

## Chapter One

The Baking Channel's newly appointed Blue-Ribbon Queen, Elvira Jenkins, lay face down alongside the kitchen island, her arms outstretched as if she had caught her toes under the long rubber spill mat and flapped wildly to catch her balance before going down. It was possible she had fainted, or maybe she had a severe case of narcolepsy and had fallen asleep in the middle of the most exciting night of her life. Neither optimistic scenario explained the large, bloody spot on the back of her iron-gray head of curls.

On this same kitchen set a mere hour ago, Elvira's forceful personality had loomed large with the confidence of one who could always turn others around to her way of thinking, whether they liked it or not. Now, she seemed insignificant—her thick, strong arms flaccid and pale, her bulky shoulders no longer firmly set. It was almost as if someone masquerading as the woman had taken off an Elvira Jenkins costume and tossed it carelessly aside.

Since I was sprawled out on the floor right next to her, I had a good view of her formerly penetrating grey eyes that now stared without seeing. And the dried spot of drool at the corner of her mouth.

The lingering smells of cookies and burnt cornbread wafted in the air, olfactory leftovers from the

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taping of the Baking Channel's newest show, *Blue-Ribbon Babes*, and there was a dusting of flour on the floor beneath her face.

"Meow! Meow! M-e-o-w!" A large bird shrieked from inside a cage tucked into a corner of the countertop, white feathers fluttering madly as if it were trying to take off in flight and leave behind the horrible scene below.

"I think I'm going to be sick," I said. And then I was.

## Chapter Two

The Baking Channel's live premiere of *Blue-Ribbon Babes* took place at Saguaro Studios off Beeline Highway, about fifteen miles from my home in Wolf Creek, Arizona. As I drove south toward Mesa, I listened to the chatter of my Aunt Gertrude, who had swept in two days ago from Wisconsin. I'd like to think she came to see me, but I knew the premiere was her sole reason for weathering airport security. Unfortunately, Auntie insisted I be her guest—she had two tickets—and I couldn't talk my way out of coming without maligning her favorite hobby, baking. Besides, I figured I owed her.

Aunt Gertrude a.k.a. Madame Guinevere was the reason I got into the pet psychic business. For as long as I could remember, she read tarot cards at her dining room table to a steady stream of locals, all dying to hear what their futures held. She taught me everything there was to know about cold reading people—watching

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their body language and gauging their reactions to leading questions in order to make spectacular predictions. I used the same technique on pet owners, and I had a pretty good business going until my ex-boyfriend Jeff told a buxom reporter all my secrets. After an exposé appeared in the Loon Lake Local, I fled from Wisconsin to Arizona to live near my best friend, Penny, who promised life would get better. I was still waiting.

"Your mother won at Bunco last week. The pot was pretty high. About a hundred bucks."

"Good for her," I said, distracted by my driving and my irritation over missing my dinner in the rush to get to the studio on time.

"I told her she should spend it on a new wardrobe." Auntie plucked at the collar of her purple-and-pink paisley print blouse, which matched her purple polyester pants and light purple-and-pink blended eye shadow. And her pink lipstick. Auntie doesn't dress up very often, but when she does, she puts the emphasis on bright. "Your mother doesn't wear enough color. Looks like a dishrag half the time. I guess God ran out of good taste after He made me."

"Not everyone can pull off Butterfly Pink," I said.

"True. Beverly does the best she can," she added in what I'm sure she considered a spirit of generosity.

I leaned forward to read the approaching street sign. Saguaro Drive. "We're here."

It only took twenty minutes to get to the studio from my house, but it took just as long to make it past

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the studio security booth. Once we made it onto the lot, we were at the mercy of orange-vested sadists who had no intention of ever letting us park. God forgive me, but I cut off a station wagon filled with old ladies to pull into an open slot.

"Hurry it up." Auntie grabbed my hand and trotted to a gigantic rectangular building marked Stage 3, where clusters of mostly women gathered around the side door and waited to enter the magical behind-the-scenes world of televised programming.

I sized up the group and decided "one of these things was not like the others", and that one was me. My sour expression—lips pressed together and eyebrows raised to show I was far above the thrill of taking part in a studio audience—contrasted with the other attendees' bright smiles and the excited, high-pitched chatter that filled the air.

Auntie noticed my look and said, "What's the matter with you? I've got some antacids in my purse if you need them."

It's fine to be a martyr, but not to get called on it.

