

## Chapter One

The poster wagged before her nose: **SAGE ADVICE: THYME TO DISCOVER NATURE'S MEDICINE—RIGHT IN YOUR SPICE RACK!**

Speechless, Cat Mendoza shrank back in her chair.

“These are merely rough ideas.” Behind thick eyeglasses, the elderly Penelope Riddle beamed. She shook the homemade poster. “Your new ad agency should design the posters to hang around the Wayfair.”

The urge to duck beneath the desk proved tempting. At half past eight in the morning, Cat didn't relish dealing with a group of excitable women. She'd arrived to find several of the Sweet Lake Sirens lurking outside her office like merry vultures.

“You're proposing a talk on the medicinal properties of herbs? Interesting,” she murmured, thinking, *Not*.

“We have oodles of great ideas.”

“You do?”

“The Sirens will host different talks each season for the Wayfair's guests. We'll fill out your whole event calendar.”

A sensation of doom sidled toward Cat. Ideas from the Sirens spelled disaster.

The activities under her current consideration ran along the lines of wine tastings for couples or family boating excursions on Sweet Lake. A stroll through the forest with a local naturalist, or an afternoon cooking class with the Wayfair's chef. An event calendar hijacked by the town's most eccentric women would hurt the inn's marketing efforts before they began.

Three of the Sirens hemmed in her desk. Politely she asked them, “You're proposing these talks year-round?” Nix the idea before the presentation ended, and they'd never leave.

The diminutive Tilda Lyons stepped forward. “We have more than enough ideas. Want to hear my favorite?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Evidently not, since the perky Realtor held up her poster. Another homemade job, this one done with purple Magic Marker and orange glitter. Handing the posters off to Adworks, as if the ideas held merit, didn’t appeal. In despair, Cat read the pitch.

Then she gasped.

**STILL ANGRY? REACH LOVED ONES IN THE AFTERLIFE AND HAVE THE LAST WORD.**

Tilda gave the poster a shake. “Don’t you love it?”

“It’s spooky.” The sensation of doom threatened to swallow Cat whole.

“You’d feel differently if you were peeved at someone who’d crossed over.” The Siren turned to her comrades, adding, “I have a friend in Columbus who found out her husband was a cheater after he kicked. Talk about unfinished business.”

The disclosure rounded Penelope’s eyes. “Your poor friend. How many women?”

“Nine on speed dial. One was an exotic dancer. She does an act with a snake and red tassels—I checked out her website.” Tilda shook her head with disgust, sending her cinnamon-colored locks swishing across her cheeks. “How’s any wife supposed to compete with a python?”

“She can’t!” Penelope cried.

“Which is why my friend deserves the last word. Frankly, she deserves a sit-down with Saint Peter.” Tilda’s eyes flashed. “Her cheating husband has earned a ticket to hell.”

Tilda’s previously hidden dark side gave Cat pause. “Let’s put a hold on your idea,” she said carefully. “Mostly because lots of families booking rooms have young children.” *And it’ll creep out the guests.*

A defeat, but the Realtor stood her ground like an avenging fairy prepared to send unfaithful husbands straight to hell.

“We won’t hold séances or do anything to scare kids,” Tilda assured her. “We were thinking about training in dream interpretation for adults.”

“I don’t understand.”

“People who’ve entered the next world make contact through dreams. Once you learn the basics of interpretation, you direct your subconscious to give them a piece of your mind.”

Dish out a verbal smackdown while snoozing? Probably not the best way to get into deep REM sleep. Astonished by her own curiosity, Cat asked, “What about the people you’re not mad at?”

“Oh, that’s different. You can use the dreaming hours to catch up with loved ones you haven’t seen in a while. Like sitting around the kitchen table with your favorite people, only you’re asleep.”

Teatime with the dead. Still too spooky for Cat’s taste. She fished around for a way to shoo the women out.

As if on cue, her smartphone buzzed.

Before she could pick up, the striking Norah Webb—by far more intimidating than the avenging fairy—shot her a black look. Letting the phone go silent, Cat dropped her hands into her lap.

