

# **LAST CHANCE BOOK CLUB**

# CHAPTER ONE

Savannah White pulled her twelve-year-old Honda into Aunt Miriam's driveway. She set the parking brake and studied the old Victorian house through the windshield. It had seen better days. Mauve and gold paint peeled from the shingles and bric-a-brac, the porch steps sagged, and the azaleas along the front porch were overgrown.

She studied the garden for a long moment. Clumps of daffodils sprouted in the side yard, shooting up through the pine needle ground cover. She had never realized that there were daffodils in the side yard. Savannah had only visited Aunt Miriam in the summertime, well past daffodil time. The whimsical yellow flowers were a reminder that she was taking a huge risk. Savannah had no idea if she would even like living in Last Chance year-round.

Of course, no one knew yet that she planned to stay. If she had announced her plans, her ex-mother-in-law would have done everything in her power to stop Savannah from leaving Baltimore. Claire White wanted complete control over the education of her grandson, Todd. But Savannah hoped that moving here might shake up Todd's father, Greg, who had canceled every weekend visitation for almost a year and who was behind on his support payments. Greg couldn't have cared less about Todd.

And that left Savannah to wage a never-ending battle with Greg's mother, who seemed more than happy to spend money on the boy and make up for the support Greg never sent. But there was a huge price tag associated with taking Claire White's assistance.

Savannah was tired of always being beholden. And she was tired of living close to her own mother, who never stopped adding up all of her faults and failures. When her last

relationship, with Jeremy, had fizzled, Savannah decided to make a change in her life. She started planning a great escape back to her roots. She'd held tag sales to reduce the clutter. She'd put stuff in storage. Her lease was up. She was all ready to go when Uncle Harry died. God bless him, he'd provided the perfect cover for a clean getaway.

Guilt slammed into her chest for allowing herself to think such a thing, even if it was true. She was sorry that she wouldn't see her gruff old uncle again. Aunt Miriam was going to be lost without him. But Claire White hadn't even batted an eye when Savannah announced that she was taking Todd out of school for a few days to attend Harry's funeral. And of course, Todd didn't know the truth either.

She turned toward her twelve-year-old son. He sat in the passenger's seat completely engrossed in a video game. His brown hair curled over his forehead, and the tip of his tongue showed at the corner of his mouth as he concentrated. His eyelashes were amazingly long for a boy, but his skin was so pale he looked like one of those teen vampires from *Twilight*, albeit a slightly chubby one.

"It's time to put the game away," Savannah said.

Todd didn't acknowledge her request. Tuning her out had become a pattern.

"We have to go now. It's time to meet Aunt Miriam."

No response.

She reached over and took the game from his hands.

"Mom," he whined, "I was just about to win that level."

Savannah turned the damn thing off and tucked it into her oversized purse. "Sorry, kiddo, we're here. It's time to join the real world."

He rolled his pretty brown eyes. "Aw, couldn't I just stay in the car?"

“No.”

“But I didn’t even know Uncle Harry, and I’m sure Aunt Miriam is just some dumb old lady.”

Savannah ground her teeth. “You will show respect to Aunt Miriam, is that clear?”

“Yes, but I hate it here.”

“You’ve been here for five minutes, during which time you’ve done nothing but zap zombies.”

He rolled his eyes. “Mom, *Semper Fi* doesn’t have any zombies. I was shooting members of the Imperial Japanese forces occupying Iwo Jima.”

Savannah stared at her son. “You do realize that World War Two is over, and the Japanese are our allies now, right?”

Todd crossed his arms over his chest and sank back into the seat. “I’m not going to some dumb old funeral.”

“The funeral isn’t until tomorrow. And you will get your butt out of this car and go be nice to your aunt Miriam or I will put your PSP in a microwave and nuke it.”

“You wouldn’t. That would blow up the apartment and kill the microwave.”

“Don’t bet on it, kiddo.”

“If you did that, Dad would buy me another one, and Grandmother would yell at you.”

And that was the problem, right there.

She drew herself up into full-out mommy mode. “I don’t care what your father or grandmother might do. You are with me right now, and you will get out of this car. Is that understood?”

He gave her a sulky look and then opened the car door.

