

TRACIE PETERSON

Ladies of the Lake

*Forever
My Own*



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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.

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In memory of Heidi.

Your life touched the lives of so many,
and you will be missed.

We'll see you again!

Chapter 1

Duluth, Minnesota
January 10, 1871

Kirstin Hallberg stepped from the train onto the depot platform. A bitter wind whipped at her bonnet, sending the tails of her ribbon ties dancing. She glanced to the right and then to the left, looking for her grandmother among the small number of people waiting on the platform. Would she recognize her? The long trip from Sweden was finally at an end, and she could hardly wait to see *Mormor* again. Kirstin had only been twelve when her grandparents and Uncle Per left Sweden to live in America, and she hadn't seen them since. Now *Morfår*, her grandfather, was dead, and Uncle Per had died as well, and that was why Kirstin had come to America—to take care of her grandmother. Without family here, the old woman would be all alone.

Kirstin spied a white-haired woman and man. The woman wore her hair braided and wrapped around her head like a crown. *Mormor*. It had to be her.

“Kirstin!” her grandmother called and waved. The couple came forward to greet her. “*Välkommen till Amerika och Duluth.*”

“I have felt very welcomed since arriving in America. I have seen so much beauty as I traveled by train. Duluth is, well, not as pretty as I had hoped.” Kirstin grinned, glancing around.

“Ja, but it is not that old of a town,” Mormor declared, her Swedish cadence giving the statement a singsong sound. “But just look at you, all grown up. You’re beautiful! You’re even prettier than your mama.”

Kirstin put down her luggage and wrapped her arms around her grandmother’s neck. “Oh, Mormor. I was afraid I wouldn’t recognize you, but you look just as I remember.” They hugged for a long time.

“I feel that I am missing out,” the man who’d accompanied Mormor said.

The older woman pulled away and kissed Kirstin’s cheeks. “Ignore him. He’s always trying to be the center of attention.”

The old man laughed. “Hardly that. You know better, Lena. I just want to meet your granddaughter. You’ve talked of nothing and no one else for weeks.” He extended his hand. “I’m Habram Farstad. I was your *morföräldrar*’s best friend.”

“Of course! I’ve heard you spoken of many times in the letters home.” Kirstin separated from her grandmother and gave him a hug. “You’ve taken good care of Mormor and might as well be family.”

He shrugged. “Ja, I might as well be. At least that’s what I’m always telling her.” He gave Kirstin’s grandmother a wink.

“Do you have a lot of luggage? A trunk or two?” Mormor asked.

Kirstin shook her head, gazing around to take in all that she could. It seemed, since her arrival in America, that all she could do was gawk at the new sights. “I only have this luggage. There

really wasn't much to bring. Papa gave me some money for the trip and told me I could use whatever was left to buy some of the things I'd need once I got here. I will definitely need to go shopping for fabric and other things."

"That will not be a problem," her grandmother said. "We have plenty of stores. It used to be there wasn't much available this time of year, but with the railroad now in place, we can get goods from St. Paul whenever we need them."

"That's for sure," Habram said, nodding. "Duluth used to be like living at the end of the world before the train. Especially in the winter." He leaned down and took Kirstin's luggage. "I'll go get the carriage, and you meet me out front."

"Ja, we'll do that."

Mormor and Kirstin began a slow walk to follow Habram. Kirstin gave a sigh. "I'm so glad to be off that train. It was noisy and dirty. I thought it all very exciting, but I'm glad to be here with you. My adventure is at an end."

Her grandmother squeezed Kirstin's shoulders and pulled her close. "Nonsense. The adventure is just beginning. Now that you're here, we can have a grand time. You'll see."

Kirstin suppressed a yawn. "Well, I hope there will at least be time for a rest before we venture too far. Oh, and a bath."

Mormor laughed. "Perhaps, but first we will eat. I've made some good Swedish food for you so that you won't be too lonely for home."



Lena watched as Kirstin ate her lunch with gusto. The girl seemed nearly starving.

