The Reluctant Fortune-Teller

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CHAPTER ONE

Six of Clubs: Your current difficulties may seem unresolvable. Do not despair. A solution is on its way. Beware of the motives of others. They are not as they seem.

The Intervention occurred on a morning in early May. Norbert Zelenka was not expecting it.

Before the doorbell rang, Ivy had been regarding Norbert with a tenderness he had never known. He was serving her breakfast, and could not be sure if the love in her eyes was in fact for him, or for the breakfast. He hoped it was for him. Ivy was a four-pound white Chihuahua, bequeathed to him by his Aunt Pearl. In all his seventy-three years, he had never before been the focus of such intense affection. It gave him a new feeling, and a new feeling is a rare thing at seventy-three.

Norbert considered himself a fortunate person. In his life, he had been truly loved by two people: his Aunt Pearl—in her peculiar, distracted way, and his beautiful wife, Lois. Both were gone from this world now, though, and he was left alone with Ivy, who loved him as only a dog can love. Although many people in his situation would have considered themselves lonely, Norbert was blessed with a gift for appreciating all that he had been given in his life, and all that he still had. It would have been an easy task for him to name a dozen things for which he was grateful: he lived in a beautiful tourist town on Lake Ontario; he enjoyed his hobby of oil painting and watercolor; he had a garden all his own to tend; and his health was still robust.

He also was grateful for his happy routines. He had been about to have his mid-morning snack of four crackers with peanut butter, breaking off a miniscule piece for Ivy. After that, he would ask Ivy if she wanted to go for a walk, and she would indicate with all her might her answer in the affirmative. This is what they did every morning.

But now the doorbell had rung, and it unsettled him. He was not accustomed to interruptions to his routines.

Because the doorbell seldom rang—in fact, it never rang—the clang of it caused Ivy to become hysterical.

Norbert, running a hand over the half ring of white hair that remained at the back of his head, glanced around his bungalow, hoping that it was presentable (it was) and that whoever was outside would not want to come in. (They would.) Norbert’s home was small, orderly, and exactly to his liking. When Norbert first saw the house eight years ago after retiring and leaving Buffalo, the realtor had exclaimed, “This has to be the tiniest house in Gibbons Corner!” Norbert liked it that way: small and manageable.

Feminine murmuring drifted in through Norbert’s windows, and he decided it must be a pair of church ladies who intended to force their way in to pray with him. There was certainly no one else he knew of who would visit him unexpectedly. Norbert was no good with forceful people, especially forceful ladies. They never heard his protests. However, he couldn’t just pretend he wasn’t home. That would feel dishonest. He would be compelled to open his door at last, and he would have to be firm and send them away.

But first, he would need to calm Ivy. She was still trembling and creating a nerve-shattering racket. Norbert shook the spray bottle of water at her, and said; “Quiet, please,” which was her command to stop barking. Ivy went silent, as if operated by a switch. Putting back her enormous ears, she retreated under the coffee table, and rested her tiny white head between her diminutive white paws.

Tugging at his lavender button-down shirt to straighten it, Norbert opened the door. Before him in the unseasonably sweltering heat he saw three slightly damp artists. He knew them all: women he saw almost every day at the Gibbons Corner Art League and Gallery. But he had never seen any of them on his doorstep before.

All three of them were his age or older. They were known in town as “Carlotta’s Club” and had been friends with each other for decades; their leader, Carlotta, was always running something, and at present she ran the Art League. Norbert, on moving to Gibbons Corner, had begun classes there, and even become a member, attending faithfully, hoping to find some structure for his days and possibly discover a hidden talent. He had even wondered if he might make new friends. He hadn’t really expected to make friends, though. He had never made them before.

Blinking into the bright morning, Norbert regarded the women who had come, inexplicably, to his door. One was tiny and gave off a sparkly feeling; her eyes were very blue: Margaret Birch. Birdie Walsh was the one with reddish hair and freckles; she always wore flowy hippie clothes and had a permanently far-off expression in her eyes. And the leader of the trio was the intensely smiling Carlotta Moon: slim, stylish and white-haired, with eyebrows thinly drawn.

