

THE HEART  
*of* ALASKA  
Book Three

# UNDER THE MIDNIGHT SUN

TRACIE PETERSON  
.....  
AND KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE



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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearance 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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18 19 20 21 22 23 24      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is lovingly dedicated to my  
beautiful friend Jackie Hale.

God blessed me immeasurably when He brought you to me.  
You are one of a kind.

Your honesty, encouragement, love, and—let’s be  
honest—amazing wit and sarcasm have been a joy to  
me. I love how you call me your twin (even though you’re  
younger, cuter, taller, and—ahem—thinner) and how it  
doesn’t take anything for us to laugh or cry together.  
You are a gift.

Every once in a while, God brings some-  
one special into our lives . . .  
and it’s hard to say good-bye. Wow. Is it ever.  
Even though the physical distance between us may be much  
greater, our hearts will always be connected. Thank God  
for technology that helps make the world so much smaller.

You are amazing and loved.  
Don’t forget that. Our journey has just begun.  
I love you dearly.

And to Tayler . . . the *real* Tayler Hale.  
I love you more than words can say. Keep your focus on  
the Lord, and let your beautiful light shine for *Him*.  
Your adopted mom loves you to the moon and back.

—Kimberley

Jackie and Tayler, I have been so honored to become friends  
with you beautiful ladies. I pray God’s blessings on you  
and your family. Thank you for letting me call you *friend*.

—Tracie

## A Note from the Authors

**W**e are so excited to have you journey with us once again for the conclusion to *THE HEART OF ALASKA* series.

The Curry Hotel has become very special to us, and it has been such a joy to hear how much you love it as well. The characters will live on in our hearts for decades to come, even though the series has come to an end. We appreciate the letters you've sent mentioning your trips on the Alaskan Railroad and your brief sightings of where Curry once stood. It is always such a delight to know that the stories interested you enough to further explore one of our finest states. We hope you'll continue to enjoy the richness that Alaska offers.

We hope too that the stories will continue to encourage you spiritually. The stories we've heard from you—our readers—have been so uplifting. We love that the gift of story has been used in your hearts and minds for God's glory: how something one of the characters went through touched your life, or how a particular Scripture drew you closer to God. Writing, for both of us, is a ministry to share the Gospel of Jesus and biblical

application. When you send us your letters and emails, they bless us. Thank you.

While we hate to say good-bye to Curry, there's one last story to tell.

Thomas.

Out of all the fun characters, we've heard you cheering him on the most. And we love it.

So it's a privilege to give you *Under the Midnight Sun*.

Kimberley and Tracie

# Prologue

FRIDAY, MAY 30, 1919—ESTES PARK, COLORADO

White velvet and blue satin. That's what the snow on the mountains and the brilliant blue of the cloudless sky made thirteen-year-old Tayler Hale think of as she lay on her back on the ridge above their campsite.

Squinting her eyes at the sky, she imagined she was floating in a giant satiny blue bubble . . . high above the rocky peaks that seemed blanketed in white velvet. The thought made her smile. What she wouldn't give to be able to fly above it all. Watch all the activity in the wild from her bubble, write in her journals about it, and draw the pictures she captured in her mind. Just like the woman she so admired, Lady Isabella Bird.

Lady Bird had come to America and traveled all over these very mountains—alone. She wrote in great detail about her adventures in one of Tayler's favorite books, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*. Tayler loved every page of it. Her copy was worn from the many times she'd read the account and dreamt of her own future. Isabella Bird's descriptions of the

Estes Park area had given flight to Tayler's desires to become an explorer just like the refined Englishwoman.

Oh, to be as free as Lady Bird. And to be admired for her spirit and knowledge when she'd become the first woman to be allowed in the Royal Geographic Society. She had traveled the world, lending a hand wherever she went, even helping to found a hospital in India. Tayler couldn't have admired her more. Lady Isabella Bird had made a difference, and Tayler wanted to do the same.

As she looked at the sky and mountain peaks surrounding her, she could almost imagine herself an adult, riding on horseback over the snow-covered elevation on her way to rescue some campers who'd lost their way. It sent a little thrill through her. They'd talk about her as a great woman explorer, an expert on the plants and wildlife. People would flock to hear her lectures on survival in the wilderness.

Her smile grew into a giggle. Tayler's imagination could take her to far-off places with amazing adventures, and surely her mother would scold her for such thoughts. But she couldn't help it. One day, Mother would understand.

Squinting at the height of the sun in the sky, she realized the time. Her dreams of adventure were inspiring, but none of them beat the real-life adventures she had with her brother, Joshua, and his best friend, Emerson.

They'd had camping and mountaineering trips together with her father for as long as she could remember. It was a mystery why Mother allowed her to go for so long—despite all her pushing for Tayler to “be a lady”—but Dad had a way of convincing Henrietta Hale.

Yet it was all coming to an end.

Reality set back in, and Tayler felt her face scrunch into a frown.

Joshua and Emerson would soon be heading back east to their prep school. The last year of their college preparatory academy was intense and year-round. After that, they'd be headed to Harvard. Would this be their last adventure together? Ever?

She swallowed the question and tried to blink away the tears that threatened every time the thought invaded. A gust of wind blew over her like a whispered answer. Too bad she didn't understand it. If only God would send her *real* answers on the wind.

A rustle sounded behind her and then something dark and scratchy landed on her face.

"Boo!" Joshua's voice. The scoundrel. Always such a prankster.

Taylor swiped at the wool blanket he'd thrown over her but stayed calm and still in her position. "Just remember *who* squeals like a girl when they see a spider and which one of us has *no* trouble catching aforementioned eight-legged critters *and* has access to your bedroll."

"You wouldn't." His upside-down face held a lopsided grin as he bent over her.

She raised her eyebrows. "Oh, wouldn't I?"

He shook his head and plopped himself onto the grass beside her. "You're not playing fair."

"I know." Allowing a smug smile to lift her lips, she sat up. "But you're older, remember? You *taught* me to not play fair. So it's your fault." She tossed the blanket in his direction.

His laugh filled the air, and he threw the blanket back at her. "Yes, let's remember who *is* older, young lady."

She made a face at him and rolled her eyes. "But that doesn't mean wiser . . . *or* more mature. You know, one of these days, you're going to have to grow up and take on responsibility instead of joking around." Lowering her brows, she attempted to look serious. She adored Joshua—he was the best brother

in the whole world—and the thought of him truly *growing up* made her sad. But she couldn't allow her feelings to show.

"I'm hurt. I thought you loved my jokes." He put a hand to his chest and played the dramatic sad fellow.

With her right hand, she shoved at his shoulder and laughed. If only these days could go on forever. She often heard other girls her age tell of how much they despised their brothers, but from her earliest memories she'd adored Joshua. He was clever and witty and so wonderfully observant. He had taught her to see the world with different eyes.

"Hey, Emerson and I are going down to the creek to get cleaned up." And just like that he slammed the door on her reverie. "Just wanted to give you some warning. Dad is working on the fish we caught, so he sent me to tell you that he wants your help."

