THE TREASURE OF ENDLESS SANDS

A Tale of the Mojave

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PORTFOLIO READING SAMPLE • PROLOGUE AND CHAPTER ONE

PROLOGUE

"The desert keeps what you seek until you no longer want it and gives what you need only when you can no longer hold it."
— Mojave saying Unknown

There is a particular quality to desert legends that sets them apart from the stories told in green places, in lands where water runs freely and life renews itself with the turning of seasons. Desert stories are born of thirst and distance, of the strange clarity that comes when a man stands alone beneath a sky so vast it seems to swallow the very notion of human significance. They are stories about what we seek and what seeks us in return, about the prices we pay for the things we desire most, and about the terrible moment when we discover that what we thought we wanted was never the treasure at all.

The Mojave Desert has always been a keeper of secrets. Long before the Spanish came with their missions and their maps, long before the Americans arrived with their wagons and their hunger for gold, the desert held mysteries that belonged to older times, to peoples whose names have been worn away by wind and sand like inscriptions on ancient stone. Some of these mysteries were meant to stay buried. Some were meant to be found, but only by those who understood what finding them would cost. And some—the most dangerous kind—were meant to test the human heart, to measure what a soul truly values when faced with an impossible choice.

This is a story about such a mystery, and about a man who spent his life searching for it. It is a love story, though not the kind that ends with wedding bells and happiness. It is a ghost story, though the ghost in question may not be what you expect. And it is a cautionary tale about the difference between treasure and worth, between possession and love, between finding what you seek and understanding what you need.

The old ones who still remember the desert's true language say that some treasures are not meant to be taken, only recognized. They say that the greatest riches are the ones we hold without grasping, the ones that slip through our fingers the moment we try to claim them as our own. They say that the desert teaches this lesson to everyone eventually, though some learn it too late, and some never learn it at all.

BOOK ONE: THE SEEKER

Chapter One: The Legend Whispered

There are stories that live in the desert longer than men, longer than memory, stories that the wind carries across the dunes like seeds searching for fertile ground. This is one such story, though whether it happened exactly as I tell it, or whether time has polished it smooth like a river stone, I cannot say with certainty. But I know it is true in the way that matters most, true in the heart, true in the warning it carries, true in the love it remembers.

In the years after the war between the states, when the Mojave Desert stretched vast and unconquered between California and the territories beyond, there lived a man named Samuel Garrett. He was not born to the desert, but he came to it as so many did in those days, chasing something. Gold, perhaps. Freedom, maybe. Or that peculiar American madness that mistakes movement for purpose and distance for destiny.

But Samuel Garrett was not chasing gold, at least not the kind that could be weighed in a pan or spent in a saloon. He was chasing a legend.

The legend went like this, though it changed depending on who told it and how much whiskey had loosened their tongue: Somewhere in the Mojave, hidden beneath the shifting sands or sealed within a canyon that appeared only when the light struck it just so, there lay a treasure beyond imagining. Not Spanish gold or stolen silver, but something older, something that predated the missions and the conquistadors, something that reached back to a time when the desert was green and great civilizations rose and fell beneath skies that modern men had forgotten how to read.

Some said it was the wealth of an ancient people who had mastered arts lost to the world who could turn base metal into gold, who could read the future in the stars, who could live for centuries without aging. Others claimed it was a doorway to another world entirely, a place where time moved differently and the rules that governed ordinary existence held no sway. The Paiute spoke of it in whispers, calling it the "Place Where Spirits Sleep," and would not venture near the regions where it was said to lie. The Spanish had searched for it and called it "El Tesoro de las Edades" The Treasure of the Ages. Mexican prospectors knew it as "La Puerta del Tiempo" The Door of Time.

But most simply called it the Mojave Treasure, and most believed it did not exist at all.

Samuel Garrett believed. He believed with the kind of faith that moves mountains or breaks men, and in the desert, there is often little difference between the two.

He had first heard the tale in a mining camp outside of what would later become the town of Calico, from an old prospector named Dutch Henry who claimed to have seen a

map drawn by a Franciscan monk in the previous century. Dutch Henry was dying, the desert had gotten into his lungs and was slowly turning them to quicksand; and he told the story with the fevered intensity of a man trying to pass on something precious before the darkness took him.

