

THE HEART
of ALASKA
BOOK TWO

OUT OF THE ASHES

TRACIE PETERSON
.....
AND KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE



BETHANYHOUSE

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Tracie Peterson and Kimberley Woodhouse, *Out of Ashes*
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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the authors' imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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This book is lovingly dedicated in memory of:

Raymond Earl Frappier

My beloved grandpa.

Married for seventy years to an equally amazing lady,
father to five children—who've all
served in full-time ministry,
grandfather to twelve, great-grandfather to a continually
expanding number (and soon to be great-great-grandfather),
godly example, prayer warrior, WWII
veteran, Bronze Star recipient,
lover of mashed potatoes and gravy and all things sweet,
jokester, and all-around wonderful man.

You never hesitated to be there. Whether it was in the middle
of the night when I had growing pains in my legs and you
sat with me at the piano for hours to keep my mind off the
spasms, or the times you told me a silly story when I needed
cheering up, or when you sent notes of encouragement be-
fore big competitions, or made me cry at my own wedding,
there are a million beautiful memories of you being there.

But the biggest and most marvelous gift
you ever gave was your prayers.

You and Grandma prayed for me—and
every single member of our big,
beautiful family—every day, without fail, for hours on end.

What a legacy you have left us. Thank you.
I love you and miss you, oh, so very much.

—Kim

A Note from the Authors

Welcome to the second novel in THE HEART OF ALASKA series—*Out of the Ashes*.

As we go back to Curry, Alaska, in the 1920s and the Curry Hotel, we journey with some very broken people. Like so many of us today, they experience pain—physical and emotional—that only our great God can help us endure and overcome. But that’s the beautiful part—He is there. Amidst all the junk.

During the writing of this book, Tracie and I both went through some very difficult circumstances. I had an adventurous two-hour ride in an ambulance that led to numerous surgeries and a long road to recovery. Tracie’s beloved nephew suffered a seizure, and they ultimately had to say good-bye to a family member who was all too young. It all happened within the same month. And we feel that the title of this book is even more significant in our lives—as we’ve come out of the ashes ourselves to see the beauty only God can make.

In the Shadow of Denali, book one, started this series in 2017. It introduces the reader to Curry from its inception and tells the love story of Allan and Cassidy, whom you’ll see again in this story. Each book in the series is designed to stand alone.

You don't have to read each one to enjoy the series; however, reading each in order will definitely add to your enjoyment.

In this story, we have used real historical details and real people intermixed with our fictional characters. And since we didn't know the people personally, we've had to use our imaginations along with our historical research to depict some of their personality traits. Please see the *Dear Reader* letter at the end of the book for more details, links to pictures, and our own research.

Many of our readers have written in asking about visiting Alaska. We definitely recommend taking a trip to the Last Frontier if at all possible. The Alaska Railroad is a wonderful way to see Alaska and the only way to see the remains of Curry at milepost 248.

Denali is just as magnificent as ever and one of the most beautiful sights to behold, but be prepared for him to shroud himself in clouds for weeks on end. While in Alaska, if you hear the beloved phrase "The Mountain is out," make sure you chase the mountain that day in case you don't get the chance again. Take lots of pictures, because it will be a treasure to show your friends and family.

And now, we head back in time to Curry. Our prayer—as always—is that you see the beauty of redemption in this story. But most importantly, we hope you see that God can take our worst circumstances—our shattered pieces—and transform the ashes into an exquisite masterpiece.

Enjoy the journey,

Kim and Tracie

Prologue

AUGUST 1925

AL-MAZRAA, SYRIA—ROUGHLY 100 KM SOUTH OF
DAMASCUS

Horrific, gut-wrenching wails brought Jean-Michel Lange-
lier awake. Face-first in the hot sand, he tried to push up
from his prostrate position but couldn't lift his head. Where
was he?

Syria.

He took a few deep breaths. He'd been stationed in Syria to
serve out the rest of his term in the French Army.

The army.

Blinking away grit and sand, he worked to remember his
surroundings and all that had happened. He'd offered to serve
his country in hopes of helping stabilize Europe after the Great
War, the war that had devastated them all. But who was he
kidding—in all honesty, he'd run off after the love of his life
left France without a good-bye. Not that he'd expected one.
Once her father had forbade them to marry, all communica-
tion was cut off.

