

All Things Hidden

TRACIE PETERSON

— *and* —

KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE



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Song lyrics quoted: “Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus,” Louisa M. R. Stead, 1882.

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author’s imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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This book is lovingly dedicated to

Lori Healy

Through all the TV craziness, home schooling, the writing of books, traveling with us on book tours and signings, and sorting millions of phone calls and emails—you've been a constant friend and trusted assistant.

Thank you, precious lady.

Authors' Note

The novel you are about to read is fiction, though it is bathed in historical detail, facts, and yes—a few factual characters. We loved researching and discovering these fascinating people who were pioneers of their time, but most of the personality traits and characteristics were fleshed out in our own imaginations and should be construed as such.

The Hillermans and Dr. Vaughan were not historical people of this time period, but many of the other characters were. Please see our note to the reader at the end of the book to see the list there. (Yes, there really *was* a man chosen with a wooden leg, there was a teenage girl who had a bear cub as a pet, and one of the colony houses was torn down three times and restarted.)

In addition to the characters, a major part of the story is the grand setting of Alaska. Were you to visit the Mat-Su Valley today, you would see a landscape much different from the time of our novel. In fact, the cities of Wasilla and Palmer didn't exist yet. But thanks in part to the colony and

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the other homesteaders who stuck it out during the Great Depression, the valley flourishes today.

Our great country's history is rich, and we invite you along on a journey to discover one of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal projects: The Matanuska Colonization.

Enjoy the journey.

Tracie and Kimberley

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FEBRUARY 1, 1935

ANCHORAGE, ALASKA TERRITORY

Fear twisted Gwyn Hillerman's stomach just like her fingers twisted the delicate handkerchief into a knot. If she wasn't careful, the fabric would be ruined. Forcing her hands to still, she glanced out the picture window on the southeast side of the large lodge. Wind whipped at the jagged peaks surrounding the small town of Anchorage, the snow whirling around like a dance. But even the rugged beauty of her beloved mountains couldn't calm her spirit. Usually the daily sight of God's handiwork cheered her, no matter how hard the wind blew, how low the temperature dropped, or how deep the snow drifted. It was Alaska, after all—the most beautiful place on the planet.

But today was different. A heavy sigh left her lips. How long must they be kept waiting?

She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. The warm glow from the fireplace couldn't ease the chill of anxiety. What was this new board? And what would it mean for them? Would a group of total strangers make life-changing

decisions without concern for what others in the area might want?

As much as Gwyn loved people and loved helping her father doctor the few families in their remote area, she held an equal amount of hate at the thought of change. Maybe because Mother always wanted change.

Which was why she'd left them.

Gwyn glanced at her father. Gray hair, shoulders straight and strong, twinkling gray eyes as he read the *Anchorage Daily News*. His face held an expression of expectance. Almost joyous. The exact opposite of what Gwyn felt inside.

This beautiful and grand territory was her home. Not here in the bustling little town of Anchorage, but in the quiet valley—the snow-covered mountains of the Chugach and Talkeetnas on the east and the north. The Knik Arm joining them to the Cook Inlet in the south. The moose, the bear, the spruce, the snow . . . The Matanuska valley was *her* valley. The people were *her* people; she'd known them almost all of her life. But more than that, she belonged here. It was etched on her soul.

Gwyn's thoughts went back to their comfortable place—worry. What would the government board members require of them? Would they ask her father to take another post? How could she leave her home?

She had a few memories of life back in Chicago, but they were disconnected. Unreal. This place—Alaska—held her in its mesmerizing grip. She didn't want or need change.

Change meant new. Different.

But most of all, change meant heartache.

Gwyn unwound the fabric from her fingers and attempted to press it flat. Each tick of the clock seemed to span longer

with each beat. She folded the kerchief in rhythm, feeling as if time almost stood still. She allowed herself to dart a glance to the clock over the fireplace in the large meeting room. It couldn't be working properly.

Good grief, she'd allowed her nerves to get the best of her once again. With a huff, Gwyn blew a few curls off her forehead. She stood and walked around the room before she could mangle the monogrammed cloth in her hands. Again.