"It ain't gold, boy," Dutch Henry had rasped, his breath rattling like seeds in a dried gourd. "It's older than gold. Older than this desert, maybe. The monk, he wrote that whoever found it would possess knowledge of worlds beyond this one, would hold in his hands the accumulated wisdom of a people who walked this earth when it was young." He had gripped Samuel's arm with surprising strength, his bloodshot eyes burning. "But he also wrote a warning, written in Latin, which I had translated by a priest in Santa Fe. 'Beware the seeker who cannot see what lies before him, for the treasure reveals only what the heart already knows.'"

Dutch Henry died that night, and Samuel Garrett buried him in the desert with a wooden cross made from a broken wagon wheel. But the story lived on, taking root in Samuel's mind like a seed that had finally found its fertile ground.

That was in 1867, when Samuel was twenty-three years old, lean and strong, with dark hair that fell across his forehead and gray eyes that seemed to reflect the desert sky. He had come west after the war, having served with the Union forces though he had no particular desire for the war. He had simply been swept up in the great tide of history, as young men often are, and when it deposited him back on shore, he found he no longer fit in the small Pennsylvania town where he had been born. The east felt cramped to him now, the horizons too close, the future too prescribed.

So, he had come west, and the west had led him to the desert, and the desert had given him a purpose that consumed him like a slow-burning fire.

For the next three years, Samuel Garrett searched. He spent every dollar he earned—working as a rail worker, a ranch hand, a guard for mining operations—on supplies and maps and information. He talked to everyone who might know something: old prospectors and young fortune-seekers, Paiute guides, Mexican traders and Mormon settlers. He learned to read the desert, to understand its moods and its dangers, to survive in a landscape that killed careless men with casual indifference.

He learned that the desert was not empty, as it appeared to those who merely passed through it. It was full, full of life that hid itself in the heat of the day and emerged in the cool of evening, full of history written in stone and sand, full of secrets that revealed themselves, only to those, patient enough to listen. He found the desert silence talks, and it says a lot to those than can hear it. He learned to find water where others saw only dust, to navigate by stars and landmarks, to read the weather in the color of the sky at dawn.

The Mojave in those days was a place of extremes and contradictions. In summer, the temperature could reach heights that made the air shimmer and dance, that could kill a man in hours if he was caught without water. In winter, frost could coat the creosote bushes, and the rare rains could transform the desert overnight into a carpet of wildflowers, golden poppies and purple lupines and white evening primroses that opened their blooms to the moon.

It was a landscape of mesas and valleys, of dry lake beds that stretched flat and white to the horizon, of mountains that rose sudden and stark from the desert floor. Joshua trees stood like sentinels; their twisted arms raised to the sky in what might have been prayer or surrender. Cholla cactus glowed golden in the late afternoon light, beautiful and treacherous. Rattlesnakes coiled in the shade of rocks, and roadrunners darted across the sand in pursuit of lizards. At night, coyotes sang their wild songs to the stars, and the silence between their calls was so profound it seemed to have weight and substance.

Through this landscape Samuel Garrett wandered, searching. He explored canyons whose walls bore the petroglyphs of ancient peoples, spirals and handprints and figures that might have been gods or men or something in between. He climbed mountains to survey the land from above, looking for patterns or anomalies that might indicate something hidden below. He dug in places where the sand seemed disturbed or where rocks formed unusual configurations. He followed dry washes and traced the paths of long-vanished rivers.

He found many things in his searching arrowheads and pottery shards, the bones of animals and occasionally of men, abandoned mines and forgotten campsites, beauty and desolation in equal measure. But he did not find the treasure.

His obsession became known throughout the region. In the scattered settlements and way stations, in the mining camps and ranches, people spoke of "Treasure Sam" or "Mad Garrett," depending on their disposition. Some thought him foolish, wasting his life on a fantasy. Others envied him and the purity of his purpose, the way he had given himself over completely to his quest. A few believed he might actually find something, and these same watched him with a mixture of hope and greed.

Samuel himself rarely spoke of what he was searching for. He had learned that the treasure meant different things to different people, and that most could not understand what drew him. It was not greed that drove him, though he would not have refused wealth if he found it. It was something deeper, something he could not quite articulate even to himself. It was the need to know that there was more to the world than what could be seen and touched, that mystery still existed, that wonder had not been entirely mapped and measured and explained away.

