

**WELCOME TO LAST CHANCE**

## CHAPTER ONE

"One ticket to Last Chance," the agent said as he took Jane's money. "The bus leaves in five minutes."

Jane picked up the flimsy slip of paper and hurried through the Atlanta, Georgia, Greyhound terminal. She found the gate, climbed aboard the motor coach, and sank into one of the plush seats.

She tried to think positive thoughts.

It was hard. She had five dollars left in her pocketbook, a zero balance in her checking account, and bad guys in her recent past. Her dreams of making it big in Nashville had just taken a dive over the cliff called reality.

Thank you Woody West, you peanut brained weasel.

The diesel engines roared to life, and the bus glided out of the parking lot heading toward South Carolina, which was not where Jane really wanted to go.

She took three deep breaths and tried to visualize her future the way Dr. Goodbody advised in his self-help recordings. If she could just unleash her inner consciousness through positive thinking, the Universe would give her a road map for success.

That seemed like a good plan. She needed a road map to a better future in the worst way. And where better to seek a new start than a place called Last Chance? She had never been to Last Chance, but the name sounded hopeful.

She sank back into her seat and tried to see the place in her mind's eye. She imagined it like Pleasantville where the streets were picturesque, the people friendly, and the job opportunities plentiful.

Eight hours later, reality intruded.

The Greyhound left her standing on a deserted sidewalk right in front of a place called Bill's Grease Pit. Thankfully, this establishment was not a fast-food joint but an auto-repair service that doubled as a bus terminal. Both the garage and the terminal were closed for the night.

She looked down the street and knew herself for a fool. Last Chance had exactly one traffic light. The only sign of life was the glow of neon shining like a beacon from a building two blocks down the main drag.

Okay, so Last Chance wasn't Bedford Falls, from the fabled movie It's a Wonderful Life. She could deal.

She told herself that where there was Budweiser and neon there was hope of finding some dinner. Although how she was going to pay for it remained a mystery. She fought against the panic that gripped her insides. She hugged herself as she walked up the street, running through her usual list of positive affirmations.

She would get herself out of this mess. She had done it before. And the truth was, she should have read the warning signs when Woody walked into the Shrimp Shack six months ago.

If she had read those signs, she wouldn't be standing here today. Well, every mistake was an opportunity to learn, according to Dr. Goodbody.

The bar bore the name 'Dot's Spot' in bright blue neon. It sported a dark wood exterior and small windows festooned with half a dozen beer signs. Jane stood in the garish light cast by the signs, thinking it would be truly awesome if she could walk through that doorway and find Sir Galahad waiting for her. But wishing for Sir Galahad was not positive thinking. Heroes didn't magically appear in Southern honky-tonks on a Wednesday night.

Besides, this particular fantasy of a knightly rescue had gotten her into trouble every time she allowed herself to believe it. So she pushed it out of her mind. She needed to focus on manifesting a hot meal and a place to spend the night. Period. She fixed that positive plan of action in her mind and pushed through the front door.

Hoo boy, the place was like something right out of a bad country and western tune. Smoke hung over the place and a five-piece country band occupied a raised stage at one end of the barroom. They played a twangy Garth Brooks tune in waltz time. No one was dancing.

The men in the band were, by and large, a bunch of middle-aged geezers, with beer bellies and wedding rings and receding hairlines.

Except for the fiddler.

Jane stared at him for a moment, recognition washing through her. No question about it--there stood another peanut-brained weasel in the flesh. She could tell this because he was a big, powerfully built man with a ponytail and facial hair. He also wore a black Stetson, and a black shirt, and black jeans that hugged his butt and thighs, and a gem that sparkled from his earlobe like a black diamond.

What was that thing? A sapphire?

He was the real-deal, bad-for-any-females-who-came-within-range package. Someone should hang a big yellow warning sign on his neck that said danger.

Guys like him didn't rescue girls. They rode around on Harleys, and were mean and tough and bad, and got into lots of trouble with the local law. They also had really big shoulders that a girl could lean on, and in a moment of confusion, a girl could confuse one of these bad boys with Sir Galahad, only on a motorcycle.

Good thing Jane planned on rescuing herself, because this guy was like some walking embodiment of Murphy's Law. The spit dried up in her mouth, and her heart rate kicked up. The Universe had just thrown her another curve ball.

So she looked away, sweeping the room with her gaze. The rest of the pickings were slim and ran to old men and floozies, and a few obviously married guys in John Deere hats. She might be about to do some serious flirting in order to get a drink and some food, but she would not hit on any married men. That ran counter to her moral code.

She scanned the bar. Bingo. Two prospects, twelve o'clock.

Prospect One wore a dirty Houston Astros hat, his chin propped up on his left fist as he watched the World Series game on the big screen television. He was devilishly handsome, but the words "hard drinking" scrolled through her mind.