She did the same and stepped out into a balmy March day.

“I’ve never seen a house painted puke green and purple before,” he said.

“It’s not that bad.”

The boy wrinkled his nose in disgust. “It’s mad warm here. Are we gonna stand around looking at the dumb old house all day?”

The muscles along Savannah’s shoulders knotted, and the headache she’d been fighting since they crossed the South Carolina border was beginning to actually throb.

Just then the front door opened with a bang, and a white-haired lady wearing a blue polyester pantsuit and a pair of red Keds appeared on the porch. Dark, almost black, eyes peered at Savannah through a pair of 1960s-style spectacles festooned with rhinestones. “Well, look who just turned up pretty as a daisy. C’mon up here, sugar,” Aunt Miriam said, opening her arms.

Savannah took the rickety porch steps in two long strides and gave her aunt a bear hug.

“Oh, I’m so glad you came,” Aunt Miriam said.

Savannah pulled away and looked down at her great-aunt, noting the changes recorded in her face. Her apple cheeks now drooped a little along her jawline. Her skin looked pale and papery. Even the ever-present twinkle in her eyes was dimmed by time and sorrow. Savannah felt a sharp pang of regret that she had allowed so much time to elapse between visits. Aunt Miriam was getting old. Savannah wished with all her might that she could turn back the clock.

“I’m so sorry about Uncle Harry,” Savannah said.

Miriam nodded. “He was old as dirt. And sick these last few years. I know at the end he just wanted to lay his burden down and go on home.” Her voice wavered.

Savannah gave Miriam another big hug and whispered, “I’m sure he did. But I know you would have liked him to stay awhile longer.”

Miriam pushed back and wiped a few tears from her cheeks. “Enough of this maudlin stuff. Let me see that boy of yours. Last time I saw him, he was no bigger than a minute.”

Miriam turned her gaze toward the yard where Todd slouched. Savannah’s son had assumed the preteen position—arms crossed and disinterest plastered all over his face.

“Hmm,” Aunt Miriam said, “he’s a big boy, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is.”

“Too bad he doesn’t live around here. I’m sure Red Canaday would be all over you recruiting him for Pop Warner football.”

“Really? His father played football for the University of Maryland.”

“Well, it looks like your boy may have inherited his genes. I think Todd would make an excellent center.”

Savannah filed that information away. Todd probably had no interest in playing football. But Savannah was determined to get her son off the couch and out into the fresh air. Last Chance had lots and lots of fresh air.

“Well, son,” Miriam said with a wave, “c’mon up here and meet your old aunt Mim. I know you don’t remember me.”

The boy walked slowly up the stairs and stoically allowed himself to be hugged.

“Y’all come on in,” Aunt Miriam said once she let Todd go. “I’ve got cookies and pie and enough food to choke a horse. The casserole brigade has been doing overtime these last few days. To be honest, I got so tired of Lillian Bray trying to take charge of my kitchen that I shoed

them all away this noontime. They mean well, I suppose, but a morning with Lillian is enough to try even the most patient of souls.”

She turned toward Todd. “I’m sure you’re hungry, son.”

Todd nodded. Todd was always hungry.

“Well, come on then. I’ll show you the way to the kitchen.”

A burst of cool air greeted them in the hallway. It took a moment for Savannah’s eyes to adjust to the dark interior. The house had changed little in the eight years since her last visit. To the right stood the formal dining room with its gleaming mahogany table and chairs upholstered in light green moiré. The china closet filled with blue willowware still dominated the far wall. She could practically smell the ham and butter beans that Granny had served on those dishes all those years ago.

She turned her gaze to the left. The front parlor still contained Victorian settees upholstered in red velvet and striped damask silk. The baby grand piano, where she’d practiced endless scales and learned Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata,” still stood in the corner between the bay window and the pink marble fireplace.

She closed her eyes and breathed in the scents of lemon oil, beeswax, and memory. This house had once belonged to her grandfather, Aunt Miriam’s older brother. Savannah had spent many happy summers here.

Miriam came to a stop beside the oak stairway. “Oh, there you are. I called you to come down five minutes ago,” she said as a dark-headed man of about thirty-five sauntered down to the landing and leaned into the newel post.

