

Take a Chance on Me

Jill Mansell

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Extract

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Jill
Mansell

take a chance on me

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Chapter 1

‘Come on, come on, late as usual.’ Waiting in the porch, Ash Parry-Jones tapped his watch as Cleo and Will hurried up the gravelled path. ‘Better get in there and grab a seat. Place is filling up fast.’

Like it was an Elton John concert or something. Cleo paused to straighten Ash’s wonky yellow-and-grey striped tie. ‘Don’t nag. And I can’t believe you’re wearing this shirt.’

He looked offended. ‘Who are you insulting?’

‘You.’ She gave his collar an affectionate tweak. ‘Stripes and swirls don’t go.’

They found somewhere to sit in a pew on the left-hand side of the church. As the organ music played and Will studied the order of service, Cleo composed herself. Of course it was a sad occasion – it was the end of a life, after all – but as funerals went, it had to be one of the cheerier ones she’d attended.

Then again, as deaths went, Lawrence LaVenture’s had been better than most. It may even count as enviable. As Lawrence himself had been fond of remarking, the family name was derived from the French word for ‘lucky’ or ‘fortunate’, and he’d taken enormous pleasure in living up to it. And what rakish 73-year-old widower, given the choice, wouldn’t want to go as he had gone,

following a sublime meal and a bottle of delicious Saint-Émilion, in bed with an attractive brunette many, *many* years younger than himself?

Mind you, it had given the poor woman he'd hired for the evening a bit of a shock. One minute they'd been having a high old time together, getting up to all sorts of naughtiness. The next, she'd come back into the bedroom carrying the bottle of cognac and two glasses Lawrence had asked her to bring upstairs and there he'd been, collapsed back against the goose-down pillows, stone dead.

Peering around the church, Cleo whispered, 'Do you think she'll turn up?'

'Who?'

'The woman who was with him when he died!' Who had actually, *technically*, killed him, when you thought about it. 'I want to know what she looks like.'

'She'll be the one in the black leather basque,' Will murmured. 'Stockings, suspenders, spike-heeled stilettos . . .'

Cleo dug him in the ribs then slipped her arm through his, grateful to him for having come along. Will had never met Lawrence LaVenture but she'd wanted him with her today and he'd obligingly taken the afternoon off work. He even knew why she'd asked him and hadn't laughed, for which she was grateful. Meeting Will Newman in a nightclub three months ago had definitely been one of the happier accidents in her life. She'd been nudged from behind in a crowded bar in Bath, her drink had splashed over his sleeve, they'd got chatting as a result . . . and what a result it had turned out to be. Will was handsome and charming, hard-working and intelligent . . . basically, he was perfect in every way. Her Mr Right had finally come along and she couldn't have been happier about it.

‘Could be her.’ Pointing helpfully to a roly-poly woman in her sixties, squeezing into an already full pew across the aisle, Will said, ‘There’s a high-class hooker if ever I saw one.’

‘That’s Effie Farnham from Corner Cottage.’

‘There’s a studded leather whip hanging out of her handbag.’

‘She breeds Cairn terriers. It’s a dog’s lead.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Trust me, Effie’s not the whippy kind.’

‘You never know. Under that coat she could be wearing something completely outrageous.’

OK, this definitely came under the heading of Too Much Information. Thankfully, before Cleo could start picturing Effie in a tasselled thong, distraction was provided by the arrival of Lawrence’s family. Well, such as it was. She held her breath and watched as the three of them made their way up the aisle, two ancient, creaking older sisters swathed in politically incorrect fur and supported by silver-topped ebony canes. And between them, matching his pace to theirs, Johnny LaVenture.

He was looking smarter than usual in a dark suit and with his habitually wayward black hair combed back from his forehead. For a split second he glanced to the left and their eyes met, prompting a Pavlovian jolt of resentment in her chest. She couldn’t help it; old habits died hard. Then Johnny looked away, carried on past and took his place between his ancient aunts in the front pew.