“Good morning, Norbert!” chorused the Club.

“Why are you here?” is what Norbert wanted to ask, but didn’t.

At the Art League, as everywhere else, Norbert felt invisible. He tried to be noticed by being thoughtful, but perhaps he wasn’t very good at it. The only thing he could think to do was bring fresh kolaczkis every day from Gloria’s Bakery, and offer them to everyone. These special Polish pastries, covered in powdered sugar and containing a fruit filling, were irresistible and caused the takers to glance up at him and say, “Thanks!” as they passed. He used them as a conversation piece with gallery customers and Art League members, instructing them in the pronunciation of the delicacy: “Koh-latch-keys,” he would say slowly, but people really only wanted to eat kolaczkis and not learn hard Polish words.

On his doorstep, Birdie and Margaret exchanged glances.

Carlotta tilted her head at Norbert. “Were you going to invite us in, Norbert, or just smile at us?”

Norbert had a habit of smiling in all situations, but especially when nervous. It was a very inconvenient habit to have at funerals. Funerals made him very nervous.

Norbert, pinkening, said, “What a nice surprise! Come right in, please! Welcome!” But they were already coming in, and as people usually did, talking over him.

“Oh!” sighed Margaret, the short, sparkly one. “We walked from Carlotta’s house! It seems like we’re getting the dog days in May now! Eighty degrees! This has to be a record! It will be refreshing to get out of this awful heat.” She broke off when she saw the open windows and then Norbert’s damp forehead. It was a few degrees warmer inside the little 1920’s-style bungalow than it was outside.

Norbert’s social security check did not stretch to cover luxuries such as air-conditioning, so he went without—usually not a problem in upstate New York, except for this unusually hot day.

Norbert bustled about, offering cold water to his guests and asking them to sit down, please, and make themselves at home. He said a few more times that this was a nice surprise, hoping that it would be.

The ladies brought in the vaguely flowery fragrances of powder and perfume. That was nice.

Ivy ventured out of hiding when Norbert sat down at last, and he set her in her basket by the window, hoping she would feel a breeze from Lake Ontario. From her safe perch she turned her head from one intruder to the next, growling softly. Norbert had already introduced her to them all, as he brought her to the Art League each time he went. She even had her own basket to sleep in at the Art League, and everyone stopped by to tell her she was a lovely dog and to pat her apple-shaped head. It was quite a different feeling, however, for both Norbert and Ivy, to see these people in their home.

After courtesies and pauses, remarks on the unusual heat wave, exclamations on the divine aroma of lilacs coming in through the window screens, the little group sat in silence for a moment.

Margaret sipped her water and remarked on how refreshing it was.

Carlotta cleared her throat and launched into the reason for the unexpected visit.

“Norbert, we always thought you volunteered at the food pantry at St. Edmund’s.”

Norbert crossed his thin legs and felt his big toes pushing through the holes in his beige socks. He hoped that his visitors wouldn’t notice where his shoes were separating at the soles.

“Why?” asked Norbert, coloring slightly. “I never said so.” This was true: Norbert was temperamentally incapable of lying, unless it was for someone else’s benefit.

“No, you didn’t. But of course we’ve seen you going in. It’s a small town,” added Carlotta, straightening. “We can’t help seeing our friends going around town.”

Norbert was surprised and pleased that Carlotta had, even indirectly, referred to him as a friend. But he was wary of what might be coming next.

Birdie leaned forward, her dangling earrings jingling softly. “I saw you yesterday, Norbert, crossing the street from the church—with a cardboard box of food. You were taking it home.”

“And so,” added Margaret, her eyes gleaming, “we’re here to find out how bad you’ve got it, and to help you out.”

