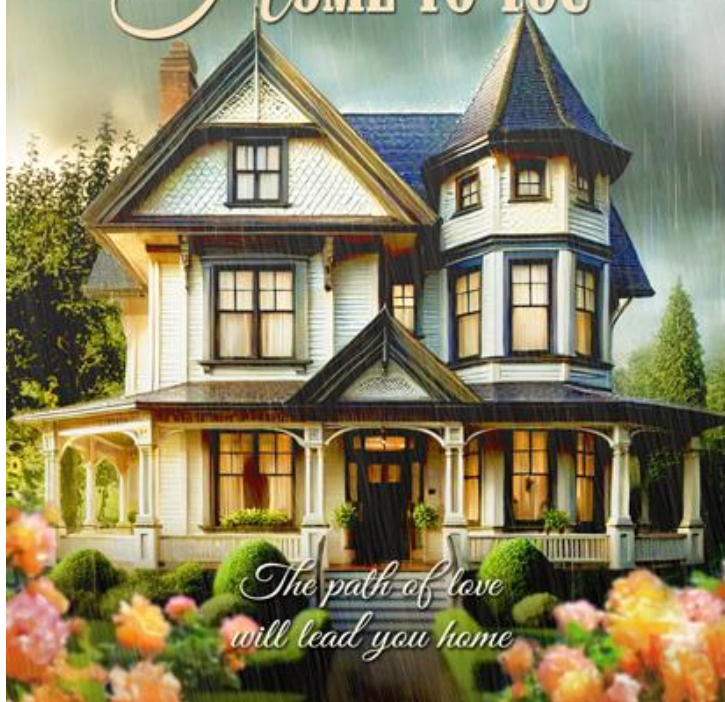


NINA CARLISLE

Home TO YOU



*The path of love
will lead you home*

Home to You

Nina Carlisle

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Dedication

For my husband, whose faith never wavers

1

Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near Your altar, LORD Almighty, my King and my God. —Psalm 84:3

As Kimberly Marlowe turned off the freeway and threaded her sedan through the familiar streets of Poloma Pines, the drumming in her ears eased, and she relaxed her grip on the steering wheel. She shook her head. Her young patients at the hospital would lose all confidence in Nurse Kim if they knew what a scaredy-cat she became on the freeway.

She navigated up the steep hill leading to Grandma Boyd's house and said a prayer, more from habit than heart. "Thank You for getting me here safely." When she turned into the familiar gravel driveway, she added, "Please make this visit quick and drama free."

Shivering in the February sunshine, she switched off the engine and flexed her stiff hands. Glancing at the white-shingled Victorian with its deep front porch, her heart galloped.

A man was crouched in front of a window, jimmying it with a pocketknife.

She threw open the car door and sprang out. "What are you doing? Get off that porch—now!" She pointed away from the house.

The man stood slowly as if Kimberly were an annoyance. She waited. Her heart thumped, and her hand trembled. Should she get back into the car? Should she call the sheriff? Instead, she stood firm and glared at the man.

He turned. Something about his broad shoulders, his height—at least six feet—the strong profile, and the crinkles around his eyes as he squinted in the sunlight looked familiar. The way his chestnut-brown hair fell over his eyebrows in the breeze brought to her mind the memory of a hard-faced teenage boy, and recognition beat in her throat. "Nicky Jenkins." She dropped her hand to her side.

"It's Nick now," he said, his smile warm on his tanned face. "Welcome home, Kimber."

"Home? I thought you were in Montana."

"Yeah, well, I came back." He slid the pocketknife into his back pocket and eased himself onto the top step of the porch. That smile crept across his lips again and dimpled his cheeks. "Same as you?" he added, his cinnamon-brown eyes asking the question.

Kimberly's gaze flickered away and then turned back to Nick. "I live in Seattle now. I mean, I will once I finish here." Why did she feel the need to tell Nicky Jenkins anything? Kimberly shifted from one foot to the other, making no move toward him. Seeing Nick again was not part of her plan when she handed in her apartment key in San Diego early that morning and

headed to her childhood hometown in Northern California.

Nick nodded. "Right, the city. Well, we heard you were coming."

