
COMING HOME TO
PROMISE

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

“Are we there yet?”

Megan glanced in the rearview mirror, but she could barely see her son in the interior darkness of the van.

“Don’t wake up your brothers. Why aren’t you asleep?” she asked softly.

“Someone has to stay awake to make sure you don’t miss our exit,” answered eleven-year-old Taylor. “We should have been there by now. Can I come up front?”

“Yes, but unhook the travel vest and bring it up here,” she said, welcoming the company. She was not going to admit her mistake of taking the wrong exit and getting lost while he had been sound asleep.

“We’re too big to be strapped in like babies,” her son complained, even though he was small enough to slide between the bucket seats and reattach the safety harness to the front seat.

“Texas law requires anyone under four-foot nine-inches to be in a restraining seat,” Megan repeated for probably the hundredth time.

“You’re misreading the requirements,” Taylor complained.

“Anyone over eight doesn’t have to be in a restraining seat, just a seatbelt.

“So you keep telling me, but you don’t have a degree in law, and I do,” Megan said, tempering her tone of voice she used when her kids were arguing over a lost cause. “The travel vest qualifies as a safety seat, and it doesn’t look like a child’s safety seat. That’s why I bought them. You and T2 are going to wear them until you get another spurt of growth, so quit complaining.”

“When is that going to happen?” Taylor moaned.

“Soon, I think. I just bought new shoes for both of you,” Megan said. “When the feet grow, it means your body is getting ready to support some more height.”

Thirty minutes later, she heard the same lamentation that drove most parents crazy.

“Mom! Why aren’t we there yet?”

Megan wished she could close her eyes, but she was on a dark country road. She hadn’t seen an overhead light pole in far too many miles. The moon was a tiny sliver, and although there were plenty of stars glittering, they weren’t very helpful to her in the pitch black of night. She glanced over to her son. “I haven’t come across an exit sign or any signs advertising a motel, or a hotel,” she said. “Towns are few and far between out here. We’ll find Promise, or we’ll find another place to stop.”

“Everything is far away out here,” Taylor complained. “We haven’t seen much of anything since we passed Plainview. We should have stopped there!”

“We can’t be that far from Promise,” Megan assured him. The next second, she gasped and instinctively threw out her arm to keep her son from pitching forward in his seat as something darted across the road. Her other hand firmly gripped the steering wheel.

They heard a loud thump, and the van rolled over whatever animal had committed suicide by crossing a road in front of a

moving vehicle. Megan's stomach roiled at the idea of killing an animal.

"Mom! The headlight is broken!" Taylor exclaimed.

"What happened?" Tyler, twin to Taylor, asked, awaking from his sleep.

"We hit something," Megan answered. "Quiet down you two. I don't want Sam awake too!"

"Don't stop, Mom," Taylor's voice was urgent. "Keep going and take the next turn. The sign says Promise, eleven miles."

Megan squinted, and she turned on the high beam of her remaining headlight. She followed her son's directions. Of the twins, Taylor was the most reasonable, generally the most mature. He was a brilliant child, wise far beyond his years.

"There's a gas station," Tyler said pointing.

"It's closed," Megan complained as they pulled into the parking lot, causing sensor lights to come on.

"It's almost midnight, Mom. At least we're somewhere," Taylor said. "Pull over and park under the security lights. We can sleep until daylight, and then figure out what to do when the gas station opens. It looks like it has mechanic bays."

Megan nodded and parked the van at the side of the convenience store. Tyler unbuckled his safety vest, and shimmied his skinny body around the backseats to retrieve several blankets and a bottle of water from the back of the van.

"We'll be okay, Mom," Taylor said.

"I know we will," Megan answered with what she hoped sounded like optimism. "Tuck in and let's get some sleep." It was a child reassuring the parent; something she heard too often from her twins.

Megan awakened to the first rays of sunlight on the horizon. She blinked and automatically looked around to count heads. There were three, carbon copies of their father with their blond hair with a hint of red in it, and bright hazel green eyes. Taylor and Tyler—the twins, their names often shortened

to T1 and T2 between them, a habit she had picked up herself, and her four-year-old Sam. Everyone was still asleep. She turned her head, jumped, and almost screamed as she saw a man peering in her side window, his knuckles about to rap on the glass.

