

BRIDES *of* SEATTLE,
BOOK ONE

STEADFAST HEART

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PETERSON



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Tracie Peterson, *Steadfast Heart*
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To Abrianna

May you be blessed in the Lord
all the days of your life.



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SEATTLE, WASHINGTON
MARCH 1888

Lenore Fulcher swept into her father's offices, feeling like a flower in full bloom. The men who worked for Fulcher's freight brokerage business glanced up to smile and then rose to their feet.

"Mornin', Miss Lenore," one man offered. "What a lovely color you're wearing. That yellow complements your brown hair."

"You're like sunshine" came another comment.

"My, Miss Fulcher, you are more beautiful each time we see you."

Lenore offered a ladylike smile but wanted to giggle. Each one old enough to be her father, these men never failed to fuss and fawn over her as if they were would-be suitors. She gave a nod in acknowledgment of their statements, but a glance at her father caused her to cringe.

"We have freighting matters to see to, or have you forgotten what you do for a living?" Josiah Fulcher roared. Softening his

expression, he looked at Lenore. “You always cause such a stir when you come here.”

“But, Father, you know as well as I do that you are the one who asked me to be here today.” She took hold of his arm and decided it was best not to inquire about the frown crowding his face. “Otherwise I would have gone immediately to see Abrianna. I have some gowns to share with her. After you show me what it is you want me to see, I’m heading upstairs to Mrs. Madison’s school.” Mrs. Madison owned the building where her father kept his freighting business, but he’d never quite approved of the bridal school being hosted upstairs or of Mrs. Madison’s ward, Abrianna Cunningham.

Her father’s frown deepened as he escorted her into his office. “I don’t know what to think about your friendship with Miss Cunningham or that school. Why, the very thought that Mrs. Madison advertises back east for women to come to Seattle to a school for would-be brides is rather appalling. Isn’t she a bit too old to be running such a school? And what of her ward, Miss Cunningham? She seems a bit of a wild and headstrong young woman. And that red hair.” He sighed and shook his head. “You know what they say about redheads—they’re certain to be challenging. I’m not sure her influence is a good one.”

“If they are all so questionable, why rent office space from them?”

“Because it was the only place in close proximity to my own buildings. You know full well that was the only reason. Mrs. Madison is a complete mystery to me, but she lets me have the space at a low rate, so I have no choice. Even so, I retain my concerns about her and the other ladies who work with her. And I believe my worries about Miss Cunningham have been proven over and over.”

Lenore laughed and squeezed her father's arm. "Oh, Father, you and Mother watched Abrianna and me grow up! We've been dear friends forever. And we attended and worked for the same church and charities. What is all this newfound worry about? I've turned out quite fine, haven't I?" She released her father's arm and gave a twirl.

"Well, I, for one, think you have" came a male voice.

Lenore turned on her heel so fast that her skirts ballooned in a swoosh of air. One of her father's associates stood in the open doorway with a look of amusement. Heat crept up her neck.

"Come in, James," her father ordered.

James Rybus did as instructed, pausing only long enough to give Lenore a quick bow. Of all the men in her father's office, he was the handsomest and the youngest, even though the man was a widower and pushing forty.

"I do apologize for any discomfort I've caused."

"Nonsense, James," her father replied before Lenore could form words. "Take a seat and let us get right to the heart of this matter."

Lenore worked to calm the rapid beat of her heart with a few deep breaths. Was Mr. Rybus joining them? Why would her father ask her to meet with him and his accountant? Perhaps he had something to share with Lenore about the trust she would inherit when she turned twenty-one. Of course that was still several months away, so it wouldn't be of any importance just yet. Would it?

Father took hold of Lenore's arm and brought her out of her thoughts, moving her to a large leather chair. Lenore settled on the edge of the seat, knowing that should she ease back into the comfort of the chair, her feet would not reach the floor. What an embarrassment that would be. And after her last little spectacle,

goodness. Not that it was a shameful thing to stand a mere five feet tall, but with dangling limbs, Lenore would feel more like a child than a regal and fashionable young woman.

Father walked to his desk and picked up a cigar. Crimping the end, he looked to James. “Would you care to begin, or shall I?”

