

SHE'S SURVIVED YEARS OF ABUSE. CAN AN APPRENTICE CARPENTER'S
FAITH OVERCOME THE DANGER NOW STALKING HER?

KATHLEEN FRIESEN

MILLA'S HOPE

Nila's Hope

Kathleen Friesen

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Nila's Hope

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Dedication

To my precious family. You continue to teach me about
love, forgiveness, and hope.

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May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

1

“And now, by the power vested in me by Saskatoon Grace Chapel and the province of Saskatchewan, I am delighted to pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

As applause began to ripple through the audience, Nila Black gazed up at the tall, blond man standing just a few feet away. His deep-set blue eyes met hers, and the world shrank to just the two of them. Her lips parted in a smile, and she...

“Nila.” The bride’s urgent whisper jolted her back to reality. “The bouquet—I need it back.”

Nila’s face burned as she untangled the bridal bouquet from her own and slipped it into her friend’s waiting hand.

“Introducing Mr. and Mrs. Daniel and Melody Martens!” The pastor’s voice rang with joy.

As the recessional music lilted through the sanctuary, the bride and groom turned, clasped hands, and walked down the aisle of the packed church.

Best man, Will Jamison, held out his arm for Nila. She slipped her hand inside the crook of his arm and settled her hand onto his forearm. He covered it with his own hand, pulling her close to his side. Perfectly in step, they followed Will’s mother and her new husband down the aisle toward the foyer of the church.

“You look amazing.” Will’s breathy whisper caressed her skin.

Nila barely noticed the fragrant pine and cedar boughs, decorated pews, broad smiles of the guests, or even the whispered greetings. Her world at that moment consisted of the handsome man beside her, the harmony of their steps, and the warmth emanating from his body to hers.

When they reached the foyer, Nila's world expanded again. She stepped away from Will and embraced his mother.

"Congratulations, Melody. I'm *so* happy for you. And thanks for trusting me to fill in for Faith. I hope she feels better soon."

Melody returned the hug. "Thank you, sweetie. Faith will be fine."

As Nila stepped back, Will folded his mother into a warm embrace. "You look beautiful, Mom."

At the same time, Daniel's strong arms pulled Nila close.

"Congratulations, boss," she said and stepped back. Nila took her place on the other side of Melody as Will released his mother and held out his hand to his new stepfather.

"Congratulations, boss," he echoed but with considerably more enthusiasm. Nila could hear the grin in Will's voice as he added, "Glad you're finally part of the family."

"Me, too. Your mother wouldn't set the date until the trial was done," Daniel said, a crooked smile softening his words. "Seeing that lowlife get sentenced was worth the wait, though, and now we can get on with our lives."

Nila cringed and then shivered as the outside door opened and a blast of icy wind and swirling snow swept through the foyer. No one else seemed to notice.

People lined up to greet the wedding party, and she had to do her part. Forcing a smile, she held out her hand for the next person in the long line of well-wishers.

That old, crushing feeling of "you don't belong here" stiffened her face as she shook hand after hand in the reception line. The words spoken by others were pleasant, but they didn't register.

Just a few more minutes and it would be over.

A male guest she didn't recognize swept her into a tight hug. She froze as she fought the urge to flee. Why had she ever agreed to this?

In a moment of respite, Melody reached over and gave her arm a quick squeeze. "Thanks for being here. I know this isn't easy for you," she whispered into Nila's ear. "I love you."

That was why. She would do anything for Melody.

A tiny blur of pale pink organdy and blonde hair parted the crowd with her shrill, "Gramma, Gramma! Here I am."

Nila's heart twisted just a bit as Melody stopped to scoop up her granddaughter and flower girl. "Hey, Jessica. I didn't even notice you leave. Did you find your mommy?"

"Uh-huh." The little head nodded, and she pointed. "There she is."

Faith's puffy eyes and red nose testified to her nasty cold as she struggled to hang onto the squirming baby boy in her arms. She nearly lost her grip as he lunged toward Will.

"Guess he wants his uncle. Do you mind?"

Will grinned and took little Tommy. "My pleasure, Sis. Oops, I think he changed his mind." Tommy now leaned toward Nila. "Can't blame him. He's got good

taste.”