He hooked his thumbs through the loops of his Wranglers, lazily crossed one cowboy-booted heel over the other, and assumed the traditional Western pose. Too hard and rangy to

belong to the house with its 1940s cabbage rose wallpaper, lace doilies, and china figurines, he looked like he'd just stepped out of a grade-B western.

He gazed at Savannah with a pair of sexy eyes as blue as Bradley Cooper's, and the corner of his mouth tipped up in a craggy smile. "It's been a long time," he said in a twangy drawl.

She blinked a few times, taken by her visceral reaction to his accent. Recognition flashed through her like the Roman candles Granddaddy used to set off on the Fourth of July.

"Cousin Dash," she said. "You still sound like a Texan."

Dash's gaze did a slow circuit of her body, and she felt naked as a jaybird under his intense inspection. "And you've grown up some since I saw you last, princess."

"Don't call me that," she said through gritted teeth. "I'm not ten years old anymore." Granddaddy had called Savannah princess until the day he died, but in Dash's mouth the word came out as a twisted insult.

"No, I guess not." His eyes flashed to Todd and back. "And I see you've become a momma."

She turned toward her son. "Todd, this is Cousin Dash. When he was twelve, he put a snake in my bed and blew up my favorite Barbie doll with a cherry bomb. I'm sure he is very sorry for what he did. And I am very—"

"Did the Barbie doll melt?" Todd asked.

Dash chuckled. "As I recall, it blew apart in about a dozen flaming pieces. But yeah, it melted."

"It was my favorite, Twirly Curls Barbie. And—"

"Cool. What kind of snake did you put in the bed?" Todd asked.



“A garter snake, entirely harmless. Scared your momma to pieces, though. You should have seen her running through the hallway in her baby-doll nightie. It was the—”

“Dash, I really don’t think we have to rerun our entire history for Todd’s benefit, do we?” Savannah said.

“If we’re talking about the past, princess, it’s because you raised the issue.”

Aunt Miriam entered the fray. “I declare you two sound just like you did when you were children. Now both of y’all act like the adults you are and c’mon back to the kitchen and have some dinner. I’ve got one of Jenny Carpenter’s pies. A cherry one, I believe.”

Dash flashed a bright smile in Miriam’s direction. “Yes, ma’am, I will try to behave. But no thank you, ma’am, to the dinner and pie. I have errands to run up at the stable. Aunt Mim, will you be all right if I leave you with Savannah for a little bit?”

“You go on, Dash. I’m fine,” Miriam said.

He nodded to Savannah. “Welcome back,” he said without much enthusiasm. Then he strode toward the front door, his cowboy boots scraping across the oak floor. He stopped at the rack by the door and snagged an old, sweat-stained baseball hat bearing the logo of the Houston Astros. He slapped it down on his head and turned toward Miriam. “Don’t wait up. I’ll probably be late,” he said, then turned toward Savannah. “Princess.” He tipped his hat and headed through the open door.

“Dash, don’t slam—” Miriam’s admonishment was cut off by the loud bang of the front door slamming.

Todd spoke into the silence that followed. “He’s really tight.”

Oh, great. Dash Randall was the last person on earth that Savannah wanted as a role model for her problem child.

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“Boy, *that* was a big mistake,” Dash muttered as he watched the television above the bar. The Atlanta Braves’ pitcher had just served up a meatball, and the batter had clocked it 435 feet.

“Uh-huh. Dash, honey, you want another Coke? You’ve been nursing that one for the better part of an hour now, and it’s mostly water,” said Dottie Cox, the proprietor of Dot’s Spot, Last Chance’s main watering hole.

Dash pulled his gaze away from the spring training game on the television above the bar and looked into Dottie’s over-made-up eyes. Dottie had to be pushing sixty hard, but she was outfitted in a neon green tank top and too-tight blue jeans. She might be trashy, but she had a heart of gold.

“Honey, you want another Coke?” Dot asked again.

Dash took a deep breath. “I guess I’ll have to settle. Especially since I can’t have you.”

Dottie leaned over the bar and gave him the kind of wise look only a bartender could manage. “Dash, if you want to flirt, go find someone your own age. In fact, I have a suggestion—why don’t you find your courage and do something about Hettie Marshall.”