Time to get her mind off these worrisome thoughts. Worry never helped. Besides, it was a sin. She could almost hear Nasnana's voice—in her gentle singsong way—drilling those words into her as a child. A lesson she still needed to learn. The older native woman had taken Gwyn under her wing at an early age, when Gwyn formed an attachment to Nasnana's granddaughter, Sadzi. The two girls had been inseparable, and Gwyn would always be grateful for the woman's guiding hand in her life.

But even with Nasnana's advice and direction, Gwyn's habit of giving in to worry had gotten her into trouble on multiple occasions. A glance down at the frayed fabric between her fingers proved she hadn't conquered it yet. But she would.

With a nod to emphasize her point, she tucked the hankie into her pocket and focused her thoughts on the furnishings around her. Dark wood beams covered the ceiling, but the log building's interior walls were plastered and painted a creamy white. Three long tables surrounded the room, but they wouldn't do at all. Crossing her arms, Gwyn cocked her head to the right and narrowed her gaze. The chairs sat in a crooked line, if one could even call it a line. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason whatsoever. Well, she could fix that.

Gwyn scurried around the room, straightening chairs and

the several sets of wooden benches that took up residence in the middle.

Another glance at the clock. Bother. That spent all of two minutes. She blew a stray curl off her forehead. She needed something to occupy her mind. Something other than worry. As the fire roared in the grand fireplace, Gwyn looked out one of the windows. Snow dwelt two inches above the ledge and they still had a good bit of winter left. A memory surfaced.

“Father?”

The newspaper crinkled. “I’m sorry, Gwyn, did you say something?”

“Do you remember the winter we had blizzard after blizzard and the snow reached the roof?”

“I do.” He chuckled and the paper rustled some more in his hands. “You dug tunnels all the way around the house. Oh, the energy of youth.”

She laughed with him and crossed her arms. “If I recall, you helped.” It had been a tough winter. Their first without her mother and sister.

“I did.” He patted the chair next to him with the now-folded newsprint. “Come, sit.”

Plopping down onto the seat in a manner her mother would deem unladylike, Gwyn fidgeted some more.

Her father reached out a strong hand and covered both of hers. “I’m sure it will be good news, my dear. What’s causing all these nervous jitters?”

Gwyn met his gaze. Harold Hillerman was a handsome man. Add to that, he was caring, positive, helpful, a wonderful doctor, and he loved the Lord. How could her mother have ever thought to leave this man? It didn’t make sense. Gwyn shook her head to rid her mind of the negative thoughts.

It'd be best if she didn't cause him more concern. When she worried, he hovered and tried to fix everything. Father hadn't quite recovered emotionally since Mother and Sophia abandoned them for the amenities of "civilized society." Oh, he was strong and steadfast, as always. But Gwyn never wanted to see the same pain in her father's eyes again. More than that, she had no intention of being the source.

She pasted on a smile. "Of course. It was just a bit of a shock—the request that we attend a meeting, when we have no idea what it's about." She squeezed his hand and released it with a long sigh. "I'm not very good at surprises. Or waiting."

Father chuckled. "With this, I'm all too familiar." He gave another pat to her hands. "Change is coming, my dear."

Of course it was. And that was the exact thing she *didn't* want.

The clock chimed, bringing her attention back to her impatience. What could be taking so long? They'd taken the time to travel to Anchorage and now were kept waiting. Although the board technically wasn't late . . . yet. She and Father were just early. But the waiting . . . oh, she abhorred waiting.

She placed her hands on her knees, straightened, and breathed deeply. Gwyn longed for the crisp, frozen air outside and the cabin she called home. Meeting with a bunch of government bigwigs in town was not her idea of an outing.

Outings were for friends, a hike in the woods, snowshoeing up the pass, catching salmon in the stream, picking berries, or helping her father deliver a baby. Meetings in town would never be on her wish list of outings.

A slammed door made her jump. Heavy footsteps followed, echoing on the wooden floor. Finally. The waiting would be

over. Her spine straightened out of habit as her fingers fidgeted with the hankie again.