He wore a uniform, and he was apparently from the sheriff's department since he stood beside a vehicle labeled as such. He motioned for Megan to roll down her window, but instead, she opened and closed her door as quietly as possible, stepping away from the van.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Deputy Clearwater, ma'am. I received a call from Joyce, the woman who opens the convenience store side of the station. She gets here around five-thirty in the morning. She noticed your out-of-state tags and was wondering why you were here?"

Megan turned around and saw lights on in the store. "She could have asked me. I hit an animal or something last night on the highway, and one of my headlights was broken. We're going to Promise. Since we were close, but I don't know exactly where we are going, I thought it was safer to stop, rather than roam around in the dark."

"Jimmy Calhoun, the mechanic, doesn't open the garage until eight, and he's not known for being on time," the deputy explained. "He's a man who marches to his own drum."

"Where exactly is Promise from here?" Megan asked.

"Eleven miles further west," the deputy answered. "Are you visiting someone?"

"No, I'm moving here," Megan stated. "Which way is west?"

The deputy smiled. "The sun is coming up over there, ma'am – that's east. The opposite is west."

"I'm not an idiot, Deputy. I'm from Maryland, where we don't depend on the positioning of the sun for directions. It would be difficult as we spend half our time under cloudy skies or rain. We generally speak in terms of right or left, or we

depend on our GPS systems. My GPS seems to be a little spotty out here,” Megan said.

“Bad reception is our normal out here, ma’am, and that includes phones, GPS, cable, and the internet. It doesn’t take much to knock it out. West would be a left turn out of the station, ma’am. Don’t turn off until you’re in town. Where are you heading?”

“Duvall Street.”

“It’s a nice part of town, although Promise doesn’t have what most towns would call a *bad* section. I live on Duvall myself. Some of our older folks have been selling out lately. They’re downsizing and moving to smaller places, or moving somewhere else to be closer to their kids.”

“Yes, my aunt lived on Duvall Street. I used to visit her when I was a kid.”

Deputy Clearwater stepped back and gave Megan an overall visual inquiry. She was a pretty woman, although there wasn’t much of her. She was barely over five feet, and thin. Some would say skinny. She was pretty though, with eyes the color of wild Texas violets, and blazing red hair pulled back in a long ponytail of curls.

The deputy regarded Megan with a puzzled expression on his face, and then he grinned. “Meggie? Meggie O’Connor?”

Megan tilted back her head and she stepped closer, searching the deputy’s face for recognition. “Ricky Clearwater? Boy, did you grow up! What was your momma feeding you?”

Rick laughed. “I took after my dad. He was six feet, five inches although I didn’t make the last inch. It’s just Rick now.”

Megan straightened and tried to stretch her five feet, one inch a little taller as Ricky, Rick, Clearwater, gave her a second male appraisal. She usually objected to such male scrutiny, but something about the man standing so tall and gorgeous in front of her made her wish she was not sleep wrinkled and scruffy.

She was walking proof of her Irish immigrant ancestors.

Megan had never been able to tame her unruly red curls, except by slicking them back into a ponytail or braids. Even then frisky tendrils managed to escape to bounce around and annoy her. At least the freckles were less obvious since she had found a fading product that lived up to its advertising.

“You don’t look much bigger than the last time you visited. What were you, about ten or eleven? That’s a while back!”

“I was twelve the last time I was in Promise visiting Aunt Callie. I’m Megan Palmer now, and it has been a long time.”

“Yeah, a very long time,” Rick said. “A lot of people were saddened when Callie died. They were even more upset when her family swooped in and had her body taken to Lubbock. We heard they had her cremated.”

“They did, and they made sure I wasn’t notified,” Megan said. “Those assholes didn’t want me to know she had died. Aunt Callie loved Promise and she should have been left here. It wasn’t my call to make at the time.”

“I’m sorry. It’s been a while since Callie passed,” the deputy commented.

“I know,” Megan replied sadly. “Well, I have to get going. If you still live on Duvall, I guess we’ll be street neighbors.”

“It’s eleven miles west to the town’s welcome sign, and welcome back,” Rick instructed. “Drive to the center square, make another left, and Duvall is six blocks down.”

