

A woman with light brown hair styled in an updo, wearing a cream-colored lace dress with a large floral ruffled collar, stands in a doorway. She is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The background is dark and moody, with a teal door visible on the right.

TRACIE PETERSON

A decorative flourish consisting of elegant, flowing lines in a golden-brown color, with a small red heart at its center.

Secrets of My Heart

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WILLAMETTE BRIDES • 1



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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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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

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Peterson, Tracie, author.

Title: Secrets of my heart / Tracie Peterson.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker
Publishing Group, [2020] | Series: Willamette brides ; book 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2019040907 | ISBN 9780764232251 (trade paperback) | ISBN
9780764232268 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493422746 (ebook) | ISBN 9780764232275
(large print)

Subjects: GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3566.E7717 S43 2020 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019040907>

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

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Cover design by LOOK Design Studio

Cover photography by Aimee Christenson

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my sister Karen

You are such an amazing woman,
and I am so blessed to call you sister and friend.
You've been an inspiration to me.



CHAPTER 1



PORTLAND, OREGON

MARCH 1879

Oh, my poor dear Mrs. Pritchard,” the older woman declared as soon as Nancy opened the front door. “Poor grieving wife. But no! No longer a wife, but a widow.” She *tsked* and pushed into the house without giving Nancy a chance to offer an invitation.

“I heard about your precious Albert’s death while I was visiting my daughter in California.” The stocky woman placed the basket she’d been carrying by the door. “I was completely overcome with grief for you and cut my visit short. I knew you would need the wise counsel of your closest friends.”

Nancy would have rolled her eyes if she wasn’t being stared at as though she might burst into tears at any moment.

“I can see it’s still such a shock. Come, we must sit, and I will have the entire story.”

“Mrs. Mortenson, I’m afraid you have caught me at a bad time.”

“Oh, pshaw. There are no good times when you are in a state of grief, but fear not, I am in no way offended.” Mrs.

Mortenson took a seat on the large mauve sofa without being asked. “Now, come sit with me, child. I know very well how these things can be.” She carefully arranged her wool gown and shawl. “Although I have not been a widow myself, I have had many close friends who are. I believe I am well acquainted with this grief.”

Nancy stared at her guest for a moment, noting the fixed look of expectation on the older woman’s face. Agnes Mortenson was well known in Nancy’s circle of acquaintances as the person from whom to get news—if one couldn’t afford a newspaper. Mrs. Mortenson was sixty-seven years old, but while her snowy head suggested possibilities of wisdom and sage advice, nothing could be further from the truth. She was insatiable when it came to sticking her nose into the business of others and sharing said details with anyone who gave her the time of day. Worse still, she was known to embellish those details. Nancy had dreaded her return to town and the stories she might spread about Albert’s death.

Knowing there was little else to be done, Nancy sank into the wooden rocker by the fireplace across from the older woman.

“I heard your husband was found floating facedown in the river near the ferry landing,” Mrs. Mortenson began.

Nancy had envisioned the scene at least a thousand times. “Yes.”

Mrs. Mortenson leaned forward. “And that he had fallen into the river farther upstream.”

“Possibly.” Nancy wasn’t at all certain why she needed such detail.

The old woman leaned even closer. “But . . . there are those who fear he was . . . *pushed* into the river. Murdered.” She let the word linger in the air.

Nancy hurried to suppress that rumor. “I hardly think so. Albert had no enemies of which I’m aware.”

Mrs. Mortenson shook her head and *tsked* once again. “I’ve yet to know a man who wasn’t wished dead by someone. Even dear Mr. Mortenson is constantly at threat. He does, after all, own a very productive ironworks. He’s in constant danger.”

Nancy nodded, knowing it would do little good to suggest otherwise. She hoped the old woman would get her fill of information and particulars and move on quickly rather than keep Nancy imprisoned for the entirety of the afternoon.

