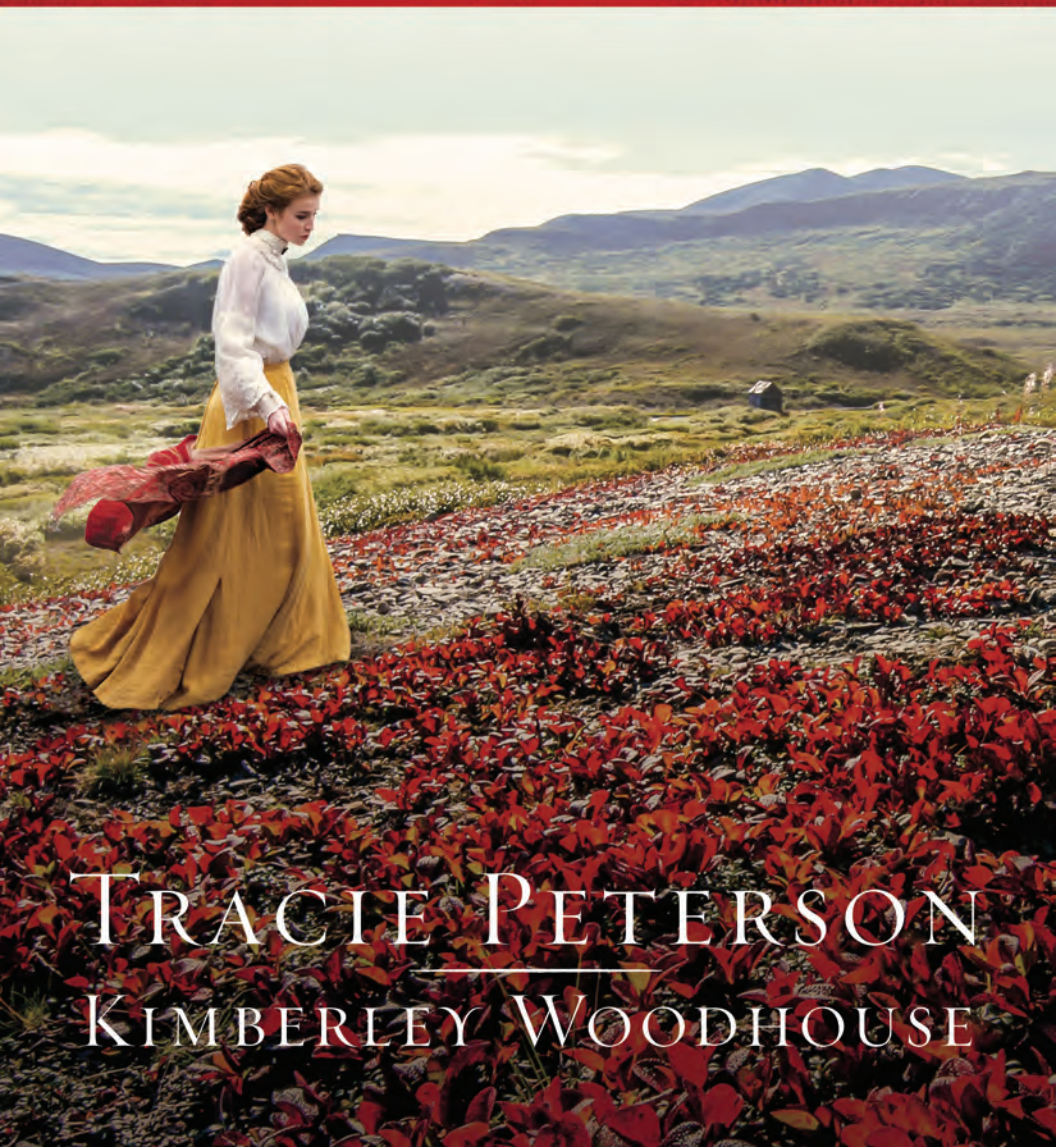


*The Treasures of Nome* v. 1

# FOREVER HIDDEN



TRACIE PETERSON  
KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE

*The Treasures of Nome* › 1



FOREVER  
HIDDEN



TRACIE PETERSON  
AND KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE



BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN 978-0-7642-3248-0 (paper)

ISBN 978-0-7642-3249-7 (cloth)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019949995

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

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Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Cover photography by Mike Habermann Photography, LLC

Kimberley Woodhouse is represented by The Steve Laube Agency.

