

Last One Home: A Novel

By Debbie Macomber

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***NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER**

Debbie Macomber, author of the Blossom Street and Cedar Cove series, delivers an inspiring new stand-alone novel about the enduring bond between sisters, the power of forgiveness, and a second chance at love.

Growing up, Cassie Carter and her sisters, Karen and Nichole, were incredibly close—until one fateful event drove them apart. After high school, Cassie ran away from home to marry the wrong man, throwing away a college scholarship and breaking her parents' hearts. To make matters worse, Cassie had always been their father's favorite—a sentiment that weighed heavily on her sisters and made Cassie's actions even harder to bear.

Now thirty-one, Cassie is back in Washington, living in Seattle with her daughter and hoping to leave her past behind. After ending a difficult marriage, Cassie is back on her own two feet, the pieces of her life slowly but surely coming together. Despite the strides Cassie's made, she hasn't been able to make peace with her sisters. Karen, the oldest, is a busy wife and mother, balancing her career with raising her two children. And Nichole, the youngest, is a stay-at-home mom whose husband indulges her every whim. Then one day, Cassie receives a letter from Karen, offering what Cassie thinks may be a chance to reconcile. And as Cassie opens herself up to new possibilities—making amends with her sisters, finding love once more—she realizes the power of compassion, and the promise of a fresh start.

A wonderful novel of perseverance and trust, and an exciting journey through life's challenges and joys, *Last One Home* is Debbie Macomber at the height of her talents.

Praise for *Last One Home*

"Fans of bestselling author Macomber will not be disappointed by this compelling stand-alone novel."***—Library Journal***

"Family, forgiveness and second chances are the themes in Macomber's latest stand-alone novel. No one writes better women's contemporary fiction, and *Last One Home* is another wonderful example. Always inspiring and heartwarming, this is a read you will cherish."***—RT Book Reviews***

“Tender, real, and full of hope.”***—Heroes and Heartbreakers***

“Once again, Ms. Macomber has woven a charming tale dealing with facing life’s hard knocks, begging forgiveness, and gaining self-confidence.”***—Reader to Reader***

“Macomber never disappoints me. . . . She always manages to leave me with a warming of the soul and fuzzy feelings that stays for days.”***—Fresh Fiction***

“A very heartwarming novel of healing and reconciliation . . . that touches on life’s more serious moments and will leave readers hoping to revisit these flawed but lovable characters in the future.”**—Book Reviews & More by Kathy**

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Editorial Review

Review
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About the Author
Debbie Macomber, the author of *Love Letters, Mr. Miracle, Blossom Street Brides,* and *Rose Harbor in Bloom,* is a leading voice in women’s fiction. Nine of her novels have hit #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller lists, and three of her beloved Christmas novels have been hit movies on the Hallmark Channel, including *Mrs. Miracle* and *Mr. Miracle*. Hallmark also produces the hit original series *Debbie Macomber’s Cedar Cove,* based on the author’s Cedar Cove books. She has more than 170 million copies of her books in print worldwide.

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Chapter 1

The impossibly thin woman sitting next to Cassie Carter in the King County Courthouse in Seattle trembled like an oak leaf in a storm. When the judge entered the courtroom and they were asked to rise, Maureen could barely manage to get to her feet. Cassie wrapped her arm around the other woman’s waist and helped her to stand upright. Maureen was skin and bone, so thin Cassie could feel her ribs. She’d been that thin once herself. Like Maureen, she had been beaten down, battered, and emotionally broken.

“You’re doing great,” Cassie whispered. She understood all too well what courage it took for

Maureen to testify against her husband. Cassie had sat in a similar courtroom in Florida, only she’d sat alone. Duke, her husband, had glared at her as she’d slowly walked toward the witness stand, his dark eyes filled with hatred. Eyes that said he would kill her if he got the chance.
He nearly had.

They’d been married only a few months when Duke hit her the first time. He’d had a few beers with friends

and come home and found Cassie didn't yet have dinner ready. To show her how displeased he was, he'd slapped her. Cassie had been stunned. Her father had never laid a hand on her mother or her, nor her two sisters. Horrified, she'd pressed her hand to her cheek, hardly knowing what to think.

That was the first of many such slaps. Afterward he was sorry. He felt horrible that he could do anything to hurt the woman he loved beyond life itself. He'd cover his face and weep, begging her forgiveness. The irony of it was that she, the one who'd been hurt, would rationalize his anger and comfort him. Shocking, really, when she thought about it. Duke hit her and she was the one who apologized.

As the years progressed, the slaps turned to slugs and the slugs into beatings. During the last beating she'd seen that very look in his eyes, the same one he gave her the day she stood in a Florida courtroom.

