

*The Treasures of Nome* > 2

# ENDLESS MERCY



TRACIE PETERSON  
KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE

*The Treasures of Nome 2*



ENDLESS  
MERCY



TRACIE PETERSON  
AND KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE



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*To our Shepherd, who not only puts up with Your little sheep but paid the ultimate sacrifice for us.*

*And to our sheep peeps, Kim Tucker and Amanda Schmitt. This story wouldn't have been the same without you.*

*And to the real Madysen. Keep singing, beautiful girl.*

## Dear Reader

**T**racie and I are thrilled to have you join us for the second book in our TREASURES OF NOME Series. We've enjoyed getting the reader mail from you about how much you loved *Forever Hidden* and the Powell sisters.

The namesakes for the characters in this series are beloved to us. These three sisters are precious and, oh, so talented. Another big thanks to Merle and Monica for allowing us to name characters after their daughters. Yes, the real Powell girls all have gorgeous red hair. And yes, they are all very musical. But I wouldn't want them to have to go through what we put our characters through!

Many people are puzzled about a dairy and poultry farm surviving in Alaska. Believe me, I understand. When my family moved to Alaska from Louisiana it was quite a shock. First, I thought I'd be going to six months of daylight and six months of darkness. Second, I wondered how anything could survive up there. But some of the stereotypes we put on places are wrong. Just like when I tell people I grew up in Louisiana and they ask if I had a pet alligator or lived on a swamp. Go ahead, you can laugh with me. No, I didn't have an alligator, and no, I didn't

live on a swamp. Same thing for our largest state. Alaska doesn't have six months of darkness and six months of daylight. Not even up in Barrow, the northernmost point of the state. It is an absolutely gorgeous wonderland, and while winters there can be quite brutal, farms have been thriving there for a long time. To give you some fun, you can search for the Alaska Dairy Co. and Poultry Yard in Nome, Alaska, to see some historic photos of the real dairy farm that was in Nome during this time.

So let's head back to Nome and the Powell/Bundrant/Roselli family. I know I'm personally wondering what the chickens are up to. . . .

Enjoy the journey,  
Kimberley and Tracie

# Prologue

## *Cripple Creek, Colorado—1891*

“These are ugly.” Madysen Powell scrunched up her nose and looked down at the rock in her hand. The warm, yellow glow from the lantern didn’t help it look any better. “Let’s look somewhere else.” With a toss, she chucked the stone against the dirt wall.

“They’re *rocks*, Maddy.” Jeb leaned his head back and let out a groan. “What’d you expect?”

“To find some special ones.” Placing her hands on her hips, she sent him a scowl. “That’s what you promised when we came here.” Boys. They were so dumb.

“I said we could *try* to find special rocks, but I never promised they wouldn’t be ugly. This is a mine, ya know.”

“You have no imagination.”

“Why ya gotta use those big words all the time? I’m sure I got plenty of . . . magination, or whatever you said.” He crossed his scrawny arms over his chest.

With a roll of her eyes and a tap of her foot, she crossed her arms and mimicked his expression. “I’m sure you do.” She took a long glance down the dark mine shaft and a great idea struck. “Let’s race!”

“In the dark?”

“What? Are you a fraidycat?” She lifted her lantern and shot him a taunting glare. “Or you just don’t wanna lose again . . . to a *girl*.”

“I ain’t afraid of losing to you, because you can’t beat me.” He lifted his chin and held up his lantern too.

“Catch me if you can!” Madysen giggled as she took off down the narrow corridor of the shaft.

“No fair, Maddy!” Jeb’s voice echoed behind her. “You got a head start—that’s cheating!” The sound of his steps hinted that he was only a few paces off her heels.

“It’s not cheating. You’re just slower than me!” Pumping her legs for all she was worth, she held the lamp in front of her as she ran. She was fast. Faster than any boy or girl her age in Cripple Creek. And that included Jeb Morrison, who was a whole year and a half older. He’d been bragging about his ninth birthday coming up. The same day she’d raced him to the mercantile. And won.

This tunnel was perfect. Long and straight, it gradually sloped down into the belly of the mountain. No one ever found any gold or silver here, so it had been abandoned for a while. Which made it the perfect place for them to run. She should have thought of it before.

“I’ll catch ya, just watch.” Jeb’s huffing and puffing sounded like Mama’s metronome ticking the beats in *vivace*.

*Vivace*. The word was fun to say.

V-i-v-a-c-e. A letter with every stride, she repeated it over and over. Mama made her a new spelling list this week, and it was all tempo words. Words like *larghissimo* and *adagietto* weren’t as fun as *grave* and *vivace*. Probably because they were harder to spell. But Mama insisted. And Maddy didn’t mind. She loved music.

Almost as much as she loved running.

