

A Place to Call Home #3

# AT HOME IN LAST CHANCE

A Novel

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Cathleen Armstrong, *At Home in Last Chance*  
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For Bill, Lisa, and Kate  
You filled my life with love and purpose

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# 1



Pure and simple, Kaitlyn Reed hated her job. She hated getting up in the early hours of a cold, dark January morning to get there. She hated the curious to outright hostile looks of the diners she served. She hated that she didn't really have a choice about whether to work at the Dip 'n' Dine. But most of all, she hated taking orders from Juanita Sheppard.

Truth be told, she wasn't very good at taking orders from anyone. Her reputation back in Scottsdale as a creative, avant-garde hairstylist had gained her positions in some of Scottsdale's toniest salons, but those jobs never lasted long. Neither did the jobs she held after she left Scottsdale. Kaitlyn simply could not stand being told what to do, and employers always seemed to think they had to give directions. Nine times out of ten, if they had just given her five seconds, she'd have completed the task before they even mentioned it. But they'd go and bark their orders, this white-hot flare would shoot through her, and before she even realized she had said anything, she was out the door, purse and final paycheck in hand.

"Here, refill this and make the rounds." Juanita Sheppard shoved a nearly empty coffeepot into her hands. "And tables four and six need busing, too. Let's keep our eyes open, Kaitlyn, and try to stay on top of things."

Kaitlyn's eyes narrowed. True, her brother had asked Juanita to show her the ropes, but Kaitlyn was about ready to grab that rope and strangle her with it. Holding the pot in both hands, she started after Juanita, who hadn't even paused as she breezed by.

No telling what pyrotechnics the early breakfast diners at the Dip 'n' Dine might have been treated to if her brother Chris, the diner's owner, hadn't intercepted her.

"Why don't I take care of the coffee?" He took the coffeepot from her and gave her a wink. "You go ahead and clean those tables. And Kaitlyn? Try not to throw the dishes in the bin so hard you break them, okay?"

His grin lightened his words but not her temper, and after shooting one last murderous glare at Juanita, who was chatting with a customer and clearly clueless about the apocalypse she so nearly brought down upon herself, Kaitlyn ducked into the kitchen to find Carlos, her one friend and ally in this awful place.

"I just cannot deal with her one more day." Kaitlyn could almost feel steam coming from her ears. She squeezed her eyes shut as Juanita's voice reached them.

"Who? Juanita?" Carlos Montoya pulled a pan of biscuits out of the oven and straightened to look at her. "She's okay. Get's a little bossy sometimes, but you don't need to let it bother you. I don't."

"Well, you don't have to. You're in here. I'm the one she's treating like her own personal servant."

On cue, Juanita appeared at the window to the dining room. "Kaitlyn? Those tables still need busing and we have people waiting for a table. Let's save the chatting for our break, okay?"

Kaitlyn's mouth popped open on its own accord, but before she could say anything, Carlos spoke for her. "She'll be right with

you, Juanita. I needed her in here for a minute. The bins are there on the counter, though, if you want to go ahead and get started.”

Juanita was silenced, but only for a second. “She wasn’t hired to help you, Carlos. She was hired to help me, and I need her out here.”

She pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows at Kaitlyn before whirling away, leaving Kaitlyn fighting yet another flash of rage. Carlos shook his head and turned back to his biscuits.

“Take a second and cool off. Here. Eat a biscuit. Then go on out there and bus some tables. Just do your job and let Juanita roll off your back. I mean that.” His voice took on a serious tone Kaitlyn had not heard before, and she paused in midbite. “This place doesn’t belong to Juanita. It belongs to your brother. He’s a good man, and if you think you owe him anything, keep the catfights out of his restaurant.”

His dark eyes held hers for a long moment before she dropped her glance and took a thoughtful pull off her biscuit. She hated it that Carlos wasn’t just taking her side against the insufferable Juanita, but she had to admit he was right. She did owe Chris. Big time. If there was one person in her life who had always been there for her, it was Chris. When they were growing up, it was he who tried so hard to take the place of their always-busy parents. When she got pregnant at sixteen, it was he who stood by her decision to have the baby when everybody else told her what a bad idea that was. Seven years later, when she decided she was tired of motherhood and had dropped her daughter off like a puppy at a pound, he had taken Olivia in and given her a home. Several months after that, when Kaitlyn found herself alone and penniless and beginning to understand what a world-class idiot she had been, Chris, without a word of recrimination, brought her home and took her in too. Yep. One could say she owed her brother.