A stout man walked into the room, followed by an assortment of five well-dressed businessmen. The leader carried a mess of papers. When he reached the table at the front of the room, the others began to take chairs and sit. The stout man's papers slid in disarray as he dropped them in a heap. Gwyn longed to reach out and straighten the pile.

A heavy sigh preceded the leader's drop into his chair. "Good afternoon, Dr. Hillerman, Miss Hillerman." His smile seemed genuine. "I'm George Townsend. I've been asked to head up this new board of the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation—ARRC—until President Roosevelt gets everything in place. These gentlemen are here to assist as well."

Gwyn's father walked to the table to shake each man's hand. "We're eager to hear what news you have and how we may be of service."

Mr. Townsend nodded his head and leaned forward. "Thank you. Have a seat and let's get right to it. President Roosevelt has initiated some new experiments to help the country through these tough times. The ARRC will be a part of that. On January fifteenth, the decision was made to move forward with what the president calls the Matanuska Colony Project."

Gwyn drew her eyebrows together. The Matanuska Colony Project? Referring to *her* valley? The president of the United States?

Her father sat back and nodded. "January fifteenth? You're moving forward pretty fast."

"That's why we summoned you as soon as we heard and why we're a little unorganized." Mr. Townsend shuffled

through the messy pile. “Forgive me as I work to be clear on this matter. It will progress even faster as we approach the end of winter.” He pulled out a sheet of paper and continued. “The Matanuska Project is to bring relief to a portion of the American people and bring settlement to Alaska. The president wants them here by May to prepare for the next winter.”

Gwyn’s stomach dropped. Settlement? They meant to settle the valley? Mr. Townsend continued speaking to her father, but her ears clamped shut. She loved Alaska. Truly, she did. And she loved to share with others. Hadn’t she always wanted the world to know what an incredible land she lived in? To give people glimpses of the wonderland that was her home? But she’d only done that twice. And those were wealthy tourists wanting to explore the Last Frontier. But they came and went and left the valley in peace.

“Approximately two hundred families will be chosen for the colonization of the Matanuska valley,” she heard the board chairman say as she started listening again. The man slid his glasses to the end of his nose and held out two of the sheets of paper from his stack to read. “Families will be selected from those areas with a climate closest to Alaska’s and those hardest hit by the droughts: Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.”

She swallowed. Her throat was so dry. What she wouldn’t give for a huge glass of water.

Her father chimed in. “Will there be any medical personnel coming as well?”

The man to Mr. Townsend’s right responded. “Not at this time. The Red Cross will hopefully send some nurses, but right now this is all we know. That’s why we asked to meet

with you. We would like to avoid any epidemics or deaths that would cast a poor light on the area to the rest of the world.”

Her ever-calm father crinkled his brow. “You should know by now my dedication to healing people, but this is a *large number* of people we’re talking about. I can’t guarantee the health of everyone just so we look good to the press—besides, we haven’t had any press up in our area for some time, sir, so why are you concerned?”

“We appreciate your honesty, Dr. Hillerman, and we’re asking you to do this for the benefit of future Alaskans. These people will need medical care. As to the press, the president’s declaration has caused quite a stir in the newspapers. We’ll probably have a lot of tenderfoot reporters up here as well.” The man at the end of the table puffed on his cigar. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we’re all in the papers every day.”

Discussion erupted around the table as the men voiced their excitement about the chance for Alaska to make its mark on the world. Other people would surely see the beauty and opportunities in this Last Frontier. *Hope* would be Alaska’s new motto.

Gwyn bowed her head. *Two hundred families*. That could be well over a thousand people. With no clue how to survive in the often harsh land that was Alaska.

Her brain replayed those three words again and again like a stuck phonograph.

Two. Hundred. Families.

She attempted to swallow again and almost choked. Her throat felt like it was stuffed with cotton.

Two. Hundred. Families.

Heat rose up her neck and into her face. She attempted to breathe.

But the air in her lungs fought for space to move around the words. . . . *Two. Hundred. Families.*

And they would be here in less than four months.

