

LAST CHANCE CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER ONE

Jesus looked like he'd been hit by a Mack truck. The statue of the son of God lay on its side, its fiberglass infrastructure torn and ragged. Scattered on the gravel beside the bleaching carcass were the remnants of a sign that read "Golfing for God."

Lark Chaikin hugged her elbows and tried to keep warm against the December gust that blew her bangs into her eyes. Who knew South Carolina could be so cold. She looked up at the tops of the pine trees, swaying in the wind. She shivered.

She had to be crazy to have driven all the way from New York on this fool's errand. Roadside America was littered with the corpses of mini-golf courses, their windmills suspended in time, their giant Paul Bunyans toppled. And it sure looked like Golfing for God had gone the way of all the fiberglass dinosaurs.

Pop should have checked before he made his last request. But, of course, Pop had been sick for a long time.

Lark turned back toward her late father's SUV, a giant silver thing that drove like an ocean liner and guzzled gas like one, too. She opened the back door and stared down at the cardboard box containing Pop's ashes. The box was eight inches square with the words "Chaikin, Abe" scrawled across its top.

She pressed a couple of fingers against the ache in her forehead that had been growing all day. "Why'd you make a big *mahgilla* about being buried here in the middle of nowhere on a closed-up mini-golf course?" She couldn't go on. Her throat closed up, and tears threatened her eyes. She swallowed back the grief that was too new to be expressed yet.

Lark leaned on the tailgate, her gaze shifting from the box to the canvas camera bag sitting beside it. Her fingers itched to pick up the Nikon, maybe shoot a few photos of the broken statue. She might be able to capture the Picasso-like perspective of its smashed face. Maybe shooting a few photos would help her get back the balance she'd lost during the Libyan civil war. She had experienced a lot of heavy fighting during the battle for Misurata.

But she couldn't find the courage to pick up the camera. She slammed the tailgate and turned toward a gravel path clearly posted with "No Trespassing" signs.

Something violent had damaged the stand of pines growing on the right side of the path. The trees looked as if they had been blasted by napalm or something. A wave of nausea gripped her. Man, she was really losing it. The nightmares were bad. But the waking flashbacks were worse.

She took a few calming breaths and focused on the noise of her feet crunching on the gravel. She looked up. Clouds, heavy with rain, scudded across the sky, and a lone hawk circled, watching and waiting. She felt light-headed. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten or slept.

She lowered her gaze. A medium-sized structure resembling Noah's Ark loomed ahead of her. Scaffolding had been set up around it, and it looked as if someone were giving the Ark a fresh coat of paint. Still, for all that, the place seemed sad and abandoned. A few dead leaves, driven by the wind, swirled across the path.

She turned right and made a circuit of the place, hole-to-hole, past Adam and Eve, the Tower of Babel, and David and Goliath, feeling as if she'd slipped through the bounds of reality. She stopped at the tee box labeled "Plague of Frogs." Something terrible had happened here. She

remembered Pop talking about how the frogs used to spit water over the fairway. But there weren't any frogs left. Just random frog legs stuck onto concrete lily pads.

She turned and walked past the undamaged Jonah and the whale, then cut through the Wise Men with their bobbing camels and Jesus walking on water, until she reached the eighteenth hole.

She halfway expected this hole to be the much-laughed-about Tomb of Jesus. It would be just like Pop to want to have his ashes installed in the ersatz tomb of a messiah that wasn't his. She could see him laughing his ass off as people putted golf balls across his grave. After all, Pop had a murderous short game.

But the eighteenth hole wasn't a tomb.

It was a statue of Jesus. The sign beside the tee box displayed a quote from Mark 16: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."

Apparently the eighteenth hole was a celebration of the resurrection.

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Stonewall Rhodes, the chief of police for the incorporated city of Last Chance, South Carolina, drove his cruiser south on Palmetto Avenue, taking his second-to-last circuit of the day. It was nearly five o'clock, and the light was fading quickly into dusk. It would be dark by the time he drove out to the edge of town and back.

He got about halfway to the Allenberg County line before he saw the silver Cadillac Escalade parked in the lot at Golfing for God. The New York tags caught his attention.

Cars with New York plates didn't come through this neck of the woods very often—unless the folks in them were lost tourists searching for the road to Hilton Head, or people making a pilgrimage to Golfing for God.

