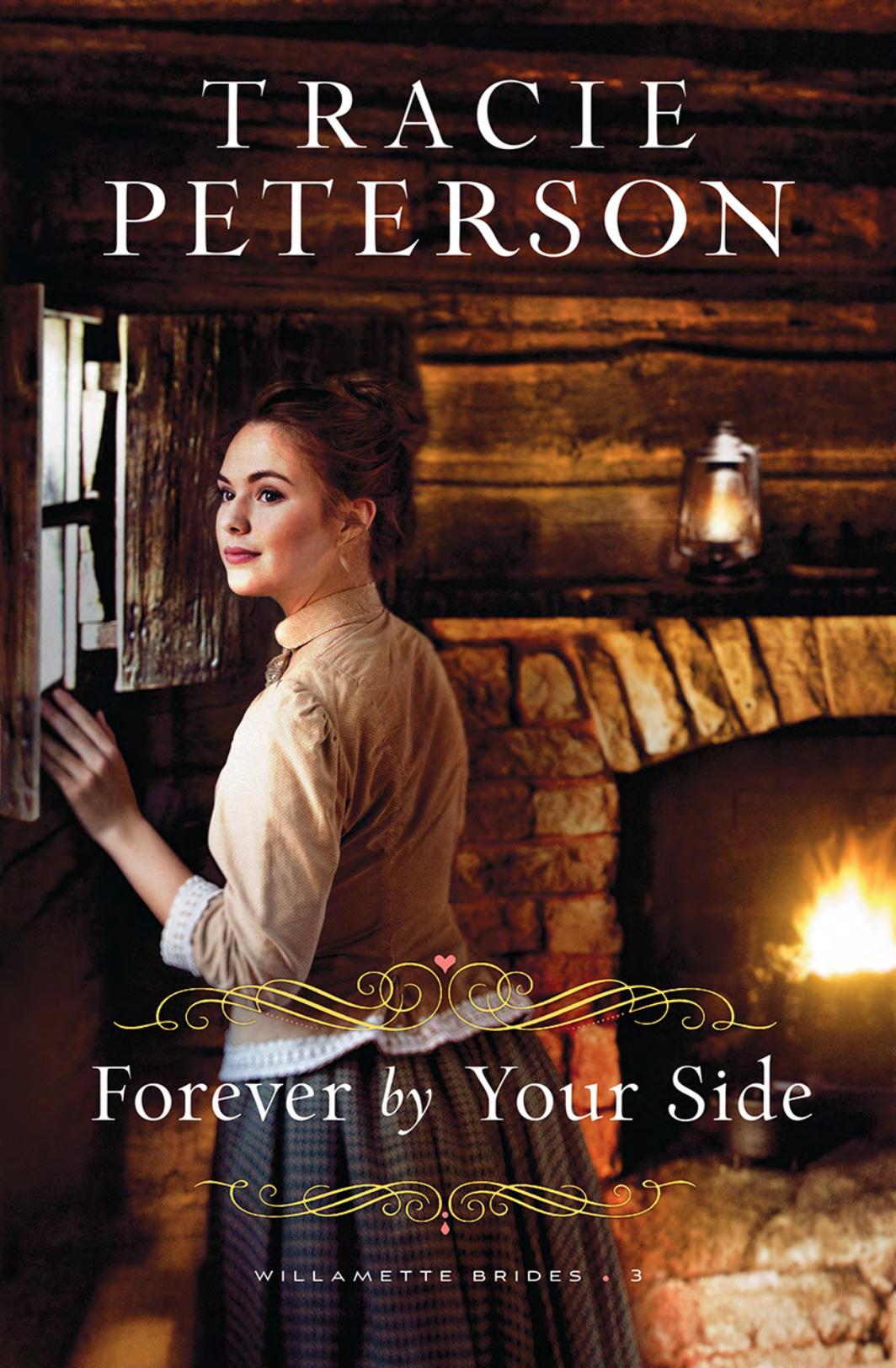


TRACIE PETERSON



Forever *by* Your Side



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WILLAMETTE BRIDES • 3

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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.