"*Tack*, Mormor." Kirstin beamed her a smile. "I haven't eaten

much since coming to America. My English is good, but I don't always understand what some of the foods are. Especially when they give them strange names. In New York I had something called *lasagna*. It was very good, but I was afraid to try it because I couldn't understand what the man was telling me about it."

"I've had lasagna too," Mormor admitted. "It's very good."

"I sometimes didn't have much choice, so I just decided not to eat. I'm so glad to be here now and know what I'm eating."

"I'm glad you like it." Mormor spooned more lingonberry jam on her granddaughter's plate.

"I haven't had *raggmunk* with lingonberries for such a long time."

Swedish potato pancakes had always been one of Kirstin's favorites when she was very little. Lena had hoped they still were.

"I'm glad you like them. Raggmunk is always good for winter food. Plenty of potatoes are available, and we put up a lot of berries this summer. One of my friends from church has a big piece of land where blueberries grow wild, and five years ago she planted lingonberries too. They are growing so well that she gave me a whole bushel to can. You won't have to do without them here."

"I wondered if the same things that grow at home would grow here in America. I remember, though, that you wrote to Mama about the lingonberries."

"Your grandmother is a mighty fine cook, ja?" Habram said.

"Ja," Kirstin declared. "The best. Mama says she learned everything about cooking from you."

"How is your mama? I bet it was hard for her to let you sail to America," Lena said as she gathered the dishes.

"Ja, Mama was worried. She didn't like the idea of me sailing

after what happened to my brother Domar. She still mourns his loss.”

Lena and Habram exchanged a glance but said nothing as Kirstin continued.

“When I got to America, I wrote her a letter and mailed it right away. I don’t know how long it will take to arrive, but I’m sure she’ll know soon that I got here safe. The ship is owned in Sweden. They would hear plenty quick if it had been lost.”

“Ja, no doubt that’s true.” Lena gave her granddaughter a smile. “Come on now, I’ll show you your room, and you can wash up and rest.”

“Don’t you need help with the dishes?”

“Not this time. I know you are tired from the long train ride. There are many changes of trains between here and New York.”

“Ja. Many.”

Lena led Kirstin from the dining room and down the hall to the narrow stairs hidden behind an equally narrow door. “Your room is upstairs.” She climbed ahead of Kirstin, and Habram brought up the rear with Kirstin’s luggage in hand.

The stairs opened right into a small room that Lena had set up as a sitting area. Beyond that were two doors, one to the immediate right and one straight ahead.

“You can have the room over there,” Lena said, pointing straight ahead.

Kirstin opened the door. “Oh, it’s lovely. So perfect.”

Lena watched as Kirstin made her way around the room, touching the mirrored dresser and then the quilted bed cover. “I made that quilt special for you when I heard you would come. We worked on it together, me and the ladies in the neighborhood.”

“I love it. Blue and green are my favorite colors.” Kirstin examined the quilt. It was done up in a series of stars and pin-wheels.

“It’s my welcoming gift to you,” Lena said.

Kirstin hurried back to her grandmother and hugged her tight. “I love it, and I love you for making it for me.”

“*Jag älskar dig, dotterdotter.*” *I love you, granddaughter.* Lena smiled and gently pushed Kirstin away. “Now, you wash up and rest. I’ll come get you if it gets too late.”

Kirstin kissed Lena’s cheek and stepped back to the bed. She pulled down the covers and positioned the pillow just so.

“There’s water in the pitcher and soap in the little dish behind the bowl,” Lena explained. “And the hand towels are hanging just under the window. Later tonight you can have a proper bath downstairs.”

“You have wooden shutters just like at home.” Kirstin ran her fingers over the carved and painted designs. “It almost feels like home.”

“This is your home now for as long as you like.” Lena turned to Habram. “Just leave that luggage and come with me. I’ll pour you another cup of coffee.”

“Ja, another cup sounds good. It’s mighty cold today.”

