



Ann Charles

A BUNCH OF MONKEY MALARKEY

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

Chapter One



Tippytoe, Louisiana
Madam Electra's Fortune Teller Tent
One hour until showtime

"I'm thinking about taking up sword swallowing, Electra," said the bear of a man sitting across my parlor table from me.

"Sword swallowing?" My palms hovered over Ol' Blue, the crystal ball handed down through my family for generations. "Eugene, you just got over your fear of swallowing fire. Why do you want to mess with a good thing?"

Eugene had a popular act here at AC Silly Circus's freakshow division. He started out as "The Giant Man," making the crowd "ooh" and "ahhh" with his intimidating human size. Then he shapeshifted into his furry werebear self, lit the end of a torch on fire, and swallowed the flames, all without burning himself alive in the process.

"Fire is boring these days, not to mention the heartburn is a killer. You wouldn't believe how many antacid pills I've gone through already this week."

"That's because we're in Cajun country. You've been eating spicy jambalaya and garlic seafood gumbo since we hit the state line. Plus, all those deep-fried boudin balls you keep popping in your mouth like candy can't be helping your gut. I thought you were off pork, anyway." His doctor had recently told him that too much pork fat in his diet made him more flammable.

"Oh, those aren't the pork boudin. They're alligator with rice and peppers mixed in and deep fried to a crispy brown perfection." He licked his chops at the mention of them.

I grimaced. His stomach acid had to be nearing a Chernobyl meltdown. "And you want to stick a sword down into that fiery smelter you call a stomach?"

He shrugged. "I need to mix up my act a little. It's starting to feel like yesterday's news." He pointed a hairy-knuckled finger at Ol' Blue. "What does your magic ball say about my crowd tonight? Am I going to fill the seats?"

Fill the seats? I lowered my hands to the table on each side of my crystal ball. Eugene usually wasn't concerned about his show's attendance, more about his act going off without a hitch—or an inferno. It didn't take a psychic to figure out that something else was spurring this change for him.

"Eugene, why did you really come here today? And don't tell me it was for a prediction

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about the size of your crowd this evening, because I call bullshit on that. You've never cared about how many folks showed up before." I leaned closer, watching his round eyes and whiskered cheeks for telltale signs of lying. "Are the monkey brothers pressuring you into swallowing swords to bring in more money?"

Donatello and Marco, aka the monkey brothers, were middle-aged wereapes currently acting as the freakshow's co-ringmasters. Known throughout the circus world for their business acumen, they had built their stellar reputation on their food stand enterprise, which had grown more popular than the Mad Monkey magic act that they had debuted decades ago. However, since they'd been asked to stand in after the last ringmaster had an emotional breakdown, they'd been working on "improving" several others' freakshow acts for one reason or another. They claimed their intentions were to help the circus staff members up their games, but I saw through their smoke and mirrors. It was all about a healthy bottom line.

Eugene shifted in my parlor chair, scratching his hulking shoulder against the seatback. The wood creaked under his weight. "Well, Donatello might have suggested that if I doubled my crowd size, he could swing an assistant for me."

Of the two brothers, Donatello was the bigger penny-pincher. He was often seen rushing around the circus, howling out orders, while insisting he had no time to deal with whatever problem was at hand.

"Why do you need an assistant?" I asked.

Eugene's act was pretty basic. Like my fortune-teller routine, he'd been running his show on his own since he started in the circus business. Maybe he was getting lonely, though. I certainly had been until the head of security started sharing my bed every night.

Eugene held up his large right hand, stretching out his fingers. "The older I get, the harder it is to use lighters or strike matches with my big bear hands."

"You mean *bear* paws or *bare* paws." When he just frowned at me in response, I said, "Never mind. Aren't you wearing your special torch-glove during the show?" He'd had a special metal glove with a built-in torch made for his right paw to alleviate his grip problem.

"No. I kept burning myself with it." He held his left hand up for me to see. Sure enough, his knuckles were hair-free, singed clear to the skin. "Last night, I dropped two matches and ended up calling for a volunteer from the crowd to light the last torch."

"Crowd participation is a good thing." I tried to come at this with a positive attitude. Eugene had enough insecurities without Donatello picking apart his act.