At one time, Golfing for God had attracted a fair number of pilgrims. The place was listed on RoadsideAmerica.com and had made it into a couple of tour guides. But the place had been closed up for more than a year—ever since its propane tank had been struck by lightning.

Of course, Hettie Marshall and the Committee to Resurrect Golfing for God had just hired a contractor to begin fixing up the place. They were aiming for a big reopening in the spring. In the meantime, though, the “No Trespassing” signs were designed to keep the pilgrims and the pranksters away.

Stone pulled his cruiser into the golf course’s parking lot, the gravel crunching under its wheels. He eyeballed the Cadillac. It appeared to be unoccupied, but appearances could be deceiving. Before getting out of his car, he keyed the plate information into his cruiser’s computer. An instant later the Cadillac’s history came back to him. There were no outstanding warrants involving the vehicle, which was registered to one Abe Chaikin of Kings Point, New York.

Stone stared at the name for a long moment as the little hairs on the back of his neck stood up on end.

The past had come back to haunt his town.

He snagged his Stetson from the passenger’s seat and dropped it on his head as he left the cruiser. He pulled his heavy-duty flashlight from his utility belt as he cautiously approached the vehicle. He shone the light through the driver’s side window and confirmed that the car was unoccupied.

The SUV was a late model, clean and fully loaded, with a GPS system and satellite radio in the dashboard. A well-worn canvas bag in army green occupied the cargo area, loaded with what looked like expensive camera equipment. The SUV was locked.

He turned away from the car and walked up the charred remains of the main walkway. He saw the woman as soon as he turned the corner by the first hole. She sat on the wooden bench at the feet of the resurrected Jesus on hole eighteen, with her head bowed as if deep in prayer. For a brief moment the Savior's hand seemed to move outward toward the praying woman, as if He were trying to comfort her.

A shiver inched down Stone's spine, and he blinked a couple of times. Only then did he realize the deepening dusk had played a trick on him. A little sparrow sat in the hand of Jesus. It turned its head this way and that and gave the appearance of the statue's hand in motion.

The woman was as tiny as the bird, with short-cropped dark hair that spiked around her head. She wore jeans and a peacoat. A stiff wind might blow her away.

She looked up, turning a pair of dark, hollow eyes in his direction. All the breath left his lungs as he found himself caught up in her stare. For an instant, he felt as if he might be looking at a ghost from some forgotten past. Her face was oddly gray in the fading light, the skin beneath her eyes smudged with the purple of exhaustion.

She looked hopelessly lost, like a small waif or street urchin.

A hot, tight feeling slammed into his chest. The unexpected intensity of the emotion was tempered by the immediate clanging of alarm bells in his head. She was trouble.

She had arrived in a car registered to Abe Chaikin—a man who had so upset the balance of things in Last Chance that practically everyone still remembered the incident.

He couldn't shake the feeling that the woman was here for the same purpose. This tiny person was going to rend the daily fabric of life in his town, and he couldn't let that happen.

She looked up at him, and he recognized his doom right there in her hollow eyes, just as he recognized something about her that he couldn't even put words to. He had this odd feeling that he had known her for a long, long time.

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Lark gripped the edge of the bench and stared at the fiberglass Jesus. This had to be the Excedrin headache to end all headaches. Was this Pop's idea of a joke?

The sound of boots on gravel drew her attention to the walkway by the Ark. A policeman came into view.

Holy crap, she was in trouble now.

"Ma'am," the cop said. "What part of 'No Trespassing' do you not understand? Golfing for God is not in business, and I'd be obliged if you would move on."

She stood up, feeling dizzy and disconnected as she focused on the cop's face. She recognized the green eyes, dimpled chin, and meandering nose. Crap. She *was* going crazy.

"Carmine?" she asked. Her throat hurt.

"Ma'am?" The cop went on alert. His shoulders stiffened, and his body coiled in that ready-for-action pose she'd seen in the marines patrolling the streets of Baghdad.

She blinked a couple of times, trying to clear her vision. He wasn't Carmine, of course. And she was not losing her mind. She cleared her dry throat. "I was wondering if you could tell me where I might find Zeke Rhodes. I need to speak with him about something."

"Ma'am, Zeke Rhodes has been dead for more than forty years. I would have expected you to know that."

"Oh," Lark said as she fought a wave of disappointment. "More than forty years? Really?"

“Yes, ma’am. He died the day Abe Chaikin left town.”

