

Last Chance Hero
Excerpt

Chapter One

Wednesdays were slow at the Last Chance Around Antique Mall. So Sabina Grey was alone. She sat behind the checkout counter surfing the Internet while the morning sun slanted through the front windows of what once had been a Woolworth five-and-ten-cent store.

Sabina was using this rare moment of inaction to daydream about the grand European tour she planned to take one day. She was flipping through images of the Parthenon and thinking of handsome, dark-eyed Greek men.

“Hey there.” The voice wobbled like an ancient phonograph recording.

Sabina looked up with a start to find Miriam Randall blinking at her through her thick trifocals. Miz Miriam had to be eighty-five and, bless her heart, she was starting to lose her mind. Today she was wearing a house dress that might have been a nightgown or a robe. Her white hair looked a little lopsided, as if she’d had trouble putting it up in the crown braids she always wore.

“Hey, Miz Miriam, what brings you to Last Chance Around this morning?” Sabina stood up behind the point-of-sale counter to get a better look at the old woman. Oh, good Lord, Miriam was wearing a pair of bedroom slippers. Had she walked all the way into town dressed like that?

This wasn't good. Sabina picked up her cell phone and started punching in the numbers for Miriam's niece, Savannah. But before she could finish, Miriam leaned both elbows on the counter. "Honey, I need to talk with you."

Sabina's insides went all weightless like they did on the first dip of the big roller coaster at Six Flags Over Georgia. "You want to talk to me? What about?"

"What do you think it's about? I have some advice for you."

Advice? Oh, boy. This was unexpected. Before she started losing her mind, Miriam Randall had been Allenberg County's premier matchmaker. Not that Miriam actually matched people up. She was really more of a soothsayer or something. She would hand out vague advice, like the kind in fortune cookies. And dang if her advice always turned out to be true.

So if you were single and pining away for love, it was a red letter day when Miz Miriam darkened your door. "I, uh, well, I'm surprised." Sabina's breath chose that moment to go on vacation. Too bad the rest of her couldn't tag along.

"You didn't think you were going to end up a spinster, did you?"

"Well..." In fact she was kind of starting to worry about that.

Which was truly sad, since her high school had voted her the girl most likely to require a shotgun wedding. An honor that was not really true then, but definitely out of the question now.

Events had changed the silly, boy-crazy girl she'd once been. And while she'd been maturing, all the eligible bachelors in her age group had gotten married or moved away. So the soulmate pickings in Allenberg County were slim at best, that was for sure.

Besides, her activities with the Altar Guild, the book club, the Chamber of Commerce, and the new Discover Last Chance Association didn't give her much time for romance.

Miz Miriam spoke again in a voice as ancient as faded parchment. "I declare, you young people are so impatient. Well, you listen up now. I came over here to tell you that your soulmate will arrive just as soon as you set your mind to helping your sister tie the knot."

Well, that was sort of a letdown. For one glorious moment, Sabina had thought this visit was about her. But of course it made total sense that Miz Miriam would consult her about Lucy.

And yet, unwanted envy pricked Sabina like a lance. "Miz Miriam, I do appreciate this advice. You've made my day." The stiff, brittle words felt sour in Sabina's mouth.

"I have?" The old lady's white brows arched. "I would have thought you'd be annoyed with me, since I'm asking you to think about someone else."

Sabina's composure crumbled. How could anyone accuse her of not caring about Lucy? "I love my sister, Miz Miriam. I would do anything for her."

"If you love her, girl, then get out of her way. Let her discover the truth."

"The truth?"

The old woman gave her a stare so penetrating, it probably could have pierced the vault at Fort Knox. It was hard to believe that Miriam's mind (or eyesight) was going when her look was so keen. "Yes, the truth. You don't ask a fish about the water, do you?"

"Huh?"

“You know, a fish doesn’t see the water. It’s right there in front of his eyeballs. It’s the God’s honest truth that people never notice what’s right in front of their faces. Your sister is like that. And I think you’re part of the problem.”

“I am? How?”

Just then Momma came striding through the front doors, dressed in her usual shabby chic ensemble composed of a hand-sewn flowered skirt, a sleeveless jean jacket, and a vintage lace blouse. Momma also wore a pair of blinged-out cowboy boots she’d picked up in San Antonio last year on one of Daddy’s business trips. Momma was trying hard not to grow old.

“Oh, hey, Miz Miriam. What brings you to Last Chance Around?” Momma’s high-pitched voice sounded as young as she wished she still was.

“I came to give your daughter advice.”

Momma lit up like the Vegas Strip at midnight. “You did? How wonderful.”

“Well, maybe not.” Miriam turned and gave Sabina another pointed look. “You need to give your sister space, you hear?”

“Space?” Momma blinked in befuddlement.

“That’s what I said, isn’t it? I always say what I mean.”

That was a debatable point, but Sabina was not about to get into an argument with Miriam Randall. Not when she was delivering marital advice.

But Momma had been waiting a long, long time for Miriam to darken one of her daughters’ doors. So as usual, Momma blundered ahead like a blind horse. “What did you tell her, Miriam?”

“I told her that she needed to make sure of her sister’s happiness before she can ever find her own.”

“Well, that’s good news, isn’t it?”

Before Miriam could say another word, Dash Randall came striding into the store.

“Aunt Mim, what are you doing here in your house dress?” he asked.

Miz Miriam pulled herself up straight. “I had urgent business here.”

Dash cast his gaze from Sabina to Momma and back again. “Morning, ladies. I think I should caution you that Aunt Mim hasn’t been herself the last few days.”

He gave them both a charming, lopsided grin and then gently took his aunt’s arm.

“Come on, now. You need to get dressed for the senior center, and then there’s the Purly Girls meeting later.”

“I was helping them, Dash.”

“I know, Aunt Mim.” He nodded then looked up at Momma and Sabina. He gave them a little wink and a shrug.

And with that, Dash guided Miz Miriam out of the antiques mall.

“Well, isn’t that something?” Momma said, looking after them with a glance that had gone all wistful. “Honey, we need to put our heads together and figure out a way to get Ross off his lazy backside. What in the name of all creation is he waiting for? Maybe I should tell him he’s standing in the way of your happiness.”

“Oh good Lord, Momma, I don’t think that’s a good plan. You heard Dash. Miriam hasn’t been herself lately. I think we should keep what just happened here to ourselves. I don’t think it means one thing.”

“You don’t? Well I have more faith in Miriam Randall than you do, I guess. I want my girls to be happy. And right now I’m sick to death of the way Ross has been dragging his heels. He needs to propose to Lucy. Sooner rather than later. And Miriam has just given us the leverage we need.”

Momma turned and headed toward the door. “Don’t you worry now, honey. I’m going to talk to Elsie, and we’ll figure out a way to light a fire under Ross.”

Oh, no. This was bad. Very bad. Sabina didn’t want Ross to think that he stood between her and happiness. It was embarrassing. Once a million years ago—before the fire that had scarred Lucy—Sabina had been the Davis High Homecoming Queen. She could have had her pick.

But she didn’t want Ross thinking she was desperate. And she didn’t want to be used as leverage against him, either.

“Momma, don’t you dare tell the Altar Guild about this,” Sabina said. “You tell Elsie Campbell what happened here this morning and the whole town will know about it before nightfall. You can’t do that to Ross and Lucy.” Not to mention herself. She was going to look pathetic, which was actually kind of true.

“I can’t? You just watch me.”