"We?" Was Nicky married? Her gaze flitted to his left hand, and an odd sense of relief washed over her to see it bare.

He rested his elbows on his thighs. "News travels in a small town. You remember that much."

The familiar movement made Kimberly want to sit beside him, like the old days, when she'd walk across town to visit her grandparents and Nicky would come by. Her parents' harsh admonishments echoed in her mind, and instead of taking her old seat next to him, she scraped the gravel driveway with her tennis shoe. "So, what *are* you doing here—at my grandmother's?"

He grinned. "Just what you thought—breaking in."

Kimberly caught her breath and then saw the mischief in his eyes. "Still the class clown, I see."

The grin left his face. "Abby asked me to do some repairs for her. Before she puts the old house on the market."

Had Gram forgotten to tell her he'd be here, or had she purposely not mention it?

Kimberly's sedan ticked as the engine cooled from the long drive. A trace of spice-scented aftershave wafted in the shifting breeze. If she closed her eyes, she would have been transported back to these very steps as they watched the moon rise on a July evening.

In a moment, Kimberly might have broken her

own silence and asked him all the questions inside her. But she couldn't, not now. She had to move forward, so she shook her head, as if to settle the questions back into place in her head and heart, and straightened her shoulders. "Well, it was nice to see you...Nick, but I want to visit with my grandmother—"

"She's not home. She told me to tell you—let's see..." He glanced up as if the answer was in the sky. "She's packing lunches at the church. But you should still have a key."

"You keep her calendar, too?" Kimberly asked, annoyed by his familiarity with her grandmother's schedule and disappointed that she'd have to wait to see her.

"She's a busy woman. Retirement hasn't slowed her down."

Kimberly opened the trunk and turned to Nick. "Anyway, I want to get settled before she returns. So, if you'll excuse me."

"Noted. Get on your horse and ride." He stood with grace, a movement that tapped her chest and quickened her pulse. He had always been graceful, even in his teens, despite being rough around the edges. It was one thing about him that had attracted her to him, despite her parents' concern. He nodded at the house. "No dry rot, no termites."

"Excuse me?"

"She asked me to check, and the structure is in good condition. She's taken good care of it over the years. It could last another hundred years." He smoothed back his hair, and his boot steps echoed as

he stepped evenly down the stairs.

Kimberly's heartbeat quickened but then dulled when he continued on toward his pickup in the lower driveway. She shook her head and sighed. What did she think he would do?

"Well, that will be up to the new owner to take care of," she said as he reached his truck.

Nicky opened the driver's door, climbed in, and turned to her. "A shame to lose all that history."

"The house isn't historical," she said over the whine of the ignition.

"Not what I meant."

He meant all the history that Gram's house held. All the personal, family history—the meals together, the music, the soft laughter in the summer, the squeals of opening presents at Christmas, the prayers around the table and at bedtime.

Nick backed the truck from the driveway and headed down the hill. As it disappeared around the corner, her thoughts continued. Gram's house held not only her family's history but hers and Nicky's—the nights on the porch, the whispers, the tears, and the laughter.

She sighed, pulled out her backpack and the large suitcase she'd packed for the four weeks she planned to stay with Gram, and looked at the sky. Long, gray clouds gathered like sleek sharks in the north, and the breeze had turned to a light wind. Storm coming. Thank goodness, she'd arrived before it would hit.

She looked back down the hill where Nicky's pickup had disappeared. Nicky, familiar but different.

What had happened to him in the ten years since her family left Poloma Pines, and what changed him since they'd last seen each other? Was it nostalgia that had quickened her heartbeat, or something else—something in the present? *Stop it, Kimberly. What happened between you is history. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow is uncertain. You have only now. And now is for helping Gram prepare for her tomorrows.*

~*~

Nick lowered his window and filled his lungs with the midwinter air. Cold and refreshing—his favorite weather—not frigid like Montana would be, and mixed with the fragrance of pine and impending rain. Exhaling, he tried to purge the memories that seeing Kimber again had teased from the recesses, but he was unsuccessful. The memories emerged stronger, sharper.

