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EVER CONSTANT

A woman with long, wavy, reddish-brown hair is shown in profile, looking towards the left. She is wearing a vibrant red shawl with fringed edges over a blue and white striped dress. She stands in a vast, snowy mountain landscape under a dramatic, cloudy sky. The sun is breaking through the clouds, creating a bright, golden glow. The mountains in the background are covered in snow and partially shrouded in mist.

TRACIE PETERSON
KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE

The Treasures of Nome



EVER
CONSTANT



TRACIE PETERSON AND
KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE



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This book is lovingly dedicated to the real Whitney.

Thank you for allowing us to name a character after you—even when I told you what we were going to put her through.

You were the first of the Powell girls to take lessons from me, and we shared so many amazing times together. I have been blessed to know you all these years.

You. Are. A. Joy.

We've shared laughter, tears, FaceTime calls, chats, and lots of music.

Remember how very much I love you.

Remember I'm here for you.

And remember that our God loves you more than anything and has blessed you with amazing talent. Keep using it for Him. Always.

Put Him first, and everything else will fall into place.

I'm praying for you, and I adore you.

—Kim

And to Havyn and Madysen, Tracie and I hope you have enjoyed having your namesake characters. I can't wait to hear all about what you are up to next. If the two of you ever take up working on a farm with chickens and sheep, I'm going to laugh hysterically. Just make sure you tell me all the stories.

You two are so precious, and I love having you in my life. Give each other a hug from me and Tracie, and give your parents hugs too!

Dear Reader

Several years ago, Tracie and I were having a book signing and fund-raising event for the scholarship fund in Cassidy Hale's honor with the launch of our HEART OF ALASKA series' *In the Shadow of Denali*. Music students of mine—the Powell girls—came to meet their beloved favorite author, Tracie Peterson. The girls' mom—Monica—and I are dear friends, and she's quite a fan as well. The excitement as the foursome walked into the event was contagious. Even though the girls knew me really well, had spent hours at my home, and understood that I had written several books already with Tracie, the joy of getting to meet her in person put them over the moon and in total fan mode. Giggles and smiles and chatter filled the air.

It was at that event that Tracie looked at me and said, "Books need to be written about three precocious, musical, redheaded sisters."

THE TREASURES OF NOME series was born that day.

The three main characters throughout this series are named after my precious girls. (I will always claim them

as mine—once a student of mine, *always* one of my kids.) Whitney, Havyn, and Madysen. And while we might have used a few character traits of the real girls, the Powell sisters in our series are purely fictitious. I’m truly thankful that the real sisters haven’t had to endure all the craziness we threw at the characters in our books.

Tracie and I have loved sharing these girls, the chicken stories, the sled dogs, the chaos with the sheep, the cheese making, and all the other adventures in this series with you.

For those of you who have read Jack London’s *Call of the Wild* or have seen the movie, you know the command *mush* is used to get the dogs to go. Most likely this is the English derivation from the French-Canadian *marche*, which meant “go.”

In this book, you will find these terms:

Let’s go simply means “go.” (The most common terms used are *hike*, *let’s go*, and *all right*, which you might remember me using in *Race Against Time*.)

Haw means “turn left.”

Gee means “turn right.”

Whoa means “slow down and come to a stop.”

Because I have spent so much time with real-life dog-sled pros while we lived in Alaska and during research trips there, I want to honor the knowledge they’ve poured into me and respect the amazing sport.

The Grand Nome Hotel and Golden Palace Restaurant in this book are fictitious. I know how many of you love the historical landmarks we use, but in this instance we needed to create something for the purposes of the story.

You will also notice that there are two different terms used for the native people. *Inupiat* is plural, *Inupiaq* is singular. There you have it, your language lesson for the day.

Lastly, I wanted to tell you about something that a lot of people don't know. Are you ready?

The northern lights—auroras—make noise.

This is shown in *Ever Constant*, and I wanted to assure you that, yes, it is true!

I've heard them many times myself, but it's not loud. In fact, the best way to truly experience them is to be out away from everything else. Their sound has been described as crackling, the bursting of soap bubbles, and sputtering. Sometimes you have to concentrate on listening to actually hear them.

Check out the Note from the Authors at the end of the book for some fun facts and links. And make sure you join us for our next series, which takes place in Kalispell, Montana.

As always, we couldn't do what we do without YOU, our readers.

Enjoy the journey,
Kim and Tracie

Prologue

Cripple Creek, Colorado—1889

Furries of snow drifted down from the dark and cloudy sky. Whitney Powell shivered and lifted her face to the heavens as she stopped in the middle of the quiet street. Mama would scold her for being out in the wee hours of the morning, but it was her mother's tears that woke her.

Daddy wasn't home. *Again*. Which meant one thing. Whitney wanted to growl out her anger and throw something. Really hard. She'd been old enough to understand what was going on for a couple of years now. No matter how much her parents tried to hide it.

Lifting her chin, she clenched her jaw against the chill in the wind and shoved her hands into her coat pockets. She had to fix Mama's tears. Havyn and Madysen were too young. So even if she had to drag her good-for-nothin' father back from the saloon—again—at least he would be home.