“I remember that part,” Megan said, and she couldn’t stop her smile. They were almost there! She and her boys had finally reached their destination, their new home.

She climbed into the van and closed the door, but she rolled down the window when Deputy Rick Clearwater gestured for her to do so.

“Don’t forget to get that headlight fixed,” he warned.

“I will, as soon as I can,” Megan promised.

She started the engine and put on her sunglasses. Megan watched the deputy behind her sunglasses, as she knew he was

watching her. She pulled out of the parking lot and glanced down at herself. She was holding up pretty well for a woman of thirty-six and two pregnancies. She was still an off-the-rack size five or six, although it had been awhile since she'd shopped for anything beyond jeans and tee shirts, for herself or her boys.

She looked in the rearview mirror at her boys. She was only a few inches taller than the twins, and she felt certain that before the summer break was over, they would be taller than her. At eleven, twelve in two months, they still had a lot of growing left to do, and they carried their father's genes. They stood a good chance of being well over six feet.

There wasn't much to the town of Promise. There were some stores along the main street. Some she remembered from spending her childhood summers visiting. There were some newer businesses in town she knew hadn't been there before.

Megan saw the old IGA grocery off a side street, and two blocks further, she discovered the location of what would be her bank branch. She had used the same national bank in Maryland, and she had already checked online to confirm the transfer of her funds would be easy. She turned on to Duvall Street, happy to see the elementary school. Next, she noted the middle and high schools combined in two large buildings connected by a shared auditorium. She and the boys had read about it on the Promise website.

The next block held a good-sized town park with an old-fashioned gazebo bandstand. She knew ball diamonds and football fields extended beyond the grassy expanse of the park where people picnicked and tossed Frisbees.

Duvall was an older neighborhood. Some of the houses dated to the late 1800s as was the one she was aching to see again. The neighborhood was not the cookie cutter sameness of the suburbia sprawl she was used to, where every unit was the same. Megan had lived in shacks, old trailers, military housing and the townhouse she and her husband purchased early in their

marriage. They had thought of the townhouse as a stepping-stone to something bigger and better, but it hadn't happened.

Megan and Ryan had lived in a town about thirty miles from Washington, D.C. Both of them stationed in nearby military facilities. The townhouse had been affordable, and when Ryan had been transferred, they rented out the townhouse for twice the monthly mortgage payment. They had paid down the mortgage considerably, while moving around in military housing. Their hopes had been to net a good profit when they were ready to sell and settle down permanently.

She often recalled the old Yiddish saying her aunt frequently quoted: *'If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans.'* Megan and her husband had been so young and optimistic. Unfortunately, many obstacles had been thrown in the path of their dreams for the future. Megan continued to make plans even if Ryan was no longer with her and the boys. Her beloved Aunt Callie had instilled long-term dreams in her at a young age.

Megan had moved back into the townhouse after her husband had been killed, in order to make ends meet. She had also hoped it would discourage her remaining two family members from thinking she had money to spare.

Megan felt her heart swell as she steered the van closer to the sidewalk, slowly driving down the street where no two houses were alike. The front yards were small, but Megan remembered the backyards being large and fenced.

She turned into the driveway of 112 Duvall Avenue, smiling with relief. Her eyes welled as she held back tears. She wouldn't cry. These were tears of happiness, but the Ts associated all of her tears with the loss of their father.

Aunt Callie's house was a Victorian, a description Megan had not known as a child. It was a masterpiece of eighteenth-century architecture, standing three stories high with a turret. Scalloped shingles decorated the steeply pitched gabled slate roof. A front porch wrapped across the front and around both

sides of the house, and a stately balcony, the width of the front entrance, graced the second floor. Elaborate gingerbread adorned each eave. Wooden rosettes connected swags of hand-carved greenery on the flat fascia boards around the porch and under the stained glass and etched windows. The porch itself was nearly as wide as the townhouse they had left behind.

Her memories of Promise were of this grand house and living with Aunt Callie. Those memories were visceral. She could almost smell the cookies baking and feel Callie's loving touches as she braided Megan's hair, or tucked her unruly curls behind her ears.