"All right. Thanks." Why didn't he seem fazed by all the change like she was?

"We'll be back soon." He tapped her nose with his finger and jumped back to his feet. "Don't burn any of *my* fish. But you can burn Emerson's."

She stuck out her tongue and then smiled. Leaning back to gaze at the sky again, she sighed. It wasn't fair. Rolling over onto her stomach, she huffed and then propped herself up on her elbows and peeked over the edge of the ridge to the crystal lake below her in the valley. They were all growing up whether they liked it or not. The boys were sixteen now, and their lives were practically mapped out for them—including the much-expected Harvard educations. If only she were sixteen too . . .

Taylor plopped her chin down on her hands and kicked her feet in the air. Mother would definitely disapprove of such unladylike behavior, but *she* wasn't here on this trip. In fact, she never came, because camping was a bit too primitive for her.

And Tayler had heard the hushed conversations between her parents. Mother thought Tayler was getting entirely too old to be traipsing off into the woods and hiking up mountains. In fact, Mother thought her daughter should focus on etiquette and manners, dinner parties and the arts.

But Tayler wanted to go to college. She wanted to study plants and animals and mountains and . . . well . . . everything outdoors. She wanted to travel and see the world for herself, and maybe . . . just maybe even write about it like Lady Bird.

If Mother knew Tayler's real plan, she'd probably lock her daughter up for a good long while.

Tayler giggled and stood, brushing at her skirt. Her mother wasn't *that* bad. But it was scary enough to think of telling her the truth. Dad had an inkling of Tayler's desires, but he would never go against his wife. Never. Men might run the rest of the world, but Tayler's mother ran the Hale family corner of it.

Might as well face it. She was stuck. At least for now. She headed over to the camp to help her dad cook the fish. There would be plenty of time later to talk with her parents about her future. No need to worry them. Once Joshua was away at Harvard, maybe she would venture the subject with Dad.

But that would mean Joshua would be gone. Permanently. Emerson too. And that thought was almost as horrific as telling Mother. A shiver raced up her spine. If only she could go with them. But she wasn't a boy. A fact that had felt like a thorn in her side most of her life. Now that she was getting older, it seemed even more divisive. The fairer sex were rarely allowed into the same circles as men, even though things were changing. Tayler had pointed out the exploits and world travels of women like Lady Bird and the famous journalist Nellie Bly, only to have her mother threaten to limit her access to reading materials.

With a glance over her shoulder to the white-covered peaks,

she vowed to capture this scene with her watercolors later. Perhaps when the sun streaked its last rays across the sky in brilliant color.

The thought made her smile. There was at least one thing she liked to do that Mother approved of—paint.

“What’s brought that lovely smile to your face, Tayler?” Dad looked back down as he dredged fish fillets in his special concoction of flour, cornmeal, and spices.

“Just thinking about painting the sunset later.” Tying her hair back with a ribbon, Tayler walked over to the bowl they used as a washbasin. “After dinner, I think I’ll attempt to capture it for Mother.”

Dad gave her a wide grin, his hands covered in white, sticky-looking globs of breading as he worked with the last few fillets. “She’ll love that. There’s nothing quite like a Colorado sunset over the mountains.” He held up his hands and frowned. “And nothing quite like the mess I’ve made here.”

Tayler shook her head and brought him a towel. She couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled up. “You say that every time, Dad, and every time you manage to make an even bigger mess.”

“But it will taste good.” He leaned in with his hands raised high and kissed her on the cheek. “You start frying them, and I’ll get this cleaned up.”

Tying an apron around her waist, Tayler noticed that he already had the cast-iron skillet heating over the fire. She plopped a heaping spoonful of lard into the skillet and watched it melt, then added another. As it began to bubble and sizzle around the edges, she brought the plate of fish over. Whistling a tune she’d heard from the radio, she began to fry the fish, a few fillets at a time, and then watched them turn a beautiful golden brown.

Emerson Pruitt strode up the hill toward her, his dark, curly

hair wet from the stream. Seeing the towel hung over his shoulder and his charming smile aimed at her, Tayler felt her stomach do a little flip.

She'd hung around Emerson and Joshua since she could walk. The boys had been best friends their whole lives. But it had been only recently that Emerson paid Tayler just a touch more attention than he used to. With compliments and special smiles just for her—smiles that were different from the ones he used to give—she thought their parents' wish to see the two families joined might come to fruition one day.

While boys had never before held much interest to her romantically, in the last few months Tayler had begun to think that maybe marrying one day wouldn't be so bad. Emerson liked a good adventure, and it was possible he wouldn't mind the fact that his wife did as well.

"Hey, Tayler, that sure smells good." Emerson gave her a wink as he passed by.

"Well, I hope you're hungry. I burned a few of them just for you."

Dad laughed in the background as splashes of water sounded behind her. "Actually, I don't think the boys should be allowed to eat any of the fish until they help me clean up the mess."

Tayler joined in on the laughter. "I agree. I think they should have to wash *all* the dishes. Even after supper."

Joshua ran up at that moment, his hair dripping into his eyes. "Come on, Pop, you wouldn't do that to two starving young men headed to Harvard, would ya?"

"You bet I would." Dad wiggled his eyebrows at Tayler and then looked back to the boys with a mischievous grin. "Now get over there and scrub while Emerson dries. I'll help Tayler with the rest of supper."

With moans and dramatics from the boys spurring on the

laughter, Tayler finished cooking the fish while Dad pan-fried potatoes he'd cut up into chunks.

Dinner around the fire was another jovial affair, just like everything seemed to be up in the mountains on their camping expeditions. Nothing could be better—at least in Tayler's mind. But as the boys talked about their dreams and how Harvard was a year away for them both, her heart sank. Melancholy washed over her, and the urge to cry hit her like a ton of bricks.

Not one to normally give in to girlish emotions, she stood abruptly. "If you'll excuse me, I'm off to paint the sunset."

The boys seemed to ignore her—they were so caught up in telling a story from prep school—but Dad at least nodded at her as he listened to the boys' story. A second later, he held up a hand to them and turned to Tayler. "Don't forget a rifle, just in case."

"Yes, sir." Tayler felt wounded. The boys didn't even seem to care that she was leaving. They just kept on with their stories. Their banter continued as she grabbed her easel and supplies. Tears pricked her eyes. She wasn't one of them. When they thought of their futures, they probably didn't think of continuing these types of adventures with *her*. Not like she did. The truth hurt more than she wanted to admit. Childish dreams couldn't guide her any longer. What did she want?

Exasperation filled her entire being. Stupid girl tears. She didn't have time for this.

But the entire trek back up the ridge her thoughts pressed on her all the more. Tears escaped and spilled down her cheeks. The boys were fine without her. But in contrast, she wasn't fine without them. They would leave again, and eventually, they'd go far away to college and maybe not even come back to Denver at all. The thought depressed her as she went to the stream to fill her jar with water and then set up the easel.

Joshua and Emerson had each other as friends. Always together. Always backing the other up with support and slaps on the back.