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*To Miss B (otherwise known as Miss B Havyn).* Keep singing, beautiful girl. I miss seeing you every week for lessons, but it's a privilege to watch you blossom and grow from afar. (Thank goodness for the technology of today!) Oh, make sure you do the monkey exercise . . . at *least* once a day. For me.

*And to Monica and Merle Powell,* precious friends and an amazing couple. Thank you for allowing us to make fictional characters out of your girls. It has been so much fun. Although, we could never capture how amazing they really are! Keep on keepin' on—we cherish your friendship.

*And to Chuck and Diane Bundrant.* What an absolute privilege it is to know you and call you friends. Thank you for your generous spirits and love for people. You've touched thousands of lives.

*To God be the glory!*

## Dear Reader

This series began with three beautiful young ladies whose cinnamon-colored hair and dark brown eyes stirred us to create stories to match their spirits. Whitney, Havyn, and Madysen Powell were my (Kim's) piano and voice students. In January of 2017, they came to one of our book events, so excited that not only did I *know* the amazing Tracie Peterson, but we wrote books together. Tracie was completely captivated by my girls and told me that someone *had* to write stories about them. The idea was born and we ran with it.

In researching our next locale for this series, I came across some historical pictures from Nome. A few in particular were of the Nome Dairy and Poultry Yard. Inspiration struck when I saw a picture of a man with a yoke over his shoulders, two pails of milk dangling, with walls of snow around him that rose in height above his head. On top of the snow, a chicken appeared in mid stride. It cracked me up. I had chickens when we lived in the country in Colorado. I loved those girls. And yes, they all had names. In fact, the mom of

one of my piano students made a sign for my chicken house with all of their names. Check out my blog for pictures.

Apparently, I am not the “type” in most people’s minds to have chickens. So “Kim’s chicken adventure” amused my husband and my friends. Jeremy would often find me out there feeding them and carrying on conversations. (Don’t judge. Yes, I talked to my chickens. Yes, they chattered back. One followed me around like a puppy, always at my heels.) I even had a wonderful lady bring me a chicken at a large women’s event I spoke at—and much to Kayla’s shock, I drove all the way from Nebraska back to Colorado with the chicken in the car.

Needless to say, all the chicken stories in this series will be based on real events from Kim’s crazy time of having chickens. And one even from my dad. Well, my grandmother always told me the story. And made sure I saw the chicken grave. Every time we visited. Tracie also made me chicken pillows. I should post pictures of those too.

While Whitney, Havyn, and Madysen are named after the real girls, please remember they are fictional characters. But if you ever get the chance to hear the real-life Powell girls sing or play, you should take it. I promise you won’t be disappointed.

As always, Tracie and I find it an absolute joy and privilege to bring you another story. Thank you for reading. For praying. For investing in us.

Enjoy the journey,

Kimberley and Tracie

## Prologue

*Cripple Creek, Colorado—1891*

Your husband is . . . well . . . he's *gone*." Chuck Bundrant bit the inside of his cheek after he gave the news to his daughter. "I'm sorry, Melissa." It was necessary to tell her the news, but the apology left a bitter taste in his mouth. The truth about Christopher Powell was much worse than Chuck would ever tell his girl, but at least it was over and done now. While he hated to see Melly hurt, what coursed through him was more than just relief. Gratitude and joy were the first words to come to mind.

His son-in-law had been a constant thorn in his side.

"Chris . . . is dead?" Melly blinked several times and half sat, half fell into the chair behind her. "But . . . what . . . ? What happened? Can I see him?"

"I'm sorry. No. He's already been buried. He was beyond recognition. I'd hate for you to see him like that."

She took a deep breath and put a hand to her mouth. After

several moments, she lowered her hand and looked him in the eye. “What will we do?”

“You don’t need to worry about it. I’ll take care of everything.” Sighing, he touched her shoulder as he looked out the window to the snowy landscape around them. Down the hill, he could see men with wheelbarrows hauling rocks out of his mine. The clanking of picks and shovels echoed through the mining camp. “Why don’t you and the girls move in with me? You spend most of your time here anyway, around the piano.”

Her chin lifted and he got a glimpse of his strong and independent daughter. “I appreciate that, but I can’t do that to you. When we’re here, it’s for the girls’ lessons. And you’re never here during that time. I don’t think you realize what it would be like to have us around at all hours. The girls are rambunctious . . . playing their instruments or singing . . . *all* the time. You’d never have any peace. Besides, I can’t expect you to take care of us . . .” Melissa used her hands as she spoke—a normal habit for her whenever an instrument wasn’t in them. But her frantic movements now and the speed of her words showed her distress.

