

# Chapter One



It was official.

Sirena Rachel Caraway just broke the world's record for having the weirdest month ever. Fate seemed determined to give her nothing but tricks and no treats during these thirty- one days of October. Sirena, having been born and raised in Freya Grove, expected silly scares and whimsy mayhem. When you formerly attended high school with ghouls and werewolves, you adopted an anything-goes attitude super quick about this time of year. However, Sirena was embarrassed, shocked, and just plain annoyed by the series of events that unfolded. Tonight, on Halloween, she wanted to be in a place where for once she felt in charge and learned how to hone her magic.

Sirena, in her fluffy robe and slippers, stood in the Caraway kitchen.

The hanging rack with copper pots and pans had a thin layer of dust on them. The stainless- steel appliances were pristine, and the ceramic jar was filled with untouched spatulas and wooden spoons. Just looking at the stove gave Sirena a stomachache. Bad things happened when she touched the stove. Even now, she could still smell the lingering aroma of burnt scrambled eggs and toast.

It was the last meal she had attempted to cook in her kitchen. She just didn't cook anymore, but rather put deli meat, sliced cheese, and grapes on a plate to eat after work.

The hand-painted moon- and- star wall clock Nana Ruth purchased years ago remained on the wall next to said stove. Its steady ticking filled the emptiness of the kitchen and gave Sirena a small sense of comfort. It felt as if Nana were still standing at Sirena's side, telling her to either make a cup of tea or take her sleepy behind back upstairs.

"This month needs to end," she murmured. "Right now."

The clock *tick- tocked* in response, and the minute hand moved forward.

It was a good time for tea. Sirena filled the electric kettle with water, placed it back on the base, and flipped the switch. It began to burble. Her fingers played with the ends of her braids, which were coming undone. She leaned against the counter and recounted six events that made October a time of regrets.

First event: Sirena rolled her ankle while she was delivering a meal order for Empty Fridge. It was her fault, since she hadn't been paying attention and hit an uneven patch on the sidewalk. She had a choice: save her phone, or save the milkshakes and burgers that a start-up company ordered for lunch. Sirena saved the order from hitting the sidewalk, but her phone was cracked and barely functional.

She delivered the meals unscathed to the office manager.

The manager said, "Thanks, Sheila!"

Sirena's ankle hurt so much that she didn't even bother to correct her. Eventually, she had to dip into her meager savings to buy a new phone.

Second event: Sirena ruined Callie's Halloween decorations.

She hadn't even seen the pumpkins on the floor and ended up accidentally kicking a hole into one of the gourds. There were pumpkin seeds and guts everywhere, and the living room smelled earthy. Their cat, Shadow, got caught playing in the guts and needed a bath. Callie looked as if she was going to cry at the scattered seeds all over the carpet. This pumpkin incident led to Sirena missing out on a huge delivery bonus and limiting her cooking demo budget.

It had taken her two months to land an interview for Lighthouse, one of the Jersey Shore's best-reviewed award-winning restaurants in the last five years. Sirena wasn't going to cancel because her favorite fungus was super expensive. She slapped down her credit card and bought the porcini mushrooms, packed up her plastic tub of culinary items, and drove over to the premier beachfront eatery. After Ad Astra let her go as their head chef months ago, Sirena worked two part-time jobs to make ends meet. It was her goal to lead another world-class kitchen one day, and it was going to happen for her. Last month, Ursula helped Sirena make a whole vision board, and she even wrote her intention in permanent gold marker—the color that invited success and prosperity into one's life. Even now, she envisioned her intention, *Find Your Path*, in her mind, guiding like a shining neon sign. Sirena pushed away the wiggle of doubt in her stomach as she parked outside Lighthouse. So, her dishes were a little off, and her food didn't quite hit right the way it used to. It would be fine. She had magic on her side. Kitchen witches always brought the heat.

Third event: Sirena completely fumbled the big interview at Lighthouse.

Anyone could make an egg explode, but it took a special talent

to make the hiring manager spit out their food into a napkin. Her stomach jumped into her throat the moment the entire dish was scraped into the plastic bin. Her second chance to run a professional kitchen just went up in flames— or rather went into the trash. Goodbye to another dream.

The manager spoke gently as she walked Sirena out after the interview.

“Your dish was . . . interesting. We’re still looking at candidates. We’ll call you.”

Fourth event: Sirena went semi- viral after a Halloween prank at work went bonkers.