“It is possible, of course, that he fell,” Mrs. Mortenson mused. “I’ve often said the docks and boat decks are much too slippery. There’s so much activity amongst the ships that a man could be knocked into the water and never noticed until it was too late.” Without drawing a breath, she changed the subject. “Do you suppose you will sell this house? It’s such a lovely place.” She gazed around the room. “Just lovely. I’ve always admired the way you furnished it.”

Nancy was momentarily taken aback. “I, uh, have no plan to sell.”

Mrs. Mortenson nodded. “It’s just as well. A widow should never make rash plans unless she is forced to.” She leaned forward again. “You *aren’t* forced to, are you? You must be honest with me. Did Albert leave you settled comfortably?”

“No. I mean, yes. Well, that is, I don’t really know the details of my husband’s estate.”

“Late husband,” Mrs. Mortenson interjected.

“Yes, my late husband. I know he wasn’t one to carry debt, so the house and store are free and clear.”

Mrs. Mortenson bobbed her head up and down like a daisy waving in the breeze. “That is good, because you don’t want to

be known for debt. I would imagine the store he owned could provide a steady income, but you would have to hire someone to run it for you. Mr. Mortenson might be able to suggest someone. I'll ask him when I see him tonight."

Nancy didn't tell her not to bother. The old woman wouldn't have listened anyway. Nancy had known many a gossip in Oregon City but had hoped to avoid them in a larger town. In Portland it was easier to blend into the background and be overlooked—at least she had hoped to be overlooked. Unfortunately, she was still expected to attend church, and the women of that holy institution were notorious for gossip. It was funny—when Nancy had been at home, her mother had instilled in her the absolute assurance that gossip was a sin no less looked down upon by God than murder. But the worshipers here didn't see it that way. Even the pastor knew better than to preach sermons on gossip.

"And of course there are other ways to manage such a large house."

Mrs. Mortenson was still droning on about how she thought Nancy should arrange her life. It seemed everyone thought Nancy an easy mark when it came to such matters. Perhaps it was because she kept to herself and remained quiet when others openly spoke their opinions. It was possible that people believed Nancy to be completely void of opinion, although nothing could be further from the truth.

The problem was that everyone wanted to tell Nancy what was best for her, but Nancy wasn't sure they were right. Mainly because she didn't know what she wanted out of life.

"You look so pale, my dear. Are you ill?" Mrs. Mortenson's face took on a look of surprise. "You aren't with child, are you? Oh my goodness, all these years of wanting a baby, only to find yourself with child and the father gone. Oh, the tragedy of it."

She put a gloved hand to her throat. “Yet many a poor woman has found herself in such a position with only the wee one to remind her of what she once had.”

“I’m not with child, Mrs. Mortenson. Please don’t spread that rumor about.”

The old woman gasped. “I am the soul of discretion, my dear. I would never tell such delicate news in a public forum. Such things should only be discussed in private, as we are here. But if you are certain that you are not with child, then perhaps you have taken on a fever. Mourning can bring that about, you know. I suggest you take yourself to bed with some strong chamomile tea and a hot water bottle. Perhaps your mother or sister could come tend to you. I would do so myself, but I did just return. I haven’t even had time to share news of our daughter with Mr. Mortenson. She is so very busy, don’t you know.”

“I’m sure she is.”

“Oh goodness, yes. With four boys under the age of twelve, it hasn’t been easy. She finds not one moment of time for herself.”

And all I have is time for myself, Nancy thought.

“She is fortunate enough to have a good maid and cook. Say, where is your housekeeper? Is this her day off? Honestly, I think domestic help expect far too much these days. I remember when a housekeeper might have a few hours in the afternoon to herself, but entire days? What will they think of next?”

“I let my housekeeper and cook go,” Nancy said. “I never wanted them in the first place. I enjoy doing my own cooking and cleaning. It gives me a sense of purpose.” She wished there was a way to hurry this visit along, but she had to be polite. “I have hot water on the stove. I could make you a cup of tea, if you like. I have some cookies too. Mrs. Taylor brought them to me yesterday.”