“You are in charge here,” Rybus replied, yielding to his superior.

Her father lit the cigar and puffed on it a couple of times before taking his seat at the massive mahogany desk. There was an air of confidence about him, but Lenore could see something in his eyes that suggested worry.

“Lenore, I wanted you to come here today because Mr. Rybus has asked for permission to court you.”

A lump formed in Lenore’s throat, and for a moment she feared fainting. *Mr. Rybus?* Her immediate thought was to refuse. *Surely Father must be suffering a fever to think such a thing would interest me. The man is very nice looking and has a steady situation, but goodness, how could Father want me to court this old man?*

Yet how could she possibly refuse? Her father would speak for her at least until she married or came of age. She really had nothing to say on the matter—at least nothing she could voice in front of Mr. Rybus.

“I’m certain this comes as a surprise,” her father continued, “but I thought perhaps it was time to see you take on a serious beau. After all, your mother is worried that you’ll be an old maid.”

Mr. Rybus shot her a smile. “I doubt that would ever be possible. One as lovely as you, Miss Fulcher, must have a great many admirers. Even so, I’d be very honored if you would accept my request.”

Lenore needed time to think. But she knew it would be impossible to leave the office without offering some kind of commitment. “I don’t know what to say,” she replied honestly. “I never expected to come here and be presented with such a request. Mother would have palpitations if she knew we were having such an important conversation here—at your place of business, Father.”

Her father blanched, and Lenore knew she’d taken the right approach. Even so, she didn’t wish to shame her father. She folded her gloved hands together. “I will consider the matter, however. Perhaps we should continue the conversation later this evening if Mr. Rybus could come for dinner.”

“A splendid idea,” her father replied. “We will dine at six, James. I’m sure you can attend.” It was more a command than invitation. “And we always dress for dinner.”

“I would be honored.” He smiled at Lenore and came to where she sat. He gave a low bow. “Until tonight, Miss Fulcher.” Lenore nodded. “Yes. Until tonight.”



“He did what?” Abrianna asked but never gave Lenore time to respond. “Right there in the brokerage office? In front of everyone?”

“Yes. Well, no. It was in Father’s private office. Still, I’m sure that everyone knew what was being discussed. I don’t know what must have gotten into him. It wasn’t like Father at all.”

“Perhaps he’s suffered a malady of the brain,” Abrianna suggested. She tapped her finger to her chin. “I believe Mrs. Madison said that people his age were often given to such things.”

“He’s had no symptoms,” Lenore replied. “But I suppose you could be right.”

Abrianna pushed back her curly hair. Dark auburn-red with

gold highlights rippled and caught the sunlight. Lenore had always thought it quite pretty but wished that Abrianna cared more about fashion and propriety. Sometimes her friend was known to do some of the strangest things. Lenore had always hoped that maturity would tone down the risks she took, but instead, it seemed they had increased.

“Has he taken a fall?” Abrianna questioned. “I read that a blow to the head can alter a person’s state of mind.”

“I’m sure it can, but Father has taken no fall.”

“Are you certain?” Abrianna looked most concerned.

“I would have heard it discussed around the house. The servants are always sharing one scandal or another.” Lenore plopped onto Abrianna’s bed in a most unladylike manner.

“I don’t want to court Mr. Rybus. He’s handsome and all, but he makes me feel like a child. He’s so much older—nearly forty. Goodness, but that’s ancient.”

Abrianna giggled and put her hand to her mouth. Glancing around as if to make certain no one overheard, she lowered her hands and whispered, “Don’t let my aunts hear you say that. There’s not a one of them who doesn’t long for that age.”

“Well, it’s all right for aunts to be old, but not suitors.”

“I quite agree,” Abrianna said.

By the look of her contorted expression, Lenore knew her friend was deep in thought again. Lenore couldn’t help but find a small comfort in Abrianna’s consideration of her dilemma. The young woman was good at problem solving. Where Lenore always seemed to be focused on the questions of why and how, Abrianna took more interest in the solutions.