Cripple Creek didn’t have a lot of areas that made for good

running. Active mines everywhere, rocks all over the place, and adults always telling them to go play somewhere else.

At least no one would bother them here. She could run as fast and as much as she wanted. Picking up speed down the slope, she leaned back so her momentum wouldn't cause her to tumble. Too many times—when she was little—she'd made that mistake on the side of the mountain.

The air grew cooler with every breath she took. No way Jeb could catch her now.

How she loved the feel of her feet pounding the ground. Faster and faster. At times, she dreamed her feet didn't even touch it. The damp air pressed into her face as she practically flew over the surface of the earth. Just like eagles. Except they never flew in mines.

Running and music. She could do them all day long. Even though Mama told her that ladies shouldn't run.

Better get in all her running now while she had the chance. Probably had three good years of running left in her before she grew up and got old. By then, she'd be ten and almost a full-grown lady. But she wouldn't be serious like Whitney. No. Her older sister didn't know how to have fun anymore. But Maddy did. She let her smile widen.

The path leveled out, which meant she was almost to the end. Slowing down, she made it to the back of the shaft and touched it with her hand. "I win!"

"Ah, shucks! No fair, Maddy!" Jeb slowed to a stop and bent over to set his lantern down. Putting his hands on his knees, he sucked in air with great big gulps.

A deep rumbling beneath her feet made her gasp and turn around.

"Maddy!" Jeb's voice wasn't playful anymore.

She held up her lantern toward him and watched him tumble to the ground. "Jeb!" The rumbling stopped. But for how long?

He jumped back to his feet and wiped off his hands. "I don't

think we should be in here.” He picked up his lantern and held it high, turning in a slow motion.

Madysen frowned. Pebbles and dirt fell from above.

Several seconds passed while they caught their breath.

Then everything quieted.

Good. She didn’t like the rumbling.

“I think you’re just sore that I beat you.” Throwing him a grin with her taunt, she raised her eyebrows.

“This time . . .” He turned around and ran. “Race you back!”

“Hey!” She took off after him.

“You won’t beat me again, Maddy. Just watch!”

Silly Jeb. He *thought* he could beat her. But even with his head start, she was gaining on him.

The rumbling sound started again, but this time it made the ground shudder like God had picked up the mountain and shook it out like a rug. They tumbled to the ground as rocks and dirt rained down on them again from above.

“Run, Maddy!” Her friend looked over his shoulder and jumped back to his feet, his eyes wide.

“Jeb!” She got up and made it a couple of steps before she fell down and hit her knees to the hard earth, gripping the lantern for all she was worth. The tunnel was no longer smooth and straight. Rocks of all sizes littered the path.

Maddy looked up and watched the ceiling open and pour its contents in front of her. “*Help!*” Her scream bounced off the wall of stones and dirt that now blocked her path and separated her from the one way out. “Help! Please, help!”

Several moments later, her voice was hoarse from yelling. Swallowing against the raw scratchiness in her throat, she lifted the lantern higher. The thumping in her chest grew faster. Her ears pounded, and everything in her wanted to scream and cry all at the same time.

She lifted her chin against the urge and bit her lip. Brave. Be brave.

She wasn't a fraidycat.

But as she blinked, hot tears escaped.

The ground stopped shaking, but tiny pebbles and dirt skittered down from the wall in front of her until everything halted and the cool air stilled. A scary silence surrounded her.

As a shiver raced up her back, her legs trembled. So she sat on the ground and tucked her skirt around her legs. Another swallow. Her throat hurt. What would happen? Was Jeb on the other side trying to get her out? Or would he leave her all alone to go and get help?

The thought of being alone in the dark made her shiver again. She wasn't feeling brave at all. Tears choked her. "Jeb . . . *help!*"

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Christopher Powell swiped a hand down his face. He should clean himself up before Melly saw him. Maybe he shouldn't have gone back to the saloon so early in the day. Nah, he was fine. Wasn't even drunk. He wouldn't go back tonight. Yeah. That would make his wife happy.

Tripping over something he didn't see, he heard voices coming from his cabin. With a bit of focus, he listened. A low-timbered voice.

Great. His wife's father was here. Just what he needed. To feel insignificant and incompetent again. It wasn't Chris's fault that he couldn't make a fortune at anything he put his hand to like good ol' Chuck Bundrant. Maybe he should go back to the saloon after all. At least he fit in there.

He turned on his heel, but his wife's cries tore at him. Why was she upset? He stepped forward a few paces to listen.

"She's been gone for hours, Papa," Melly sobbed. "No one knows where she is. I wanted to come get you earlier, but I thought we could find her."

"Don't you worry, Melly." Chuck's bossy voice echoed

through the cracks in the thin cabin walls. “I’ll go put a search team together. I employ plenty of men. We’ll find her. I promise.”

