

COMING HOME SERIES - BOOK THREE

Coming Home *Forever*

MICHELLE DE BRUIN



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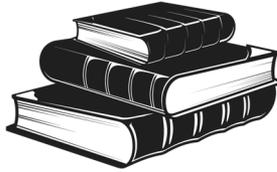
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To those who serve on the front lines for the kingdom—worship leaders, intercessors, evangelists, chaplains, apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers. Thank you for the courage and bravery to proclaim the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Keep standing. We need you.

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Philippians 1:4-6



Oswell City, Iowa
January 1919

“I’m coming, I’m coming!” Rose Harper dropped her collection of silverware onto the lace tablecloth in the Ellenbroek dining room and rushed to the kitchen.

Mavis, the cook, stood with her hand on her hip and a grimace on her face. Even the wooden spoon poking out from her hand seemed to glare at Rose in disapproval.

“What’s the matter now?” Having worked as household staff for only a few months, and then as only occasional help called in for special events, Rose was still learning her job.

“You clumsy girl! You forgot to take these fruit dishes with you when you went to set the table,” Mavis yelled.

Rose sucked in a breath to calm her nerves. “I’m awfully sorry, but I didn’t know you had them ready.”

Mavis waved the hand holding the spoon. It arched through the air as if heralding the decree of an eccentric monarch. “Ready, you say? I’m always ready. Those dishes were sitting on that counter right under your nose. Pay attention!” She turned

back to the pot simmering on the stove, plunging the wooden spoon to its depths.

“Yes, ma’am.” Rose’s words came in a breathless whisper as she picked up the tray containing delicate china dishes filled with a red fruit sauce and returned to the dining room.

She’d learned where Mrs. Ellenbroek kept the dishes and silverware. She’d also learned how to serve guests at the table while a meal was underway. But she had yet to learn how to get along with the cook. The woman was disagreeable every time Rose had been called in to work with her. Maybe she treated everyone this way, or maybe special dinners caused her stress, and Rose just happened to be around at Mavis’s worst moments.

With a withering glance at the door to the kitchen, Rose worked her way around the table, placing a petite dish at the corner of every plate. When the task was completed, she slid the silver tray onto a stand with Mrs. Ellenbroek’s cherished Christmas cactus. Exotic flowers in a light pink shade poured from the healthy plant. It gave the room a touch of elegance and warmth as the only source of live growth at this time of year.

“Rose!” Her name called in a woman’s upper register sent a jolt of energy down her spine as she put the silverware in order.

Holding her breath, Rose glanced up in time to see Kendra, the Ellenbroeks’ housemaid, enter the room.

“He’s coming!” Kendra’s eyes were wide, and her face had gone white.

Rose frowned. “Who is coming?” Kendra wasn’t usually the one on staff given to theatrics. Something must have startled her.

“Timothy. You know, the Ellenbroeks’ son.” Kendra’s gaze fastened on Rose’s face.

“Yes, I realize that.” Rose nodded. “It’s the reason Mrs. Ellenbroek called my aunt, asking if I could leave my job at the hotel and work here for the afternoon. We’ve known he is coming for three days.” One more place setting waited for a full array of silverware, so she went to work on it.

Kendra crossed the room, grasped Rose's shoulders, and looked her in the eye. "No, I mean, he's coming now."

"What? But how?" Rose stole a glance out the window at the placid street.

"I heard it from Mrs. Ellenbroek herself." Kendra paused to inhale. "He was able to catch an earlier train from Chicago. The telegram came through this afternoon, and the mayor brought it home with him. He just now showed it to his wife. Oh, goodness! Do you know what this means?" Kendra rested the back of her hand on her forehead. A damsel in distress in one of those silent movies Rose liked to watch with her friends couldn't have done the pose better.

"How soon?" Rose asked, but her words were drowned out by pounding footsteps on the open staircase.

Mayor Paul Ellenbroek and his wife, Lillian, stood in the foyer and glanced through the wide entry to the dining room. "Timothy's train is due to arrive in fifteen minutes." Paul's words came out breathlessly as he panted from his rush down the steps.

Lillian's hand fluttered to her bodice. "Oh, my dear. Do we have everything?"