“He’s to come to supper this evening. It’s there that I’m supposed to give him an answer. Fiddlesticks. I don’t see how I can possibly refuse.”

“Perhaps tell your father there is someone else.”

“But there’s not,” Lenore replied. “Furthermore, Father and Mother know that very well. They oversee all of my activities. You know that. I can’t even slip away to see you without having to notify a driver.”

Abrianna sat on the opposite side of the bed and lay back to stare at the ceiling. Lenore did likewise from her side and their heads met in the middle. Turning to face her friend, Lenore shrugged. “It’s hopeless.”

“Never. We just need to figure out how God wants us to resolve the situation—then make it happen.”

Lenore wasn’t convinced things were done that way, but Abrianna’s wisdom bore consideration. She could be quite spiritual in times of trouble.

“I don’t suppose it would hurt to allow him to escort me a few times. I could then tell my father that he wasn’t a suitable suitor and let him handle dismissing Mr. Rybus.”

“I’d like to think he might.” Abrianna looked toward Lenore. “However, your father is an educated man.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that he has most likely spent a great deal of time analyzing and evaluating this matter. Aunt Selma told me once that her husband was like that. He would spend hours pondering a situation before making a decision. She said that most men were like that.” She paused, sat up, and flipped her hair over her shoulder. “It wastes time, if you ask me. I say why not just plunge right into a decision. If it works out, you’ve saved yourself a great deal of time, and if it doesn’t work, then you’ve still plenty of time to try again.”

Lenore considered Abrianna’s comment. Her father was a man who liked to weigh his options. No doubt he had considered

this idea for some time, even if Lenore was just now hearing about it. And then there was Mother to consider. She had often tried to suggest various acceptable suitors. “Goodness, but sometimes I wish we could go back to short dresses and ribbons in our hair.”

“I still wear short dresses,” Abrianna declared. “At least short enough to run in. Sometimes I get myself in quite a hurry and I don’t have patience for a gown binding my legs.”

“*Limbs*, Abrianna. *Legs* are vulgar.”

Her friend giggled. “Not if they can run fast.”

“Be serious. This weighs heavy on my heart.”

A brief knock on the bedroom door was followed by Mrs. Madison’s brisk entry into the room. “Abrianna, you have a lesson in baking bread. You’re late again and I do not appreciate having to round you up while the other young ladies wait.”

“But I have a guest.” She dramatically jumped to her feet and put her hand to her breast. “Lenore has just received some troubling news, and we are in deep spiritual thought for an answer.”

Mrs. Madison raised her eyebrows and lowered her chin. “I am quite certain you can continue to think deeply while kneading bread. Perhaps Miss Fulcher will wait for you in the parlor. She will find a selection of ladies’ magazines there that I’m sure will occupy her time.” She gave Lenore a knowing smile. “Or you could spend the time in prayer.”

Lenore didn’t wish to ire the lady any further. In an instant, she was on her feet. “I will be happy to wait there, Mrs. Madison. Father will be busy until lunchtime, so I really haven’t anywhere I need to be. I only wanted to bring some gowns to Abrianna. Might I have our man fetch them?”

“Of course.” Mrs. Madison glanced at Abrianna’s wrinkled

appearance. “If you can persuade her to dress in a manner more befitting her age, I would be most appreciative.”

“Oh, Aunt Miriam,” Abrianna sighed. “First bread and now my attire. Must I always suffer such trials and torments of disapproval?”

Mrs. Madison tightened her lips and turned for the door. “Two minutes, Abrianna. Do not give me cause to berate you in front of the other young ladies.” With that, she exited the room, leaving Lenore and Abrianna to follow.

“My life is such a chore.” Abrianna retucked her blouse into her skirt. She went to the dressing table and began forming her long curls into a knot at her neck. She secured this with a few pins and sighed. “I have no great love of bread, so why must I learn to bake it? Would God not have me do something of greater value? Just look at all the times in the Bible where bread got folks in trouble. The Israelites had to make it without leaven so they could leave quickly, and the disciples always seemed confused about bread.”