She cringed. Good for nothin'? What a horrible thought!

What would Mama say? How often had she drilled into her that thoughts were just as important as the words that came out of her mouth? Reminded her that God knew every one of them?

No doubt about it, their mother would be crushed. And she'd be so embarrassed if she found out that her oldest daughter had gone to Saloon Row to haul her father home. More than once.

Mama was the best lady in the world. *And* the most talented. If only she could stand up for herself. She always saw the good in everyone, believed in them, cheered them on, and recognized what she called their *potential*.

Why couldn't she see that people took advantage of her goodwill?

No matter how many times Mama had been hurt, she'd still forgive.

Whitney gritted her teeth. In all her ten years, she'd never met anyone on earth as good as her mama. If only *she* could be as kind and generous. No matter how much she tried to mimic her mother's behavior, she couldn't do it. Mama's patience and goodness rivaled that of any saint. Granddad said so himself.

"Maybe by the time I'm all grown up I can be like Mama." Her words puffed from her mouth in the icy air.

For now, as the oldest daughter, it fell to her to take care of their mother when their father wasn't capable of doing it. She'd gone to get him four times now. Four. She'd had to scrape up all her courage to go to the saloons that first time, but she'd done it. Because she loved her Mama and couldn't watch her suffer and worry.

She shook her head and continued walking toward Saloon Row. The still of the evening was disrupted by sounds of

the establishments ahead. The noise crescendoed with every few steps.

How many more times would she have to do this? How long before someone found out? She'd thought about asking Granddad for help. Other than her sisters, he was her best friend. But he already didn't think too well of Daddy. . . .

The wind bit at her face while the scent of logs burning in stoves filled her nose.

Music from the saloons drifted toward her, and she flinched. It was nothing like the beautiful music they played and sang at home. This was harsh, raucous, and out of tune. How could people even stand it? It hurt her ears. The closer she got, the more she hated the sound, the noise, the smells. Oh, to curl up in her bed like her younger sisters and go to sleep as if she didn't have the weight of the world on her shoulders. All because Daddy couldn't control himself.

Two men wobbled down the street toward her, then one of them doubled over and got sick in the middle of the road. She covered her face with her scarf and stepped several paces around them. Why did they *do* that to themselves? Disgusting.

Picking up her stride, she kept her chin down. There were things here that she didn't want to see.

Not again.

Questions peppered her brain. She wouldn't allow them entry. Best to think about music. Mama. Havyn and Madyson.

Wait a minute. . . the hairs on the back of her neck prickled and a shiver raced up her spine. A lump in the street—no, not a lump. A man.

For a moment, she couldn't take another step. Could barely breathe. No. Please. That scrawny heap couldn't be her father. But . . . the blue coat.

She'd recognize the coat anywhere. Mama made it for him last Christmas.

With a deep breath, she moved forward. At least she could be thankful he wasn't *inside* one of the saloons. She hated going in them. The adults always tried to shoo her out, but her presence made it easier to get her dad out the door. No one wanted a little girl inside.

The closer her feet brought her to the telltale form, the more she wanted to run away. But then she was standing beside him. Daddy wasn't moving. Was he even breathing?

She knelt down beside him and poked at his shoulder. Hard.

Nothing happened.

When she touched his face, it was cold. Her stomach revolted and her heart sank.

Oh, Daddy . . .

Shaking her head, she closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. A sharp clenching in her chest made her gasp for air. She fought the tears that threatened to flood her eyes and race down her face. He wouldn't leave them . . . would he?

As much as she detested his actions, he was still her daddy.

She leaned her ear close to his face. He stunk. It made her stomach turn again.

She couldn't hear any breath.

She poked him again. Harder. And again. Even harder.

"Daddy?" She shook him with all she had.

No response.

She touched his face again. Cold. But it was snowing outside, and the temperature was frigid. Maybe he was passed out. He did that at home all the time lately.

Sitting down beside him, she shook him and poked him.

Over and over. If he was dead . . . what would they do? Mama and Havyn and Madysen would cry. So would she.

What would become of them?

The few wonderful memories she had with her dad began to play in her mind. The way his eyes crinkled when he laughed. Playing outside in the snow. Him chasing her around the house until she crumpled on the floor, giggling.

She shoved him again. “Wake up! Havyn and Maddy need some good memories too.” With her other hand, she swiped at her hair.

If he was dead . . . she’d never have to come find him again. He’d never come home drunk. Never make Mama cry.

No. He couldn’t get out of his responsibilities that easily. *Someone* had to take care of them. He’d promised he’d stop. Get cleaned up. Be the husband and father they needed.

A pounding started in her ears as heat rushed to her cheeks. Every ugly thing she’d ever wanted to say to him threatened to spew from her mouth as she pushed and shoved, poked and prodded.

But after several minutes, she slumped down. Not a moan or a sound came from him. Swallowing against the tears, she swiped at her cheeks.

It was no use. He was dead. Gone.

Glancing from side to side, she searched the street. Not a soul around that she knew. No one she could trust to help.

What would she tell Mama? How could she fix *this*?