Why did the women choose today of all days to barge into her makeshift office? *Makeshift* being the operative word. Until recently, the cramped space had served as an extra storage room for the kitchen staff.

The pinewood shelving was now gone, the trails of sugar and flour swept from the floor. A pleasing citrus fragrance still clung to the air—from lemons or oranges, or a delectable

combination of both. The air also contained thuds, bangs, and the occasional shouted command. The kitchen lay on the other side of the wall, and breakfast service was in full swing.

Compared to the women herding around the desk, knocking elbows and jostling to talk over one another, the noise marking the inn's breakfast rush was subdued.

Only Ruth Kenefsky hung back. She leaned against the doorjamb, her oddly girlish braids framing her leathery face. The retired police dispatcher seemed content to guard the door while the others pitched ideas sure to derail Cat's marketing plans. With her thumbs hitched inside the pockets of her unfashionable jeans, Ruth looked like she was gearing up for the shootout at the OK Corral.

What goofy suggestions would they pose next? As the daughter of a Sweet Lake Siren, Cat didn't relish ousting the women without a fair hearing. The group, whose members were mostly middle-aged or older, was as integral to Sweet Lake, Ohio, as the historic inn where she found herself trapped.

Penelope looked to her expectantly. "Well? What do you think so far?"

"About hosting seminars?" Cat produced a manufactured smile. "Gosh, I don't know. We're just getting the inn back on its feet. We aren't ready to consider activities for the guests." A lie, but a better way to spare Penelope's feelings didn't come to mind.

Norah said, "Getting the Wayfair back to healthy profits affects us all. Think of the businesses that'll reopen. A fresh start for the town—you'd do well to thank us for helping with the effort."

"And your help is appreciated . . . later. I have a big meeting tomorrow—lots to prepare beforehand. May I get back to you?"

“No, you may not. We’ve spent days working out the kinks for each talk.” Norah produced a notepad from her oversize purse, a leather number artfully decorated with tiny gold beads. “We’ll finish this now.”

Heart sinking, Cat stole a glance out the window. Trees danced in the gusting September breeze. Farther off, men crawled across the roof of the south wing, the hammers in their tool belts glinting in the sun.

“We shouldn’t discuss this without Linnie,” she said of the inn’s manager and majority stockholder. “She’s busy overseeing the renovations and doesn’t have time to spare. Perhaps we can all get together later, like in November?”

Norah peered down her hawkish nose. “Weren’t you recently promoted?”

True enough. With Linnie’s blessing, she’d taken charge of a generous advertising budget with the freedom to steer the inn’s long-term marketing plan. Cat’s good fortune still felt surreal. Given the foolish mistakes she’d made in the past, the do over was an undeserved gift, an opportunity to spread good karma.

She refused to waste the chance.

“I’m still the hospitality manager,” she said. “Same old, same old. I can’t make decisions without Linnie’s go-ahead.”

“You’re also now the events director, in charge of the on-site promotions Linnie plans to implement. You don’t need her approval to make a decision.”

Caught beneath the heavy-lidded stare, Cat understood why children in town believed her adversary kept a broom at the ready. In her early sixties, Norah gave her flowing silver hair added beauty with distinctive plum streaks. It was a new look for the formerly raven-haired Siren. A

runway model in her youth, she had buried four husbands. Her personal tragedy led to wild gossip about the danger to any man charmed by her arresting grey eyes.

For today's surprise attack she wore hip-hugging black jeans, a silk T-shirt, and a gorgeous hand-knitted vest of plum and azure. Long fringe hung from the vest. The shells wagging on the ends of the fringe clicked furiously around her knees.

Cat swallowed. "Okay, you've got me," she confessed. "I'm in charge. Linnie's too busy to hang over my shoulder. She's having new carpeting laid in some of the guest rooms this week, and the painters are wrapping up in the lobby."

"Then make a decision."

"We're still in the planning stages. Might be months before we host activities for the guests." She licked her parched lips. "Years, maybe."