In the desert, alone beneath stars that seemed close enough to touch, he felt he was searching for proof that the universe was larger and stranger and more magical than the modern world wanted to admit. He was searching for transcendence, though he would not have used that word. He was searching for meaning in a world that increasingly seemed to have none.

And so the years passed, and Samuel Garrett grew lean and hard and brown from the sun, and the desert became his home and his church and his obsession.

It was in the spring of 1870, when Samuel was twenty-six years old and had been searching for three years, that everything changed.

He had come into the town of Daggett, a rough settlement on the Mojave River that served as a supply point for the mines and ranches scattered throughout the region. It was not much of a town—a few dozen buildings made of wood and adobe, a main street that turned to mud when it rained and to dust when it didn't, saloons and general stores and a hotel that was generous in its self-description. But it was civilization of a sort, and Samuel came there every few months to resupply and to see if any new information about the treasure had surfaced.

He was in the general store, purchasing flour and coffee and dried beans, when he saw her.

She was standing near the counter, examining a bolt of blue fabric, and when she turned and the light from the window caught her face, Samuel felt something shift in his chest, as if the world had suddenly tilted on its axis and he was seeing it from an entirely new angle.

She was beautiful, but it was not her beauty alone that struck him. There was something in her bearing, in the way she moved, that suggested depths he could not fathom. She was tall for a woman of that era, with dark hair pulled back in a simple style and eyes that were almost black, eyes that seemed to hold secrets. Her skin was the color of desert sand in late afternoon, suggesting Spanish or Mexican heritage, or perhaps native blood, or some combination that made such distinctions meaningless. She wore a simple dress of gray cotton, but she wore it with a natural grace that made it seem elegant.

Samuel stood frozen, his arms full of supplies, staring like a fool.

She noticed him watching and met his gaze directly, without the coy deflection that was expected of women in that time. For a moment they simply looked at each other, and Samuel felt as if she could see straight through him, could read every thought and desire and secret shame he carried.

Then she smiled, just slightly, and turned back to the fabric.

Samuel forced himself to move, to complete his transaction with the storekeeper, but his hands fumbled with the coins and he had to count them twice. When he finally gathered his supplies and turned to leave, he found her standing near the door, as if she had been waiting for him.

"You're the treasure hunter," she said. It was not a question.

"I... yes," Samuel managed. "Samuel Garrett."

"I know," she said. "Everyone knows. You're famous in these parts, Mr. Garrett. Or infamous, depending on who's telling the story."

"And which do you think I am?" he asked, finding his voice.

She considered this, her dark eyes studying him with an intensity that made him feel exposed. "I think you're a man looking for something," she said finally. "Whether you're famous or infamous depends on whether you find it."

"And what if what I'm looking for doesn't exist?"

"Then you're infamous," she said, but there was no mockery in her voice. "But I don't think you believe that. I think you believe with your whole heart, and that's either the most admirable thing about you or the most dangerous."

"Which do you think it is?"

She smiled again, and this time it reached her eyes. "I haven't decided yet."

"Will you give me a chance to help you decide?" Samuel asked, surprising himself with his boldness. "May I call on you?"

"You don't even know my name," she pointed out.

"Then tell me your name, and let me call on you."

She studied him for a long moment, and Samuel had the strange feeling that she was deciding something far more important than whether to allow him to court her. Finally, she nodded.

"My name is Elena," she said. "Elena Vasquez. I live at the Widow Morrison's boarding house, the white one at the end of the street. You may call on me tomorrow evening, if you wish."

"I wish," Samuel said.

She nodded once more, then stepped past him and out into the bright desert sunlight, leaving Samuel standing in the dim interior of the store with his heart pounding and his

carefully ordered world suddenly thrown into beautiful chaos.

The storekeeper, an old man named Hutchins who had seen everything the desert had to offer and was surprised by none of it, chuckled softly.

"That's a rare woman, that Elena," he said. "Been here about six months. Came from somewhere down south, Mexico maybe, or California. Keeps to herself mostly, works as a seamstress and helps the Widow Morrison with her boarding house. Lot of men have tried to court her. She's turned them all down." He gave Samuel a knowing look. "Until now, apparently."

