

A Place to Call Home #4

LAST CHANCE HERO

A Novel

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Cathleen Armstrong, *Last Chance Hero*
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For my mother,
Elizabeth

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1



Good morning, and welcome to Last Chance.” Rita Sandoval, owner and manager of the Last Chance Motel as well as the town’s mayor and chief booster, tucked her pencil back behind her ear and smiled up at Dr. Jessica MacLeod. “I know you’re going to love it here.”

“I hope so. I’m counting on it.” Jess found the big urn of coffee in the corner of the motel lobby and filled a Styrofoam cup to the brim. Cradling it between her hands, she gazed out the front window. The sky had just begun to lighten an hour ago when she began her run, but now the sun was fully up, spilling its light over the desert, shading the distant mountains in blue and purple and the nearby desert floor in sage green and gold. Over it all arched a sky of such brilliant turquoise that it almost hurt to look at it, so different from the gray and foggy mornings she knew in San Francisco. She took a sip of her coffee. *Oh, I do hope so, because there’s no turning back now.*

“Well, I wish I had time today to take you around and introduce you to everyone.” Rita picked up a clipboard from her desk and stood up. “Ordinarily, that’s just what I’d do, but I’m afraid I’ve got to get right over to the Dip ’n’ Dine and start getting set up for our fiesta tonight.”

“That’s okay. I’ll meet everybody eventually. It’s not like I’m just passing through.”

“You should come with me.” Rita slung her purse over her shoulder. “It’s only a couple blocks from here, and you’re going to want some breakfast anyway. Have you eaten at the Dip ’n’ Dine yet? Well, I’m here to tell you that you are about to eat some of the best food you’ll ever put in your mouth. Carlos, the cook, has been famous in these parts for years, and he and Chris Reed, the new owner, are doing some great things. Chris was a big chef up in Albuquerque before he bought the place, you know, and it took him a little while to find his footing here, but now there’s just no holding ’em back. This fiesta tonight is just one of a series of food and live music events we’ve been having all summer. This one’s called Red Chile and Bluegrass.”

Still talking, Rita put the “Back Soon” placard in the window, ushered Jess outside, locked the front door, and headed across the parking lot at a brisk pace. Jess’s choices were either calling after Rita that she was staying behind or going along. Going along with Rita seemed the easier course of action, and as Jess hurried to catch up, she wondered if most people didn’t find going along with Rita the easier route.

“Oh, there’s Manny Baca opening up Otero Gas and Oil. You’ll want to meet him. He’s got three little kids, twin girls and a boy. He bought Otero’s from his father-in-law last spring, so by rights, it should be called Baca’s now, but once something takes hold in Last Chance, it’s hard to change it.” She waved her hand over her head as she led Jess across the road. “Manny, I want you to meet our new doctor. This is Dr. Jessica MacLeod. She’s opening an office right here in Last Chance. What do you think about that?”

“I think it sounds great.” Manny grinned and offered his hand. “We’ve been wearing a groove in the Last Chance highway getting

our kids back and forth to the pediatrician in San Ramon for one thing and another. I'm not sure what Patsy would think about changing doctors, though. He's been taking care of us for years."

"I'm not here to raid anyone's practice." Jess liked the wide smile and firm handshake of the proprietor of Otero Gas and Oil, although he did seem way too young to be a business owner and father of three. "I've joined the family practice at San Ramon Medical Center, and I'll have a satellite office here in Last Chance."

"Well, we've got places to go and things to do." Rita's stated purpose in crossing the road had been to introduce Manny, and clearly, since that objective had been met, it was time to move along.

"We'll see you all this evening at Red Chile and Bluegrass, right?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Nice meeting you, Doc." He lifted his hand in a wave and turned back toward his office as Rita led Jess back across the road.

"Now, up ahead across the road is Last Chance's newest business establishment, Desert Sage. It's a beauty salon, and I'm here to tell you that Kaitlyn Reed, who owns it, can do anything. Don't think for a minute that just because ninety percent of the people who come out of there have wash-and-set perms, she doesn't know what's what. She just knows how to give her customers what they want, that's all. She's from Scottsdale and only moved here because her brother's here. I told you about him; he's the one who bought the Dip 'n' Dine. Oh, good. It looks like the place is full."

They had reached the parking lot of the Dip 'n' Dine, and Jess found herself wondering how someone could walk so fast and talk so much and not be out of breath. Rita had to be at least sixty.