So he found himself in the army. And it brought him to Syria.
All had been peaceful.

Until a rebellion of Druze tribes and Syrian nationalists rose up against French rule little more than a month ago. No one expected it. In fact, the French had been pulling out troops.

But now the rebellion was fighting against the French troops that were left. Jean-Michel shook his head again to clear the fog. Hadn't he heard screaming?

Turning to take in his surroundings, he realized that their ammunition convoy had been attacked as they'd approached the village. Some sort of blast must have rendered him unconscious, which accounted for the pain in his head. He wiped his eyes, hoping to clear them of the grit and smoke. Every muscle in his body protested as he pushed to all fours, and the ringing in his ears grew louder. Blinking against the bright light, he forced himself to focus. But sounds were indistinct—almost muted against the drumming and rushing of his own blood pumping as he pushed himself to stand and move.

Jean-Michel looked down at his torn uniform. There were splotches of blood here and there, but upon inspection he found it was nothing serious. Just small lacerations, no doubt from the explosion.

The explosion. What had caused it? Where was George? And Luc? The two younger men had become dear to him. As their commander, Jean-Michel had earned their respect. However, over time something more had developed—a deep, abiding friendship.

Rapid gunfire and explosions erupted around him. The ringing in his ears gradually subsided, but the pounding pain in his head increased. He staggered to the right, still trying to assess the situation. He was in command, but he couldn't even focus on what should be done.

Desperate screams brought his attention around. Flames en-

gulfed a building several hundred meters north. A bullet ripped past him, bringing Jean-Michel's attention back to his own precarious situation. He staggered toward the small structure that was a gathering place for the women of the area. The desperate cries and screams of those inside made his stomach roil.

Someone had chained the only door in and out. They were trapped!

Jean-Michel tried to pull away the heavy chains, but they had been secured with a lock. He struggled to think amidst the conflict and noise. He had to get help. He needed something to cut the chain. He started off across the compound toward the supply depot.

Just then another explosion sent him to his knees. Looking back, he saw that now the back of the building was on fire. This couldn't be happening. Not now. He'd spent a lot of time around the Syrian people. Earning their trust.

And for what?

He struggled once again to his feet and turned in a circle to survey the world around him. It was as if everyone had gone mad and time stood still. Were those French soldiers igniting other buildings around him? *His* soldiers? No. It couldn't be. Not when there were innocents inside.

Jean-Michel didn't understand what was happening and why they were fighting. So far, all he'd had to do was follow orders and pass them on to his soldiers. But as he watched the flames grow, he couldn't fathom who would order such outright evil.

A figure Jean-Michel recognized all too well strode around the building, a torch in his hand and a sneer on his face. Phillippe.

Phillippe hated the Syrian people. Hated being posted here. Hated being under Jean-Michel's command when he was fifteen years Jean-Michel's senior. The motivation behind the abhorrence was clear, but his actions were so barbaric Jean-Michel found it difficult to believe. What had made the man snap like this?

This new “war” obviously fueled the man’s hate. Phillippe lit another small building and moved on.

“*Non!!*” The guttural cry exploded from Jean-Michel’s lips amidst the raging sounds of war around him and he forced his legs to run faster. He had to free the women and children.

George and Luc emerged from a cloud of gunfire after his shout. Off to the west about a hundred meters, they looked toward his destination and came on the double. Whether they saw Phillippe or the innocent people inside the buildings that were burning, Jean-Michel wasn’t sure, but at least they would help stop the madness.

The heat from the fires intensified the heat of the desert and sweat poured from Jean-Michel’s body as he ran. There weren’t any orders to kill villagers and innocent people. The rebellion hadn’t even reached their area yet—at least not until their convoy was attacked. What had happened?

A small face appeared in the tiny window high up the building wall. Mouth open in cries. A small hand beat the glass pane. Someone had to be holding him up to gain that height. Their only hope of escape—a window they couldn’t reach.

The face was familiar—the same little boy who’d watched him try a magic trick and giggled when Jean-Michel failed.

They didn’t have much time left.

Oomph!

Jean-Michel’s right leg buckled underneath him and he crumpled into the sand as his body ignited in pain. Glancing down at his leg, he watched the bloodstain grow on his uniform. He’d never been shot before, and as the agony grew, he ground his teeth. He couldn’t think about his own pain right now.