It wasn’t her fault that she accidentally punched that terrifying trash clown; she just instinctively reacted to someone jumping out at her from behind the dumpster. What hurt more than Sirena’s fist was the fact that her coworker Beckett set her up and filmed the entire thing on his phone. As the clown screamed and clutched their big red nose, Sirena demanded Beckett explain why he would do something so pointless. *So unkind.*

He just shrugged. “I thought you could use a laugh.”

Sirena clutched her casting hand to her chest to keep from throwing an itchy underwear hex on him. She glared at Beckett and returned to work in the bistro. An odd blend of foolishness and hurt roiled in her gut. Here she thought she was getting along with her coworkers, but apparently, she wasn’t *fun* enough for them.

She finished her shift at Night Sky, then went home to get ready for the party of the year.

Fifth event: Sirena embarrassed herself in front of half the Grove.

When *the* Diane Dearworth personally invited the Caraways

to the famous Halloween celebration at the historical society to benefit the Freya Grove Historical Society, Sirena was beyond geeked out to attend. Lucy had plans with Alex, and Callie was working with a high-profile bride. Ursula was handing out candy with Xavier at the shop, so Sirena was left to go alone. She spent weeks piecing her outfit together, sourcing her coastal granddaughter costume from thrift stores and attic finds. Sirena drank two cups of ginger and lemon tea to calm her nerves and listened to her party-prep music as she did her makeup. By the time Sirena arrived at the Dearworths' in her cheerful blue floral dress, floppy bag, and wedge sandals, she was ready to party. The house was decorated with touches of black lace and Gothic decorations. She made small talk with a pixie, ate mini brownies, and awkwardly tried to flirt with a vampire while drinking punch.

Buzzy magic tickled her skin as she danced and swayed to the pop hit playlist.

She was attempting to drop it down low when she knocked into a bookshelf and ended up covered in a bucket of translucent goo. Several guests took out their phones while others cringed at the image of Sirena looking as if she had gotten handsy with a lusty ghost. There was a talk of calling the Ghostbusters, and someone even cued up the classic theme song from the movie. Sirena rushed to the kitchen to find baking soda and vinegar in a vain attempt to save the costume.

But instead, she found Gus Dearworth. Their eyes met.

For an instant, time ceased, and they were suspended in that space together. Her steps halted once she stared up into the richest brown eyes she'd ever seen on a magician. Sirena's brain automatically began comparing them to all the foods she loved to

taste and cook with. Melted chocolate. Hazelnuts. No, he was cinnamon, strong and unmistakable.

Behind the beauty of those eyes, there was a shadow of trepidation. He shifted his weight from foot to foot as if he was going to make a choice he didn't feel comfortable with.

Time started again. She blinked and took in the situation before her.

Sixth event: Sirena caught Gus Dearworth wearing a custom-made tuxedo and holding an open velvet box. It held a sparkly piece of jewelry that might have been a ring. She let out a shocked gasp. Was he proposing?! He shoved it into his pocket so quickly that Sirena wondered whether she saw anything in his hand. Out of sight, out of mind.

Gus retreated into his jovial demeanor, flashing her a smile that seemed a little too sharp. What were the odds of her running into Gus Dearworth now, when she looked like a slime monster? They'd seen each other around town over the last few years. Ursula, her cousin, went to school with Diane, his sister, so they knew of each other. They attended the same backyard cookouts and holiday parties but rarely spoke. Tonight, Gus stood before Sirena by the sink, with his thick frame and big shoulders emitting an air of playfulness.

She half expected him to pull a rabbit out of his tux.

He gave her a quick once-over. His smile softened. "You look absolutely frightening."

She grinned at his compliment, noting the hint of concern in his voice.

"Do you need a towel— or the bathroom?" he offered.

"No, I need a hot shower," she said, gesturing to her outfit. "The slime is everywhere."

She shivered as the icy substance trickled down her back and into her underwear. Ugh. Gus eased out of his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Sirena gently protested this action. “No, Gus. Don’t ruin your outfit.”

“Hush,” he said. “I know a good dry cleaner.”

She took the oversized jacket and burrowed herself into it. The spicy scent of cloves and teakwood oil remained in his fabric, easing her nerves. Instantly, she was warm. Gus went over to a cabinet, took out a tea towel, and handed it to her. Their fingertips brushed briefly, sending a light tickle of bright magic over her hand and causing her heart to sprint. She wiped her face with the terry cloth and felt a little less sticky. It wasn’t enough, and she would still need to leave.