"Hey, everybody, I want you to meet our new doctor. This is Dr. Jessica MacLeod." Rita's voice carried well, even through the buzz of conversation and clatter of dishes. Silence fell as everyone stopped eating and looked toward the door Rita had just blown

through with Jess in tow. “I know. You all think she doesn’t look old enough to be a doctor, but she is, and a good one too from everything I hear. She’ll have an office right here on Main Street, and for starters she’ll be here three days a week and in San Ramon for two. Right, Doctor?”

“That’s right.” Jess tried to smile but was suddenly extremely aware that this was not how she had planned to meet the people of Last Chance and her future patients. All she had wanted when she stopped in the office of the Last Chance Motel after her run was a cup of coffee. She was wearing shorts, running shoes, and a Beat Stanford T-shirt. Her strawberry blonde hair was pulled off her face in a stubby ponytail, and she could almost feel every last freckle beaming from her scrubbed face. What had she been thinking to follow Rita down the street looking like that?

Everyone smiled, some called “Welcome,” and all went back to their breakfasts. Jess felt a tap on her arm.

“I need to talk to Chris about the fiesta tonight, so I’m going to set you right here at the counter, if that’s all right. You’ll want to meet Andy anyway. He’s our new high school football coach. Andy, this is our new doctor, Jessica MacLeod.”

“Morning.” Andy put down his fork and extended his hand. “Welcome to Last Chance. I hope you’ll be happy here.”

“Thanks. I’m pretty sure I will be.”

A woman wearing a name tag that read “Juanita” appeared on the other side of the counter and beamed a wide smile as she poured coffee Jess had not yet asked for into the cup sitting in front her. “Mornin’, I’m Juanita Sheppard. Welcome to Last Chance. It’s about time we got our own doctor. Of course, Russ and I have had the same doctor in San Ramon since our kids were little, so you probably won’t be seeing much of us. At least not professionally.”

“Well then, I hope we’ll be seeing each other on a nonprofessional

level.” Jess returned the smile, but she did notice that Juanita was the second person she had met in the last twenty minutes who expressed delight that Last Chance was finally getting its own doctor and told her she could look for patients elsewhere in the same breath.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that for a minute. The Dip ’n’ Dine is the heart and soul of this town, and I’m here just about every day. Just come on in and I’ll be happy to introduce you to folks.” She slid a menu across the counter toward Jess. “Although I’m sure you’ve already heard of Andy, here. This is Andrew Ryan. Quarterback for the Denver Broncos?”

“Um, I’m afraid I don’t follow football very closely.” Jess looked back at Andy and shrugged. “Sorry. I know I should know who you are.”

“Not necessarily. I spent a whole lot more time on the bench than on the field.” Andy’s grin was rueful. “And as of the end of last season, it looks like I’m out of football for good. At least out of professional football.”

“Well, their loss is our gain, that’s all I can say.” Juanita pulled out her order pad and cocked her head as she looked at Jess. “You say you don’t follow football? Huh. What’ll you have for breakfast?”

Jessica hadn’t had time to even open the menu, but she had been in diners before and knew from experience that there wouldn’t be a whole lot on the menu that she wanted to eat. “I guess I’ll just have a single poached egg and some dry wheat toast.”

“Alrighty. Red or green?”

“Red or green?”

“You want red or green chile with that egg?” Juanita didn’t look up from her order pad.

“Neither. Just the egg and toast, please.”

This time Juanita did look up. “Neither? Huh.” She tore off the

order and put it on the rack in the window to the kitchen. Tucking the pad back in her apron pocket, she headed back to the dining room with the coffeepot, but not before giving Jessica one last curious look.

“Well, that was a little awkward. I feel like I made a giant mis-step somewhere, but I’m not sure where.”

Andy swiveled his stool around and leaned his elbow on the counter. “Well, I’ll tell you. Football’s pretty big around here, my short lusterless career notwithstanding. Same with chile. It’s not whether you want chile that’s the question. It’s what color. Juanita probably never met anyone who doesn’t care about either.”

“Oh.” Jess shrugged again and took a sip of her coffee. “Well, now she has.”

Andy raised one eyebrow. “You are a brave woman.” He gestured at Jess’s T-shirt with his chin. “You must have been at least a little interested in football at some point. That’s some rivalry you’re sporting.”