He'd known she was coming. Abby Boyd had mentioned it the week before as he was refreshing the paint on the outside trim. Curiosity, nostalgia, and something else—his memories of the sweet and beautiful girl who'd been kind to him despite their obvious differences—nagged him, and he'd made a plan. It was no accident that he'd been on the porch when she pulled into the driveway today. He'd waited there for over two hours, practicing his breaking-in pose. It was the perfect way for her to find him, since everyone in Poloma Pines had always thought of him as the town bad boy.

Now he wished he hadn't done that. He should have waited until she'd gotten settled or until he was in a more objective state of mind. Or he never should have come back to Poloma Pines at all.

The ten years since they'd last seen each other hadn't changed her much. Her face still glowed, her hazel eyes still sparkled, her honey-blonde curls still bobbed when the breeze lifted them from her shoulders, and her voice still held that tingle of laughter, like soda bubbles against a glass.

Yet, there was something new—a shadow of sadness that had crossed her expression. Nick had heard about her husband, and though it had happened two years ago, the pain of her loss was likely still fresh.

He pulled up to the Poloma Pines Community Center and parked on the street. He noted with pride that his crew had made the necessary repairs to the center, which originally had been the town hall. As he strode toward the freshly painted building, music, laughter, and joyful voices reached his ears. He pulled open the door. *This is why I came back.*

"Hey, it's Mr. Nick." Tanya Fielding, the center's director, said from the middle of the floor. Six children surrounded her, engrossed in painting flowers and animals on large sheets of paper.

"Got a minute?" he asked.

Tanya nodded. "Keep making those beautiful paintings," she said to the children. She popped up from her cross-legged position and dusted off her shorts. "What's up?"

"The electrical inspection went well this morning,

and we'll start installing the insulation tomorrow. Just want to make sure that'll still work with your schedule here."

"Fine on my end. What time will your crew be here?"

"Seven thirty AM, as usual. Too early?"

"Miss Tanya," Kayleigh Tang said from the floor, "you got green in your hair."

The other children laughed as Tanya shook her head and then pinched a blob of green paint out of her blonde hair. She smiled at the children. "Now, how did that get there?"

"You put it there," Kayleigh said, pointing at Landis Hoegel.

"No, you did."

"No, you," someone else said.

The children's teasing and laughter, and Tanya's response to them, filled Nick with joy. These moments made him feel like a child again—the child he was before he realized his family wasn't a safe place. "So," he said, turning back to Tanya, "Seven thirty OK?"

"Yeah, that's good. It's better for you to start early and get as much done as you can before the kids arrive."

Nick nodded. "That's what I thought. We'll stay out of your way, as usual, so the disruption will be minimal."

"You've got the key, right?" she asked.

He patted his breast pocket.

With the conversation over, he could have left then. But the bright colors, the children's paintings on

the walls, the activity tables, and the art projects set up around the perimeter of the hall cheered him, and he hesitated to leave so soon. Deeper than that, the center provided structure for the children, which caring and responsible adults formed and maintained—something he'd missed out on as a kid.

"You OK, Nick?" Tanya asked, concern in her voice.

He rubbed his neck and smiled. "Sometimes I want to forget about work and stay here and paint or make something with clay."

She laughed. "Anytime. The kids would love it."

The diamond on her ring finger sparkled in the light.

"How's Evan doing?" he asked.

Tanya smiled as if the very name of her fiancé warmed her heart. "He's in San Francisco meeting with vendors. It's just a few days, but I miss him."

Nick patted her arm. "It's a gift to love someone that much."

Tanya and Evan had worked hard for their engagement, and their challenges had made them a stronger couple. Good for them. His joy for them was mixed with a tinge of sadness. Marriage wasn't for him. It would never be.

The front door opened quietly, and a teen girl dressed in baggy jeans with unintentional rips at the knees and an oversized sweater that appeared to swallow her stepped in. Keeping her head down, she moved to the reading nook and disappeared behind a tall bookshelf that also served as a room divider.

Nick raised his eyebrows toward Tanya.

"She's come in a few times," she whispered. "Goes to the reading nook, stays there an hour and then leaves."

"Her name?"

