



Love Finds You
in
**Last
Chance**
CALIFORNIA







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BY MIRALEE FERRELL



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Love Finds You in Last Chance, California

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The town depicted in this book is a real place, but all characters are fictional. Any resemblances to actual people or events are purely coincidental.

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Dedication

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This book is dedicated to Kim Vogel Sawyer.
My heartfelt thanks for your friendship,
your confidence in my writing,
and your prayer support.
I'm truly humbled and blessed.







Acknowledgments

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This story, and the opportunity to share it, was placed in my path by the Lord. The idea of a strong young woman trying to succeed in a man's world in the Old West rumbled in my heart for months. The story of Kittie Wilkins, a woman who lived in the 1800s and ran one of the largest horse ranches in her area and time period, fascinated me, but I had no idea how it might be born. One day I got a note from my friend and fellow author Kim Vogel Sawyer, saying she'd recommended my work to a new publishing house that was starting a romance line. She offered the information a bit apologetically, half afraid I might not be pleased. Not so. I felt honored that someone of Kim's caliber would endorse me. Thank you, my friend; I'll forever be in your debt.

A huge thank-you to Rachel Meisel and Jason Rovenstine from Summerside Press, along with the rest of the staff who helped make this book a reality. You gave me an opportunity to be part of this awesome new line, and I'm grateful for your encouragement and support. You guys are the best!

Tamela Hancock Murray, my wonderful agent, has watched over my career and championed my work from the very beginning. She's stood beside me when prospects looked dim, prayed for me when we were unsure of an outcome, and cheered when prayers were answered. I so appreciate not only the professionalism she brings to her job, but the friendship and personal touch she offers, as well.

My husband and I journeyed to Last Chance, now just a wide spot in the road with a few tombstones, foundations, and hundred-year-old fence posts rotting in the woods. We discovered two wonderful sources





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of help in the Foresthill area. Nolan Smith, District Archaeologist for Tahoe National Forest, drove with us over three hours round trip from our B and B up to the high mountain site of Last Chance. He was invaluable, showing us the area and providing wonderful bits of insight into the local history. While we were there, we spent three nights at the Christmas Tree Vineyard Lodge, a wonderful B and B owned and run by Claudia Raco. Her hospitality, knowledge of the area, books she lent me, and suggestions of whom to consult were a tremendous help. The great people who volunteer at the Foresthill museum also have my thanks.

I couldn't write an acknowledgment page without touting the praises of my family, especially my wonderful husband, Allen. He listens patiently when I'm stressed, puts up with scanty meals when I'm pushing a deadline, and celebrates with me when each book is contracted and released. My grown kids, Marnee and Steven, along with their spouses, Brian and Hannah, have been staunch supporters, as has my sister, Jenny, and brother, Tim. Sylvia Gould, my mother, gets a special word of thanks for taking the time to be a proofreader for me and for being a constant source of encouragement.

Some of the inspiration for my character of Alexia came from my strong, independent daughter, Marnee. She's my best friend as well as my riding partner; the girl was practically born on a horse. And don't worry, Steven—one of these days I'll weave a story around your personality, as well. God has blessed me with such an incredible family network. No author can succeed alone. I have some of the best critique partners and knowledgeable advance readers. A huge thanks goes to my critique partners who labored and brainstormed with me: Kimberly Johnson, Sherri Sand, and Teresa Morgan. You gals rock! Blessings on my three faithful advance readers who gave me honest feedback. Tammy, Kristy, and Amanda, you're awesome and I hope you'll stick with me for a few more books.





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And finally, my heartfelt thanks to the rest of my family, church body, and friends who so unfailingly cheer me on in this exciting and challenging journey called writing. I'd never make it without your prayers and love surrounding me. My greatest source of inspiration is from the Lord, and all praise, honor, and glory go to Him. I'm nothing without Jesus, and my writing would be hollow words without His touch. May He always receive the glory for every word that I write.