“Pivot and change your costume,” Gus advised.

Sirena gestured to her soaked floral dress. “Who am I supposed to be now?”

“You’re a ghost-hunting tourist who got a little too close to the ghost,” he said. “Anything can happen tonight.”

Sirena snorted. “Anything did happen.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “I can’t tempt you into staying?”

“You can try,” she said dryly.

He paused for a second, as if weighing his options, and reached into his pants pocket. Sirena eyed him. Magicians were unpredictable. Was he offering her a trick or a treat?

Gus pulled out a coin. “Let’s ask fate. Heads, you stay. Tails, you go home.”

It was the size of a half-dollar and had a profile of a woman looking off into the distance. The coin sparkled in the overhead light. They shared a look. It was probably better for Sirena to go

home, but she saw a quiet longing in his eyes. He didn't want her to leave. For an instant she was tempted to pivot and just stay the night. To see what was building between them. To ask him about that ring he had in his pocket. To learn whether his touch would make her heart race again. Gus was about to toss the coin when two party guests dressed as twins ambled into the room, swaying as one unit.

"There's the birthday boy! We're looking for you to blow out the candles."

"I'm here," he said, that sharp smile resurfacing on his face.

"You are the guest of honor!" the other twin sang.

A feeling of hot guilt washed through her at those words. He had a whole houseful of guests, but he was in here entertaining her. She needed to leave now and stop taking up his time. He glanced at her, his eyes hopeful that she would continue playing this game. Oh, how she hated to let him down. Sirena eased out of the jacket and placed it on the kitchen table.

"Thanks, Gus, for everything, but I'm heading out." His shoulders lowered and the hope in his eyes dimmed.

He palmed his coin, then nodded. "Get home safe."

They exchanged good nights, and she went out the back kitchen door, giving a final glance over her shoulder. The magician was gone. Her heart ached in his absence.

Once Sirena got home, she undressed and stepped into the shower. She let the water run over her skin. The constant feeling of sticky embarrassment and shame filled her chest and made it hard to think. She stood under the spray until she felt clean. Sirena dried off, changed into her pajamas and robe, and went down to the kitchen. As she stared at the starry wall clock ticking down to midnight, one question kept echoing in her brain.



Why hadn't she made better choices? All the bad decisions Sirena made over the last month had led her to this night of complete failure. Here she stood in the family kitchen alone with an aching hand to match her heart. If Sirena had the power, she'd throw the entire whole month of October in the trash with her slime-covered costume.

The electric kettle clicked off as steam wafted out of the spout.

Sirena went to the tea pantry and studied the rows of brand-new labeled loose teas. She let out a baffled laugh at the new labels taped to the glass jars. Lucy, the family tea witch, must have reorganized the tea closet while Sirena was at work.

Sirena scanned the labels for the words "Sweet Dreamer," her favorite tea, but that container was missing. Add another disappointment to the day. She was about to settle for a nice cup of pure chamomile when she saw the tall jar next to it. The label was written in a delicate script Sirena hadn't seen in years but knew by heart. It was Nana Ruth's spidery handwriting, the same writing that filled the cookbooks and spellbooks Sirena cherished.

She took the jar in her hand, then read the label. "Wish Tea. That's new."

Hmm. Maybe Lucy found an old recipe of Nana's and refilled the jar.

Sirena unscrewed the top and breathed in the strong, distinct aroma.

Goose bumps rose on her skin. As a kitchen witch, she was gifted with the ability to separate the different herbs and ingredients by tasting or smelling a dish. She sniffed deeply, differentiating the scents from each other. Chamomile. Lemon balm. Rosehips. Lavender. There was another herb she couldn't define, but it smelled heavenly. Like baked sunshine on a fall afternoon. Sirena took the jar over to the counter, scooped two

spoonfuls of loose tea leaves into the mug, and then poured the water. She drizzled in honey and let the leaves steep for a few minutes.

The water turned a pleasing golden shade. Sirena gently blew on the tea to cool it down and then took a sip. The floral taste of the brew flooded her mouth, and she relished the hotness it delivered. A good cup of tea could make you feel at peace for a precious minute. As Sirena drank, she thought about yesteryear's spells.