Harold watched his daughter stare out the window of the train. For twenty-two years he'd been blessed by her quick mind and quiet spirit. This wouldn't be easy for her, all the chaos and upheaval. Gwyn liked things stable. Organized.

And steady. She enjoyed the quietness of their lives. But even though he understood her underlying fear, she'd done a great job in front of the board, showing her strength and ability to assist and tackle a project. It'd been obvious she was dumbstruck at the beginning of the meeting, but as the plan unfolded, his brave Gwyn had straightened her shoulders, cleared her throat, and answered their questions without any hesitation.

The Matanuska Project. His heart sped up a little at the thought. The president's task was unprecedented. But the biggest question dangled out there: Could they be ready in time?

Harold allowed his thoughts to go back to the meeting. What little facts they knew for certain were overwhelming. The colony families would be chosen by each state's local aid workers. The federal government would pay for their transportation and for shipment of two thousand pounds of household goods per family, and would build them a house and a barn on their forty-acre parcel, which would be purchased for five dollars an acre and given out by lottery once all the colonists arrived. Each family would be granted a loan to pay for their land, farm equipment, and household goods as needed. For all of that, the colonists must agree to live in

Alaska for thirty years. Eighty thousand acres were already set aside in the Matanuska valley.

As the train chugged the forty-plus miles toward their valley, Harold considered the needs of the colonists. Adding another thousand people—if not more—to care for in a very rural area would tax his time and energy. What would this mean for him? He was the only white doctor outside of Anchorage for hundreds of miles into the interior. His heart had always been for the Alaskan Indians. If that many people moved in, how would he have time to travel to the remote villages? He already cared for almost a thousand people.

And what of the hundreds of transient workers the board planned to bring up? They would help provide jobs and also help out the colonists, but they were going to be in need of medical care as well. Especially when clearing land and building on an insane timeline were involved. The rush plus the people not being acclimated to Alaska could prove to be disastrous. Harold prayed not.

His thoughts drifted to Edith. His wife's disdain for his work bothered him to this day. She had never liked the native Alaskan people and disliked his work with them even more. When she left, she'd blamed him. Could he have done something more to keep her here?

But her goals and wishes for him had always been her own visions of grandeur. Raised in wealth and in the city, she'd jumped at the chance to marry a promising doctor from a good family. Harold had fooled himself to think it was because of love. Their first few years had been wonderful, but very busy with his work at the hospital in Chicago and the addition of their two baby girls.

Edith's true heart appeared several months after the Hiller-

man family arrived in the Alaska Territory in 1916 to homestead. With the railroad's work to connect the interior to the ports, four hundred homesteads had been applied for the previous years. Harold knew he could build a medical practice and work to help build the hospital in Anchorage. The territory was exciting to all the wealthy people in society. Edith and her friends seemed so supportive of this new move. But once they left Chicago, she'd followed like a ghost as a dutiful wife with two young children. And her demeanor changed. After the difficult journey and the realization that the comforts of home wouldn't be in Alaska for years, possibly decades, her silence turned to rage.

In his heart, all these years, Harold knew he'd married a spoiled girl, but she'd always been sweet. And she was so beautiful. But after the fateful move to this beautiful land, in private she unleashed her anger on him. He worked hard to please her, and Edith's pride kept her by his side until her father suffered a massive heart attack after the stock market crash of '29.

It was all the excuse she needed. And she left.

Harold glanced at Gwyn again. Her hands folded tight in her lap, eyes closed. Probably praying about the changes to come. As he gazed at his older daughter, he pondered what he'd done to deserve her loyalty, and where he'd gone wrong with her sister, Sophia.

When Gwyn had followed him around like a young pup, wanting to learn anything and everything there was to know about helping people, Sophia wanted more ribbons for her hair and soaked up every word Edith told her about how the "real" world lived. All the talk of grand dances, lavish dinner parties, and society occasions filled the young beauty's head with the same ideals as her mother.

And he'd allowed it. Allowed one daughter to be spoiled while granting himself the adoration of the other.

Guilt squeezed his heart in time with the chugging of the train. If only he'd been a better husband, a better father, maybe they would have stayed . . . maybe . . .