He squinted back up at the television. “They’re putting in Ramirez. Good move,” he muttered.

“I declare, Dash, you’re a chicken. And I don’t mean one of them chickens they process out at the plant. Hettie is a single woman now, and near as I can tell you’ve done nothing about it.”

“She just lost her husband. She’s in mourning.”

Dottie leaned an elbow on the bar. It was a slow night at The Spot. The house band didn’t play on Mondays, so the regular patrons were feeding their pocket change to the jukebox. And

since the regulars drank too much, the jukebox was pumping out mostly drinking and cheating songs.

“Honey, you’re afraid Hettie’s going to say no.”

He snorted. “Of course I am. She’s been saying no for decades.”

“My point exactly. You’re so afraid of being alone that you don’t even try. Which, of course, means you’re destined to be alone.”

He frowned. “Dottie, have you been sampling the liquor?”

“No, I haven’t. And you know I’m right about this.”

He tamped down his annoyance. He needed Dottie pointing out his fears and failures like he needed a hole in the head.

“Dottie, the truth is that I love Hettie, but she doesn’t love me.” He looked down at his soda pop and ran his finger through the condensation on the outside of the glass. Hettie was a sore spot.

He’d been carrying a torch for that woman since he was a teenager. They’d had a pretty hot thing going his senior year in high school, and then she up and dumped Dash on the same day he signed his first major-league contract. He was suddenly a rich man, but Hettie broke his heart by walking away from him. She’d left him for Jimmy Marshall.

But now Jimmy was dead. And everything had changed. Dash wasn’t the big man with the major-league contract anymore. He was a recovering alcoholic with a busted-up knee.

He hated to admit it, but Dottie was right. Hettie wanted a different kind of man. And he’d have to change if he wanted to win her love. What if he put himself on the line, and she still said no? What if he let himself fall hard for her, and she walked away like she had all those years ago?

This was why AA suggested that people like him stay away from relationships. Dash had had a few in his twenties. But every time a woman turned heel and walked out, he crashed, hard. And then he'd go looking for a drink.

Shoot, his life was exactly like those stupid drinking and cheating songs on Dottie's jukebox. It was pitiful.

He straightened his shoulders and turned toward the jukebox, where Willie Nelson was singing "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain." "It's a damn good thing I don't have a shotgun because I might be tempted to murder that thing. Don't you have any happy songs in there?"

Dottie laughed. "No, honey, I don't."

"Don't you believe in happiness?"

"Sure I do, but on the nights when the Wild Horses don't play I get patrons who just want to drink and listen to sad music. Ain't that right, Roy?" She turned toward Roy Burdett, who was, as usual, drunker than a skunk.

"Yeah."

"Well, I come here most Mondays and I'm tired of it." Dash pushed himself up from the bar stool and headed over to the jukebox. He didn't have a shotgun, but he was fully capable of disabling that infernal machine. He searched out the wall socket and pulled the power cord from the wall. Dot's Spot went quiet.

Half a dozen good ol' boys looked up from their beers and bourbons.

"Hey, why'd you do that?" Roy staggered to his feet and came toward Dash. "I like that song. You plug it back in."

"No, Roy, I won't. And besides, you're wasted. You should get on home to Laura-Beth. Have you ever thought what she must think of you coming down here every night and drinking

yourself numb? Maybe you should think about joining AA. I've got the number of the folks at the Allenberg County chapter and—"

"Now, Dash," Dottie said, "don't you be trying to sign folks up for AA. That's bad for business. Why don't you just go on home to Miriam? You should be with her tonight, anyway. The fact is, you don't belong here anymore. You know that, don't you?"

"Don't belong?" Dash's pulse kicked up. Folks were always telling him he didn't belong.

Dottie continued in her sweet voice. "Dash, honey, you're a recovering alcoholic. A bar is a strange place for a person like you. I think you've proved to everyone's satisfaction that you're tough enough to sit here surrounded by booze and not give in to temptation. So maybe you should start thinking about moving on. I'm sure Hettie would approve if you moved on."

"Yeah," Roy said, staggering forward. "And I really don't like your taste in music."