LAST CHANCE, CALIFORNIA LIES ABOUT TWO AND A HALF hours northeast of Auburn, California, deep in the Sierra Nevada mountains. It's now a ghost town with only one small shack and a cemetery attesting to the thriving mining town that once existed. The town is almost totally obscured, and the encroaching forest hides the remnants of several hand-dug cellars. In the late 1800s, the main street contained a hotel, a candy store, a butcher shop, a dry goods store, and possibly more. Visitors can still see the spring and nearby glade that once boasted a small apple orchard, all tucked behind the scattering of homes that backed main street. The mule team routes into the town were steep, dropping nearly 5,000 feet in elevation from the top of the ridges to the bottom of the canyons, making for treacherous travel. It took a hardy miner or pioneer to traverse the rugged mountains and make his home in Last Chance.

Miralee Ferrell







Prologue

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June 1877—two miles outside of Last Chance, California

Benjamin Travers trotted his horse across the mesquite-dotted meadow that was just beginning to show patches of green. Spots of snow still clung to protected areas under the spreading boughs of cedar trees where the sun hadn't yet stretched its warm fingers. The nearby ridges of the Sierra Nevada mountains failed to stir his appreciation today. Getting to town and ridding himself of his heavy burden filled his thoughts and drove him forward.

A bright glint flashed, pulling his gaze to the tree-covered hill nearby. He reined in his horse and stared but didn't see it again. His unease deepened and his horse seemed to sense it, snorting and sidestepping. He picked up his reins, determined to get to town, and the sooner the better. Once he'd paid for the horses, dropped off his ore samples, and headed back home, he'd breathe easy again.

The loud bark of a rifle report struck his ears a split second before a bullet pinged off a nearby rock, scattering bits of flint. His Morgan gelding snorted and jumped to the side, dancing and rearing.

Ben jerked on the reins, pulling his horse back to a standstill. "Easy, Ricky." He patted the gelding's neck and removed one foot from his stirrup. He had started to swing off when another shot erupted from the hillside above. The bullet whistled by, only inches from his head, and struck bits of flint from a large boulder a few yards away.

Ricky screamed and reared, landed hard, and kicked out. The horse tucked his head low between his front knees, and his hind feet lashed out





high. Ben never regained his seat. Ricky's tremendous lunge threw him hard, and he landed next to the rock outcropping on a shallow wash of loose gravel and small boulders.

His heart hurt. The pain crept up his neck and down his arm, growing so intense that he groaned and gripped his chest. He sucked in a deep breath, gasped, and choked. A sharper pain somewhere in the region of his heart struck again, sending an agonizing ache all the way up to his jaw.

Somehow he managed to drag himself the few feet to the base of the rock-strewn bluff. He fumbled in his pocket and withdrew the leather pouch, shoving it under a small jumble of boulders and branches. Every breath hurt. He waited a moment, praying that the pain would pass. Fighting to finish his task, he piled small stones up in front of the shallow cleft where the gold lay. If the rider still waited, he'd find the spot, but if not, Alexia or Joe might discover the hiding place later.

The last rock dropped into place and Ben dragged himself away. No sense in someone finding him close by, if he did pass out or die. He managed to crawl twenty feet or so, when another fierce pain rocked him back on the sand. He uttered a deep groan and slid forward onto his belly, his face lying against the rough pebbles. A vision of Alex and her cheerful smile flashed across his mind before everything around him grew hazy and faded into darkness.

* * * * *

The man sheathed his rifle with a satisfied grunt. Travers had taken a hard fall, and after crawling a few feet, he hadn't moved. His body lay partially hidden, with only his legs in view. He'd like to put a bullet into the man's skull, but the presence of the law in the area stayed his hand. Too bad his bullet had missed, but it might be better this way. He'd best





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get away from this spot fast, before a passing miner came to investigate. If no one stopped by and Ben didn't get up, so much the better. He'd wait an hour or so and come by again to see what had transpired.







Chapter One

.....

Early July 1877

“He did what?” Alex couldn’t believe the banker’s words. “My father wouldn’t put me in that position. I’m sorry, Mr. Elton, but I have a hard time believing this.” She leaned against the straight-backed chair and crossed her arms, trying to keep the fear out of her voice.

The clink of coins at a teller’s window not far from the bank president’s desk sounded loud in the room. Only a short wall divided Clarence Elton’s private space from the foyer, and Alex saw the familiar faces of three townspeople doing business a few yards away. She dropped her voice, hating the idea that inquisitive ears might try to pry. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? Dad’s been gone almost three weeks.”