Cleo bent her head. OK, don’t think about him now. Just concentrate on the funeral. Lawrence might have been an off-the-wall character, fond of a drink and, well, various other lusty pastimes, but he’d been entertaining to have around. They were here to celebrate a life well lived.

After the service, everyone huddled up against the icy wind

and made their way across the village green to the Hollybush Inn where food had been laid on and the drinks were free, as stipulated in Lawrence's last will and testament. For so many years a cornerstone of the pub, he knew how to guarantee a good turn-out.

Ash, catching up with Cleo and Will, rubbed his hands together and said cheerfully, 'All went off pretty well, then. I really enjoyed that, didn't you?'

And *still* he was managing to make it sound like an Elton John concert. Cleo said, 'You're not supposed to enjoy funerals. Next you'll be giving it five stars on Amazon.'

'Actually, that's not a bad idea. We could do it on the show, get the listeners to call in with reviews of their favourite—'

'No you couldn't. That's just wrong. Oh God, look at my *heels*.' As they reached the entrance to the pub, Cleo leaned against one of the outdoor tables and used a tissue to clean away the clumps of mud and grass. 'Did you see me sinking into the ground while we were standing around the grave? I thought I was going to tip over and fall flat on my back.'

'That's why I didn't wear mine.' Ash nodded sympathetically. 'You know, you're looking good today. Scrubbed up well. Even if you don't deserve a compliment when you think of all the grief you give me.'

'It's not grief. It's constructive criticism. Which you badly need, by the way.' Having more or less cleaned her heels, Cleo lobbed the muddy tissue into the bin and adjusted her narrow cream skirt. Of course she was looking good; hadn't she put in a whole heap of extra effort making sure of it? But that was pride for you. It was also the reason she'd dragged Will along for the occasion. When you'd spent your teenage years being mercilessly teased and humiliated, you didn't want to turn up to meet your tormentor

looking like a . . . a *donkey*. You felt compelled to prove to them that you weren't still a complete loser, not to mention capable these days of bagging yourself the kind of boyfriend any girl would be thrilled to, well, bag.

And here he was, standing just inside the entrance to the pub, greeting everyone as they came in and gravely receiving condolences in return. Oh well, on an occasion like this at least he wouldn't call her—

'Hello, Misa.' Dark eyes glinting with amusement, Johnny gave her hand a cross between a shake and a squeeze. He may even have been about to lean forward and plant a polite kiss on her cheek but she pulled back before that could happen.

I can't believe he just called me that.

'Hello, Johnny. I'm sorry about your dad. We'll all miss him.'

'Thanks. I guess this village is going to be a quieter place from now on.' His gaze flickered over her and the smile broadened. 'You're looking very well.'

Damn right I am. Turning to indicate Will, Cleo said, 'This is my boyfriend, Will Newman.'

'I'm so sorry for your loss,' Will said politely as they shook hands.

'Thank you. So, Misa, gone and got yourself a new man. Excellent.' Evidently pleased with his play on words, Johnny said, 'From what I hear, the old ones haven't been much cop.'

See what a nightmare he was? Cleo quelled the urge to retaliate with something cutting; it would hardly be seemly, after all. Plus, dammit, she couldn't think of anything fast enough. Instead she turned away. When they were safely out of earshot, Will said, 'I see what you mean. Why does he call you Misa?'

All the old emotions were rushing back. Only someone whose teenage years had been similarly blighted could possibly understand how it felt to have been picked on non-stop.

‘Oh, it’s a hilarious nickname. I used to work hard at school, pay attention in class, ask loads of questions, answer them too. One day I was so excited about knowing the answer to a really difficult question that I stuck my hand up and yelled, “Me, sir!” Well, everyone practically wet themselves laughing. And that was it, I was stuck with it for the next three years of school. I was officially Teacher’s Pet. Some of the other kids thought my name actually *was* Misa.’

‘And he’s still calling you it, all these years later.’ Will jerked his head in Johnny’s direction.