Norbert’s eyes widened behind his thick lenses. In a leap, this conversation had gone from embarrassing to mortifying. These women had come to announce that they knew he was poor, and even worse, they were going to offer him money. He glanced at the door and wondered how he could get them out, or, failing that, how he could escape himself.

At seventy-three years of age, after having worked as an accountant for forty years, Norbert’s cupboards were empty except for dog food, peanut butter, rice and beans. Whatever food he had, he picked up at St. Edmund’s food pantry twice a month. For variety in his week, there was a free spaghetti dinner at the church every Friday night. He always wrapped the garlic bread to have the next day. He often had to choose between buying food and paying utility bills. It was a continual juggle to keep the lights on and the water running. After all his years of work and responsible living, Norbert did not even own the little house he lived in.

Norbert’s secret was no longer a secret. He thought of protecting himself by telling the ladies that he was a “private person.” But was he? People generally didn’t try to find out anything about him, so he didn’t know.

“There’s really no need for you to be concerned,” he said, looking from one interested face to the other.

How long had it been since he had had a real conversation with anyone? Ages. It had probably been with his Aunt Pearl, before her death six months ago. Was that possible? It felt good to have company, but there was his routine to get back to. He didn’t want to offend the Art League ladies, but Ivy would be expecting her walk. He needed to send them on their way.

“Thank you very much,” he said. “I, uh, thank you for coming, and I won’t hold you up any longer.”

Carlotta pursued: “Are you able to pay your bills?”

Norbert was shocked at her frankness and simply looked at her.

Carlotta stared back at him and pressed, “Or not?”

The misery on his face answered her question. Even his eternal smile extinguished itself.

The sympathy on the three faces of the Club was more than he could bear. Before he would allow himself to show tears in their presence, he made a stab at saving his self-esteem.

“I made a good living, all my life, as an accountant. I was careful with my money, always. I invested well. I had quite a bit saved for my retirement, if you want to know.”

They did.

“How much, Norbert?” asked Margaret, her blue eyes bright.

Norbert lowered his chin. He did not want to appear to be boasting. “It would be over two million, all together.”

“‘It would be?’” Birdie encouraged him.

“It would be, if I hadn’t, you know…”

Three pairs of eyes were trained on Norbert, willing the truth out of him. And although it was painful to admit his weakness, there was something so spellbinding about being the center of attention for once in his life. Three people were waiting to hear what he would say next.

“I, uh, well, I gave it away, I guess.”

Three ladies sat back in their chairs and regarded him without blinking. Carlotta spoke: “You gave away two million dollars?”

“Well, not all at once, of course. It happened a little at a time, over several years.”

Carlotta demanded, “Well who on earth did you give it to, Norbert?” And it didn’t sound like a criticism, but more like a lament.

Really, his financial information was none of their business. Their curiosity about it was very strange, to begin with. They were asking him questions that people simply don’t ask, especially of people who are not intimate friends or family members, and they seemed to expect answers. The word “boundaries” came to mind. He hesitated, deciding first that he would put an end to their questioning, and then deciding that he didn’t want their attention to end. He was beginning to feel interesting.

Norbert fixed his eyes on a large oil painting that hung over the couch on which Margaret and Birdie were sitting. The painting was of three Native American men on horseback, riding across the plains, and was signed simply, “Norbert.”

He didn’t want to meet their eyes while he spoke.

“I gave sums of money to people who needed it more than I did, and I guess I just did that a few too many times. A cousin’s nephew needed money to go to medical school. Of course, he dropped out later.… A coworker’s daughter wound up being a single mother with no job… A neighbor wanted to start a business—well, that didn’t work out, and then he moved away… My Aunt Pearl needed her house made handicapped-accessible, with a ramp for the front door, a special bathroom, and an elevator to take her to the second floor… Let’s see. Oh, then another neighbor—”

“Enough!” Carlotta held up her hand. “Are you a bank, Norbert? A scholarship program? A one-man social service agency?”

If Carlotta had not stopped him, he would have gone on to tell them about what happened to his wife, Lois, and that was truly something he did not want to be reminded of, let alone discuss.