He wrinkled his long nose. "Not when it comes to fire. Somehow word got to Donatello about what happened. He stopped by early this morning and read me the riot act. Apparently, a customer messing with fire is an insurance no-no. If anything happens and we have to file a claim, the insurance company will either triple our rates or drop us entirely."

I sighed. Of course, the almighty dollar played a role in all of this. Ever since the monkey brothers took over, we'd had what they called "troop scrums"—aka early-morning meetings from hell. During these bleary-eyed rallies under the big top, the brothers went from one shifter to the next, citing the current tasks on our individual project lists, demanding each of us report what we accomplished the night before. They didn't seem to understand that this circus was about so much more than productivity percentages and revenue streams; that there were living and breathing folks involved who had big hearts and fragile egos.

Damn. I missed the days when all I had to do was give psychic readings without worrying about my return-on-investment profitability ratio.

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“And here I always thought bonobo apes were more interested in romance than financial gain,” I muttered.

“The monkey brothers are only half bonobo on their mother’s side. The other half is busybody chimpanzee blood.”

Right. Someone had mentioned their mother was the idealist who’d given them their Italian names.

“I just wish I had an assistant,” Eugene continued with slumped shoulders. “Someone to help me with my act each night and make sure my net profits exceed my next pen dentures.”

His next what? Oh, wait. I grinned. “You mean *expenditures*.”

He grunted. “Did I tell you that Donatello wants me to keep track of how many matches I go through each night? He’s keeping an inventory list on his clipboard for all of us.”

“Oh, jeez!” I crossed my arms. “What a bunch of monkey malarkey.”

I could see now why an assistant appealed to Eugene. If the monkey brothers didn’t back off, none of us were going to have time to practice our acts, let alone perform them. Maybe I needed to have a talk with Donatello to try to convince him to loosen up a little on the bookkeeping front. Not all of us lived and breathed debits and credits.

“Listen, Eugene,” I started.

The sound of footfalls in my waiting room on the other side of my parlor’s red velvet curtains made me pause. I could hear someone huffing. I sniffed, picking up a hint of cigar smoke.

“Madam Electra?” Marco, the taller of the two monkey brothers, called out from the other room. His voice was a notch higher than usual. “I need your help.”

Eugene and I exchanged a raised-brow look. Normally, Marco and Donatello insisted on not being interrupted so close to showtime while they performed their last rehearsals alone in their tent. Why they would need my assistance at this point was beyond me.

I draped a velvet shroud edged with beads over Ol’ Blue. My werecoyote instincts were skittish about letting the bean-counting businessman see my crystal ball for some reason. “Come in, Marco.”

He rushed through the curtain, wearing his red and black ringmaster getup, magician’s hat and all. His face was a roadmap of frown lines that doubled at the sight of Eugene sitting there. “I need you to come with me.”

Eugene’s eyes widened. “Me?” he croaked, sounding like a kid busted with his hand in the cookie jar.

“No, not you. I need Madam Electra.”

“Why did you look at me when you said it, then?” he asked.

Marco growled. “It was an accident.” He turned to me, his gaze intense. “Electra, could you please follow me to my tent?”

I stood, yet hesitated, wary. The anxiety rippling off of Marco was almost palpable. “What’s going on?”

He shot a scowl toward Eugene. “I’d rather not discuss it in mixed company.”

“I’m not mixed,” Eugene said, his chin jutting. “I’m a purebred *Ursus arctos horribilis*, otherwise known as a North American brown bear to the science folks, but you can just call me a grizzly.”

I did a double take. “If you’re a purebred grizzly, what are you doing at a freakshow?”

Most of the shapeshifters who worked at this division of the circus were hybrids, mixed in a manner that made them freaks among the regular shapeshifting population. I had

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thought I was the exception, since I was a purebred werecoyote. Fortunately, my abilities as a psychic allowed me to blend with the rest of the circus folks, although it did take many of them some time to accept me due to my non-hybrid pedigree.

“My tail is a few inches longer than normal, my snout is fatter, and my ears are too pointy. My mother always claimed it was advanced engineering on her part, but short of a red glowing nose, I stick out like a bear version of Rudolph the Reindeer amongst my contemporaries.”

Marco snorted. “Listen, we don’t have time to discuss Eugene’s lineage and genetic abominations.”

