

A Place to Call Home #2

ONE MORE LAST CHANCE

A Novel

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ARMSTRONG



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For Rebecca, Amy, Sarah, Jacob, Dylan,
Eli, Luke, and Lydia Cathleen.

Thank you for the joy.

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1



The day the new owner of the Dip 'n' Dine tried to put line-caught trout dusted with blue cornmeal and lightly napped in a tricolor chile cream on the menu was the day his cook nearly hung up his apron for good.

“I don’t know who you think is going to cook that stuff, but it’s not going to be me.” Carlos Montoya folded his arms and leaned against his prep table.

Chris Reed looked out the window and sighed. Fayette had warned him when he bought the diner from her that he’d have to go slow if he wanted to change anything. And yes, he understood that people could get set in their ways. But for crying out loud, it had been weeks already. Six long weeks, in fact, of tiptoeing around the prima donna in the kitchen as if Chris were a none-too-bright busboy instead of the new owner. It was time to take charge. He raised himself up to his full six foot four and tried to make his smile warm yet authoritative.

“Let’s just give it a try. I have a feeling it’ll be a hit. If you’re right and it’s not, well, at least we tried to shake things up a little.”

“Some folks think things don’t need any shaking up. Some folks think things are just fine the way they are. But if you’re set on turning this place into some kind of fancy Santa Fe bistro, you just might have to find yourself another cook. Excuse me, better make

that *chef*.” Carlos’s glare grew darker, and Chris noticed that Pete, the nephew who helped Carlos in the kitchen, edged closer to his uncle in a show of solidarity.

Chris opened his mouth, but before he could say another word, Juanita Sheppard, his part-time waitress and full-time interpreter of all things Last Chance, stuck her head in the kitchen. “Chris, we’ve got a little problem out here. Could I see you a minute?”

Chris took a last look at Carlos, now standing shoulder to shoulder with Pete. His own shoulders sagged and he shook his head as he pushed through the swinging door into the dining room of the Dip ‘n’ Dine where Juanita was waiting for him.

Juanita glanced at the kitchen door and gestured for Chris to follow her to a far corner of the room. She waited till he was close enough to hear a whisper that was so loud Carlos could probably hear it too. “I hope you don’t mind my butting in, but I couldn’t help hearing you and Carlos talking in there.”

Chris didn’t say anything. Whether he minded Juanita butting in or not probably didn’t make much difference. He waited for her to say what was on her mind.

“Personally, I think that fish dish you were talking about sounds scrumptious. I’d order it in a minute.” Juanita put her hand on Chris’s arm. “And I think if you make just a couple changes, people will gobble it up, and Carlos might feel better about making it too.”

“Changes? Like what?” Chris tried to keep his voice even.

“Well, first of all, use yellow cornmeal. That blue stuff just looks nasty when it’s fried. Food was never meant to be that color. Then, instead of going to the work of making all those sauces, just stir pickle relish into some mayonnaise. Fast and easy and gourmet as you please.”

Chris just looked at Juanita.

She beamed. “So what do you think?”

“I think you’re talking about fried fish and tartar sauce.”

“Use your imagination, Chris. Fancy it up like you did with that blue corn stuff. I’m telling you, it’ll be a winner. And you’ll get to keep your cook.” She leaned in and lowered her whisper to a level only Chris could hear. “Fayette spoiled Carlos rotten, of course, but just between you and me, every restaurant within fifty miles of Last Chance has tried to take him away from here. He’s turned down every one because he liked working at the Dip ’n’ Dine. And he’s liked working here because no one ever got in his way. Just a word to the wise.”

The front door opened and Juanita patted his arm. “I’ve got customers that need tending. If I think of something, I’ll let you know. But I don’t think changing the menu is your answer. You’d probably wind up having to raise your prices, and that’ll just make folks mad.”

Chris sighed and straightened his shoulders before stopping by a table to say hello on his way to the kitchen. He could at least try to look like the owner, even if no one really believed it.

Carlos looked up from the pot of green chile stew he was stirring and glowered at Chris when he came through the door. Chris lifted his hand in a resigned wave. “Okay, Carlos, no blue corn trout. But keep an open mind, okay? Have you ever heard the saying, ‘Unless things change, they die?’”

