

## Chapter One

There it was again. A high-pitched buzz that tickled at my ears. The noises started last week, sometimes coming as a low rumble and at other times as more of a whine. The tickling was new. There was definitely something going on with my hearing that would require a professional opinion, but I was in the middle of an appointment and I needed to concentrate. I shook my head to try to clear my thoughts and returned my attention to the problem at hand.

Tasha, a pudgy bichon frisé decked out in a pink sweater with *Kiss Me* embroidered on the back, belched out a wave of chicken livers, hacked, and then stared up at me with desperate, black eyes. She cocked her head and the matching bows tied around her ears jiggled.

Though I billed myself as a pet psychic, I was actually a devoted pragmatist. Instead of hoping some spirit would flutter by and tell me why Fido was rolling in poop (because he likes it), my business relied on a healthy library of animal behavior books, common sense, and the inability of pet parents to spot the obvious. Like the fact that Tasha needed to lose half her body weight. I shouldn't complain since it's the source of my income, but how could people ignore blatant signs that their pets were in distress?

“What is she telling you?” my client asked. Mrs.

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Shropshire, a rail thin woman in her sixties, perched on the edge of a chintz covered couch, her hands clasped around her knees.

“That she needs an antacid,” I snapped, unable to cover my disgust. I have the patience of a saint with animals, but my social skills are sorely lacking when I’m interacting with the human species.

Mrs. Shropshire, still hoping to get a mystical solution to an obvious problem, valiantly ignored my comment. “But has she said anything about *last week*? She’s been listless since we missed playtime with her friends.”

I took another look at the tiny diva, irritated that the owner could allow a cute bichon to turn into Jabba the Mutt.

“This dog has been listless for longer than a week. If I tossed a ball across the room, her only hope of catching it would be if the ball rolled back.”

Mrs. Shropshire scowled at me and gathered her pooch to her chest, grunting from the effort of picking up Tasha. She gave me a withering look and whispered in the dog’s ear, “Mommy loves you just as you are. I’ll buy you a new sweater. Would you like that?”

As I watched this woman cuddle her gassy dog and shoot me admonishing glances, I remembered the advice of my Aunt Gertrude, a.k.a. Madame Guinevere, the woman who inspired my pseudo-mystical career choice.

“Frances, if people wanted the truth, they’d see a priest. They come to us for hope, even if it’s a lie.” And

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come they did, bringing their hope, their questions, and their cash, all to have their tarot cards read by Aunt Gertrude. Repeat business made up the bulk of her income. With my own bank account hovering around empty, I mustered up my happy voice and fought for the bichon's waistline and my fifty bucks.

"She'd really like a new wardrobe, but in a smaller size. Think how good she'll look in a doggie jacket once she's lost a few pounds."

Botox kept the woman's forehead from wrinkling, but she radiated disappointment. A diet wasn't half as exciting as finding out that your pet was channeling your dead grandmother. She crossed her legs and laid an arm across her lap in a defensive posture. Did I mention I excel at reading body language? I decided to pull out the stops and give her what she wanted—a performance.

After a subtle glance around the room, I found my prop—a mirrored door in the hallway next to the front door. Now to bring in my acting skills. I set my hand on Tasha's head and closed my eyes. "She's speaking to me," I murmured. Since Tasha's round body was being propped up by her owner, I could feel it when Mrs. Shropshire stiffened in excited anticipation of what the spirits had to say.

"She's telling me that every time she walks out the front door, she sees her reflection, and it makes her feel bad about herself."

"Reflection?" Mrs. Shropshire sucked in her breath. "The closet," she whispered, and she turned to

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look at the mirror, just as I hoped she would.

Pleased that she had picked up on my hint so easily, I rewarded both my clients—Mrs. Shropshire with a smile and Tasha with a pat on the head.

“Losing weight is all the rage,” I pointed out. “Even celebrities have books and shows about it. A vet could work up a *special* diet, just for Tasha. Something *exclusive*. And then you can dress her up properly.”

Mrs. Shropshire tugged Tasha’s sweater down to cover her pudgy tummy. “Every woman likes to look her best, I suppose.”

My stomach growled. All this talk about food had made me hungry. Mrs. Shropshire had laid out a bowl of crackers—a miserly serving, in my opinion—and the smell of cheese had been teasing me ever since I arrived. In fact, the minute I had stepped into the room, my gaze had zeroed in on those tiny squares of delight, which surprised me, as I had eaten lunch a little under an hour ago. Unable to resist any longer, I snatched a few. Tasha whined with envy.

My client waved her hands about as if she had won the lottery. “Precious Pooch just opened up a branch at the mall! I could take Tasha there for her outfits!”

“That’s right!” I had no idea about doggie fashions and cared less. I popped a couple of crackers into my mouth. They were excellent, with just the right note of cheddar, so I grabbed another handful and emptied the bowl. Then I noticed Mrs. Shropshire’s odd expression.

