

THE HEART
of ALASKA
BOOK ONE

IN THE SHADOW OF DENALI

TRACIE PETERSON
.....
AND KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE



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Tracie Peterson and Kimberley Woodhouse, *In the Shadow of Denali*
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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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This book is lovingly dedicated in memory and honor of:

Cassidy Faith Hale

(March 14, 2000—September 16, 2015)

So young. So vibrant. So fun.

I wish I'd had more time with you.

More hugs. More laughter.

The past few months without you have been so very hard as we've walked with your family through this journey. But even through the heartache, there is joy.

Joy in the memories.

Joy in the knowledge of where you are—

No more tears. No more pain.

Joy in the anticipation of seeing you again—

and praising our Lord forever.

Joy in the lives touched and changed on this earth
by you—because you dared to shine your light.

You've inspired us all.

Your light—*His light*—is still shining.

I'm gonna let it shine . . .

A Note from the Authors

We are overjoyed that you have chosen to join us for yet another journey into our great country's history. Again—as with our other collaborations—we'd like to reiterate that while this novel is rich with historical detail about Curry, Alaska, its incredible Curry Hotel, the Alaska Railroad, Talkeetna, Denali (Mount McKinley), and the people who lived and breathed this little bit of history—please remember that this is a work of fiction. While many real people are used in the story, their personalities and dialogue are from our imaginations. Please see the Dear Reader letter at the conclusion of the book to find out more details about the amazing research for this series and the author liberties that were taken.

We (Kimberley and Tracie) are passionate about Alaska. Kim's family lived there for many years and Tracie has spent oodles of time in that great state as well. On our last book tour together, our readers told us over and over how excited they were for another Alaska book. So here it is.

Curry, Alaska, and the grand Curry Hotel were very real indeed, although now the only way to see it is through the lens of historical photographs. At mile 248 on the Alaska Railroad

today there are interpretive signs and a few lost remnants of Curry. The historic Curry Lookout is the only remaining piece still standing of this fascinating part of Alaska's history.

To give you a glimpse into this time and setting, we'd like to share an excerpt from the Preface of a book written by one of the team that was the very first to summit the tallest mountain in North America, Denali, back in 1913. Hudson Stuck's passion for Alaska, its peoples, its lands, and its mountains is commendable to this day. And one hundred years after the publication of his book, we would see the author's wish and desire come to fruition as the Great Mountain was rightly given back his true name: *Denali*.

From *The Ascent of Denali* by Hudson Stuck (Scribner, 1914):

Forefront in this book, because forefront in the author's heart and desire, must stand a plea for the restoration to the greatest mountain in North America of its immemorial native name. If there be any prestige or authority in such matter from the accomplishment of a first complete ascent, "if there be any virtue, if there be any praise," the author values it chiefly as it may give weight to this plea.

It is now little more than seventeen years ago that a prospector penetrated from the south into the neighborhood of this mountain, guessed its height with remarkable accuracy at twenty thousand feet, and, ignorant of any name that it already bore, placed upon it the name of the Republican candidate for President of the United States at the approaching election—William McKinley . . .

. . . The author would add, perhaps quite unnecessarily, yet lest any should mistake, a final personal note. He is no professed explorer or climber or "scientist," but a missionary, and of these matters an amateur only. The vivid recollection of a back bent down with burdens and lungs at the limit of their function makes him hesitate to describe this enterprise as recreation. It

was the most laborious undertaking with which he was ever connected; yet it was done for the pleasure of doing it, and the pleasure far outweighed the pain. But he is concerned much more with men than mountains, and would say, since “out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh,” that his especial and growing concern, these ten years past, is with the native people of Alaska, a gentle and kindly race, now threatened with a wanton and senseless extermination, and sadly in need of generous champions if that threat is to be averted.