Penelope, a more agreeable adversary, wrenched the notepad from Norah's grasp. The owner of Gift of Garb, the consignment shop in town, adjusted her eyeglasses.

"Norah, stop scaring her." Penelope's rheumy gaze scanned the notes.

"I'm not trying to scare her. I *would* like to knock some sense into her. She's being obstinate."

"She hasn't asked us to leave, has she?"

"I haven't," Cat agreed. Norah wasn't violent, but her tongue could eviscerate the mightiest opponent. Remaining on her good side was a smart plan.

In a lively tone, Penelope said, "Here's a perfect idea for women of a certain age. 'Helpful Hot Flashes: Sweating Your Way to a Thinner You.'" Delight shivered across her double chin. "A chat on the benefits of menopause will help lots of women avoid fear of the aging process."

Cat's smile froze in place. If this was the best idea, she dreaded hearing the worst.

She didn't have long to wait.

“I have another. We’ll host this one for older couples.” Penelope gazed at her with fizzy excitement. “Ready?”

“No.”

“Oh, you’ll love this—promise! ‘Sex in the Twilight Years: Myth or Magic?’”

Drumming up a response wasn’t necessary. By the door, Ruth unleashed her gravelly voice. “A myth, if you ask me,” she growled. “Haven’t seen a man in my bed since the turn of the century. If one’s hiding beneath the covers, I would’ve found him by now.”

Norah threw an impatient glance her way. “You can’t possibly believe sex is reserved only for young adults like Cat. Why, if the right man came along, I’d want to enjoy him in every way.” Her disapproving regard took a stroll across Ruth’s high-waisted jeans before stalling at her plaid, mannish shirt. “If you’re looking for romance, retire your Western wear. This isn’t Texas. There are no rodeos scheduled.”

“Meaning I should dress like a filly half my age?” Ruth examined her nails, which were as blunt as her personality. “I’ll let you in on a secret, Norah. Designer duds won’t land you a fifth husband.”

“I’m not looking for a fifth husband.”

“Paint me surprised. With all the cash you spend on glam, I assumed you had an itch you wanted some poor bastard to scratch.”

The shells on Norah’s vest clacked madly as she swiveled toward her opponent. “Must you resort to vulgar language? I dress to please myself and no one else.”

“Suit yourself. Just keep in mind every bachelor in town believes you’re deadlier than a black widow.”

Norah’s expression evolved from irritated to thunderous. Trouble on the horizon.

“If I choose to find love again, I won’t waste my time rooting beneath the covers in hopes of finding a warm body,” she announced. “Wishing isn’t necessary with the proper attitude. The perfect man is sure to arrive if my heart beckons. It only takes time.”

The remark drew a sigh from Cat. For years she’d searched for the right man. Fate wasn’t listening, or didn’t care—the men dropped in her path possessed the charm of garden snails, or they stuck her with the check on dinner dates. The rest played around, like the cheater Tilda would bar from the pearly gates. All she had to show for her efforts was the blow-up man received as a joke gift from Linnie.

Beefcake Bill valiantly guarded Cat’s suite in the south wing, but he wasn’t much company on lonely nights.

The argument between the Sirens escalated, and Tilda planted herself between them. Her pacifist tendencies, though admirable, didn’t make her trustworthy. The fortyish Siren had a deplorable habit of texting the latest gossip the moment it pinged her smartphone.

“Ladies, please! Let’s not waste time on petty arguments.” The Realtor tapped a manicured finger on the notepad in Penelope’s fist. “You have the floor, Penelope. Tell Cat the next idea.”

“Go for it,” Cat said, thinking, *I should kill my agreeable nature with black widow venom.*

Faking interest, she tamped down her growing impatience. Tomorrow her old college roommate would arrive. Although they were no longer close, Miri Blum, the owner of Adworks, had been offering guidance and expertise for over a month now. Would the new marketing campaign put the Wayfair back on the map of great travel destinations in the Midwest?

A monumental task, and Cat dreaded failing.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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