Whom did *she* have?

Wiping her tears, she finished getting her supplies ready and waited for the sun's show to begin. She had plenty of time to wallow in the boys' leaving. She needed to enjoy the little time she had left with them on this trip. And she couldn't allow them to see her crying. Not ever. She'd never hear the end of it. Then they wouldn't want to bring a girl along anymore. And she desperately wanted to be included . . . as long as possible.

And once they were gone? She'd just have to follow in Lady Bird's footsteps and do it all on her own.

Only, the thought of having adventures alone wasn't nearly as appealing.

Dipping her brush in the water, she looked to the sky above and shook off the dreary thoughts.

Capture the picture. That's what she needed to focus on. The deep pinks and oranges that changed the thin, wispy clouds from plain white to glowing masterpieces. The mountain carving a shadow below it as it blocked the light. This would be a beautiful painting, if she could simply get it on the canvas.

Taylor pushed all depressing thoughts aside and poured herself into the work before her. Sometimes growing up was painful. While she couldn't wait to be an adult, she missed the carefree life of her childhood. Besides, adulthood seemed to bring too many . . . responsibilities. Too many emotions and good-byes. And a great many rules and restrictions.

With a sigh, she did her best to remove the clutter of her mind and focus on the colors. A dark lavender added just the right touch to capture the color of the mountains in the setting sun's light.

Laughter floated up to her from their camp below. Well, at least the guys were having fun. Did they miss her yet?

Words escaped her lips, even though there wasn't anyone to answer but the sky and herself. "Tayler, you know full well it's best to get your mind off that." With a huff, she blew a stray hair off her forehead. Even with the stern talking-to, her mind still went back to Joshua and Emerson. What would she do without them?

A rustling in the grass to her left made her pause with her brush in midair.

Whatever it was, it had to be small. The sound quieted and Tayler counted slowly to twenty. Nothing. Probably just a squirrel. Best to finish the painting while she still had light.

Fully immersed in her work, she furiously set about getting the last of it done. Mother would love to have a new piece of art to hang. At least her daughter could do *something* feminine.

Satisfied with the last streaks of pink, Tayler tapped her chin with the handle of the brush and stepped back a foot. The sun would completely set soon, and she'd do well to get back down the ridge before it was dark.

She rinsed her brush and wiped it on the small towel she kept hung on the portable easel. As she stepped toward her bag, a small ball of black fur rambled over to it.

She gasped.

A bear cub.

Intent on her canvas bag.

With another intake of breath, she realized her mistake. Like an idiot, she'd left it on the ground a good ten feet away. And if that weren't enough . . . she'd left cookies in there.

No wonder the bear cub was after it.

Tayler knew better. She really did. But this time, she'd been engrossed in her melancholy thoughts, and she'd made a mistake

that might well cost her more than simple embarrassment. Not only had she *not* hung her bag—as she normally did—but she forgot the rifle. She'd never want to kill a baby animal, but she could have used something to scare it off. Because most certainly, there was a mama bear around here somewhere.

Maybe the cub didn't see her. Tayler moved and made some noise so the baby might get scared and leave.

But no. The stubborn little thing glanced at her and stuck its nose back into her bag.

“Shoo. Go on, now. We do *not* want a visit from your mother, do we?” Tayler waved her hands at it and inched toward her bag. The bear made a cute little growling noise and then began munching.

“Great. You found my cookies. Just what I needed. Bear slobber inside my bag.” She stepped closer and raised her voice a bit. “Shoo. Go on.”

But the bear had its head buried all the way inside the bag now. Maybe it was best to just go. Leave now before Mama showed up. Tayler backed away and then grabbed the painting and her easel in one swift move.

As she turned to head back down the ridge, an all-too-familiar sound made her stop in her tracks. Deep huffs, followed by clacking of teeth.

The mama had found her cub. And she wasn't happy.

Tayler turned her head to see but kept as still as possible. She knew she couldn't outrun it—and shouldn't try—but she also couldn't appear as a threat. Oh, bother, why had she stopped for the painting and easel? As she turned around to see what the bear would do, she held her breath.

The mama bear ambled over to her cub and gave it a sound thump on its backside. The little guy pulled his head out of the bag and made some cute—almost purring-like—noises.

Another few large breaths and snorts from the mama as she stared Tayler down.

Then she moved in front of the baby bear and closer to Tayler—making it clear she was protecting her cub. She clacked her teeth again.

Tayler slowly set down the easel and painting, hoping she would look less threatening to the animal. She backed up two steps with her hands out.

Three more steps. *Oh, Lord, please forgive my stupidity.*

Two more steps. But something rustled behind her.

At the sound, mama bear charged toward Tayler. Before she could even think of what to do, Tayler screamed.

A shot rang out and Tayler covered her mouth. The mama bear snorted in her direction and then swatted her little cub, and they took off at a fast pace away from where Tayler stood.

“Are you all right?” Emerson’s voice was beside her.

Tayler watched the bear with her hand over her mouth. Shaking her head, she felt the tears again. How could she have been so reckless?

“Emerson!” Tayler heard her father yell.

“Everything’s fine,” Emerson called down to camp. “I just encouraged a mother bear to seek another location.” Tayler heard her father’s laugh, and it only served to make her cry all the more.

Emerson moved closer, set the rifle down, and looked her over. “Are you hurt?”

Without a second thought, she threw herself into Emerson’s arms and sobbed up against him. “No. Yes. . . . I don’t know.”

His chuckle reverberated through his chest.

Tayler pulled back and swiped at her cheeks with the backs of her hands. “It’s not funny, Emerson, and you know it.”

“Oh, Tayler. I’m not laughing at you. I promise.” He reached

for her and put his hands on her elbows. “I guess I’m just surprised to see you crying. You’ve always been so . . . fearless. We’ve seen plenty of bears before.” He pulled her close and ducked his head as if daring her to meet his gaze, which made her insides do a little flip.

She’d never been held by a boy before . . . well, other than her father or her brother. “It’s not about the bear. Well, okay, maybe it was a little about the bear . . . but now I know it was you and your scent coming that made her charge. I should be upset with *you!*” She smacked him in the chest and pulled away, the tears streaming down her cheeks in great big drops as her heart beat inside her rib cage. What a great explorer she was . . . screaming at the first sign of trouble. Embarrassment, anger, and grief all battled for center stage in her mind.

“Hey, I was just bringing you the rifle because your dad was worried.” Emerson held his hands out as though surrendering. “Come on, what’s wrong? You can talk to me. We’ve been friends forever.”

Before she could contain it, her words tumbled out. “Don’t you get it? The years of our camping and mountaineering trips like this are over! You and Josh have all your plans and success waiting for you, and I’m going to be left behind. For more etiquette lessons and finishing school and social gatherings. And that’s not who I want to be!” She lifted her hands in disgust. “I hate it. I hate that you both are going away. And the future will be different. You have no idea how tough it is being a girl.” Tears dripped from her chin, and she gave a huff of exasperation.

“Ah, Tayler Grace . . . you know it’s not going to be forever.”