But there was no cover. The rebels had him. Probably thought he *wanted* to see all those people burn to their deaths, since it was his own troops lighting the fires.

“Jean-Michel!” George’s voice cut through the gunfire. “*Ne bougez pas!*”

Don’t move? He didn’t think he could even if he tried. Jean-Michel attempted to wave him off—to convince them to stay put. He couldn’t risk anyone else’s lives. It was his own fault for taking off into the open. Maybe he could still crawl to the building. But how could he save those people?

Spots danced in his eyes. He shook his head.

Sound began to dim. He heard George’s voice again. Then Luc’s. But Jean-Michel’s gaze was fixed on the building.

A haze filled the outline of his sight as familiar faces entered his vision. George and Luc dragged him backward.

“*Non! Non!*” They were dragging him away from the building. Didn’t they hear him screaming? Didn’t they know about those people inside?

Jean-Michel squirmed in his buddies’ arms. “Help me save them! Please!”

“We’ll get them, but we can’t risk you being shot again. You’ve lost a lot of blood.” Luc’s calm voice did nothing but grate on Jean-Michel’s nerves.

“I don’t care about me”—a cough choked him—“save . . . *them!*”

Did they hear him? They were speaking to him, but the words made no sense.

Were his eyes open anymore? He commanded his eyelids to lift, but he couldn’t see anything. Only black.

Muffled sounds were the only evidence that he was still somewhat conscious. That and the throbbing pain.

A sudden jerk from side to side released his arms and he plummeted.

Where were George and Luc?

Maybe this was death. And he deserved it.

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SIX MONTHS LATER

FEBRUARY 25, 1926—NEW YORK

Katherine Harrison Demarchis paced the floor of Grandmother's formal sitting room. The older woman had once again taken to arranging her life—*without* consulting her. Not that she was doing a good job of it herself or even wanted the job.

Not anymore.

Grandmother was a dear and loved to keep Katherine on her toes—which used to make her smile. But now? Did she feel anything anymore?

It wasn't Grandmother's fault that Katherine didn't care a whit about her future. The careless thought made her wince. All the cynicism and negativity swirling in the dark fog around her had turned her into . . . what exactly? What had happened to the carefree, joyous girl of her youth? Always looking forward to the days ahead . . .

Now, all she wanted was to retreat to a quiet life of widowhood. Alone.

A knot formed in her stomach. Hard like stone and heavier than an anvil, as ugly words—*his* words—rushed in.

Destroyed by the harsh reality of a miserable and loveless

marriage, the days of dreams and happy endings were long gone. Katherine straightened her shoulders and stepped to the window to watch the busy, snow-filled street below. How long would it all haunt her? How long would his words continue to wound her? How long before the world realized that everything Randall Demarchis had said about her was true?

She was worthless. A poor excuse for womanhood. She didn't deserve to live.

The gauzy curtain fluttered in the crisp breeze from the slightly opened window and made her take a breath. The chilly air froze her lungs much like her heart. She wanted to matter . . . longed to, in fact, like she used to . . . before she married a monster.

"Katherine?" The sweet voice held just a hint of concern. "I thought you were going to join me in the library."

"I needed a bit of fresh air." That should appease the dear woman for the moment. Until she could rein her thoughts back in. Grandmother always insisted on having fresh air flowing throughout the house, no matter the temperature outside.

"We need to discuss our plans, dear." The scent of peppermint pierced the air.

Katherine didn't want the discussion, nor the plans. Yet how was she supposed to deny her last living relative—a woman who had become her lifeline over the past few years?

Randall had done all he could to isolate her from her family, but Grandmother would not be managed then, nor now. The determined woman had inserted herself into Katherine's married life, despite her husband's open protests. At one time, he'd threatened Grandmother, but she reminded him she was a powerful woman with friends in high places. If Randall wanted to continue climbing his political ladder, he would do best to humor her and allow for her visits. He conceded, but not without severe punishment meted out on Katherine. Of course, Katherine never revealed that to her grandmother.

When Randall Demarchis died suddenly, Grandmother was the one who'd picked up the pieces. She'd taken Katherine home with her after the funeral and wouldn't let her be alone during any of the night terrors she suffered. The same woman who'd dried her tears as a child now comforted her as an adult. And daily, the woman prodded her to step out of her dark shell and back into the light. Not that Grandmother had much luck, but God bless her for trying.

