

BRIDES *of* SEATTLE,
BOOK THREE

LOVE
EVERLASTING

TRACIE
PETERSON



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Tracie Peterson, *Love Everlasting*
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2015. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2015 by Peterson Ink, Inc.

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, 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

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Peterson, Tracie.

Love everlasting / Tracie Peterson.

pages ; cm. — (Brides of Seattle ; book three)

Summary: "After the great fire that destroyed much of Seattle in 1889, Abrianna Cunningham recognizes that her longtime friendship with Wade Ackerman is changing, but she finds herself overwhelmed by her conflicting feelings and the pursuit of another relentless suitor"— Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1305-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-7642-1063-1 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7642-1306-9 (large-print pbk.)

I. Title.

PS3566.E7717L68 2015

813'.54—dc23

2015009358

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

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Cover design by LOOK Design Studio

Cover photography by Aimee Christensen

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



*In memory of Sharon Asmus,
a phenomenal editor and friend.*

You will be missed.





SEATTLE, WASHINGTON TERRITORY
AUGUST 1889

“Surprise!”
Abrianna Cunningham’s heart leapt to her throat as she jumped back against the wall. Her hand flew to her breast. Goodness. Why did people think it amusing or even desirable to frighten a person half to death on such occasions?

“Happy Birthday!” the crowd called in unison.

She willed her heart to slow. “I am deeply touched.” And she was. “But honestly, I think such surprises are quite a shock to one’s system. I once read that a man died from just such a shock, though I think that was a bit dire. As I recall, he was startled by a burglar demanding he hand over his money. Nevertheless, it was a similar stupefaction, and he wasn’t much older than me. Although perhaps he had a weaker heart.” Abrianna looked at the others. There were looks of joy mingled with confusion. It would seem that the entire Madison Bridal School had turned out to honor her.

“Nevermind.” Abrianna smiled at the two dozen people gathered for the celebration. “I fear I am given to digress, but I

am honored that you would plan such a wonderful surprise.” Several of the bridal school students clapped in joy and ushered her toward the table where a large cake awaited.

“We helped with the baking,” one of the girls announced, “but Mrs. Madison did all the decorating.”

Abrianna’s three aunts stood behind the adorned table, each smiling in her own way. Miriam Madison, owner of the Madison Bridal School, looked rather severe, but she always did. With her gray hair secured in a tight bun and her mouth almost always in a straight line, even when smiling, Aunt Miriam’s appearance suggested she was never quite happy. However, Abrianna knew better. Aunt Selma, Aunt Miriam’s dear friend, stood to one side, her closed mouth bent upward as a horseshoe might. There was a definite gleam in her eyes. Aunt Poisie stood on the opposite side. As the younger sister of Miriam Madison, she had the job of sharing all the emotions her sister held back. Her smile was given with great abandon and looked as though she had just heard a very humorous joke. All so different, yet so dear.

“Don’t you love how beautiful it all is?” Clara asked. As one of the more outspoken and flirtatious of the bridal students, she was generally first to make her presence known. “Miss Poisie and I gathered the flowers.”

“Well, we all helped with the decorating, and Mrs. Gibson made the linens,” Elizabeth, another student offered.

Abrianna nodded. “I can see Aunt Miriam’s beloved Minton china has been chosen for this affair.” She put her hand again to her heart. “I know just how special those dishes are to you, Aunt Miriam. I am honored that you would use them for my birthday. But I would be completely devastated should they be so much as chipped.”

“I believe everyone will be careful, Abrianna,” her father said,

coming forward. “Happy Birthday.” He put his arm around her and gave a squeeze. “You look a lot like your ma.” He winked. “Minus the red hair, of course. That is now and ever will be your mark of honor.” After being absent most of her life, Jay Cunningham seemed quite caught up in the moment.

“Thank you, Father. Although I hardly see my hair as something to bring me honor.” She touched her hand to the hastily coiffed gathering of curls. “Mostly, it has seemed a curse.”

“Nonsense. You are beautiful.”

“I keep trying to tell her that.” Wade Ackerman stepped up to join them while the bridal school students buzzed around them like bees in a hive, helping get the cake served and punch poured.

Abrianna felt her heart skip a beat at Wade’s closeness. She had come to realize, just a little more than a month ago, that she was very much in love with her lifelong friend. To her surprise, he leaned over and boldly kissed her cheek.

“You are the prettiest girl here,” he whispered.

“Indeed,” her father said with a quick glance around the room. “But I’m prejudiced.”