Find who? Who was missing? One of his girls? His heart skipped, and he stormed through the door. “What’s wrong?”

Melissa ran to him and put her arms around him. “I’m so glad you’re home—Maddy is missing. We can’t find her anywhere.” The grief in her voice made him feel like the lowest of the low. If he’d been here . . . then maybe . . . No. It didn’t matter. Chris peered into his other daughters’ wide eyes. Whitney and Havyn clung to each other behind their mother. Tears streamed down Havyn’s cheeks, while Whitney said soft, comforting words and shot daggers at him with her eyes.

At twelve years old, she was the oldest and mother hen of the group. And she’d become wise to the world’s temptations. At least *his*. She had come to the saloon a few times to find him and drag him home. Not something a father wanted his daughter to do. But she was a stubborn one. Just like her dad.

Avoiding eye contact with his wife’s father, Chris held Melly close. “I’ll go look for her.”

“Papa’s going to put together a search team. Maybe you could go with them.” She pulled back and gazed up into his eyes. A gaze that still held hope and love for him. God only knew why.

“I’m glad he’s getting a group together, but I’ll do better on my own. I’m her father, I bet I can find her.” Lifting his chin, he dared a look at Chuck. “Thank you for helping us search.”

The older man didn’t flinch. “The only thing that matters now is Madysen. I’ll get the word out, and we’ll send teams in every direction. We’ll comb this mountain if we have to.” Chuck headed toward the door. “Melissa, stay here in case she returns. We’ll fire two shots in the air when we find her.”

“Thank you, Papa.” Melly twisted a hankie in her hands and watched him leave.

“I best get out there as well.” Chris gazed at his girls. “I’ll find her.”

Havyn ran to him and sobbed into his coat.

Whitney crossed her arms over her chest. It had been a while since his eldest daughter had trusted him. But the slight glimmer of hope in her eyes pushed him forward. He would find Maddy and gain everyone's respect again. Then maybe, just maybe, he could turn things around.

"I'll find her. I will. Don't worry." Chris patted Havyn's head and gave Melissa a nod. He *had* to do this.

A half hour later, he searched the streets. How sad was it that he had no idea where his little girl would be? Where did she like to play? Where would she go to hide? The girls were constantly playing hide-and-seek. Did she have any friends other than her sisters?

Hadn't she mentioned a friend named Sally? And wasn't there a Jeb? Or was it Jed? Scratching his days-old beard, he went to the school. Maybe the kids from town would be there and he could ask them questions. Not that his girls went to the school, but they would know other children . . . wouldn't they?

Taking long strides, Chris set out for the schoolhouse on the edge of town. But when he reached it, it was locked up tight. Blast! Today was Saturday.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and tried to ignore his overwhelming thirst. But it nagged and pulled at him until he licked his lips. Maybe just one drink. It couldn't hurt. Probably make him think clearer too 'cause then he wouldn't be distracted by it.

He closed his eyes. No wonder he was such a horrible father—his little girl was lost, and he couldn't even keep his focus on her for an hour before he started thinking about liquor.

A new resolve filled his mind. Melly and the girls deserved better. This was his chance. He could be a better man. He could. He balled his fists at his side and took a long, deep breath. He *would* do this. Maddy needed him.

Pushing his legs back into motion, he ran back to town.

Two young girls darted across his path.

“Hey!”

His harsh tone made them stop, and they turned to him with eyes as big as saucers.

“Have you seen Madysen Powell?”

They relaxed a bit. One of the girls shrugged.

The other looked to her friend. Then back at him. “She was playing with Jeb Morrison this morning. Down near the mines.” The little girl grabbed her friend’s hand, and they took off running again.

The mines? Didn’t these kids know it was dangerous to play near any of the mines?

Chris headed for the mercantile. Someone had to know where he could find Jeb Morrison.

As he yanked the door open to the merc, the little bell above the door gave a jangle. Would anyone listen to him? Most people didn’t pay attention to town drunks.

Even as he thought it, his stomach plummeted. Everything stopped, and he stood on the threshold unable to breathe. That’s how the town saw him . . . as one of the drunks. So why would they even give him the time of day? Was this the life he wanted to live? The reputation he wanted his family to live in the shadow of—that he was a no-good drunk?

He shook off the mounting dread. This was about Maddy. Surely they would help a little girl. He stepped up to the counter.

“How can I help you, Mr. Powell?” At least the man had the decency to know his name and talk to him without condescension.

“I’m looking for Jeb Morrison. He’s a friend of my daughter Maddy. She’s missing.”

A hush fell over the customers in the room.

The man standing at the counter next to him nudged him in the arm. “I saw Jeb and his pa down by the creek just south of here ’fore I came in.”

“Thank you.” Chris nodded at the man and raced out the door. The thought of finding his daughter and making his wife proud gave him a surge of energy and diminished his thirst. Maybe he could change. If he put his mind to it.