The wind howled, and her hair flew in her face again. The strands, wet from the snow, stuck to her nose.

She *couldn’t* fix this. She couldn’t even get him home. It was one thing to drag her drunken father home when he had use of his legs, but when he was dead weight?

The tears stung her cheeks as they escaped, and the wind

threatened to freeze them on her skin. As much as she wanted to be strong, all she wanted now was Granddad. Whenever she couldn't turn to Mama, he was her rock.

But how could she leave her dad in the street to go get Granddad? What would happen to Daddy if she left him there? Would anyone care? Would he get run over by a horse?

How could Daddy do this to them?

For several minutes, she allowed the tears to flow. Then she swiped at them again, her wool coat scratching and rubbing her cheeks raw. Why couldn't he do what he was supposed to do so that she could be a kid? But *no* . . . here she was in the middle of the street crying over his sorry form. Mama would tell her not to be angry with him. Again. But she was.

She was furious!

Whitney surged to her feet and glared down at her father. Her hands fisted at her sides. "I *hate* you. Hate you for leaving us. Hate you for making Mama cry." She lifted her chin. "But I won't cry for you. Never again." She made the meanest face she could and forced it at him. Too bad he couldn't see it.

"Whitney? What are you doing out here?"

She whirled around.

Granddad!

"Whoa, young lady. What's got you all fired up?" He held his hands in front of him.

She jabbed a finger toward her father. "He's gone and done it. He's dead. Left us. What're we gonna do now?"

Granddad furrowed his brow and stepped closer. Tilting his head, he placed a hand on her shoulder.

The touch melted the edges of her fury.

"I don't know for sure if he's dead, Whit. Why don't you let me check?" His soft words washed over her, cooling the fire in her heart.

Her shoulders slumped, and she dove toward him, wrapping her arms around his waist. She didn't want her dad to be dead. She didn't! But he made her so mad. How could he do this to them?

A long sigh escaped her grandfather as he embraced her. "I'm sorry, Whit. You should never have to see anything like this." His arms tightened around her, and then he pulled back, his hands on her shoulders. "Let me check on him, and then we'll talk about it, all right?"

She sniffed and lifted her chin to give a slight nod.

Granddad put a hand over her dad's mouth and nose for several moments. He turned back to her. "Your dad's not dead, honey. He's still breathing."

Thank You, God.

But as soon as the prayer whipped through her mind, she shook her head and pressed her lips together. She'd have to deal with this again. What about poor Mama?

"Let's get him home." Granddad grunted as he picked up her father and tossed him over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

They walked in silence for several minutes.

"Wanna tell me why you were out there in the middle of the night?" His tone wasn't scolding, but she could tell by the way his eyebrows drew together that he'd been unhappy to find her there. Would she get in trouble for going to the saloons?

"Mama was crying because Daddy wasn't home."

"Ah, I see. So you thought you should just wander out into the middle of town looking for him?"

The truth was the best way to go. "I've gone to get Daddy a few times. I don't see why I should get in trouble for that. *He's* the one who causes all the problems." She dared a look up at her grandfather.

His eyebrows raised. “Young lady, that’s no way to talk about your father. . . .” His face pinched and he clenched his jaw several times. A long breath came out before his next words. “And I wasn’t saying you were in trouble, though you should never leave the house unaccompanied—especially in the middle of the night.” The words were hushed. Sad.

“But . . . what else was I supposed to do?” She crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. “Besides, I’ve heard what you’ve said about him to Mama—”

“What were you doing listening in on our conversations? Those words weren’t meant for your ears. And besides, that’s no excuse for you talking about him that way.”

Now he was scolding.

She bit her lip. Caught. Heat rose into her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Granddad. But someone has to take care of Mama. That’s why I was up. If Daddy isn’t home, I always listen for her . . . to make sure she’s all right.”

His lips pinched together. Several moments passed before he continued. “Your mother would be heartbroken to hear you say those things about your father. And to find out that you’ve been sneaking out in the middle of the night to bring your dad home.” He huffed and shifted her dad’s limp form on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Whitney. So sorry that you’ve had to do this. This is all my fault.”

She had to strain to hear his last faint words. “Why is it *your* fault, Granddad?”

He shook his head as they trudged up the hill to their little house, and his breaths came faster. “I should have taken care of this long ago.”

“Taken care of what?” Her heart pounded in her chest. “Could you have stopped Daddy from drinking? From it making him sick all the time?”

Then why hadn't he done so? Why had he let them be hurt this way?

"No. I've tried to get him to stop, but to no avail. Your mother has tried too. This is something only your dad can stop."

"So what should *you* have taken care of?" It made little sense.

Granddad turned to her and stopped. He took several moments to catch his breath. He smiled, but not really. It wasn't a smile that warmed her or made her want to smile back. Instead, she wanted to cry. "It doesn't matter now, Whitney. Your dad drinks until he's sick—"

"But why?"

Granddad sighed. "The one thing I can gather is that it helps him to forget."

"Forget *what*? He doesn't want to forget *us*, does he?" Tears stung the corners of her eyes, but she refused to let them out. Fine! If Dad didn't love them, she wouldn't love *him*. She didn't want his love. Let him forget her. She didn't care.

