

HOPE RAMSAY'S LAST CHANCE BRIDE
EXCERPT

LAST CHANCE BRIDE, Hope Ramsay
FOREVER YOURS ORIGINAL TITLE
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Sharon McKee sat in the back row of The Kismet and dashed a tear from her eye. She gave her boyfriend Stony a brief glance. He would laugh at her for getting all teary-eyed. But darn it, the movie was sad.

The heroine, Demi Moore, had to let go of her dead boyfriend, Patrick Swayze, and go on with her life. And boy, Patrick Swayze made one handsome ghost. Sharon would have a lot of trouble letting go of a guy like him. Of course, Stony was just as handsome. But Patrick was a much better dancer.

Stony gave her a little squeeze. He draped his arm over her shoulders during that scene where Demi and Patrick made a clay bowl. Who knew pottery could be so . . . well she didn't know what, but she had practically combusted during that scene, especially when Stony moved his hand down to her breast. She was leaning into him so hard her ribs came up against the metal armrest between them. Her insides had melted when his thumb brushed over her nipple.

Once they got in Stony's truck, there wouldn't be any barriers.

Sharon was looking forward to it. Mother would be shocked to know that Sharon liked it when Stony touched her breast, or all the other things Sharon had fun doing in Stony's truck.

The house lights came up. "Well, that was a different kind of ghost story," he said as they stood up. "I was expecting something scary."

"I liked it. It was sweet."

"It was girly." He took her hand and pulled her up the aisle. The crowd was pretty sparse, it being a Wednesday night. It was a wonder Mr. Brooks managed to keep The Kismet going, especially since he was always a few weeks behind other theaters in showing the newest movies. *Ghost* had been playing up in Orangeburg for weeks. Annie had seen it up there and raved about it.

Five minutes later, they were riding in Stony's old truck, heading out to Bluff Road. George Strait was singing about love without end on the radio. Stony didn't say much as he drove, which wasn't all that unusual. But tonight Sharon got the feeling he might be brooding on something. Maybe he wasn't so proud of her for giving up her prize money.

She studied her boyfriend as he drove, his wrist over the steering wheel. He looked so

competent behind the wheel. And the dash lights seemed to highlight the hard angles of his face. He might be a quiet boy, but she would much rather be with Stony than with the other boys and their constant chatter.

There was something really solid about Stony. She had once overheard Miz Randall telling Miz Polk that Stony was the kind of boy who would grow up to be a man a woman could depend on. Kind of like Daddy had been.

Stony stopped the truck at the end of Bluff Road. He set the brake and turned down Garth Brooks, who was singing about friends in low places. She slid across the bench seat and ran her hands up through his hair, repositioning the lock that always wanted to curl down over his forehead. It had been a while since he'd been to the barber. The long, silky strands slipped softly through her fingertips. "When we get to Carolina, we should take a pottery course," she whispered into his ear. "We could recreate that scene in the movie." She licked his ear, then linked a trail of kisses across his hard jaw to his soft mouth.

"Honey," he said, when she tried to interest him in a kiss, "we need to talk about that."

"What's wrong?" She pulled away and searched his face in the pale green dashboard lights. What the heck? He had never responded like that when she kissed his ear before. Usually a kiss on the ear turned him into jelly. Well . . . not all of him, of course. And Stony was not the kind of boy who would stop fooling around to talk. About anything. He really liked fooling around. His lack of reaction was like a flashing danger sign.

He turned his gaze toward the dark pine woods that grew at the end of the road. "Um, look," he said. "I care about you, Sharon. I . . . well, I can't imagine being with any other girl. But, the thing is, I can't go to Carolina with you." When he turned back, his green eyes were filled with emotion.

"What are you talking about? We've been planning this for a year. We were both accepted." She slid to the far edge of the bench seat.

"I can't afford college. And I can't ask my folks to pay for it. Momma and Daddy aren't rich, and I have two little brothers and a sister. I've seen Momma sitting up late at night sometimes doing her bookkeeping. She worries all the time about making ends meet."