Jane turned her attention to prospect number two. He turned on the stool, and she got a good look at him. He was a smaller than average guy, with sandy hair, a widow's peak and regular features. He wore a blue work shirt with his name--Ray--embroidered above the right pocket. Unlike the other two hunks in the room, this guy wore work boots. He wasn't a cowboy, and he didn't look dangerous at all.

He looked up from his drink.

Okay, he would do. Kindness shone from his eyes. She concentrated on holding his gaze . . . counted to three . . . then dazzled him with a smile.

He blinked two or three times like a deer caught in a hunter's sight. But she wasn't a hunter, not really. She was vulnerable, and scared, and hunted herself. And that explained why she was about to do something not very nice--something she would most likely regret in the morning.

The bodacious brunette hit Dot's Spot like the hurricane expected to arrive tomorrow. She wore high-heel boots and a little tank top that barely constrained her assets. Clay Rhodes had never seen her before, which had to mean she'd just gotten off the nine-thirty bus from Atlanta.

She waltzed her butt through the door and captured the attention of every male in the place, except maybe Dash Randall, who was concentrating on the World Series. She stopped just inside the door and gave the place a once-over.

It took all of three seconds for her to look Clay's way, and about fifteen for her to catalog him and move on. But that was all it took for Clay Rhodes to feel the unmistakable pull of lust centering right behind his belly button. Yeah, he could go for some of that, if it wasn't for the fact that he was a responsible, almost middle-aged grown-up, and she looked like trouble on high heels.

He pulled the fiddle down and tried to put some feeling into his harmony line on Night Rider's Lament, but since he had played this song about five thousand times, it was hard to do.

The little gal distracted him as she scanned the room. It didn't surprise him one bit when her sharp gaze lingered on Dash. The ex-jock was unaware of it though. He sat at the end of the bar wallowing in self-pity and doing battle with God-only-knew-how-many demons as he watched the baseball game.

The girl was interested, of course. Dash was a fine looking man, but a woman would have to be nuts to tangle with a guy like that. Clay gave her points when her gaze shifted and moved on.

He pulled the fiddle up to his chin and played the bridge, while Kyle tried his hardest to sound like Garth Brooks. Kyle failed, like he did every night, which was no surprise to anyone.

What happened next, though, surprised the heck out of just about everyone in Dot's Spot.

That girl aimed her laser beam look at the back of Ray's head and darned if the boy didn't jump like he was some kind of marionette with a nervous puppeteer. He jerked his head around, and disaster struck about twelve hours earlier than expected.

The woman aimed a smile at Ray that had all the subtlety of a stinger missile, and poor Ray didn't have any defenses for something like that.

Uh oh.

The song ended, and Clay turned toward Kyle. "Let's cut it short and go to break," he said.

"But--"

Clay jerked his head toward Ray and rolled his eyes.

"Not again," Kyle said under his breath, as he took in the unfolding scene.

"Looks like."

Kyle leaned into the mic and told the crowd they'd be back in ten, while Clay put his fiddle into the hard-shell case that sat atop the upright piano. Then Clay stepped down from the stage and headed toward the bar.

"Clay," Ray said as he approached. "Look, it's April. What do you figure the odds are on that? A million to one?" Ray rocked a little on the bar stool and gave Clay his goofy smile. Eighteen years ago, that grin, combined with Ray's uncanny ability to do math, had made the boy semi-popular with the girls at Davis High who wanted to adopt him, or befriend him, or otherwise allow him to do their homework. But that had changed three weeks before graduation.

Clay came to a halt and turned toward the little gal in the white tank top. Man-oh-man, she was something else. Tawny skin and dark eyes with a pair of killer cheek bones and pouty lips that said kiss me quick. She was pure sex on three-inch stiletto heels.

A man didn't get within five feet of this and not lose his perspective on things. Even a half-dead man like himself. The little tingle in his private parts was kind of reassuring though. It confirmed that he was still alive. Sometimes living in Last Chance, South Carolina, it was hard to tell.

Her pink nail polish was chipped, the neck of her tank top sported a little stain, and the cuffs of her jean jacket were frayed. Her gaze seemed a little guileless, which surprised the heck out of him. He had taken her for trash, but up close she didn't look trashy at all--just a little rumpled and forlorn.

And utterly irresistible.

"So your name's April?" he asked, knowing darn well her name wasn't April. She did look like April, though, which made her hotter than a chili pepper. Hot and forlorn. A deadly combination if there ever was one.

She shook her head. "No. . .uh. . .my name's. . .um. . .Mary."

Clay went on guard. She was lying. "How old are you, Mary?" he asked.

Her square chin inched up. "Why? Do I look like jail bait?"

Yeah. But he didn't say it out loud. He studied her for a long moment, trying to ignore the sexual rush. She had incredible skin. It looked silky soft, firm and warm. He wanted to touch it.