Jess looked down at her faded blue Beat Stanford shirt. “Oh, this? I think it was one of my roommate’s when I was an undergrad. I don’t know how I wound up with it. I know I didn’t buy it. In fact, I didn’t make it to a single game the entire time I went to Cal.”

“You’re kidding.” Andy leaned back for a better look. “Not one game in four years?”

“No.” Jess was starting to feel a little warm. “Is there something wrong with that? I’m beginning to feel like I have a horn growing out of my forehead or something.”

“Oh, no. You might run into someone around here with a horn growing out of their forehead, but someone who doesn’t like football? Now, that’s weird.”

Jess looked closely at Andy. He did not appear to be kidding. A little flare of anger shot up between her shoulder blades and made her neck prickle. For one thing, she didn’t believe him. Sure, you

could expect the high school football coach, and a former pro no less, to think football was the be-all and end-all of life. Juanita probably wasn't his only fan either. But surely grown-ups in Last Chance—Manny Baca, for example, with his three kids and his service station, and Rita Sandoval, who was mayor as well as the owner of the motel—had other things to think about than a bunch of high school kids and their football game.

“Well, I suppose I should get used to being a curiosity then.” She cradled her coffee cup in her hands, wondering how rude it would be if she got up and moved a stool or two down the counter.

“Here you go.” Juanita set her toast and egg in front of her. “And I went ahead and brought you a little green chile anyway. You don't have to eat it, of course, but honey, if you're going to live in Last Chance, you really need to learn to eat chile. It's who we are and what we do around here.”

“So I hear.” Jess's smile felt stiff. She lifted the egg to the toast with her spoon while Juanita watched, and when she realized what Juanita must be waiting for, added just a touch of the chile. No need to alienate every single person she met today.

The chile was hotter than she expected, but the creamy yolk quickly soothed the heat. It was the chile's flavor, though, that really took her by surprise. Rich and sharp, it bore no resemblance whatsoever to the pallid, tasteless green stuff she had spooned from cans.

“This is really good!” She looked up at Juanita with a real smile.

“Thought you'd like it.” Juanita gave a brisk nod as she picked up a couple more plates off the shelf to take to a booth by the window. “You just need to learn to try new things, that's all.”

Jess turned to her breakfast as Juanita disappeared. Actually, she had been under the impression that leaving Marin County in California and heading out to a tiny town in southwestern New Mexico to begin her practice was pretty darned adventurous, although

some of her friends and relatives used other terms ranging from ill-advised to downright crazy. But hey, what was pulling up stakes and moving a thousand miles from home compared to eating green chile with your eggs?

“I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to make you mad.” Andy’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “I’ve known lots of people who didn’t like football.”

“Really.” Jess barely glanced at him. All she wanted was to finish her breakfast and get back to her room.

“Well, actually, not a lot, but I’ve known some. A few. Three, maybe. No, not that many, but there was this one girl . . . Nope, now that I think about it, she was just mad at her boyfriend and he was on the team. I guess when you get right down to it, there’s just you. You’re the only one.”

Jess’s fork stopped halfway to her mouth as she turned to stare. Seriously? What was his problem? Was he really expecting everyone he met to fall at his feet in admiration because he knew how to throw a football, or kick one, or whatever quarterbacks did with footballs?

Andy met her gaze with a look both grave and sorrowful. She shook her head and was about to dismiss him for good and turn back to her breakfast when she noticed the little crinkles around his brown eyes and the tiny twitch at the corner of his mouth. She narrowed her eyes, and Andy’s grin broke through.

“I am sorry. Truly.” He laughed. “I’m not being very neighborly, am I? Truth is, you’re welcome here in Last Chance. We are glad you came. Honest.”

Andy’s grin was infectious, and as annoyed as Jess had been with him a minute before, she found herself returning it.

“Friends?” Andy stuck out his hand.

Jess slipped her hand in his. “Friends, I think.”

“Are you about done?” Rita came up behind Jess and put her

hand on her shoulder. “They’re fixing to bring the tables and chairs over from the church, and I need to get over there and see about that. You can come if you want.”

“I think I’ll walk on back to the motel, but thanks.”

“Got your key?”

Jess patted her pocket. “Right here.”

“All right then. See you after a while.” Rita headed out the door, and Jess could see her waving her hand over her head and calling to someone as she strode across the parking lot.