And so, dear friends, we take you back a century to the dawn of a new era for Alaska. A new national park, the first successful attempt to climb Denali, the people who loved the land, the pioneers who blazed the trails, the railroad that connected it all, and the incredible Curry Hotel in the remote Alaska Territory.

We give you: *In the Shadow of Denali*.

Kim and Tracie

Prologue

1917

Henry Brennan—the insufferable man—should’ve been dead. But he wasn’t.

Frank Irving cursed his luck. His partner was still very much alive.

It was all the fault of that too-good, overzealous guide.

It wouldn’t be so bad if Frank hadn’t been the one to hire John Ivanoff. But he had.

How was he to know the man was a native Alaskan who’d climbed around Mount McKinley so many times he had private nicknames for certain parts? He’d thought John sounded so normal, and *Ivanoff* was Russian.

He’d certainly seemed perfect on paper. Solid reputation as a guide—which Henry required—but no actual full-ascent experience, so he could be blamed for any fatal accident—which Frank required.

“Gentlemen, we need to take advantage of this good weather,” the guide called from outside the tent. “Be ready to leave in ten minutes.”

Fighting the urge to lose his breakfast, a sign of the altitude sickness he and Henry both shared, Frank began to shove everything into his pack. John Ivanoff was nothing but a tyrant.

Who knew the man would end up being such a conscientious guide, especially after he agreed to shorten the preparation schedule from six months to eight weeks? Such a man should be easy to buy, especially because John dreamed of opening his own mountaineering guided tour business. But no! He was another of those churchy Bible-thumpers like Henry. It made Frank twitch.

The side walls of the tent shifted with another gust of frigid mountain wind. Frank and Henry had made a fortune the past twenty years selling these very same tents to all the gold-rush-fever idiots who stopped in their Seattle store before heading to Alaska. It had been Frank's idea to make a killing off of all the crazies who thought dashing off to the frozen north to dig for gold would be their pot at the end of the rainbow. But he hadn't planned to stay in a tent himself. Ever. Especially not at the top of a mountain. And definitely not for this many weeks.

But desperate times called for desperate measures. And he was desperate.

Desperate to call the profits his own.

Not just half. *All*.

That's why he'd cooked up this harebrained plan to climb Mount McKinley. He was tired of sharing with his partner. And they'd signed an agreement when they started the company. So if he eliminated Henry . . .

It'd all be his.

So here he was. On the side of this stupid mountain. They'd trained for months on lesser mountains and talked of all the equipment they would try out and then advertise to sell.

Henry had been thrilled. The do-gooder. Always an out-

doorsman, he didn't want to give up his own exploring for a job in the office at the factory.

So the opportunity was born. New national park. Big, treacherous mountain.

It was remote. And bound to be a place where a tragic mishap could occur and nothing could be done about it.

It all seemed so easy.

But then John Ivanoff happened. The man was everywhere, constantly watching. And—unfortunately—prepared for any possible scenario.

It should not have taken this long to find a way to get rid of Henry, but Frank couldn't do it when the native haulers were with them—too many witnesses—and he definitely couldn't finagle it with all the sled dogs around. They'd find the body for sure. So he'd waited.

As the helpers, sleds, and dogs stayed behind, the paths got steeper and the air got thinner. And his patience thinned right along with it. But he'd come this far. He might as well finish the climb. Perhaps it would even be good for business to make it to the top and then have tragedy befall them. He'd have the acclaim of the press for his success *and* the sympathy of the public for his loss.

Frank swept the tent flap aside, stepped into the frigid wind, and grimaced.

John coiled a rope, a sappy smile on his face. "We have to cross Cassidy Lane today. It's dangerous, but one of my favorite places on Denali."

The native name for Mount McKinley rolled off John's tongue with ease and some sort of weird reverence. Frank found it annoying. Since the President of the United States had signed something called the Mount McKinley Park Bill, that's what the mountain should be called. Not that Frank cared two nickels

about the name. But, as Henry pointed out, it meant he and Frank could claim to be the first climbers to reach the peak *in* Mount McKinley National Park. Some team back in 1913 had a documented ascent, but that was before the new national park bill had been signed into effect. Not that it mattered. Frank only cared about the opportunity this afforded to be rid of his partner. He was tired of this wretched mountain.