Nila’s heart thumped as she took Tommy in her arms. “You sweetheart,” she whispered.

Will’s grin widened. “You talking to me?” As her cheeks heated, he relented. “Just teasing. This looks like a good time to grab your coat. It’s pretty cold in here.”

The warmth in her face seemed to work its way down to her heart. She squeezed the little boy in her arms and nuzzled his chubby cheek while furtively watching the best man maneuver his way through the crowd for her.

As the wedding party entered the rented hall, guests clapped and cheered, and some tapped their glasses with spoons.

Will pulled his beautiful companion closer and whispered in her ear, “Pretty impatient, aren’t they?”

Daniel and Melody stopped short, nearly causing Will and Nila to bump into them. Will stared as Daniel bowed to the guests, took his bride in his arms, and pressed his lips to hers until her cheeks turned red. The crowd roared their approval. Melody gazed at her new husband and pressed her fingers to her thoroughly-kissed lips.

Will felt Nila tremble against his side. “You OK?”

Her cheeks were pink, but she said, “It’s...it’s just the toast. I don’t think I can do it. I’m too nervous, and I don’t belong here, and...”

“You’ll be fine.” They’d reached the head table, and Will pulled out Nila’s chair. “And you do belong. Mom wouldn’t have asked you if you didn’t.”

Will sat on the other side of Daniel and leaned toward his new stepfather. "Didn't think you had it in you, hamming it up for the crowd like that." He raised one eyebrow as he appraised his mother's new husband. "I like it. Mom's been good for you. And I can't believe you guys pulled all this together in three weeks—especially right before Christmas."

Daniel nodded while gazing at his bride. The soft look in his eyes erased years from his face. "You're right; she is amazing. And I admit she's been good for me. And will be for many, many years, I hope."

Daniel looked at their guests and cupped his hand to his ear.

They caught the hint and began tapping their glasses again. Daniel grinned at Will and then turned to his bride, pulled her to her feet, and kissed her forehead, nose, and finally settled his mouth on her lips once again.

Will squirmed in his chair and stared at his empty plate. He was happy for his mom and Daniel, but man, it was awkward watching them smooch. He wondered how Nila was handling it.

He leaned forward until he caught her eye, glanced at the newlyweds and back to her. Nila followed his gaze, and as their eyes met, she touched her lips, blushed, and dropped her focus to the tablecloth.

Whoa! What was that?

He glanced across the room at his sister. Faith grinned, pointed from him to Nila, and winked.

Yeah, she'd razz him for sure. He knew she'd caught him staring when Nila walked down the aisle. But his little co-worker was gorgeous. Who knew? That red dress fit her like a lucky glove, and her hair—what

a change. All those curls and little flowers and stuff. Too bad that come Monday morning she'd be back in her overalls and braids.

He swung his gaze back to Nila. She was blushing again.

Sweet.

Nila squirmed as heat rushed up her neck. For a moment she'd gotten caught up in the romance of the day and imagined herself being kissed. And Will had noticed.

She pushed up the long sleeve of her burgundy silk dress and tugged a small paper from under her watchband. As Faith's husband, Jason, began his master of ceremonies monologue, Nila unfolded the note and tried to smooth out the wrinkles. Her hands were shaking so much she ripped it in half from top to the middle.

The servers began bringing their dinner so Nila tucked the torn paper under her plate and clasped her hands in her lap. She wished Faith hadn't gotten sick. She wished she could be sitting out there instead of in front of everyone. She didn't want to disappoint Melody, especially today.

Too soon, dinner was finished and Jason introduced her toast to the bride.

Nila pushed herself upright onto shaking legs and tried not to wobble or spill the juice in her fluted glass. She clung to the podium for support and smoothed out the torn paper. She tried to read her notes, but her handwriting seemed to have morphed into another language. Her hands shook the podium, so she folded

them together on top of the useless paper. The silence in the room felt heavy. Nila glanced up. So many people.

She opened her mouth, but no words came. Then she spotted Faith sitting at a table near the back.

Faith smiled, patted her heart, and put one thumb up. *Speak from your heart.* Easier said than done.