“Mr. Cunningham,” Aunt Poisie said, coming to them looking worried, “I wonder if I could impose on you to help me bring in ice for the punch?”

“Of course.” He too kissed Abrianna’s cheek. “Duty calls.” He then extended his arm for Aunt Poisie to take. “Lead the way, dear lady.”

James Bowes Cunningham was—in spite of his difficult life—a rather handsome man who had returned to Abrianna after a lifetime absence. She and her aunts had long thought him dead. Having been falsely accused of murder and imprisoned for almost twenty years, Jay, as he preferred to be called, had allowed his family to think him deceased to spare them shame.

Abrianna found his reappearance in her life to only add to the confusion of her age.

And that confusion, this mastery of intricate exhaustion, culminated with Wade Ackerman. She braved a sidelong glance at the young man she'd known all of her life. He had been a brother and dear friend to her in his association with her aunts, but now . . . oh, now things were ever so different.

She felt her cheeks grow hot when Wade caught her glance and winked. Ducking her head, Abrianna fought her emotions. Now she was in love with Wade. What in the world was she to do about that?

"I'm so happy for you," Elizabeth declared. "Everything will change for you now that you are of age and in love." She giggled and added in a whisper. "Love changes everything."

Abrianna frowned. Just what she was afraid of. Her friendship with Wade was a foundation that she understood and counted on. Her aunts were most precious, but they were old, and their ideals and concerns harkened back to another age. Wade, on the other hand, had been privy to her innermost secrets and ambitions. Their friendship was the one thing she didn't wish to see change.

"Mr. Ackerman, I am so pleased to find you here tonight," Clara said, sidling up to him opposite Abrianna. She batted her eyes and fanned herself. "My, it is warm tonight. Maybe a little stroll in the garden would be nice." Her expression betrayed her desire that Wade offer to accompany her.

"As low cut as that bodice is, I'm surprised you haven't taken a chill." Abrianna shook her head in disapproval.

Clara giggled. "Oh, Abrianna, you do go on. The bodice isn't at all scandalous. It's quite fashionable."

"Not by Aunt Miriam's standards. I'm surprised you were allowed downstairs."

Clara gave a coy smile. “Well, she didn’t realize I planned to wear this particular gown. I only purchased it yesterday. What say you, Mr. Ackerman? Don’t you think it quite lovely?”

Wade looked to the ceiling. “I know little about fashion, but I do know Mrs. Madison’s rules about modesty.”

“Oh, that’s just because she’s old.” Clara gave a twirl. “I’m young, and I want to attire myself in the latest fashion to enhance my beauty.”

Abrianna noticed the way the bodice strained against Clara’s well-endowed bosom. “I’d be careful about moving too much or too quick. Maybe you should retrieve a shawl.”

“No. Clara needs to go change her gown altogether.” They all turned to find Aunt Miriam looking on in disapproval. “We shall discuss this further tomorrow, but for now you will go upstairs and make a better choice.”

Clara pouted, pursing her lips. “But I shall miss the party.”

“You should have thought of that before making such a display.” Aunt Miriam fixed the girl with one of her looks that Abrianna knew only too well. With her arched brow and narrowed eyes, Aunt Miriam could look quite imposing. She would not be moved by Clara’s childish moping.

“Well, fine!” Clara’s tone of exasperation and crestfallen expression put closure on the matter as she turned and stomped out of the room.

“You two need to get a piece of cake and some punch,” Aunt Miriam said in a more pleasant tone. “After all, it’s not every day that one celebrates her twenty-first birthday.”

“It certainly isn’t,” Kolbein Booth declared. He and his wife, Lenore, joined the trio. “Happy birthday, Abrianna.” He lifted her hand and kissed it.

Lenore, her longtime friend, waited her turn and then

embraced Abrianna. “Happy birthday. This is such a grand occasion, and you certainly deserve it.” She leaned closer and whispered, “I was glad to see you get rid of Clara. That dress was positively scandalous.”

“Indeed. But it is just one of many shocks I’ve had tonight.”

“I’ll get us some cake,” Wade said. “How about it, Kolbein? Join me?”

“I will. That cake looks much too good to pass up. I heard someone say it has strawberry preserves in between the layers.” He patted his stomach. “If I keep eating like this I’ll be a fat old man in no time.”

Abrianna stepped back as the men made their way to the table.

Lenore took hold of her arm. “You mentioned shock. I do hope nothing’s wrong. Your aunts were quite excited to plan this celebration for you.”

Another friend, Militine Patton, joined them. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but you have to know this party has completely occupied your aunts since the Fourth of July party was completed.”