Megan had loved her aunt so much, as had all her friends and the neighbor kids. One of those kids had been Ricky Clearwater who had been a teenager at the time. She remembered him mowing her aunt's lawn. Aunt Callie always rewarded him with cookies and sweet tea, and a crisp five-dollar bill. Megan and her aunt had walked next door nearly every day to check on Mrs. Clearwater who was a frail woman and rarely ventured outside since her son and neighbors were always there to help.

Aunt Callie's house had been empty for years, caught up in a legal battle with her greedy family members. They believed they were entitled to Callie Nichols' property solely by virtue of being her last blood-related relatives. They had immediately contested Callie's will, which left the house and property to Megan.

It had taken five long years for the judge in the case to decide to uphold a will written when a woman was in her late forties, living and supporting herself, and obviously in her right mind. Callie Nichols had died young. She had only been sixty-one years old.

The courts had upheld Megan's right to her inheritance, and she would not deny her aunt's last wishes. Callie Nichols might not have been a blood relative, but she and Megan had remained close despite the obstacles Megan's father had placed in their way to separate them.

Megan had kept in touch by phone and letters. When she had become an adult, she often invited her Aunt Callie to visit. She had produced handwritten letters from her aunt as evidence for the judge, all five hundred and twelve of them, proof she had been loved by her aunt. Megan treasured Callie's handwritten letters, an art her aunt had considered lost. Callie put pen to paper, even though she and Megan communicated nearly every day through emails and social media.

Megan had written her responses on a computer, and she had documented proof of the letters via email logs and social media history. The distant relatives could not produce one letter or even so much as a Christmas card as evidence that Callie had stayed in contact with them.

The house was beautiful in Megan's eyes. She could see it needed repairs and it needed a fresh coat of paint and some loving care, although someone had been tending the lawn. She would attend to those details in time. Number 112 Duvall was perfect for this new phase of her life. Her boys would have space to run, play and grow.

Megan dug into her oversized hobo purse, which carried more items for her boys than for her, searching for the large key ring. She was unsure what they would find inside as she knew Aunt Callie's relatives had transformed into vultures after her death. Megan had heard through lawyers how the relatives had held auctions and yard sales to dispose of Callie's property before Megan obtained a court order to stop them. Those same relatives had been convinced they would overturn the wishes of Callie's will. Megan had already decided she would fight them in court, and lose the house to debts owed to lawyers before she would let them get their hands on one more cent of her Aunt's estate.

Megan had been contacted by Promise real estate agents several times wanting her to sell the property. Instead, she had started putting her business and house affairs into order to move and start a new life for herself and her sons.

“Is this it, Mom?” Taylor asked.

“This is it,” Megan whispered.

“We’re here!” Tyler shouted, waking Sam from his sleep. He began to cry, not understanding what was happening. He had been a poor traveler, and keeping him occupied for the two-thousand-mile trip had been difficult.

“I gotta pee!” Sam whined with enough urgency that Megan unhooked him from his car seat, and hurried to the front porch. She had to try three keys before finding the one that worked.

“Go inside, you should see a powder room at the end of the entryway under the stairs,” Megan told her twins.

Taylor took the hand of his younger brother and they followed Megan’s directions.

“What’s a powder room?” Tyler asked.

It’s a bathroom like the one at home, I mean it’s like the one at the townhouse, the one under the stairs. It’s called a powder room, because women can check their make-up in it,” Megan explained. She flipped a switch and was relieved when the entryway chandelier came on.

“Boys! Stay together until we can investigate. I remember most of the layout, but things might have changed,” Megan admonished as her youngest came out of the bathroom, and her oldest twin closed the door behind him. The Ts had informed Megan when they were eight that they were too old for her to be in the bathroom with them.

“Let’s open these drapes and let some light in,” she suggested, crossing the expanse of one of the front parlors.

“Pink?” Tyler exclaimed looking around at the large living room, which was one of two twin parlors located at the front of the house.

Megan laughed at his typical boyish disgust.

“It can be changed. It’s only paint and wallpaper,” Megan commented, glancing around. The pink flowered drapes matched the pink wallpapered walls. She remembered the room.

Mauve pinks and heavily flowered patterns had been the height of fashion in the 1980s. Aunt Callie had not been one to change what she enjoyed, and she had loved her living room décor with its ultra-feminine colors and antiques. The antiques were gone, sold Megan assumed. Gone too was the mauve carpeting, revealing refinished old oak floors.