Lena led the way downstairs and smiled at the sight of three sets of dishes awaiting her attention by the sink. She loved to have company. Being alone was so lonely. The house was always too quiet when the others were gone. She preferred having people in the house and extra work every day compared to being by herself.

Of course, Per had not been dead even a year. Her only son had been killed in a logging accident five years after Lena

lost her beloved husband, Jürgen, to sickness. How she missed them both. If not for Habram and the boys, she might have died from a broken heart.

“When will you tell her about her brother?” Habram asked in a hushed tone.

Lena took his coffee to the table and shook her head. “I don’t know. It’s a great deal to tell.”

“Ja, but it must be told.”

She nodded. “Ja. It must be.”



Kirstin awoke and glanced around the room. She had been traveling for weeks—a month and a half, actually—and it was almost surprising to find that the room wasn’t moving or rocking in some manner. Ships and trains were in constant motion, and she had definitely wearied of the movement.

She snuggled down beneath Mormor’s quilt and sighed. It was good to be here. She could feel it. It was the right thing to do—a thing of God, as her father might say. When they’d learned that Uncle Per had died, there had been a frenzy of conversations to decide what was to be done. Mama had concluded that they should write to Mormor and send her money to come back to Sweden. After all, they’d only gone to America because Per wanted to buy farmland and take a wife. They had heard about the cheap land in America, where a man had only to dream a dream and it would come true. In their area, the Crown and the noblemen owned the land. Papa had rented his piece for many years and even owned his house. It was one of the ways some noblemen rewarded their most faithful tenants. But Papa would never own the land.

But Mormor had written back, declining the offer. She didn't want to leave America, where her husband and son were buried. She called it home now, and Sweden was but a distant memory. So the frenzy began once again to decide the best course. Mormor could not live by herself, after all.

Each of Kirstin's siblings discussed what they might do, except for the youngest, Brita. She was only twelve. Kirstin's brother Härse had a well-established business making furniture and had no desire to move to America, even given the possibilities of expanding his business. Their sister Svena was married and expecting her second baby. There was no money for the little family to even consider moving so far away.

That left Kirstin, who was more than happy to be the one to solve the problem. All her life she had liked being in the position of helping people fix what was wrong and manage difficult situations. Although she had never married or had children, she gave advice to her friends and family who had. Most of the time the advice was sound, because Kirstin paid great attention to everything around her. When the old women talked, she listened. She'd made it her life's ambition to be wise. She wanted one day to be that old lady all the people sought for answers to their problems. Even now the idea made her smile.

When she announced that she was very much up for an adventure and would love to go to America, her parents had been surprised but saw the sense of it. For Kirstin, it was not only a way to care for her grandmother, but also to leave a part of the past behind. Sweden was full of painful memories. Perhaps none so painful as the loss of her elder brother Domar.

She had been close to him, and the fact that she hadn't been able to fix the problems that drove him away still haunted her

all these years later. Never mind that she'd been a child when the problems arose. Kirstin felt a sense of failure. Domar had always been there for her, even when others felt he wasn't there for anyone. He was something of an outcast, refusing to be intimidated by authority or put in his place. Domar felt the rules were for everyone else, not for him. He drank too much on occasion and ran his mouth in such a way that he embarrassed his family and sometimes really hurt them. But when he sobered up and returned to his senses, he was always sorry for the harm he'd done and always sought to right his wrongs. If anything could be said of him, he was honest to a fault. That was why it was so hard when no one believed him.

Kirstin stretched and got up. It was dark, even though she was certain it couldn't be all that late. She wasn't sure what Mormor's routine was for the evening, but she figured she'd best join her and see what she could do to make herself useful.

As she passed the other upstairs room, Kirstin couldn't help but peek inside. Despite the darkness of the room, she could see it was another bedroom with a more masculine look to it. This had likely been Uncle Per's room. She smiled at the scent of cologne that hung in the air. She remembered Uncle Per as something of a dandy when it came to cleaning up on a Saturday night. Poor Mormor. No doubt she missed him terribly.