‘He was the one who came up with it in the first place.’ Cleo cringed at the memory. It went without saying that she had never once put her hand up in class for the rest of her time at school, had stopped asking questions and paying attention to the answers. OK, maybe she couldn’t blame everything on Johnny LaVenture, but he certainly hadn’t helped. Her teenage hormones had been all over the place, she had fallen in with a wilder group of girls and her grades had slipped badly as a result. When her GCSEs had been a complete car crash, she’d felt an almost perverse sense of pride at their awfulness. *See, look at me, look at these abysmal grades! Here’s the proof that I’m not a teacher’s pet any more!*

‘Poor baby.’ Rubbing her shoulder in jokey consolation, Will said, ‘Want me to beat him up for you?’

‘Yes please. Except you’d better not. It’s his dad’s funeral, after all.’ Plus, although Cleo didn’t say this bit out loud, Johnny was bigger than him and had always been pretty athletic. It would be frankly embarrassing if he were to reduce Will to a slushy pulp. Still, it was generous of Will to have offered.

An hour and a couple of drinks later, the party had begun to warm up; everyone had begun to relax and Cleo’s skin had stopped prickling every time she glanced over at her nemesis. Was it stupid

to still feel like this? Maybe, but she couldn't help herself. It was thirteen years since they'd been at school together. She had left at sixteen and plunged into the first of many jobs. Johnny had stayed on to take his A-levels – ha! *Now* who was the swotty teacher's pet? – before heading off to art school. After that he'd moved to New York, returning only occasionally to Channings Hill to visit his father, although Lawrence had evidently kept him updated on the subject of her less-than-dazzling successes on the boyfriend front. You'd have been more likely to spot Elvis around the village than Johnny in those days. Meanwhile, through a combination of hard work and socialising in all the right places, he had begun to make a real name for himself with his wire-constructed sculptures. When it came to the luck of the LaVentures, he'd inherited his share too. As time went by, the sculptures grew and so did Johnny's reputation, culminating in an exhibition during which every last one of the larger-than-life-size pieces had been snapped up by the billionaire owner of a chain of casinos. Overnight, Johnny became a recognised name, a celebrity in his own right with a stunning supermodel girlfriend to match. And Cleo, reading about his star-studded lifestyle in magazines, discovered a level of resentment she'd had no idea she was capable of experiencing, because it was all just so completely and utterly unfair. If a nice person experienced something wonderful, you were delighted for them and rejoiced in their success. But for all this to have happened to someone who so profoundly *didn't* deserve it . . . well, where was the fairness in that?

Will checked his watch and said apologetically, 'I have to go.'

'Of course you do. Thanks for coming.' He had a work meeting in Bristol to get back to, followed by a squash tournament this evening. Cleo hugged him, kissed him quickly on the mouth and said, 'I'll see you on Friday.'

‘Can’t wait. Will you be all right here?’

‘I’ll be fine. I’ve got my big sister to look after me.’ Abbie, fifteen years older and light years more sensible, was over by the bar chatting to some neighbours.

‘Well, make sure she does. No pole dancing,’ said Will. ‘No chatting up handsome men.’ He indicated a couple of whiskery ancient farmers huddled over their pints in the corner.

‘Good luck with the squash competition.’ Cleo gave him another kiss.

‘Thanks. I’ll be over after work on Friday.’ Wiggling his fingers at her as he moved towards the door, Will said, ‘Bye.’

‘Or I could come to you,’ Cleo offered, ‘if it’s easier.’

‘Hmm, you know what? I think I’d rather stay at your place.’ He smiled and pulled a you-know-why face; the two friends with whom he shared an untidy flat in Redland were the boisterous, heavy drinking, perpetually-up-for-a-laugh types whose presence wasn’t exactly conducive to a romantic atmosphere. Will, reluctant to subject her to their ribald remarks, had explained that it wouldn’t matter so much if she were just a casual one-off fling, but she wasn’t, she was way more important than that.

Hearing this had caused Cleo’s heart to expand with hope. Crikey, just imagine where she and Will might be in a year’s time. She watched him leave and exhaled happily. Will Newman. Cleo Newman. He really could be The One.