“Those are *Tasha’s* treats, dear.”

I swallowed hard. “Eating her treats, um, helps me

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connect with her.” Funny, but knowing that I had just chomped on dog biscuits didn’t stop me from wanting more. I dropped the remaining treats back in the bowl and wiped my fingers on my jeans, wondering what other surprises fate had for me today.

Ever since I’d fooled around with the tarot cards last night, I’d been worried that something bad was going to happen. Maybe I was reading too much into it. It’s not as if I *believed* in psychic phenomenon.

Mrs. Shropshire brought me back around with her joyful whoop. “Tasha, we could get matching outfits. Would you like that sweetie?”

Tasha wagged her tail.

“Wait until I tell Mildred. Her Mimi isn’t on an *exclusive* diet,” Mrs. Shropshire simpered. “I expect Tasha’s just more sensitive.”

I accepted a check for fifty dollars and left confident that I’d be hearing from Mildred. Pet owners are more competitive than a room full of stage mothers at an open call for the next *Orphan Annie*. As soon as Mildred heard about Tasha’s *exclusive* diet, I was certain her Mimi would require even more attention. Maybe a personalized diet *and* exercise program with a pedicure thrown in to keep the pooch’s spirits up.

Back in the car, I scraped my tongue with a tissue and tried to convince myself that the ingredients in dog treats couldn’t be worse than those in processed snacks. What in the heck was the matter with me? Tasha’s cheesy bits weren’t the only odd thing to happen recently.

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Over the last week, I'd been getting frequent headaches that had steadily increased in intensity. Then there was the noise. The humming came and went, but the pitch and volume were never the same. And I'm by no means a vegetarian, but I'd been craving meat. Lots of meat. Lots of *bloody, undercooked* meat. Maybe I had developed an iron deficiency. But that didn't explain the peanut butter cravings. Or my new habit of sleeping with my dog Chauncey's ball under my pillow. What can I say? It comforted me.

My cell phone rang. I looked at the caller ID. It was my best friend, Penny Newcombe. I flipped the phone open.

"I'll kill you if you're cancelling tonight," I said.

"Why do you always assume it's bad news?"

"Because it usually is."

"Honestly, Frankie," Penny chirped. Yes, my obsessively optimistic friend Penny had a tendency to chirp. "It's a beautiful day, we're healthy, young women—"

"Is this a long story?"

"Short version? You have nothing to complain about."

"Then we're still on for dinner?" I asked.

"Absolutely," Penny said. "I'm starved."

"Good. I've been dying to try the filet smothered in sautéed onions and blue cheese."

"I'm not cancelling," Penny hedged, "but there *is* a slight problem."

"What?" I tried to keep the panic out of my voice.

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Like my clients, the quickest way to my heart was through my stomach. I'd been looking forward to dining at La Hacienda Chop House ever since the restaurant had opened six months ago. Reservations were hard to come by, and once I'd managed to book a table for two, a day hadn't passed without my dreaming of the stuffed mushroom appetizers or au gratin potatoes served in dainty side dishes.

"The thing is, Ann's daughter is sick, and that leaves the new girl, Monica, waiting tables alone. If we eat at the Prickly Pear, I'll at least be on hand in case Monica runs into problems."

Penny owned the Prickly Pear Bistro, a former bakery that she'd turned into a successful eatery in downtown Wolf Creek, Arizona.

"It will be a good learning experience for her," I grumbled.

Penny sounded shocked. "That wouldn't be right."

"We eat at the Prickly Pear almost every day." I'd moved on to whining.

"It's not a big deal. We *will* go to La Hacienda. Sooner than you think," she added in a mysterious voice.

"Fine. But you owe me."

"Can you make it a bit earlier, before the dinner rush?"

Penny was pushing her luck.

"I'll see what I can do. I have one last appointment in Fountain Hills. Since I no longer need to change for dinner," I said with emphasis, "I'll head straight there."

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“I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

“It’s just as well,” I said. “I have a headache and my taste buds are acting up.”

“Another headache?” Penny tisked. “Maybe you should see the eye doctor. You might need glasses.”

“If they keep up, I will.”

Satisfied, Penny hung up after singing out, “Have a good reading.”

Because my best friend is the one person in the world under the delusion that I actually have a psychic gift, I hadn’t mentioned anything, but I was nervous about my next appointment. It was the last opportunity for something to go terribly wrong, and I was certain that accidentally eating dog treats wasn’t the source of the ominous feeling I’d carried around all day.

Last night I’d been flipping the tarot cards. It was something I did to relax. I didn’t actually believe that the cards could predict anything. Not like Aunt Gertrude’s clients. I thought of them as a way to pry information I already had in my brain out of my subconscious and into the open.

At the end of each day, I’d ask aloud, “What does tomorrow hold for me?” And then I would pull a card and study it to see what thoughts came to mind.

Last night I’d pulled the Death card.