Heavy brows lowered over Clarence Elton’s eyes, a sharp contrast to the normally gentle expression on the older man’s face.

“I’m sorry, Alexia. I should’ve taken care of this right after his passing. I knew this would add to your grief, so I kept putting it off.” He leaned forward and propped his elbows on the top of the well-polished desk that served as his work space in the diminutive office at the back of the town’s only bank. “I witnessed his signature myself.”

Alex felt the blood rush to her cheeks and thought her high-necked dress might choke her.

Time. She needed time to absorb what she’d been told. Mr. Elton sat without speaking, the warm light in his faded blue eyes testifying to his sympathy.

Why would her father do this without her knowledge? “The ranch





has been doing well. We've been selling a steady stream of horses to the cavalry, and smaller lots are selling in the cities. Why would he mortgage the ranch?"

Mr. Elton steepled his fingers and rested his chin against their tips. "He'd planned a substantial increase of your stock. He told me he'd contracted for some fresh blood, as he put it. A Morgan stallion was to ship from Los Angeles, along with a few blooded mares. He didn't discuss his plans with you?"

Alex shook her head and frowned. "He didn't. Can I turn over the funds in our account and cancel the note?"

"I wish it were that simple—but there isn't enough to clear off the loan. He borrowed more than he needed for the horses. He asked for gold coins and planned to take them home until he decided what he needed. No money was found on his...er, I mean..." His face reddened and he dropped his gaze. "I'm sorry."

"I understand. I'll check his safe, office desk, and bureau drawers when I return to the ranch. I'll pay you as soon as I find the money. How long ago did he take out the note?"

"The day before his accident. Knowing Ben, I'm sure he would have put the gold in a secure place at home."

Alex gazed around the tidy bank, trying to take in all that she'd learned. The familiarity of the pine walls and polished floor brought some sense of normalcy but did little to quiet the tumult in her mind. She rose, shook out her skirt, and met his gaze.

"Let's hope so." She started to speak again, but her voice caught in her throat. She walked over to the window with her back toward Mr. Elton. Nothing made sense right now. This was wrong, all of it. Papa shouldn't be dead; he was only sixty-two. Why, he'd been as healthy as a wild mustang and had never been sick a day in his life.

She turned around and met Mr. Elton's eyes. "His horse arrived home





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a couple of hours after he left, and from what I've discovered, he never made it to town. It's possible he may have sent the wire to the people in Los Angeles the day before—in which case, I should find a receipt for the new stock. Either way, I'll see that the note is paid."

"It isn't due for a year. There's plenty of time to build your herd."

"Thanks, Mr. Elton, but I'd prefer to pay it now if the gold can be found."

Mr. Elton leaned his elbows on the desk and clasped his hands. "Martha's getting up in years," he observed, seemingly trying to lighten the mood. "How's she doing? She rarely makes it to church anymore, and I haven't seen her since your father's service. She's been with your family—what, about twelve years now?"

Alex nodded, and a smile touched her lips. "Since just after Mother's death. You'd never know she's seventy years old. She can work circles around me in the house and still find time to bake bread and pies. She doesn't do well sitting long spells in the buckboard, though, and when her back bothers her, she has devotions at home."

A wide smile brightened the banker's face. "Ah, yes. Martha's famous pies. What I wouldn't give for a slice of her Gravenstein apple pie right now?"

"You'll have to come out sometime. Papa would..."

Sudden realization hit so hard that she felt like a shod mule had kicked the wind right out of her lungs.

"I miss him," she whispered.

Mr. Elton probably did, as well. He and her father had been close friends, and the older man had spent a number of hours eating pie in their kitchen over the years. She turned away for a moment and then swung around, all trace of emotion wiped clean.

"I know as much about running the ranch as Papa did. I can make it succeed on my own."





Mr. Elton's bushy brows drew together, giving his normally serious face a more somber look. "It was one of your father's dearest wishes that you settle down with a young man from the area. It's not seemly for a young single woman to run a ranch and boss a crew of rough wranglers."