“It’s like being inside a bottle of Pepto-Bismol,” Taylor snickered, coming into the room, as Tyler ran to the bathroom.

“It is,” Megan laughed and agreed. “But look at the size of the room, the floors, and that beautiful fireplace!”

“Where to next?” Tyler asked when he joined them a few minutes later.

“My turn,” Megan said urgently. “Don’t leave this room!”

Megan hurried inside the powder room, checking first to make sure the seat was down. Living in a household of boys, she’d learned to always check.

Once the bathroom duties were completed, they walked through the house together. The old Victorian was empty except for an occasional odd piece of furniture. Megan was thankful the built-in cabinetry had remained untouched. All the wall-to-wall carpeting had been removed, and the walls were pocked with dark and light tones where the sun had faded the paint or wallpaper around now missing furniture and paintings.

Megan knew paint could be changed. The rooms were large with the tall ceilings of a by-gone era, along with intricate and beautiful crown moldings. The bathrooms had been modernized, probably not long before her aunt had died, and there were more of them than Megan recalled. Everything appeared new, usable and functioning. It was all she cared about for the time being.

The kitchen was a major surprise. Although Megan knew it was for the best, she actually felt an ache in her heart when she saw the 1940s-era kitchen was gone. The old white kitchen cabinets and the battered table where she had learned to peel apples and mimic her aunt’s efficient hands as she made pies were gone

too. She could almost see the old kitchen wallpaper and curtains with a strawberry motif, with the matching aprons and quilted potholders worn thin from use. It was all gone.

The new kitchen was a designer's masterpiece. It had tall ceiling-height cabinets, still white, but now staggered in height and depth with crafted moldings. The countertops were marble and stools lined a large island. The unplugged stainless-steel appliances were brand new with the stickers on them. Megan did the honors with the twins help in pulling them from the walls and plugging them into the outlets. She checked to make sure the cooling units were cooling, and the gas stove burners lit when she turned them on.

Memory plucked at her, and Megan turned around to look behind her. It was then she realized part of the back porch had been remodeled too. It now housed a laundry room and a mudroom. The old butler's pantry was still there with its built-in cabinetry. One door in the pantry led to basement steps, while another led to what remained of the back porch. The porch she remembered was now smaller and had been screened-in.

Megan looked around in confusion. Callie hadn't told her about remodeling the house, and they spoke several times a week. Maybe the greedy relatives were remodeling to ask a higher sale price when they listed the property. If so, why hadn't the relatives sold the new appliances when they discovered Megan was going to fight for her inheritance? They had sold everything else in the house.

All the major changes had been professionally done, and the rest of the house could be fixed in time. Paint and wallpaper could be changed, and she had a moving van of furniture coming. Until the furniture van arrived, they would make do.

"Everything looks to be ship-shape in here," she said. "Let's go upstairs and see what has changed. If I remember correctly, there were five bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor. The third-floor is attic space."

“Does that mean we don’t have to share a bedroom anymore?” Taylor asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Megan answered honestly. “For now, yes. I have to have the house inspected, and I don’t want you, boys, that far away from me until I can get the smoke alarms checked along with everything else. You’re used to sharing, and Sam would miss his big brothers.”

Taylor and Tyler exchanged some kind of unspoken message between them. “We’re okay with sharing, Mom.”

Megan pulled Sam into her arms, kissing him on the forehead. She tried to pull her twins into her embrace with her free arm. “My guys!” she said, struggling to kiss the twins who managed to squirm away from her.

Deputy Rick Clearwater’s radio buzzed, and he called into the dispatcher. “What’s going on, Hedy?”

“Stephanie called. She said your house is being invaded by squatters.”

“What?”

“That’s what she said, so I figured you had better get over there,” the dispatcher stated.

“I’m on my way,” Rick responded. He switched off his radio, swapping it for his cell phone. He tried to reach his home number and Stephanie’s cell, but she was not answering. He turned on the flashing lights of his vehicle and headed four streets over.

As Rick pulled into his driveway and opened his car door, he witnessed Stephanie Hayes, his thirteen-year-old temporary guest, pulling bedding from the arms of two young boys, and then shoving them aside. She knocked an even younger boy down to the sidewalk.