Then her skin started prickling again and a voice behind her said, ‘So that’s the boyfriend, is it, Misa?’

Chapter 2

Was her blood actually *physically* heating up or did it just feel that way? Cleo kept herself under control and nodded. No need to react and give Johnny the kick of knowing the effect he had on her; she was *so* much better than that.

‘And now he’s run off and left you?’

‘He had to get back to work for an important meeting. He has a very responsible job.’

‘He does? Good for him.’ Johnny sounded amused.

How did he manage to make even those few words sound as if he was taking the mickey? Cleo marvelled at his talent. Logically she might know her own lack of further education wasn’t his fault, but deep down inside, it still kind of felt that way. She loved her job at Henleaze Limos, but who knew, if her schooldays hadn’t been blighted, she might have gone on to do anything. The sky could have been the limit . . . she could have become, God, an astrophysicist!

Well, she *might* have wanted to be an astrophysicist. Whatever that involved. Physics, presumably, mixed with . . . possibly . . . Astroturf.

‘So is this Will New-Man the love of your life?’

See? Even now he was making fun of Will's surname. How would he like it if she called him Lahhhh-Venture?

Instead, taking the moral high ground, she said easily, 'Maybe. It's all going very well at the moment. How about you?'

Johnny grinned and pulled a face. 'Not so great. Temperamental creatures, women. They can be pretty hard work.'

They. Just to let her know how popular he was, subject to the attentions of hordes of besotted females. Cleo smiled politely, registering lack of interest, and said, 'What's going to happen to Ravenswood?'

'Sell it, I suppose. If I can.' Johnny shook his head. 'Just stick it on the market, asap. Not the ideal time, of course, but you never know. Someone might come along and see the potential. And it'd be great if we could find a buyer before Christmas. There's an opportunity to bag the apartment below mine if we can get a quick sale. I could turn it into a fantastic gallery.' He stopped and looked at her. 'Why are you asking? Might you and your chap be interested in putting in an offer?'

Oh yes, that was *so* on the cards, what with Ravenswood being a seven-bedroomed detached house with a garden bigger than a football pitch. Although when it was that size you didn't call it a garden, it was referred to as *the grounds*.

'I could mention it to Will.' And start buying extra Lotto tickets. 'How much will you be asking?'

He shrugged. 'I've got a couple of estate agents coming over tomorrow to look the place over and come up with a valuation. I'm pretty out of touch, but somewhere around two and a half, at a guess.'

Two and a half million pounds. Cleo envisaged the number, all those noughts rolling across the paper if you were to write it down. Did Johnny have any idea what an inconceivably huge

amount of money that was? And the casual way he said it, as if it were completely *normal* . . .

Ah well, maybe she and Will would give it a miss after all. 'Well, good luck. I'll leave you to get on.'

As she made to move away, he said, 'This chap of yours. Does he work in private health insurance?'

'What? No! Why?'

'Just curious.' A smile lifted the corners of Johnny's mouth. 'He just looks as if he might, that's all.'

Ooooooh . . .

'Oh dear, look at you.' Abbie greeted her sympathetically. 'I saw you talking to Johnny. Been getting under your skin, has he? Here, have a sip of my Malibu.'

Cleo could always rely on her sister to make her feel better. Abbie was looking lovely today, her fine honey-blonde hair falling in waves to her shoulders and her gentle face glowing, thanks to the subtle application of make-up she generally didn't wear but liked to save 'for best'.

Then again, sisterly sympathy only went so far. 'I've got a better idea. Why don't I have my own drink? Seeing as Lawrence is paying. Which means Johnny is. In fact, let's make it a great big one. Dry white, please.' Cleo signalled to Deborah behind the bar. 'Lovely, thanks. Honestly, he doesn't change, does he?' She knocked back some much-needed wine. 'Two and a half million pounds he's going to be asking for his dad's house. He wondered if Will and I might like to make him an offer. And he's keen to get it sorted before Christmas because he wants to buy another apartment in New York and turn it into a gallery. I mean, does he even *care* that Lawrence has just died? As far as he's concerned, it's a nice little windfall coming along at just the right time . . . God, it's enough to make you *spit*.'