Paul removed her coat from the hall tree. "I believe we do." He held her coat as she slipped her arms into the sleeves.

Knocking came on the front door. "That will be Brandt and Lorraine," Lillian reached to adjust her hat.

"I'll answer it." Kendra broke out of her panic and moved toward the heavy walnut door. A well-dressed couple's faces showed through the beveled glass. Kendra opened the door, and an entire family bounded into the house.

"Grandpa, is he really comin'?" Brandt and Lorraine Koelman's daughter, Frances, tugged on Paul's coat as he hastened to put it on.

"Yes, my dear. That's where Grandma and I are going with your mother and father." Paul chuckled as he thrust his hands into his gloves.

Lorraine bent down, level with the four-year-old. "That's why we had to leave your dolls and come to Grandma's early."

"Can't wait to meet Uncle Tim." Seven-year-old Mitch clapped his hands.

"This will be your first meeting since you were a baby," Lorraine arched an eyebrow. "Do you remember him?"

"No, but I've seen his picture," Mitch stated with pride.

"Rudy is sleeping. Where should I lay him down?" Brandt asked with a glance at the baby in his arms.

"Upstairs in the little playroom I keep for your children." Lillian pointed at the stairs. "Please hurry." She patted her son-in-law's back as he passed by.

Rose exchanged an anxious glance with Kendra. Was the baby staying here while the rest of the family went to the train station?

"Whose car are we taking?" Lorraine cast a glance at the window.

"The Bentley is warming in the garage. It's large enough to bring Tim and all his gear home with us." Paul's voice sounded more stable, as if he'd finally caught his breath.

"We parked in the street, so we'll leave our car there until we return." Brandt breezed down the steps and joined the group.

"Did he stay asleep?" Lorraine lifted worried eyes to her husband.

Brandt smiled. "The boy is out."

"Let's go." Paul reached for the doorknob.

Lillian turned to Kendra and Rose. "You'll watch the children, won't you, until we return? We'll be back in time for dinner." She smiled and took a step to follow her husband. Then she paused and looked up. "Oh, and do be sure to put lots of cream and sugar near Tim's plate. He dearly loves cream and sugar in his coffee. The poor boy has probably been deprived of it while he's been away at war. He should have every comfort now that he's come home."

“Lillian, come on. We’ll be late.” Paul’s impatient voice carried from the porch.

“Goodbye!” She gave her sweetest smile and left.

Rose’s jaw dropped as she turned to her colleague.

“She wants us to babysit,” Kendra said in a voice much subdued from her panic a few moments ago.

“But I still have to put the glasses out and fill them with water.” Rose mentally calculated the approximate amount of water she would need for the entire party.

“And I have to lay out the towels in Timothy’s room.” Kendra lifted her eyes to the ceiling where the guest’s room waited above them.

“Mavis will want us to get the food on the table at the precise moment the family pulls in the driveway.” Rose glanced out the window.

“And then there’s all that cream and sugar.” Kendra rested her hand on her forehead.

“And finding another set of pitchers and sugar bowls.”

“And the salad.”

“And the soup.” The menu Mrs. Ellenbroek had decided on floated through Rose’s mind. Soup was such a stressful course to serve. Did the lady of the house really need to include it on tonight’s menu when so many other issues strained Rose’s nerves?

“I still need to set out the bowls.”

“And the baby’s sleeping upstairs.”

Frances sauntered over to Kendra and tugged on her crisp white apron. “Kendie, I’m hungry.”

She bent down. “I know, dear. Let’s take your coat off first.”

Rose watched Mitch wander around the far side of the room. An energetic boy with a tendency for finding trouble, he could pose a serious threat to all the breakables set out on his grandmother’s dining room table.

“Have you put the refreshments in the parlor yet?” Kendra glanced up.

“No, I was waiting on—” Rose’s words were cut off by a yell from the kitchen.

“Kendra! Rose! Where are you?” The angry bellow echoed through the halls.

They looked at each other and exclaimed in unison. “Mavis!”

At that moment, the well-ordered household came the closest it ever had to falling apart. Its long history of serenity flew out the window with that cry from the cook.