The tears almost escaped. Almost.

"No, sweetheart. He'd never want to forget you." Granddad started back up the hill. "But a lot of adults need to forget the bad things that have happened to them, and the bad things they've done."

"Like God forgets?"

Granddad's face scrunched up and then relaxed. "Yes. We wish we could forgive like God does. But we have a hard time doing it, don't we?"

As they walked the rest of the way up to the house, Whitney couldn't get Granddad's words out of her head. If only she could forget all the bad things she'd done too. All the

times she'd been mean to her sisters. Or selfish. Or the times she'd lied. Mama said Jesus forgave her when she apologized to Him. But those bad actions came back to haunt her.

A lot.

Why couldn't she be better? Like her mother.

A few Sundays ago, the reverend talked about forgiveness and how God chose to forget their sins, to put those sins as far away as the east from the west. How could He do that?

God, I sure hope You forget all my bad deeds.

Maybe God could forget her daddy's too? And forgive him? Make him do better?

Jesus died for everyone's sins. God loved all of them the same no matter what they'd done.

She sniffed and winced. She was supposed to forgive Daddy like God did. It was a good thing her dad wasn't dead. Now she had to find some way to help him forget so he didn't need to go out drinking.

Mama made certain to tell them every day that Daddy loved them. She promised it was true. That should be reason enough for him to give up his drinking. Shouldn't it?

If he could stop, then she could forgive him. God would help her.

Then Mama wouldn't cry anymore.

And then they could be a *proper* family.

That ate every meal together around the dinner table.

Talked about their days.

Laughed together.

Made memories together.

Went to church together.

Gathered around the piano to play music and sing.

Had picnics in the meadow on red-and-white checkered cloths.

The pictures in her mind were so vivid that she smiled.

“Whitney?” Granddad’s voice broke through her thoughts.
“It’s freezing out here, honey. Let’s get inside.”

“Yes, sir.” As she walked into the tiny cabin they called home, she let the remnants of the pictures cement into her mind. She turned to close the door and watched as the snow laid a fresh white coating on everything.

Clean. Bright.

New.

Tomorrow could be the start of something new for them.
It could.

And she couldn’t wait.

ONE

Sixteen Years Later

Monday, January 9, 1905—Nome, Alaska

Snow glimmered in the moonlight. A beautiful start to another morning in Nome. Whitney whistled a lively tune as the sled swished and shushed over the snow. Her dogs were in fine form, obeying every command with precision and executing each turn in perfect unity. Not a tangled line or misbehaving pup. By the time the sun crested the horizon, there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Oh, for more perfect days like thi—

She grimaced.

The ache started in the back of her neck and radiated up into her head. She lifted a hand to her neck and rubbed. But once this pain started, it was hard to get rid of. What came next was usually much worse.

When would these blasted headaches let up? They'd tormented her for months.

Ever since—

No. She wouldn't think about it. She'd gotten away from him. That's what mattered.

“Whoa!” Her dogs responded, coming to a stop.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the bottle of tonic. Dr. Cameron gave it to her months ago because of the blow to her head. Thank heaven it helped ease her discomfort. A sip here and there was all it took.

She took a sip, replaced the bottle in her pocket, then urged the dogs back into motion. The pain lessened enough that she could make a mental list of everything she needed to accomplish today.

Lists kept her on track. Helped her to focus.

Life on the farm moved at a rapid pace, thank goodness. It kept her mind occupied, her hands busy. Between the cows, dogs, sheep, and chickens, she and her family had their work cut out for them. Havyn and Madysen had found good men to marry, men who wanted to help run the farm. Which she and her sisters needed. There was no way they would have been able to keep up by themselves.

Especially with Granddad still laid up after the bouts of apoplexy.

His movement had improved with exercises, but this past week he'd looked so weary. Maybe the winter doldrums were taking effect. It was, after all, the dead of winter. Or maybe he'd pushed himself too hard and too long over the past few weeks. He'd been determined to get up and walking soon.

Whatever it was, there had to be a way to lift his spirits. Lift *all* of their spirits. Maybe they should spend a bit more time around the piano in the evenings, on nights they weren't at the Roadhouse.

Just the thought of playing with Havyn and Madysen brought a smile to her face.

With Maddy on cello and Havyn on the violin, they made quite the trio. But it was when they sang together that every-

thing was the way it should be. There was something wonderful about singing tight harmonies with her sisters. With letting their voices soar.

As much as she was a mother hen to her younger sisters—even more so since Mama’s passing last year—the way they’d come around her after she’d been attacked showed her how much she needed them too. Whitney didn’t want to face a day without either of them. No matter how much they might get on one another’s nerves.

As her sled crested the hill, she caught sight of the farm. The expansive log-and-stone home Granddad built had smoke billowing from the chimney. The barns were alive with plenty of activity as the workers milked the herd. The usual cacophony of chickens chattering drifted on the air.