“Abominations?” Eugene sat up tall. “That’s hitting a little below the belt, ape man.”

“I told you before, we’re monkeys.”

“I may be a bit slow in the morning and colder months, but even I know that chimps and bonobos are apes, not monkeys.”

The monkey brothers shunned the A-word in public. According to rumor, their mother was a shapeshifting bonobo who’d been mated with a chimpanzee while locked away in some scientific laboratory. She’d escaped while pregnant, finding her way to the circus. When the babies were born, she’d insisted on calling them “monkeys” rather than “apes” in order to shield the fraternal twins from possible capture because she feared they’d be locked away and experimented upon for the rest of their lives. Their mother was long gone, but the brothers continued to use the “monkey” moniker out of fear of being caught and imprisoned.

“Fine, I take it back,” Marco told Eugene and then turned to me again. “Come with me, please. We need to hurry. The show starts soon.”

“Do I need any of my tools of the trade?”

“No.” He glanced around my tent, his focus moving from the jeweled lamps, to the velvet- and silk-draped chests covered with various marketing fliers listing my services, to the smoke from my jasmine incense, to the padded chair I sat in behind my parlor table, before settling on Ol’ Blue, which was still under wraps. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

Without another word, he raced out of the tent.

I followed empty-handed. Eugene lumbered along behind me.

We zigzagged through the red and white striped tents, rushing to keep up with Marco. He held open the flap of the large private tent he shared with his brother, leading us through a small sitting room with plush furniture to a side room where the walls were lined with what I figured were magicians’ trunks. The back room wasn’t nearly as lavish and smelled musty with a hint of cigar smoke.

“I need you both to promise you’ll keep this a secret.” He eyed us in turn.

Was this part of their magic act? Was Marco using us as test subjects? If so, it was working well. My heart was pounding while my legs were ready to pull a “coyote” and run.

I nodded. Eugene followed my lead.

Marco walked over to a red trunk standing on end with several small holes drilled into the lid. A pair of white rabbits was painted on the top. He unfastened the lid. It creaked open, giving me goose bumps. Marco stepped aside and held out his arm in a grand gesture to reveal what was waiting inside ...

Which turned out to be his brother, Donatello, in his wereape form. His black magician ensemble lay in a wrinkled pile at the bottom of the trunk. Inside the box, Donatello sat on his haunches and stared at us with an empty expression.

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I had a sudden urge to hand him a banana. What was this? Some kind of new thought manipulation the brothers were working on for the show?

“I don’t get it.” Eugene spoke first. “Is this part of your act?”

“No.”

I frowned at Marco. “Then why are you keeping Donatello in this trunk?”

“I’m not. He’s in there of his own will and he won’t come out, not even when I try to force him.” Marco pulled up his sleeve, showing us what appeared to be a bite mark on his wrist.

I looked back at the ape in the box. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I,” Marco said. “That’s why I need your help.”

“Did he do a magic trick on himself?” Eugene asked.

“Maybe,” Marco answered. “But since I can’t get him to talk to me—or even use sign language—I have no idea.”

“How long has he been in the trunk?” I asked.

Marco took off his hat and scratched his bristly flattop. “I don’t know the answer to that, either. I was out at the front gate helping get things ready for our opening, and when I arrived back here a half hour ago to practice at our usual time, I couldn’t find Donatello. I assumed he was running late doing his pre-show rounds, so I started setting up for the show. That’s when I found him in the trunk where we keep the white rabbits we use in our show.” He glanced around at the other trunks. “To add to the mystery, the rabbits are missing.”

I stepped closer to Donatello, waving my hand in front of his eyes. He stared right through me, blinking every so often. “It’s like some sort of trance.”

“Maybe it’s a curse of some sort,” Eugene said, poking Donatello in the cheek several times and getting no response.

“Stop messing with him, Eugene.” Marco put his hat back on and checked his watch. “What are we going to do? The show starts in under an hour. I can’t work with him like this.”

I rubbed my jaw, trying to think. The only sort of magic I’d heard of that could put a person in a trance was the dark sort. My grandmother, who had taught me all about being a seer, had told me to avoid dark magic at all costs. *The toll on a psychic’s aura is too great*, she’d tell me when I pressed for more answers, warning me that sticking even a single toe in those waters risked being pulled in over my head.