A fact that made him feel even more of a horrible father than when he couldn’t control his son-in-law’s actions. Was he doing the right thing? It wasn’t like he could change the course of events now. “You’re my daughter, and your three precocious redheads are my granddaughters. Who, I might add, bring joy to my life every day. I know quite well how energetic and . . . *loud* they are. They keep me young.” His words seemed to go unheard. She just turned her face to look out the window.

“It’s not supposed to be this way.”

The words were hushed. Her hands still.



He started to make a retort about the no-good man she'd married, but when her shoulders slumped, it pricked his heart. By the look of her, shock had settled in. Why was Christopher's death so hard for her to believe? Didn't she know her husband for who he was? Or was he that good of an actor? Of course it wasn't supposed to be this way. Couples were supposed to grow old together and raise their children in loving homes. In a normal marriage situation, that would be true. But theirs?

Chuck had thought for sure the news would bring her a bit of relief. After all, she'd never again have to deal with a husband coming home drunk. Or worry that he would gamble away all their money. But watching Melissa now . . .

He'd thought wrong.

He'd been so focused on his own distaste for the lowlife that he'd let himself forget who his daughter was at the core of her being. She'd always had a heart for people, always believed there was good in them. When she eloped with the rogue all those years ago, she'd raved about what a good man Christopher Powell was deep down.

Chuck knew better the minute he met Christopher. He'd seen him for what he was: a gambler. A drunk. A man who made a habit of coming to his father-in-law for money to cover his debts. At family gatherings, Christopher always put on a show. Cleaned up real nice. Showered Melissa with attention. Knew how to talk the talk of society.

Of course, if Chuck was honest . . . he'd put on as much of a show himself. Pretending to like the man his daughter had married. All to keep the girls happy. The façade had become a way of life. But the girls were sharp as tacks . . . surely *they* had noticed their father's behavior or heard the rumors of Christopher's exploits around town?

No. They'd never given any indication of it. All they ever showed was adoration for their father.

Melissa stared out the window, still and quiet. And then she looked at Chuck. The depth of emotion in her eyes moved across the room like waves that rushed over him, threatening to swallow him up. Guilt filled his gut. Rather than the take-charge, everything-is-in-hand father he wanted to be, the moment—and even the future—seemed out of his control. She turned back to the window without saying a word.

One thing was clear.

His daughter needed his comfort.

He sat on the ottoman in front of her and listened to the rhythm of tools clanking against rock in the distance. The sound had always been soothing to him in the past. Now, it felt like a hammer to his chest. Pounding over and over that he'd failed. "My darling girl, I'm . . ." He swallowed. "I'm sorry for your loss."

The words pulled her attention from the window. A sheen of tears covered her eyes. "I don't know if I'll ever be able to get over this, Papa." The drops escaped and slipped down her cheeks.

Leaning forward, he took her hands and clasped them in his.

*Lord, I need Your help. Your compassion. Give me the words . . .*

"When I lost your mother, I thought I would die right along with her. But God had me here for an important reason. That reason was *you*. I had to be both parents to you and help you grieve the loss of your mother. You had so much talent oozing from your fingertips that the only thing I could figure was to give you more lessons. More instruments. With every teacher I could find. So every day, we traveled from one

teacher to the next, filling our days with music. Music helped you heal . . . it helped me too. In more ways than you can imagine.” Memories of those years brought a rush of feelings he couldn’t distinguish because he’d tried to lock away the death of his beloved. “I can’t take the pain and hurt of this loss away, but I can be here for you. We’ll get through it. Just like we did before. Together.”

She sniffed and pulled one of her hands away to wipe at her cheeks as she gave a slight nod.

Time to steer the conversation in a different direction. Take the reins of the situation back and encourage her that everything would be fine. Christopher was no longer part of the equation. Melissa would grieve. The girls would too. But they’d be back to normal soon enough. In the meantime, Chuck would have to be their strength, hold them together, comfort them, and take care of things. Something his son-in-law had never done.

“I still think it’s for the best that you and the girls move in with me. I won’t take no for an answer.” He managed a smile.