Alex frowned. Why did people always assume she wanted a husband? Had her mother lived, her softening influence might have tipped her toward more domestic tasks, but her father had trained her in every aspect of running the ranch. They'd spent hundreds of hours riding the hills and caring for the horses that supplied their livelihood. She'd idolized Papa and the other cowhands as a girl, and her constant interaction with the men only strengthened her desire to make a success of the ranch. She didn't need a husband to run it for her.

She felt a little guilty for glaring at the banker, but she didn't much care. "And exactly who am I supposed to marry?"

A smile tugged at the corners of Mr. Elton's mouth. "There's Charlie Danson on your neighboring property—his father has a prosperous gold mine—and Walter Sloan's been sweet on you since you wore short skirts. Both are good, hardworking young men who'd be proud to court you."

Alex took two strides toward her chair and flopped into it. "Charlie can barely stay on a horse, and Walter is a big baby. Do you know that when we were in the second grade I showed him a snake, and he almost fainted?"

A small chuckle escaped Mr. Elton's lips and he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Sorry, my dear. I can't imagine what I was thinking. But I'm sure if you take some time and study on it, you'll find there's at least one eligible man in the area that might suit you. I've certainly heard of several who think they're in love with you." The twinkle in his eyes was unmistakable and served to irritate Alex even more.

"This is not funny, Mr. Elton."





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“Of course not. I apologize. I realize it’s a serious matter.” He sank back into his chair and sobered. “You have a year to settle the note, even if you don’t find the gold. You might check with Rob at the telegraph office and see if anything came in about the horses’ arrival.”

“I’ll do that. I’d better be going.”

“One more thing.” He held up a hand. “Your cousin Carter Foster stopped in not long after your father’s passing. He indicated an interest in purchasing your ranch, should you have any trouble making it succeed.”

“Carter Foster?” She cocked her head to one side. “He’s not my cousin, you know. He’s barely related by marriage. Besides, I have no desire to sell.”

“Of course you’re under no obligation, but I thought you should know.”

She nodded, pushed her chair back, and stood. “I need to check on that gold and try to get this mortgage off my back. Thank you for your kindness, Mr. Elton. Please come out to the ranch anytime. We’d love to have you.”

He leaned his knuckles on the desk and pushed himself to his feet, a small grunt escaping his lips. “Thank you, my dear. I’ll do that.”

* * * * *

Alex stepped out of the small wood structure and shielded her eyes against the glare of the early summer sun. Somehow the sights and smells of Last Chance seemed different after hearing Clarence Elton’s tidings. No longer did the view of the magnificent pines and cedars dotting the landscape make her heart swell with joy or the green of the trees remind her of childhood days racing through the woods on her pony. Today they only brought a sense of loneliness and isolation. She looked across the canyon separating the distant Deadwood Ridge from their little town. Long, hard toil was required to reach the nearest settlement by wagon,





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and she hadn't been out of Last Chance for more than a year. With her father gone and Uncle Joe's health failing, she doubted she'd see the sites of a large town any time soon.

Not that she hadn't loved the years she'd spent here—Last Chance was her home. But life was a constant struggle for most of its one hundred or so inhabitants. The town's survival depended on the productivity of the half dozen mines dotting the landscape within a mile or two of town, and it was rare to see a wagon roll into the area. Mule teams brought most of the goods, and Alex doubted that a stagecoach or train would ever wend its way up the steep, forested canyon walls or along the dense ridge tops. Last Chance was truly the end of the trail in more ways than one.

Her childhood had been happy, tagging after her father while pretending to be a wrangler. Friends hadn't come easily, and many of the other children viewed her as arrogant or stuck-up. Many a day she'd gone home to her mother, and later to Martha, crying over mistreatment by the other girls. She'd eventually learned to ignore teasing, turning an uncaring ear to those who didn't understand.

While her mother had taught her manners, Alex had always preferred riding a horse or helping birth a new foal to attending a church social. Time hadn't altered that desire, and her current lack of friends among the female population of Last Chance proved that little had changed.

Except for Elizabeth Anders, her best friend these past couple of years. Alex still had a hard time believing that the tall, elegant brunette who'd arrived by mule team to help run her ailing uncle's dry goods store had befriended her. The men coming in from the mining claims were smitten with the green-eyed beauty, and a few of the women had been catty at first. But Elizabeth's sweet, accepting nature swayed public opinion and produced a grudging acceptance among the women, which soon turned to respect and even admiration.