“Dear Mary. She’s a saint if ever there was one. She is positively without thought for herself and always striving to help the poor. I would do more myself, but Mr. Mortenson has so many clients who must be entertained. He could hardly bear to be without me these last three weeks.”

“I’m sure.” Nancy could well imagine him enjoying his quiet evenings. “But I’m happy to offer you refreshments.”

“No, my dear. I must be on my way soon. I have been shopping this morning, as you might have guessed from my basket.” She motioned toward the foyer. “A few personal items that I would not send my maid for.”

Nancy fervently hoped that this would prompt her guest to reclaim her basket and be on her way. Unfortunately, it didn’t.

“Will your mother and sister be coming to stay with you?” Mrs. Mortenson asked.

“No. I would rather they remain at home. Mother does a great deal of healing work, and my sister is but fourteen and tends to be flighty.”

“Girls today are often that way. When I was a girl, fourteen meant adulthood. We were already considering a young man for our future husband. We were much more serious, but we had to be. The times called for it, don’t you know.” Mrs. Mortenson gave a knowing nod and pursed her lips.

Nancy had no idea what the old woman was thinking, but she looked ready to launch into another diatribe, and Nancy had little patience for it.

“I believe you’re right, Mrs. Mortenson. I’m afraid I’ve not been myself since Albert’s passing. I would like to lie down for a while.”

Mrs. Mortenson looked confused for a moment but then nodded. “Of course, my dear. I have a great knack for sensing

these things.” Her expression suggested it was a great burden to bear. “I’ll come again to call in a day or two, depending on what Mr. Mortenson requires of me. We might well be hosting dinner parties this week. I simply have no idea.” She got to her feet, and Nancy rose as well. “He often finds it necessary to host his clients and then leaves me to settle the arrangements.”

“I am grateful for your concern, but I’m sure with some rest and time, I’ll be fine.” Nancy made her voice sound as pathetic as she dared. She wanted Mrs. Mortenson to leave her alone but not be so worried that she spread it around town that Nancy was at death’s door.

“I’ll see if I can’t locate some of that strong Chinese tea they use for illness. We had some when Mr. Mortenson took sick last winter. It did a world of wonder for him, and I’m certain it will restore your constitution as well.” Mrs. Mortenson paused and tapped her brow with a gloved index finger. “I count thoughts like that as words from the Lord Himself—otherwise I would have no reason to think of Chinese tea.” She smiled and reached out to pat Nancy’s arm. “Be brave, my girl. This is a hardship that women often must bear. Be strong.”

“I will. I promise.” Nancy moved ever closer to the front door. “Thank you so much for coming to see me.” She reached down and retrieved Mrs. Mortenson’s basket.

The old woman immediately laid claim to it and smiled. “I knew it wouldn’t do to wait until later. You would expect me to be here for you.”

Nancy opened the door and stepped back. “I appreciate your efforts, but please do not put yourself out again on my behalf. You have so many responsibilities, and I would feel terrible should I cause you to be remiss in your duties.”

Mrs. Mortenson paused and looked at Nancy as if she were

some sort of angelic being. “You are truly amazing, my dear. Truly selfless and of such a pure nature.” She shook her head. “I know God will surely not call you to be widowed long. In fact, if I had more time, we might discuss that very thing. The West is not held to the same standards as the East. We have far too few women to let the young and beautiful go single for long. We will have to find you another husband, and soon.”

Before she could launch into a further discussion about finding Nancy a husband, Nancy began to close the door. “Thank you so much.”

She turned the lock as quietly as possible. She could risk the hurried dismissal of the old woman—her new state of widowhood would excuse the brash move—but the lock would suggest a barrier that might very well offend. Nancy knew the penalty for offending Mrs. Mortenson would not be expulsion from her company but rather more attention in order to sort through the problem.