“Rita is a dynamo, isn’t she?” Jess turned to Andy with a smile.

“Wait till you get to know her better. Dynamos come to sit at her feet and learn.”

“I’ll just bet.”

Jess forked in the last bite of eggs and toast as Juanita appeared on the other side of the counter.

“Here, let me give you these checks.” She placed one ticket on the counter in front of Jess and another in front of Andy. “You don’t need to rush, but we’ll be closing here in a minute to get ready for the big shindig tonight, so if you don’t mind, I’ll just run these for you now.”

Jess had a panicked second or two as she looked around for her purse before she remembered where it was—safely tucked in the top drawer of the dresser in Room 3 of the Last Chance Motel. Her hand flew to her mouth.

“Oh my goodness, Juanita, I don’t have any money. I went for a run this morning and then stopped by the motel office for some coffee, and before I could think to grab my purse, Rita brought me here. If you can give me twenty minutes, I’ll run back and get my wallet. I am so, so embarrassed!”

Juanita flapped a hand. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll just catch you next time. It’s not a big deal.”

“Let me.” Andy picked up Jess’s check, added his own, and

handed them both to Juanita with a couple bills he pulled from his wallet. “Don’t need any change.”

“No, I can’t let you do that.” Jess made a grab for the ticket, but Juanita had already whisked it away. She turned back to Andy with a resigned sigh. “Well, thank you, although I’d have been happy to go get my purse.”

“I know, but this’ll save you a trip. It’s getting hot out there.” He stood up as Jess slid from her stool and followed her to the door. “Can I give you a ride? Truck’s air-conditioned.”

Jess’s first inclination was to say thanks but no thanks. She had already taken enough from Andy for one day, from the hard time he gave her about football to the price of breakfast, but he was right about one thing. It was hot, and getting hotter. And hot in Last Chance was nothing like hot in San Francisco. She hesitated just a second. “Thanks, I’d appreciate that.”

It was only a couple minutes’ drive before Andy’s truck pulled into the driveway of the Last Chance Motel, and he used the entire time talking about the Red Chile and Bluegrass fiesta that night at the Dip ’n’ Dine.

“Everyone for miles around comes. Tickets sell out as soon as they go on sale. They set up tables outside and there’s live music and the best food you’ll ever eat. And every one of these fiestas has a different kind of music. Tonight is bluegrass, of course, but they’ve had jazz, and classic rock ’n’ roll, and I think they’re planning one to coincide with the chile harvest called ‘It’s Chile Country.’”

Jess had a feeling she knew where this was heading and tried to forestall it by opening the pickup door and starting to get out. “Sounds like you’ll have a lot of fun. Thanks for the ride.”

“So, can I pick you up? About 7:00?”

“I don’t have a ticket, and if they’re sold out . . .” Jess finished her thought with a shrug. “But thanks anyway.”

“But I do.” Andy leaned across the seat with a grin. “The town council gave me two tickets when I got here. Sort of a welcome home. And one of them will just go to waste if you don’t use it.”

“I don’t think so, Andy.” Jess wanted to make her own place in Last Chance, and she had no intention of turning up tonight on the arm of the local football hero. “But thanks again.”

She started to swing the door shut, but Andy stopped her. “Wait.”

Jess stopped. She was really beginning to get annoyed. Andy may have still been in the cool cab of his truck, but she was standing in the heat of a gravel parking lot. The hum of her window air conditioner six feet away called her, and she longed for a shower.

“Here.” Andy opened his glove box and pulled out a slip of card stock. “It’s my extra ticket. It will just go to waste if you don’t use it. If I see you there, I can introduce you to a few people. Or not. But if you go, I’m pretty sure you won’t be sorry.”

He lifted his hand in a little salute as he leaned back behind the wheel before shifting into Drive. Jess heard the tires take hold in the gravel as she pulled her key from her pocket and fitted it into the lock. What had she gotten herself into? Since a family vacation through the Southwest when she was in middle school, she had dreamed of practicing medicine in a place like Last Chance. The research she had done on rural medicine, southwestern New Mexico, and the San Ramon Medical Center before she made her final choice was detailed and exhaustive. That’s how she did things. How then had she failed to consider that there were people involved, with their own thoughts and ideas about her work? The answer came to her, and she winced as the door opened and a blast of overchilled and slightly stale air engulfed her. Because all too often, the one element she left out when making her minutely detailed plans was other people.