The expression on her face was one of resignation. “But, Papa . . . once I married, you were relieved of your duty to take care of me. This isn’t fair to you.” Her voice drifted to a soft murmur as she looked away. “It wasn’t supposed to be this way.” The repeat of her statement, and the depth of pain in her voice, made his hands fist. He wanted to throttle Christopher, but that wasn’t possible. How could the ne’er-do-well have thrown away his family like he had? All for what? Gambling? Other women?

He closed his eyes against the last thought. Melissa would never find that out. Not as long as he lived and breathed.

But he needed to help her understand the reality. “Melissa, I’ve been taking care of you behind the scenes for years

whether or not it was my duty. So of course I'm going to continue to do that. There was nothing to *relieve* me of . . . I'll never cease being your father. The mine is doing very well and I'm by myself, tinkering around this large house."

She snapped her attention back to him, her brow furrowed. "What do you mean *taking care of me behind the scenes?*" Melissa grabbed the armrests as her eyes narrowed. "You don't mean . . . no . . . Christopher would never do that. . . ."

He let understanding come to fruition in her mind. He was so tired of all the lies and his daughter continuing to believe that Chris would somehow, one day, miraculously change.

She straightened. "I take it from your silence that yes, he did. I can't believe it. He *lied* to me. Over and over again."

Emotions played across her face as Chuck watched it all sink in. Disbelief turned to shock.

"I knew he had a gambling problem, but he tried to overcome it. At least he *said* he did. And it seemed he'd get better for a while and he'd be home more . . . and he told me that he paid the bills. We didn't have much, but, Papa, he treated me like a queen—even when he was drunk, he never got mean." Coming to her feet, she balled her fists at her sides and paced the room, jaw set and firm. The fire was back in her eyes.

So. She'd moved from shock to anger.

She shook her head as she paced. "Let me get this straight. . . . Christopher's been coming to you for money? For how long?"

At last, the truth was coming out. But he couldn't triumph in that fact the way he'd thought he would. It was causing his girl too much pain. "Since the week after you married."

A sharp gasp caused her to cough. "Things weren't great, but I would never have dreamed that . . ." She lifted her chin

and pulled a handkerchief out of her sleeve to wipe at her nose and eyes. “I know how much you disapproved of him at the beginning, but I loved him. Knew that he had so much potential . . .” She sniffed. “What am I supposed to do now? I don’t have any way to support myself and the girls.” She turned away and looked out the window again. After several moments, her shoulders stiffened and she looked back at him. “It seems you were right all those years ago, and I should have listened.” With slow steps, she headed back to her chair and sat.

He’d ached to hear those words, but they brought little joy. “It doesn’t matter now. And it brings me no pleasure to be correct on this.” If only he could take away the pain he saw in her face.

Dipping her chin, she drew a deep breath. “I suppose I should tell you that his creditors have been coming by the house for several weeks now.” When she looked back up at him, her lips formed a thin line. “I haven’t wanted to say anything because Chris said he’d take care of it. As much as I hate to inconvenience you, now I need to ask for your help with that too.” Her eyes darted down to the hankie in her lap.

A deep pink color tinged her face and ears. It made Chuck wish he’d punched Christopher Powell in the face at some point over the past fifteen years for the obvious pain and embarrassment he’d caused Melissa. The one good thing the man had ever done was give them Whitney, Havyn, and Madysen. Chuck was glad the man was out of their lives. But he couldn’t say that right now. “No need. I’ve already paid off his debts.”

“But how did you . . . ?”

“It doesn’t matter. I took care of it. He’s buried. You can move on.” He cringed as soon as the words left his mouth.

Even though he'd been thinking it, he never should've said it out loud.

"Move on? Isn't that a bit callous?" The look she gave him stabbed him in the heart. "Flaws and all, I still loved Chris. And how exactly am I supposed to *move on*? I just found out that my husband is dead!" Her voice rose in pitch. "I have three girls that need raising. And now it will be *without* their father—who they adored. The man that I loved." Hurt, anger, and fear all resided in her gaze. "And my girls . . ." She took another deep breath. "This loss will not be easy on them. On top of that, they need education, food, clothing. Good heavens, we live in a mining town. It was all right as long as Chris was attempting to be a miner, but now . . . I don't know. I don't think Cripple Creek is the right environment for the girls. How can we possibly stay here?"

Blast Christopher! What a predicament he'd left them all in. "Where are you going to go? Your husband never amounted to anything. You should have told him to get a job and work if you didn't want to live in a mining town, where all he did was drink and gamble away the hours rather than actually *do* the hard work of a miner. And before you say another word about raising the girls in a mining town, please remember that my livelihood has provided for you the entire course of your life, and I happen to have a very *successful* mine here. We've *always* been successful, from the Black Hills Gold Rush until now."