“But what if you never come back?”

“Why wouldn’t I come back? My home and my family are in Denver. And so are you. . . .”

“Me?” Her voice squeaked on the word.

Emerson raked a hand through his curly hair. “I thought you knew that I was sweet on you.” He licked his lips. “I was kinda hoping you would promise to wait for me.”

Blinking rapidly, Tayler wasn’t sure what to think. Wait for him? As in—being in love and waiting for him to finish school so they could get married—*wait* for him? “I’m not sure I know what you . . . mean?” Her voice squeaked again, making her feel like a small child.

“Come on, Tayler. I know you’re quite grown up now. Don’t you know that I think you’re the one for me? I mean, even our parents know it. They’ve been planning this for years.”

She raised her eyebrows. “But what about all the girls you were talking about with Josh? The ones who go to the girls’ school across the way?”

He blushed. “Aw, you know how guys talk. It’s all just talk. You must know that I’m your prince. . . .” He moved closer and closer.

A light laugh escaped. “Well, you did scare the bear off, *after* you made it charge at me.”

“Whadaya say, then? Will you wait for me and be my princess forever and ever?” He bowed before her in a sweeping and dramatic gesture. Then his look turned serious, and he stepped even closer. His shoes touched hers, and a tiny thrill shot through Tayler.

“Yes.” She felt the heat creep up her neck. Emerson’s attention *had* been real. He wanted to marry her!

“Promise?” Emerson reached for her hands.

“I promise.” Tayler shivered as his nearness took her breath away.

He leaned in and kissed her on the lips, shocking her into silence. It was only a peck, but still . . . Tayler had never been

kissed before. Her eyebrows shot up and gone were any thoughts of tears.

Emerson released her and winked, his fun-loving, boyish expression back in place. “That’s my girl. Now, come on. I’ll get your bag and you collect your painting.” He left her side and moved to where the bears had been only moments earlier.

She put a few fingers to her lips and shivered. Was this what it felt like to be in love?

•••••

SUNDAY, JUNE 1, 1919—

TURNAGAIN ARM, ALASKA TERRITORY

Kicking a rock along the railroad tracks with his hole-riddled boot, thirteen-year-old Thomas Smith slung his pack over his shoulder. Everything he owned was wrapped up in the tattered blanket he’d tied in a knot. But that was all right. He didn’t need a lot.

When winter came back with a vengeance—as it was prone to do in Alaska—he’d have to find a coat and a better blanket.

But he couldn’t think about that now.

Food and work were bigger needs. He was on his own. Not by choice, but it had only been a matter of time before the missionaries kicked him out of their makeshift orphanage. Just like all the boys who were old enough to work and too big to feed and clothe anymore.

The tracks stretched in front of him like a blank slate. What would his future hold? While he’d like to be confident and say he was a man and could take care of himself, there was a small part of him that still longed for a family. He’d never had one—at least not that he could remember.

The ground vibrated and Thomas looked behind him.

A short train with a cloud of smoke above its stack headed toward him.

Thomas backed away from the tracks and adjusted his pack. Maybe they would throw some food leftovers at him like the train yesterday. It hadn't been good, but at least it had been food, and his stomach was raw again today. Life as an orphan had taught him not to be choosy.

As he waited for the train to pass, he forced himself not to think about food. Wouldn't be a good idea to get his hopes up. He turned his head to watch, though. Just in case they threw something out for him.

But instead of passing him up, the train began to slow. Thomas's stomach twisted. He couldn't be in trouble . . . could he? Taking a deep breath, he faced forward and kept walking.

"Hey!" a deep voice shouted over the brakes of the train.

Thomas turned. Lifted a weak smile and waved.

A wiry man waved him forward from the railing. "Where're you headed, kid?"

Thomas shrugged.

The man smiled, which made him seem kind, but that impression could be wrong. "You all by yourself?"

This made Thomas a bit nervous. What would they do to him if he was? But then again, maybe the man could help him find a job. Honesty seemed to be the way to go. "Yes, sir."

With a nod, the man hopped down from the train. "Were you the one we saw yesterday on these same tracks?"

The question made him swallow. "Yes, sir. Should I not be walking here? I don't want to cause any trouble. I'm looking for work."

Sighing, the man looked off toward the mountains and then back to Thomas. With his hands on his hips, the man looked down at Thomas's shoes. "I might be able to help with that, but you have to let me know the truth first."

“The truth about what, sir?”

“Where you came from. Did you run away from home?”

“No, sir.”

“Where’s your family?”

“I ain’t got none, sir.” Heat filled Thomas’s cheeks.

“Not anyone?”

“No, sir. I’m an orphan.”

The man’s brow furrowed—his smile gone. “Did you run off from an orphanage?”

“No, sir. I got too big to clothe and feed, sir. So I’m on my own now.” Hoping his words sounded intelligent enough, he lifted his shoulders. He didn’t have a great education, but at least the missionaries had drilled into him that he had to have manners. Respect should go a long ways, shouldn’t it? Tears threatened at the corners of his eyes as exhaustion and hunger warred for his attention and his hope drained. “I’d best be on my way. Like I said, I’m just looking for work.”

“Hold on.” The man held up a hand. “What’s your name?”

“Thomas Smith, sir.”

“That’s a fine name.” He rubbed his chin. “Ya know, I’ve been looking for someone to help me out. It’s a hard job, working on the railroad. Probably just have to run back and forth and fetch stuff at first until we put some meat on those bones of yours, but then you could work your way in other jobs.”

The flame of hope in Thomas’s heart grew into a blaze. A job. An actual job! All he could manage was a nod as the man kept talking.

Holding out his hand, the man gave him another broad smile.

“Name’s Joseph Carter.”

“Nice to meet you.” Thomas shook his hand.

Joseph put his hands back on his hips. “First thing, we probably ought to get you some food. Then some decent shoes.” He

tilted his head toward the train. “Better get moving. There’s lots of daylight left in the day to get things done.”

Thomas’s heart picked up in rhythm. “Yes, sir.” He climbed up behind Joseph and grinned. As the train began to move again, he watched the terrain as it floated by. Maybe he’d be okay after all.

A bell clanging in the distance brought Thomas awake. Last night was the first night in years he’d slept through without being woken up by a growling stomach. Jumping up from his bedroll, he ran his hands through his shaggy hair and then put his cap back on. He straightened his bedroll and headed to the privy. No matter what, he wanted to make a really good impression on Joseph’s boss. No way he wanted to give the hardened man an excuse to dismiss him—especially not after everything Joseph had done for him. Looking down at the new boots on his feet, Thomas smiled. It was the first time he’d had a new pair of shoes. Ever.

Breakfast passed in a flurry, but Thomas didn’t have any problem eating fast. Growing up in the orphanage, he learned he’d better eat as quick as he could, or he might not eat at all.

Joseph took him to his designated job site and went over all the rules of the camp. After he’d explained his expectations, he clapped Thomas on the back and sent him running for water for the workers.

