

SECOND
CHANCE

A Novel

DAVID LENNON

Prologue

Chance surveyed the crowd gathered around his father's grave in the bright morning sun, as the minister intoned about the life of a man who hadn't passed through the doors of a church in over forty years. Chance had expected his best friend, Joel, and Joel's grandparents, Pappy and Mammau Gauthier, to be there, and perhaps a few of his father's drinking cronies if they'd been able to get out of bed in time, but there were at least three dozen people at the funeral. About half looked to be his father's age, the rest quite a bit older.

I guess that's life in a small town, he thought. People may avoid you and talk shit behind your back for your whole life, but when you die, everyone turns out to pay their respects. He didn't feel any bitterness at the thought. In fact he found it oddly comforting. It was proof of the connection between all these people whose lives were rooted in the local soil.

He looked at Pappy and Mammau and saw genuine sadness on their faces. He wondered if it was sadness for his father or for him. He suspected it was both. Even though his father's life had been one long downward spiral, he knew from firsthand experience that Joel's grandparents had an unwavering belief in the value of every person. They always saw the potential rather than dwelling on the mistakes. Regardless of his own many mistakes, they'd never lost faith in him.

A movement behind Pappy's right shoulder caught his attention and Chance shifted his gaze. Although he hadn't seen her in fifteen years, he recognized his mother immediately.

Luanne LeDuc hadn't changed much. She was still small and trim, though her once-girlish features had grown somewhat harder. It wasn't the hardness of alcohol and anger that had ravaged the face of his father, Chance Sr., however, but rather a hardness that spoke of maturity and resolve. Though he hated to admit it, Chance thought it suited her. She looked more capable.

She was dressed in a simple, knee-length, black dress with cap sleeves and a high scoop neck that looked as though its sole purpose might be for attending funerals. Her blond hair was pulled back and knotted in a bun. Again, Chance had to admit that the warm honey color suited his mother far better than the peroxide blond she'd had the last time he'd seen her.

He quickly averted his eyes, afraid that Luanne might look up at him.

He felt a sudden swell of anxiety. Although he'd never expected his father to live past fifty, the end had been a shock. He'd always imagined a long, slow decline, with his father hanging on for years, making life miserable for everyone around him—especially Chance—for as long as possible. That his father had died peacefully in his sleep of a heart attack had come as a surprise and a blessing. It was the first thing he could ever remember his father having done with grace. Still, it had stirred up an unexpected mix of feelings—anger, regret, relief, guilt—that had already taken a heavy toll on him emotionally. Now to see his mother again after so many years was overwhelming him.

Luanne had left one night when Chance was seven, while his father was passed out on the sofa. She'd never come back. There'd never been any calls or letters. It was as if she'd simply vanished.

For the first few months Chance's father had continued to insist she'd be back, at first optimistically, then angrily, saying that "the bitch has no place else to go." Then he'd stopped talking about her altogether. But Chance had kept hoping.

Every morning he'd wake up and run to his parents' bedroom on the chance that she might have reappeared during the night as mysteriously as she'd disappeared.

Eventually he'd realized that she wouldn't be back, but he kept hoping that someday she'd send for him. Finally, by the time he'd turned thirteen, even that hope was gone, and if he thought about his mother at all—which wasn't often—it was with resentment and anger.

To see her now brought all his old feelings to the surface, heightening his already raw emotional state. He literally wanted to scream to release the pressure.

Suddenly he became aware that the minister had stopped speaking and looked up. The other mourners were all staring at him expectantly, and he realized they were waiting for him to place the first flower on his father's casket.

He took a deep breath and forced himself to step forward, then gently placed the red carnation on the polished pine surface.

"People will be coming back to the house," Mammau said. "Do you want to walk back with us?"

Chance shook his head distractedly.

"No, I just need a few minutes. Go on ahead and I'll meet you there."

"Okay," Mammau said with an understanding look.

Chance walked back to the grave and stared at the carnation-strewn coffin. He could hear distant voices, and then tires receding down the gravel road behind him. So this is it, he thought.