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To Care and Bill Tuk.
You have fought the good fight and inspired so many.
Thank you for your friendship
and continued encouragement.



CHAPTER 1



JUNE 1880

I want this job.” Constance Browning looked her interviewer straight in the eye. “I want to do this. And furthermore, I’m the best person for the job.”

“But you are a woman,” Ulysses Berryton said, as if her gender was somehow unknown to her.

Connie was already frustrated by his condescending nature. “I know I’m a woman. I have been of the female persuasion for twenty-two years now.”

He reddened. “And you truly feel qualified for this position?”

“I do. Although my skin is white, I was born on an Indian reservation and have many friends there. The project to catalog and record all Oregon tribes and their cultures is something I’m not only qualified for but would very much enjoy. In addition, many of the people there already know me. It will help speed things up.”

He looked again at her application. “The Bureau of Ethnology takes its work very seriously. We must consider what’s best for this organization. After all, the government has put a lot of

trust in the Smithsonian Institution by transferring the duties of ethnology from the Department of the Interior to us.”

Connie had had enough. “Mr. Berryton, I’m a very practical woman. I have never been one to attempt something without being convinced of my capability. I can assure you I am the best person for this job. If you need further reference, you only have to speak to my uncle, Dean Murdoch. He works right here at the Smithsonian.”

“I’m very familiar with your uncle, Miss Browning. In fact, I did seek his opinion, and he gave his highest approval.”

She nodded. “Of course he did. He’s taught me a variety of specialized studies every summer since I was fifteen.”

Berryton smiled. “I have my concerns, Miss Browning, but frankly I cannot imagine anyone more qualified for this task than you. Welcome to our department. You will be working with Thomas Lowell. I understand you know each other quite well.”

The joy she felt at finally being approved for the job threatened to spill out. Instead, Connie forced herself to remain stoic and professional. “Yes, Thomas and I have been good friends for over seven years. He knows my family, and when he was attending Georgetown, he took numerous classes with Uncle Dean.”

“Well, I expect you both to work in cooperation with one another. You will leave in a week for Oregon. I hope that won’t be a problem.”

Connie rose. “Not at all. I know you won’t regret this decision, Mr. Berryton.”

He stood and shook her hand. Connie smiled, gathered her things, and exited before he could change his mind.

She knew Tom would be waiting for her in the hall. He had

a meeting with Berryton at two o'clock. That meant they only had a few minutes to talk. She caught sight of the tall, lean young man and smiled. He was her dearest friend in all the world, and she had him to thank for this job.

"I got it." She couldn't hold back a giggle. "I'm going with you to Oregon."

Tom grinned. "Of course you are. Berryton is a smart man. He no doubt understood the benefit of having you as a part of the team."

"I doubt he would have if you hadn't put in a good word for me." She juggled her books as they threatened to slip from her grip.

"Here, let me have those," Tom said, taking the books. "You're the most qualified, Connie. A lifetime of experience living among the Indians is something few people can boast."

Connie thought of those years. They were a mixture of pleasant memories and sorrow. The Indians might as well have been in captivity on the reservation. They were forced to remain on reservation grounds unless they had permission to leave, but it was usually for no more than a few hours, unless they were lucky enough to have procured work with the local white settlers. Even then, Connie wasn't sure how lucky it was to work for the white families. They generally paid very little and treated the Indians like the lowest of slaves.

"I was glad to help you," Tom continued. "No one gets ahead in this town without knowing someone and getting their help." He rearranged the books into a better order.

"Well, maybe someday I can return the favor."

"I'll hold you to that. Now, I've got to go, or I'll be late." He leaned down and kissed her cheek, then pushed the books back into her arms. "I'll meet you at four—the usual place."

Oh, but if I'm late, it's because I have a meeting with Mr. Van Buren."

Connie's mind was already churning with thoughts and plans. She would have to secure a better wardrobe right away. The clothes she had at her aunt and uncle's house were perfect for Washington's social circles but would be confining and overly formal on the reservation.

"I'll see you then." She started to turn, then glanced back over her shoulder. "Tom, you truly are my best friend."

He grinned. "I know. And you're mine."