It was an easy trek to the stream, but once he loaded the filled buckets up on the yoke, Thomas realized that they weighed almost as much as he did. The path back to the railroad camp was uphill, and the struggle to carry the load without spilling water was an intense challenge.

Thomas bit his lip and kept trudging ahead. He could do this. Just needed to build up his strength. For the first time in

his young life, he had a place to sleep, a job, and a full belly. There was no way he'd give that up.

As he reached the edge of the camp, he stopped to catch his breath. The mountains before him were still covered in snow, the air clean and crisp. Alaska was home to him. He'd never been anywhere else and had no desire to be. Maybe he'd be able to work for the railroad for a long time. Wouldn't that be grand? Especially if he drove one of the trains one day. He'd have a family with the railroad.

A smile cracked his lips as he moved forward again. The men wouldn't take to waiting too long for water.

The clanging of sledges against the rails rang out in steady rhythm. The men slinging them had shoulders and arms that looked like they were carved out of steel themselves. Thomas glanced down at his skinny arms. Definitely needed some more meat on his bones. Just like Joseph said.

He neared the break area and tripped over a rock. Before he could do anything about it, the momentum flung the buckets and the yoke smacked him in the back of the head. Tumbling to the rocky ground, Thomas put his hands out in front of him to brace his fall.

All around him, several men laughed.

Heat crept up his neck and face as pain seared through his palms and knees.

One loud voice rose above the noise around Thomas. "Is that the orphan kid you picked up yesterday, Joe? Doesn't look like he's good for much. . . ."

More laughter.

Other voices competed for attention in Thomas's hearing. Joseph was saying something back to the man, but Thomas couldn't understand it. Picking himself up from the ground, he tried to brush himself off as the men continued to joke and

talk around him. He picked up the buckets and the yoke and took off down the hill to the stream as embarrassment filled his entire frame.

So much for finding a family here. He would always be known as an *orphan*.

When he reached the stream, he slammed the buckets into the water. That word had never really bothered him before because all the kids he knew were orphans. But now, things were different. He wanted to be something else. Someone else.

Determination built in his gut. He was gonna be somebody someday. He would. Orphan or not. He'd prove that he was worth something.

# 1

TEN YEARS LATER

THURSDAY, APRIL 4, 1929—DENVER, COLORADO

As twenty-three-year-old Tayler threw another brown split skirt into her suitcase, a light knock sounded on her bedroom door. “Come in,” she called out, and went to look for the matching neck scarves in her closet.

“Miss, you’ve been called to the study.” Millie, her maid since she was twelve, stood in the doorway.

A groan left Tayler’s lips as she peeked at her maid. Summoned to the study again? “Is it urgent, do you think? Or has Mother just found another way to word her displeasure? I’m really quite busy packing.” She turned back to the closet and found the brown scarves along with the olive-green ones. Just what she needed.

“Miss, it’s your mother *and* Mr. Dunham this time. They said you need to come right away.”

Tayler peeked around the doorjamb at her maid and then looked to the ceiling. Mother probably convinced the family’s lawyer to come by because she thought Tayler needed a stern talking-to. About why she shouldn’t go traipsing off to her job.

As if she hadn't heard the first *four* lectures by Mother already this morning. With a sigh, she resigned herself to yet another.

Nothing had been the same since Dad died last September. She'd come home like a dutiful daughter to lend her mother support—not that she needed it after all. Thankfully Tayler's job at Yellowstone National Park had been about to end for the winter. Even though her absence hadn't put her boss in a tough situation, how she wished she were there now.

The thought sounded horrible, but Tayler couldn't help it. The past few months had been worse than she'd ever imagined. Mother had always been strong, but when Father died, she'd hardened herself in a way Tayler hadn't expected. If ever Tayler doubted that her mother ran the household, she didn't anymore. Mother had always been a part of the business ventures and decisions. When Father was alive she'd had the decency to downplay her role, but in the last seven months since his death she didn't even attempt to pretend. Rather than spend time grieving, Mother simply got to work. She'd called in Mr. Dunham, demanded a full audit of the family holdings, and made everyone aware of her demands. Henrietta Hale was insistent that the Hale empire be known just like J.P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie: as business magnates, investors in numerous companies and real estate, philanthropists—and most importantly—well-established in their social standing.

Poor Joshua had been blindsided. He'd expected to take over for their father, but instead he found himself more of a pawn. Tayler could still see his stunned expression when Mother announced she had everything under control and he could return to New York City to manage his own businesses. Maybe when she was older and tired of running everything she would ask him to come take over.

Joshua hadn't been home since the funeral. He buried him-

self in his work, and even Tayler's repeated pleas that he come home and help her reason with their mother went unanswered for the most part. He'd sent one letter after Tayler had sent him four lengthy diatribes as to their mother's actions and attitude. Especially her insistence that Tayler give up working and remain at home. Joshua's response had been given in one line:

*I am sorry, but I can't change the way things are. Mother has made her decision.*

Tayler was still at a loss to understand. They'd always been so close, but whether it was the sadness of mourning their father or the harshness of their mother, Joshua had changed and left Tayler alone to deal with the aftermath.

"Miss?" Millie interrupted her thoughts.

Tayler shook her head. "I'm sorry." With a sigh, she resigned herself to the fate before her. The sooner she left, the sooner she could get out of Mother's grasp. "I'd better go down. Can you find the green split skirts for my uniforms as well? There should be three. Just place them on the bed, and I will get them packed when I return." She ran to the mirror and checked her appearance before she went downstairs. No need to alarm her mother by looking disheveled. If Tayler planned to go into battle, she had to have the upper hand.

"Yes, miss. I'll wait for you here."

"Thanks, Millie. You're a dear." She headed out of her room at a brisk pace. Mother hated waiting. But Tayler wondered how many more times she would have to express her feelings and wishes. Goodness, it was almost 1930, for pity's sake. Mother acted as if they still lived in the previous century.

But as Tayler rounded the corner into the study, an unmistakable voice made her stiffen. She'd been ambushed.

Standing in the middle of the study with Mother fawning all over him was none other than that lying, cheating, no-good

Emerson Pruitt. Tayler crossed her arms over her chest and took a deep breath. This would not be pretty. Her temper started to boil, and she attempted to keep a lid on it. “I hear you needed to speak with me?” Lips tight, she glared at her mother. She knew her expression had turned into a scowl, but she couldn’t help it.

“Darling, I’m so glad you joined us. Isn’t it lovely that Emerson has come to call?” Mother’s voice dripped with adoration.

“Lovely.” The sarcastic word left her lips unchecked.

Emerson—hands outstretched like she was a beloved family member—strode toward her with that charming smile she knew to be all too fake. “Tayler Grace, it is *so* enchanting to see you.” He came in for a kiss, but she turned away at the last second, and he missed.

Walking over to Mr. Dunham, Tayler reached out to shake his hand. “Good morning, Mr. Dunham. How are you?”