No. This wasn't an easy place to live. Beautiful and fertile, yes, but darkness, harsh winters, and death caused more than one family to abandon their homes and farms. Only about a hundred of the original families were left.

Edith tried to convince Gwyn to leave "this Godforsaken country" with her and Sophia, stating that no young woman should be left in the wild, untamed land. But as much as Edith argued and yelled, Gwyn dug in her heels and stayed by Harold's side.

Edith left with not even a hug for her husband and daughter. Harold would never forget the sting of her expression as she looked over her shoulder at him, grabbed Sophia's hand, jugged her chin forward, and walked away.

And they hadn't returned.

His heart shattered that day.

A tear rolling down Gwyn's cheek caught his attention and brought him back to the present. A wife abandoning a husband was one thing, but a mother abandoning a child was quite another.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. Gwyn wasn't one for coddling or sympathy, so he pressed the kerchief into her hand. Even though she never expressed it to him, he knew. The worry in her eyes every time he left without her. The tears every time she received a letter in Edith's handwriting.

Her heart had never healed either.

She dabbed at the tears and straightened her shoulders. “Well, I guess we have a lot of work to do.” The weak smile she gave him couldn’t erase the fear he saw in her eyes.

“Yes, it sounds like we will have our hands full.”

She looked forward and sniffed. “I know you are excited about this, Father. I will do whatever I can to help.”

“I know you will.”

Gwyn turned back to the window.

Harold let his thoughts roam. Excited? Yes, he was excited. New people. New families. New homes. New farms. New businesses.

Their beautiful valley would thrive.

But Gwyn didn’t share his excitement. At least not yet.

His mind couldn’t quite take in all the thoughts as it jumped from one subject to another. He longed to be able to discuss them with his daughter but knew she needed time to digest all the information thrown at them in the meeting.

America needed encouragement through these tough times. Alaska was bountiful. This was sure to be a successful project. But the thought of more than two thousand people for one physician to care for overwhelmed him. Gwyn’s gifts as a nurse were valuable. She had no formal training, no hospital work, no experience whatsoever except what she’d learned from him. Would the government consider sending him another doctor? Most of his patients lived off the beaten path in small villages. And he didn’t desire to give up his work with the native Indian people. Would the government expect that of him? Would they see the natives as less important and demand he work solely with the whites?

Even if they tried to demand it, he wouldn’t allow for it. People were people no matter the color of their skin or the

place they lived. He'd give his all, so long as he had the ability to work.

But it wouldn't be easy. He knew that. He wasn't one of those men who could cast aside the truth and pretend that roses would pop up where turnips had been planted.

An idea took root. He needed help. Where could he find someone with enough of an adventurous spirit to abandon city life and a steady income to come here? During one of the worst economic times the country had ever seen?



The scent of spruce trees and the glittering powder of fresh-fallen snow greeted Gwyn as she exited the train at the tiny stop for their valley. Quiet. Serene. With nothing around. Finally, her world was right again. The meeting with the ARRC had been thrilling. To her father, at least. To her, it just meant change. The unknown. Between all the details and the rapid timeline, she found her thoughts spinning out of control. As they made the trek to their home on foot, she longed for space to mull it all over, and the place calling her right now was Nasnana's.

She kept pace with her father. "I'd like to go visit Nasnana and Sadzi, if that's all right with you."

Her father turned to her and patted her shoulder, his breath visible in little puffs. "That would be fine. We will definitely need their help preparing the newcomers for the next winter. Would you mind asking them for their assistance?" Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "I wonder if it would be prudent to move my clinic closer to the train. It would take a bit of effort, but maybe we should think of moving the cabin as well."

Gwyn wasn't sure she liked the direction her father's thoughts were taking. Change, change, change. Too much change. She felt her forehead crease with a frown.

Father turned back to her. "Goodness, there I go again. Don't mind me, Gwyn. You know how I think ahead. Don't worry about all that right now. It will all come in time." He gripped her shoulders and squeezed. "I need to write a letter, so I will be in my office."

Standing on tiptoe, she nodded and kissed her father's cheek before heading to her friends' home.