Her eyes grew wide. "I'm so sorry, Papa, I didn't mean . . ." Her voice cracked. "That sounded so ungrateful of me."

Oh, why did he say all that? This wasn't about him or his pride. It was about taking care of his daughter. Chuck sighed. "I'm sorry, Melly. I never should have said those things." Swiping a hand down his face, he clenched and un-

clenched his hands. “My frustration with your husband all these years was hard to keep shoved down.”

Melissa’s face had gone pale. She licked her lips. “I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean to insult the hard work that you’ve always done, Papa. It’s just . . . I never saw the ugly side of mining until Chris . . . that is, I never had a problem with you mining or living in a mining town until Chris started at it and failed. I don’t know what I feel. Every negative remark I’ve ever heard about miners and mining towns has rushed to the surface—like it’s my fault that I chose to raise my children in this. I probably should’ve stood up to him about staying here, but I have to admit that it was a comfort knowing that you were here.” She held up a hand. “Not that I expected you to have to do what Chris asked of you, but having family around made me feel secure. I loved my husband . . . believed him when he said he was taking care of things. I simply can’t believe he’s gone.” A sob shook her shoulders.

“Oh, Melly. This isn’t the time to be speaking of such things with you just getting the news about Chris.”

“I didn’t realize everything Chris had done. . . . I guess he had too many vices.” She shook her head and swiped at her eyes. “I can’t believe I was so blind.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over this. Give yourself time to grieve.” It would take a lot for her to heal, especially if she found out the whole truth. And she did have a point. In fact . . .

The more he thought about it, moving away had a great appeal. “I understand it’s hard to stay here. But for right now, this is where we are. How about we make a deal?”

She narrowed her eyes. “What kind of a deal?”

“If you agree to stay here for a bit, I’ll look into selling the mine and finding us another place to call home.”

For a moment she looked like a little girl again, wanting her daddy's approval. "You'd do that for me?"

"I'd do anything for you and the girls. I hope you know that."

Her lips made a thin line. Either she was trying to control her emotions, or she was still perturbed with him. "That's a deal I can agree to. I appreciate all you've done for us over the years, but I would prefer not to raise the girls here. That doesn't mean that I want to take you away from your livelihood. We've done just fine in different mining areas over the years. I just don't want to stay *here*, where everyone will remember Chris for his failings. As the girls get older, I don't want them hearing things . . ."

Of course she didn't. He should have thought of that. Chuck nodded. "Perhaps we can head north. I hear there's some beautiful country yet to be discovered."

"Thanks, Papa." She stood and twisted the handkerchief in her hands. "I think I need to lie down for a while and figure out how to break this to the girls. Would you keep an eye on them for a bit until I'm ready?" Leaning down, she kissed him on the cheek.

"Of course."

Melly walked out of the room, the weight of the world appearing to rest on her shoulders. This whole conversation had been harder than he'd expected. But then, he hadn't thought it all through. He'd been thinking of himself. What a relief it would be to *him*. How this would affect *him*.

Getting to his feet, he wandered to the window in the kitchen area. When he'd come home to give his daughter the news, a neighbor's wife had been having tea with Melly and the girls. He'd asked the woman to take the girls outside.

As he gazed out the window, he smiled at the girls tramp-



ing around in the snow, their cheeks pink and faces full of smiles. Completely unaware of the news their mother would share with them later.

How would they take it?

Whitney, as the oldest, would try to hold her tears back . . . but then she would take the other two under her wing. Like she always did. Havyn adored her father, at least from what Chuck had observed, but she had a good head on her shoulders and would be strong for her mother and sisters. Madysen, though . . .

She was the one he worried about the most. At seven years old, she was also the most tenderhearted of the three.

The girls' laughter drifted to him. If only there were an easier way for his dear granddaughters. But there wasn't. What was done was done. With a tap to the windowsill, he made a decision.

Tomorrow, he'd put the word out that the mine was for sale. Melissa was correct—the sooner they left Cripple Creek, the better.

# ONE

*Thirteen Years Later*  
*Nome, Alaska—April 1904*

Guiding the bow over the strings, Havyn Powell played the final run in Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto in D Major. Her fingers flew over the fingerboard as she raced to the end of the piece she’d worked on for the past three years. As the last notes resounded from her violin, Granddad stood to his feet in the parlor and clapped. Even though they were alone, she couldn’t help but let a smile bubble up and spread across her face. She took a deep curtsy as Granddad continued to applaud.