His slight groan under his breath told her more than she needed. “Fine. Just fine.” In Tayler’s opinion, the lawyer had spent entirely too much time at the Hale home since Mother went into a frenzy over managing everything. It wasn’t that Tayler disliked the man, but he was just . . . odd. And secretive. He was short and round, and nothing like her father, Martin Hale, who’d been a tall, strong man.

The thought of Daddy brought a prick of tears to her eyes. If he were here, he wouldn’t allow for Mother’s nonsense. Goodness, he’d encouraged Tayler to go to college when she told them of her dreams and had cheered her on when she gained a prestigious position at Yellowstone National Park. And he’d been especially supportive when she’d learned the truth about Emerson and ended their engagement.

Mr. Dunham cleared his throat and brought her thoughts back to the moment. In the study. Being ambushed. “How are you doing, Miss Hale?”

“Well . . . considering this is the fifth time this morning that I’ve been called to the study—”

“That’s quite enough, Tayler Grace.” Mother frowned. Everyone knew Tayler preferred going by just her first name, but Mother—and apparently Emerson—refused to acquiesce.

She sighed.

“Goodness, Tayler Grace, that is no way to greet your guest.” Mother scolded and pursed her lips, then motioned to Emerson. “Especially since he’s come that we might set the wedding date.”

*What?*

Tayler shook her head and blinked. Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward. “Emerson? He is not my guest, Mother. Nor will he ever be. And there’s not going to be a wedding. If you will remind yourself, I broke off our charade of an engagement three years ago.”

Emerson looked wounded, and Mother put a hand on his arm. Which he accepted and patted and then appeared ready to cry. The big actor.

Mother pursed her lips. “You were distraught at the time—”

“No. Mother, I wasn’t distraught or delirious or dumbfounded or whatever other word you can come up with and *have* come up with over the past few years. I came to my senses. Father understood and supported my decision, and I would appreciate it if you would do the same.”

“There’s no call for such an attitude, Tayler Grace. It’s time for you to settle down and stop gallivanting off on your ridiculous adventures.” Mother looked to Mr. Dunham. “I do apologize for bringing you into the middle of this. I’m afraid my daughter has been allowed a rather unruly upbringing. As you know, my husband spoiled her.”

Tayler put her hands on her hips. “I’m standing right here, Mother.” She held in a groan. “While I mean you no disrespect,

you know this has nothing to do with my being spoiled. And I don't go gallivanting off. I'm a naturalist." Trying to keep her voice calm, she felt the words gushing to the surface. "You also well know of Emerson's exploits and, dare I say, love affairs—while we were engaged—that were all over the papers? And that Emerson freely admitted to? And then, he didn't even bother to respond to the broken engagement, nor did he come to visit and apologize?" Her voice always rose in pitch when she was angry, and she fought against the squeaky childish sound. She was an adult and needed to be heard.

"But, darling, you know that he needed to go away for a while to let the gossip die down." Mother *tsked* at Tayler like she was a child.

Shaking her head, she took another deep breath. "No, Mother. It wasn't gossip. I'm done with all of this. I will *not* be marrying Emerson Pruitt. No matter what you say. I have a job to get to. A job I love."

"I've had quite enough of this, Tayler Grace Hale. You haven't listened to a word I've said all morning, have you? Besides, Emerson told us just now that none of it was true." Mother turned to the slimy weasel. "Isn't that right, dear?"

Tayler narrowed her eyes. Should she tell her mother once and for all that she witnessed it firsthand? In their own home, no less? Images flitted back into her mind. Images that had broken her heart. Of Emerson kissing that Wainwright girl behind the grand staircase. Then at the Stewarts' party the following month—a party he attended with *her*—she caught him in the gazebo with his arms around Mary Lou Stewart. Not to mention the dozen other episodes over that spring. The spring that Tayler had to grow up and face facts. While he'd been back in Denver and she'd been away at college, he'd apparently had plenty of *friends* to take her place.

Not that they'd ever had much time together for her to *have* a place. After their little mountaintop promise, he'd gone back to prep school and then went off to Harvard. By the time he came home to Denver, she was off to college. The few weeks they'd seen each other over the years had been few and far between. And it only proved to her one thing:

Men were liars and cheaters. At least Emerson proved to be.

She put a hand to her face and pinched the bridge of her nose. While Joshua had listened to her and comforted her before he went back to Harvard to continue his graduate studies in law, he'd also had to admit that his best friend of all these years hadn't been faithful to his little sister. And *everyone* knew it. Tayler refused to be the laughingstock. She was a child of God. And He had something much better for her. She knew that. Felt assured in that. If the Lord had a special someone out there for her . . . somewhere . . . then she would rest in that and wait for God to reveal him. She only knew for sure that it *wasn't* Emerson.

Emerson moved toward her. "Tayler, let's put all this behind us. I'm here now."

Tayler held up a hand to stop him. "No. I don't know what game you're playing, but I'm going back to my job in Yellowstone. There's nothing more to discuss."

Emerson had the gall to laugh. "Your *job*? As a tour guide?" He looked at her mother and simply shook his head.

Rage bubbled up to the surface, but Tayler clenched her teeth to keep from exploding. Measuring her words, she spoke in a controlled tone. "I'm not a tour guide, Emerson Pruitt, and you know that. I'm a naturalist and interpreter with a degree in botany. A well-respected one at that."

"Honey, I'm sure you are very well respected, and I wasn't trying to belittle you, I promise. But we both know that you are

just doing this job until we marry. I'm sorry for my wayward behavior as a boy, although I assure you it was never as bad as the newspapers made out. I've come to my senses. You know me . . . I was just a silly young man." He stepped the rest of the way to her and put an arm around her shoulders.

It made her cringe. "Silly young man? For all these years? You expect me to believe that? No. Do not call me 'honey' and again, *no*, I'm not just doing this job until we marry." She lifted his hand from her shoulder and flung it back to his side with more force than was necessary, but she couldn't help it. Marching over to the window, she stomped her feet. Then she turned back to face the liar. If flames could shoot from her eyes, she'd want to aim them at him right now. "I will never marry you, Emerson."

"Let's not be hasty." He held up his hands and pasted that oily smile back on. "You made a promise to me, and I know I've been a little careless, but my heart is true."

An unladylike snort escaped at his ludicrous response. "A promise when I was a child, you big oaf. Just as you made mistakes as a . . . what did you call it . . . silly young man? I made mistakes as a silly young girl. A girl who believed the best of everyone—until they betrayed me. I have no feelings for you whatsoever . . . you . . . you womanizer."

"Tayler Grace!" Mother grimaced. "I will not stand for you speaking to Emerson in that manner, and in front of poor Mr. Dunham no less." She glided over the marble floor to stand in front of Tayler, but Tayler turned away. Her action did nothing to deter Mother.

"You made a promise and our families have invested heavily in each other because of that promise. You and Emerson have been best friends since you were little." Her voice turned calm and soothing. "Now, let's put all the past behind us and move forward, shall we?"

Taylor turned to look at her mother. “What has happened to you? Dad would never force me to marry this liar.” Tears streaked down her cheeks, her emotion threatening to choke her. “Don’t you care about me anymore?”