When he reached the creek, a man and his son were washing gold pans.

“You Jeb Morrison?” Chris reached for the kid’s arm. Blood pumped through his veins. The kid must know something, and Chris would get it out of him.

“Who’s askin’?” The man yanked the boy’s arm out of Chris’s grasp and narrowed his eyes. When he straightened to his full height, he towered a good foot over Chris. And the breadth of his chest testified to years of hard labor on the mountain.

All the bravado Chris had felt a moment ago vanished. He cleared his throat and forced himself to be congenial. “Name’s Chris Powell. I hear that Jeb and my daughter Maddy are friends. She’s missing. One of the other kids said she saw Jeb and Maddy playing near the mines this morning, so I thought your boy here might know where she is.”

The man looked down at the boy. “You know anything about this? ’Cause if you been playing near the mines, you’ll get a beating you’ll not soon forget.”

The kid shook his head. A little too fast. Something wasn’t right in the look of his eyes. Had he turned a touch paler? “Me and Maddy were looking for rocks this morning, but I haven’t seen her since.” He looked down and kicked the dirt with his shoe.

“Good.” The man turned back to Chris. “Seems like we can’t help ya. Sorry ’bout that.” He crouched back down and picked up the gold pans. “Hope ya find yer girl. We got chores to do.”

“Thanks for your help.” Chris watched them walk away. What was he supposed to do now? The kid had said they were looking for rocks . . . but where? The look on Jeb’s face had

said it all. He knew something. Chris just had to get him away from his pa so he would talk.

Staring at the two as they walked farther away, Chris shoved his hands back in his pockets. There had to be some way he could talk to the boy. Maybe if he followed them. And then waited outside their house. It might be the only way.

Decision made, Chris started after them. But only a few steps later, he saw the kid headed back in his direction. Alone.

Chris darted behind a tree. Somehow he had to get Jeb to cough up what he knew without scaring him off. But how?

Light footsteps alerted him to the kid passing. Chris peeked around the tree and watched for several moments. Jeb was headed toward town, his head dipped low.

Following a safe distance behind, Chris worked on what he would say. Calm voice. Don't scare him away. Maddy needed to be found.

When the kid went into the mercantile, Chris followed him. The perfect opportunity.

"I need some tobacco for my pa." The kid plunked down a coin. After several moments, the kid had his purchase tucked under his arm and headed for the door. He looked up, and his eyes widened as he spotted Chris.

Chris held his hands out. "I'm not going to hurt you, and I won't tell your pa. I promise. But I know you know something about where Maddy is. I need you to tell me the truth . . . please."

The kid bit his lip.

"Look, I'm not mad at you, but there must be something wrong. Please. Just tell me."

Jeb's face crumbled and his shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, mister. I didn't know what to do. My pa will beat me bad if he knows we were playing in the mine." Tears streamed down his face.

Chris grabbed the boy's shoulders and knelt down in front

of him. “There’s hundreds of mines, which one? I promise I won’t say a word, but I have to find my daughter.”

“The Long Shot. But a rumblin’ started and the ceiling came down. I don’t know where she is.” The kid used his sleeve to wipe up his face, but it didn’t do any good. The tears came faster. “It was so scary. And so I ran.” He gulped and sobbed. “She’s probably dead.”

A surge of anger roiled inside his chest. He shook the kid. A little hard. “What do you mean? You just left her there?”

“I didn’t know what to do!” The kid’s sobs turned into wails.

“Is there a problem here?” Some nosy gentleman dressed in a spiffy suit eyed them. Along with other customers.

Chris released Jeb and straightened up. “Nope. No problem.” Best to leave before the kid’s pa heard about it. Didn’t matter anyway. He got what he needed. He turned on his heel and headed out the door toward the Long Shot. He’d need a pick and a lantern if what the kid said was true. Good thing he knew where Chuck kept extra mining supplies. He raced through town and grabbed what he needed. His Maddy couldn’t be gone. It couldn’t be true. The boy just blew the story up in his mind.

Chris reached the mine, stood for a moment trying to catch his breath. But he couldn’t wait any longer. His little girl was in there. As he entered the main shaft, the scent of freshly moved dirt filled his senses. Had there been a collapse? His heart plummeted and then beat even faster. The kid hadn’t been exaggerating. The pounding in Chris’s ears was deafening. What if Maddy was hurt? Or . . .

No!

He leaned over and put his hands on his knees, shaking his head against the negative thoughts. He drew in several deep breaths.

It was all his fault. He was a failure. At everything.

But he could find his daughter. He *would*.

He straightened. “Maddy! Can you hear me, honey?”

Dirt and rocks littered the shaft floor. This must be what Jeb was talking about. Chris held his lantern, watching every step for debris.

“Maddy!”