"Well, that's okay, Roy, because I don't like yours either. In my opinion, Willie Nelson sucks."

"He does not." And Roy Burdett, who had once been a member of the Davis High Rebel defensive line, rushed Dash like he was an opposing quarterback.

Dash might have been sober, but he was hampered by a bum knee—the injury that had ended his baseball career. And Roy was still surprisingly fast, even for a drunk.

Dash didn't see stars when Roy tackled him. In fact, Dash didn't even remember hitting the floor.

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Savannah rested her head on the back of the rocking chair and cuddled a little deeper into her old cashmere sweater. It was almost too cold to be out here on the porch, but she held her ground hoping her summer memories might warm her up. Darn it, South Carolina had always

been hot and humid when she came to visit. And that's the way she wanted it now. Like her most treasured memories.

Still, she wasn't about to let the late hour or the cold drive her inside. She wanted to sit here and remember Granddaddy.

But instead of finding the happy memories of her childhood, she ended up obsessing over the enormous thing she had done today. She had actually gotten off her fanny and taken Todd across several state lines. If she decided to stay here, there wasn't much Claire could do about it.

Of course, if Greg decided he was unhappy about the situation, he could cause trouble. Savannah was surprisingly ambivalent about that. In some corner of her heart, she almost hoped that Greg cared enough to cause trouble. But in her head, she knew that wasn't ever going to happen. Greg was a lot like her own father, who had walked out on her and Mom when Savannah was three.

So Savannah had faced the unhappy truth. And surprisingly, facing it only lent more urgency to her escape plans. Coming here to Last Chance might be her last chance to really take charge of her life.

She could also follow her dream of finally *doing* something about The Kismet, the movie theater Granddaddy had left to her. She wanted to renovate The Kismet and bring it back to life.

Accomplishing that dream would take a miracle, of course. Nothing had changed since the big chain theaters had driven Granddaddy out of business. A person like Savannah, with no financing and no business experience, had zero chance of succeeding where Granddaddy had failed.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to silence the negative voice inside her head. She wasn't much for praying, but she winged a little prayer skyward anyway. *Help me find the courage.*

Just then the sound of crunching gravel alerted her to the arrival of someone in the driveway. She opened her eyes to the glare of headlights. A moment later two backlit silhouettes emerged from the brightness.

"Ma'am," a voice called out. "Is that you, Miz Miriam?"

"No, it's Savannah White. I'm Miriam's niece."

"That's the princess I been tellin' you 'bout, Damian." Savannah recognized that deep drawl.

An athletic-looking African-American dressed in the buff uniform of the Last Chance Police Department stepped up onto the front porch, followed by Dash, who was pressing an ice pack to his lip. The front of Dash's shirt was covered in blood.

The officer brushed his fingers along the side of his Stetson. "Ma'am, I'm Chief Damian Easley. Miz Dottie gave me a call about an hour and a half ago. I'm afraid Dash ran into a little bit of trouble with Roy Burdett down at The Spot."

Savannah stared at her unruly cousin. "You got into a bar fight on the night before Uncle Harry's funeral?"

Dash said not a word. Possibly because his lip was injured, but probably because he had nothing to say in his own defense.

Chief Easley grinned like he thought it was a joke or something. "Well, that's not all that unusual when you consider Roy Burdett. I took Dash over to the clinic, and Doc Cooper put a couple of stitches in his lip. The good news is that, even though Roy knocked the crap out of

him, Dash doesn't appear to have a concussion. Otherwise Doc would have probably kept him under observation all night."

"I need to get my car." Dash's voice sounded muffled and slurred.

"I'll see about having someone drive it over in the morning. You probably shouldn't drive."

Well, of course not. Dash was obviously three sheets to the wind. Savannah watched as her cousin made his way up the porch steps. He leaned a little unsteadily against the porch railing and turned back toward the policeman. "Thanks, Damian."

Officer Easley tipped his hat a second time. "Good night, y'all. I'm sorry about your loss." A moment later the cruiser's headlights swung in a wide arc, and the night returned to darkness.

Dash turned toward Savannah. "Don't look at me like that. Roy tackled me because of Dottie's jukebox. Everyone's a music critic these days."