A sigh escaped, and Nancy suddenly felt very tired. It had only been a few weeks since Albert’s death, but already the steady parade of concerned friends and family had wearied her of ever seeing another person.

The grandfather clock chimed three o’clock. It was only midafternoon. What was she to do with the rest of the day? Perhaps a nap truly was in order. At least if she were asleep, she would have a good excuse for missing out on potential visitors.

She walked from the foyer into the sitting room and retrieved the book she had been reading before Mrs. Mortenson descended. The book had been a gift for her twenty-sixth birthday the week before. It had come through the post from Aunt Hope and Uncle Lance—mailed prior to the news of Albert’s death. When family and friends had arrived for the funeral, her

aunt had explained that it would be coming. Aunt Hope had confessed that she had not read the story herself but had heard from others that it was a romantic study of human nature.

Nancy turned the book in her hand. *The Europeans*. So far she wasn't all that impressed, though she did own that the author, Henry James, had an occasional turn of phrase that she enjoyed.

She made her way to her new bedroom with the book. Until Albert's death, the bedrooms were contained to the second story of the house. But after his body had been found and his coffin set up in the front room prior to burial, Nancy had felt better remaining on the first floor. She had taken what had once been a reading room next to Albert's office and turned it into a bedroom. When her brother Gabe had come to town, she had imposed upon him to transfer her bed, chest, and wardrobe from upstairs to make the move permanent.

As she made her way past Albert's closed office door, Nancy couldn't help but think of her deceased husband. He was a man of business and kept his focus on anything and everything that might benefit his investments. He was good at what he did and always seemed able to second-guess the value of property and stocks in such a way as to make money for himself. He was admired locally for his abilities as a businessman. Pity he couldn't have been as good a husband.

It wasn't that he didn't provide for Nancy. In fact, he provided in abundance. Nancy knew he prided himself on having a stellar reputation in business and the community. He wanted his neighbors and fellow Portlanders to know that he was able to bestow upon his wife any gift he saw fitting. Nancy, therefore, had a large, impressive home on the edge of the neighborhood that housed the elite and wealthy. The two-story, five-bedroom

house was filled with beautiful things, which included an impeccable wardrobe of gowns that came directly from Paris. She and Albert had used fine china, silver, and crystal when dining and relied upon servants to see to their every need.

This had won the approval of the wealthy and allowed Albert and Nancy a glimpse into their exclusive world from time to time. Nancy had tried to find pleasure in that, but the standoffish attitudes of the elite left her feeling more alone than she already did in her amply furnished but empty house.

Empty because she had no children—and now no husband.

Even before his death, Albert was something of a distant and aloof companion. Her days after his death were so similar to the days before them that Nancy didn't have the heart to tell her friends she was more relieved than grieved. Of course, that only served to add to her guilt.

She crawled into bed fully dressed and laid the book at her side. Lying on her back, she stared up at the ceiling, wondering if she was heartless for feeling so indifferent. Eight years married to a man, and she knew so little about him. He seldom spoke of his childhood or past, and when Nancy pried, he was quick to change the subject. Perhaps he was without any kin or pleasant recollections. Maybe, as he so often said, there was nothing to tell. The most she had gotten out of him was that he had been abandoned to the streets after the death of his mother and had raised himself. There were no fond childhood memories or stories to share, and that was that.

And yet Albert Pritchard had made something out of nothing.

Nancy shook her head. She wanted to feel sadness at his passing, but there was nothing in her heart that could even contrive it. They had shared very little besides this house.

On their wedding night eight years ago, Albert had arranged

their lives in an orderly fashion. He had consummated the marriage and then announced that they would have separate bedrooms—explaining that he was often restless at night and might disturb her sleep. He visited her room on a fairly regular basis, but not because of any great passion or romance. He wanted a large family, as did Nancy, and knew what was required to get one. Only babies never came. Nancy didn't conceive even once and couldn't help but wonder what was wrong with them that they didn't have at least one child in eight years. She'd even gone to her mother for advice, but nothing had worked.