So this was about the scholarship he hadn't gotten. Her heartbeat steadied a little as relief washed through her. He could get a job. He could get work-study. He could take out a loan. "Stony, come on, we can find solutions to this problem. Money should never be an obstacle to education. You could --"

"No, I can't. It's more than the money."

"What are you talking about? Are you upset about what I did with my prize money?"

Muscles bunched along his jaw. "No, Sharon, I love what you did with your prize money. That's not it. It's something else. See, well, I've joined the Marines."

She laughed. "Okay you can quit with the joke. I know you didn't join the Marines. You're just trying to get a rise out of me."

"But I did. I have to report to Parris Island on August sixteenth."

Sharon's stomach heaved, and for an instant, she thought she might be sick right there in his front seat. "You're leaving in two weeks? You aren't coming to Columbia with me?" Pain swept through her like a raging river. She couldn't breathe. Stony was abandoning her.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said in answer to her shock. "I know you made plans for the two of us. But I don't want to go to college."

"But we've been over this a million times. Mother is never going to accept you until you finish school."

"Right." He sounded angry.

"But you know how she is."

"I do. But I don't care about your mother. I care about you."

"But we made plans and--"

"We can still be together. I mean, you'll be at college, and I'll be at boot camp. But we could still be . . . you know . . ."

"What? What could we be?" She was angry now. She had planned it all out in her head. They were supposed to be living in the same co-ed dorm. She had her packing list all done, and Stony's too. They would be together and see each other every day. They would share this time in their lives like they had shared everything since they were eight. And, most important, they could find some privacy.

"I thought we were going to be together."

"But we will be. Like we've always been."

"With you God knows where and me in Columbia? That's not together, Stony."

"Well, I know, but we'd still be going steady."

"That's a heck of an assumption," she said in anger.

He stared at her for a long moment. "Sharon, come on, don't you even care about how I feel?"

"I do, but why didn't you say something before I made plans? I have whole pages of plans."

He stared at the dashboard for a moment as if he were gathering his arguments. "I know. I never saw a person make lists the way you do. And I feel bad about it. I've been trying to find a way to

tell you and my mother how I feel, but you never give me a chance to explain. Y'all are always talking and planning. It's hard to get a word in edge-ways. I don't think I'd be that good in college." He finally turned back toward her but he wouldn't meet her gaze.

"Why do you always sell yourself short? You're smart. You could be anything you want to be."

"Except a Marine? Do you think being a Marine is selling myself short?"

"Stop twisting my words like that."

His gaze finally met hers, and she could tell he was angry. "I didn't twist them, honey. That's the way they sounded when they came out of your mouth." He paused for a moment, the corner of his mouth twitching upward. "Just listen for one second. Miriam Randall tackled me at the post office today and told me I should be looking for a crusader -- you know someone who wants to change the world. And I thought about you the minute I heard that. I admire you so much. And I always thought you admired me. I thought we were, you know, like a pair, no matter where we are."

Sharon's head was about to explode. "What are you saying? Are you saying you want to get married just because Miriam Randall gave you some lame forecast? And then you want to go off and join the Marines while I go to college all by myself?"

A truly stunned look crossed Stony's face. "No. We're too young to get married. But I guess I thought, what with Miriam saying what she said and you always talking about us being together in Columbia, well I thought maybe we could move things up a little bit. Maybe we could go to the Peach Blossom Motor Court or something before I ship out. I don't want to get to boot camp and still be a virgin."

"Take me home," she said.

"But Sharon, I--"

"I'm not sleeping with you at the Peach Blossom Motor Court so you can cross that off your to-do list. And I don't want to marry you." She took Stony's high school ring off the chain she wore around her neck, turned in her seat, and hurled it at him. It hit him in the face, and she was glad. He'd wrecked her carefully laid plans. Everything she had been dreaming about was undone. She was going to be in Columbia all on her own. And he wanted to take her to some seedy motel instead of finding a nice, private place where they could actually sleep together. She could almost hear her Mother saying, "I told you so."

"Damn, Sharon," he said touching his cheek. "That hurt."

"Good, because you joining the Marines without telling me hurt too. And I don't even want to talk about the suggestion you just made about that seedy hotel."

"Ah crap, are we breaking up?"

"I guess so."