Birdie pushed in, “Compassion, Carlotta. Compassion. Isn’t that why we’re here?”

Margaret, seeming to change subjects, said, “Your Aunt Pearl, she’s the one who left you Ivy, isn’t she? And you were very involved with your aunt’s care.”

“Why, yes.” Norbert had not realized that anyone had ever heard him talk about Aunt Pearl—or anything else, for that matter. “Aunt Pearl raised me. I’d always go when she called, and even when she didn’t. She frequently needed something in the house fixed, and I enjoy fixing things. I did all her yard work. I’d organize her stacks of mail into files, pay her bills, drive her to her appointments. We were very close.”

From the window, Ivy let out a shuddering sigh and a yawn.

Margaret pursued, “That’s nice… Did she happen to…leave you anything else—I mean, besides the dog?”

“Actually,” said Norbert, “it turned out she had more money than anyone ever imagined. She lived very frugally, and I always assumed she was just scraping by. That’s why I paid to have her house remodeled. But I guess she didn’t want to touch her, uh, ‘nest egg.’ Which was considerable.” Norbert glanced toward the window where a hot breeze was wafting over Ivy and into the warm living room. “But she didn’t leave it to me.” Norbert ran his moist palms over his trousers. “She left it all to my cousin in California.”

“After all you did for her?” asked Margaret, clearly disappointed in Aunt Pearl. “Why?”

“Because she thought I didn’t need any money.”

Carlotta tilted her head at Norbert, in lieu of asking the obvious question.

“Because I made her believe I was well-off. I didn’t like to give her a false impression, but I had to. Otherwise, she would have insisted on paying me for helping her. I couldn’t take her money.”

Norbert thought, but did not add, After Lois was gone, she was the only person left who truly loved me.

Carlotta took charge.

“We’re not here to pry into the past,” she began, ignoring the fact that they had all been doing just that. “We’re here to see what can be done now.”

“I couldn’t possibly accept your money,” said Norbert, eyes wide.

“We weren’t going to offer you any!” exclaimed Carlotta, eyes wider.

An awkward silence ensued.

“First of all,” Carlotta resumed, “what have you tried, or thought of trying, yourself, to make money?”

Norbert had, in fact, been trying and thinking of trying many things over the past year, as his situation had become increasingly grim. Eight years retired, he was unable to get anyone to hire him as a consultant. He made a few dollars a week working in the Art League’s frame shop, but it wasn’t enough. He thought he’d do well in a job in one of the stores—Gibbons Corner and nearby Edwards Cove had a plethora of touristy shops and bookstores, but none were hiring. He thought of bartering: for example, in exchange for getting Ivy’s teeth cleaned—important maintenance for a small breed dog, as his Aunt Pearl always told him—he could clean kennels, file and make calls for the vet. But the ponytailed veterinarian smiled and shook her baby face at him, saying that she employed paid staff to do all of that. He would even mow lawns, but the fifteen-year-olds had that market cornered. He sold his television and then his car, and found he didn’t miss them much; it was easy to get around Gibbons Corner without a car, and there was a bus to Edwards Cove. At the food pantry, he heard some people in line talking about selling plasma, and making twenty-five dollars twice a week. After just one week, that would earn him enough to pay a monthly water bill. But at seventy-three, Norbert’s plasma was apparently too old. You had to be sixty and under to sell your life’s blood. And it seemed his kidneys had also passed their freshness date and could not be sold for cash.

After Norbert finished his list, Carlotta nodded. “Very thorough and creative,” she approved. “So you are, shall we say, at a dead end. You have no further options for generating cash flow.” Carlotta glanced at her friends, and then, folding her arms, settled her eyes on Norbert. “You are clean out of ideas.”

Norbert could not contradict her. He was smiling his default smile.

“That’s what we thought.”

Norbert looked from one intent face to the next.

“That’s where our idea comes in.”