She’d finally conquered the great piece!

“Magnificent, my dear. Absolutely magnificent!” He came to her side and put his hands on her shoulders. “I believe you’ve mastered it.”

“Truly?” Praise from Granddad came on a daily basis. But this? This was different. He knew how important this piece was to her. She couldn’t hold back her exuberance as her heart pounded in her chest. Bouncing on her toes, she clutched the violin to her chest. “Do you think Mother will be pleased?”

“*Absolutely*, and won’t she be surprised?” He tucked his thumbs behind his suspenders and looked as proud as her prized rooster. “She’ll never guess that you’ve prepared such a piece for her birthday. Now if only we had one of those big bands—”

“Orchestras.”

“Yes, one of those.” He pointed at her and winked. “To play the part that backs you up. Not that you need anyone to back you up. You sound splendid.”

Havyn laid her bow and violin on the piano bench in their large parlor. The sun sparkled off the snow outside and filled the room with glorious light. “Don’t you worry, Granddad, Whit has been looking at the orchestrations and she’s made up a piano part to play along with it.” Her older sister was such a genius on the piano. No matter what she played, it would be beautiful accompaniment.

“I’m sure it will be the likes of nothing we have heard before.” His eyes twinkled.

“Thanks for listening to me practice. I knew this was my chance while Mama was in town with Madysen. And poor Whitney has heard it too many times already.”

“Your mother will love it.” He moved forward and kissed her on the cheek. “Where is Whitney?”

“Out with her dogs. She wanted to get another run in with the sled and the new pups. All this late snow has been good for the new litter to practice. They’re quick learners.”

He clapped his hands together. “With Whitney as their teacher, do they have any other choice?” Granddad wiggled his eyebrows.

“Very true. It’s a good thing she’s the eldest, because she’s definitely the best at barking out orders.”

They laughed together and Granddad put an arm around

her shoulder. “A couple weeks until your mother’s party, and then we can all go back to our regular shenanigans.”

Placing a hand on her hip, she gave him a look. “*You* are the only one who’s allowed to get away with shenanigans. And it’s highly unlikely you’ll stop them for that amount of time. Am I supposed to believe you are going to be on your best behavior for the next *two* weeks?” She shook her head and went to put her violin back in its case.

“Of course not. It’s a rite of passage that you too will one day enjoy . . . once you’re old like me and have earned it.” He tugged on her braid and then headed to the door. “I best get back out there. More calves should be making their appearance any day now.”

Havyn smiled as her grandfather walked out the door. How she loved her family. With a glance around the room that had been their gathering place every night since 1892, images washed over her.

The exquisite grand piano that Granddad paid for in gold and had shipped up from Seattle so their mother could play for hours each day and teach all of them music. The massive windows that looked out upon the beautiful rolling hills surrounding their farm—how many fingerprints and smudges had she and her sisters made on those panes when they were younger? The dark, wood shelves filled to the brim with music and books.

Oh, how she loved this room! It was so warm and inviting, with the massive stone fireplace in the corner. They’d practiced their instruments, sung their hearts out, had their own concerts, and even held Sunday services here.

She’d also been told more than one secret in this room. Probably because she was a good listener and she also knew how to keep a confidence—

She wrapped her arms around her middle and looked back to the window.

Dad.

He used to tell her secrets.

Oh, how she missed him. Her little-girl memories of him were a treasure.

Why did they have to leave him buried on the mountain in Cripple Creek? It seemed so cold and unforgiving up there. As a child, that was the part she couldn't understand. Even now as an adult, it felt . . . wrong somehow.

Stepping closer to the large picture window that faced south, Havyn blinked at the brightness. The days were getting longer, but the snow lingered. Which happened often up in their little hamlet near the top of the world.

When they'd moved up to the Alaska Territory after Dad died, she'd been enchanted by the area from the very beginning. The new adventure had made it easier on her young heart, helping her heal. She'd always been a daddy's girl.

But the first few years had been rough on their mother. She'd grieved their father and refused to talk to the girls about him. Oh, she put her best foot forward for the girls' birthdays and for Christmas . . . but celebrating her own birthday hadn't been allowed. Because it had also been her wedding anniversary. As Havyn and her sisters got older and the grief became memories, they'd tried to surprise their mother with something special on her birthday. With no success. Somehow, Mama always figured it out. She'd smile and hug them all, but the sadness behind her eyes always showed up on that day.