Carlos went back to his stirring. “Can’t say I have, boss. But have you ever heard the saying, ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it?’” His grin softened his words, but Chris got the message. Things weren’t going to change much at the Dip ’n’ Dine, not with Carlos in the kitchen. He gritted his teeth and went to cross blue cornmeal off his food order. The row of cookbooks he had set up for inspiration

on the shelf over his desk mocked him, and his dream of gradually turning the Dip 'n' Dine into a destination restaurant seemed in danger of wafting away in the fragrant steam of green chile stew.

The bell on the front door jingled and Chris winced. That bell was one of the first things he had intended to deep-six when he took possession of his restaurant, but now he found himself second-guessing even that. Who might be offended and raise a ruckus if the door opened without that irritating jangle?

“Well, good morning, Elizabeth.” Juanita’s voice carried through the window into the kitchen. “And here’s our new college graduate. Congratulations, Miss Sarah.”

Chris half-raised from his chair to see Juanita hugging what appeared from the back to be a young teenager. She couldn’t have been much more than five feet tall, and if it weren’t for the cascade of dark curls around her shoulders, she could have been taken for a twelve-year-old boy. When Juanita let her go and she turned around and found Chris staring at her, he fell back in his chair like he had been caught spying. *Smooth move, Reed.* He rubbed his forehead. *Handled just like the owner of a successful establishment. One thing’s for sure, though—that is no twelve-year-old boy.*

“So what can I get you ladies?” Juanita’s voice carried into the kitchen.

“Gran and I both want the green chile stew. Carlos hasn’t changed his Monday special, has he?” The voice was surprisingly low and husky for such a tiny person.

“Not yet, but the way things are going, you never can tell.” Juanita’s conspiratorial whisper could be heard in every corner of the Dip 'n' Dine. “Chris and Carlos had a dust-up just a while ago that left me wondering what might happen around here. You wouldn’t believe the stuff Chris wants to put on the menu.”

“Well, it can take a while to settle in when new management takes over.” Elizabeth Cooley’s wise old voice entered the conversation. “I’m sure they’ll get things all worked out before too long.”

“Well, I sure hope so. Fayette poured her life and soul into this place, and I’d sure hate to see it go to pot the minute she leaves town.”

Chris shoved his chair back and stood up. *That’s it.* Time to forget his embarrassment and get out there and stop Juanita before she had the whole town in an uproar over the future of the Dip ’n’ Dine.

“Miss Elizabeth, good to see you.” His smile was broad and, he hoped, assured as he crossed the room. “Did I hear you ladies say you wanted a bowl of green chile stew? Juanita, you want to take care of that?” He tried to look strong and confident as he turned to Elizabeth’s dining companion and extended his hand. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Chris Reed.”

Her hand felt cool and smooth. “I’m Sarah Cooley. Glad to see you’re all right. You disappeared so fast a minute ago, I thought you’d slipped.”

Shoot, she had noticed his duck. “I, uh, dropped my pen.”

One corner of her mouth turned up. “Ah.”

And she knew a lie when she heard one. Why couldn’t he leave bad enough alone?

“Sarah is my granddaughter, Chris.” If Elizabeth was aware of the torment Sarah was putting him through, she chose to ignore it. “She just graduated from State, and she’s going to teach second grade at the elementary school. You probably met her at Fayette’s wedding, but you were so busy catering that you might not remember.”

“Well, if I did, it’s nice to see you again.” He looked up as

Juanita appeared with two bowls of green chile stew and a basket of tortillas. “Enjoy your lunch.”

Chris headed back to the kitchen. No, he had never met Sarah. If he had ever looked into those eyes, which were somewhere between hazel and khaki, he’d have remembered.



“What a doofus.” Sarah grabbed a thick, hot tortilla from the basket and buttered it. “Who does he think he is, anyway?”

“Shhh.” Elizabeth lowered her voice to just above a whisper. “He can hear you.”

“So?” But she did lower her voice. “Did you see him march in here with that slop-eating grin on his face, just like he owned the place?”