A shadow appeared alongside his own on the side of the casket.

"So did you come to dance on his grave, Luanne?" Chance asked coldly without looking up.

“No,” Luanne LeDuc replied in a soft voice. “I couldn’t stay with him, but I never hated him.”

Although it had been a long time since he’d heard it, his mother’s voice was instantly familiar. The soft drawl and lilting cadence seemed like they had always been with him. He felt a momentary, reflexive sense of comfort, but pushed the feeling away and turned to face his mother.

“And what about me?” he asked, his eyes flashing with anger. “Could you just not stay with me, too?”

Luanne flinched but didn’t reply.

“Because if you loved me, I don’t understand how you could have left me behind with him,” Chance continued, his voice breaking with emotion. “Didn’t you know he’d take it out on me? That he’d punish me for you leaving?”

“I’m sorry, Chance,” Luanne replied quietly. “I’m so sorry.”

“Well, gee, that just makes it all better,” Chance replied acidly. “Why don’t we just hug now and things will all be better. No harm, no foul.”

“Stop it,” Luanne said, her voice suddenly more forceful. “I did what I had to do. If I’d stayed, eventually he would have killed me.”

“Oh, but you weren’t afraid he’d kill me?” Chance asked sarcastically.

“No,” Luanne replied flatly. “You were his flesh and blood. He couldn’t kill you. He loved you.”

Chance snorted derisively.

“Is that what you call that? Love?” he asked. “Beating me, ignoring me, acting like he could barely stand to look at me?”

Luanne was quiet for a moment. She stared at the ground as though trying to collect her thoughts. Finally she looked up at Chance and her pale blue eyes—his eyes—were kind and maternal.

“Can we sit down?” she asked, gesturing toward a granite bench in the shade of a nearby oak tree. “There are some things I think you need to understand about your daddy.”

Chance hesitated before responding. A part of him wanted to tell his mother to just fuck off and leave. At the same time, another part of him was glad to see her, and still another part was curious about why she'd come back and what she had to say.

"Okay," he replied grudgingly.

They settled on the bench and Luanne took a deep breath before speaking.

"He wasn't always the way he was when you knew him," she began. "In fact, he used to be a lot like you."

Chance felt a surge of anger that his mother would presume to know anything about him, but decided to hold his tongue.

"I remember when my family moved here," Luanne continued. "I was fourteen. All the other girls told me to stay away from Chance LeDuc. They said he was crazy, that his family was no good, and that associating with his kind could only lead to trouble. But I saw something different. No doubt he had a wild streak a mile wide, but mostly what I saw was hurt. He was like a wounded animal that was lashing out, and I thought that maybe if someone showed him some kindness he'd be different.

"So after a few weeks, I passed him a note in science class asking him to meet me at Miller's Pond after school."

Luanne's eyes became focused on the middle distance and her voice grew softer, as though she were reliving a dream.

"I remember I was so nervous," she continued. "Chance was the most handsome boy I'd ever seen. And I was afraid he'd think I was one of *those* kind of girls for being so forward. But when he showed up, he was shy and sweet and funny, and I think I fell in love with him that very afternoon."

Chance tried to imagine the person his mother was describing.

"We started going steady a few days later," Luanne continued. "Everyone told me I was going to get hurt, but I didn't care because I was convinced that Chance was a good

man. With other people he was mostly sullen or just plain mean, but I knew that was just his way of protecting himself so he wouldn't get his feelings hurt. When we were alone together he was kind and gentle, and he loved to talk about his dreams."

"Wait a second," Chance interrupted. "He had dreams?"

"Of course he had dreams," Luanne snapped, breaking out of her reverie. "He was a young man."

Chance nodded, acknowledging her reproach.

"He always said that someday we'd get out of Natchez and that he'd get a job in a city and we'd have a nice house in the suburbs and a Cadillac," Luanne continued. "Maybe they weren't grand dreams, but they were dreams.

"But there was a darker side to your daddy, too, even then. Sometimes after he'd had a few drinks and was feeling melancholy, he'd talk about 'the family curse.' He was convinced that somewhere in the past, someone had done something terrible that had brought a curse on the family. He said that's why they'd lost their money and become outcasts. He was always afraid that some day the curse would touch him, too."