The look that said her days were numbered. She would pay for what she'd done.

That final time, as Duke's fists pounded down on her, Cassie had been terrified by the cold hate in her husband's eyes. Duke would not stop until he killed her. It was as clear as the writing on a highway billboard. In that breathless moment, Cassie knew beyond a doubt that she was about to die. She lost consciousness briefly, and when she came to again she heard him rifling through the kitchen drawers. She knew he was searching for a knife.

Carried by adrenaline, numb with fear, she managed to escape into her daughter's bedroom and blocked the door by tilting a chair beneath the knob. She grabbed seven--year--old Amiee and fled out the window.

She didn't take her purse or her identification or any money. And she had no friends, no resources. Just her daughter and the clothes on her back.

Cassie hadn't needed anything else. The one precious thing that had come out of her marriage had been her daughter. Fleeing to a women's shelter, Cassie was given housing and assistance.

Duke was arrested and sentenced to a six--month jail term.

Cassie had taken those months to put her life together. And to try to make her way back to the good life she'd left behind. The hardest part hadn't even been leaving Duke after all—-it was that she didn't have her family's support. She was on her own, without her parents, without her sisters. She had to do it alone, and so she had.

"What if the judge doesn't believe me?" Maureen whispered, her voice trembling to the point that her words were barely discernible.

"He has the police report," Cassie assured her.

"I .?.?. I don't know that I can do this." Maureen started to shake again, even worse than before.

"Lonny doesn't mean to hurt me .?.?. he can't help himself. He has a temper, you see, and it gets away from him. He doesn't know what he's doing. He can't help himself."

"Maureen, we've been through this. It isn't your fault that your husband hits you. You've done nothing wrong." Cassie recognized the thought process: If only she'd been a better wife, a better housekeeper, a better mother, then Duke wouldn't be upset. It was her failings that brought on the abuse. Only later, with

counseling and patience, did she accept that the blame wasn't hers.
She had done nothing to deserve the beatings Duke gave her.

"But .?.?."

"I was married to a man who beat me," Cassie reminded her. "I thought it was my fault, too. If only I hadn't put mustard instead of mayo on his ham sandwich he wouldn't have hit me. I should have remembered. How could I have been so stupid? Maureen, think about it. Would you pound your fist into your daughter's face for something like that?"

"No, never .?.?. I'd never hit one of my children."

"I didn't deserve it, either, and neither did you."

Maureen stared up at her with wide, blank eyes. At one time Cassie's eyes had had that same hollowed, hopeless look.

"I'll be right here," she promised the other woman. "I'm not going to leave you. Once we're finished I'll take you back to the shelter."

Maureen gripped her hands together in a hold so tight her fingers went white. "I can do this."

"Yes, you can," Cassie assured her and gave her thin body a gentle squeeze. "Think of your children."

Maureen briefly closed her eyes and nodded.

"Lonny is going to jail, if there is any justice," Cassie assured her.

"But what will I do then?"

"The shelter will help you get a job and find housing." Cassie had already been through this with Maureen a number of times, but the fragile soul needed to hear it again.

"The paperwork .?.?."

"I'll help you fill out the forms, Maureen."

Cassie understood the other woman's fears. As easy as it might sound to others, little things like obtaining a driver's license or completing a job application seemed overwhelming. Duke had refused to allow Cassie to drive. It became a control issue with him. If she had access to a car she might leave him. When they'd married she'd had a license, but it had long since expired and was from a different state. Moving her away from family and friends had been one of the first things he'd done, taking her from Spokane all the way to Florida, where there were supposed to be good jobs. The job had never materialized, but he'd succeeded in getting her far from family, friends, and all that was familiar.

To anyone who hadn't been the victim of domestic violence, the hesitation to testify, to put the aggressor behind bars, was incomprehensible. Only those who'd walked through this madness understood what courage it took, what fortitude and pure nerve were required to stand up in court and admit what they had endured.

When Maureen was called to the witness stand, Cassie held her breath. She slid to the very edge of the hard wooden seat as the young mother reluctantly stood.

“Don’t look at Lonny,” Cassie advised, giving the other woman’s hand a gentle squeeze as she scooted past. “If you need to, focus on me instead.”

Maureen was deathly pale and her nod was barely noticeable. Her walk from the back of the courtroom all the way to the witness stand seemed to take thirty minutes. Thankfully, she followed Cassie’s advice and kept her gaze lowered, refusing to look in the vicinity of her husband.

Twice the judge had to ask Maureen to speak up in order for her to be heard.

Cassie wanted to cheer when Maureen squared her shoulders as resolve came to her. She looked directly at the judge and said clearly, “Please don’t let him hurt me again.” With that, she stood and started to leave the witness stand.