Frances whimpered. Mitch screamed. A tremor shook his whole body until he lost his balance. Headfirst, he careened into the plantstand. With a great crash, Mitch, the silver tray, and Mrs. Ellenbroek’s expansive Christmas cactus tumbled to the floor. Dirt poured in a heap from the upset plant. Mitch rolled into it and spread it all over the rug. A baby’s wail came from upstairs.

Kendra and Rose bumped into each other, hardly knowing which crisis to attend first. “Come on!” Kendra grabbed Frances’s hand and took off for the kitchen.

Rose dared not dally around. She waved at Mitch over her shoulder. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.” Following Kendra, she left Mitch in a pile of dirt, his eyes wide and his coat hanging off one shoulder.

Mavis launched into militant command as soon as the kitchen door cracked open. “The rolls go in that basket. Here’s the butter dish. Assemble the salad. Put some on each plate and take them to the table. Make the dressing. Pour it in that glass flask and take it out too.” The cook stood in the middle of the room, pointing with her wooden spoon.

Frances’s crying grew louder, and Mitch pushed through the door. “Kendra? I have a problem.”

Rose held her breath. Mavis didn’t need to get the news of more problems. Plenty of them existed right here in the cook’s domain.

Kendra turned around. “I’ll be right there. Take off your coat

and go hang it up. I'll help you in just a minute." She picked Frances up and held her on her hip.

Mitch cast a sorry look to the floor and backed out of the kitchen with the door creeping closed behind him.

Mavis's eyes took on a wild, angry look. "Surely the Koelmans didn't leave all their children here."

Kendra cleared her throat. "Yes, Mavis. As a matter of fact, they did."

"The baby is crying upstairs," Rose whispered.

Mavis rolled her eyes and heaved a sigh. "And us with all this food to fix. What was Lillian thinking? We'll never have the meal ready on time."

"But they left earlier than they'd originally planned. The Ellenbroeks may not expect to eat as soon as they arrive. Maybe they will want some time with their son before dinner." Rose's voice stayed calm as she shared her line of reason.

"But, Rose, you heard Mrs. Ellenbroek. She said they'd be home in time for dinner." Kendra was getting theatrical again.

"I don't care what Lillian said." Mavis cut in gruffly. "We have to get this meal ready and everything on the table."

Frances buried her face in Kendra's neck, and Mitch came back. He wandered over to the rolls and was about to touch one, but Mavis smacked his hand away. His face displayed his hurt feelings.

Rose reached out to him. He came to her side and held her hand.

Mavis picked up where she left off, commanding and pointing. "After the salad comes the soup. Rose, I want you to ladle it into the bowls and carry them to the table as soon as the family has finished their salad. Kendra, here are the meat and the vegetables. While everyone is eating their soup, you should slice the roast and put it on this platter. Rose, as soon as you can, carry the platter to the table along with the vegetables. When the time for dessert comes, you both must serve it, since it is a

cheesecake with a cherry topping. Make sure to keep their glasses and cups filled.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Rose saw Mitch’s finger dip into the bowl of leftover fruit. She jerked on his other hand. When he looked up, she frowned at him and shook her head.

Frances giggled as Mitch slipped his sticky red finger into his mouth.

“Mrs. Ellenbroek requested a set of cream and sugar by Tim’s plate. Where is the spare pitcher and sugar bowl?” Kendra asked Mavis.

“Oh, goodness, how should I know?” Mavis pointed to the butler’s pantry. “Look up there in one of them top cupboards. But it won’t match the other dishes.” She scowled as she opened the oven door.

“We’ll see to the children and come right back,” Rose said as she led Mitch from the kitchen. With a glance at the dirty rug, she headed for the stairs. The plant would have to get cleaned up before Mavis saw it and before the family came home. “Come on. Hurry.” She tugged on Mitch’s hand as they climbed the stairs, following the baby’s cries.

Kendra followed them to the playroom. They settled Mitch and Frances with a stack of books and a collection of toy trains. Rose picked up Rudy, calmed him with a few pats to his back, and went with Kendra downstairs as she held him against her shoulder. The voices of children content in their play followed them.

“What are you going to do with him?” Kendra pointed to the baby.

“Let’s spread a blanket out in the dining room. He can lie on that. Then we can watch him while we work.” Rose entered the dining room while Kendra went to the parlor for a quilt. The baby fussed as Kendra laid him down.