Samuel barely heard him. He gathered his supplies and walked out into the sunlight, which seemed brighter than it had been before, the air clearer, the world more vivid. The desert, which had been his sole focus for three years, suddenly seemed less important than it had that morning.

He spent the rest of the day in a state of distraction, making camp outside of town and attempting to organize his supplies and plan his next expedition, but his mind kept returning to Elena Vasquez—to her dark eyes and her direct gaze, to the way she had seemed to see through him, to the strange feeling that meeting her had been somehow inevitable, as if all his wandering had been leading him not to the treasure but to her.

That night, lying in his bedroll beneath the stars, Samuel found himself thinking about the future in a way he had not done since he had first heard the legend of the Mojave Treasure. For three years, his future had been singular and simple: search until he found what he was looking for or until the desert killed him. But now, suddenly, he could imagine another future, one that included a home and a companion and a life that was about more than endless searching.

The thought both thrilled and frightened him.

The next evening, freshly washed and wearing his best shirt, Samuel presented himself at the Widow Morrison's boarding house. It was indeed white, or had been once, though the desert sun and wind had faded it to a pale cream. It was a two-story structure with a wide porch, and it looked solid and respectable, a small outpost of eastern propriety in the wild west.

The Widow Morrison herself answered his knock—a formidable woman in her sixties with steel-gray hair and sharp blue eyes that assessed him in an instant.

"Mr. Garrett," she said. "Elena said you might call. Come in."

She led him to a small parlor furnished with pieces that had clearly been hauled across the country at great expense and effort—a horsehair sofa, a mahogany side table, a lamp with a painted glass shade. It was a room that insisted on civilization in the face of

the wilderness outside.

"I'll fetch Elena," the widow said. "You'll visit here, in this room, with the door open. I trust that's understood."

"Yes, ma'am," Samuel said.

She nodded and disappeared, and Samuel stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, suddenly aware of how rough he must seem, how much the desert had marked him. His hands were calloused and scarred, his face weathered beyond his years. He probably smelled of dust and sweat despite his washing. What could a woman like Elena possibly see in him?

But then she entered the room, wearing a dress of deep green that brought out the warmth in her skin, her hair loose around her shoulders, and when she smiled at him, all his doubts evaporated like morning dew in the desert sun.

"Mr. Garrett," she said. "Please, sit."

They sat, Samuel on the sofa and Elena in a chair across from him, and for a moment neither spoke. Then they both started to speak at once, stopped, and laughed.

"You first," Elena said.

"I was just going to say that I'm glad you agreed to see me," Samuel said. "I wasn't sure you would."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because I'm... well, I'm not exactly a respectable prospect. I have no property, no steady income, no real future that anyone can see. I spend my time chasing legends in the desert. Most people think I'm crazy."

"Are you?" Elena asked. "Crazy?"

Samuel considered this seriously. "I don't think so. But I suppose that's what a crazy person would say."

Elena laughed, a sound like water over stones. "Tell me about the treasure," she said. "What is it you're really looking for?"

And so Samuel told her. He told her about Dutch Henry and the legend, about the years of searching, about the places he had been and the things he had seen. But more than that, he told her about why he searched—about the need to believe in mystery, about the hunger for something beyond the ordinary, about the feeling that the world was larger and stranger than most people dared to imagine.

Elena listened without interrupting, her dark eyes fixed on his face, and Samuel had the strange sensation that she understood him in a way that no one else ever had.

When he finished, she was quiet for a long moment. Then she said, "And what will you do if you find it? This treasure?"

"I don't know," Samuel admitted. "I've never really thought that far ahead. The searching has become its own purpose, I suppose."

"And what if you never find it? Will you search forever?"

"I..." Samuel paused, realizing he had never seriously considered this possibility. "I don't know that either."

Elena nodded slowly. "My father used to say that a man who doesn't know where he's going will never know when he's arrived."

"Your father sounds like a wise man."

"He was," Elena said, and there was a note of sadness in her voice. "He died when I was sixteen. A fever took him, and my mother a year later. I've been on my own since then."

"I'm sorry," Samuel said.

"Don't be. We all lose people. It's the price of loving them." She met his eyes. "But it's a price worth paying, don't you think?"

"Yes," Samuel said, though he was not sure he had ever really loved anyone enough to know.