She sighed and shook her head sadly before continuing.

"You have to understand, your daddy hated his life here. He hated his daddy for the way he treated him, and he hated that he had to live in a run-down old house, and mostly he hated that people treated him like he was damaged because he was another one of 'those crazy LeDucs.'"

"I know the feeling," Chance said.

Luanne smiled sympathetically.

"The worst thing your daddy could imagine was being stuck here and ending up like his own daddy," Luanne continued. "He wanted to go somewhere where no one knew his family, where he could make a fresh start. Just like you."

Instead of anger, this time Chance felt surprise that his mother did seem to know some things about him. He considered asking her how, but decided to wait.

“So why didn’t you both leave?” he asked instead.

“We did,” Luanne responded. “The summer before our senior year, on your daddy’s 17th birthday, we packed up his truck and moved to Woodville where he’d gotten a job working in a lumber mill. Oh, the trouble that caused. My parents told me if I left they’d disown me. And they pretty much did for a long time.”

She gave Chance a small, wistful smile, then the smile suddenly warmed.

“And about a month later I found out I was pregnant with you so we got married,” she said.

Chance blinked his eyes in wonderment as he tried to reconcile the image of his parents that Luanne was describing with the people he’d known. He felt as though he’d just discovered he was adopted.

“Do you know why he wanted to name you after himself?” Luanne asked suddenly, staring meaningfully into Chance’s eyes.

Chance shook his head.

“Because he said you’d be his second chance,” Luanne said. “He wanted to give you all the things he never had so that your life could be different.”

Chance was stunned. The father he’d known had always seemed intent on belittling him and tearing him down.

“For about a year things were good,” Luanne continued. “We rented a small house and your daddy fixed up a room for you, and we even bought a new car. But that’s when things started to go bad. Just after you were born, your daddy hurt his back in an accident at the mill and was out of work for about a month, and then when he went back they told him they didn’t need him anymore.

“We tried to make do for a while and your daddy was able to pick up some odd jobs here and there, but no steady work, and after a few months the money was gone and we had to move back here.”

Again she sighed.

“After he lost the job at the mill, your daddy had started to change,” she said. “It was like the light was gone from his eyes and he got moody sometimes. But when we moved back in with his daddy, it got much worse.

“I thought he was stronger than that, but I guess when you live with a fear for that long and then it seems to be coming true, it takes a hard toll. It also didn’t help that his daddy rubbed it in his face, ragging on him for thinking he was something special and that he could escape his family’s past. If it’d been anyone else who’d said those things, your daddy might have killed him, but your daddy was scared of his daddy. His daddy had a power over him. It was a terrible thing to see.”

For the first time he could remember, Chance felt sympathy for his father.

“I think your daddy was sort of a tortured soul,” Luanne continued. “He had a struggle between doing what was good and doing what came naturally, what he’d learned from his daddy and granddaddy. He’d tried hard to overcome his worst self, but when things went bad he seemed to lose the will. I think he decided that if he was cursed he might as well just become exactly what everyone expected of him.

“He stopped trying to find work, and every day his mood grew darker and he was drinking more. He started getting into fights in town, and he began...” Luanne trailed off.

“Beating you?” Chance asked softly.

Luanne nodded with a look of embarrassment.

“But there was no place for me to go. I didn’t have any money, and as I said, my folks had disowned me and I didn’t even know where they were because they’d moved while we were in Woodville.”

There was a moment of thoughtful silence, then suddenly Luanne brightened.

“So now do you understand what I meant about your daddy loving you?”

“Huh?” Chance replied.

He felt as though he’d fallen asleep during a movie and missed a crucial plot point.

“Weren’t you paying attention?” Luanne asked with a look that suggested she’d just discovered he was simple.

“I guess not,” Chance stammered.

Luanne gave an exasperated sigh and fixed Chance with her eyes.