“Of course I care about you, dear. I want what’s best for you. And this union between you and Emerson is just that. You’re simply upset. Losing your father has been a terrible blow to us all.”

Mr. Dunham stepped beside her mother. “Let’s not forget the family ties, Miss Hale. Your mother simply wants the best for you and for the whole family. As she mentioned, investments have been made on both sides that would be irresponsible to dismiss when speaking of the future of your fortunes.”

Mother nodded.

Emerson played innocent and stayed quiet, but all the while he watched her like a cat sizing up his prey.

Something wasn’t adding up in her mind. Her mother’s behavior the past few months. Mr. Dunham’s visits. Hushed conversations in the study and private meetings elsewhere. If her heart could break again after Emerson’s betrayal and then the loss of her beloved father, she was sure it would shatter into a million pieces on the floor. If she ever wanted her big brother to walk through the front door, it was now. Why couldn’t Joshua put aside his own grief and help her?

“Taylor Grace, you must know that this is the right thing to do. For the Hale and Pruitt family legacies.” Emerson simpered at her, a very unbecoming look.

Taylor turned to Mother and looked her square in the eye. “So let me get this straight. You want me to marry this *louse* because you have *invested heavily*? Isn’t that how Dad built your precious empire—by investing? Is that what all this is about? Your precious money and family legacy? I don’t care about who

has invested in what or whom.” She flung an arm out in front of her. “I doubt you even know all the companies that Dad built by investing, so why does this matter? You and the Pruitts can continue on investing however you please. What happened to the mother who cared about my hopes and dreams rather than marrying me off to a man who probably has five mistresses lined up already?”

Mother gasped and put a hand to her throat. “You will not speak to me in that manner, young lady!”

Dunham placed a hand on Mother’s arm. “Henrietta, she’s distraught. Let me.” He turned to Tayler. “Your mother cares for you a great deal. But yes, your family has invested quite heavily in the Pruitts’ businesses, and they have reciprocated. It’s been ten years since you two pledged to each other, so quite an industry has been built. The two family holdings are quite intertwined now. Real estate, iron, steel, oil . . . many purchases and investments have been made together.” He moved a step forward. “Your mother has so much weight on her shoulders. She simply wants you to be happily married and settled down.”

Tayler couldn’t believe it. The Hale family was extremely wealthy. What did a little investment in the Pruitts’ holdings have to do with this? Why not just sell off the purchases they’d made together? Was it that big of a deal? Tayler didn’t understand it and didn’t want to. And now she was a burden to her mother? What was going on? And why was Emerson here all of a sudden? “But I broke off the engagement three years ago . . . why didn’t Dad just adjust things if those investments were a problem?”

Mother swallowed. “Emerson’s father came to us a few months after you broke it off—while Emerson was in Europe—and assured us that everything would go as planned and Emerson had changed his ways. . . . We all just thought you needed

time. . . .” Her voice trailed off as if the excuse uttered didn’t sound all that good anymore.

“But you’ve had plenty of time to grow up. We both have, my dear. Mistakes were made and now we must forgive and put it all behind us.” Emerson finished and gave a small smile.

Taylor backed up a few paces and shook her head. Looking at the three people staring back at her—waiting for her reply—made her feel very alone. Had she really been this blind? All this time? Her own parents had thought she would *still* marry Emerson? Dad had listened to her time and again and consoled her. Why hadn’t he told her the truth?

“So you all just thought you could plan my future without even consulting me?”

Mother sighed. “I’m sorry, Taylor Grace. I really thought you would be all right with this. It’s been long enough. It’s time for us to move forward with the wedding. You’ve loved Emerson forever.” Her tone was sad and motherly. For a brief moment it reminded Taylor of the woman her mother had been. The woman Taylor wished she could see on a regular basis. The real lady underneath all the layers of aristocratic and rich nonsense. The woman who had genuinely loved her husband and not just his business dealings. Or were they ever his? Perhaps Mother had always orchestrated the business and this was all just an act. Oh, it was too confusing and too much to bear.

“Taylor, your father loved to talk about the camping trips and how well you and Emerson got along. We both thought you would be perfect for each other.” Her mother looked out the window. “Your father even told me . . . that . . . well . . . he knew in time you would work things out, because your love was genuine and you had such a forgiving heart.” She looked back at Taylor. “He said there were many people in the world

who pretended to love, but he knew your heart would never allow for that.”

Taylor felt the weight of her mother’s comment. Had Dad really said that? If he had, then surely her mother understood why she couldn’t play a game of loving Emerson.

Mr. Dunham cleared his throat again. “Maybe we just need to give Taylor some time to think.”

Emerson held out his hand toward Taylor. “This isn’t about time, it’s about forgiveness. I thought God wanted us to forgive one another. I know I have His forgiveness, and if God can forgive me, then I know you will want to do likewise. After all, Taylor, it is about pleasing God, is it not?”

Taylor was never at a loss for words, but the fact that Emerson would bring God into the conversation when she knew full well he didn’t have much to do with God, church, or even prayer was enough to momentarily stupefy her.

He took advantage of her silence. “Now, let’s not delay things anymore. Everything is fine. Really. Isn’t it, Taylor? We simply need to work through a few things. You know we’ve always been destined for each other, and I’m completely devoted to you.”

That cleared the shock from her brain. “Completely devoted to me? When you were running around with other girls and getting into all sorts of trouble? Really?” Taylor could hardly believe her own ears.

“You know me . . . I needed to ‘sow my wild oats,’ as my dad put it. But now I’m ready to settle down and be respectable.” His smile seemed pasted on. “I’m a new man.”

What was his game? She knew that Emerson didn’t care for her like a husband should for a wife, so why was he trying to convince her? Especially with an embarrassing explanation of sowing his wild oats. “No, Emerson. How many times can I tell you in one day? No. It’s *not* fine. We’re *not* going to work

through anything. And I will *not* marry you.” She put a hand to her stomach and took a glance around the room. A room that was filled with beautiful memories with her family. But today, it only felt cold and lonely. The marble floors and deep bookcases seemed sterile instead of inviting. There wasn’t a fire in the fireplace to warm the chill from her bones. No tea or sponge cakes on the tray inviting her to stay and read a book. And Dad. He was gone. Forever. She’d never have the chance to watch him work at his desk again. This room had been her favorite.

Instead she wanted to run from it. And hope no one would follow. But she’d never been one to run from her troubles.

Until now.

“I leave in three days—as you all well know—and I’ve made a decision. I won’t be returning in the fall.”

Her mother gasped.

“Tayler.” Emerson’s voice cracked. “Don’t make any hasty choices right now. If time is what will prove my sincerity, we can wait a bit.”

As much as she wanted to honor her parents, since that was what the Bible said, and it was the good Christian thing to do, she couldn’t abide by their decision to force her into a loveless marriage with an unfaithful man. It didn’t make any sense. At all. She closed her eyes and tried to block out the people before her.

*Lord, I don’t understand what You want me to do. Help. Please!*

How had things spun out of control so fast? When she’d awoken this morning, everything was normal.