"I've got a headache," I mumbled, which was true.

About a month ago, I'd discovered my ability to communicate with animals. Quite a surprise for a *fake* pet psychic. The "gift" had only brought me trouble, including my involvement in a murder that concluded with my inability to hear my furry friends. I'd re-billed myself as an animal behaviorist, and the moment I'd tossed out my pet psychic business cards, my client list took a nosedive.

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Today, I'd had one customer who felt I should use domination techniques on his Rottweiler. Though he'd never try it himself, he wanted me to pin the Rottie to the floor with my shoulder and show him who was the boss, *just like the guy on television*. Then I met with a woman who couldn't understand why a reward system of gumdrops had left her Chihuahua hyperactive. And toothless.

"You had a headache yesterday. You should get those looked into," Auntie said. "Might be early menopause."

Standing in front of us was a Hispanic woman who had white streaks in her black hair and the figure of a rectangle cinched tightly at the waist. Her companion, a tall, thin beanpole with dishwasher-grey hair, wore a light green cotton dress and the same puckered expression as my Home Economics teacher in high school.

"Did I hear someone has a headache?" said the Hispanic woman. "I've got chewable baby aspirin." She dug them out and handed me two.

"Isn't that kind," Auntie said. "I'm Gertrude Pit." She reached into her purse, pulled out a deck of cards, and handed them round. I took one from her and gaped. These weren't Auntie's favored Rider Waite tarot cards. The symbols on the front of the one I held resembled a typical Magician card, but the back had a swirling multi-colored pattern with Auntie's name, phone number, website, and addresses for Facebook, Twitter, and Skype in the corner. Tarot cards that

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doubled as business cards. All that technology was hard to reconcile with Auntie's word-of-mouth kitchen table business.

"This is my niece, Frances," Auntie said.

The Hispanic woman nodded. "A beautiful name. Like St. Francis of Assisi."

The tall woman asked, "Isn't he the one who talked to animals?"

"Something like that," I said with a slight shudder, and I leaned sideways to see if the line was moving at all. My gaze roved over the people, my mouth moving as I silently counted heads. We were twenty-ninth and thirtieth in line, but the old woman with a walker in the big group up front was going to slow down our progress.

"It *is* a beautiful name. Can you believe some people call her Frankie?" Auntie asked. "Not very feminine."

"I'm Beatrisa," said the Hispanic woman, "but everybody calls me Bea." Bea pointed to the tall woman. "This is my friend, Jane."

Jane held her purse in front of her, clasping the handle in both hands. "Pleased to meet you," she said.

A short, plump woman in a blue-green floral big shirt, black stretch pants, and enough jewelry to start her own mall kiosk, spun around at the mention of the name Frankie. Her dangly earrings tinkled with the motion. She continued to stare at me until introductions were made, and then she stepped up to join our group.

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"Frankie. That's an unusual name," she said. "I seem to remember a pet psychic named Frankie Chandler helping the police with the murder last month."

"Murder!" Auntie's face turned red. "No one in our family has ever been involved in a murder! We're not that sort. Tell her, Sissy," she said, invoking the nickname she always used for me.

I avoided looking into my Aunt's sharp china-blue eyes. She'd see through me in a minute. Thing is, I hadn't given my family details about the murder or my role in solving it, because my mother already had me permanently fixed on her prayer chain. If I'd said anything about my surprisingly real ability to read the minds of animals, I'm sure she would have called for a full exorcism.

"Actually, the maid of a client was the victim. Everyone connected with the client was questioned. Nothing to do with me, really."

She cocked her head. "But I'm certain I read that you helped out with the investigation."

Auntie, quick to latch onto a compliment, puffed with pride. "Helped out? That sounds more like it. Our family is known for their ability to separate the facts from the phooey."

"We are?" I mumbled under my breath.

"I bet I could tell the Loon Lake police a thing or two about solving crimes. Not that we have that many."

"You're a pet psychic?" Jane peered down at me over her long, thin nose.

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"I only take animal behavior appointments now."

I couldn't very well explain that after reading the mind of a dog in order to save two lives—one of them being the dog's—I had lost my ability, especially as I'd never told my family about my "gift" in the first place. It had been three weeks since I'd "heard" from my furry friends.

The tattle-tale's name turned out to be Lola, and by asking her how she came to be at the *Blue-Ribbon Babes* premiere, I managed to switch the topic of conversation from murder to baking.