The solitude of the woods gave Gwyn the time she needed to corral her thoughts. The thick blanket of snow muted her steps. All was quiet. And peaceful. But how long would it stay that way? Her native friends would understand her feelings better than anyone.

How could she love the Lord, love people, love Alaska, and want to share it, and then *not* want to share it all at the same time? Her special little world seemed to be crumbling around her. Was she really that selfish?

Gwyn stopped in her tracks. Is that what had happened? Had she become selfish and uncaring? The thought horrified her—because those were traits she equated with her mother. Even though she loved the woman and still longed to know her mother's love in return, Gwyn had no desire to be like her. At all.

She crested a hill and poked her head through the trees. There in the distance, across the shining water of the Knik Arm, lay Susitna. The beautiful mountain rose up seemingly out of the water to bask in the sun's brief winter rays. The Sleeping Lady.

If only Gwyn could be like the native legend and lie down

to sleep one day. She could become a lush mountain and remain the same while the world changed around her. One day, Gwyn wanted to see if she could hike to the lovely lady and picnic at her base. But the legend behind the beloved mountain wasn't real. The changes to come *were*.

Soft munching to her right brought Gwyn's attention back to the moment. She smiled as she watched a young moose about twenty feet away stretch his neck to reach a shrub covered in snow. She giggled at his antics, but then mama moose appeared and stared straight at Gwyn. Time to move on.

It would have been smarter to grab her snowshoes before she headed this way, but she didn't mind the deep snow that slowed her steps—it gave her more time to think. How could she share all that was on her heart? Would the changes to come alter their relationships as well?

Sadzi greeted her outside the small cabin as she approached. Her friend's long black braid swung back and forth as Sadzi waved and then wrapped Gwyn in a tight hug. "It's so good to see you! Are you back from the meeting? What did they say?" Sadzi grabbed her hand and dragged her to the door.

Gwyn laughed in response. The only thing that could break through her barriers was one of Sadzi's hugs. They'd first met on Gwyn's sixth birthday. As the young native girl hugged Gwyn and played with her curly blond hair, she announced her birthday was the same day. Only she was a year younger. The two were fascinated with each other and had been best friends ever since. Gwyn always felt alive and real when she was with these precious people. "Yes, I have a lot of news. And I'm afraid it's a little scary."

Nasnana appeared at the entryway, dish towel in one hand,

iron skillet in the other. “The one scary thing on this earth is not knowing where you will spend eternity.” She pointed the skillet at Gwyn. “The rest is just worry. And worry—”

“—is a sin.”

“—is a sin.”

Gwyn and Sadzi laughed as they chimed in together and followed the older woman back into the house.

“Ah, so you have been listening to this old woman after all.”

“Only for the past sixteen years.” Gwyn hugged the woman who’d been the only grandmother she’d ever known.

Sadzi went to the stove. “Tea?”

“Yes, please.” Gwyn twisted her hands again and sat in a chair.

Nasnana sat next to her. “Now, what is this news?”

Two weathered hands covered Gwyn’s. Taking a deep breath, she decided to just plunge in with every detail, starting from the time they waited in the large room of the government lodge up to the end of the train ride.

After she’d spilled out every fact and word she could remember, she watched her friends. Sadzi’s eyes glowed—her excitement and anticipation palpable in the small room—while Nasnana’s smile grew.

“Well?” Gwyn glanced from Sadzi to her grandmother. “What do you think?”

The crinkled lines around Nasnana’s eyes increased. “I think this is exciting news. We all love this land, and God is using it as a way to rescue others from poverty and death.”

Sadzi bounced on her toes in the kitchen. “And just think of all the fun we’ll have teaching everyone about salmon and berries, and there will be children! Won’t it be fun to have little feet around here? We can make cookies, and fireweed honey,

and jellies . . .” Gwyn’s friend twirled around the kitchen as she continued her list.

Nasnana gripped Gwyn’s chin in her hand, forcing Gwyn to look at her. “You are afraid, precious one—I see it in your eyes. But there is no need to fear.”

Before she could stop them, tears sprang into Gwyn’s eyes. Their valley would change. “Oh, but there *is* . . .”