They talked until the Widow Morrison appeared to announce that visiting hours were over, and Samuel left feeling as if he had known Elena for years rather than hours. There was an ease between them, a natural rhythm to their conversation, that made everything feel right and inevitable.

He called on her again the next evening, and the evening after that. Within a week, it was understood that they were courting, and the town of Daggett watched with interest and speculation. Some said Elena was a fool to attach herself to a man with no prospects. Others said Samuel was lucky to have caught the attention of the most beautiful woman in the territory. A few said they were well-matched, both of them being outsiders, both of them carrying secrets.

For Samuel, those weeks were a revelation. He had not realized how lonely he had been, how much he had been living inside his own head, until he had someone to share his thoughts with. Elena was unlike anyone he had ever known—intelligent and independent, with a quiet strength that needed no demonstration. She had opinions on everything and was not afraid to express them. She read books, which was rare for women in that time and place, and she could discuss philosophy and history and science

with an ease that suggested education far beyond what was typical.

But there was also something mysterious about her, something she held back. She would speak freely about many things, but about her past, about where she had come from and why she had come to Daggett, she was vague. She had been born in California, she said, or maybe Mexico—she was not entirely sure, as her family had moved often when she was young. She had lived in many places, had seen much of the west. But the details were always fuzzy, and when Samuel pressed, she would change the subject with such skill that he often didn't realize she had done it until later.

He told himself it didn't matter. Everyone in the west had a past they preferred not to discuss. The desert was full of people running from something or toward something, and the unwritten rule was that you didn't ask too many questions. A person's past was their own business.

But sometimes, when Elena looked at him with those dark, fathomless eyes, Samuel had the unsettling feeling that she knew things about him that he had never told her, that she could see into the deepest parts of his soul. And sometimes, in the middle of a conversation, she would pause and look away, as if listening to something he could not hear, and a shadow would cross her face.

Still, he was falling in love with her. He could feel it happening, as inevitable as the sunrise, as natural as breathing. And the miracle was that she seemed to be falling in love with him too.

Two months after they met, on a warm evening in early summer, Samuel asked Elena to marry him.

They were sitting on the porch of the boarding house, watching the sun set over the desert, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink and purple that seemed too vivid to be real. The air was cooling, and the first stars were beginning to appear.

"Elena," Samuel said, taking her hand. "I know I'm not much of a prospect. I have no money, no property, no family to speak of. All I have is a dream that most people think is foolish. But I love you. I love you more than I thought it was possible to love anyone. And I want to spend my life with you, if you'll have me."

Elena was quiet for a long moment, looking out at the desert. When she finally turned to him, there were tears in her eyes.

"Samuel," she said softly. "Do you know what you're asking?"

"I'm asking you to marry me," he said, confused by her reaction.

"You're asking me to tie my life to yours. To share your future, whatever it may be. To accept you as you are, with all your dreams and obsessions." She squeezed his hand. "Are

you prepared to do the same for me? To accept me as I am, with all my secrets and shadows?"

"Yes," Samuel said without hesitation. "Whatever you are, whatever you've been, I don't care. I love you, Elena. That's all that matters."

She studied his face for a long moment, and Samuel had the strange feeling that she was searching for something, testing him in some way he didn't understand. Then she smiled, though the tears still glistened in her eyes.

"Then yes," she said. "Yes, I'll marry you, Samuel Garrett. God help us both."

They were married a month later, in a small ceremony at the boarding house with the Widow Morrison and a few townspeople as witnesses. There was no priest or minister in Daggett at the time, so they were married by a circuit judge who happened to be passing through. It was a simple affair, but to Samuel it felt like the most important moment of his life.

Elena wore a dress of white cotton that she had sewn herself, with lace at the collar and cuffs. She had woven wildflowers into her hair—desert marigolds and brittlebush blooms that glowed golden in the afternoon light. She was so beautiful that Samuel felt his throat tighten when he saw her.

When the judge pronounced them man and wife, Samuel kissed her, and the small gathering applauded, and for that moment, the treasure and the desert and everything else faded away. There was only Elena, only this woman who had somehow seen past his obsession to the man beneath, who had chosen to bind her life to his despite all the reasons she shouldn't.

They spent their wedding night in a room at the boarding house, and in the morning, they began their life together.