“Cassidy Lane?” Henry poked his head out of the second tent he’d shared with the guide, since Frank hated to share and was adamant that he wanted privacy. “Named for your daughter?” He emerged with his pack, a knitted cap in hand and a fur hat dangling over one arm.

“Sure is.” John kept winding the rope like it was as natural to him as breathing. “It’s a dangerous, narrow path along a cliff. I almost fell off it once.”

Frank’s heart rate perked up. This was promising. “How long ago?”

“Many years.” John’s face sobered. “The weather changed on us instantly. What had been a calm, bright day like this one suddenly turned fierce.”

Another gust of wind almost lifted Frank off his feet. This was calm?

“I didn’t think I was going to make it.” John reached the end of the rope, the loops perfectly matched. “But I kept thinking of my Cassidy, recalling every memory from the time she was born up to then, until I made it home.”

Henry put down his pack, then pulled on the black knitted cap over his graying hair. Just the night before he’d told Frank they needed to experiment with different materials to find or create something that would be better at holding in body heat. Especially at these temperatures. He’d even tried to convince Frank that one tent would be better than two—less to carry,

and they could share body heat. But Frank would have none of it. It was just one more reason he hated his partner. The man always came up with the most marvelous ideas and of course was given all the credit.

“When I told Cassidy—much later, of course—she made light of it and said that if I ever got here again, I would just have to take another trip down Cassidy Lane and I’d be sure to make it home.”

“Instead of Memory Lane? How delightful.” Henry slapped the guide’s shoulder, the same sentimental smile on his face as the one John had worn a minute ago.

Frank wanted to lose the contents of his stomach right then and there. This time, however, it had nothing to do with altitude sickness. Fatherhood made saps of even the strongest men. Henry had been all but worthless since his brats had come along. Rushing home to be with his family instead of shouldering his fair share. Talking to customers about his son or one of the girls. How many did they have? Two? Three? Didn’t matter. Because Henry’s repellent brood wouldn’t inherit any part of The Brennan/Irving Company. The business contract Henry and Frank signed when they first opened stipulated that should one partner die, the other partner inherited full control.

Which was why this plan worked.

He’d make a show of supporting the grieving family—with everything but actual money. Martha Brennan was a comely enough woman. She’d remarry, move away, and The Brennan/Irving Company would become The Irving Company.

No more sharing profits. No more running each and every idea by Henry. No more of the honesty-at-all-times practice. No more faking he actually liked these people.

Stupid Henry. Didn’t he know how much money they could make now that they’d established a reputation for selling the

best ropes, tents, and climbing attire in the Pacific Northwest? Now was the time to *cut* quality and boost profits.

Henry gave John another hearty pat on the back, then donned the fur hat and tied it. “What say you, expert guide? We still a go for the summit today?”

John nodded, glancing upward. “Yes, but as you can see, the clouds are draping him today. Once we reach the top, you’ll have a beautiful view of the clouds below.”

It bugged Frank that John called the mountain “he” and “him” all the time, but to be fair, everything about John Ivannoff, Henry Brennan, and this blasted mountain made Frank furious.

“Any danger of storms?”

“There’s always that danger here. I don’t see any immediate threat, but remember, storms roll in fast.” John threw the heavy rope over his shoulder. “If you two are ready to go, I think we should head up. I’ve already done my tests on the ropes and ice climbs for today.”

“We’re already at 18,500 feet.” Frank huffed for breath. “There’s less than two thousand feet to reach the summit.”

John nodded. “Two thousand feet that will take us at least six hours.”

“Both ways?” Frank felt all the energy leave him. Would it never end?