‘Is this a diatribe?’ Tom, Abbie’s husband, looked pleased with himself. ‘Ha, there’s a word I’ve never used before. But it is, isn’t it? Definitely sounds like a diatribe to me.’

Cleo smiled, because Tom was looking so smart in his dark funeral suit and a bright blue shirt that matched his sparkling eyes. It always seemed strange to see him out of his work clothes of dusty polo shirt and jeans. Even his short brown hair had been given a trim in honour of Lawrence’s funeral. ‘Oh yes, it’s a diatribe. Some people just deserve one.’ She nodded and took another glug of wine.

‘But you liked him once,’ said Tom.

‘What?’ Cleo froze. ‘No I didn’t!’

‘You must have done. If you didn’t fancy him, why would you have said yes when he asked you out?’

Oh, for crying out loud. To his left, Abbie was suddenly engrossed in a loose thread on her bronze shirt. Her heart beginning to thud in double time, Cleo said, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

Tom was actually laughing now, wagging a finger at her. ‘Come on, I know it was a while back, but you still did it. Johnny LaVenture asked you out at the school disco and you agreed, then— *hey*, mind my drink!’

‘Tom.’ Abbie, who had given him a nudge, shot him a warning look. ‘Shut *up*.’

Staring at them open-mouthed, Cleo said slowly, ‘Oh my God, you *know* about that? *Both* of you know?’

It was her deepest, darkest, most shameful adolescent secret. All these years she’d kept it buried, telling herself that, OK, she’d made an almighty fool of herself but at least her family didn’t know.

Except . . . she looked from Abbie to Tom, then back again . . . it rather looked as if they did.

‘Honestly, you’re such a blabbermouth,’ Abbie scolded.

‘Hey, it was years ago.’ Tom’s grin spread across his face as Ash approached them. ‘What does it matter now?’

‘What are we talking about?’ Ash, whose nosiness knew no bounds, looked interested.

Cleo blurted out, ‘Don’t tell him!’

‘The time Johnny LaVenture told Cleo he was crazy about her and she agreed to go out with him.’

Brilliant, thanks a lot.

‘Oh yeah, at the school’s end-of-term disco.’ Ash nodded solemnly.

Right, that was it. Ash had only moved into the village three years ago. Facing him, Cleo’s voice rose. ‘Does *everyone* know about this?’

‘Well, yes. Although I thought it was supposed to be a secret. You weren’t meant to *know* that we know.’

Cleo swallowed. What had taken place had been enough to mentally scar a girl for life. In fact, she was fairly sure it *had* mentally scarred her for life. She’d gone along to the end-of-year disco with no expectations other than drinking a few alcohol-free shandies, dancing with her friends and having a fun time. When Johnny LaVenture had come up to her and asked to speak to her outside, she had initially refused, but he’d practically begged until curiosity had got the better of her and she’d eventually given in. Then, once they were outside, Johnny had haltingly confessed his true feelings for her. He’d only teased her so much, it transpired, to cover up the fact that he really liked her, but now he could no longer hide how he really felt. And as he’d been telling her this, his beautiful dark eyes had gazed beseechingly into hers, his trembling hands had stroked her shoulders. Cleo, hypnotised by the declaration and scarcely able to take it in, had leaned back against the rough exterior wall of the girls’ changing rooms and

been unbelievably moved by the admission; he must have been plucking up the courage to say this for months.

Then Johnny had falteringly asked her out on a date the following week and although she didn't really want to go out with him, she'd known she couldn't refuse. It would shatter his confidence. Sixteen-year-old boys had easily bruised egos, it would be too cruel to turn him down . . . just one trip to the cinema, then she'd gently suggest that they'd be better off as platonic friends . . .