She waited until Tom disappeared into Berryton's office before all but skipping down the hall, despite her load. She paused at the flight of stairs that would take her to the second floor, where her uncle's office was located. Smiling, she juggled the books and hiked up her skirt. She had to tell him her news. He'd be delighted.

Moments later, Connie burst into the office without knocking. "Uncle Dean!"

He looked up from behind the stacks of books and papers that occupied his desk. "What in the world? You rush in like there's a fire following you."

She added the heavy tomes she carried to those on the desk. "I got the books you asked for." She gave him a kiss on top of his head. "And I got the job. I'm going home."

Uncle Dean stood to embrace her. "I'm so proud of you, honey. No one is more deserving."

"I'm just so relieved. This will allow me to help Mama and Papa." She pulled away, looking over her shoulder. Seeing she'd left the door open, she went to close it so no one could overhear her words. "There. Now we can talk."

Uncle Dean reclaimed his seat. "I doubt anyone would un-

derstand even if they heard you. It's only natural that a child would wish to help her parents." He leaned back in his chair and gave his graying beard a stroke.

Connie lowered her voice. "The very idea that the government thinks Mama and Papa could be a part of the conspiracy to incite the Indians to war just makes me mad. My parents have served faithfully ever since the reservation system came into being. They were there teaching and preaching before the government offered any compensation. They didn't even raise a fuss when the government replaced them with the Catholic Church representatives. They just quietly kept on working to help the Indians, being paid with private funds alone."

"I know, sweetheart. I know as well as you do that they aren't capable of the things they're accused of."

"Well, in time I will find the proof that will clear them altogether. And then"—she shook her index finger at some unseen foe—"I will take them all to task for maligning the good Browning name."

"When do you leave?"

"In a week." Connie opened the drawstring of her reticule and withdrew a small brown paper sack. "I stopped at your favorite candy store." She plopped the bag in front of her uncle. "Toffee."

"What will I do without you? Every day your aunt asks me if I visited the candy store, and thanks to you, I never have to answer in the affirmative. When you go to Oregon, I shall have to do without or find someone else to do my bidding."

"I'm sure there are plenty of interns who would vie for a chance."

Her uncle met her gaze and shook his head. "I shall miss you so much. Your aunt will be heartbroken."

“Aunt Delphinea will write me copious numbers of letters. Maybe you can buy her some beautiful jewelry to soften the blow. I’ve learned in this town that if you have something beautiful to show off, all your troubles seem far less important.”

“Ha. That’s hardly the case for your Aunt Phinny, and you know it. You were the only beautiful thing she truly enjoyed showing off. You gave her days purpose.”

Connie shrugged. “She could come West with me. In fact, you both could. I know my folks would love to see you.”

“We would be hard-pressed to get away. I have my work, as you can see.” He waved a hand over the desk. “And Delphinea has her social responsibilities. Goodness, the Independence Day celebration is just a few weeks away, and you know how many committees she’s on for that.”

Connie had often wondered if anything at all would get done in Washington if her aunt didn’t oversee or control the details. She wouldn’t have been surprised in the least to have found her aunt in the middle of the president’s office, barking out orders to those doing his bidding or seeking his favor.

“Well, it was just a thought,” she said. “I know Papa misses his family.”

“Perhaps one day. It won’t take long for her to miss you. I fully expect by fall she’ll be making arrangements for some sort of trip West. That’s another reason I must get all of this done first.” He gave another wave at the top of his desk.

“Well, then, I should be on my way. I’m meeting with Tom later, and I have a great many things to accomplish before I can leave for Oregon.” She kissed him again on the head. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Here, take this.” Her uncle pulled a wallet from his coat pocket. He took out several bills and handed them to her. “I

want to make sure you have money, just in case you shop where your aunt doesn't have an account."

"I doubt that's even possible," Connie said, taking the money. "But thank you. I must find some more serviceable clothes and shoes, not to mention . . ." She smiled. "Well, we won't mention them."

He laughed. "I am going to miss you, Connie. You have brought such laughter to our home. What a blessing it has been to have you here all these years."