Chuckling, John shook his head. “Well, we could always let gravity work with us on the trip down—if you’d like to go faster.”

Henry pulled on his pack with what appeared little effort. “Well, I say let’s go. I’m anxious to finish this climb, and I must say that sleeping in a warm bed in front of a roaring fire sounds awfully good after four long weeks trudging and climbing in the ice and snow. I’d like to have full feeling back in my hands

and feet.” He shook his head and patted his partner’s back. “But that’s why we’re doing it, right? To experience the thrill for our customers?”

Reminding himself to play along, Frank tried to sound excited and supportive. “Lots and lots of customers. Yes. That’s the plan. If the government would just get the road built into this area, we could bring more customers than we could ever imagine. All with John as our guide. We just won’t tell the customers about not feeling their fingers and toes.” He laughed too loud for his own ears.

“Of course.” John’s smile looked a little uneasy.

“Lead on, then.” Frank ducked his head and adjusted his thick gloves over a thinner pair. No use giving away that John’s dream of being their business partner for guided tours was as doomed as Henry’s of a warm bed.

Henry carried a long walking stick—one carved with their names and the date—that they planned to drive into the snow at the top later that day. His eagerness shone in his eyes as he nodded to John. “I’m ready. Let’s go!”

By two in the afternoon, their weary troop reached the southern peak of Mount McKinley. Even as the wind tried to knock him off his feet and the air was too thin for a decent breath, Frank couldn’t help feeling a little euphoric. “We did it, boys . . . We’re the first ones . . . to climb Mount . . . McKinley in the new . . . Mount McKinley National Park.” His sentences were punctured by the many breaths he had to take.

Henry handed John the wooden pole. “The honor . . . should go . . . to you.”

No it shouldn’t!

But the guide grinned and plunged the marker into the snow. “Success!”

Hardly, but there was always hope. A hearty gale from the west brought his attention up. The clouds moved in at a rapid clip and were tinged an ominous gray.

"We need to get down, and quickly," John yelled and waved a hand at the clouds. "That doesn't bode well."

They hurried to take a few pictures. Henry and John wanted to have a visual record of the trip, and Henry thought it would make for great advertising. Of course he was right, but it only made Frank's hatred grow. And all he really cared about was getting rid of the man and getting off the wretched mountain.

With the pictures taken, Henry went to repack the camera.

"Here, let me . . . put it in mine," Frank said. "You need . . . to get your pack on . . . and your hands are shaking." No sense losing the camera and photographs if he had any success eliminating his problem.

"Thanks." Henry nodded. "A man never had a better partner." He slipped his backpack on again and moved to John's side as snow began to fall. "Do we have . . . time to get to safety?"

"Yes, if we . . . move fast. But stay sure of . . . your footing. Going down is often . . . more dangerous and . . . time-consuming. Be prepared for the gusts of wind . . . that may try to knock you off your feet, and blowing snow . . . can disorient you, so hold tight to the rope between us." John looked back to the clouds above. "We should try to get to camp. If that's not possible, we'll make a shelter on the way and ride out the storm." The building clouds blocked out the sun that only minutes ago had been quite intense. John handed a rope to Henry. "Secure it around you. This doesn't look good at all."

"I have a bad feeling . . ." Henry's words were lost in a swirl of wind and snow.

Frank took as deep a breath as he could at twenty thousand feet. Fear lurked behind John's eyes, which didn't bode well for the plan. Only one person was supposed to die up here. Not him, not even John.

Just Henry.

1

JULY 8, 1923—SIX YEARS LATER

CURRY, ALASKA—MILE 248 ON THE ALASKA RAILROAD

Cassidy Faith Ivanoff walked up the stairs from the basement of the Curry Hotel with a massive tray in her hands. The staff was all abuzz. The railroad was finally about to be completed, and there were hushed whispers about the President of the United States coming to stay in their hotel as well. Imagine that. The President himself! Here, in Alaska. As far as she knew, no other President had ever visited the territory. It would bring Alaska to the attention of the rest of the country.