At the bottom of the stairs, Kirstin opened the door and stepped out. She paused to look down the hall. She'd been too tired earlier to pay much attention to the layout of the house. To the right it appeared there were other doors lining the darkened hallway. Perhaps other bedrooms or a sewing room. Mormor had mentioned a proper bath, so perhaps she had a bathing room. There were framed pictures on the hallway wall.

Landscapes that could have been Sweden. They were small and of no real significance to Kirstin. Perhaps they'd been gifts.

Kirstin glanced to the left and started for the dining room. The oak floor was polished to perfection, and despite the only light coming from a lamp on the dining room table, it still gleamed. She passed through the dining room, where they had eaten lunch, and took a moment to glance at the flowered wallpaper and an unlit lamp hanging over the table. Mormor had lit the single lamp on the table, no doubt to give Kirstin enough light by which to navigate, but hadn't lit the overhead lamp in order to be frugal. That was typical of Kirstin's family.

The kitchen came next, and Kirstin smiled at the similarity it held to her mother's in Sweden. Here there was plenty of light. Mormor had probably been working in here recently, because Kirstin could smell something baking in the oven.

White cabinets with carved trim attracted her attention. Little hearts and flying bluebirds decorated the edges, just as they did the wooden shutters in her room. No doubt her grandfather had carved and painted them. It brought cheer to the impeccably clean kitchen. There was a huge woodstove and an icebox and a long wooden table, also painted white, on which a person could prepare an entire *smörgåsbord*. A small table with four chairs sat to the far side by the window. Kirstin could almost imagine her morfar and Uncle Per taking a casual meal there with Mormor.

From outside the house came laughter. It sounded like Mormor and Mr. Farstad. It hadn't been hard to see that Mr. Farstad was sweet on her grandmother. The affection that shone in his eyes reminded Kirstin of the way Papa looked at Mama.

Not wanting them to think she'd been spying on them, she hurried away from the kitchen door and into the lighted living

room. A fire burned in the hearth, and Kirstin made her way over to warm herself. The clock on the mantel showed half past five. Goodness, she had slept a very long time.

The front door opened, and Mormor stepped inside, looking over her shoulder to wave good-bye. “Yes, yes. We’ll be ready. Never fear,” she called. She turned back and spied Kirstin at the fire. “Ah, you’re awake. How did you sleep?”

Kirstin shrugged. “Given I was in bed for nearly four hours, I would say quite well.”

Mormor laughed. “Well, good. You’ll be nice and rested so you can tell me all about the folks at home.” She shrugged out of her coat and hung it on a peg. Next she bent to remove her boots. “I’m so glad you were able to rest. A lot of folks find daytime sleeping difficult.” She came to the fire and gave her granddaughter a hug. “It’s so good to have you here.”

“I’m very happy to be here, Mormor.” Kirstin moved from the fire and took a seat after her grandmother claimed the fireside rocker. “Was that Mr. Farstad?”

“Ja. He’s a good man.”

“He seems rather sweet on you.”

Her grandmother’s eyes twinkled. “*Ja, det är sant.*”

“Of course it’s true. I’m glad you aren’t trying to suggest otherwise.”

Mormor chuckled. “You were always a very observant child.”

“Well, I’m a child no more.” Kirstin smiled and eased back in her seat. “I thought maybe I’d be the one to find romance in America, but now I see it shall be my grandmother.”

Mormor chuckled and shook her index finger. “Don’t be so sure. There are many men in Duluth. Mr. Farstad has a son, as you might recall. He’s quite handsome and just the right age

to take a wife. I've often thought it would be nice to have him in our family."

"I do recall he has a son. He has two daughters also. You told us in a letter about them living in Kansas—married to farmers—and Morfar taught Mr. Farstad and his son how to make those small sailboats."

Mormor nodded. "The Mackinaw boats. Ja. They used to work all together when the boys were free from their other jobs. Those were happy times." She seemed to drift off in thought for a moment. "But there will be happy times again now that you're here."