Katherine turned away from the window to look at her dear elder. "Grandmother, you know I am not interested in taking any trips—"

"You're not interested in much of anything these days." She pointed a knobby finger. "And don't take that irritated tone with me. It won't work, and you know it. One of these days, *my* Katherine will be free to come out again, and I'm looking forward to it." The finger dropped as the older woman squared her shoulders. "And this is not just *any* trip, my child. This is the last trip your dear Grandpapa wanted to take . . . he planned and planned, God rest his soul. You wouldn't deny me that, would you? The last trip *I* would like to take before I leave this earth?"

Katherine braced herself. The guilt trip wouldn't end there. The woman was well into her eighties, but she didn't look like it or act like it, for that matter. Only when she needed to use her advancing years to get what she wanted. "Grandmother, you are too stubborn to leave this earth one second before you choose to. I would imagine even God consults your calendar."

"Don't be blasphemous. Of course, God doesn't consult me, but we do discuss it." She winked and put on a sly grin.

"Be that as it may, I very much doubt that this will be the last trip you *want* to take, nor the last you will take." The woman constantly flitted to and fro between Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. "As to *your* Katherine being free . . . well, I'm

quite certain she doesn't exist anymore." The thought tore at her heart.

"It's been over a year since that"—Grandmother always refused to call Randall by his given name—"Senator Demarchis died. Time will heal the wounds. I'm confident of it. I know you don't wish to speak of him or your marriage, but I'm willing to listen if you need me."

"I know." But she couldn't. Wouldn't. Not ever.

Grandmother gave a slight nod and then turned to look at the fireplace. "It's been almost two years since Grandpapa went on to heaven. I've been planning this ever since my beloved passed, and I think I've waited quite patiently." She looked down at the watch hanging from her blouse. "You know, I may not have a lot of time left."

In earlier years, Katherine would have laughed at the swift change to a safer subject—not to mention the dramatic look on the older woman's face. But laughter didn't come easily anymore—it hadn't for a long time—and she really didn't want a scolding about respecting her elders. "I highly doubt that your time here will be so brief, Grandmother."

"Doubt all you want. I just wish you would agree so that we could start fresh. Wash you clean of that man once and for all. Stop allowing him to control you."

Katherine bristled. Did Randall still control her from the grave? She had often thought only death could release her. Her death. His. It never mattered which, so long as she no longer had to abide such a heinous creature.

Apparently, it wasn't that easy.

Randall Demarchis. He'd been her parents' choice. *Not* hers. And she'd never loved the man. But she'd resigned herself to the arrangement out of respect for her parents. At the time, she had little choice.

Her senator husband had been all manners and smooth-

talking politician until their wedding day. But as soon as they were alone that first night, his façade fell—and the beast behind the mask came out.

The horrors she faced during those few years of marriage were something she never spoke of—to anyone. But Grandmother had guessed, although never to the degree of severity. And on the evening she persuaded Katherine to be honest with her mother and father, they'd received the news that her parents were dead—killed in an automobile accident.

At that moment, Katherine knew all hope was lost. She was destined to her fate. And refused to ever speak of it again.

After the loss of her parents, Randall's cruelty only intensified. But around town they were the toast and envy of all. He was dashing and handsome and she was classically beautiful. His constituents and peers alike respected and even loved him. Randall was all charm and grace when he wanted to be.

It was all a game. A perverted and hideous game.

The charade continued for three long, miserable years until Randall drank himself into oblivion one night, slipped on the ice outside his club, and fell down the stairs. A broken neck made death instantaneous.

The nightmare was over. The monster was gone. And she didn't shed a tear.

Three years.

And it had changed everything.

Short for a marriage by most people's standards. But it felt like three hundred to her.

Every once in a while, she dreamed of happier times. Back when she *had* hopes and dreams. When she had been in love . . . a long time ago. But those were few and far between now. The reality of her marriage hammered the truth into her heart.

There was no hope of happily ever after.

“Katherine? Don't go into that dark place alone. You can tell

me the truth.” Grandmother tilted her head in a way that said she knew exactly where Katherine’s thoughts had taken her. But the conversation Grandmother wanted to have wouldn’t happen. Couldn’t happen.