Her head throbbed, and her face went from hot to cold. “You knew my father?” That seemed unlikely.

“No, ma’am. But I’ve heard the stories about him. He hightailed it out of town the same day Zeke Rhodes died. They found Zeke’s body right where you’re standing now.”

She took a reflexive step backward as if to avoid the long-dead body of Zeke Rhodes.

“Of course, not everyone thinks Zeke was murdered. There’s a big debate on that topic.”

“But you think he was.”

The cop’s shoulders moved a little. “Maybe. It happened before I was born. So you’re Abe’s daughter?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m his daughter.” The world started tilting sideways.

“Well, ma’am, some folks think *your daddy* murdered Zeke.”

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Abe Chaikin’s daughter gave Stone one wide-eyed look before her eyes rolled up in her head and she crumpled. He caught her before she planted her face in the Astroturf.

He hoisted her up in his arms and realized that she was burning with fever. No telling what kind of bug she’d brought to town. She could be carrying anthrax or some deadly virus for all Stone knew. But that was nothing compared with the fact that she was Abe Chaikin’s daughter.

He lugged her deadweight up the gravel walk. She regained consciousness before he laid her in the backseat of his Crown Vic. She cracked one bloodshot eye.

“I passed out, didn’t I?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“To the clinic, you’re sick.”

“But my car and cameras and—”

“I’ll make sure they’re safe. You need medical attention. You just rest there for a minute.” He opened the trunk and pulled out an emergency blanket, which he wrapped around her.

“Thanks,” she said through chattering teeth. “I’m so sorry. I never get sick. Really.” Her eyes closed. Her chest rattled ominously when she took a deep breath.

Just his luck. He needed this like he needed a hole in the head. She was the daughter of the most notorious man to ever set foot in Last Chance. What the hell was she doing here?

He slid into the driver’s seat, dropped his Stetson on the seat beside him, and radioed back to main dispatch. He gave them his location and an outline of the situation. Winnie, his night dispatcher, replied that she would give his momma a call to let her know he would be late for supper.

Momma would call Miz Polk, and Miz Polk would call Miz Hanks, and Miz Hanks would call Miz Bray, and pretty soon every member of the Christ Church Ladies’ Auxiliary would know that Abe Chaikin’s daughter had just arrived from New York.

By this time tomorrow morning, the entire county would be in an uproar. And wouldn’t that be fun?

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“You think you can stand?” he asked Abe Chaikin’s daughter when they arrived at the urgent care center five minutes later.

The woman tried to push herself up, but flopped back onto the cruiser's seat. He hopped out of the driver's seat, opened the back door, and pulled her up into his arms.

She was as delicate as a dragonfly's wing. Not his type of woman at all. But when she looked up at him out of those glassy brown eyes, something pressed hard against his chest, and he had trouble breathing.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured as her head fell against his shoulder. For some inexplicable reason, the weight of her head against him felt impossibly good.

He needed to run this woman off just as soon as he could. She was big trouble.

Winnie had already alerted Annie Jasper, the night nurse, who directed Stone into one of the half dozen exam rooms. He eased Abe Chaikin's daughter down to the exam table. "You'll be fine, ma'am. Do you have your car keys? If you do, I can see about moving your car to a safer place."

She dug into the pocket of her jeans and handed him the keys.

"Thank you, ma'am. Now, what's your name?"

"Lark."

"Lark? Like the bird?"

She nodded and swallowed hard. "Yeah. Mom and Pop were nonconformists."

Now, there was an understatement. Folks of a certain age in this county still remembered her daddy. They mostly referred to him as that Yankee hippie.

"Is your last name Chaikin, too?"

She nodded. "Who runs the golf course these days?" she asked.

Stone hesitated. “That’s a complicated question. Elbert Rhodes holds the deed to the land, but there’s a committee that has taken over the rebuilding and expansion of the place. Hettie Marshall chairs that.”

Her bloodshot gaze wandered over his face and then down to the name badge on his chest. Her eyes widened a little. “Deputy Rhodes?” she said.

“That would be Chief Rhodes, ma’am.”

“And the ‘S’ is for...?”

He tried not to grimace. “Stonewall. Everyone calls me Stone—Stony if they know me well.”

The corner of her mouth twitched. “And you thought I had a strange name? So, are you related to Zeke and this Elbert guy?”