"Lily, but that's all I've gotten out of her. She keeps her nose in the books."

"So, you don't know anything about her?"

"Nope, but she seems to know she's safe here."

Compassion tapped Nick's chest. "I know her."

Tanya's eyes widened. "You do?"

He held up his palms. "I mean, I get her."

"I see. You're welcome to try to get her to talk. If we know more about her, we can try to help her—if she needs help."

He shook his head. "She could feel threatened by a guy approaching her."

"You're right, even though you're the least threatening guy I know."

"But it took you a long time to realize that," he said with a grin.

She smiled in return. "I'll keep my eye on her. Maybe if she feels safe enough here, she'll open up."

Nick nodded and tapped the desk. "Gotta go. I need a few things at Mac's before dinner." He stepped away to leave but then turned around. "You heard about Kimberly Marlowe?"

Tanya's eyes narrowed as if in thought. "Marlowe?" She shook her head.

Nick snapped his fingers. "Used to be Boyd."

"Oh," she said, now nodding slowly as a

mischievous smile crept across her lips. "I heard she was coming back."

"She's already here," he said and noted the odd way his pulse quickened.

Tanya tilted her head. "Then why don't you look happy?"

Nick gave her a rueful smile and then turned and headed toward the exit. "See you in the morning," he called. "Bright and early."

Back in his pickup, he switched on the engine and checked his mirrors.

Who said he wasn't happy?

2

The lock in Gram's front door made a familiar click as Kimberly turned the key. She nudged open the door and from an old habit, twirled the handle on the old-fashioned doorbell.

When she rolled her suitcase into the front hall, the fragrances of the house—and Grandma Boyd—immediately filled her nostrils and permeated her soul. Cinnamon, blueberry muffins, balsam pine-needle pillows on the couch, and sun-dried laundry lingered as if waiting for Kimberly's return.

Kimberly had arrived at a different Poloma Pines from the one she'd left ten years before. She was no longer a teenager. She was now a widow, an identity she'd neither asked nor wished for, but one that pressed a fresh bruise on her heart whenever she remembered. Though two years had passed, the spot was still tender.

Her grandmother had decided to leave Poloma Pines and join Kimberly's parents in Flagstaff. Grandma had asked Kimberly to help her pack and prepare the house before Kimberly began her new life in Seattle. Gram's move to Arizona would begin a new chapter in her family's life.

Not sure I'm ready for this much change. Kimberly

began to climb the stairs with her luggage. But the sound of tires crunching in the gravel driveway told her Gram was back, and Kimberly's heart leaped. Leaving her luggage on the stairs, she rushed out to the porch and flew down the steps to greet her grandmother as she stepped out of her mini-SUV.

"You beat me home," Gram cried, holding out her arms.

Kimberly stepped into the embrace, as she savored the fragrance of Gram's cherry-almond scented lotion and the grip of the arms that had held her since the day of her birth.

When they broke away, Gram beamed at her with joy. Gram's love had always wrapped around Kimberly, warming and comforting her.

"Now my day's complete." Gram ruffled her stylishly short, gray hair, highlighted with youthful strands of violet. "I'm sorry I wasn't here when you arrived."

She basked in her grandmother's love. "No worries. I hope you don't mind that I let myself in."

"This is your home, dear. Always."

"For as long as it's still yours, you mean."

Abby laughed and touched her forehead. "I keep forgetting."

Kimberly peeked into the backseat of her grandmother's car. Several bags of yarn sat on the floor. She opened the door and reached for them.

"I can do that," Abby said.

"Already done," Kimberly said as she slid the bags onto her arm. With the other, she took her

grandmother's hand and together, they walked into the house.

"I hope you're planning on doing a lot of knitting in the next few weeks," Kimberly said as Gram emptied the bags in the dining room. Yarns of all colors and textures spilled across the table. "Aren't you supposed to be getting *rid* of stuff?"

"It's for my knitting group, the Nimble Knitters. Some of us crochet. But," Gram whispered, "we don't hold that against them. All are welcome. Do you remember how to knit?"

Kimberly shook her head. "It's been more than a minute since I picked up a pair of needles. Or a crochet hook."