Kirstin noticed a long piece of jute attached to a nail on one side of the wall. It went along the wall to the other side, where it was again tied to a nail. There was some sort of twine hanging from the jute and tied together to make a diamond pattern. "What is that?"

"I'm making gill nets. I earn my keep by making them for the fishermen. I sell eggs too. Out in the shed I have twenty hens. They are all good layers, except in the winter. The lack of light makes them lazy, so I threaten to eat them." She laughed and slapped her knee as if she'd just told a great joke. "Habram put in a very small stove to keep them warm in the winter, so I just point to it and tell them they'll go in the pot if they don't lay eggs." She looked at the net on the wall. "The gill nets are something I learned to do after I arrived here."

"What do the fishermen do with these particular nets?"

"They set them in the water and catch whitefish or herring, depending on how big I make the holes."

Kirstin perked up. "I forgot you have herring in the lake. How wonderful. We can pickle and can it."

“Ja. We’ll have some for breakfast tomorrow.”

“It’ll be just like being home.”

“This is your home now. You are welcome to do what you like with your room, and if you want to change something in the house, just talk to me.”

“No, the house seems perfect. Like a Swedish cottage. You even have the steep roof and traditional trim. I’d love to get a tour and see it all, when you have time.”

“We can do that right now.” Mormor got to her feet. “Come, I’ll show you all there is. Even the chickens.”

They toured the house with Mormor pointing out little things of interest. When they reached the bedroom she had once shared with her husband, she stepped aside. “You see that bed? Your morfar made it for me when we came to America.”

Kirstin admired the four-poster bed. Mormor hadn’t put up a canopy but rather left the bed open. “Don’t you get cold without the curtains?”

“Sometimes I use them in the winter, but I forgot to put them up this year, so I just added more covers.” Mormor smiled and ran her hand down the pine post. “Sometimes when it turned cold before we got the curtains up, your morfar would pile on the covers so that I could hardly move. I told him to stop or I wouldn’t be able to get out of bed. He said that was the way he liked it. He thought we should stay cuddled up all winter.”

Kirstin giggled. “That’s a rather risqué thing to tell your granddaughter.”

Mormor shrugged. “I suppose it’s all in how you take it. He was a good man to me and always showed me such love. You should remember that we were a love match. We did not marry because of convenience or necessity. We fell in love in school,

and that love only grew stronger through the years. He was a good husband and provider.”

“I’m sure he was, Mormor. I loved Morfar very much. He was so much fun. He would play with us children and always brought us sweets to eat.”

“And he loved God. That saw us through both hard times and good. He used to spend time every night before bed in prayer. I did too. Prayer is so important, Kirstin. Always remember to pray.”

“I do, Mormor. I love God very much. Mama used to tell me that God should come first before anyone else—even our husbands. She said if we put God first, our husband’s place coming next would be just right, because you want a husband who works hand in hand with God.”

“Ja. I taught her that.”

Kirstin smiled. “I know. She told me. And your mama taught it to you.”

“And no doubt her mama taught her. It’s good for a family to put their trust in God. Always remember that, Kirstin. No matter what else you say or do, God must come first.”

Mormor continued the tour by showing Kirstin a sewing room that also doubled as the laundry room in the winter and a bathing room when baths were needed.

“We’ll get the tub out and prepare lots of hot water for you to take a bath after supper.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Kirstin followed her into the hall.

“This is the linen closet. I keep all the bedding and towels here. Your morfar built it right into the wall so that it would be convenient for everyone to use.”

“That was very smart.”

“And this was Per’s room,” Mormor declared, opening the final door.

Kirstin stepped into the decidedly masculine room. “But I thought his room was upstairs. The room I’m not using.”

“No, this one was his.” Mormor offered no explanation of the room upstairs. “He liked to stay close to us in case of trouble. In the early days there were problems occasionally. He and Morfar always kept a loaded gun handy. I’m sure Mr. Farstad could tell you all about it sometime, if you ask.”

Kirstin nodded, but what she wanted to ask about was the room upstairs.