The minutes passed as he ventured deeper into the mine. Vast amounts of rubble now covered the shaft floor. Then he saw it. A wall of dirt and rocks in front of him.

“Maddy! Are you in there?” He set the lantern down and felt the wall in front of him. It was loose. That was a good thing. But what if she was buried? What if more came down?

“Maddy! Can you hear me?” He swung the pick at the obstruction in front of him, then pulled down. Maybe he could get it all to move enough so there would be a crack at the top. Or would it just continue to spill out?

He had to take the chance. His gut told him his little girl was behind the wall. “Maddy, I’m coming.”

For what seemed like an eternity, he chipped at dirt and rocks, all the while talking as if his daughter could hear him. She had to be there. She had to be.

She was alive. He couldn’t fail her. Couldn’t fail his family. He’d already done enough damage.

Sweat soaked his clothes even though the air was cool. Every muscle within his body screamed from the repeated motion of swinging and tugging, but he kept pulling at the pick with all he had. Could he even make a dent in the massive mountain of debris in front of him?

“Maddy, I’m coming. It’s your dad. I’m here.”

More dirt. More rocks. Another swing. Then another.

“Honey, just talk to me. It’s going to be okay.”

“Daddy?” The sound was muffled and weak, but it was her voice.

Chris climbed up the wall to where he’d made a small hole at the top. He forced his voice through the opening. “Maddy, are you all right?”

“It’s cold and I’m scared.”

“Don’t move, I’m coming. Just keep talking.” He lifted the pick and pushed his aching muscles to move as fast as they could. How long had she been there? In the dark and all alone. His heart wrenched and he grimaced. If he had been home rather than at the saloon . . .

Overwhelming thirst took over his mind. His tongue felt like cotton. If only he had a drink.

He closed his eyes against the demons in his mind and swung the pick.

Focus. He could get a drink later. After he rescued Maddy and got her home.

“I wanna go home.” His little girl’s voice sounded so sad.

“I know, honey. I’m coming. I am.” Another swing. The hole widened. If he could just go faster.

“It’s so cold.” Her voice was shaky now.

He didn’t have a lot of time. Swinging the pick for all he was worth, he chipped at the wall of dirt and rock. Over and over and over.

Finally, the hole seemed big enough to get through. He peered into the expanse beyond, but it was all black. “Maddy? Where are you?”

“Over here. The lantern went out.”

“Can you see me? Can you climb up to me so I can pull you out?”

“I’ll try.”

He heard her movements but couldn’t see her in the pitch black. Until her hand grabbed onto his. Small and freezing cold, it was still a relief.

“I’ve got you. Now push with your legs up the wall while I pull, all right?”

“Okay.”

As he pulled, he reached down with his other hand to get a better hold. Rumbling began around them.

Maddy screamed.

Dirt rained down.

Chris yanked harder on his daughter. They couldn't be buried alive—

There! She was through the hole. He held her in his arms and grabbed the lantern as the rumbling grew louder. They had to get out fast.

Running over the rough and debris-littered floor, Chris prayed for the first time in years. *God, I know I'm not worthy of You listening to me, but if You help us out of this, I'll turn my life around. I promise.*

Light from the entrance of the tunnel grew in front of him. The ground shook and rolled around them.

Maddy ducked her head into his chest. Protectiveness and love poured through him. He'd have to follow through with his promise to God if they got out of this. And that wasn't such a bad thing, was it?

But he was so thirsty.

Lungs pinching, Chris made it the last few steps out. As soon as he set Maddy down on the ground, a loud crashing made him turn back to the mine. A cloud of dirt and dust roared toward them. He ducked his head and covered Maddy.

His heart pumped. They almost didn't make it.

Madysen started crying. Great big sobs. "Daddy . . . I was so scared." She threw her little arms around his neck. "But I kept praying that God would send somebody to find me."

He clenched his eyes tight. What would he have done if the mine had collapsed on his daughter? The thought was almost too much to bear.

"I love you, sweet girl. And I will always come to find you, no matter where you are. I'll always be there for you."

# ONE

*Thirteen years later*  
*Nome, Alaska—September 12, 1904*

The lively tune on the piano couldn't keep up with the smile in Madysen's heart. Too much heartache and grief had enveloped them for too long. But now boisterous laughter, off-key singing from some of the men, and plenty of lively conversation surrounded her as she surveyed the crowd. What a wonderful party. And it was all for her.

Her twenty-first birthday.

The sweet smell of baked goodies filled the air. Tables were packed with cakes, pies, and an array of other treats. How precious that these people cared for her so much.

The Roadhouse was full to the brim, and she would sing with her sisters in a little while to keep all the patrons happy. They were, after all, used to the Powell sisters entertaining them. Herb told them often that the crowds at his Roadhouse were all credit to them. The thought made her smile. Madysen loved every minute of their performances.