“Kaitlyn?” Juanita had appeared at the window again with a brittle smile. “Are you coming?”

Kaitlyn took a deep breath and held it before exhaling in a long slow whoosh. She smiled too and squared her shoulders. “Coming.”

She stopped just before pushing her way through the door into the dining room and turned to Carlos. “For Chris.”

He raised his spatula in salute. “For the boss.”

If Juanita noticed her new, cooperative attitude, she certainly gave no sign. In fact, her instructions, always frequent, seemed more curt and brusque than ever. More than once during the day, Juanita had backed Chris into a corner, and from her glances in Kaitlyn’s direction and the fact that she had actually lowered her voice to a near whisper, Kaitlyn could only surmise that the discussions were about her.

Chris listened as he always did. He lowered his head to better look into Juanita’s face, nodded thoughtfully as she spoke, then smiled, straightened, said a few words, and put his hand on her shoulder before walking away. Whatever he said could not have been what Juanita was looking for, because she looked Kaitlyn’s way, sighed, and shook her head before huffing off.

*For Chris.* Kaitlyn took another deep breath and held it as long as she could before slowly exhaling. *For Chris. For Chris. For Chris . . . and for my sweet, abandoned Livvy.*



Kaitlyn wasn’t sure which was more exhausting, serving tables or trying to keep from snapping back at Juanita, but by the time she climbed into the front seat of Chris’s Jeep and let her head drop back against the headrest, she felt as if she never wanted to move again.



“You look beat.” Chris’s smile may have seemed a bit weary as he slid behind the wheel, but at least he looked as if he had a good chance of remaining upright till they got home. Kaitlyn wasn’t at all sure she could if it weren’t for the help of the seat belt.

“And you don’t. How come?”

Chris shrugged and pulled out onto the road. “Used to it, I guess, and the place is mine. That makes a big difference. For some reason, I used to get a lot more tired when I worked in someone else’s restaurant.”

They rode in silence for a few minutes before Kaitlyn’s frustration burst out again.

“But Chris, I really hate it. It’s not only being on my feet all day. I’m used to that. I just can’t stand working at the Dip ’n’ Dine. It’s not as if you really need me. You did just fine before I got here.”

“Give yourself some time. It’s still really new to you.” Chris stopped the Jeep in front of the small brown stucco house where Olivia went every day after school. “You have to do something, Sis, and there aren’t a lot of choices here in Last Chance. It’s not like you can work at the beauty shop. There isn’t one.”

“It’s called a salon. And I know that. But why can’t I just stay home and take care of Olivia after school instead of Elizabeth? Wouldn’t that be easier on everybody?”

Chris took a deep breath and Kaitlyn had the feeling she wasn’t going to like what he had to say, when her door was yanked open and her seven-year-old daughter appeared in the opening.

“Hey! You guys are late. Hurry up and come in. Me and Miss Elizabeth want to show you something.”

Kaitlyn sighed. She had hoped to just wait in the car while Chris went in and got Olivia, but it looked like that wasn’t going to happen. She unsnapped her seat belt and slowly unfolded her long legs.

Where in the world did this child find energy at this time of day? By the time she stood next to the Jeep, Chris had joined them, and it was with a twinge that Kaitlyn noticed it was his hand Olivia grabbed and tugged up the sidewalk.

Elizabeth Cooley was waiting on the porch. Even she looked fresher than Kaitlyn felt, and she was nearly ninety and had been riding herd on a seven-year-old for the last few hours. Chris dropped Olivia's hand to give her a hug. "Sorry we're late. I guess the time got away."

"Oh, you're not a bit late. Livvy just started watching early." Elizabeth smiled past Chris's shoulder at Kaitlyn. "Come in. How about a hot cup of tea? With the sun going down, it's really starting to get cold."

Tired as she was, Kaitlyn brightened at the suggestion. Elizabeth always seemed genuinely glad to see her, something she didn't experience from everyone she met, and spending even a little while sipping tea in Elizabeth's warm presence sounded like a great way to put her rotten day behind her.

Chris put his hand on Olivia's head and waggled it. "If you're sure you're not worn out from this one, I bet Kaitlyn could use a cup of tea. She's about done in."

