

LAST CHANCE KNIT & STITCH

Excerpt

Molly Canaday pulled the tow truck in front of the silver Hyundai Sonata. She killed the engine and used her side-view mirror to assess the stranded motorist.

He was not from around these parts.

For one thing, he was driving a rental car.

And for another, he was standing in the hot May sunshine wearing a black crew-necked shirt, gray dress pants, and a charcoal gray worsted sport jacket.

The sun lit up threads of gray in his dark, chin-length hair. He hadn't shaved today, but somehow the stubble looked carefully groomed.

This guy was seriously lost, like he'd made a wrong turn in Charleston and kept on driving.

She straightened her ball cap and hopped from the truck's cab. "Howdy," she said, putting out her hand for him to shake. "I'm Molly Canaday from Bill's Grease Pit. We're located in Last Chance, just down the road a ways. The rental agency sent your distress call to us. What seems to be the problem?"

Mr. I'm-so-cool-and-sexy regarded her hand, then let his gaze climb up to her battered Atlanta Braves hat, then back down to her favorite Big and Rich T-shirt, ending with her baggy painter's pants. His mouth curled at the corners like a couple of ornate apostrophes. The smile was elegant and sexy, and might have impressed Molly if it hadn't also been a tiny bit smirk-like.

She forced a neutral customer-service expression to her face, even as she dropped her hand. She sure wanted to leave Mr. Urban Cool to burn up by the side of the road. Maybe

walking the six miles into town in the blistering sun would help him lose that smirk.

He finally spoke in an accent that sounded like it came from nowhere. "Canaday, huh? Does Red Canaday still coach the Rebels' football team?"

Whoa, this guy didn't look like your average football fan. Much less like anyone who would know anything about Davis High's football program. "Uh, yeah, he's my daddy." She studied his face, trying to place him. He had dark brown eyes and a sturdy, straight nose. He didn't look a lick like anyone Molly knew.

His steady stare sucked her in and left her feeling unsettled. If he knew about the Rebels, then he wasn't a stranger.

He wasn't lost.

"Nothing ever changes here, does it?" he said.

"Do I know you?"

Something flickered in his eyes. Was it kindness? It was there and gone in an instant. "You might remember me. I mean, I knew your father. But that was a long time ago, and you were little."

"Are you saying you're from around here?" No way.

"I'm Simon Wolfe. Charlotte and Ira's boy. I was a place kicker on the team a long time ago."

Oh. Wow. Talk about prodigal sons. She didn't really remember him. But she sure knew all about him. He had been a member of the 1990 dream team -- the one that won the state championship. He was also the player who hadn't attended a single team reunion. The guy who left home, the guy who never came back, the guy who broke his daddy's heart.

And now his daddy was dead.

Two days ago, Ira Wolfe had keeled over right in the middle of his Ford dealership's showroom.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Molly said. Although Simon didn't look all that broken hearted. In fact, he shrugged like a cold-hearted idiot.

And he proved his cool nature a moment later when he said, "So Red Canaday's little girl grew up to become a mechanic. I guess that was totally predictable."

She clamped her back teeth together before she said something unlady-like. Not that she was much of a lady. Instead, she took a deep breath and tried to be *mindful* of her feelings, like Momma was always telling her to be. She sucked at being *mindful*, and she was not about to take up meditation the way Momma had.

"What seems to be the problem?" she asked in her sweetest voice, which admittedly was not very sweet. Sweet was definitely not her normal MO.

"I have no clue what's wrong with it. It stopped running," he said.

Boy, he might have been born in the South and even played football once. But he'd clearly lost his Southern accent and attitude somewhere. Any local man worth his salt would have already popped the hood and taken a look. Local men would also have dozens of theories about what had gone wrong.

Not this guy. This guy spoke in short sentences, dressed like a *GQ* model, and didn't want to get dirty. But then he'd been a place kicker on the team, and a good one too. But place kickers avoided dirt. It was a well-known fact.

"Did it make any funny noises before it died?"

"Nope." He looked at his watch.

"I'm sorry. You have a wake to get to don't you?" She didn't mention that she, also, had

to get to Ira Wolfe's wake. She owed that man a great deal.

Simon turned his back on her. He walked a short distance away toward the edge of the road and put his hands on his hips. He studied the soybean fields like he was looking at some alien landscape.

"God, this place is like being nowhere at all." The words were spoken in a soft, low voice and not intended for Molly to hear. But she was just annoyed enough not to let him get away with them.

"Yeah, well, some of us like living here," she said, investing her words with all the civic pride she could muster.

