

Chapter 1

Coconuts bouncing down a bowling lane.

Linnie Wayfair woke with a start. She peered through the semidarkness in a vain attempt to locate the disturbance. No, coconuts weren't the source of the sharp rattling. She didn't stow tropical fruit in her suite—or own a bowling alley, for that matter.

Wincing, she glanced at the ceiling. Bats in the attic?

Problems galore plagued an inn the size of The Wayfair. Problems multiplied when half of the rooms were shut tight, the air inside growing stale and the four-poster beds lying naked, the Italian linens and the velvet bedspreads packed away. As for the attic, raccoons never waited for an invitation. Bats were also savvy party crashers.

In autumn when Ohio's temperatures plummeted, Linnie patrolled the attic in her brother's old football helmet and the wool topcoat her father hadn't taken to Florida. Neither of her close friends volunteered for the missions. Since she didn't believe in conscription, she went up by herself armed with a steel garbage lid, a flashlight, and an oversized broom that would make a witch proud. When claws skittered or the flapping of invisible wings zoomed by, she always contemplated adding her brother's old BB gun to the arsenal.

The thought never led to action. She didn't have the heart to harm any critter.

Please, not bats. Outside shadows caressed the rolling hills. Farther off, fingers of daylight glittered on Sweet Lake's ebony surface. Linnie was about to pass the sound off as nothing when the rattling started again.

From the corridor Jada Brooks padded in with her 'fro bouncing and her slippers smacking the floor. "What *is* that?"

The Wayfair's pastry chef and second-in-command wore yoga pants and a heavy jersey. Despite summer's arrival, the neglected south wing usually remained chilly until noon. Linnie grabbed her robe from the chaise lounge in a corner of the suite.

"I'm not sure," she replied, cinching the belt.

Jada gave out a mock shiver. "Not more bats." Her chestnut-colored eyes

rounded. Then she glanced at the ceiling. "Should I wake Cat?"

"To do what?" Linnie ducked beneath the bed, found her slippers. "Cat doesn't like vermin any more than you do. Let her sleep."

"It's June, not October. If the bats have come early, I'm not going upstairs with you."

"You never go upstairs with me."

"Well, I'm not starting now."

"There aren't bats nesting in the eaves." More rattling, and Linnie perked her ears. "The sound's coming from the lake."

They went downstairs to investigate. Behind the reception desk Mr. Uchida dozed, the carnation pinned to his lapel wilting. His light snoring carried across an area more closely resembling a living room than an austere hotel lobby, with tapestry chairs and thickly cushioned couches. Above the lobby, the main portion of the inn remained blissfully silent.

Linnie said, "Whatever's going on, it hasn't woken our guests." Only the murmured conversation of the A.M. kitchen staff drifted into the lobby.

Jada frowned. "Do you think . . .?"

"Oh, I hope not."

"They usually give us fair warning."

Linnie's irritation gained speed. "*Usually*," she repeated, fearing the worst. "If they've broken the rule, I will not be amused."

"Relax. Maybe they're holding a ceremony to place good vibes around The Wayfair. It *is* the beginning of the tourist season. We can use the help."

"I don't need their help." She wasn't foolish enough to rely on a group of nutty women to make magical charms in hope of increasing the inn's reservations.

"They're supposed to give me notice before holding a meeting on the beach. If they're here out of a misplaced desire to help, they should've given me a heads-up."

Jada glanced at the clock above the dozing Mr. Uchida's head. "Stop worrying. It's barely dawn. They aren't dancing around naked."

"And you're sure because...?" Given the recent fiasco, she wouldn't put anything past the Sweet Lake Sirens.

Last May, newlyweds honeymooning at The Wayfair decided to take a midnight stroll around the lake's dancing blue waters, while on the beach, the Sweet Lake Sirens were holding an impromptu meeting. The women, mostly middle-aged or older, had imbibed too many of the mojitos that were a Mendoza family staple. One of the members, certain she'd lost all feminine allure, bemoaned her husband's golf obsession and lack of sexual interest since his retirement.

Frances Dufour, the group's oldest member, arrived at the perfect—and perfectly silly—solution.

During daylight hours, Frances wore a variety of sedate dresses to highlight calves as shapely at the age of seventy-four as they'd been in her twenties. In summer months, she carried a parasol with a design of lilies stamped on the fabric. The care and maintenance of her alabaster skin was a particular obsession, and one that put her at odds with her closest friend and rival, Cat's mother, Silvia Mendoza.