"How about you?" Elizabeth was already on her way to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

"Um, I noticed smoke coming out of Sarah's chimney when we pulled up. I think I'll run down real quick and confirm some plans we made to celebrate her birthday this weekend."

"Wait! I want to show you." Olivia came from the kitchen carrying a plate on which rested the most colorful cake Kaitlyn had ever seen.

"Well, that's a cake if I've ever seen one." Chris was visibly impressed. "Don't tell me you did this all by yourself."

“Yes, I did. Well, me and Miss Elizabeth made the cake part, then she helped me put the white frosting on, but I decorated it all by myself. It’s for Sarah.”

“She will be amazed. I can tell that right now.”

“Well, don’t tell her when you go see her. It’s supposed to be a surprise.”

“Your secret is safe.” He caressed her cheek with one hand and smiled over her head at Elizabeth. “That is indeed an amazing cake. So, I’ll be back in about a half hour. Will that give you enough time for tea?”

“Plenty. But don’t think you need to rush. To tell the truth, I could use a good sit-down and cup of tea, myself.”

“Bet you could.” Chris was already heading for the door. “See you in a few.”

Kaitlyn watched the door shut. She had not said one word since Chris’s Jeep had pulled up outside, and no one had even noticed. It wasn’t that she was trying to give anyone the silent treatment. It just never seemed to occur to anyone that she might have something to say.

“My goodness, Kaitlyn. You must be just dead on your feet. I don’t believe you’ve made a peep since you walked in this house. Of course, it can be hard to get a word in edgewise around here.” Elizabeth rescued the cake from Olivia and motioned for Kaitlyn to follow her into the kitchen. “Let’s have our tea here at the kitchen table. Tea just tastes better in the kitchen.” She put the cake on the counter and turned to the stove.

Kaitlyn seated herself in the chair Elizabeth indicated, and Olivia came and stood beside her. Kaitlyn slipped her arm around her daughter and pulled her close. She smelled so good, even after a long day at school. “I liked your cake, Livvy. You used so many beautiful colors.”

“Well, Miss Elizabeth showed me how I could mix some colors to make other colors. Did you know red and yellow make orange and blue and red make purple?”

“I do now. What else?”

“Well, blue and yellow make green. And just a tiny bit of red in the white frosting makes pink. But I knew that already. But if you mix them all together it makes this yucky brownish color. There. That one. We didn’t use very much of that.”

Kaitlyn laughed and pulled her closer in a hug. How had it escaped her that her daughter was an absolute delight? “I’m sure your teacher will love your cake.”

“I didn’t make it because she’s my teacher. I made it because she’s my friend.” Olivia scraped a bit of blue icing off the edge of the plate and popped her finger in her mouth. “She was my friend first, even before Uncle Chris. She took me out to the ranch to ride horses and everything.”

“I remember. You told me all about it when we talked on the phone.” Kaitlyn closed her eyes against the stab of pain she experienced every time she thought of those runaway-mom days. What could she have been thinking?

When she opened her eyes again, Elizabeth was placing a plate of cookies on the table and sitting down in the chair across from her. Kaitlyn searched her face for the familiar signs of disapproval she found in so many people she had met, not that she blamed them. They could not, even if they banded together and pooled their condemnation, think less of her than she thought of herself.

But Elizabeth just smiled and pushed the cookie plate toward her. “This is nice. I’ve been just dying to get you alone and have a good visit. But Chris, as much as I love that boy, just doesn’t seem to want to let you out of his sight.”

Kaitlyn felt her stomach sink again. *Here we go. More little digs. More innuendo.* She picked up a cookie and took a nibble. “Well, I guess he has his reasons.”

“Hogwash. You’re not going anywhere. I know that and he knows it too.”

“I know it too. And I’m not going anywhere either, right, Mom?”

Olivia had climbed into her own chair at the table, and as Kaitlyn looked from one indignant face to another, she couldn’t help smiling. It didn’t appear Elizabeth shied away from saying exactly what she thought. So much for innuendo.

“No. Unless I’m actually run out of town, I’m not going anywhere.”

“No one’s going to run you out of town.” The teakettle whistled, and Elizabeth got up to make the tea. “Yes, leaving Livvy here and taking off who-knows-where was a big mistake. No one knows that better than you do. But look what came of it. Never underestimate what the Lord can do, honey. He can take the biggest mess you ever saw and make something so beautiful it can take your breath away.”