She popped the hood and started poking around in the engine. "So, I take it you're not planning to stay very long." She aimed her flashlight down into the engine to check the fan belt.

"No, I have to get back to Paradise."

"Paradise? Really?" The fan belt looked okay.

"It's a place in California."

"Of course it is." He would live in a place called Paradise. She had a feeling he was about to discover that there could be hard times in Paradise, but far be it from her to be the bearer of bad news.

Instead she inspected the battery terminals and connections but didn't see anything obvious. There was probably a problem with the generator, or alternator, or maybe the voltage regulator.

She pulled her head out of the engine. "I'm going to have to tow it."

He checked his damn watch again. Boy, this guy was wound up tighter than a spring.

"Don't worry, I'll get you to the church on time. Or the funeral home, as the case might

be."

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Simon stifled the laugh that wanted to spring from his chest. It wasn't right to find Molly Canaday amusing on the day of his father's wake. But it sure wasn't surprising.

She helped him transfer his luggage from the Hyundai's trunk to the back of her truck. Then he stood back and watched while Coach Canaday's daughter hooked the Sonata up to a heavy chain and then winched it onto the truck's flat bed. The woman sure had a way with machinery.

Which didn't surprise him either.

The last time Simon had seen Molly Canaday, she'd been a little kid in overalls, not much older than four, standing on the sidelines with Coach. She never missed a game. She never whined like other little kids. She never failed to inspire them all.

And Simon never attempted a field goal without first patting Molly's head. Her hair had been short and soft under his hands. Her hair was longer now, but still dark and barely contained by her ball cap. He had the sudden desire to paint a portrait of her, with all that glorious hair undone and falling like a curly, black waterfall to her shoulders.

"It's going to be tomorrow before we can figure out what's going on with the car. So I'll drop you by the funeral home. I'm sure Rob or Ryan Polk or one of their kids can give you a lift home from there. And you can use Ira's car. God knows he has a lot of them." Molly's words pulled him away from his suddenly wayward muse.

He climbed into the passenger seat and checked his watch.

"So, I guess you're just counting the hours until you can leave again? Paradise is calling, huh?"

He kept his gaze fastened to the soybean fields that whizzed past as she pulled the truck onto the road and headed into town. He saw no point in responding to her question. She had summed up the truth. He needed to get back home and back to work, especially since the work hadn't been going well.

The fields gave way to houses with big yards, and then he caught his first glance of the Last Chance water tower -- painted like a big, tiger-striped watermelon.

This scene was frozen in his memory. And yet, nothing was quite the same as he remembered it. A large commercial building with a big parking lot occupied what had once been cotton fields just north of town. A big sign at the gates of the facility said deBracy Ltd. Not too far away, someone was developing a neighborhood of new single-family homes.

The Last Chance of his memory was gray and used-up and on its last legs. But in this town had bright awnings hung over the shop windows. In this town, pedestrians hurried about their business on the sidewalks. In this town, the movie theater was no longer an empty eyesore, but covered in a scaffold where workers were bringing it back to life. This town looked alive.

He wasn't prepared for the tight band that squeezed his lungs like a tourniquet, cutting off his oxygen. He refused to feel any nostalgia for this place. He'd buried a piece of himself here a long time ago, when he'd been just a boy. He'd never planned on coming back and unearthing it.

And yet, for all the pain he'd suffered here, Last Chance would always be home.

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Despite her joke about being late to a funeral, Molly had no intention of being late for Ira Wolfe's wake. She had to hump to get Simon and his car delivered and then get home.

She raced through her shower, threw on a pair of slacks that weren't too wrinkled, and topped off her outfit with a gray cotton shell she'd knitted for herself using a seed stitch.

She headed into her mother's big country kitchen to collect the casserole Momma had made last night. Miz Charlotte wouldn't need too many casseroles, seeing as she probably had a housekeeper up in that big house of hers who would do her cooking and cleaning during this sad time. But still. Momma was of the opinion that when somebody died, it was a moral obligation to cook a casserole.

Molly didn't entirely share this view, mostly because she couldn't cook worth a darn.

She was just putting the mac and cheese into a grocery sack when her brother, Allen, sauntered into the kitchen wearing a pair of garnet-and-black plaid boxers and a University of South Carolina athletic department T-shirt. He looked like he had just rolled out of bed, even though it was four-thirty in the afternoon. He scratched his head, mussing the cowlick he'd had since he was two. "Have you seen my sunglasses?" he asked.

"Don't tell me you've already lost the Oakleys. You spent your entire paycheck on them."

"Don't be that way, Mol I just misplaced them is all." Allen shuffled to the refrigerator, pulled out the milk carton, and took a couple of long, deep swallows that made his Adam's apple bounce.