“Help me with this rug. Quick.” Rose spoke over the baby’s growing discontent as she went to the battered Christmas cactus and settled it back on its stand.

“But what about Mavis?” Kendra cast a worried glance at the kitchen door.

“All I know is, she can’t see this.” Rose bent down and brushed a hand over the dirt. “Get the broom. We’ll try to sweep up as much as we can.”

Kendra whimpered and scurried away. She soon returned with the broom and a dustpan. “Settle down, Rudy. One of us will hold you in a minute.” She stroked the baby’s head, but it made little difference. He continued to fuss.

“Where are you girls? I’m waiting!” Mavis bellowed from the kitchen.

“I’ll stay. You go see what she wants.” Rose whispered as she coaxed the powdery soil out of the rug’s fabric. A few blooms had broken off the plant, so Rose swept them up as well, but they didn’t slide into the dustpan as easily as the dirt. If only she could roll the whole rug up and give it a good shake outside. But it covered most of the floor and had the heavy table and chairs on top of it. She had no way of moving the rug without a mammoth upheaval.

“Rose, where are you? The dressing won’t make itself.” Mavis shouted.

Stifling a sigh, Rose worked faster at getting the rug clean. She straightened, hid the broom and dustpan in the corner between the hutch and the window, and hastened across the room. Dirt remained on the rug, but she had no more time to clean it. Maybe everyone would be too busy eating to notice the shadow of potting soil near the edge of the dining area.

“Come here.” Rose picked up the baby and headed for the kitchen. Holding her breath, she hastened past the cook. A fussy baby would surely draw attention. “Shh,” she whispered as she joined Kendra in the butler’s pantry. Mavis was completely engrossed in basting the meat, so Rose dared to take a deep breath. Maybe the worst of her wrath had passed now that she’d had a chance to bark out her commands.

“How much do you know about the Ellenbroeks’ son?” Kendra asked as she climbed onto a step stool.

“Not much. I’ve read his letters in the newspaper, but that’s all.” Rose patted Rudy’s back and jiggled him on her hip.

Kendra glanced down at her with sparkling eyes. “You’ll never learn about the real Timothy Ellenbroek from the letters published in the town paper. He’s too modest.” She bent down and lowered her voice. “I’ve overheard his mother talking about him to her friends and her daughter.” With a furtive glance at the stove, where Mavis still had her back turned, Kendra continued. “They say he’s a war hero. He enlisted two years ago, after his graduation from seminary. But instead of staying in the country to take a church, he went to the front in France as a chaplain for the Army.” Kendra straightened. “He’s seen the fighting, even to the point of risking his life to save others.” Pure admiration glowed in her eyes.

Rose’s heart thumped as she listened.

“I bet he looks marvelous in uniform. But then, he hasn’t been home to Oswell City for several years. He got his education in other parts of the country and then went directly overseas. But I’ve seen his pictures.”

Rose’s imagination kicked in. A handsome, intelligent, uniformed war hero. She’d never met anyone like him. Her friends from her one year of college hadn’t done anything even close to what this man had accomplished. If she’d stayed in school, maybe she’d have a reason to feel equal to him.

But college had been much harder than she’d expected. She’d dropped out to take a job with her aunt Helen at the hotel instead. The salary satisfied her. Picking up extra hours working for the Ellenbroeks helped too. She liked working, but always in the back of her mind, doubt niggled at her. Had she made the right choice to abandon her education? Did she want to be a hotel maid for the rest of her life? If she’d stayed in school, would she have seen as much of the world as the highly esteemed Timothy Ellenbroek?

The longing for expertise and a place in the world reared to life again as a vision of the Ellenbroeks' son formed in her imagination.

"Found them." Kendra stepped down from her stool with a small pitcher, a bowl, and a lid in her hands. "Let's go see if Mavis has any cream left after making the soup."

"It's time the dressing was made." Mavis straightened from before the oven, and her gaze roamed the kitchen until she spotted Rose. "What's taking you so long?"

"We're coming." Rose jiggled Rudy on her hip. How in the world was she to keep up with the demands of a fussy baby and an even fussier cook?