Tears stung Kaitlyn’s eyes. “I’m afraid I don’t see anything very beautiful right now. Except you.” She smiled a watery smile as she reached for her daughter’s hand and gave it a squeeze.

“Give it some time. There’s just a lot of healing that needs to take place. I think that’s the real reason why Chris keeps you so close. He’s just worried about you.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had an entire town hate me before.”

“Now, don’t start feeling sorry for yourself. That’s not going to help one bit. Most of this everybody-hates-me is you feeling bad about yourself and seeing blame even when it’s not intended. Pshaw. If the hide of everyone in Last Chance who ever made

mistakes was nailed to the barn door, you wouldn't be able to get the thing open."

"It would be really gross too." Olivia reached for another cookie.

"That it would." Elizabeth poured tea in all the cups and added a large splash of milk to Olivia's.

Kaitlyn watched her daughter stir sugar into her milky tea. Olivia could seem so grown-up sometimes. Most seven-year-olds would have been carefully excluded from conversations about their disgraced mother, but Olivia took it in stride. After all, nothing said was new to her. Kaitlyn wished with all her heart she could scoop her up and hold her tight and somehow make all the things Olivia had seen and heard and dealt with in her short seven years go away. She felt so helpless and so unworthy of such a beautiful gift.

"Hey. Where is everybody?" Kaitlyn heard the front door open and a man's voice drift in.

"Steven." Olivia heaved a sigh and downed her tea in one long drink. "I think I'll go finish my picture. I'm done here."

"Okay, honey." Elizabeth looked up and smiled as her grandson appeared in the doorway. "We're having some tea. Would you like a cup?"

"I'll skip the tea. But if you have any milk, I'll help you with the cookies."

"In the refrigerator. While you're up, put a few more cookies on the plate, would you?"

When Steven slid the plate of cookies onto the table and plopped into a chair holding his glass of milk, his eyes were only for Kaitlyn.

"I haven't seen you since Christmas. How are you settling in?"

Kaitlyn shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"Planning on staying long?"

She hesitated. Another dig? But his smile was open and warm.

Besides, Elizabeth was right. It was time to start holding her head up.

Taking a cookie from the plate he offered her, she returned his smile. “Looks like I might be here a while. Chris has me working for him at that diner of his, and that’s an opportunity that doesn’t come along all that often.”

He laughed. “No, I can see how you wouldn’t want to pass that up. How is it working out with Juanita? She has a way of keeping everybody hopping. Even Chris, and he’s the boss.”

“Juanita would like me gone, no question about that. But I’m afraid she’s just going to have to deal with the fact that I’m there. Like it or not.”

“Oh, don’t worry about Juanita. She’s one of those people you either take as she is or leave alone.” Elizabeth nudged the plate of cookies toward Kaitlyn, who shook her head. “I’ve known her nearly all her life, and she’s been exactly the same. She was in my first class at Last Chance School, you know, and the bossiest little thing you ever saw. She was always trying to organize clubs and name herself president.”

It felt good to laugh, and for the first time in months Kaitlyn felt the heaviness she carried in her heart lighten a bit.

“Sounds like you’re having a good time in here.” Chris walked into the kitchen, smiling and hand in hand with Sarah. “I hate to break it up, but are you ready to go? Sarah invited me to stay for dinner, so I thought I’d run you two home real quick and come back.”

“Sure. If Livvy eats any more of these cookies, she’s not going to eat dinner anyway.” Kaitlyn stood up and gave Elizabeth a hug. “Thanks so much for the tea . . . and everything.”

“My pleasure, darlin’. Come back soon.”

“Why don’t I take them home?” Steven got to his feet too. “Save

you a trip. Although I've got to say, bro, if you are voluntarily eating Sarah's cooking, you are hooked really bad."

Sarah took a swipe at her cousin, but Chris grinned. "Thanks. I'd appreciate that. You don't mind, do you, Kaitlyn?"

"No. Why should I mind?" Kaitlyn was careful to keep her voice casual. But truth be told, she was getting pretty tired of having her opinion asked *after* the decision had already been made.

"Then, m'lady, your chariot awaits." Steven bowed and offered his arm.

*Oh, brother, just give me a break.* Kaitlyn ignored the proffered arm and headed for the front door, calling Olivia as she went.