He didn’t want this interview to get personal, but it was heading in that direction. It wasn’t as if he could lie. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I need to talk to Elbert.”

“About what?”

She closed her eyes, and the shivers took her for a long moment. Stone took off his uniform jacket and draped it over her legs.

He was about to shout for Annie when Lark said through chattering teeth, “My father wants to have his ashes scattered on the eighteenth hole. He died a week ago.”

Holy crap.

“I can tell that I’ve surprised you,” Lark said. The shivering seemed to be passing.

“Well, as a matter of fact, yes, ma’am, you have.”

Lark's eyes flew open. "Look, I heard what you said, before. But my father didn't murder Zeke Rhodes. Pop always said he 'found himself' on the eighteenth hole at Golfing for God, whatever the heck that means."

"Really? That's hardly evidence of his innocence, is it?"

She stared at him like he was an alien. "No, I guess not. But, to be honest, Pop never explained why he used to say that."

"There you go. There is also the fact that your father left town suddenly on the same day as my granddaddy died."

"Zeke Rhodes was your grandfather?"

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The Last Chance chief of police stared down at Lark out of a pair of oddly familiar green eyes. "Yes, ma'am," he drawled in a deep voice that sounded like it came right up from the earth itself.

"And you think my father murdered him?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. My granddaddy's death was ruled an accident. But my daddy always said it was kind of hard to explain how a man gets that beat up by accident."

She must be having a fever dream because the gorgeous policeman was saying stuff about Pop that made no sense whatsoever.

Just then, a thin, youngish nurse wearing blue scrubs and bearing a badge with the name "A. Jasper" bustled in. The nurse interrupted the mutual interrogation. "Ruby called," she said to the cop. "She's holding dinner for you. You need to be getting along home."

"It'll keep. I need to ask the patient a couple of—"

“Your questions can wait.” The nurse advanced with a digital thermometer, which she pressed into Lark’s ear. It beeped inside of thirty seconds.

“Uh-huh, you see? One hundred and three.” Nurse Jasper looked down at Lark. “You take any medicine?”

“A couple of aspirin about four hours ago, when the headache started.” Lark sank back into the pillows. Her head felt like an anvil. Every muscle screamed in agony if she so much as twitched, which was problematic because she was twitching all over with the shivers.

“All right,” Nurse Jasper said. “Let me go get Doc Cooper.”

“I’ll just stay here and ask a few—”

“I told you, Stony, the questions can wait. Now, you go on home to your girls.” Nurse Jasper’s voice knifed through Lark’s head and sent pinpricks of pain shooting behind her eyes.

The chief folded his big arms across his chest. He didn’t look very impressed with Nurse Jasper. “Can she drive?” he asked.

The nurse gave the cop an imperious stare before replying, “The patient has a hundred-and-three fever. She isn’t going anywhere anytime soon. What’s the problem?”

“Y’all gonna keep her here, then?”

“Depends on what Doc Cooper says. He’ll either send her up to Orangeburg or see if Miz Miriam can nurse her.”

Lark was not entirely sure, but this news didn’t seem to make the chief of police happy. Truth to tell, it didn’t make her happy either.

“Um, no hospitals. It’s just a virus,” she managed between her trembling jaws. “And as soon as I’m feeling better, I’d be happy to leave. Is there a hotel nearby with room service?”

The nurse and the cop laughed. Lark’s head pounded.

“This ain’t like New York,” the cop said.

The nurse put on a professional smile. Lark would give her points for her bedside manner. “Honey, don’t you worry,” Nurse Jasper said. “We’ll take good care of you.”

Then the nurse turned toward the cop. “And you quit harassing her. What’s she done, anyway?”

“She’s Abe Chaikin’s daughter.”

That stopped the pretty nurse right in her tracks. “You’re kidding?”

Chief Rhodes glanced toward Lark. “Am I kidding?”

Lark shook her head.

Big mistake. Her stomach roiled, and her brains rattled. She must have made some kind of gagging noise, because when her stomach heaved an instant later, Nurse Jasper was there with a basin.

“Aw, honey,” the nurse soothed, “there aren’t any hotels worth staying at around here. So I reckon you’ll be sent to the nursing home in Orangeburg. Or maybe Miriam Randall and the Ladies’ Auxiliary will look after you. But don’t you worry. And don’t you listen to Chief Rhodes, now, you hear? Because there are plenty of folks in town, like Nita Wills, who think your daddy was a hero.”