With the completion of the railroad connecting Seward to Fairbanks, the Curry Hotel was the ideal mid-journey stopping point. It had been built by the railroad not only for guests and tourists, but also for workers. Rumor had it a large town was sure to develop around the beautiful hotel. But right now there were only a few buildings from when the community had been called Deadhorse—a water tower, a roundhouse, and a power plant to generate electricity.

But Cassidy could imagine the growth and it excited her. The months had flown by since she'd first been hired as the cook's assistant at the spacious and luxurious hotel. Born and raised in

Alaska, Cassidy and her father had been quite familiar with the area. Dad signed on to lead guests on guided tours, while Cassidy's passion for cooking made her a natural for the kitchen.

Unfortunately, cooking wasn't always the focus of her duties. In fact, she spent what felt like half of her time climbing up and down the stairs between the basement kitchen, provision rooms, and the main-level kitchen. Why they ever built the provisions rooms downstairs was beyond her. Must've been a man who designed it. Who never had to work in a big hotel like this.

"Cassidy, when you finish with the pickled onions, I need you to start on the crab salad." Margaret Johnson's voice prevailed across the room.

"Yes, Mrs. Johnson." The woman amazed Cassidy day in and day out. A hard woman, she was the hotel's head cook and Cassidy's boss. Rumor had it that she'd beaten out some big chef from San Francisco for the job. The manager insisted on calling Mrs. Johnson "Chef," but she still labeled herself as the cook. She ran the kitchen from 5:00 a.m. until 9:00 p.m. when the night cook took over. But he couldn't tie his shoes without her approval. Even off duty, she ran that kitchen. Day or night. And everyone knew it.

Cassidy smiled as she set the tray down and filled the elegant serving dishes with the pungent hors d'oeuvres.

No-nonsense and a little rough around the edges, Mrs. Johnson kept Cassidy on her toes. And Cassidy loved it. There had been few women in her life, but those who had been part of her upbringing were in many ways just like Mrs. Johnson. Blunt and to the point, without beating around the bush. It allowed for no doubt as to what was expected. But it tended to make Cassidy feel a little . . . lonely.

Setting the tray off to the side to be chilled, Cassidy reached for the crab legs and peeked at the woman barking orders to the

kitchen hands. True, everyone else feared—even dreaded—the head cook, but beneath that gruff exterior, there was a glimmer of something deep and soothing. Cassidy already had a soft spot in her heart for her.

Never having a memory of her mother, Cassidy found she often craved the company of older women, and she liked and respected Margaret Johnson. Maybe over time . . . they could be friends.

“Quit your day-dreaming, Cassidy Faith. We have hundreds of mouths to feed a fancy dinner to and I won’t allow you to mess up the schedule.”

And maybe not.

The two girls washing dishes giggled at the sink. Everyone knew that if Cook used your middle name, she was more than serious.

“Sorry, Mrs. Johnson.” She couldn’t keep from smiling to herself—she could always try, right? She donned her protective gloves, broke the shell of the first crab leg before her, and started pulling out the thick pink-and-white meat. Sweet and rich, it was one of Cassidy’s favorites. She had lived off the land and sea of Alaska her entire twenty-three years.

Her father, John, was half-Athabaskan and had met and fallen in love with an Irish missionary’s daughter. When the missionary couple heard of seventeen-year-old Eliza’s plans to marry this native man, they were appalled at the “mixing of races” and demanded Eliza turn her back on John. But Eliza defied her parents and married him anyway.

Only a year passed before she died right after childbirth, and her parents left Alaska and told John it was God’s punishment. They wouldn’t even see Cassidy or acknowledge her existence.