Nila breathed a silent prayer. "Jesus, help me do this, for Melody's sake."

She glanced over at the head table, hearing only the pounding of her heart.

Three faces wore encouraging smiles.

Will nodded and mouthed, "You can do it."

Nila took a deep breath and cleared her throat.

"As most of you know, Melody's daughter Faith was supposed to be her matron of honor, but she caught a bad cold last week. When Melody and Faith asked me to take Faith's place, I was honored—and terrified. I've never done anything like this before."

She glanced at the nearest tables. No one snickered. Everyone seemed to be listening, most with smiles on their faces. She looked down at her paper. "Melody is a very special lady. The first time we met was when she came to visit me in the hospital. Even though Melody didn't know me and had to fight through her own fear, she came to tell me that God loves me. She didn't just visit me once and then leave me alone. She kept telling me over and over how much I was worth to God and to her. No one had ever talked to me like that. She showed me what real love is."

She glanced up. Every gaze was locked on her. Her hands shook again. She quickly looked at Melody, and her warm smile gave Nila the courage to continue. "God used Melody to save me—not only my soul, but

my life. If it weren't for Melody..." Her vision blurred. Nila blinked several times and dabbed at the tears that spilled onto her cheeks.

She took a deep breath and released it slowly. "When Melody and Daniel realized they were meant to be together, I was thrilled for her. I've enjoyed watching their love grow and bloom as beautifully as the flowers Melody nurtures in her garden. She deserves a life full of love and happiness, and I trust that today is the beginning of many years of joy with Daniel."

She paused, looked out at the crowd, and with a steady hand raised her glass. "Would you please stand and join me in toasting the bride? To Melody!"

A movement caught her eye.

A door at the back of the hall opened without a sound. A head appeared. Glittering eyes stared at her. Hatred sliced across the room and raked her with an icy touch. The figure raised a finger to his lips and shook his head. The message was all too familiar.

Nila froze. Black spots filled her vision, and the room disappeared. When she came to, she was back in her seat at the table.

Melody patted her face with a tender hand. "Nila, honey, are you OK?"

She shuddered and looked toward the door. No one was there.

2

Four hours later, the minus twenty-seven temperature felt like springtime and the snowy prairie wind like a gentle breeze. Nila skipped up the well-swept concrete steps of the large two-story house humming Anne Murray's *Could I Have This Dance*.

The old song was new to her, but when Will had held out his hand for her to join him on the dance floor, she'd thought it must be the most beautiful love song ever.

She waltzed into the house, paused to lock the door behind her, and slipped out of her long coat and boots. She danced down the stairs to her basement bedroom and closed her door carefully in case her landlords were sleeping. Then she pirouetted with her hands in the air, feeling like a fairy-tale princess.

What a night! But was it real? Or was she dreaming? Had Will felt it, too? That look in his eyes when he'd helped her into her coat and when they'd said good night—she didn't think that was a 'just friends' kind of look.

She lifted her chin as though gazing into Will's face once more. An unfamiliar yearning warmed her as she pictured the way his eyes had darkened to sapphire when he looked at her. Something deep in his gaze sparkled like diamonds as he'd lifted her gloved hand to his lips.

Nila looked at her hand, and her mood shifted.

Without the dressy gloves, it was the hand of a labourer with short, newly polished nails, small cuts, and bruises. There was nothing romantic about her reality.

She shook her head, reluctantly dispelling the vision. Will Jamison was her co-worker and friend, and that's all they could be. Romance? That was for others, not her. Love was a shadowy dream that too soon turned into a nightmare.

She pulled a hanger from her closet and fastened her bouquet to it. She'd rarely attended weddings, let alone been a maid of honor. So it was no wonder the romance of the day got to her. She sighed. Her fingertips lingered on the top boxes stacked in her closet. She pulled her hand back, closed the doors, and leaned against them.

She should feel safe now. Her ex-boyfriend, Nick Parnell, was in jail, and she'd helped put him there. Living with him had nearly destroyed her, but she was finally free.

Boarding with Pastor Dave and Lydia for the past several months had given her room and time to grow in her faith and self-confidence. Soon she'd be ready to move on. She'd saved up enough for the required first and last month's rent plus a cheap vehicle. Her cherished dreams were finally within reach.