His words were hard to understand through the swelling and the ice pack.

"Do you need help getting to bed?" she asked.

"Are you volunteering to tuck me in?"

Was that a put-down? Or was it a come-on? *Ew.*

And just like that, a little unwanted vibration of awareness shot through her, underscoring the nonexistent status of her current social life. Dash had grown into an amazingly handsome man—all craggy-faced in a Harrison Ford kind of way. Even with a bloody shirt and a swollen lip, he looked like some larger-than-life movie cowboy. But still. This was Dash she was looking at. Her cousin.

Okay, so he wasn't really her cousin exactly, but they were still related.



And he was a total screwup. And a drunk. And he was trying to mess with her mind like he always did.

She gave him her Uma-Thurman-as-Beatrix-Kiddo squint that still put the fear of God into Todd. “Honestly, I should ground you or something. You’re acting like an out-of-control teenager.”

He didn’t seem all that affected by the squint. He pushed off the porch railing and walked slowly toward the front door. He moved carefully like a drunk who didn’t want to stumble.

“Here, let me help you with the—”

“I don’t need your help.” His words sounded angry as he managed to open the door. He headed across the foyer toward the stairway in a kind of stiff-legged walk. He was obviously limping. Savannah followed in his wake like a mother chasing after an unsteady one-year-old. Boy, he had really put on a bender tonight, hadn’t he?

Maybe he was so sad about Uncle Harry’s passing he’d tried to numb his grief with booze.

Or maybe he put on a bender most nights.

He took the first step and let out a groan. He stopped, bending over to massage his knee. He was listing to one side. In a minute, he was going to fall ass-over-teacart. Savannah snagged his shoulders and steadied him on his feet. “Whoa there, pardner,” she said in a phony drawl, as the feel of bone, sinew, and soft cotton beneath her fingers triggered an unexpected and entirely unacceptable internal response.

She resisted the instinct to draw back as if she’d been scalded. If she did that, Dash would fall.

“Thank you, princess,” he said under his breath. He steadied himself and took the first couple of steps up to the landing. “You know, I’m not nearly as drunk as you think I am.”

“Oh, really?” she said, letting go of his shoulders. Releasing him didn’t seem to help her spiky heart rhythm one bit, especially since her field of vision filled with a view of his Wrangler butt. He had a very nice butt. She hated herself for even noticing.

He stumbled again as he attempted the quarter turn on the landing. She darted up beside him, and he sagged against her, his arm snaking over her shoulder. She took a portion of his weight and became uncomfortably aware of Dash’s muscular chest.

“What kinda perfume you got on?” he asked.

“I don’t wear perfume, Dash. And I don’t want to hear one crack about BO. I wash every day. I washed when I was ten, too. Now, here we go; one step at a time.” They wobbled forward and up the stairs. He was limping on his right side.

He sniffed her hair. “You smell like the lilacs my granny used to grow.” His voice took on a soft and faraway sound that she didn’t want to hear. But her brain registered the longing in his words, and her heart reacted by doing a real Texas two-step right on her ribs.

Why the hell was she having this reaction to *Cousin* Dash? She had to distance herself, fast.

“You, dear cousin, smell like a brewery,” she jibed.

“That’s only because Roy dumped his beer on my head after he knocked me out. Damn, that hurts.”

“What hurts?”

“My effing knee. Doc says I’ll have to go get an MRI if it’s not better by tomorrow. And I had finally gotten to a pain-free place. I know now why I decided against playing football. Roy

still has a few moves he hasn't used up." It certainly sounded like Dash was using booze to self-medicate. She tuned out his drunken ramblings and focused on helping him get to his bedroom on the second floor.

When they reached his bedroom door, he let go of her shoulder and steadied himself against the wall. He continued to press the slightly bloody ice pack to his mouth, but he looked down at her out of a pair of sharp blue eyes.

"Honey, I think it's best we be honest with each other, right off the bat," he said, after a very long and uncomfortable moment. "So I think it's important for you to know that—"

"Save it, cuz. We know each other too well. We're like oil and water. We always have been. I don't approve of you going off and getting drunk. Good night. I hope you're clearheaded in the morning. It's the least you could do for Aunt Miriam and Uncle Harry."