Cassidy grew up knowing that she had been named after a family surname on her maternal grandparents’ side, but she

hated that she would never know them or know where her name came from. How could anyone turn their back on family? It baffled her to no end. Even after all these years. Strangely she felt as if it were all her fault—that she’d done something wrong without having had any say in the matter whatsoever. Dad assured her that this wasn’t the case, that pain had driven her grandparents to make the choice they’d made. Still, it haunted Cassidy. She’d tried for years to imagine how she might go about contacting her grandparents and healing the division between them and her father, but there never seemed to be even a hint of what might work. She had no idea of where her grandparents had gone or even if they were still alive.

The shells piled up as she made swift work of the crab. The thoughts and memories kept her mind spinning and her hands busy.

Her middle name, Faith, was the last gift she’d been given by her mother. Over the years Dad had told Cassidy how Eliza Ivanoff prayed over her baby, blessed her with her name, and took her last breath. He’d challenged Cassidy to live up to her name on more than one occasion.

Just recently, in fact. A few months ago, when they’d left their home of Tanana—the only place she’d ever called home—to come work in Curry, Dad said it would be a grand step of faith. And so it was.

Cassidy would never have guessed the blessings that would come by taking that step. But she was indeed blessed.

She loved it here.

The Curry Hotel was more magnificent than any building Cassidy had ever seen. From the rich red carpets, the dark woods, and the deep leather chairs in the lobby, all the way to the gleaming kitchen with its Duparquet range and shiny aluminum and copper pots. There were even electric lights and hot water. Such

things were never seen in most of Alaska, and yet they were here in Curry. The Alaska Railroad had outdone itself. And the enormous number of visitors proved its success.

She hadn't understood at the time that her Dad needed something different. After the successful summit of Mount McKinley in 1917, he'd changed. Maybe because he'd always wanted to open a guide service and that wouldn't be happening anytime soon—especially since the park still wasn't easily accessible—and maybe because having lost one of his climbers weighed him down. He'd probably never get over the loss, even though he'd told Cassidy that the man loved the Lord and was certain to be in heaven.

Their faith in God was also the Ivanoffs' foundation for living, and her father preferred to work with people who were of like mind. She'd only been seventeen when her father made that climb, but she knew that he blamed himself for the death of the climber. He took responsibility for getting the men up the mountain and returning them safely back down. Losing one of his clients had devastated her strong father, and she wasn't at all certain he would ever fully recover. It had stolen a good deal of his joy and brought plans for his own business to a rather abrupt halt. So he'd been working for the railroad all these years as an expert on the land and game. He'd supplied the workers with food and had been useful to the company in plotting out the best route. Highly esteemed by all who knew him, John Ivanoff was the best man she'd ever known. But even with that and the railroad's success, Cassidy knew her dad maintained a sense of failure.

"When you're done with that box, there's a second one waiting," Mrs. Johnson reminded her of the present task.

"Yes, Mrs. Johnson." Cassidy heard the agitation in the older woman's voice. Mrs. Johnson always worried about the clock

and whether everything would be done in a timely manner. So far they had never missed serving a meal on time or in the finest presentation, but still the woman worried, so Cassidy did her best to speed up her actions. She wanted to please Mrs. Johnson for many reasons, not the least of which was her desire to earn the woman's respect and friendship. Even with all of her efforts, however, the task proved difficult. Mrs. Johnson wasn't one for frivolities, which apparently included friendships. The woman had little to do with anyone during the working hours—except of course to command her staff into perfect order. Then, when the workday concluded, Mrs. Johnson went off to her quarters to be alone. She seldom was seen at all in her off-hours. But Cassidy wasn't going to be deterred. She had faith that if she pursued the friendship with Mrs. Johnson, it would eventually come about.