When Sirena cast the wish spell that fateful May night, she assumed that her wish would be granted first. It was simple. All she wished was to regain her cooking career that she put on pause when Nana got sick and needed a live-in caregiver. Bittersweet joy fluttered through Sirena as she recalled Nana's last year of life. It was a time of tears and small moments of laughter. On her good days, Nana rattled off rules for kitchen witches from her memory while Sirena wrote them down. They took their afternoon tea in the garden. Nana, in her pink floral housedress, slowly walked on the path, caressing her herbs and plants with an unsteady hand. Nana lamented her regrets on her bad days when it was too difficult for her to get out of bed. Sirena called out of work on those days, not wanting to leave her alone in case she needed anything.

Nana blinked at her, those large brown eyes filled with remorse. Her usually strong voice was wobbly and thin with exhaustion.

"I had so many plans. There wasn't enough time to make them come true. You blink your eyes, and your entire life has passed you by. I was looking at my photo albums the other day and I couldn't believe time went by so fast. If I could do it all over

again, I'd do things differently. I'd be braver. I'd have more fun and eat more cake."

Sirena blinked rapidly, trying to keep her tears at bay. *Make a joke. Don't cry. Be fun.*

"What kind of cake?"

Nana gave a small grin. "I think maybe a chocolate harvest cake with rainbow sprinkles. You've got to have sprinkles. Remember that rule. That's rule ninety- nine."

She clutched Sirena's hand in hers and gripped it with the last of her strength. "Promise me, my sweet child, you won't wish away your time. Live your life today, not tomorrow."

Sirena simply nodded, unable to talk through her falling tears. When Nana passed away and joined the ancestors shortly after that conversation, Sirena sought to keep her promise.

She'd made plans to move back to New York and jump right back where she left off once the memorial was over. She bought the train ticket on her phone, had a travel bag in hand, and was literally on her way to the transportation center when she found Lucy sitting at the kitchen table. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of her big sister. Lucy, still in her black dress, stared vacantly off into space, no light in her eyes. Her face was gaunt, and she was pale, covered in sorrow. *What was the last meal she had?*

Sirena dropped her bag on the table and went to the stove. "Have you eaten?"

Lucy blinked, then cast her eyes downward. "I don't know."

Sirena took out a pan and searched the fridge for cheese, milk, and eggs. She knew how to whip up a quick, tasty omelet that she knew Lucy would love.

*Rule one: Kitchen witches always cook for their families.*

Lucy glanced at Sirena's travel bag in front of her. "You'll miss your train," she said, her voice small.

"I'll catch the next one," Sirena said. "Do we have any parsley?"

"Check the cabinet."

Four years later, Sirena still hadn't caught the next train, and she didn't know if she would ever leave the Grove. Eventually, she outgrew her old city life the way a child outgrew a beloved sweater, but she still held on to the hope that it might fit her if she just folded her body enough.

It was this desperate hope that would be her undoing.

She pressed her lips together to keep herself from sobbing.

*Rule forty-three: Kitchen witches only cry when cutting onions.*

Sadness crept into her blood and rooted into her bones. Once upon a time, she delighted in picking fresh herbs, tasting samples, and scribbling down recipes on junk mail envelopes. Now all she cared about was getting the next job and the next gig that would get her to the next day. Her inner fire was quickly dying, and nothing she did stoked the embers in among the ashes. Tonight she didn't feel like cooking anymore. A kitchen witch who didn't want to cook was like a shark that didn't want to swim. It went against her very nature, and she couldn't imagine who she was without her gifts. Getting the head chef job at Lighthouse was supposed to reignite her culinary career. It was her chance to make her wish come true, but she failed.

If only she could hit a Restart button on this entire month.

For the first time in years, Sirena allowed herself to make a request from the universe.

"I wish I had a second chance," she said.

A thrilling tingle of magic strummed through her hands as

the mug's warmth lulled her. A deep feeling of sleepiness entered her body and made everything in the kitchen look fuzzy.

Sirena put the almost empty mug in the sink. She'd clean everything up in the morning.

"You'll start fresh tomorrow," Sirena said. She ran her fingers through her braids and studied the fraying ends once more. She could either reseal them with hot water or take them out after work, but she'd decide in the morning. Everything would look better in the light of day. Sirena took one last look at the kitchen. Hopefully, one day soon she'd feel like she belonged here again. She went upstairs.

Bright red and orange mist bubbled out of the cup from the sink and drifted onto the floor. The mist, fueled by the spoken wish, crept up the wall and seeped into the clock. Two minutes before midnight the clock paused, the hands frozen in place.

After an instant, the hands clicked backward.

Like they say in the Grove, midnight is the best time for mag