“Katherine . . . dear?” The expression on Grandmother’s face changed to worry.

If she didn’t steer the conversation back, she’d distress the poor woman, and Grandmother had already been through too much. She knew too much. Even if it was only a fraction—Katherine had to spare her beloved grandparent.

Wherever they traveled, the bleak cloud that was Katherine’s existence would follow. It was her fate. Randall had seen to that. But she could spare her grandmother and give her a little peace. “All right, all right. Wherever you want to go. I’ll go along. As long as I don’t have to dress in any of those crazy new designs that just keep getting shorter.” She raised an eyebrow. “And don’t think I didn’t hear you speaking to your dressmaker about a new wardrobe for me. If I told you the reputation of the girls who don such apparel, you would keel over here and now.”

“Agreed. No short dresses.” Grandmother’s eyes twinkled. “It’s nice to hear some spunk back in your voice.”

Katherine shook her head. She didn’t have the will to argue. Spunk or no spunk, apparently, she was about to travel. “So where are we going?”

“Alaska, my dear.” The older woman grinned like the cat that swallowed the canary. “We’re going to Alaska.”

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MARCH 5—THE CURRY HOTEL, CURRY, ALASKA

Twenty-year-old Thomas Smith lifted the slop bucket over his head as he navigated his way through the chickens and into the pigpen.

Today, he wouldn't trip. Nor would he spill anything on his clean apron.

And then he would be able to say that he had made it a whole one hundred days without being clumsy. Mrs. Johnson—the head cook at the Curry Hotel—had promised him a cake, and the cook's chief assistant, Cassidy, had promised him that all the kitchen girls and maids would line up and kiss him on the cheek if he made it.

He didn't need any more motivation than that.

But even more exciting was that he'd completed a course with Cassidy's father, Mr. John Ivanoff, and her husband, Mr. Allan Brennan—the two expert wilderness and exploration guides—and they would be presenting him with a certificate of achievement at dinner tonight.

Could the day get any better?

Bessie—the hotel's old sow—made a charge for him inside the pen. With a quick step to the right, Thomas avoided the grumpy pig's first run, but she made another effort with her hind end.

Before he knew it, he was slipping and sliding in the mud as Bessie made another run for him.

Thomas threw the bucket over his head and reached for the fence post to keep from falling. Today of all days. The old girl just had to take it out on him *today*.

Scrambling over the fence, Thomas heard whistles and applause. Great. They were probably all going to laugh at clumsy ol' Thomas.

But as his feet hit the ground and he took stock of his clothing, he was amazed. Not a single smudge. Except for the mud on his shoes. And to make everything even better, the slop bucket had landed squarely in the feed trough and the pigs were enjoying their breakfast.

As the whistles and applause continued, Thomas clapped his hands together and took a bow.

Allan Brennan walked over to him and patted him on the back. “That’s what I call thinking on your feet, Thomas. Good job!” He winked at Thomas and walked away.

The praise made him want to puff out his chest. Even though Allan had won Cassidy’s heart when Thomas fancied himself in love with her too, the older man had earned his utmost respect. Especially when he and Cassidy came to Thomas a couple years earlier with an offer to help him expand his education.

Growing up in an orphanage until he was fourteen, Thomas had only received a cursory education. The strict religious leaders of the orphanage saw little purpose in teaching the boys anything but physical labor and the restrictions of an angry, harsh, and judging God. The Brennans helped him not only to see God in a different light, but they had made it their goal to give Thomas an education.

Amazingly enough Thomas proved to be a very quick learner. So quick, in fact, that one year later he was able to take the entrance exam for the new college in Fairbanks. The Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines.

Education had changed his life. He fit in a semester here and there around the busiest seasons of the Curry, but next fall he would attend for the entire fall and spring semesters. Allan and Cassidy offered to pay his tuition and transportation to school. In turn, Thomas offered and pledged to work as a guide for the Curry for the foreseeable future. He also hoped to be able to assist the Brennans with their Seattle-based company by learning as much as he could and offering new ideas for mountaineering equipment they could sell. Especially to all the miners headed to Alaska.

He smiled at the retreating figure of Allan Brennan. The man was his hero, and one day, Thomas hoped to be like Allan. God-fearing, hardworking, and well respected.