Abrianna smiled. “They are dears. I suppose it isn’t every day that your ward turns twenty-one. It was very kind of all of you to join in the festivities. I feel quite beloved. I have never had so much attention put upon me—well, at least not this pleasant type of attention. Goodness, I’ve had more than my share of unpleasant attention, as you both know, and often by no fault of my own.”

“Well that’s of little concern now.” Lenore patted her arm. “It’s a wonderful party, and of course . . . there’s Wade. Has he proposed yet?”

Abrianna bit her lower lip. Word had gotten around rather

fast that Wade and Abrianna had indeed admitted feelings for each other that went far beyond the friendship they'd known. Lenore and Militine had been her immediate confidantes. To them she shared her confused emotions where Wade was concerned. Both assured her that this kind of change was no cause for alarm. They further suggested she enjoy rather than dread the change. Lenore put it in most eloquent words: "Love is always a mixed bowl of fruit. Some pieces are tart and others sweet." Abrianna didn't bother to add that some also could be full of worms.

The men returned with the cake. She sampled a forkful and found it a wonderful concoction of strawberries and whipped butter frosting layered between moist white cake. Across the room the bridal students got up a game of charades, and the party atmosphere was soon alive with whimsical laughter as each lady vied to act out her secret. From time to time someone came up to congratulate Abrianna and wish her well. It was a lovely party, but Abrianna found it hard to concentrate. Everything was happening much too quickly. Her father's return. Her change of heart toward Wade, and now coming of age. Could life become any more complicated?

"I would like to speak to you in the parlor," Aunt Miriam declared in her authoritative manner. "You may join us as well, Militine and Lenore." She looked to Wade and Kolbein who were now discussing something with Militine's husband, Thane. "You three, as well."

She led the way to the parlor while Abrianna began to fret. What was this all about? Why was Aunt Miriam sequestering them away from the others? Abrianna bit her lip and made her way into the parlor to find Aunt Selma and Aunt Poisie, as well as her father, already waiting. She scanned her memory for

something she might have done to cause reprimand, but it seemed unlikely that Aunt Miriam would confront her on her birthday.

“Please come stand here, Abrianna,” instructed Aunt Miriam.

Every gaze was now upon her, and Abrianna felt her face flush. Goodness, but this was enough to put a person into a state of apoplexy, although she’d never been in one before and really wasn’t at all certain what the symptoms would feel like.

Life could be full of extremely vexing and embarrassing moments, and this definitely appeared to rate right at the top of her list. Of course, that time earlier in the summer when she’d had to discard her skirt and swim to safety when the great Seattle fire threatened to consume both her and Wade was probably her most recent humiliation. Thankfully, her aunts had been understanding.

“As you know, Abrianna became our responsibility upon the death of her mother,” Aunt Miriam began.

“God rest her soul,” Aunt Poisie declared.

“Amen,” Aunt Miriam and Aunt Selma offered their customary reply.

“We had thought her father to have perished, as well,” Aunt Miriam continued, “but are happy to realize that he had not.” The aunts looked to Abrianna’s father and gave a brief nod.

“In taking charge of Abrianna, we devoted ourselves to benefitting her throughout her life,” Aunt Miriam added. “We worked to give her a solid education, teaching her ourselves rather than allowing her to be misled by public schools.”

Aunt Poisie bobbed her head in her usual manner and gave a toothy smile. Aunt Selma looked quite satisfied, no doubt congratulating herself on the fact that she had spared Abrianna a lifetime of unlearning what she considered to be outrageous, ungodly claims by leading educators and scientists of the day.

“ . . . and because of this, we now have a gift for Abrianna. One that we have prepared for throughout the years.”

Abrianna hadn't heard the entirety of Aunt Miriam's comment, but smiled nevertheless as the women beckoned her forward. Aunt Miriam handed her an envelope.

“You will find all of the details inside, but Mr. Booth can better explain, should you have questions.”

“Questions?” Abrianna asked. She looked around her as if for explanation. Lenore's husband came forward with a grin.

“It means that you are now self-sufficient—a woman of means.”

Abrianna shook her head. “I don't understand.”

“Were you not listening?” Aunt Miriam asked, raising a brow. “No, I suppose your mind was filled with thoughts of fancy.” She sounded harsh, but Abrianna saw the amusement in her eyes. “I said that we have put aside an inheritance for you.” She looked to Kolbein. “Mr. Booth helped us to manage and invest the money we faithfully put aside. He has agreed to continue assisting you.”