Lenore couldn’t hold back her laughter. “Oh, Abrianna, you do go on. Perhaps the greatest value of your life will be baking bread. Perhaps the Lord has plans for your bread-baking abilities. Just imagine it—you might very well be able to feed thousands by giving your bread like the boy in the Bible with his loaves and fishes.”

Her friend gave Lenore a troubled look. “I don’t mind feeding the hungry, but why must I be the one to bake their bread? I would be just as content to serve it or even pay for it—if I had riches.”

Lenore laughed again and put her arm around Abrianna’s shoulders. “Pity you weren’t born into a wealthy family.”

Abrianna sighed. “It is, Lenore. It is a great pity.”



Miriam Madison advertised her school as a place for “practical women who desire to become practical brides.” When her husband passed away shortly after coming west to make a new life in Seattle, she found he had left her a small amount of money and this building near the waterfront in Seattle. Taking her situation in hand, Mrs. Madison took on the task of reordering her life, and the idea of the school came to her. With the help of her younger sister, Poisie Holmes, and dear friend and widow Selma Gibson, she turned her misfortune into a way to support not only herself but the other two women, as well. They lived quite comfortably and trained other women to do likewise. Together they had managed the Madison Bridal School for nearly twenty years.

Miriam knew a deep satisfaction at her success. The early years had been difficult, but based on a previous idea tried by a local man named Mercer, Miriam was certain she could make the arrangement work. Mr. Mercer had no doubt failed because he was a man. At least that was her firm belief. After all, what godly woman would want to set sail and leave kith and kin to risk Mr. Mercer’s proposal of mail-order brides? The man might just as well be a debaucher of women. For certain he had persuaded a few, but the project never worked as well as he had hoped, and many a bachelor was sorely disappointed. That was, until Miriam took on the project.

“Now, ladies, you must form loaves and put them into the pans to rise.” She walked down the center table and nodded in approval at each woman’s progress. “This will take several hours. During that time you can work with Mrs. Gibson on crocheting doilies for your hope chests.”

Another idea that had come to Miriam. Most of these young women arrived in Seattle with nothing much but the clothes on their backs. The school provided their train ticket to San Francisco and a steamer ticket to Seattle. The girls would earn their keep while attending school by making various things to sell to locals. There was always a wide variety of foods and handwork for sale. Particular favorites were jams and cookies, as well as items of sewing. Work shirts and simple wool blankets often were sold in a frenzy of bidding. Some of their talents were auctioned off at monthly receptions, which serious young men seeking a bride could attend and get to know the young ladies better. Of course, there was an admission fee. That was one of the only ways to prove a man was serious, according to Selma. If a man were to part with some of his hard-earned cash for the right to dress uncomfortably and spend a day attempting to be cultured and socially astute, then the ladies believed them of serious interest.

At the end of the table, Miriam found Abrianna and her attempt at bread making. Her ward was generously sprinkled with flour, as was the floor. In fact, Miriam thought perhaps more flour had made it onto the floor and into Abrianna's hair than into the bread. The tiny lump of dough looked gooey and refused to form up properly.

“What have you here, Abrianna?”

“I think it looks rather disappointing. Don't you, Aunt Miriam?” Abrianna shook her head. “I would not want to be the recipient of bread so obviously wanting. I do not believe I have the talent to make bread. Pity, too, for I would have enjoyed tasting the finished product. You always make such lovely loaves, Auntie, although bread is certainly not my favorite. I'm much more appreciative of your apple pies.”

Unwilling to give in to flattery, the older woman merely nodded. “Start again, Abrianna. This time I shall watch you measure out your ingredients. My guess is that you simply put in too much water or perhaps not enough flour. Either way, we shall endeavor together to overcome your *disappointing* dough.”

She saw the disappointment on the redhead’s face but knew better than to feel sorry for the girl. Abrianna had been her most difficult pupil since the ladies took her as their own. Perhaps it was the trauma of losing a mother so young. It might even have been the desertion or death of her father right after Abrianna was born. They were never quite sure which was the case, although Abrianna’s mother was certain to her dying day that he never would have abandoned them. Who knew how such things truly affected one’s ability to function—and to make bread. In Abrianna’s case, however, Miriam Madison had found her greatest and most frustrating challenge.