Cassidy's hands worked through more than a hundred crab legs from the first box and started in on the next. The scent of Mrs. Johnson's famous Parker House rolls filled the kitchen and made Cassidy smile. She and Dad had many challenges to face in their duties, but taking their place among the Curry Hotel staff seemed right. Yes, this had been a good step of faith for them both. And the excitement and challenge of the Curry Hotel made her happier than she could've dreamed. It made her father happy that they could work in a capacity that allowed him to keep an eye on her. The Alaska Territory was still more than seventy-five percent male, and she liked the protectiveness of her father. It also didn't hurt that she found comfort in being able to keep a closer eye on him as well.

As the resident recreational guide, John Ivanoff led hiking and fishing tours for the guests. He taught them all about Alaska's incredible wild flowers, berries, and plants, and helped them reel in large trophy fish to take pictures of and show their families

back home. Then there were the truly adventurous groups that would travel by boat across the river and hike for miles up the ridge to gain the spectacular view of the High One and the surrounding mountains. He'd been kept very busy, and Cassidy was thankful that he was soon to have a full-time assistant to help.

"Thomas!" Mrs. Johnson's shrill tone made everyone jump, and all work clattered to an abrupt halt.

Cassidy laid a hand on her chest. That certainly jolted her out of day-dreaming. As she looked around the room, she spotted the seventeen-year-old kitchen boy, a wobbling stack of pots behind him. His face was ashen as he quaked in his boots. Oh bother, what had he done this time to rile the cook? A resounding crash behind the boy gave everyone the answer. He closed his eyes in resignation.

Several of the kitchen maids giggled.

"Kindly remember, Thomas, that you cannot haphazardly stack the large pots. There is a system, and everything must be in its place." Mrs. Johnson's tone was at least a tad softer than her initial screech.

More giggles.

"And there will be no laughter at Thomas's plight." Their boss rounded on the young women, hands on her hips. "Or I will have you scrub the floor by hand."

Straight faces and nods answered as they rushed back to their duties.

The bustle of the kitchen began again, but Thomas stood anchored to the floor, his cap in his hand.

"Cassidy, please assist Thomas in the proper placement of the kitchenware."

"Yes, Mrs. Johnson." Cassidy smiled at the young man as the older woman walked away. "Let's get this sorted, shall we? I must hurry and get back to the crab salad."

He nodded. And his stomach rumbled loud enough for Cassidy to hear.

She tried to cover for his embarrassment. “If you look closely, each shelf is labeled with the size of the pot that sits there. Only two in each stack. But once you learn it, it’s not hard. They really just go in order of size from the smallest to the largest of big stockpots. All the other pots hang from the ceiling over there, but you probably can see that for yourself. Just don’t forget to line these handles up. She can’t stand for any of them to be crooked on the shelves. She always says it’s for ease of picking them up.”

Grabbing the huge cauldrons from the floor, Thomas sighed. “I’m sorry I was in too big of a hurry to notice.” Another big sigh as he fumbled with a large pot that probably outweighed him. “Seems I can’t do anything right. If I’m too slow, I get hollered at, and if I try to speed up, things aren’t done properly and I *still* get hollered at.”

“You’re learning, Thomas. And that’s what matters. Mrs. Johnson may be tough, but she’s fair. Pay attention and do your best. Besides, she knows you’re still growing and all of us were clumsy in those stages.” Cassidy stepped back to let him settle the items in their places. “And you know what? Next time you feel you’re being ‘hollered’ at, why don’t you just remember that they’re doing it to teach you the correct way.”

“You’re always so positive.” Thomas smiled down at her as he placed the last pot in its place. He stood back, looked at his work, and then reached forward, straightening the handles. “Thank you for always being so nice to me, and for your help.”

“Oh, we were all your age at one time and have had to learn new jobs. The hotel only opened in March, so we’ll keep learning together.” Cassidy turned and wiped down her apron. Then she threw over her shoulder, “And I like being positive—makes the world a bit sunnier, don’t you agree?”

“But it’s so embarrassing to fall down and drop things. I admit it’s been nice to finally grow taller ’cause I was always the shortest in my class. But my brain doesn’t seem to know the difference, and my feet keep getting in the way.” He followed her back through the kitchen.