Carlotta seemed to be waiting for Norbert to ask.

Norbert reflected. He had known these women from a distance for eight years. They had never noticed him until now. Suddenly, they had come into his home, torn the veil of secrecy off his poverty, and were ready to offer him, if not money, then something else. Advice?

This was an odd turn of events. He was used to giving help—in the form of money, only. No one ever wanted his advice, of course. He did try to offer his advice whenever he could, but no one seemed interested in his words of wisdom. People had always been glad to take money from him, however. Giving money had made him feel significant, because people certainly treated him as someone very significant before the check was cut. Afterwards, though, they tended to drift off. Noticing the financial crisis of another and offering aid had always been his department. He wasn’t sure how to handle being on the receiving end of help for his own money trouble.

Norbert pushed his glasses, which were sliding in sweat, up toward the bridge of his nose. Birdie drained her water glass and Margaret dabbed at her brow with a tissue. My, but it was hot.

“You have an idea? About how I can get cash flow?”

“That is exactly what we have,” replied Carlotta, apparently determined to wait again. She obviously would say nothing more until Norbert asked for the idea.

Norbert took a deep breath and exhaled. Why did he feel that he needed to be very careful just now? He was enjoying the ladies’ attention and was even willing to postpone Ivy’s walk so that this fascinating experience could continue. But there was also something else; in the back of his mind, a muted warning began to sound. He looked into the eyes that were observing him so closely, willing him to go ahead and ask the question.

“So,” said Norbert. “What, uh, what’s your idea?”

CHAPTER TWO

Queen of Diamonds: A charming woman with a deep need for control. She is always involved in some intrigue. In youth, flirtatious; in old age, commanding. She can be a strong ally, but beware of falling into her power.

Carlotta’s Club had begun at the dawn of time—or so it seemed now—as a Wednesday afternoon Mothers Coffee Klatch. As their children grew, the Club developed an abiding passion for literature, and met in the evenings to discuss the classics. For a couple of years in the `70s, it was an astrology-numerology-tarot-palmistry club; Carlotta, through a distinctive combination of inspiration, charm and force, then led the Club through a psychology and self-development phase in the `80s; for a few years in the `90s, they focused enthusiastically on the study of guardian angels. Then they moved on to being a wine-tasting club, but pulled back hastily after some embarrassing incidents they immediately and collectively chose to forget. When their peers began to dedicate themselves to bridge, they became the No-Bridge Club, which involved thinking games and puzzles, and they all felt brighter-than-average for a long time. There were also several years during which they did crafts, such as candle-making, soap-making and origami, teaching themselves as they went. When they moved on to sketching one another, it seemed only logical to have everyone take some drawing classes. Almost immediately, the Art League became the new home of the Club, and older members of the Art League watched this influx of energy with passivity, expecting the zealots to clear out in a short time. However, the Club had come to stay. By now, it had been occupying the Art League for seven years.

Many members of the Club had come and gone over the decades, some of them moving away, others passing away, and several running away from the group’s manic energy. Some had stormed away, complaining of Carlotta’s bossiness, but that was envy, pure and simple.

Lately, Carlotta had been sensing the Club’s restlessness, which was always her cue to come up with a new direction. Just as Carlotta had become aware of the need for a new idea, Birdie had seen Norbert leaving the food pantry. And in Carlotta’s creative consciousness the new scheme formed itself: take the murmuring, watchful, ghostly Norbert—that odd, solitary man who was always trying to advise people who never took any notice of him—take him and his problem, and make a project out of him.

He had said something odd to her one day at the Art League. They had been painting side by side, and she had been thinking of her granddaughter, Summer. The young woman didn’t seem to be having any fun in life, and Carlotta was pondering how she might remedy her granddaughter’s lack of social connections, when Norbert murmured, “Let it be.”

“Excuse me, Norbert?”

“Hmm?”

“What did you say?”

“Did I say something?”

“You said, ‘Let it be.’ At least, I think that’s what you said. What do you mean by that?”