“For now, we need to come up with a different opening act.” I glanced around the tent, zeroing in on a pink trunk with kittens painted on the lid. “Marco, can you use Lemon Drop and Lolli Pop as your assistants and do enough of your magic act to appease the audience until the rest of us are set up and ready for our usual shows?”

Lemon and Lolli had been adopted by the monkey brothers years ago. The guys had taken them in when the two werecats had shown up after running away from an orphanage. Under the brothers’ stern but loving hand, the two girls had grown into beautiful young women with a contortionist act that astounded all who attended their show. Their cats-in-boxes act sold out almost every night, especially to families with young children.

Marco puffed his round cheeks. “I guess so. The girls helped us when they were young.” His eyes softened at the memory.

“Good. Eugene, go round up the girls and tell them to meet Marco at the big top tent.”

Eugene lumbered off, leaving me alone with the two brothers.

“We need to let security know about this,” I said, pointing at Donatello. “There might be

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foul play involved.”

Marco’s thick eyebrows wrinkled. “You think someone did this to Donatello on purpose?”

I shrugged. “It’s possible. Magic works in different ways. In the wrong hands, it can be deadly.”

“Yeah, but you’re a sorcerer.”

“No, I’m a psychic.”

“Close enough.”

I swallowed a scoff. In what universe were those two close to the same? The panic in Marco’s eyes kept my mouth shut. For now, I’d let him hold onto that thought if it gave him the hope he needed to get through the opening show.

“There has to be something you can do for him.” Marco pressed, wringing his hands together.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure where to start. I was accustomed to helping those who could talk and ask me and my crystal ball questions.

“Maybe.” I wondered if Ol’ Blue would be able to give me any hints on where to start with this mystery. “First, we need help from someone who’s good at sniffing out crimes.”

Marco groaned and dropped onto one of the trunks. “We have to keep this quiet, Electra. If word gets out to the local police, they’ll come and take Donatello away to a lab somewhere to poke and prod. He’d rather die than go through what Mother warned us would happen if that day ever came.”

I squeezed his shoulder. “Nobody is taking anyone to a lab. I was talking about Bruno.”

Head of the freakshow division’s security, Bruno Maska was the ideal mixed breed to sniff out trouble and take down criminals. His mother had been a St. Bernard shifter and his father like me, a werecoyote. Their genes had blended to create the perfect law dog, both in the flesh and fur form. The big hunk was easy on the eyes, too, with those long dark eyelashes, brawny shoulders, and tight ...

But I digress.

“Go get Bruno and bring him here,” I ordered Marco, trying to snap him out of his sudden despondency. “Between the two of us, we’ll figure out what’s going on with Donatello and if someone else is behind this.”

After one last frown in his brother’s direction, Marco rushed out of the tent, leaving me alone with Donatello.

I returned to the rabbit trunk, studying the unresponsive ape. Why had he shapeshifted? Had someone forced him to change to his were-form before making him move to the trunk? Or had it been self-inflicted? Or self-defense? Was he hiding from something when it happened? Or was he like Eugene, who shifted whenever his anxiety red-lined?

Once again, I waved my hand in front of the wereape’s eyes.

Still no reaction. I took a deep breath, focusing outward, feeling through the dark with my mind. I had a strong notion that Donatello was stuck in his body somehow, unable to penetrate the wall blocking his conscious self.

“Who did this to you?” I asked. “Did you piss someone off with your nickel-and-diming? Or does this have to do with something else involving money? Did you double-cross someone you shouldn’t have?”

I knew plenty from experience when it came to betraying a criminal mind. My past screwup was the reason I was standing here trying to make a catatonic ape speak.

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Donatello blinked, his expression remaining lost, unfocused.

My chest tightened as a thought flitted past. Had somebody come looking for me, maybe trying to get Donatello to talk and he'd resisted? Was his current state my fault?

My knees felt a little quivery all of a sudden. I moved to a trunk with the big top tent painted on it and sat. "Please, not again," I whispered.

After a moment, the wave of unease passed. My fault or not, I needed to work out what was wrong with Donatello before everyone else found out and started panicking again. After the fiasco we had at Tinkerville, the last thing this freakshow needed was another dead shapeshifter.