“He does own the place.” The expression on Elizabeth’s face left little doubt in her granddaughter’s mind that she may have just crossed the lines of propriety. “And I must say, you’ve picked up some rather colorful language at college.”

“Sorry, Gran. I’ll watch it.” She jabbed her spoon into the stew. “But it just burns me that some big-city stranger thinks he can come in here and run roughshod over what the people of Last Chance want. That’s just bullying. People can figure out for themselves what they want. They don’t need anyone else telling them what’s good for them.”

“Sweetheart, settle down. Whatever else you might say about Chris, he’s not a bully. I’ve just known him a little while, but he seems to be one of the nicest young men I’ve met in a long time.” Elizabeth reached across the table to place a warm hand on Sarah’s arm. “And besides, not one thing has changed at the Dip ’n’ Dine so far. You are getting way too worked up about this. What’s the matter?”

Sarah shook her head, surprised at the tears that welled up. “I don’t know. I guess I was counting on Last Chance to be the one place where things didn’t change. I didn’t realize how much I missed it.”

Elizabeth looked doubtful. “I don’t know. You seem to be awfully upset about a menu change or two that hasn’t even happened yet. Are you sure there’s not something else bothering you?”

“No, I’m fine, really.” Sarah took a deep breath and smiled at her grandmother. “You’re right. I’m way overreacting. I guess I’m still tired from finals and graduation and everything.” She lowered her voice to a whisper that barely reached across the table. “But really, why would he even come here if all he wants to do is change everything? Why not just stay where he was and leave us alone?”

Her grandmother smiled and picked up her spoon. “I like Chris. He’s confident, all right, but it takes a lot of courage to just pack up and follow your dream like he did. I know. I was a big-city girl too, remember. And from a city a lot bigger than Albuquerque. Everyone thought I was crazy when I answered that ad to teach school ‘way out west,’ but Randolph Scott and John Wayne had made me fall in love with cowboys, so I came. And here I still am.”

Sarah grinned. “So was it everything you thought it would be?”

“Yes, and then some. Real ranchers do a whole lot more work than those movie cowboys ever did, but I wouldn’t trade my life, hard as it was, for any other you could name.”

“You didn’t teach very long.”

“No, I married your granddad as soon as school was out that first year, and that was that.”

“That will not be me.” Sarah helped herself to another tortilla. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get married, but I won’t let it interfere with my career if I do.”

“Well, times have changed.” Elizabeth looked up and smiled as Juanita appeared with the iced tea pitcher. “Thank you, I will have a little more.”

“You all doing all right over here? Need some more tortillas? How’s that stew tasting?” She filled each glass with a practiced pour.

Sarah sat back. “The stew is phenomenal. I’d have more if I had anyplace to put another bite. But I’ll be back tomorrow. I plan to be back for lunch every day this week until I’ve worked my way through the daily specials. Then I might do it again next week. I’ve really missed Carlos’s cooking.”

“That should make our new owner real happy.” Juanita may have thought she was whispering. “I’ve seen him walk past the kitchen window half a dozen times looking in here at you. I must say it didn’t take him long to figure out who the biggest rancher’s youngest daughter was.”

“Juanita!” Elizabeth sounded shocked. “You are making a lot of assumptions.”

“I just call it as I see it. You should know that about me by now.” She winked at Sarah as the sound of a bell indicated an order was ready, then turned toward the kitchen. “Not that you aren’t as cute as a bug’s ear, of course. That just makes it icing on the cake.”



Chris stood in the kitchen and watched Juanita approach the window where no order awaited as if every word she had just said hadn’t reverberated from the rafters. The puzzled look on her face as she looked over the empty shelf changed to one of mild concern when she saw his face.

“Something wrong, Chris?”

Something wrong? Chris didn't trust himself to open his mouth. He took a deep breath to try to calm himself, gritted his teeth, and jerked his head toward the back door.

By the time Chris closed the door behind them and he and Juanita were alone on the back steps, Juanita really did look worried.

"Chris, what in the world is the matter? You look like you're about to go off like a Fourth of July skyrocket."

He gave himself another few seconds without saying anything.

Juanita reached for the doorknob. "Should I get Carlos?"