For a time they'd entertained every night but Sunday. It had been glorious. Singing and playing for hours.

The performing had gotten her through the toughest times.

Financially, it helped the family during Granddad's bouts with apoplexy . . . but for her? It was life giving. Which made her miss it even more.

But now that their financial worries were lessened, it only made sense to cut back on their performances since there were so many responsibilities at the farm. Granddad needed to recover fully from his illness, and Madysen *had* added an extra burden to everyone when she acquired the sheep. . . . But oh, how she missed performing every night.

She smoothed the skirt of her favorite green dress, smiled, and received more well wishes, but she couldn't quite bring her thoughts into the present. Maybe she longed to perform every night because it reminded her of Mama. Helped her feel connected to her somehow. She missed their mother so much.

A burning sensation started at the back of her eyes. Not now. She couldn't afford tears tonight. Even though grief was still fresh, she and her family desperately needed this bright bit of sunshine. It had been a hard summer.

Forcing her mind to the present, she tapped her toe to Whitney's vivacious piano playing and closed her eyes, letting the glorious sounds of a room full of joyful people fill her senses.

This was how it should be. Everyone getting along. Laughter. Fun. Happiness. If only she could capture it all in a box and pull it out whenever she wanted.

"I can't wait to hear you gals sing tonight." Toothless Jim's voice interrupted her thoughts.

Opening her eyes, she saw his familiar crooked smile. "Why, thank you, kind sir." The old man never missed one of their concerts.

His face flushed pink. "Aww, you always know how to make me feel like a gentleman. Now don't ya go leaving us to tour the world. You got lots of fans right here. And we tip pretty good." He held up a bag and shook it. The clinking of coins accentuated his laugh.

Watching Toothless Jim walk away, Madysen tilted her head. Over the last few months, thoughts of performing beyond Nome had surfaced more often. A comment here or there from one of the newcomers to Nome surprised to find the Powell women's musical talent in such a remote place . . . the memory of Mama encouraging them to use their musical talents because they were gifts from God and should be used for His glory . . . her constant dreaming of beautiful concert halls . . .

It all sent her thoughts in that direction.

Madysen had no problem imagining a life focused on her music, but could she actually think about leaving her family and Alaska? Obviously she couldn't expect to perform full-time here at the Roadhouse. Nome wasn't all that big . . . not like New York, Chicago, or London.

"Madysen?" The voice pulled her out of her thoughts, and she glanced up into her father's hesitant eyes.

Clearing her throat, she blinked several times. Was she ready for this? "Hi, Dad."

Some of the uncertainty left his face, and a slight smile lifted his lips. "I appreciate you inviting me."

She sent him a return smile. But not a full one. Why on earth did she invite him? It didn't feel like a good idea anymore. He hadn't been a part of their lives for over thirteen years, and then he just showed up in Nome. Madysen still couldn't make sense of it.

"I know this hasn't been easy on any of you." His voice cracked, then he looked around the room. Awkward couldn't describe the interaction. "How's Chuck?"

"Granddad is getting stronger every day. Thanks for asking." Eyeing Whitney's fierce glare from across the room as she exited the stage, Madysen gave a little shrug to her eldest sister. Turning back to their dad, she straightened her shoulders. "I'm sorry. Please, if you'll excuse me."

She wiped her hands on her skirt as she took a deep breath

and headed toward her sisters, who were huddled in the corner near the stage.

“What is *he* doing here?” Whit hissed the words.

“I invited him. And don’t even ask me why.” Madysen let her exasperation with the whole situation tint her words as she waved her hands in front of her sisters.

“You did?” Havyn and Whitney chimed together.

“It was a bad idea, I know. But I guess I felt sorry for him when we didn’t invite him to the wedding, and somehow I ended up inviting him here.”

Havyn’s red hair swung with the shaking of her head. “Oh, no, you don’t. Don’t blame this on me, or the fact I asked him not to come to the wedding. We all agreed it was for the best.”

“I wasn’t blaming you. I’m sorry.” Madysen put a hand to her forehead. “I just felt guilty. How do I get myself into these things?”

“You have a big heart.” Havyn glanced over to their dad. “We should probably take our cue from you, but frankly, it’s hard having him around. Without Mama.” Her words softened.

*Without Mama.* No one said a word for several moments.

Losing Mama tore at Madysen’s heart every hour of every day. Her world had tilted, and she wasn’t sure it would ever be upright again.

“Look, I didn’t invite him to be nice or merciful, believe it or not. I’m not really sure *why* I sent the invitation. I feel sorry for him, yes, but in truth I’m also angry. I suppose I thought it might ease both.”

Her brother-in-law, John, stepped closer. “I couldn’t help but overhear.”

Madysen grimaced. “I’m sorry. To all of you.” She pressed her hands to her temples. “I shouldn’t have invited him.”