For her part, once summer's glorious heat descended on the town, Silvia changed her calendar, choosing only to meet with clients at her accounting firm in the morning hours. This left afternoons free to languidly bronze her skin on the shores of Sweet Lake. The hedonistic pursuit, as well as her flamboyant daywear and abundance of jewelry, provided the spark for many a squabble with Frances. Of course, there were other, deeper reasons for the blend of animosity and devotion governing their relationship.

Unfortunately for the newlyweds strolling beneath the waxing moon, Frances brought along a tin box of embroidery thread to the meeting. She announced the Sirens could help their troubled comrade by donning the fabric of the natural world. When the newlyweds stumbled across them, the Sirens were sitting naked in the moonlight sewing bikinis out of maple leaves.

The couple, scarred by an eyeful of mature woman flesh, checked out of the inn the next morning.

The memory propelled Linnie across the lobby. Wandering the grounds in PJs wasn't standard operating procedure for her or Jada, but what choice was there? Better to drive the Sirens from the beach before any of the guests awoke. With only half of the rooms booked, she didn't need more cancellations.

Outside, a peaceful silence cocooned the veranda that wrapped three sides of the inn. Flowerbeds in need of upkeep dotted each side of the stone walkway. The Wayfair perched on the highest point in the area, and Linnie resisted the pull of gravity as they hurried downward to the lake that shared the town's name.

The golden sands of the beach rested in shadow. She spotted a cluster of the Sweet Lake Sirens huddled in a circle.

"Great. Just great." She counted ten women. "Are the others coming?"

Jada surveyed the group. "Doubtful. The rest are getting ready for work or readying kids for summer camp."

Pulling off her slippers, Linnie marched across the sand. Several of the women paused from the ritual to stare at her solemnly.

"What's up?" she asked, taking care to wipe the amusement from her face.

On their heads, the women wore headbands threaded with hot pink and sapphire blue feathers. The colors were undoubtedly symbolic—pink for womanly virtue perhaps, and blue for wisdom. The group shook rattles fashioned from gourds. Zigzags of paint on the vegetables resembled African art. The design was probably something Frances had discovered in a fashion magazine.

The eldest of the Sirens held Linnie in an unblinking stare. Jada stepped back, away from the intense scrutiny.

"Melinda Petronia Wayfair," Frances intoned, "Your latent wisdom has drawn you to the Siren's call. Welcome to our circle."

"You were expecting me?" A first, since the Sirens only allowed members at their meetings.

"By hearing the call, you have proven yourself worthy."

Linnie crossed her arms. "For Pete's sake, Frances. It's a miracle half of my guests didn't hear the racket. Will you stop already?"

Apparently the wrong reply because Frances shook the colorful gourd beneath Linnie's nose with more vigor, as if her exertions might bring the response she desired. "The Siren's call offers you protection from the danger ahead."

Danger? A nasty twinge of fear zapped Linnie's stomach. She brushed it off. The only danger she faced was a return to the near-bankruptcy that had plagued The

Wayfair for the last seven years.

“Next time you want to wake me at dawn, send an invitation,” she snapped. “I won’t RSVP.”

Silvia leapt forward, giving her rattle a shake. Whereas Frances was tall and slender, the co-leader of the Sirens was shorter and more robust, a voluptuous fireball with flowing brown hair nearly as long as her daughter, Cat’s. Like everyone else, Linnie preferred to avoid Silvia’s temperamental outbursts. She also secretly admired Cat’s mother—the aging process had softened, but not destroyed, her sex appeal.

Her eyes drifting shut, Silvia rolled her head back and forth. “Submit to our wisdom! The longer you wait for our protection, the stronger he grows. Submit now!”

“Who’s growing stronger?” Another bad response, since she didn’t really care. Eyes still shut, Silvia murmured, “I cannot say more until events unfold.”

Linnie blew out a stream of air. “Go home already. Fine by me if you keep the mystery to yourself since I can’t deal with your antics before my first cup of Joe.” Approaching, she took a gander at Silvia’s face in the greyish light. “Of all the silly . . . what’s with the eye makeup?” Her lids were covered with greasy blue shadow, and dots of orange lipstick arched beneath her brows. “If I were checking LinkedIn for a new CPA, you would *not* receive my call.”

The insult yanked Silvia from her pseudo-trance. “How can we lend protection if you won’t heed our wisdom? The peril is great.”

“Yeah? If I can’t raise the occupancy rate at the inn, I’m in peril. Other than that, I’m doing fine without your early morning voodoo.”

“Do not take these matters lightly. Let us protect you!”