The sled glided over the snow as the dogs brought her back to the kennel area, their delight clear in their wagging tails and lolling tongues. Whitney hopped off the sled and worked with deft fingers in the bitter cold to unhook her team and get the dogs rubbed down and fed. Her mind sped through her responsibilities. Surely she had *some* time to shut her eyes against the pain. But no. Next came helping with breakfast, and then, since it was Monday, it was her turn to work with Granddad on his exercises.

She hesitated. Maybe Granddad needed something other than the same ol’ things he did every day. What if she were to read to him . . . or perhaps wheel him into the gathering room by the roaring fire and play the piano for him?

Of course! That was it. He’d love that. And it would be a pleasant change of pace for him. A break from the strenuous routine of stretches he did every day.

Ohhh . . .

Why wouldn’t the pain in her head stop? What she needed

was a hot bath. So hot that it could melt the pain. But there were too many things on her list to do before she could even think about relaxing.

The morning meal passed in a flurry of pancakes, eggs, and fried ham steaks. All the noise and laughter increased the stabbing pain in her head. It took every ounce of her self-control to not let it show. She scraped plates into the bucket they took out to the animals. She rubbed her forehead.

Relax. Breathe. So much left to do.

But the throbbing didn't lessen.

These darned headaches seemed to come more often. Maybe she needed to see Dr. Cameron. Find out if something was really wrong—

“Whit . . . another one?” Havyn placed a hand on her shoulder.

With a sigh, she glanced at her sister. The child within her was beginning to show. “Yes. But don't worry. You've got enough on your plate. I'll make it through. I always do.”

Hands on her hips, Havyn quirked an eyebrow at her. “You might be the oldest and think you can still boss us around, but I most certainly *will* worry. When one of us is hurting, the rest of us hurt.” She grabbed the wooden spoon out of Whitney's hand and tilted her head. “Let me finish this and take it out. Everyone else has already gone out for the rest of the chores, so you go ahead and spend some time with Granddad. I think your idea of playing music for him will help you both. Especially with the house being quiet for a bit.”

Since when did Havyn give her orders? Still, her fingers itched to play some relaxing music on the piano. She'd give in.

This time.

“All right. But don't think you've won.”

Havyn's wide eyes blinked at her. "Oh, never."

"I can hear the sarcasm, sis."

"Good." Havyn gave her a little pat. "Now go on."

Whitney removed her apron and hung it up before heading into their large parlor. The piano gleamed in the lantern's light. The dark wood drew her. Mama had them polish it with oil and beeswax twice a week without fail. Running her hand over the smooth surface, she allowed the memories to assail her senses. All those times they'd gathered around it, the times Mama taught them at it, the times she accompanied them as they sang . . .

Oh, to see Mama at the piano again.

Stop it. Sadness wouldn't help. Not her or Grandad. Whitney went to the cabinet in the corner to pull out the music to Chopin's *Fantaisie-Impromptu*.

Mama's favorite piece.

How Whitney had loved to sit on the floor and watch mother's fingers fly over the keys as she played this piece. For years, Mama had wanted Whitney to learn it. But the technical piece intimidated her when she was younger . . . and there was something special about watching someone else play such a phenomenal creation.

Whitney set the music on the grand piano and opened the lid. She should have learned it at Mama's side—

No. Stay positive.

She could work on it for Granddad. It was his favorite too. And maybe, just maybe, they could comfort each other with the music. Be reminded of the beauty his daughter, her mother, gave them.

With a few deep breaths, Whitney examined the opening of the piece. The part that amazed her and daunted her the most. The triplet pattern in the left hand was contrary to

the rhythm of the sixteenth notes in the right. Mama always called it three against four. Told her that the way to conquer it was for each hand to learn how to play independent of the other.

“You have to master it hands separately, my dear.” Mama’s voice was so clear in her mind. Almost as if Whitney could conjure her up beside her. *“Then let them come together. They will know the rhythm. They will know what to do. But only after you’ve practiced it hundreds of times hands separately.”*

The emphasis on the words brought a smile to Whitney’s face. How many times had her mother drilled into them, *“Count. One and two and three and four and . . . watch those scales, tuck that thumb . . . hands together, hands separately!”*

Whitney sat and practiced the first couple of pages. Hands separately, she played each part and paid careful attention to the fingering and rhythm. She knew what the song sounded like, so it was easy to imagine how it would be all together. But this would take a good deal of practice.

The clock chimed and she glanced up. Maybe she should just bring Granddad in here and tell him she would learn the piece for him. He loved to hear her and her sisters practice, no matter how many mistakes they made.

She got up from the piano bench and headed down the hall to Granddad’s room. The past year had been hard on the whole family, but they’d come through it. Together. Music was one way they accomplished that.

She opened the door to their grandfather’s bedroom. Light spilled in from the eastern window and blinded her for a brief moment. A sharp pain started at her right temple and shot across to the left. Blast these headaches!

She covered her eyes for a second and hoped Granddad

hadn't noticed. He was a worrier now that he was laid up all the time. She moved her hand and then squinted into the room. "Granddad? How about we take a little break from the exercises and I'll play some musi—"

She gasped.

Granddad lay on the floor. His form awkward and unmoving.