He forced himself to look into her wide brown eyes. No, she wasn't a teenager. But she

was still trouble. He needed to rescue Ray from this woman. Ray could get himself into a heap of trouble if someone didn't do something quick.

Clay turned away. "Hey, Ray, you got a minute?"

Ray ducked his head in that funny little tick that had been there ever since the accident senior year. "Sure. Whatever you want."

Clay jerked his head. "In private."

Ray turned toward the little gal. "You stay right here, April. I'll be back. Don't go anywhere, okay?"

The girl nodded, and Clay got the feeling that she was happy to be rescued. Like she had maybe figured out Ray was playing a few cards short of a full deck.

Clay pulled Ray down to the end of the bar and put his arm around his shoulder. "Listen, Ray, I'm you're oldest friend, right?"

Ray nodded.

"Got you fixed up with my Uncle Pete at the hardware store, didn't I?"

"Yeah, Clay."

"Bailed you out with my brother Stony that time when you busted up the place?"

Ray kept on nodding.

"Helped you out with Mr. Polk down at the bank when your momma got sick."

"Yeah, Clay, I know all that."

"So you know I wouldn't lie to you."

"No, Clay, you wouldn't ever lie to me."

"Look, Ray, that little gal isn't April."

Ray rolled away, then turned and squared up his body. "She is too. Look at her."

"April is a photograph of a girl. This isn't her. This is a girl named Mary, who's new to town. I'll bet she came on the nine-thirty bus from Atlanta."

Ray wet his lips. His fists curled up. "Don't you say that, Clay. She's April. Look at her."

Clay shook his head. The last person in the world he wanted to fight was Ray Betts. He hated fighting in general since it messed up his hands. But fighting Ray would be like fighting with one of his brothers.

"Look--" Clay started to say.

"Hey Ray," Dash called from his place by the bar.

Ray turned and relaxed his hands a fraction. "Yeah?"

"You wanna go down to the high school and shag some balls?"

"Really?" A slow smile filled Ray's face, and Clay breathed a sigh of relief.

In Ray's injured brain, this invitation from Dash Randall was like being asked if he wanted to go hang out with God. Ray loved baseball, and since Dash had once played it professionally, Dash had become one of Ray's personal heroes.

Dash gave Clay a meaningful and surprisingly sober glance. Maybe the rumors were true, and Dash was on the wagon these days. Although why a man on the wagon would spend time in a bar was kind of a mystery. Well, even if it wasn't true, he owed Dash a favor for this.

Dash leaned over and collected an aluminum cane. He stood up, favoring his bad leg. "Yeah, Ray, I mean it. But you'll have to do all the running since my knee isn't up to it, yet. C'mon, I'll even put the top down, and we can cruise over to the Tastee Freeze afterward."

"Gee, Dash, that sounds like fun," Ray said.

Dash winked at Clay as he led Ray out of the bar. Disaster had been averted.

But when Clay turned back toward the little gal, his gut tighten up like a warning. Was she desperate or just looking for some action? He had a feeling it might be a little of both.

And he'd just sent his competition packing.

Two hours later, Jane picked up the little slip of paper and read her bar tab: Six dollars for three Cokes. It might as well have been a hundred dollars. She didn't have the cash to pay it--unless she dug deep in her purse and found a dollar in change and added it to the five dollar bill in her wallet. Then she would be officially broke.

She should have nursed a single Coke all night. She should have taken steps to get a credit card, years ago. But she hadn't done either of these things. The first because it had been years since she had been this poor. The second because getting a credit card was risky, given her background.

She swallowed the lump in her throat and told herself she wasn't going to cry. Her attempt to find someone semi-nice to buy her dinner had flopped. There was just the fiddler who had run all the semi-nice guys off like some kind of reverse bouncer.

That man had spent the last two hours boring a hole in her back with his silver-eyed stare. About an hour ago, she had given up trying not to look back.

Jane could parlay this into something, if she wanted to. But she had to remember that he was not going to rescue her from her current situation. She needed to fix her own life. And, right now, staying away from a bad boy seemed like a good first step.

But then all her other choices were worse. She couldn't sleep in the public park tonight--assuming, of course, that Last Chance had a public park. But even if it did have one, the weather report on the television above the bar said a hurricane was bearing down on the South Carolina coast. It wasn't a big hurricane by Katrina standards, but even so, everyone in the bar was talking about torrential rains starting sometime after two in the morning.

Jane had hoped they might have a hurricane shelter open where she could blend right in, like a refugee or something. But there wasn't any kind of evacuation going on--no doubt because the hurricane was making landfall a hundred miles away near Hilton Head Island. She didn't have many other options in a small town like Last Chance.

Jane stole a glance up at the fiddler, and heat sizzled through her. The Cosmos and her own hormones were against her. She shouldn't do this. This was a mistake.