Frances breezed forward. “Take your kettle off boil, Silvia. Are you *still* taking potions? Sixty-five is too old for hormone replacement therapy.”

A debatable point, Linnie mused. At times, half-moon bruises that looked suspiciously like hickeys appeared on Silvia’s body. Hidden behind an ebony curl near her ear, on a bronzed thigh as she sunbathed—no one in Sweet Lake doubted passion lurked in the Mendoza marriage.

There wasn't time this morning to contemplate Silvia's fortunate status. The two Sirens began arguing. This left their comrades frowning with confusion, their feather-crowns growing floppy in the rising humidity.

Jada pulled her out of earshot. "Shouldn't we find out why they think you're in danger?" Thanks to the Sirens' bizarre warnings, her caramel-colored skin had taken on an unmistakable ashen hue. "Maybe one of the Sirens had a prophetic dream about you or the inn."

"No, thanks." Clearly Jada was buying into their silliness.

"You really should make them tell you."

"And risk encouraging them? Not on your life. They'll stuff my slippers with dried herbs, or insist on hanging trinkets around the inn." Linnie waved a hand at the group. "Hurry up, will you? I'd appreciate it if you'd wrap up the meeting and clear the beach. I don't want my guests put off their breakfasts if they see you out here. And for heaven's sake, stop rattling the gourds. This is a vacation town. You'll wake everyone."

* * *

Frances pressed a hand to her overexcited heart. The dawn ritual hadn't produced the intended result, a mishap for which she bore responsibility. The Sirens wouldn't have intervened on Linnie's behalf without her insistence they demonstrate solidarity on what would prove a most trying day. Once the mail arrived at the inn, the poor girl was in for a shock.

Helping the young was always a delicate affair. It was easy to overstep, or provide counsel without an invitation. Steering a woman toward the discovery of her inner strength was even more difficult in a case such as Linnie's. Although she'd never voiced the opinion directly, Frances was certain she viewed the Sirens as a group of addle-headed women. A common misperception, given Linnie's youth.

Most women were blind to their feminine power until they'd overcome great obstacles. The sudden loss of a cherished job, steering children through the treacherous teenage years, divorce or enduring the death of a loved one, which practically amounted to the same thing—any event capable of breaking a woman

could break her open instead, to reveal her true beauty and power.

Such a test now confronted Linnie.

"This has not worked out as intended," Frances murmured as the girl stalked away.

Once she'd left the beach with Jada at her side, Frances nodded to her comrades. One by one, the women lowered their rattles. Distress passed from one face to the next like a virus. There wasn't a woman among them who wouldn't meditate for long hours to conjure positive vibes to guard Linnie.

Silvia, clearly in a funk, spun toward the rolling waves of the lake. The surf bubbled around her toes as she brooded in privacy. Behind the beach, the rising sun painted the forest with rosy light.

Penelope Riddle landed her rheumy gaze on Frances. "What should we do now?" She adjusted her eyeglasses on her perspiring nose.

The owlish proprietor of *Gift of Garb*, the consignment shop in town, looked ready to weep. All of the Sirens were fond of Linnie, but Penelope was an especially sensitive creature.

Needing to comfort her, Frances said, "We'll continue to surround Linnie with positive thoughts.

"Shouldn't we have told her about the letter from her brother?"

"Certainly not. It wouldn't please her to learn we've been checking her mail." The Sirens had taken a vote with the majority deciding it was best to keep Linnie in the dark. "If she's faced with a crisis, we'll find a way to intervene."

Behind the thick glasses, Penelope's eyes watered. "I wish we knew what the letter contained. I hate the mystery of not knowing." Her son, the mail carrier for the route that included the inn, had called his mother the moment the suspicious missive reached the post office.

"At least your boy alerted us to the letter's arrival. Kind of him to wait until today to make delivery." Frances had requested the delay, allowing the Sirens to gather before the letter reached Linnie's hands.

"What does it matter? Linnie refused our help."

"She may have a change of heart."

“Don’t hold your breath. She’s awfully mad.” Penelope sniffled. “How can we help if she’s angry at us?”

“She’ll calm down. Then we’ll see.” The reassurance didn’t bring the intended result, and a tear escaped the corner of Penelope’s left eye. Her distress brought Frances to a decision, and she quickly added, “Rest assured, she’s already receiving help. Silvia and I are seeing to it.”

Penelope’s brows lifted. “You are? How?”

Silvia, eavesdropping from the water's edge, sent an impatient look. “Frances, we agreed to keep our plans secret. Why blab to the others?”

“We made no such agreement.”

“We did!”

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