"Granddad!" She rushed to his side. "Did you fall? Let me help you get back into bed."

But as she tugged at his shoulders, there was no response.

She put a hand to his face, then yanked it back at the cold that greeted her fingertips. She rubbed her hand on her leg to rid herself of the offensive feeling.

No. It couldn't be.

Forcing her trembling fingers forward, she held them over his nose and mouth, counted to one hundred.

No breath escaped.

The gray pallor in his skin made her want to lose her breakfast.

No.

With a hand to her forehead again, she closed her eyes. This couldn't be happening! Not again. Not now. Her headache must have her imagining things. Granddad was indestructible. He'd survived *two* bouts of apoplexy!

She opened her eyes and stared at his form on the floor.

No nightmare.

It was real.

As she knelt beside Granddad, time stood still.

She couldn't breathe. Couldn't utter a sound.

The ticking of the clock on the dresser suddenly broke through the cloud in her mind.

Tick, tock. Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

Each sound grew louder and louder until she put her hands on the side of her head. With a gulp of air, she collapsed on her grandfather's stiff chest and sobbed.

He'd always been there. Always. Ever since Dad died—well, left—Granddad had been a father figure to her. Besides Mama, he'd been the one to understand her the most. Something she desperately needed—because she wasn't merciful like Maddy, nor fun loving like Havyn. She was just like him. He'd said so on hundreds of occasions.

He'd *always* been there.

But . . . he wouldn't be with them any longer.

Granddad . . . was dead.

Tears clogged her throat and blurred her vision. It was too much. The throbbing in her head grew as she wailed out her anguish into Granddad's shirt. But what was a little more pain in the face of another horrific loss?

The clock ticked the minutes away until her nose was stuffed and her tears dried up. Straightening and swiping at her eyes, she stared down at her grandfather.

No. *No!* This wasn't happening!

She looked up at the ceiling. "Why, God? Why would you do this to us? Do you *hate* us? Want to rip away everyone we love? Don't you know how much we need him? Especially with Mama gone. How are we supposed to go on?"

Heat rose within her. Choking her. This was *wrong!* She jumped to her feet. "Or are you punishing me?" She spat out the words. "What? I haven't had enough faith? Haven't been good enough? I'm too strong-willed? I let my temper get the best of me too many times? *Why?*"

Her fury faded into silence. No answer. No sense of God. There was only . . .

Nothing.

The same silence, the same void that, for too long now, had met her attempts to pray or to sense God. It was almost as if He were dead too.

And if He was, so what? What good had He been to them?

He'd allowed their father to be a drunk. To leave them and pretend he was dead. Sure, it was at Granddad's urging, since their father had already started another family. An idea her grandfather probably got from her that night when she *thought* Dad was dead.

But Dad had agreed. Had gone through with it. Left them.

Then God had allowed Mama to die.

And now Granddad.

He'd allowed Garrett Sinclair to *attack* her.

Where were you, God? Why didn't you help?

Enough.

She wiped her face with the back of her hand again and straightened her shoulders. No time now for tears. Only the tasks ahead of her . . .

Tell her family. Send for the doctor. Send for their pastor. Plan another funeral.

In the dead of winter.

Her heart sped up. She couldn't breathe. How was she going to do all this? *How?*

She pulled the bottle from her pocket and took a sip, closing her eyes as the burn hit the back of her throat. Her pain didn't fade, but as the warmth eased through her, she seemed to float above the anxiety that had become her daily companion. Ever since that awful day.

The day Sinclair attack—

No. Don't think about that.

Another small sip, another spreading burn, and her thoughts settled. Focus on one task at a time.

One, tell the family.

She tugged on the collar of her blouse and forced herself to look back to Granddad's still form.

Her heart broke, and a cry almost escaped her. Oh, to sit with him and have one more conversation. To tell him what was going on with her. The truth, this time. He would understand.

But . . . she hadn't made her peace with him. Oh, they'd acted as if nothing was different, but only because they were both too stubborn to confront the situation. Not after he'd shared the truth with them about her father. Not after he'd invited Dad's other family *here*. To live with them, the daughters her father abandoned.

The night they arrived was the same night that Garrett had put his hands on her.

Oh, Granddad, how could you leave me?

She sank to the edge of his bed. "I wasn't angry at what you did. Dad deserved it. And really, you saved us. But why? Why did you keep it a secret? From *me*? Didn't you think I could handle it?"

With a shake of her head, she banished the thoughts. Granddad knew what she'd seen as a child. What she'd done. What she'd endured.

Her sisters? They would never understand. They'd been so young. And they had been much more willing to show forgiveness. What would they think of her if they knew the truth of what was in her heart?

She stiffened. They wouldn't. She'd make sure of that. It was her job now to keep them together. Keep things running.

She owed that much to Granddad.

Her fingers traced the outline of the bottle in her hand. At least she could count on this to help. To give her relief.

She lifted it, took one more swallow, then put on the cap and tucked it away. She stood and walked to the door. Havyn and Madysen would be devastated, but John and Daniel would console them. Help them get through.

Who would help *her*?

She closed her eyes again and faced the stark truth.

No one. She really was alone now.