Now, if he could just make it until dinner without mishap . . .

Thankfully, there were fewer guests to contend with this time of the year. For Thomas that meant he didn't do so much to help with hikes and camping trips as much as he did upkeep and repairing. But it didn't matter. He loved his work. Loved school too. His studies had opened his eyes to a better understanding of the Alaskan wilderness.

The afternoon passed quickly in his various labors. A glance at his watch made him realize it was, in fact, dinnertime. Heading toward his reward, he smiled.

The downstairs dining room teemed with noise and activity. Happy chatter of the day between all the hotel workers, clanking of silverware on plates, and above all that, Mrs. Johnson's orders. That woman never ran out of steam.

Or orders.

She wasn't a big woman, but she was stout and fierce. He'd heard it said the widow was in her forties, but the years had been hard and she looked older to him. Her reddish-brown hair was equally interspersed with gray, and the lines around her mouth suggested she'd done more frowning than smiling. But she was a fair person and a good judge of character. She could bark out orders like a sergeant in the army, but she would work alongside you with tireless effort.

Thomas admitted he'd come to care about the bossy chef. About all of the staff at the Curry. They were the most important people in his life.

Something like a big family. And he loved it.

Over the years, he'd worked hard. Harder than he ever thought possible. Made more mistakes than he'd ever want to admit, but it had all been worth it. As he looked around the huge table full of staff and workers, Thomas smiled. They weren't like a family—they *were* his family.

Once the needs of the guests were met, the Curry Hotel staff sat down to their own meal in the downstairs dining room. This

was the routine they'd followed ever since the place opened in 1923. They took advantage of the leftover food, which was always of the highest quality, and shared their thoughts about the events and happenings of the hotel. Thomas thought it the perfect way to end the day.

The clinking of a glass quieted most everyone and Mr. John Ivanoff scooted his chair back, stood, and cleared his throat. "Everyone, if I could have your attention, please."

Footsteps sounded down the hall and Mr. Bradley—the hotel manager—appeared from the doorway.

Everyone stood.

"Please, be seated." Their manager motioned with his hands. "Well now." He looked straight at Thomas.

Thomas swallowed. A little louder than he intended.

"Dinner upstairs was exceptional, everyone. Excellent job as usual. Our patrons are very happy." Mr. Bradley coughed and then continued. "Mr. Ivanoff and Mr. Brennan have informed me that we have something to celebrate this evening."

Several of the younger staff whispered to each other.

"I'd like to ask a special staff member to come forward." The manager's face was serious and gave nothing away.

More whispers and giggles around the table as most everyone sat up a little straighter.

"Thomas"—he held out a hand—"would you join me up here, please?"

A few gasps were heard around the table and then complete silence.

Thomas took a deep breath and scooted his chair back. It screeched on the hard floor. But he stood up and straightened his shoulders as he walked toward Mr. Bradley.

The manager held his hand out still.

Thomas took it and grasped it.

"As you all probably know, Thomas has been with us for

three years now. Since the beginning of the hotel. And even though we've all had challenges to schedules and routines here at the Curry, I haven't seen anyone work harder or longer under sometimes the worst of circumstances."

Gentle applause filled the room.

Mr. Bradley held up his other hand until it was quiet. "On top of his regular duties, Thomas has sought education to further himself and learn a new trade. Not only has he achieved that goal, but he has done it with flying colors and all while fitting in time in Fairbanks to attend college."

More applause.

John and Allan stood as well. Holding out a plaque, Allan handed it to Thomas.

John spoke. "This is your certificate of achievement, Thomas. You've earned it and will one day be the best guide out there—I'm sure of it."

Cassidy had sneaked up behind Mr. Bradley at some point and handed the manager another plaque as she winked at Thomas. The manager grinned. "And this award is for one hundred days—"

Cheers and clapping, hooting and hollering drowned out anything else the man might have said.

Thomas gladly took the plaque and raised it over his head as he spotted Mrs. Johnson carrying a massive cake into the workers' dining hall. His mouth watered. This was for *him*. Wow.

John and Allan crouched and each grabbed one of Thomas's legs and lifted him above their shoulders. John's baritone belted out, "For he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good fellow . . ."

As Thomas looked out across the dining room to all the smiling faces, he couldn't help but be proud.

This was his family.

And he didn't want to be anywhere else.