“Everyone has to go through growing pangs. Give it time. You’re doing just fine.” She grabbed a roll off the cooling rack. “Here, eat this quick. It should help you through the next hour.” Looking at Thomas broke her heart. He seemed so down. “You know what? I have an idea.”

“Will it help me not be such an oaf around here?” He downed the roll in two bites.

Poor Thomas. She nodded. “Like I said, we all go through that stage. But I was an exceptionally clumsy child. I tripped over everything—even nothing at all—and fell down constantly. My dad always had a funny saying for me after he’d picked me up and brushed me off. It made me smile and maybe it will help you.” She looked down at the pile of crab meat and the crab legs left to shell.

“What’d he say?”

Cassidy bit her lip. Maybe it was a bit silly for this boy who was almost a man. “Well . . . I’m a bit embarrassed to say it.”

“Go on.”

“It’ll have to be our little secret.” She leaned closer and winked.

He cracked a half smile and the twinkle in his eyes was back. “I promise.”

“Well, you see, I loved to give hugs. Always have, really. And not just people. I hugged our dogs, the pigs, chickens—I even tried to hug a squirrel once. That one didn’t go over too well with the squirrel, I’m sorry to say.”

He snickered and covered his mouth. “Sorry, I was just picturing it.”

She gave him a smile and gathered the celery and onions she needed for the salad. “Anyway, after I would fall down, my dad would say, ‘I guess the floor needed a hug.’” Cassidy couldn’t help but laugh at the memory now. “I can’t tell you how many times I hugged the floor . . . or the stairs . . . or a rock, a log, or the grass.”

He laughed out loud.

Mrs. Johnson cleared her throat across the kitchen.

Thomas straightened. “I best get back to work. Thanks again, Miss Ivanoff. I’ll never look at falling down the same way again.” His smile was as big as his face.

“You’re welcome. Now off you go. I’m sure you have quite a list to accomplish, as do I.” She handed him another roll.

Thomas tucked the roll in his apron pocket and walked out of the kitchen.

Mrs. Johnson joined Cassidy. “I suppose he did a decent job. At least the handles are straight.”

“He really wants to please you.” Cassidy pulled her gloves back out of her apron. “He’s such a good young man.”

Her boss shook her head. “I appreciate you encouraging him, but it seems he makes double the work for everyone.”

“He’s young and learning to handle himself.” Cassidy hoped Mrs. Johnson wasn’t thinking of having him fired. “I’m sure he’ll improve.”

Mrs. Johnson looked less than convinced. “Perhaps with any luck at all. Now. If we could just keep him from catastrophe for a whole day . . .”

Cassidy patted her arm and smiled. “But then we wouldn’t know what to do with ourselves. He keeps us alert, doesn’t he?”

The head cook huffed. “But what I wouldn’t give for just one *dull* day around here.”

A hush fell over the kitchen and Cassidy turned around.

“I’m sorry, Chef Johnson, but that won’t be happening today.” The hotel manager’s eyes glowed with mirth. And since he rarely visited the kitchen—normally just sent a messenger—his presence meant big news.

Mrs. Johnson sauntered forward with her hands clasped in front. “Well, you could have at least let me dream it for a moment, Mr. Bradley.”

He raised an eyebrow and kept smiling at their head cook. Not many people could get away with teasing the woman. “I shall remember that for future notice.” He cleared his throat. “We have a fancy group with the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* coming up for a formal dedication of the Mount McKinley National Park. It is a large group of about seventy, and we have been asked to help host and provide food for the ceremony. A number of staff will be asked to go along as well to assist and serve.”

Mrs. Johnson didn’t even flinch at the news. “We are up to the task, Mr. Bradley. Just let me know when.”

He grinned and turned partially back to the stairs. “Just as I knew you would be. And as to the *when*—it’s tomorrow.”