“I don't know what to say.” She looked from her aunts to Kolbein. “What must I do?”

“Not a thing,” Kolbein said, laughing. “You simply allow me to go on making wise choices for you, or I could probably help Wade to better understand the workings of the investments.”

“No thank you,” Wade said. “I think the paper work is best left to those with that kind of education. I know my limitations. Besides, this is Abrianna's money, and I won't have anyone accusing me of trying to take it out of her hands.”

“No one who knows you would ever think that,” Lenore replied. “You are a man above reproach, Wade. We have long appreciated that about you.”

To Abrianna, it seemed the world had once again turned upside down. “Thank you, Aunts,” she finally managed to murmur. “I am in such a state of shock that I have no other words.”

“Now there’s a first,” Wade teased. The others laughed.

They soon rejoined the bridal students, who now entertained with songs and piano pieces. What might have otherwise been a simple celebration in another year turned into an afternoon of revelry. Abrianna couldn’t help find herself caught up in the merriment. After all, fussing and worrying over the future wouldn’t resolve the matter in a single day. It would no doubt take weeks if not months of pondering. Of course, she would do what she could to lessen that time.

She was glad when she spied Kolbein standing alone. She needed to discuss a great many matters with him and the most pressing couldn’t wait. She had received yet another invitation for an outing with Priam Welby. Some months earlier, Welby had convinced her that she should court him in return for his help in furnishing a facility for the homeless and friendless. He had known her passion for ministering to those poor souls, and prior to the great fire that had destroyed downtown Seattle, Abrianna had even known him to donate money to the cause from time to time.

When he had proposed a contract between them, a contract that would allow Abrianna the means by which to help her old sailors and indigent citizens while giving Welby the right to court her, she had thought it utter foolishness. But she had been so long praying for an answer as to how she could better help those poor people that Welby’s proposition seemed like answered prayer. Aunt Miriam had long taught her that answers to prayer didn’t always come in an expected form. Because of that, Abrianna had to allow that God might very well have sent Priam Welby as His answer.

“Kolbein, do you have a moment?”

He nodded and led her to the far side of the room. “I’m sure you have a lot of questions.”

“I suppose I should. To be honest, I’m in such a fitful state of confusion, I don’t know if anything I say will make sense. You know, I once heard tell of a man who, upon receiving a great shock, was forever unable to even remember his address without prompts. Do you suppose I shall succumb to such madness?”

He laughed. “Abrianna, you will never succumb to madness of any kind. To do that would require you yielding control, and I’ve yet to see you do that in any area of your life, save perhaps your encounters with the Almighty, and even then I’m somewhat certain you barter with Him.”

“Oh, you do have a poor opinion of me.” Abrianna shook her head. “Perhaps I shouldn’t even ask for your help.”

“I have only the best opinion of you, Abrianna. I have always admired your strength. Now what can I do for you? Did you want to discuss your inheritance?”

“No.” She shook her head again. “I want to dissolve the contract with Mr. Welby.”

“Ah yes. I presumed that would be forthcoming and have already arranged the papers for you to sign dissolving the agreement. He won’t be happy about it, you know.”

“His happiness is not my responsibility. Besides, he knows full well I only agreed to court him because he offered help for the poor. I made it quite clear that I would never love him nor would I pretend to court him with any thought of marriage. He was the one who was deluded in thinking that he could somehow win me over. And now, given my recent . . . discovery of feelings for Wade, I cannot court Mr. Welby.”

Kolbein chuckled. “Not unless Wade were to come along, and I doubt Welby would be tolerant of that.”

“No, I’m certain he wouldn’t. Mr. Welby doesn’t seem to be tolerant of much.”

Her words appeared to sober Kolbein. “He is known for being vindictive, Abrianna. I can’t say what he might do to attempt punishment for your change of heart.”

“I do not think he will attempt anything. I was never meant for Mr. Welby, and I told him so. Why he thought he could win me over is quite beyond me. He did not appeal to me in the least, especially given his big ears, although I truly would never let that be a reason for rejecting someone’s love, if I loved him in return. Which, of course, I don’t.” She gave a heavy sigh. “I will rely upon you to finalize the matter.”

“I am your humble servant,” Kolbein declared with an exaggerated bow.



“I haven’t had you to myself all day.” Wade led Abrianna out onto the wraparound porch. The sun hung low in the sky and painted the horizon in hues of orange and red. “I can’t remember us having a moment alone since the Fourth of July.” He grinned. “A day I still reflect on with great pleasure.”