If Albert blamed her, she couldn't say. He never said a word on the matter. Nancy hugged her arms to her slim body. She remembered hushed conversations with women at church as to whether she might do something to encourage conception, and of course there were the numerous prayers on her account by those same women. If she hadn't already dismissed God's interest in her life, she might have prayed too. But God didn't care. He hadn't cared about her in years.

A loud knock on her front door caused Nancy to get out of bed. She had planned to ignore anyone who came calling, but the insistent manner in which this knock sounded left her convinced that the visitors would remain until she came to greet them.

When she opened the door and found her mother and father standing on the other side, Nancy knew she'd made the right decision.

"Oh, Nancy. We've been so worried about you." Her mother embraced her tightly. "You're skin and bones. Are you even trying to eat?"

"Mother, I'm quite well." Nancy pulled back and looked at

her father. “I certainly didn’t expect to see you so soon after the funeral.”

“That was weeks ago,” her mother protested, stepping back. “Your aunt Mercy said she was worried about you, and it just confirmed my own feelings. Your father had to come to Portland on business, and I decided to come with him so that I could see you.”

“I promise I’m fine.” Nancy glanced past her mother and saw two small traveling bags. At least they weren’t planning a lengthy stay. “Why don’t we get inside out of the dampness?”

“A good idea,” her mother replied.

“You two go ahead, and I’ll get the bags,” her father said.

Nancy nodded and stepped back to allow her mother into the house. She knew they would expect to stay at least one night. Hopefully no more. She really didn’t want to listen to their pleas for her to return to the farm outside of Oregon City.

Her mother pulled off her heavy wool shawl. “You need a fire. There’s nothing but embers here. Do you mind if I build one?”

“No, go ahead.” Nancy sighed and plopped onto the sofa.

“It’s getting late. Do you have plans for supper?” her mother asked as she went to work bringing the fire to life once again.

“No. I have a few odds and ends folks have brought me, so I wasn’t of a mind to cook.”

“We’ll arrange for something,” her father declared as he came into the room. “I left the bags by the stairs. I presume you want us to use the same guest room?”

“Yes.” Nancy tucked her feet up under her.

“Are the horse and buggy still in the carriage house?”

“Yes, Father. Albert paid someone to come see to the poor animal. He comes still, but I’ve half a mind to sell the horse. I never use him.”

“Having the ability to travel other than on foot is a good thing,” her mother murmured.

“Everyone walks everywhere in the city,” Nancy countered. “Albert was the only one who used the buggy on a regular basis, and usually that was for business or when we were asked to one of his business affairs. Otherwise, we always had things delivered to the house.”

“Well, it’s not like you don’t know how to hitch a wagon.” Her mother turned from the now-flickering flames. “You used to love to ride. Is the horse saddle broke as well?”

“Yes, he is, but one needs to have somewhere to go. I’m in mourning, and being out in public is frowned upon.”

“That’s why I think you should move home. We can easily help you close this house or even rent it out,” Mother said, her expression serious. “As for the store, I’m sure your uncle Lance can look into the situation and arrange all the legal needs.”

“Thank you, Mother, but I can manage it.” Nancy hoped her tone would settle the matter.

“Now, let’s not get into harsh words,” her father interrupted. “I’m hungry, and I’d like to have some supper. Why don’t I hitch up the buggy, and your mother and I can find one of those restaurants we passed on the way here. Grace, why don’t you gather some dishes together, and we’ll see about ordering something to bring back to the house.”

Nancy knew he was trying his best to keep the peace. She nodded. “There are lanterns by the stove. You might need one since the day is rather glum and growing darker by the minute.”

Her father nodded and gave her mother a smile. “Come on, Grace. We’ll be back before you know it, and you can figure out how to fix the problems of the world then.”

Her mother hesitated, then gave a nod. “We won’t be long.”