Chris shook his head and placed his hand on the door. He was calmer now, but he still needed one more deep breath. "Juanita, you know how much I've relied on you here as I've been getting on my feet. I counted on you to help me find my place here in Last Chance, and you've done a great job."

Juanita's expression relaxed a bit. "Well, thank you, Chris. I knew how hard it would be for an absolute stranger to know how we do things around here. Glad I could help."

Chris nodded. "But as much as I rely on you, we need to get a few things straight if you're going to continue working here."

Juanita's mouth pinched up and she seemed to swell to twice her size as she took in air through her nose. "Are you fixing to fire me? Because I'll quit in a heartbeat if you want me to."

"No, that's not what I'm saying. I want you to keep on working here. Like I said, I rely on you." Chris shook his head to clear it. How did he get on the defensive?

"Then would you please tell me why you dragged me out here? I have customers waiting on their lunch, you know."

Chris took a deep breath and tried again. "I didn't say anything when you overheard my conversation with Carlos this morning."

"Oh, is that what this is all about?" Juanita waved a dismissive

hand. “Well, I’m sorry if I stepped on your toes. But you yourself said you don’t have the faintest clue of how we like things at the Dip ‘n’ Dine. I was just trying to help.”

“And as I said, I appreciate your efforts.” When had he ever said he hadn’t the faintest clue? “But what I don’t appreciate, and what cannot continue, is your going out there and discussing things you overhear with the patrons.”

“Patrons? You mean Elizabeth? She’s one of my oldest friends. I don’t keep secrets from my friends, and if keeping secrets is part of this job, well then—”

Chris held up his hand to stop her. If he heard one more threatened resignation today, he’d probably take them all up on it, and then what would he do with the lunch crowd?

“Look, Juanita, I’m not telling you to keep secrets from anybody, just to—” He was about to say “use good judgment,” but Juanita cut him off in mid-phrase.

“Well, I should hope not. Because as much as I love this job, deceit and deception have never been anything I could tolerate, and frankly, I’m surprised that you even ask it. I am as honest and as open as the day is long.”

“Deceit and what? What are you talking about?” Chris knew they were speaking English, but nothing was making sense. “I’m just saying don’t talk about private restaurant business in front of the customers. Does being honest and open mean telling everything you hear to everyone you see?”

“Of course not, Chris. I am discretion itself. I thought we were talking about a conversation I had with my oldest friend that you listened in on.”

“As did everyone else who was in the restaurant at the time.”

“I was whispering.”

“I could hear you in the kitchen!” Chris could feel beads of sweat break out on his forehead. He dug in his pocket for his handkerchief.

Juanita was silent a long moment as she considered what he said. “Okay. I see what you mean. If the whole town knows all the problems we’re having right now, the Dip ’n’ Dine might go belly-up before you have a chance to get adjusted to the way we do things around here.” She smiled and patted his arm again. “But don’t you worry. You are doing fine. You’ll be up to speed in no time.”

“There’s one more thing.”

Juanita had turned to go into the kitchen, but she paused with her hand on the doorknob.

“The comment about the biggest rancher’s youngest daughter was completely out of line.”

Juanita finally had the grace to look embarrassed. “Oh, that, well, I was only—”

“*Completely* out of line.”

She puffed up again like she was going back on the attack, but she seemed to think better of it this time and only nodded before opening the door and disappearing into the kitchen.

Chris sank onto the back step and gazed out across the brush of the high desert behind the Dip ’n’ Dine. The craggy mountains across the valley were already beginning to stretch blue shadows across the desert floor. It was beautiful in its own austere way and one of the things that had made him fall in love with Last Chance the first time he saw it. But it had never occurred to him that people tempered by the harsh and unforgiving landscape might be just a bit inflexible themselves. What had he gotten himself into? It had taken every dime of the modest inheritance his grandparents had left him, plus every dime he had been able to save, to buy this place. He was just allowing himself to wonder for the first time if he may

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have made a mistake, ranchers' beautiful daughters notwithstanding, when the back door opened again and Juanita stuck her head out for one last observation.

“Although I have to say, Chris, eavesdroppers never hear any good of themselves. Just a word to the wise.”