Gram patted Kimberly's hand. "You'll remember. It's like riding a bicycle."

Kimberly laughed. "That I can do."

Abby began sorting the skeins and balls of yarn into colors. "Land, I remember you and your friends riding up and down this hill and all around town on your bikes. Wasn't that yesterday that you and Nicky tried to ride up to Poloma Lake? You got halfway and gave up, coasted all the way back down the hill."

At the mention of Nick Jenkins, a tinge of irritation brushed Kimberly's chest, and she stopped sorting. "So, you know Nicky was here. He was my welcoming committee."

"Nicky? Of course. He's been doing some work for me. Getting the house ready for the market."

"So, he told the truth."

Without looking at her, Gram said, "You sound

disappointed, dear."

Kimberly shook her head. "Just surprised. I accused him of breaking and entering."

"That boy." Gram shook her head, but her tone was affectionate.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, I'm sure he didn't deny it."

"Not at first."

Gram shook her head. "Still keeping things close to his chest, but there's no need. Hand me those empty bags."

Kimberly folded the bags and gave them to her grandmother. "What do you mean?"

"You remember what he was like."

"All too well." Kimberly shook off the cloud of emotions the memory evoked.

"I mean, his home life. He didn't have a fair start like most of your classmates, and his home life was very unstable. Nothing like you grew up in."

"Gram, he caused you so much grief in high school. And his mischievous pranks were actually crimes and misdemeanors."

Abby Boyd had been the high school principal for more years than people in Poloma Pines could count. By the time she retired, she was overseeing some of her original students' grandchildren.

"What exactly did go on in your office when someone was sent there?"

Gram tucked the bags under her arm and smiled. "Why don't you ask Nicky next time you see him?"

"Which I hope won't be again for a while."

Kimberly seated herself at the table and, weaving a strand of variegated yarn through her fingers, thought about what she'd just said. "Why did he come back here? I thought he'd stay in Montana and fade into the past."

Gram took a seat next to Kimberly and now began sorting the colors by texture. "To make amends."

Kimberly lifted her gaze.

Gram continued, "He's starting with me, and I'm making it easy on him. It will give him confidence with others."

"He loved you back then. Why do you think he was always hanging around here? And you loved him."

"I still do. He was basically a good boy."

"Gram, he's not a child anymore."

"In every adult remains the child. Respect and value the child, and the adult will feel valued." Gram lifted Kimberly's chin to meet her gaze. "And if I recall, you two had something going on."

Kimberly blinked. "It wasn't serious. We just...hung out. We were friends, until..." Heat burned her chest and spread to her throat. Her cheeks would soon blaze, and to avoid further embarrassment, she looked down at the yarn. "And then...Mom and Dad moved us to Flagstaff."

Words remained unspoken between them.

Gram squeezed Kimberly's hand. "Well, it's so good to have you here, Kimmy. I didn't know how I would do this without your help. And your presence."

Kimberly nodded, blinking away tears. "I'm a

bridge for you."

"Exactly," Gram said. "Connecting the past and present."

"And future—let's not forget the future." Kimberly smiled at her grandmother.

The fine lines around Gram's eyes and mouth had deepened, but her eyes still sparkled and her skin glowed. She always radiated joy, and even the uncertainty of selling the house and moving away hadn't dimmed that light.

"And your plans for Seattle are all set?"

Kimberly nodded firmly. "Yes, ma'am. I start in four weeks."

Gram sighed. "You don't know a soul there."

"I will after a while. I made friends in San Diego."

"Still...plans are nice to make, but don't let them make you." Gram then set her lips firmly closed, but her eyes seemed to want to speak.

"I know you have more to say, so out with it."

"You know me." Gram laughed. Then her eyes softened. "Plans are good, but I always consult with God first."

At the mention of God, Kimberly unwound the yarn from her fingers and went into the kitchen. *God is always Gram's answer.* She chastised herself for judging her loving grandmother, and opened the refrigerator. "Do you need any groceries?" she asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Good idea," Gram said. "I didn't know what you wanted to eat, so I didn't buy anything yet." She reached for her handbag, but Kimberly pushed it