“Oh. Yes. I did.” Norbert adjusted his thick spectacles and peered at her.

“Well? Let what be?”

“Oh, well, sometimes…don’t you find you can do too much on a painting? You have to know when to stop and let it breathe. Give it a day or two and come back to it, do you know what I mean? Just…let it be.”

She had wondered for a moment if he were reading her mind. But it was just a coincidence. In that moment, however, she’d seen in her teeming mind’s eye an image of him as a psychic. It amused her. This retiring, unexceptional man, a psychic! A fortune-teller—that would be even better! She could see him sitting in a tent and wearing a turban, saying, “Cross my palm with silver and I will give you the answers you seek.” She smiled at the ludicrousness of it. Then she thought back to the days when she and the Club—more numerous in membership in those days—had studied card reading. It had been all the rage. It was nonsense, of course. Birdie and Margaret had taken it seriously, and Carlotta had enjoyed her own skepticism as proof of her superior intelligence. But nonsense or not, they’d all had fun with it for a time.

And suddenly, just as easy as that, the connection was made.

The Universe just laid things out for her like this all the time. The Universe and her inspired mind, working together.

Carlotta considered herself an artist in more than the Gibbons Corner Art League-sense. She thought of herself as an artist of life, with human beings as her medium.

Carlotta would run this project, as she had so many others, for the amusement and benefit of the Club. Keeping them entertained was her responsibility, and she took it seriously. She was always thinking of them.

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A few days before the Intervention, Carlotta called the Club to her house for a meeting. After presenting the problem, as always, she would ask for her old friends’ suggestions. As always, she would listen to them with polite attention. And as always, the best suggestion would be her own, which she would present at the end, something no one else would have thought of, and that would be the idea they would go with.

With her usual uncanniness, Carlotta had correctly predicted the Club’s enthusiasm for the Norbert Project.

“We could have a fund-raiser!” offered Margaret, her face alight.

Birdie thought not. “Oh, no, Margaret. That would shame him publicly.”

“It’s a really nice thought, Margaret,” amended Carlotta. It was vital to take care of everyone’s feelings—especially Margaret’s. She could be touchy. “Let’s keep brainstorming, shall we?”

Birdie, looking dreamily off into space as if receiving inspiration from beyond, offered a dangerously good suggestion: “We could buy up all his paintings that are hanging in the gallery. At above selling price. Anonymously. And as he keeps painting, we could keep buying.”

Margaret turned to Birdie with interest.

Carlotta was quick to strangle this infant idea in its cradle. “Norbert would never believe that suddenly all his wolf etchings and Native American paintings are in high demand. He’d try to find out who was buying them. No,” said Carlotta, wrinkling her brow with pretend concentration, “good effort, Birdie, but I don’t think it will work.”

Margaret contradicted, “Well, I think it could work.”

Margaret shrugged and looked at Carlotta, who pressed her fingertips together in the manner of one who is concentrating deeply.

After a few beats of silence, Birdie said, “Couldn’t we just give him the money? That would be the easiest solution. If the three of us put our heads together, we can just give him what he needs for rent and utilities. Honestly, we’d never miss it.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Margaret.

“Teach a man to fish, Margaret,” admonished Carlotta, with one manicured finger raised, “Teach a man to fish.”

Margaret, as often happened, was having trouble keeping up. “We’re going to teach Norbert to fish?”

Carlotta took a deep breath. She was so patient with Margaret; it was a credit to her.

Birdie and Margaret took turns straightening each other out when one of them got muddled. Birdie supplied, “Carlotta is quoting an old adage. What she means is, we should help Norbert get started generating his own income, so he can be independent.”

“But,” puzzled Margaret, “wasn’t that your idea? To let him make money on his own paintings?”

“Yes,” replied Carlotta kindly, “but we already decided that way won’t work.”

After a perfectly timed pause, Carlotta said, as she had so many times before, “Hey! I have an Idea!”