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If only she had time for a quick cup of tea with Elizabeth before heading back to the ranch. She sorely needed someone to talk to, but the urgency of her errand pressed her forward. A gray-striped cat raced out the door of the nearby mercantile, apparently relinquishing his mousing duty at Ike's general store. Loud laughter and tin-panny music drifted through the open door of the saloon at the end of the street.

Alex shaded her eyes and stared at the distant figure who'd appeared on the walk outside the saloon. It looked like one of her wranglers. She shook her head—the men knew the saloon was off-limits during the day. Her father hadn't tolerated his hands drinking during work hours. In fact, he'd had very little sympathy for that behavior at any time of the day or night.

Alex stepped off the boardwalk and headed toward the man, but he swung the opposite direction and disappeared around a corner. Following a strange man into an alley didn't appeal to her at the moment. Instead, she turned and directed her steps to the minuscule clapboard telegraph office across the street.

The dark-clad figure of a portly, middle-aged man emerged from the office and surged toward her. Parson Moser smiled and raised his hat as he approached. "Alexia, how are you today? Haven't seen you at church recently. We've missed you."

Unlike some preachers whom Last Chance had tolerated in the distant past, Bill Moser was the genuine article. He lived what he preached, and he cared for his flock as if they were his own children. The warmth he exuded drew Alex a little closer to God, but a few gossiping women in his congregation caused her to steer clear of attending church on a regular basis. They didn't approve of her lifestyle or the freedom her father had granted her.

She slowed near the edge of the boardwalk a few feet from the telegraph office and smiled. "Thank you, Pastor, I'm doing well. I'm on an errand, or I'd love to chat."





He patted her arm. “That’s fine, my dear. You’ve been on my heart lately. Anytime you need to talk, my door is open.”

“Thank you. I might stop by sometime soon—and I’ll try to make it to church a bit more regular. Business at the ranch has been pressing since Papa passed.”

“I understand, but that’s even more reason why you need your church family.” He patted her arm one more time and smiled before moving away.

Alex watched the ambling form. Did he truly not see what some of the women put her through with their petty comments, or did he simply choose to believe the best of everyone? Was there something deeper to the man’s belief in God and mankind than she understood? She shook her head and stepped over the threshold of the tiny one-room shack that served as the telegraph office. Better get her mind back on business.

Rob Bartlett raised watery hazel eyes from the paper lying on his rough-hewn table and smiled. “How can I help you, Miss Travers?”

One step took Alex to the front edge of the table. A rumbling wagon passed by the open door, and dust rolled into the tiny enclosure.

“Aaa-choo!” Alex pulled a hanky from her pocket, covered her mouth, and sneezed again.

“Bless you. Feel free to pull the door to, if you’d like. It gets a mite dusty in here so close to the street. Guess I’ve gotten used to it.” Bartlett waved a hand in the air, but his red-rimmed eyes testified to the truth of his statement.

“That’s all right, I won’t be long. I need some information, if you’d be so kind.”

He sat up straighter, and his toothy smile lit up his homely face. “Certainly. Anything.”

“Do you know if my father sent a wire to Los Angeles about purchasing a stallion and mares?”





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“Yes, I recall that he did.”

“And did he wire instructions to the seller about payment?”

“Hmm...” He stroked the stubble on his narrow chin and looked up at the board-covered ceiling. “Let me think. Ah—I remember.” He smacked the palms of his hands together. “He planned on sending the money later. The buyer said he could wire the funds when it suited him. Guess they’d done business before and the man trusted him.”

“So he didn’t come back?” She leaned a trembling hand on the table and willed her voice to remain calm.

“Nope. Shore didn’t. In fact, I believe it was the day before he...” He cleared his throat and dropped his gaze.

“He died. Yes. I know. You’ve been most helpful, Rob.”

His head jerked up and his Adam’s apple bobbed. “Thank you, Miss Alex. Wish I could’a helped more.”

Alex mustered a smile and stepped from the room, clear on one thing. She had to get home and talk to Martha and Uncle Joe, her two oldest and best friends. Maybe they could help cast some light on her darkening world.