John patted her shoulder. “No apology necessary.”

It soothed her spirit in places she couldn’t even explain. Probably because she never had a brother . . . or much of a dad for

that matter. Being the youngest in her family was normally a joy, but at times she wrestled with it. Especially when everyone mothered her. With Mama gone, her older sisters wanted to protect her, but they didn't know how to fill the holes. And that was the thing . . . no one could.

He took a moment to look at each of them. "I know how hard this has been on all of you. But it appears your father's not leaving anytime soon. So might I suggest that we deal with it the best we can?"

Several moments passed as they exchanged glances between each other.

Whitney was the first to speak. She lifted her chin. "Yes, as much as I was hoping this would be easier, he does seem to be staying in Nome, so I think we should probably come up with a plan for how we are going to deal with this."

John stepped even closer and motioned the sisters in. "You can't avoid him forever. What is right. We need some sort of plan. Do you want me to talk to him?"

Even though everyone always said Madysen was the merciful sister, for some reason she wasn't feeling any toward their father. She watched her sisters for their response. The last few months had changed them all, but they were in this together.

Havyn pursed her lips. "You're right, we can't avoid him, no matter how difficult this is. And as much as I appreciate you offering to speak to him, John, *we* need to figure out how we are going to deal with the situation."

Whitney crossed her arms over her chest. "All right then. Let's make a plan. What do you know about him, John?"

He tilted his head a bit.

The lively party continued around them, which made it difficult for Madysen to stay focused. She'd much rather be distracted by the fun. But John cleared his throat, and she forced herself to listen.

“I’ve heard that he really is a nice man. So maybe his story of turning his life around is true.”

“I highly doubt that.” Whit’s mama-bear mentality had kicked into high gear. Something Madysen loved about her. “It’s going to take a lot more than him showing up in Nome and *telling* us that he’s changed to convince me. I’m going to need to see it for myself.”

“As much as it hurts to say it, I agree.” Havyn ducked her head a bit. “I’m thankful that he’s alive and not dead—I am. But this is a lot to swallow. Especially after losing Mama.”

Tears sprang to Madysen’s eyes. Sometimes she hated the way she became emotional so quickly. “I’m thankful he’s alive too. But this is hard. I guess I didn’t realize *how* hard. Oh, why did he have to show up this summer?”

“Maddy, I’m sorry, and this is supposed to be your birthday party.” Havyn wrapped her arms around her in a big hug. “Do you want us to ask him to leave?”

Her thoughts warred with one another. On one hand, she wished she could avoid it all, while on the other, she had an inkling that Mama would want them to at least show him some respect. She pulled out of Havyn’s arms, swiped at her eyes, and straightened her shoulders. “No. I invited him. I should probably go speak with him.” She turned on her heel and headed back toward their father.

An arm on her shoulder stopped her. “We’re coming with you.” The look in Havyn’s eyes almost did her in. But they could do this. Together.

With his hands shoved in his pockets, Dad stood right where she’d left him, looking a bit forlorn. How would she feel if someone had invited her to a party and then left her all alone? Especially if she hadn’t been in town all that long. Her dad probably didn’t know many people. What kind of daughter was she?

Her emotions made everything inside her feel sick. “I’m sorry I left.”

“That’s understandable, Madysen. I’m sorry I put you in this predicament in the first place.” He held out his hands in front of him. “Look, I don’t have any idea how to make things right or where to go from here. I’ve wanted to spend time with you girls . . . get to know you again. But I understand you probably don’t want to talk to me.” His lips thinned into a straight line.

Was he fighting off tears himself?

How was she supposed to respond?

“Hi, Dad.”

Thank goodness. Havyn to the rescue. She nodded toward their dad and leaned toward him in an awkward hug.

Whitney stayed back a pace and kept her arms crossed over her chest. Watching.

Dad stood stiff, his hands at his side. Another awkward pause encompassed them before he spoke. “I should wish you a happy birthday. That is why I’m here after all.” A forced smile now filled his face as he gazed from one sister to another.

“Thank you.” Madysen motioned to a few chairs. “Why don’t we sit down for a few minutes?” That was all she could offer.

He nodded and sat with her. The room filled with familiar faces and lively chatter kept her grounded.

“What have you been doing since you first came to Nome?” One breath at a time, one question at a time. They could have a reasonable conversation with him. Start over. Build something fresh. That was what she wanted, wasn’t it? So why was it so hard?

Because good fathers didn’t do what he did. The thought taunted her.

“Well, I knew you girls needed some time. And frankly, I did too. When your mother died before I got to make things right with her, I wanted to run away and hide. It hit me hard that we’d lost her.”