This year would be different. It *had* to be. She and her sisters had planned and planned, and Granddad had helped. Hopefully they'd be able to pull off their plans. Especially

since the party was to be a full week before Mama's actual birthday. Havyn clapped her hands as excitement filled her stomach. They'd bring such joy to Mama!

She'd taught them all music since they were old enough to pick up a bow or sit at the piano. The delight that music brought to their lives was immeasurable.

So their plan was perfect. A special night to honor their mother and thank her for the years she'd invested in them, teaching them what she loved most. They were going to perform pieces that they wrote themselves or had practiced without their mother's knowledge.

No, Havyn couldn't imagine a better present—any more than she could imagine her life *without* music. Without singing. Without performing. Havyn loved the violin, but singing was her favorite—not that she wanted to tell Mama that. Besides, so far her largest audience to her solo vocals had been her chickens.

The chickens! She turned from the window and her mind's wanderings and rushed to the door. In the mud room, she grabbed her apron. Maybe her girls wouldn't give her too hard a time. It was well past the time for feeding, and they tended to get a little ornery when she was late. Whit said it was because Havyn spoiled them, but she refused to believe it and rolled her eyes whenever her older sister said anything of the sort.

Just because they all had names, she treated them like pets, and she'd made them their own individual nesting boxes didn't mean she spoiled them.

Most people didn't understand her special relationship with them. They *talked* to her. Well, in their own little way. And they all had distinct personalities. A point on which her sisters had debated her at the dinner table on more than one occasion.

But Havyn's chickens were for egg laying and egg laying alone, a fact that produced many an argument with Granddad over the past year, after they added the poultry farm to their dairy farm. He'd made her promise that the next batch of chicks would be raised for eating. Of course, she would let someone else deal with that. After all, she did enjoy eating chicken.

Just not *her* chickens.

As she trudged through the path they'd shoveled to the farm area, the walls of snow on either side of her made her feel cozy and protected. It always made her a bit sad when spring breakup happened and all the snow melted away. But when the weather was brutally cold and it froze her lungs every time she inhaled, she did think of warmer days. Still, that was the great thing about Nome—there were wonderful seasons in addition to the long winter. The seasons were short. But beautiful.

On her trek to the chicken house, the soft lowing of the cows in the birthing shed floated over the cold air toward her. Several of them would probably become new mamas today.

As her feet crunched closer to the chicken yard, the chatter of her girls soon took over all sound around her.

"I know, I know, I'm coming. I'm sorry I'm late." Opening the gate, she stomped some of the snow off her boots and picked up the feed bucket. "Go ahead and get your feathers unruffled, because food is coming." Filling up the bucket, she listened to the uproar and then took the first round out to the gathering of hens. Angry Bird led the entourage. Her black feathers shone almost blue in the sun, with the red around her head giving the appearance of a flame. Angry Bird earned her name the day she hatched by pecking and squawking at everyone that came into her space. Havyn was

the only one she'd allow to pick her up. Havyn laughed every time she saw the chicken puff out her breast feathers and try to make everyone else listen to her.

Then there was Buttercup, the mother hen to everyone else. She spent most of her time at the back, helping to herd the rest of the girls where they were supposed to go. She was also one of the loudest, which always made Havyn giggle. Even if Havyn couldn't see the golden beauty, she'd hear her. Bossing all the other girls around.

Within seconds, Havyn was surrounded by the one hundred fifty chickens that made up her flock. Counting heads, she made sure everyone was there. The roosters were in another yard right now, since they tended to cause arguments among the hens.

Havyn filled up the bucket again, then hummed as she spread feed in the short trough. Next came the watering hole, where she broke the ice so all the chickens could get fresh water. There'd been a lot more snow this past winter, and the temperatures continued to dip well below freezing. Even though Havyn loved the snow, she was ready to see the ground again.

About a dozen of the girls followed at her feet like little puppy dogs, chattering away. Havyn joined in. "Oh, really? That's fascinating. Everyone staying warm enough?" As she continued caring for them, the jabbering continued.

A loud crash made most of the hens jump and flap their wings.

What . . . ? Havyn looked toward the birthing shed.

*Thud!*

*Oh no!* "Granddad?" She yelled for him across the yard.

No response.