She knew that, after losing their youngest two children to sickness and seeing their oldest off to West Point, her aunt and uncle had been eager to have her live with them. Coming East to attend school, in fact, had been their idea, and Connie had thought it a grand adventure. Of course, her parents had been less enthusiastic. How she longed to see them again, and her brother Isaac as well. Seven years was a long time to be away from home and family.

"I'm going to miss you and Aunt Phinny. You've been my rock all these years. But for now, I'd best let you get back to work."



"Are you sure she doesn't suspect anything?" Mr. Berryton asked.

Thomas Lowell sat back in the leather upholstered chair and casually crossed his legs. He knew it might be considered rude to strike such a pose, but he didn't care. These people were ruthless in their lack of concern for the people in his life.

"She doesn't suspect anything other than that I endorsed her for the position."

"This is critical, Mr. Lowell. This ongoing problem in Oregon must be brought to a halt. Far too many incidents have

been instigated, and war is certain to break out if we don't get to the bottom of this. It's important you ferret out all of those who are responsible. Even if it includes Miss Browning's parents, as we suspect."

"I understand the situation, Mr. Berryton. I believe I understand it so well that I was the one to suggest Miss Browning could be of use to us."

"You were." Mr. Berryton took out a handkerchief and mopped his perspiring brow. The heat was still climbing, and Tom knew they'd be lucky if temperatures didn't hit one hundred degrees. Added to that, the rising humidity suggested a storm might be brewing, and it made the day completely unbearable.

Tom was no more comfortable than Berryton, but he wasn't about to show it. He simply stared back at the older man and waited for him to speak.

"You will both receive a stipend, and accounts will be set up for you in Salem, where you can expect regular deposits for your work. I have written detailed instructions to go along with the other instructions I gave you last week. The ethnology work is equally important, but obviously not as time sensitive. I will expect regular reports."

"And you will have them." Tom smiled and waited to see if there was anything else to discuss. He wanted nothing more than to be out of Berryton's office and away from these pompous souls who so easily judged Connie's parents.

"Then I will dismiss you. We should meet again before you leave next week."

"Perhaps you could host a farewell dinner." The heat was making Tom feel testy, and he knew his tone was tinged with sarcasm.

“That’s probably a good idea,” Berryton replied. “I’ll check with Mr. Murdoch and see when he might be available.”

Tom got to his feet and extended his hand. “Until then.”



“And you’re sure he wasn’t suspicious?”

Tom gave Connie an incredulous look. “Do you think me so poor an actor that I couldn’t convince that old ninny? He believes I’m using you to get to your folks. He thinks we have the perfect situation in place.”

Connie leaned back, wishing the shade tree offered more help with the heat. She searched her purse for her fan and rejoiced when she found it. “Oh, I’m so glad for this.”

“A hot breeze is better than no breeze, I suppose.” Tom pointed to the west. “Once those rain clouds finish building into a thunderstorm, we should have a little relief in the temperature.”

“It’s never like this in Oregon. Oh, we get thunderstorms now and then and plenty of rain, but we don’t have to worry about this much heat. At least not usually. I do remember a summer when it was dreadfully hot. Rosy told me that one of the women in the tribe said she’d used her spirit powers to cause the heat wave in order to punish someone else. I asked Rosy why she would do that when she had to suffer the heat as well. If she was going to punish someone, shouldn’t she do something that would hurt that person alone? Rosy said the woman was well known for cutting off her nose to spite her face.”

Tom chuckled. “I like your stories about Rosy. Is she still there?”

“She is. Mama wrote recently to say Rosy just celebrated her sixty-sixth birthday in May. She said Rosy has the strength

and endurance of a much younger woman and the spirit of a saint. She's always doing things for others and constantly works to keep peace among the women. I can hardly wait to see her again."

"You've missed life there, I know."

"I have." Connie had no reason to be less than completely honest. Especially with Tom. "When I came here, I thought it would be a great adventure. And it was, but I'm tired of adventures. I want to go home." She smiled. "I think you'll love it there, Tom. I'm so excited to show you everything and everyone. There's just so much to do before we leave."

Tom nodded. "You can say that again."