She turned away and stared down at her bar tab. Behind her, the lead singer signed off for the night. Someone punched up a bunch of songs on the jukebox.

Well, first things first. She needed to pay the bill. She dug deep into her purse, drawing out a handful of pennies and nickels and started counting. In the background, the jukebox played Tumbleweed's new country single. . .

Feel the rush of my breath  
Feel the heat of my hand . . .

Heat crawled up her backside as the words of the song suddenly made themselves manifest. The fiddler had snuck up on her. He put one of his ginormous hands on the bar, leaned his big body in, and slapped a ten dollar bill down on top of her tab like he'd been counting the number of Cokes she'd drunk.

He turned toward her, his unreadable wolf eyes shaded by the brim of his Stetson. "You want to take this somewhere else?" he asked in a blurred drawl. Her insides clutched and burned.

She was close enough to see a network of lines at the corner of his eyes, and little threads of silver in his goatee. He wasn't young. That scared her a little. He was more man than she was used to handling--older and bigger and more dangerous than anyone else in her past.

"Maybe I was mistaken," he drawled in response to her slight hesitation. "I got the idea you might be interested."

Jane looked up into his eyes. A hot, blue flame flickered there. An answering heat resonated deep down inside her. Was this wishful thinking, desperation, or real desire made manifest by her own weakness for guys like this? It was kind of hard to tell.

Her head screamed that going with this guy would be like repeating the mistakes of the past. Getting soaked on a park bench would be better than this. But her body wasn't listening. Instead she gave the fiddler a smile and said, "Cowboy, take me away."

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"You drive a minivan?" The girl--Mary, he reminded himself--stood beyond the service entrance to Dot's Spot with her hands fisted on her hips and a semi-surprised look on her face.

"Yeah, well, it's practical for hauling around sound equipment and guitars. Disappointed?" Clay said, as he opened the side panel-door of his ancient Windstar and hoisted his fiddle, mandolin, and guitar cases into the cargo space.

The question was rhetorical. She was disappointed. Women had a habit of mistaking him for someone else--usually some bad boy jerk with a Harley who would do them wrong sooner or later. Ironically, most women wasted no time in doing him wrong, as if he were the punching bag for their collective disappointments with males in general and bad boys in particular.

He turned around and faced the girl. She had the wrong idea about him. And he wasn't

going to disabuse her of it. He was going to take her to the Peach Blossom Motor Court and become that bad boy she was looking for. He wasn't going to apologize to anyone for it either.

He was tired of being a good man.

He was tired of living his life along the straight and narrow.

But most of all, he was weary of being alone.

The girl stepped forward, her body swaying in the lamplight, the gusty wind lifting her hair and whipping it across her face. She tucked the hair behind her ear and gave him a simple smile that curled up the dimples in her cheek. Desire, sweet and warm, flooded through him.

He opened the van's door for her, and she stepped close enough for him to catch the blended scents of cigarette smoke and something spicy like sandalwood or jasmine. Awareness jolted him to full arousal. He felt like a sixteen-year-old with a killer hard-on--the kind that blinded a boy and made him do stupid things. He had to admit he liked that mindless feeling.

She turned in the corner of the door and glanced up at him. She stopped moving, her lips quirking in a clear show of interest. He leaned in, slanting his mouth over hers, pulling her lower lip into his mouth. He tasted cinnamon and the hopefulness of youth.

He fell hard into that kiss and knew he was a goner the minute she responded to him. He put his hand on the flare of her hip and pulled her hard against him.

He was headed straight to hell, with only a short layover at a no-tell-motel, before the Devil took him.

The sign said "Peach Blossom Motor Court" in flaming pink neon. Jane had hit rock bottom in her life. The fiddler had checked them in, and she watched through the windshield of his van as he returned with the key in his hand.

He was something, all right. A big man striding across the parking lot on a pair of the pointiest cowboy boots she had ever seen. Yessir, she would probably forget about this low-rent scenario the minute he put his mouth on hers again.

He opened the van door for her and looked up at her out of a pair of eyes that were as pale as a winter day on Meadow Mountain. The fire in those icy eyes burned so hot she felt the flame in the middle of her chest.

He gave her his hand, and she laid her fingers on him. His hand was huge, and warm, and rough, and male.

He helped her down and then shut the door behind her. He leaned his big-boned body against her, pushing her up against the van, his hand sliding down her rib cage and coming to rest on her hip. He was sturdy and hard, and so large that his body shielded her and made her feel safe in some inappropriate way.

How could she feel safe with a man intent on taking her without even giving her his name or asking for hers? But there it was. She knew the fiddler wasn't going to hurt her. The Universe kind of whispered in her ear and told her this would be okay.

She found herself inside the shadow of his Stetson, caught up in the heat of his mouth. He lost his hat, then she lost her mind.