While she didn’t comprehend what was happening with her family, peace had washed over her. God would supply all her needs. She simply needed to trust Him. He hadn’t brought her this far and through all that pain for nothing.

She turned to go, but Emerson stepped in front of her. “But my parents have had our engagement party planned for months. It’s next week.”

“Wait . . . what? Months? And I’m just now hearing about this *today*?” She furrowed her brow. Had they all gone mad? She glanced at her mother. “You knew about this too, didn’t you?”

“Of course.” Her mother sat on the couch, looking confused. “Honestly, Tayler Grace, it was what your father wanted.”

Tayler shook her head. “Don’t even attempt the guilt trip, Mother.”

“I have no idea what you mean.” Her expression turned stony—like she became unfeeling all of a sudden.

“How could you do this to me? *It was what my father wanted?*” she mimicked. Unbelievable. Maybe she was having a nightmare. How else could she explain all this? But as Tayler looked around the room, her eyes came back to rest on her mother, a woman she hardly recognized anymore. In her mind she longed to question the woman who’d given birth to her. *What have you done?*

But the question remained silent on her lips. With a deep breath, she tried to still the quaking that started in her hands. “I wish you would have told me, Mother.” Tears pulsated behind her eyes, but she bit the insides of her cheeks to stop from breaking down and took another shaky breath. Raising her chin, she looked each one of them in the eye. “I don’t understand what is going on here, but there will *not* be an engagement party next week. We are not engaged, Emerson. Now, or ever.”

“But—”

“No buts, Emerson. It’s over. Now leave me alone. Please.” Tayler went around him and exited the study as fast as she could. Voices called out to her, but she ignored them. Running up the massive staircase, she felt the hot tears releasing, and they stung her cheeks as they rolled down her face.

Her parents weren't perfect, but they'd always been supportive and loving. Mother had her quirks, yes, but she'd never been like this. Where in the past she had merely been annoying, now Mother was harsh and unfeeling. The loss of Dad had put them all in a tailspin.

Trying to put the puzzle together, she attempted to get her breathing back to normal as she walked the long corridor in the east wing to her suite. The purple carpet had been her favorite, with the cream-colored wainscoting and gold wallpaper above it. Daddy had always called it her "royal pathway" because she was the princess.

Oh, how she missed him.

With her father gone, nothing seemed balanced. It was like her whole world had tilted on its side, and she didn't know how to set it right.

As she approached the door to her rooms, she turned and looked back down the hall. How she loved her home. The citrusy scent of the wood oil used to polish the furniture would forever be imprinted on her mind as a smell of home. It made her want to cry. It was all too much.

She couldn't stay here another night. That fact stabbed her in the heart. She hoped Millie wasn't in on the charade too, because Tayler needed her maid in this hour of madness. She'd always been independent and strong-willed, but she longed for someone to lean on. Someone to love her for being *her*. Longing for a bright future filled with adventure and love and family threatened to overwhelm her.

It all seemed unattainable now. With Dad gone, Mother's coldness, Joshua's absence, and Emerson's lies . . . her hopes and dreams lay dashed. . . .

Except for her job at Yellowstone.

She took a deep breath and stared at her door. She could

honor God with her talents and gifts. Maybe things hadn't turned out the way she'd wanted, but that didn't matter. Maybe she hadn't understood God's plans for her life, but she could move forward.

One thing was certain—she had her faith and knew that God loved her more than anyone on earth could. She'd have to rest in that.

Opening the door to her room, Tayler breathed in deeply. Millie stood at the foot of the bed twisting her hands. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you, miss. Your mother swore me to secrecy."

"So you knew about Emerson? About the engagement party?"

The maid nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I'm sorry. Truly, I am."

"I'm surprised Mother didn't demand that you unpack all my things and put them back."

"She didn't. And I wouldn't want to, either." She swiped at her cheeks. "Look, I need to report back to Mrs. Henderson since I missed the evening check-in, but I'll be right back to help you finish your packing. Again, I'm sorry."

Numbness took over Tayler. She nodded and Millie left to find the housekeeper, while Tayler could only sit and stare at the room. Her room. All her life, she'd slept in this room. Read in this room. Dreamt of her future.

But in that moment, it no longer felt like home.

Rubbing her forehead with her hands, Tayler looked at her suitcase and focused on her packing. Thoughts of the past weren't going to help her move forward.

Inside the case, she'd packed three brown split skirts, six brown neck scarves, six olive-green neck scarves, three burnt-orange blouses, three rose blouses, three deep golden yellow blouses. Two pairs of sturdy hiking boots, her favorite wide-brimmed, Stetson-style campaign hat, and her three green split

skirts lay on the bed—Millie must have found them. Her chosen uniform as a naturalist wasn't grand, but it was practical. Now she needed plenty of undergarments, and she'd be packed. When she glanced back to her closet, some of her gowns called to her. The sequins, lace, and frilly trim always made her feel like such a lady. And she indeed loved being noticed as a lady, but shouldn't practicality win out?

She shook her head and put her hands on her hips. A million thoughts tumbled through her mind. She couldn't wear her uniform everywhere. While she needed to be prepared for her job, she also needed to be prepared for . . . life away from home. As the weight of it all pressed into her thoughts, she knew her mind had been made up.

She wouldn't be coming back.

Decision made, she started making piles on the bed. It hurt to think she may not return to this house, but relief also filled her being. A heaviness felt like it had been lifted. This was the right thing to do.

Millie tapped on the open door. "I've returned, miss."

"Would you mind grabbing the rest of my cases for me?"

Her maid tilted her head for a moment and then nodded. "Of course, I'll be right back."

Taylor made a few more trips to her dresser and back, piling the rest of her things on the bed. When Millie returned with the other three cases that matched her luggage set, Taylor went back to the closet. "I need your advice, Millie. I need to be practical but need to pack for the long-term."

"You're not returning home after the summer, are you?"

Millie put a hankie to her eyes. "I had a feeling."

Taylor walked over to her and grabbed her hands. "No, I'm not. And I need you to promise me that you won't tell a soul."

Her sweet maid nodded. "I promise."

“Anything that I tell you this evening?”

“I promise.”

“You’ve always been a dear friend to me, Millie. Much more than just my maid. I hope you know how much I appreciate you.”

Millie nodded and sniffed.

“I hate to create any problems for you when Mother finds out. . . . I’m sorry.”

“When she finds out what, miss?”

Taylor bit her lip and then blurted it out. “I’ve decided that I’m not waiting to leave in a few days. I’m going to leave tonight. And I need your help covering for me.”

Millie nodded with understanding in her eyes. No condescension. Just trust. And a bit of sorrow. “I can do that.”

“Let them think that I’m pitching a fit, pouting, whatever. Just don’t let them know that I’ve gone. I need to distance myself from it all and settle into my job. Who knows? Maybe it will all die down and they’ll leave me be.”

Millie chuckled. “I highly doubt that, miss.”

Taylor sighed. “I know, but a girl can hope, can’t she?”