Fe drew in many who saw it as an opportunity to make their pot of gold off the workers. With Prohibition wearing on the nerves of hard-drinking men, Gretchen felt confident there were also plenty of adventuring sorts who were happy to bring in liquor from Mexico. No doubt more than one gathering place had a hidden room where a drink could be had.

Walking a faintly familiar path to La Plaza Vieja, or Old Town, Gretchen enjoyed the heady scent of chilies and spices. Someone was charring large peppers on an outdoor grill, and the aroma reminded her of her grandmother. Grandmother—or Oma, as Gretchen had called the old German woman—had lived in Old Town. She'd come to San Marcial with her husband in the early days of the railroad. The little adobe dwelling they called home had been a haven of love for Gretchen. Her father had brought her here after Mama died. Not long after that, he died too, and Gretchen was left to be raised by her grandparents. Life with Oma and Opa had been full of love and happiness, but then her grandfather had been killed in a train accident, and now Oma was gone as well. They were all gone.

She passed the Protestant church and Gonzales Grocery Store and continued through Old Town to the little cemetery.

It was quiet here. Finding her parents' graves, Gretchen knelt and swept the debris and sand from the top of the stone marker. They'd both been gone for so long—most of her life. In fact, she didn't even have memories of her mother, who had died from a fever when Gretchen was barely three. Her father had been killed ten years later in an accident working on the railroad. Railroading was a deadly business.

She left her parents' graves and went to the far side of the cemetery, where her grandparents had been buried side by side. Again, she cleaned off the shared, hand-carved stone.

"Whatcha doin'?" came a child's question.

Gretchen straightened to find a precocious-looking girl watching her. "Hello. Who are you?"

The child beamed and did a little twirl. "I'm Katiann, and I'm nine years old, but I'll be ten in December."

"Well, very nice to meet you, Katiann. I'm Gretchen."

The nine-year-old danced over and tilted her head to one side. "Whatcha doin' here?"

"I came to visit the graves."

"Why?" She bobbed her head the other direction, and her brown curls bounced up and down.

"Well, I suppose because I haven't been here in a very long time, and it seemed to be the thing to do." The child was a pretty little thing. Gretchen glanced around for her mother or father. "Are you here alone?"

"Yep. I ran off. My nanny, Mrs. Escalante, was *muy enojada*."

"Why was she very angry?"

Katiann's brown eyes lit up. "You speak Spanish?"

"I do. I grew up here."

Katiann came closer and looked down at the gravestone. "What kind of a name is Gottsacker?"

"It's German. My family were of German descent."

"Do you speak German too?"

Gretchen laughed. “*Ja, mache ich.*”

The child frowned. “I’ve never heard anyone speak German. We were in a war against the Germans. They were the enemy. I learned that at school.”

“There were a lot of Germans who didn’t like the war and came to America. My family came to America long before the war, but they were very sad when the fighting started. They didn’t like it at all.”

Katiann considered this for a moment, then nodded. “There’s a lot of things I don’t like. Like when Mrs. Escalante tries to make me stay in my room until Daddy comes home. He works for Santa Fe.”

Gretchen smiled. “A lot of people do. Where’s your mother?”

“She died when I was born.” Katiann started dancing around again, careful not to step on the gravestones. “I don’t like that that happened either.”

“Is she buried here?” Gretchen looked around, thinking perhaps that was why the child had come.

“No. She died far away from here. Daddy came back here to live ’cause he said it’s the only place he’s ever been truly happy.”

What a strange contrast to Gretchen’s own heart. Yet at one time she’d been happy here as well. “Where do you live?”

“We live in a house by the school and the Methodist church. It’s close to the railroad so Daddy isn’t far away from his work.”

“Well, perhaps we should make our way back to town so your father doesn’t worry about you, Katiann.” Gretchen started for the gate, and the little girl fell in step beside her.

“I watched you come up here,” Katiann offered. “I think you’re very pretty. There aren’t many people here who have yellow hair.”

Gretchen laughed. “No, there have never been a lot of blonds here. Thank you for the compliment. I think you are very pretty too.”

Katiann nodded. “I am. Everybody says so.” She gave a little sigh, like it was a burden.

“The proper response would be to say ‘thank you.’” Gretchen hoped Katiann wouldn’t feel bad being corrected.

“I know, that’s what Mrs. Escalante says. She wants me to say ‘thank you’ all the time.”

“It is what polite people do, and you do want to be polite, don’t you?”

They stepped out of the cemetery and back onto the sandy dirt road. Katiann gave a twirl and then surprised Gretchen by doing a cartwheel in spite of wearing a frilly pink dress.

“I don’t know if being polite is all that important,” Katiann replied, remaining in constant motion. “I heard a man say ‘thank you’ once to another man just before he punched him in the mouth. Sometimes I think words and rules mean too much to folks. Like my friend Kimberley. She has a rule for every word, and she hates *l-y* words. She hates them so much, she won’t even spell her name with *l-y*. She has to have it be *l-e-y*. She’s always getting after me when I say ‘amazingly’ or ‘wonderfully’ or even when I tell her she looks lovely.”

Gretchen couldn’t fault her conclusion and smiled. “It sounds like Kimberley would make a wonderful editor for books or magazines. You know, there’s an important reason for rules.”

Katiann sighed. “Yes, Mrs. Escalante says it keeps order in society and the household. But I don’t think using *l-y* words is going to cause a revolution. Oh, look. J.B. is going to play.”

Gone was her concern about the English language and rules of society as she ran over to a collection of old men who’d gathered at the corner of the grocery store with their guitars. A dark-skinned man was picking out a tune while the others strummed along.

Katiann went right up to them. They all seemed to be old friends. “Hi, J.B.,” she said to the old black man.

He smiled and pulled a harmonica from his pocket. “Howdy, Miss Katiann. You bring a friend to hear us play?” His three Mexican companions began to pick out a tune on their guitars.

“That’s Gretchen,” she told the men, pointing Gretchen’s direction. They nodded and smiled, but none stopped playing. “We gotta go, but we’ll come again.” Katiann began walking with Gretchen again. “They always play there, every night. Sometimes there are a whole bunch of people, and sometimes they dance.” She glanced back and shook her head. “I don’t think anybody will dance tonight ’cause there’s a bingo game.”

They had no sooner reached the Catholic church than an older Mexican woman came barreling around the corner. She shook her finger at Katiann and berated her in rapid-fire Spanish.

“Mrs. Escalante, this is Gretchen Gottsacker,” Katiann said. “She speaks German . . . and Spanish.”

Gretchen noted the amusement in Katiann’s voice. Her statement silenced the older woman, who looked momentarily embarrassed. From some of the things she had said to the child, Gretchen wasn’t surprised.

“Forgive me. It’s just that I’ve been looking all over for this child. She was supposed to be in her room. Her papa will be home soon and expect her to be there for supper.”

“I understand.” Gretchen gave Katiann a wave. “It was nice to meet you, Katiann. You’ll have to come see me sometime at the Harvey House. That’s where I’m staying and working for the next few weeks.”

“I’ll come see you soon,” the child promised.

Gretchen chuckled as she made her way back to the Harvey House. “No doubt you will.”