Nila moved to her desk and picked up the marked newspaper. Three more suites to check out Monday after work. She nibbled her lips. She could almost taste her independence.

She hugged herself as she pictured her dream home. Nothing fancy, just an apartment somewhere, but it would be her own. And only hers.

"Soon," she whispered.

She picked up her cellphone from her desk, switched it on, and plugged it in to recharge. Then she wandered around her room, the room she'd designed and helped build. Daniel had been in charge of the construction, but she'd been involved through the entire process. And she'd loved every messy bit of it.

Nilas stroked her built-in desk and shelves. She remembered her nervousness when Daniel told her to make the cuts. The maple boards were pristine, and she was terrified she'd ruin them. Or maybe cut off a finger. She'd never used a table saw before—or any kind of power tool. But when she'd made that first cut, she'd fallen in love. The power in her hands as she controlled the dangerous blade exhilarated her, made her want more. Daniel had noticed, and from that moment, she'd become a builder.

Now this was her sanctuary. Not like Haven House, the temporary home for battered women, but her own space in a loving home. She lifted her face and thanked God for Dave and Lydia and the love they so freely gave. She'd always be grateful for this place and the hope she had found here.

She sat at her desk and unrolled the blueprint for the house she and Will were remodelling in Warman under Daniel's direction. A wistful smile softened her face as she recalled how her life had changed in the last year and a half.

As soon as Dave and Lydia's basement—including her new bedroom—was finished, Daniel had offered her a job and apprenticeship in carpentry. Daniel was a good boss, even though at first she'd flinch whenever he'd bark orders. On the other hand, working with Will was pure pleasure. He'd seemed wary of her at first, but they'd soon become friends.

It didn't hurt that he was awfully good looking, especially those gorgeous blue eyes.

But as she pictured them, deep blue eyes became glittering, hate-filled. Nick's eyes. Even from across the room she'd understood the message as he'd stood in the doorway. "Don't tell, or else."

Then everything had gone blank. If Jason hadn't helped her back to her seat...

Nila covered her eyes and trembled. The room seemed chilled.

That had to have been her imagination. It couldn't have been Nick. He was in jail where he belonged. Wasn't he?

Will parked in his mother's garage, leaned back, and inhaled deeply. A flood of emotions washed over him: happiness for his mother and Daniel, relief that everything had gone well, a faint throb of grief for his father's death, and a strange excitement mixed with longing. And confusion.

Nila had looked fantastic all gussied up like that. He'd hardly recognized her. And she'd surprised him when they'd danced. She'd felt as soft as little Jessica's favorite stuffed kitty, but her supple muscles enticed him even more.

Pleasure tingled through him as he relived the sensation of Nila in his arms as they glided across the dance floor, their movements perfectly synchronized.

He felt his heart rate increase, and he shook his head to clear it.

He hoped that...whatever was between them at the wedding...wouldn't mess up their work

relationship. Nila learned fast and seemed to have a real talent for design. But they both carried a lot of baggage. And what would happen when Nick got out of jail? She might even go back to him. And Will wouldn't be able to stop her.

He grunted as he opened the truck door and climbed out. He closed the door to the garage behind him, paused, and leaned against it. He wasn't sure if he was ready for a serious relationship, but for those few hours, everything felt perfect. The stuff of dreams.

Well, almost. He frowned. Until Nila raised her glass. Then she looked like she'd seen a ghost. What had that been about?

The next morning, Nila's dreams scattered like bits of hoarfrost in the wind when her cellphone jarred her awake.

"H-hello?"

"Ms. Nila Black? This is Constable Jim Grayson from the Saskatoon Police Service. This is a courtesy call to inform you that Nicholas Parnell was released from custody yesterday."

"Wh—what?" Nila gasped and rubbed her forehead, willing her brain to function. "That's not possible. He was sentenced to twenty-two months just two months ago. I thought I had time..." She shuddered. "How? Why?"

"I'm sorry, Ms. Black." The monotone voice sounded as if it came from a deep well. "I tried to contact you yesterday. You are correct. He was sentenced to twenty-two months, but with credit for time served before trial, he was granted statutory