Her hand went to the doorjamb, gripped it to steady herself.

Focus. Focus on what needs to be done . . .

Tell her family.

Call for the pastor and the doctor.

Tell the workers.

Adjust schedules.

Start making funeral arrangements.

The list grew in her mind as she walked toward Granddad's study. The locked cabinet in the corner called to her. She was the only one who had a key to it now. Granddad's key. No one had even asked about it because there was no reason to.

No one else ever needed the relief she did.

She shut the door behind her and leaned against it. Granddad didn't need his whiskey anymore. It was there for her now. She almost smiled. Granddad *was* still taking care of her.

It wouldn't hurt to refill her bottle one more time. She rarely drank it anyway. Only when anxiety or pain threatened to overtake her.

Striding toward the cabinet, she pulled in a deep breath.

As she unlocked the cabinet, Granddad's words from long ago, when he tried to explain why Dad drank, rang in her ears. "*A lot of adults need to forget the bad things that have happened to them, and the bad things they've done.*"

She nodded. She understood now.

Not that she was like her dad. Of course not! She used the tonic for medicine. Dr. Cameron had told her it was all right. The original tonic he'd given her had been more whiskey than anything else. He'd admitted as much.

She wasn't doing anything out of order.

She poured the amber liquid into the dark glass bottle and replaced the corks. There. That should help her through the next few months. Just enough to take the edge off of everything she had to face.

Is it enough?

She stopped. Stared at the bottle. Of course it was. She was being silly.

Before she could change her mind, she placed the whiskey bottle back into the cabinet, closed the door, and slid the key into the lock.

Her head twinged.

She couldn't avoid it any longer. She had to tell her family about Granddad.

Go ahead. Lock the cabinet.

But her hand wouldn't cooperate. It just held the key. And shook. Maybe she should take Granddad's large whiskey bottle back to her room—

No. There was enough in her pocket.

Setting her jaw, she turned the key. With the click of the lock, she jumped. Blinked her eyes. Felt a little like she was waking up from a deep sleep.

Shaking off the feeling, she went to grab her coat and boots. Then stopped. Why was she so jittery?

Then again, why *wouldn't* she be, considering what she was about to do?

Her trembling hand slipped into her pocket, drew out the bottle, and raised it for a sip. Just one, to steady up.

Her nerves calmed with the warmth of the liquid, and she patted the bottle. Her companion and help in facing what was to come. As she passed through the kitchen, she tore a leaf off the mint plant and shoved it into her mouth to chew on. A habit she'd picked up from her grandfather.

Oh, Granddad . . . how will we make it without you?

Dr. Peter Cameron pushed his horse as fast as he dared over the snow-covered road leading to the Bundrant farm.

How could one family endure so much loss and hardship? So much unexpected and unsettling change. The Bundrant family never seemed to get a break.

Especially Whitney.

Ever since he'd met the eldest Powell daughter, he'd been impressed. And just a little concerned. Unless he was misreading her, she was keeping something hidden behind those deep brown eyes of hers. As much as he'd tried, he hadn't been able to break through the wall she kept around herself.

But she seemed to trust him. A rarity, he'd learned, for anyone but family. Because Miss Whitney Powell kept to herself.

Especially where Mr. Sinclair's attack on her was concerned.

At least she spoke to him as her doctor. That was a good start.

He'd spent a lot of time at the Bundrant farm checking on Chuck and getting to know the family. Christmas had passed in quiet apprehension while the family seemed to hold their collective breath, awaiting the next tragedy.

Now it had arrived.

He let out a long breath and watched it float behind him in a frozen mist. If the news from the milker was correct,

they'd just lost their beloved patriarch. *Lord, how will they ever endure this tribulation?*

As he rode up to the house, Whitney was outside the door. Without a coat, gloves, or scarf. She stood there, stiff.

Her mussed, dark-red hair hung in a mass of curls around her shoulders and down her back. Her cheeks were ruddy and tear stained. But it was the look in her eyes that threatened to undo him.

Never had he seen such anguish and anger in one person. "He's gone, Dr. Cameron."

Her clipped words and clenched jaw struck him to the core. How he longed to comfort her, to reach out and hold her close, but he knew better. After all these months, all the trauma, all the struggle, she would withdraw again. Of that, he was certain.

Would she be able to get past this and heal?

"I'm so sorry, Miss Powell."

She sniffed. "Thank you for coming. I'll take you to him."

As she led him through the familiar home and down the hallway to Chuck Bundrant's room, he caught a glimpse of the rest of the family gathered in the room with the piano. Their voices were soft, as were their sobs and sniffs.

His steps echoed on the wood floor. The hall stretched out before him. And then he saw Chuck.

"I didn't move him—"

How was Whitney keeping her words so calm and controlled?

"—because I thought you might be able to save him at first, and I didn't want to hurt him if he broke any bones when he fell. Then . . . well I wouldn't let anyone else touch him." She choked on the last word, then the stoic expression was back in place.

This woman was a force to be reckoned with.

She cleared her throat. “Do you need my help to move him back to the bed?”