“It was quite the affair. My birthday party, that is. Well, the Fourth of July was quite a wondrous event, as well.” She fell silent.

Abrianna looked tired, and Wade felt selfish for demanding her time. But she was all he could think of these days. The only soul in the world he wanted to be with. With great care Wade tucked her arm in his and walked to the farthest point away from the front of the house. The porch offered them a private yet

respectable place to share a moment alone, and Wade intended to take full advantage of it.

“We need to talk.”

She looked up and nodded. “I suppose we do.”

“With the long hours I’ve been putting in helping with the rebuilding of the city, we’ve hardly been alone. And when I am here, you seem busy or have already gone to your room for the night.” He reached out and lifted her chin with his finger. “You aren’t avoiding me, are you?”

“Maybe.”

He hadn’t expected her answer. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” She pulled away and walked to the porch rail. “I suppose I’m very confused. This is all so new to me. One minute we’re good friends, and the next you kiss me and everything changes. Stuff and nonsense. I can’t even look at you without all sorts of thoughts rushing through my head.”

He chuckled. “We’re still good friends, Abrianna.” He moved toward her. “Nothing will ever change that.”

She turned and held out her hands as if to ward him off. “How can you be certain of that? After . . . well, after we . . . well, I think of you quite differently now.”

He grinned. “I’m thinking of you pretty differently, too. But they’re all very good thoughts. I love you.”

She nodded. “I know you do, and I love you, Wade.” Her expression puzzled him.

“You look like you’re about to face a battle rather than a wedding.”

“Wedding? We haven’t talked about a wedding.” She shook her head. “I vacillate between having a stomachache and then a headache. One minute I feel exhausted and the next I could

climb a mountain. If this is love, then I'm not at all sure I am going to enjoy it."

He suppressed a grin. She would never understand his amusement with her. "Oh, Abrianna, you're making this much more complicated than it needs to be."

"Well, it's just that everything I knew to be stable in my life has turned upside down. I feel so . . . so . . . misplaced." She shook her head again. "I don't expect you to understand. I don't understand it myself. Goodness knows, I've tried. I've even written out lists. I could show them to you to prove myself."

This time he couldn't suppress his amusement and laughed. "Abrianna, I believe you. I can see that you're confused. What I want you to know, however, is that despite all these changes, you are still the same. I'm still the same. That's not going to change."

"Of course it will." She gave him an indignant glare. "Only dead things don't change. I'm not the same person I was five years ago. You are completely different than you were back then. I would never have dreamed of kissing you. I recall your being a pest to me, always ruining my plans."

"For your own good." He took a step back. "Honestly, Abrianna, you make it sound like falling in love is the end of something rather than the beginning."

She turned away from him, and all those cinnamon-colored curls rippled down her back, begging his touch. Wade held himself in check. If he touched her now, she might go back to avoiding him, and he didn't want to risk that.

"I'm afraid of that very thing. I like what we have, Wade. You are the only person in the world I feel I can be completely honest with. You can be very harsh with me, but I always know it's done out of concern for my well-being and not because you are striving to make me into someone else, as my aunts do."

“No one wants you to be someone else, Abrianna. Your aunts have only tried to make you the best person you can be.”

She continued staring out toward the bay and the setting sun. Wade wanted to offer her something that would put her mind at ease, but he was rather baffled. He had fought for some time against the feelings he had for Abrianna, and now that he knew she felt the same way, he didn’t want to lose a moment in planning for their future. Abrianna, on the other hand, was fixed on the past.

Without warning, she turned to face him. “What if we’re wrong? What if that kiss was just a coincidence? What if because we were in a celebratory mood and everyone was having a good time, the kiss only seemed right? Goodness, it could have just been the night air. Aunt Poisie always said the sea breezes could stir up one’s blood.”

Wade closed the short distance between them and pulled Abrianna into his arms. His hand cradled her head as he lowered his mouth to hers, determined to prove their love had nothing to do with night air. He felt her melt against him, her hands going up to the back of his neck. His pulse quickened.

Sea breezes indeed. “Does that help answer your thoughts of coincidence?” he asked after making certain she was thoroughly kissed.

She didn’t try to get away from him or break his hold. She just laid her head upon his shoulder and gave the tiniest of nods. “It does. It’s just as I feared.”

“Just as you feared?” He lifted her face to meet his gaze. “And what is that?”

She blushed and looked away. “I like very much when you do that.”

He laughed and touched her lips with his finger. “I like it very much, as well. And once we are married, I plan to do it often, so you might as well get used to the idea.”