She nodded. Because that’s all she *could* do. She couldn’t look at her sisters. They all had tempers, but Mama often said

that Madysen's was the fiercest. Right now, she felt that. And this man was talking about their mother's loss as if he had some right to grieve along with them. He didn't have that right. And she wouldn't give it to him. Never. Claspng her hands together, she squeezed as hard as she could as the heat crept up her chest and neck, threatening to explode out of the top of her head.

No. She had to keep a lid on the anger. What would people think of her if she blew up at her long-thought-dead father at her own birthday party? Struggling to hold her composure, she bit her lip.

Whitney broke the silence. "Why did you come up here?" While there wasn't any anger in her voice, it certainly wasn't warm and friendly.

Dad swallowed, then leaned forward and put his hands on his knees. He took several breaths and swiped a hand down his face. "My main reason was to come tell you all the truth and ask for forgiveness. I wanted you to see the difference in me. But I had another reason as well. My brother-in-law came up here in '03. Supposed to come back home six months later, but no one has seen or heard from him. So Ruth—that's my sister-in-law—asked me to come find him."

"Your brother-in-law?" Madysen tried to keep her tone from being too clipped, but to hear Dad talking about this other family made her want to run away and hit something. Not a welcome feeling. But she forced herself to stay . . . she needed the truth more than anything else.

"Stan—Stanley Robertson. He's married to Ruth, who is . . . that is . . . she's Esther's sister." He took a shaky breath. "Esther is the woman who . . ."

Madysen held up a hand. It took too much effort to keep a lid on her emotions. Her words spilled out. "The woman you got pregnant before you supposedly died and left us."

"Maddy!" Havyn's sharp retort stopped her.

Dad's shoulders stiffened and he lifted his chin. "I know I

messed up. I failed. But I married her after that. She was my wife, and I would appreciate a touch of respect for her. She was a good woman.” His voice caught.

“So was our mother. A better woman than you apparently knew.” Madysen didn’t even try to keep the accusation out of her tone. It left her with a sour feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“She was that. She was a saint. The woman had an endless ability to forgive. She never made demands on me.”

“Maybe she should have.” Crossing her arms over her chest, Madysen didn’t care if her words stung.

He nodded. “I agree. Maybe if she had . . .” He shook his head. “No. I’m not going to try to make excuses. Your mother was a wonderful woman, but Esther was good too. She stood by my side and cleaned me up. If not for her, I wouldn’t be here today.” His eyes shone with a glaze of tears. “I would have died for sure with a bottle in my hand.”

Madysen shifted in her seat. To hear her father’s story, she’d have to hear about the other woman. Esther. She looked at her sisters. Whitney stood as still as a statue, her brow furrowed. Havyn looked like she might cry. Or be sick.

Madysen understood that feeling all too well as the taste of bile crept up her throat. But they had to get this over with. She swallowed. “Go on.”

His face paled. “Esther passed away last year. It tore me up. But Ruth helped me with the kids. Even though she was having an awful time with her own brood with Stan being gone. So when she asked me to come up here, I couldn’t refuse. Not after all she’d done for me. My other . . . well, my other kids are with her.”

Other kids. Just like Maddy and her sisters had heard about . . . but now they seemed more . . . *real* as their dad talked about them. Madysen closed her eyes again for a brief moment and put her hand to her stomach before looking at him again. She could do this. “How many do you have?”

Pride filled his face, and his lips hinted at a smile. “There’s three—other than you and your sisters. Matthew is eighteen, Elijah—we call him Eli—is fourteen, and then there’s Bethany. She’s twelve.”

They had three more siblings. Three. The oldest of which was a mere three years younger than herself. That meant . . . she shook her head. She refused to think about what that meant. Heat crept up her neck.

Whitney turned in a swift motion and marched away. Mady-sen couldn’t blame her. The look on Havyn’s face wasn’t shock—she’d known about their father’s indiscretions since she was young—but the pain there was profound.

Dad’s face fell. “I can see the wheels turning, Maddy—”

“Please, don’t call me that as if we can just pick back up where you left off.” She wouldn’t look into his sad eyes. She wouldn’t. He didn’t deserve mercy or acceptance.

“Mady-sen. I’m sorry. I know what you’re thinking, and you’re right to think I’m an awful person. I was—”

She held up a hand and stood. “No. No more. It’s my birthday, and it’s supposed to be a celebration after all the grief we’ve endured. This isn’t a good time.”

He stood too and took her elbow. “Is there ever going to be a good time? This is hard on me too, you know. I lost Esther and now Melissa. And my kids are having to stay with their aunt while I’m up here.”

Was he really comparing his pain to theirs? Wanting their sympathy? After all he’d done to them? “You’re good at leaving your kids for someone else to raise, aren’t you? Well, if you are feeling guilty about that, why don’t you just go back to them?”

Havyn’s gasp followed her as she turned and walked away as fast as she could from that horrible man.

Anger—one. Mercy—zero.