Peter set his black bag down and shook his head. “No. I can manage.” He’d been told that Chuck had been a robust and strong man before his bouts with apoplexy. The last year had taken a devastating toll. The man before him was thin, his skin sagging.

Peter leaned down and lifted the older man into his arms. A man who had lived a long life. Worked hard. Provided for his family. A man who had hoped to see many years to come. A man who told him just a few days ago that he was ready to put his efforts into walking again.

And yet, there was hope. Chuck had been taken from this life of suffering and gathered into the arms of his Savior.

No matter how many times Peter faced death, he never got used to it. This time, the loss lodged a lump in the back of his throat. How many had he not been able to save?

Why God?

Why did he keep failing?

“*Failure is just the first step to surrender.*” Chuck had told him that. He’d shared hours of wisdom with Peter. Hadn’t tried to hide his failings. Yearned to be a better man.

It had challenged Peter to do the same.

Why did You take this man, Lord?

He shook his head. It wasn’t his place to question. Not now.

He laid a blanket over Chuck. Rigor mortis had set in, so the man had been dead for some time.

Peter looked at Whitney. “When did you find him?”

“About an hour and a half ago.”

“He didn’t have breakfast with the family this morning?”

“No.” She lifted her chin. Did she think he was criticizing

her? “Granddad was awake when I went out at five thirty, but he asked to have more time to rest because he didn’t sleep well last night.” She pointed to the box in the chair. “Apparently, he stayed up writing his thoughts. I found the stack of paper in the bed. So I went out to run my dogs and then the rest of us had breakfast. Everyone else went back out to work, but it was my morning to help Granddad with his exercises. Since he’d seemed so weary, I thought I would bring him over to the fireplace and play for him. . . . But when I came to wake him, I found him on the floor.”

She related it with such control. “Was he breathing at that point?”

She bit her lip. Controlled, yes. But there were deep emotions there. *Lord, help her.*

“No. His skin was already cold to the touch. I held my hand over his nose and mouth for more than a minute, hoping that he’d just fallen and I would feel him breathe. But he was already gone.”

He dipped his chin. “I’m sorry you had to discover him like this.”

She winced. “I’m glad I found him rather than my sisters. This is devastating to them.”

He met her eyes. “What about you? You were so close to your grandfather.”

Her shoulders lifted a bit. “I’m fine. Things have to be taken care of.”

It wasn’t healthy for her to keep everything bottled up—not even for an expert like her. Still now was not the time to probe deeper. But he would. Eventually. “Would you get John and Daniel for me? Your sisters too . . . there’s a lot we need to discuss.”

“All right.” She left the room, and Peter stared down at

the man who'd built this farm from nothing. "I'm sorry I couldn't give you your wish to walk again, Chuck. But I'm grateful for the time I've known you." He lifted the blanket to cover Chuck's face.

On second thought, maybe he should go speak with them instead of asking them to join him in here. With quick steps he made his way to the large family gathering room.

The family stood as he entered.

"Please take your seats. I realized it would be easier if I came to you."

John reached out a hand. "Thank you for coming, Peter."

"Yes, thank you." Daniel offered his hand as well.

"I'm sorry for your loss. Chuck was a good man. He taught me a lot." Peter waited as they all took their seats. With a deep breath, he dove in. "I will prepare the body for burial today, but as you know, it's next to impossible to dig graves in the winter. You are probably aware that in town they store the coffins until the thaw. Since you have your own family cemetery here on the farm, Chuck won't need to be taken into town, but we need to find a place to store him where wild animals won't pick up the scent and try to get into the coffin. Is there a place here where it will stay cold, but also be protected from wolves and such?"

The ladies looked at each other with wide eyes. He hated having to discuss such delicate matters in front of them, but it was necessary. And they understood the harsh life in Alaska better than anyone else he knew.

Daniel lifted a hand and pointed to the fireplace. "You know, when I was in the Yukon, we often built huge fires to thaw out portions of land where we needed to dig for gold. It worked, but it took time. Maybe we could do that so we could give Chuck a proper burial sooner rather than later."

John patted his brother-in-law's shoulder. "I think we should do it."

"What about a coffin?" Havyn wiped at her eyes. "Do we need to go into town and purchase one?"

Shuffling sounded near the door.

"That won't be necessary."

All eyes shifted to find Christopher Powell standing there, his hat in his hands. "It would be an honor for me to build Chuck's coffin. I can start on it right away. If you will allow."

Peter glanced back to the family and then to Whitney. Her furrowed brow and the sparks in her eyes gave away her anger that their father had come. How long would she hold him at arm's length? While Peter understood the struggle and the painful history, the man was still her father. And she desperately needed him—even if she didn't realize it.

Madysen sprang up from the couch and went over to greet her father. "Would you? I know Granddad would appreciate that. As we all would." She glanced back at everyone, her eyes pleading.

"I could get it done by tomorrow." Christopher looked down at his hat. "I owe the man my life."

As the family stood and went to the man, the conversation stayed hushed as they expressed gratitude and sorrow.

Everyone except Whitney.

She hung back from the huddle of her family and watched. Then without a word . . .

She turned on her heel and raced out the door.