Lonny roared to his feet and started toward her. Maureen screamed and two deputies rushed forward, restraining Maureen’s husband while he blurted out profanities and threats.

The judge’s gavel pounded like shotgun blasts through the courtroom, the sounds sharp and discordant. “Order,” he demanded. “Order in the court.”

Maureen fled to where Cassie waited. Cassie immediately wrapped her arms around the other woman and led her out of the courtroom. She’d testified and nothing more was required of her. Cassie was certain Lonny’s outburst hadn’t done him any favors in the judge’s eyes. The prosecuting attorney would touch base with Cassie later in the day after he’d spoken to Maureen. The case was rock--solid and there was no reason to believe Lonny would escape jail time.

Part of Cassie’s work as a victim advocate was to provide transportation for Maureen to the courthouse and back to the women’s shelter where Maureen and her two children were currently housed. She helped the shaking Maureen across the parking lot.

At this point all Cassie’s work was on a volunteer basis. She’d taken the formal training, and one day, God willing, she’d have the chance to go to college for a degree in social work with a minor in criminal law. That, for now, was a pipe dream.

Maureen didn’t speak until they were in Cassie’s car. Once her seat belt was in place, she released a stuttering sigh as if only now was she able to breathe.

“You did it,” Cassie said, praising her.

“Yes. The worst is over.”

Cassie didn’t have the heart to tell her that this was only the beginning. When someone had been beaten down for years, making even the simplest decision seemed paralyzing. Maureen and her children would need counseling and hand--holding. Fortunately, Maureen was already in a support group. In an effort to lend encouragement and guidance, Cassie had sat with her for a couple sessions. Maureen had listened without speaking, although she’d nodded a couple times.

Lacey Wilson, who facilitated the group, did an excellent job of steering the conversation. The women who attended were at different stages of the healing process.

They drove to the shelter, and Cassie walked Maureen inside. She glanced at her watch and saw that she was already late for work. Maureen seemed reluctant to let her go. “Will I see you this evening?” she asked, following Cassie back to the door.

Cassie knew Maureen needed her, but she would be doing the other woman a disservice if she allowed her to become too dependent. Maureen blocked the entrance to the shelter, her look imploring Cassie to stay with her.

“I’ll be back later,” Cassie assured her.

“You promise?”

How needy she sounded, uncertain and afraid, looking at Cassie with wide eyes, full of fear, fear of the unknown, fear of the future. Cassie knew about that, too. Leaving Duke had required grit and raw courage, but everything afterward had as well.

“You promise,” Maureen repeated.

“I promise, but for now I need to get to work.” Cassie had a job, one that supported her and Amiee. She worked as a hairstylist at a local salon in a quaint community in the south end of Seattle known as Kent. The shelter had supported her while she got the training she needed, and in exchange she’d worked at the shelter, cleaning and cooking. It’d taken her five years following her divorce to crawl out of the black hole that had become her life while married to Duke. Thankfully, she hadn’t seen or heard from Duke since that fateful day when she’d testified against him in a Florida courtroom.

By the time Cassie arrived at work, every chair at Goldie Locks was filled, with the exception of Cassie’s. Working as an independent contractor, Cassie paid Teresa Sanchez, the shop owner, a rental fee for the hair station. This meant she was responsible for paying for her own products, setting her own schedule, building up a clientele, and, probably the most difficult, setting aside money each quarter to pay the state business tax and her federal income tax.

“Mrs. Belcher is here for her haircut,” Rosie, the receptionist, mentioned as Cassie reached for her protective top. She zipped it into place and grabbed a banana off the fruit bowl in the middle of the table. That would have to do for lunch. The hearing had taken more time than she’d expected.

“A letter came for you,” Rosie said, as Cassie peeled away the banana’s skin.

“Here? Really?”

“The envelope is handwritten and has a postmark from Spokane. You know anyone in Spokane?”

Cassie went still. The only person who would write to her from the Columbia Basin was her older sister, Karen. When Cassie first moved to Kent she’d stayed briefly in the same shelter where Maureen and her children were currently housed. Right away she’d reached out to her older sister in Spokane but explained this was only a temporary address. If Karen wanted or needed to get in touch for now, the best address would be the hair salon where she was employed. Until now Karen hadn’t contacted her.

Despite efforts to reconnect with her family, Cassie had a tenuous relationship with her two sisters. After a bitter argument with her parents and older sister, Cassie had run away to marry Duke. They had never forgiven her for leaving the way she did and for not contacting them afterward. Little did they know .?.?.

“It’s in back. Do you want me to get it for you?” Rosie asked.

“Not now.” It amazed her how unsettled she felt. The bite of banana seemed to stick in her throat and it took considerable effort to swallow.