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“No,” said Norbert. “I couldn’t possibly be a fortune-teller, I—”

Carlotta drowned out Norbert’s protest: “Oh, Norbert, open your mind. Don’t be a fuddy-duddy. And stop saying ‘fortune-teller.’ Say ‘psychic.’ It sounds more legitimate.”

“But there’s nothing legitimate about it! I’m sorry, but it’s a silly idea.”

“What’s silly?” Carlotta was speaking loudly, as if raising her volume made her ideas more reasonable. “This will solve all your problems. Your bills will be paid in no time. The money will keep coming in. There isn’t a psychic in Gibbons Corner—or in Edwards Cove. And it’s the beginning of tourist season.”

Margaret chimed in: “That’s right, Norbert. You could just do it for the tourist season and quit, if you don’t like it. People will pay you—almost whatever you ask! Twenty dollars for twenty minutes. That’s what they charge in Buffalo. We’ve all seen psychics and card readers over the years. People get their fortunes told for fun. It will be part of their vacation entertainment.”

“It would be wrong.”

Birdie, gazing with intense attention at Norbert, murmured, “Wrong? How, wrong?”

“It would be a lie. I don’t lie. I never have.”

Carlotta was quick to counter: “Sure you do! You lied to your Aunt Pearl when you told her you had money.”

Norbert recoiled. “That was for her own benefit.”

Carlotta retorted, “And so will this be for people’s own benefit. Oh, Norbert! You will give such enjoyment to people. You will calm their fears if they are worried. You can help them find the right path in life. And…and so on. It’s sort of like being a psychologist.”

“But I’m an accountant. I am not credentialed to be a psychologist. Or a psychic.”

Carlotta, as if armed with superior knowledge, made a sweeping motion with her hand. “There is no credentialing for a psychic. And anyone can be a psychologist.”

There was a silence as the group seemed to consider this assertion.

“Oh, there’s nothing to it. You just listen, and then you give advice. Nothing easier,” Carlotta insisted.

Norbert had always wanted to be helpful to people. It was pleasant to picture himself in a role where he could calm people and give them advice. But, no, this was a crackpot idea.

“I don’t believe in psychics.”

Carlotta quipped, “You don’t need to believe in psychics. Your customers do.”

“But that’s wrong.”

“Norbert,” said Birdie, trying another approach. “You are naturally intuitive.”

Norbert frowned. “But I’m not.”

“But you are,” insisted Birdie. “You told Margaret one day that her painting of petunias in a pot would sell—and it sold two hours later. When the phone rings at the gallery, you always predict who it is or what they’ll want, and you’re usually right. You asked me one day what I would do if I won the lottery, and that day I found a fifty-dollar bill in my pocket.”

“I was only making conversation,” Norbert defended himself. “I wouldn’t have the first idea how to tell fortunes.”

“Which is why,” said Carlotta, pulling a paperback from her classic black purse, “we have brought you this!”

Norbert took the book with the tips of his fingers. He read the title out loud. “The Cards Don’t Lie, by H.M. King.”

Carlotta sat back and watched him with glittering eyes.

“We would help you, Norbert,” said Carlotta. “The three of us have about 239 years’ worth of lived experience. Including you, it’s about 312 years of lived experience!”

“Stop!” said Margaret. “You make us sound like vampires.”

Carlotta ignored her. “Think about it—we have access to all our combined wisdom. We know human nature, human longings and human dramas. We know the trouble people get themselves into, and how they could avoid it. We know what people need to hear. We’ll train you and support you to—” and here she put her hands up and drew them apart, as if highlighting a slogan she saw in the air “—serve humanity through fortune-telling.”

Margaret, all aglow, added, “We’ll practice with you!”

Norbert looked around at the eager faces pressing in on him.

“Why are you doing this?”

Margaret giggled. “You’re the psychic. You tell us.”

“Margaret, shush. We just want to help you, Norbert. You and Ivy. It’s as simple as that.”

Something told Norbert that it wasn’t.