A girl dressed in the type of navy-blue uniform I usually associate with stewardesses stepped in front of us and waved her hands in the air.

"If I could have your attention." The chattering stopped. "My name is Linda." She gave us an enormous, pearly white smile. "Anyone who isn't here for the premiere of *Blue-Ribbon Babes* is in the wrong place."

The crowd applauded. I'm not sure why.

"You should all have a postcard invitation with you." She held up a sample. "Does anyone *not* have their invitation?"

Everyone had come to the party armed.

She swept her arm toward a thickset young man stationed at the door who did not look good in the male version of the uniform. "My fellow page, Mike, is that good-looking guy standing at the door. Say hello, Mike."

He waved, and then Linda turned serious and

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called out instruction in the clipped tones of a drill sergeant.

"You will hand Mike your postcard. You will wait for him to mark you off on the special invitation list. Then you will proceed through the doorway, where one of the other pages will walk you to the seating area. It's first come, first serve, but there's plenty of room for everyone, so please don't hurry." Her smile faltered. "And please don't push. We don't want any injuries." She paused long enough to let us imagine possible grim scenarios—overturned walkers and broken hips—and then, bright smile back in place, she said, "Welcome and enjoy the premiere of *Blue-Ribbon Babes!*"

The employees operated at maximum efficiency, and the line moved steadily forward. It was the third week of April, and the day's temperature had only reached the low eighties, so the wait in the evening sun, though blinding, was comfortable.

"You never told me how *you* got invited to the premiere," I said to Auntie.

"I've won several competitions with my raspberry scones, you know. Word gets around."

That didn't make sense to me, but we were next in line to pass through the door, so I let it drop. Just as I stepped forward, a teenager, his jeans pulled down to expose pink-and-white striped underwear, cut in front of us.

"I've got to see Sonny Street," he mumbled through a curtain of bangs.

"You know, Sissy, when I was younger, showing

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your butt like that was an invitation to get it kicked. In fact, my toes are starting to itch."

He ignored Auntie's threats, but he did hike his pants up an inch or two.

Mike asked, "Are you on the list?"

"I don't know about *him*, but *we're* on the list, and we were next in line," Auntie huffed.

"I don't know, man, but I've got to see him." He curled a lip at Auntie in an Elvis-style sneer. His upper lip twitched from the effort, as if he still needed practice. "It's life-or-death."

"We're taping tonight." Mike checked his watch. "He's probably in makeup."

The teen snorted. "Makeup? What is he, a girl?"

The page gave him a stern look. "Come back tomorrow."

The teen threw up his hands. "Tomorrow's too late! I gotta see him *now!*"

Mike didn't budge, so the teen was forced to move off, grumbling and tugging his pants back down to a stylish level as he walked. Mike turned his attention back to us.

"Name please?"

He took our postcard and turned it over, found Gertrude Pitt on the list and then, reading the bar code across the top of the invitation, added a number three in a column next to her name.

"I wonder what that means," Auntie whispered. "Maybe they're going to have a giveaway, like they used to do on Oprah. I could use a new blender."

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He handed us each a voting card and a pencil. The card had three check boxes next to Contestant #1, Contestant #2, and Contestant #3.

"Are the contestant's names secret?" Auntie asked.

"I don't think so." Mike said, and then he called out, "Next!" and motioned us inside.

We stepped through the door, and I got my first impression of a show biz stage. I'd imagined something out of *Singing in the Rain*, with eager young men bustling about in vests and ties, aspiring ingénues strutting like peacocks in the hopes of being discovered, and everything looking so shiny and clean that celebrities could burst into impromptu dances without fear of catching hepatitis from a rusty nail on the floor.

I wasn't prepared for a cold, musty, cement-floored room that had the ambiance of a warehouse. Instead of my nattily dressed young men, there were two guys in jeans and sweatshirts passing overhead on a wooden walkway.

Instead of a handy ladder for Gene Kelly to mount while wooing Debbie Reynolds, a forklift rested next to a pile of lumber, and the only one taking advantage was a grey mouse that skittered between the boards.

"It's dirtier than I expected. Kind of takes away my appetite."

"They won't be cooking on the floor," Auntie said. "Don't be such a Negative Nellie. I'm sure the actual set is much cleaner."

To our right, temporary drywall partitions formed a kind of maze, and another page led us through a few

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turns until the walls opened up into a large room. I took a long look at my first live television set.

"Not what I expected."