So she'd smiled up at Johnny and said yes, of course she'd go out with him, and at the back of her mind she had also taken great satisfaction in the knowledge that, *ha*, all the bitchy girls who'd sided with him and called her Misa would have to be nice to her now.

It had been a heady moment, the kind of turnaround any downtrodden sixteen-year-old could only dream about, but it had actually happened and it felt . . . God, it felt fantastic! Not only was everything going to be all right from now on, but she hadn't retaliated, poked fun at him *when she could so easily have done*, or said something mean. And now he looked as if he was about to kiss her. Well, one little kiss wouldn't hurt, would it? To be honest, she could use the practice. Tilting her face up to his, Cleo closed her eyes, encouragingly puckered her lips and waited for—

A snort of laughter directly above her head *wasn't* what she'd been waiting for, but it was what she heard. Followed by a chorus of muffled giggles, a scuffling noise and the kind of clattering sound you'd get if someone standing precariously on the loo in the cubicle below the open window had just lost their footing and fallen off.

Someone was eavesdropping. Several someones, from the sound of it. This was what the girls in her year were like. Not what you'd call mature. Still, did it really matter if they'd overheard? Putting

out a hand to reassure Johnny, Cleo said, 'It's all right, don't worry about them,' and wondered why he wasn't looking at her any more.

The giggles turned to shrieks of hysterical laughter and the head of Mandy Ellison poked through the open window. Crowing with delight, she opened her horrible big mouth and yelled, 'Ha ha, I can't believe she fell for it, you were brilliant!'

Bewildered, Cleo turned to Johnny. 'What does that mean?'

Half smiling and backing away, Johnny said, 'Sorry, she bet me a fiver I couldn't do it.'

Everyone was scrambling up on to the loo seats now; along the row of windows, more heads popped out. Everyone was laughing harder and harder. As the realisation sank in that she'd been well and truly set up, colour flooded Cleo's cheeks.

Johnny shrugged and raised his hands, absolving himself from blame. 'I never thought you'd say yes.'

She was torn between wanting the ground to swallow her up and an overwhelming longing to burst into tears. 'I only said it because I felt sorry for you!'

'Ha ha ha ha ha! Yeah, of course you did,' jeered Mandy Ellison.

'It's *true*. I don't fancy him!'

'But you seriously thought he fancied you,' Mandy sniggered. 'Like that's ever going to happen, *Misa*. Ha, you've just given us the best laugh we've had in months. And all for a fiver.' As she said it, she grinned at Johnny. '*Bargain*.'

By the time Cleo's dad had arrived to drive her home, she'd been hanging around outside the school for over an hour. Inside, the disco was about to end.

'All right, love? Didn't expect to find you out here waiting for me. Had a good night, have you?'

How could she tell him? The last thing she wanted was her

family feeling sorry for her. 'Not bad.' Buttoning up the hurt and humiliation, she said offhandedly, 'Got a bit boring towards the end.'

'Oh, that's a shame.' Her dad gave her a teasing nudge. 'But did you dance with any boys?'

'There wasn't anyone I wanted to dance with. They're just a bunch of losers,' said Cleo.

Now, here in the front bar of the Hollybush, the shame was every bit as acute as it had been all those years ago.

Cleo looked at Ash, Tom and Abbie. She said, 'Who told you?'

Ash shrugged and pointed at Abbie. 'You told me, didn't you? A couple of years back.'

'Tom told me,' said Abbie, 'straight after it happened.'

'Honestly, why do I have to get the blame for everything? Everyone was having a laugh about it in the pub the day after the disco,' Tom protested. 'Stuart Ellison told us about it. His sister Mandy was there when Johnny did it. It was just a bit of fun.'

Cleo resisted the urge to rip every last freshly trimmed hair from Tom's head. So all this time she'd been the laughing stock of the entire village. And like one of those well-kept secrets you never imagine could actually be kept secret, she'd had no idea.

What's more – talk about adding insult to injury – the chances were that if you were to ask him about it now, Johnny himself probably wouldn't even remember that evening at the school disco when he'd earned himself the easiest fiver of his life.