She set the bucket down at the gate, rushed through, and



set the latch. Her heart sank even as it picked up its pace. She raced through the troughs of snow. Granddad *always* answered. That was one of their rules. A sort of game they played as children, but one meant to ensure safety. Whenever anyone called out on the farm, whoever was present answered.

Every time.

Except this one.

Opening the door to the barn they used for the birthing, she blinked to adjust her eyes to the dim interior. As she scanned the room, she spotted her grandfather lying on the floor, tools scattered around him. “Granddad?”

A lump swelled in her throat as she raced to his side and knelt beside him. What had happened? Havyn rolled him over onto his back and put her ear to his face, praying she would hear the soft whoosh of a breath.

A light flutter of air brushed over her cheek and she let out a long sigh. “Thank You, Lord.” She sat up and gripped his shoulders. “Granddad. Granddad, wake up.”

A moan escaped his lips and his eyelids fluttered.

“Please, Granddad. I need you to look at me.” Her heart beat faster with every silent moment. What could have brought her strong grandfather down?

His eyes finally opened. “Havyn?” His voice sounded so unlike him. He sounded . . . weak.

“I’m here.” She lowered her face closer to him again. “What happened? Can you move?”

He closed his eyes, sucked in a deep breath, and then opened his eyes again. “I’m all right. I simply fell down.”

She narrowed her eyes. This seemed worse than that. “What made you fall?”

He looked around but lay pretty limp in her arms. “I must have tripped. Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t believe you for one minute.” Placing her right arm under his neck, she lifted. “Let me help you sit up and then you can tell me the truth.”

“I told you not to worry about it.”

But he sounded so out of breath, she couldn’t help worrying. What wasn’t he telling her? “You can say that all you want, but it won’t make it happen.” Once she had him sitting up, she kept her arm around his back. Then she quirked an eyebrow at him. “Now, how about the truth?”

He took several deep breaths and sat there. Still as she’d ever seen him.

“Well?”

“Pushy, aren’t you?” A disgruntled groan left his lips.

“You taught me well.”

He huffed. “I know.” Wiping at the hay that covered his trousers, he clenched his jaw.

What was going on? Granddad *never* minced words.

“Do you promise you’ll keep it to yourself?”

“Of course, I will.” That didn’t sound good, so she braced herself.

His nod was weak, but the slight smile was good to see. “I’ve fallen a few times in the last few weeks. It’s like my legs all of a sudden don’t work anymore.”

She tried to hide her dismay, but a tiny gasp escaped. “I’m calling the doctor . . . right away.” She started to stand, but his arm shot out and stopped her.

“No need. Doc Gordon and I have already been discussing this. But Doc is leaving soon. And there’s a couple new doctors. I don’t know either of them . . . and you know how many untrustworthy people have come to Nome because of the gold. Liars and thieves trying to pull the wool over people’s eyes. Doc said to give him a bit of time to find out

who would be best to work through this with me. He said there's another one coming too that he'd like to evaluate."

"What are you saying?" Was his problem that severe? Life-threatening? That he needed a specialist of some sort? For Granddad to need Doc's advice about a new physician made her cringe. She could count the times her grandfather had seen the doctor in Nome on one hand. So it must be serious. She swallowed, determined to get to the bottom of it.

"I'm saying you need to give me time to settle on one of the new docs." Wiping hay from his shirt, he squared his shoulders.

"Settle on one before what? It's serious, isn't it?" She narrowed her eyes. Granddad should know she could read him like a book. She'd keep pushing if she had to. "What aren't you saying?"

He gave her a resigned look. "The doctor thinks I'm at risk for apoplexy."

All the air in her lungs left her in a whoosh. Apoplexy? Didn't people *die* from that?

"Don't look at me like that, Havyn." He pointed a finger in her face. "Now you promise me right now that you'll keep this secret from *everyone*. You understand me?"

Havyn crossed her arms over her chest. She'd never divulged a secret before, but how could she keep this from the family?

"Ha-vyn?" His tone brooked no argument.

She had a hard time not feeling like a little girl when he spoke to her like that. They'd been raised to obey and respect their elders. But what if this wasn't for the best? One look at his face made her blurt, "I promise. But you have to promise *me* that you'll get this taken care of."

"As soon as Melly's birthday is over. I promise."

She stood and reached down to help him up. “And you’ll let me know if you have any more episodes?”

He groaned but looked steady enough. “Of course.”

She nodded, and he walked away. Slow and with a limp. The weight of this new secret crushed her chest.

What would they do if something happened to him?