Cassie couldn’t imagine what her sister would have to say to her. Then again, she could. Karen had done everything right. Following graduation, she’d gone on to college, married, and had two perfect children. She’d stayed in Spokane and helped their parents. Their father had died unexpectedly of a brain aneurysm only a few weeks after Cassie had broken free of Duke. She had been penniless and living in the shelter, and there was no possibility of Cassie returning home for the funeral. Her mother and sisters were in shock themselves. Cassie was too proud to explain her circumstances. All her family knew was that she’d left Duke and was living in Florida.
When her father died no one had offered to pay her way home, and so she’d remained in Florida and wept alone over the father she loved and hadn’t seen or talked to in nearly eight years.

Cassie had always been especially close to her father. Of the three girls, she’d been his favorite. He’d been proud of Cassie’s accomplishments, her high grades, the four--year scholarship she’d garnered upon graduation. Then she’d thrown it all away for Duke. Her father had never gotten over her turning her back on that scholarship and marrying Duke. Her sisters, either.

“Cassie?” Rosie said, breaking into her thoughts. “Mrs. Belcher is waiting.”

“Yes .?.?. I’m sorry.”

“You looked a million miles away.”

“I was,” she said, forcing a smile. She left the break room, leaving the banana behind, and collected Mrs. Belcher, who sat in the waiting area, reading the current issue of People magazine.

“I don’t know any of these people anymore,” she said, when she looked up at Cassie. “Who are these stars, anyway?” She shook her head and set the magazine aside.

Cassie led her customer to her station and slipped a plastic cape over the older woman’s shoulders, securing it with snaps at the back of Mrs. Belcher’s neck. “I hope I didn’t keep you waiting long,” Cassie apologized.

“Not at all,” Mrs. Belcher assured her. “I’m just grateful to get an appointment. You’re always so busy, and Cassie, my dear, just look at how long my hair is. I’m desperate. I can’t do a thing with it. My husband told me this morning that I resemble a shaggy dog, and he’s right.”

Cassie met the other woman’s eyes in the mirror and smiled. “I’ll take care of that in short order. Now let me take you to the shampoo station.”

It wasn’t until five o’clock that Cassie had the chance to retrieve her sister’s letter. She stared at the envelope several moments before she had the courage to tear it open.

Inside was a single sheet of paper. Rosie watched as Cassie read the letter. It didn't take her long.

"Well?" Rosie asked. The receptionist was the salon owner's cousin and not the least bit shy about asking awkward questions.

"This is the first time Karen has reached out to me since my divorce," Cassie said, unable to tear her gaze from the letter.

"Do you think your sister wants to mend fences?" Rosie asked, lowering her eyes toward the printed page as if hoping to read a few lines herself.

"I don't know." Cassie wasn't getting her hopes up.

Rosie's dark, expressive eyes widened. "Are you mad at her?"

"I was never angry with her," Cassie explained. Once Cassie had left the women's shelter, her first thought had been to go home. She'd contacted her family, needing financial help. Grief--stricken, dealing with the aftermath of her husband's sudden death, Sandra Judson, Cassie's mother, had asked Karen and Nichole to answer Cassie's plea.

According to Karen, who spoke for both her and Nichole, neither sister was financially able to help. Karen's husband had gone through a period of unemployment and they were barely making it. And Nichole had recently married and wasn't in a position to be lending anyone money. The bottom line was that Cassie had made her own bed and it was up to her to climb out of it.

As for their mother, she was completely overwhelmed dealing with the insurance company and attorneys. The death of their father had been unexpected, and she, too, was under a financial strain.

When Cassie had defied her family and married Duke, her father had predicted that one day she'd come crawling home. At the time, he'd been angry and upset. But Cassie figured he was right—-she'd gotten into this mess all by herself. So she'd better be able to get herself out of it, too. With no help from her family, Cassie had struggled for years, working odd jobs, living on food stamps and in government housing, and eventually getting her certificate in cosmetology. Only then, after working a year in Florida, did Cassie have the means to return to the West Coast. For safety reasons, Cassie chose to move to the Seattle area. If Duke were ever to look for her, it would be in Spokane, not South Seattle.

Despite her brave front, Cassie had been hurt and angry to have been abandoned by her family. In the years she'd lived with Duke she'd held on to the hope that if she found the courage to leave she could rely on them. That had been an empty dream. She'd been foolish, and it seemed that in her family's eyes, what she'd done was unforgivable. Cassie had been living in Washington state for two years and this was the first time that either of her two sisters had reached out to her.

It felt as if the letter was hot enough to burn her fingers. Cassie had been waiting a long time for this moment. She'd been eighteen and pregnant when she'd run away with Duke. Now, at thirty--one, Cassie was wise beyond her years.

Users Review

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