A small woman inserted herself between the boys and Stephanie, standing her ground as the littlest of the boys cried.

“Rick!” Stephanie screamed. “Arrest them! They’re squatters trying to move into our new house!” When Stephanie made another move toward the boys, Megan Palmer went into mother bear mode. With a quick judo or karate move, Megan tripped the teenager, rolled her on her stomach, and jerked her arms behind her, pressing her knee against the teenager’s back.

“Back off!” Rick ordered, grabbing Megan around the waist, lifting her off and away from the teenager.

Stephanie rolled over and jumped to her feet. “Arrest them!” she screeched.

“Arrest this brat for attacking my children!” Megan snapped when Rick lowered her to her feet, keeping a tight grip around her waist.

Rick turned his attention to the teenager in his charge. “Stephanie, go home!”

“They’re moving into our house!” she screamed again.

“Go!” he ordered.

The teenager burst into tears and ran to the house next door.

“Can you calm down?” Rick demanded of Megan, still holding onto her.

“Get the hell out of my way,” Megan snarled, elbowing Rick hard in the stomach. “You saw what she did, and you had better not try to blame my boys!”

“Mommy!” the littlest boy cried. Megan fell to her knees instantly, pulling the child into her lap. “Are you hurt, baby?”

“I’m not a baby,” the boy sniffed. “Why did she push us down?”

“Because she’s a mean girl,” Megan answered.

“Stephanie isn’t a mean girl,” Rick objected.

“You couldn’t prove it by me,” Megan retorted. “She was screaming at us, and she attacked my sons! She’s bigger than them. She’s bigger than me. I’m pressing charges!”

"I won't deny Stephanie is taller than you, but that doesn't take much. She's only thirteen," Rick objected. "Why are you moving into Callie's house?"

"Because it's my house," Megan responded. "I inherited it from my Aunt Callie."

"Then we have a problem," Rick admitted.

"What problem?"

"I bought Callie's house five months ago," Rick explained. "It's been empty for years."

"It's been tied up in a lawsuit by her greedy relatives who sued to override her will. They didn't like the idea of her leaving property to me. Callie was a grown woman. If she wanted to leave property to a cockroach, it was her right to do so. This house was never put on the market. Oh, those awful people tried, but they didn't get away with it. I filed injunctions against them!"

"Do you have any proof of ownership?" Rick asked.

"Of course I do," Megan exclaimed. "I have copies of Aunt Callie's will, the final court order, and the property deed in my name. If you think you purchased my house, you've been swindled!"

"One of us has," Rick replied. "May I see your identification?"

"You know who I am," Megan snapped. "My identification is in my purse, which is in the house!" She turned to the twins, barking out orders. "Go inside, boys!" The two older boys picked up the bedding and carried it toward the house.

"Mommy, my knee hurts!" the littlest boy cried.

Megan got to her feet. She scooped Sam into her arms, and stalked to the house letting the screen door slam loudly in her wake.

"Aren't you going to arrest her?" Stephanie demanded.

Rick turned around. "I told you to go to the house."

"What about..."

"Stephanie, go home and wait for me," Rick snapped. "I'll be

lucky if I can talk her out of charging you with assault! What were you thinking?"

"What about me? She attacked me!" the teenager exclaimed outraged.

"She was protecting her children from you, and if you didn't notice, you are bigger than her and her children!"

"That's not fair! She's moving into our house!"

"She seems to believe the house belongs to her, and I have to get to the bottom of this problem," Rick explained. "Please do as I ask, and let me see if I can straighten out this mess without your hysterics."

Rick walked over and knocked on the screen door of Callie Nichol's home. His future home or so he had believed. He hadn't received the final papers yet, and he hadn't given much thought to the delay in paperwork. Vanessa Tilman, his real estate agent, had warned him there might be a delay since there was a computer upgrade going on at the title company her father's real estate company used. She had assured him that her father would complete the last details of settlement on the house.

He knocked a second time, noticing the front door was ajar. When no one answered, Rick went inside. He knew the layout of the house. He could quote the dimensions of each room because he had been renovating since the day after he had been handed the keys. Every spare moment of his time had been spent working on the house. Most of his life savings were invested in it too.