"That is totally disgusting." Molly's voice assumed the big sister tone that Allen had learned to ignore at a depressingly early age.

Allen wasn't very mature for twenty-three. His twin brother, Beau, on the other hand, had been born responsible. Beau had just completed his first year of law school, and he was working as an intern in the governor's office up in Columbia. Everyone reckoned that Beau had a bright future in politics.

Allen, not so much.

Allen rolled his gorgeous amber eyes and managed to look adorable even with a milk

mustache. He'd always been adorable, which explained why he got away with so much.

He put the milk down on the counter and frowned. "Oh, uh, I forgot. Momma called around nine-thirty this morning with a message for you."

"Why would she do that? I had my cell phone."

"I have no idea. I was groggy, you know. It was a late night last night. Anyway, she told me to tell you that she loves you, and then she told me where I could find the message she left."

"Find the message? You mean she wrote me a note?"

"Yeah." Allen shuffled over to the little desk in the corner of the kitchen where Pat Canaday, Molly's mother, kept the household bills and her other personal papers. He picked up an envelope and handed it to Molly.

Molly stared down at the white envelope bearing her name written in Momma's flowing script. This couldn't be good. The little hairs on the back of her neck and along her arms danced a little jig. Momma hadn't been very happy the last few months. She hadn't said much. She almost never talked about her feelings. But something was wrong. Momma had gone to town with her meditating. She'd even set up a meditation corner in the spare room.

Anyone who meditated that much must have a whole lot on her mind.

Molly's heart pounded as she tore open the envelope and read.

Molly, darling,

I'm off to see the world. I would have liked to see it with your daddy, but he's gone fishing. Again. I'm not going to wait for another football season to come and go. Again. So I'm going by myself. You'll need to take care of the shop. I know think you don't want to, but it will be good for you. Take care of your little brothers, too. Your

daddy can obviously take care of himself.

Love,

Momma

P.S. You know I've been meditating about this situation. I've even tried praying about it, too. And at the moment it seems like leaving is the best thing. But just because I've failed to control my temper, doesn't mean you shouldn't keep trying to control yours. You should read my meditation book. And you can use my thinking corner if you like.

P. P. S. I left the book on the kitchen counter, along with my recipe box. You're going to have to learn how to cook.

Molly blinked down at the stationery with rosebuds embellishing the edges and bottom of the page. She shifted her gaze to the kitchen counter. Sure enough, there was Momma's recipe box sitting right on top of a well-thumbed copy of *One Minute Meditations*.

"What's the note say?" Allen asked, as he pulled a jar of peanut butter from the pantry, opened it, and scooped some up with his finger.

She scowled at her brother. "Do you have any idea how gross you are?"

He shrugged like he didn't really care about her opinion. "What's it say?" he asked through the peanut butter in his mouth.

"It says she's ticked off with Coach, and she's gone to see the world."

"Momma's ticked off? Really? That's kind of interesting, isn't it?"

"I don't know, but I have a really bad feeling about this." She handed the note to her brother who proceeded to get peanut butter on it, which was more or less par for the course. Molly pulled out her cell and dialed her mother's number. Momma's unmistakable ring tone -- Bert and Ernie singing "Rubber Ducky" -- sounded from her desk drawer. Molly opened the

drawer and discovered Momma's phone with a sticky note attached to it that said, "You didn't think I was dumb enough to take my phone, did you?"

Just then, the land-line rang. Molly picked up the hand set from the old-fashioned phone bolted to the kitchen wall. "Hey."

"Molly, is that you? It's Kenzie. I'm desperate for a skein of Carmine Red Alpaca, but there's a sign on the front door of the yarn shop that says 'Closed until Molly realizes she's in charge.' What in the world does that mean?"

Molly rested her head on the wall beside the phone and squeezed her eyes shut. "It means my mother has run away and expects me to fill her shoes and run the Knit & Stitch." No doubt this was Momma's way of forcing her to become a true Southern lady – the kind who cooked casseroles, never lost her temper, and was always gracious and polite. In short the kind of woman who didn't have a burning desire to fix cars, or a five year plan to open a business restoring old cars.

"Oh, well, that's okay," Kenzie said. "You know more about yarn than your mother does. Can you open the shop, please? I'm desperate."

"Uh, no. Not right now. I've got to go to Ira Wolfe's wake."

"Oh. Okay. But what about the Purly Girls meeting tomorrow afternoon? You're going to open up for that, right?"

Oh brother. Molly was going to murder her mother the next time she saw her. If there ever was a next time.