“He treated you the way he did because he was trying to protect you,” she explained slowly. “He didn’t want you to go through what he did, so he figured that if you didn’t have any grand expectations you wouldn’t be hurt when your life didn’t amount to much.”

“That’s it?” Chance asked incredulously.

“What do you mean?” Luanne asked, giving him a perplexed look.

Chance fought a sudden urge to laugh at Luanne’s perverse logic. He realized that despite her attempts at insightfulness, she was still just a simple country girl whose greatest ambition had probably been to run off and marry her high school sweetheart, and then later to escape him. Then he realized that she had inadvertently provided some plausible reasons for the way his father had treated him—resentment, a projection of self-loathing, bitterness about his own failure—though she’d missed the point herself. Still, he couldn’t keep a small smirk from crossing his lips.

“What?” Luanne asked with a hint of testiness.

“Nothing,” Chance replied, forcing himself to look serious. “I get it now. Makes perfect sense.”

Luanne studied him for a moment, as though trying to discern whether he was telling the truth.

“Good,” she said, apparently satisfied.

Again they were quiet for a moment before Luanne broke the silence again.

“So I imagine you’re wondering where I’ve been?”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Chance replied dryly. “That and why you didn’t take me with you.”

“Because I knew he’d come after us,” Luanne replied. “I knew he’d be angry if I left, but after a while he’d let it go. But he’d never have let me take you. Besides, I was only twenty-two when I left. I didn’t have any money. I didn’t have a job or a home for you. I figured you’d be better off with your daddy for a while because at least you’d have a roof over your head.

“I kept thinking that once I had enough money saved I’d get a two-bedroom apartment and find a lawyer and get custody of you legally. But then I got married again and had your baby sister, Daisy, but that marriage didn’t work out and it wasn’t legal anyway because your daddy and I were still married. So then I was on my own again and raising the baby to boot. I kept thinking I’d get you soon, but the years kept passing and after a while I figured that maybe it was best if I stayed away because I was sure by then you’d hate me.”

Chance felt as though he were watching an episode of Jerry Springer. It amazed him that both of his parents had chosen to hurt him, believing it would be in his best interest.

“But I kept checking up on you,” Luanne continued breathlessly. “I used to call Mrs. Gauthier every few months.”

“Mammau?” Chance asked, surprised that his mother knew Joel’s grandmother.

“Yeah, I ran into her in Fayette one day and she recognized me and told me that you and her grandson were best friends, so I asked her if it would be all right if I called now and again to see how you were doing. She told me about you moving to New Orleans and how you got stabbed. I went to the hospital to visit you once, but your daddy was there so I didn’t go in the room, and then another time...”

“Okay, okay,” Chance said impatiently, holding up his right hand. “So why are you here now?”

Luanne gave him a slightly hurt look at having been interrupted so abruptly.

“Because I have to fulfill a promise I made to your great granddaddy,” she replied.

She reached into her purse, took out a thick yellowed envelope, and held it out toward Chance.

“What is it?” he asked, eyeing the envelope suspiciously.

“It’s your inheritance,” Luanne replied.

“Inheritance?” Chance laughed. “There hasn’t been any money in our family for over a hundred years.”

“That’s not true,” Luanne replied. “Your great granddaddy had some money. You’d never have known it to look at him, but he had money that’d been passed down to him.”

Chance reached out slowly and took the envelope.

“But why would he leave it to me?” he asked.

“Because your great granddaddy knew that your granddaddy and your daddy would waste it,” Luanne replied. “They were both big disappointments to him, and he didn’t want to see what was left of the family fortune squandered.

“A few months before I left—about a year before he died—he gave me that envelope and told me to give it to when your daddy passed. He said that he hoped you’d be able to use it to make something of yourself so you could break the cycle.”

Chance opened the envelope and pulled out the folded sheaves of paper. He straightened them on his lap and began reading.

It was a trust document in his name, dated September 5, 1990. The principal amount at the time it was executed had been \$175,000.

He looked up at Luanne, fighting back sudden tears.

“The Gaulthiers are having people back to the house,” he said quietly. “Do you want to go with me...momma?”