

THE INDIGO SOLUTION

PSYCHIC SOLUTIONS, BOOK 1



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PROLOGUE



GIVEN THE SPEED HIS LOVINGLY RESTORED XKE COULD TRAVEL, AFTERTHOUGHT, South Carolina was less than an hour's drive from Damon Jackson's Savannah office. Roaring down the rural two-lane, Jax glimpsed a brick-pillared welcome sign hidden behind an untrimmed crape myrtle and slowed to a crawl to avoid speed traps. This assignment was far beneath his skills, but he carried out each mission as if the world depended on it, as in fact, it had upon occasion. This wasn't one of them.

Except for his time in service, Jax had lived in the South all his life. The muddy pond and stand of ancient trees after the welcome sign, the county seat's neat streets, ornamented with ancient, shiny-leaved magnolias, didn't charm him. The flowerpots beneath the Victorian lampposts left him unimpressed. His focus was on finding the firm's young ward and prying her out of grasping hands.

He scanned the brick shops—none more than three stories. The church steeple towered a floor higher than the courthouse's cupola. The lack of a Wal-Mart or Piggly-Wiggly wasn't unusual. Like so many other small towns, Aftersought was lost to the faded glory of the Civil War.

With his top down, he could hear sixties music pumping from the Oldies' Café. A Siamese cat licked its paws in the sun of a shop window. Glancing at the cat, Jax almost missed the sign beneath a gabled overhang, but he braked at the glitter of a crystal ball in the big plate window. PSYCHIC SOLUTIONS

AGENCY written in gold lettering adorned a small black plaque dangling over the sidewalk.

He gave the Malcolms credit for being a class above MADAME THERESAS TAROT READING, which was the usual front for unimaginative flakes and con artists. He glanced in the window as he rolled past, but the sun was too bright against the glass to see inside.

Jax parallel-parked the XKE in front of Hank's Hardware. Climbing out, he strode past a stand of tomato seedlings back to the *agency*. The cat had disappeared. Jax shrugged off the stares from behind windows up and down the street. All small towns had built-in neighborhood watches. If the kid was here, everyone in town knew it. She couldn't hide.

Even though the door was already open, a bell rang as he stepped inside. Momentarily blinded from the sun and the dozens of spinning crystals and whirligigs, he had to wait until his eyes adjusted before noticing the curvaceous female behind the counter in the back.

He blinked again to be certain his vision was clear.

Medusa was his first reaction—except riotous orange curls replaced snakes. Her stony gaze, however, ought to have frozen him to the floor. Women did not generally react to him as if he were Public Enemy Number One.

Although, admittedly, her plush mouth had difficulty forming a disapproving line, and the crystalline blue of her eyes resembled the cloudless sky more than ice. Interesting, but irrelevant.

She had no way of knowing who he was. How did he deserve that glare?

"Mavis Malcolm?" he inquired, asserting his authority with his tone.

He couldn't tell if the tight line of her mouth curved in amusement or disapproval. Her lips appeared to be a dark rose color that clashed with her orange halter top. He was trying too hard to see what the top concealed when the crystals over his head began to chatter. He shut the door on the rising breeze. His first mistake.

He was large and the space was small and cluttered, but that didn't cause his impression of confinement. The knowing glare in *Medusa's* eyes had him twitching like a prisoner—a sensation he was particularly unattached to.

Jax belatedly realized that he'd arrived in his paint-splattered camouflage and not his usual suit. The Stockton team training exercises resembled war zones.

"Hmnn?" a disembodied voice asked from behind the counter.

"The Magician? It seems so," *Medusa* replied. "Best warn the others."

The voice had sounded human, and her reply indicated human, but logic

prevailed. Jax towered over his diminutive nemesis to check behind the counter. A Siamese cat gracefully climbed from a basket on the floor, shooting him a disgruntled look as it slipped behind the curtains. "Talk to cats often?"

Closer inspection of his human target revealed orange short shorts and more curves than justified by her slight stature. When he looked up again, amusement tweaked her smile. He hadn't expected the front for a psychic con game to be quite so. . . *interesting*.

He didn't need *interesting* mucking with his mind.

Her eyes laughed. They weren't crystal but blue flecked with silver and green. "I expected better of a Magician," she said, nonsensically. "A little *presto chango* would be good. *Let there be light* would be asking a little much. But talking cats?"

Momentarily befuddled by her scent of ylang-ylang and multi-colored eyes, Jax had to rethink his plan to intimidate his opponent into handing over the child. He'd imagined someone older and savvier, not an obvious flake.

Before he could formulate a suitable action, the door flew open again. An equally diminutive—but much stouter—woman swept in, accompanied by a golden retriever. "I came as soon as I heard the Magician had arrived." The cat followed her in, looking smug, and vanished behind the counter again.

Jax cocked his head to study the new arrival. The flowing red caftan and silver chignon pinned with astrological hairclips formed a stereotype of the charlatan he'd expected. Relieved that he didn't have to terrorize the cat-eyed flake, he focused his attention on the newcomer. "Mavis?"

The charlatan narrowed her eyes and dramatically swung the flowing arms of her gown. "Begone, heathen, spread your enlightenment elsewhere," she intoned, adding more prosaically, "You could start with the mayor."

Behind him, the Medusa snorted but said nothing.

Unruffled, Jax regarded the new arrival. He disliked the deceptive asshole part of law work, but he could handle it—up until the time he throttled his prey. "I do not know any magician. I am Loretta Post's guardian, and I have it on good authority that she is here or on her way here."

"Post?" The older woman looked at him with incredulity. "Do you see a Rolls Royce out there that she could have arrived in? The only fancy car on the street is yours. I can't imagine a wealthy Post would *walk* into town."

"But they might arrive by bus, especially if they're only ten," he countered.

The woman muttered something that had the retriever growling. Jax had

the greatest respect for animal teeth and no desire to harm a dog. He could, if he must, but now that he was out of the military, he preferred non-violent confrontation.

"I should have introduced myself. My apologies." He reached for his jacket pocket and realized he was still in the sweat-soaked polo and camouflage pants he'd been wearing when he'd received the call about Loretta. He dug for his billfold instead. "I'm Jax Jackson of Stockton and Stockton out of Savannah." He located a slightly mangled business card and handed it over.

"This says Damon Jackson." The charlatan didn't look mollified. "As in *demon*."

"Named after my grandfather, which is why I prefer Jax." He turned to give another card to the Medusa behind the counter—but she'd vanished.

Hadn't he heard her snorting not five seconds ago?

Seeing the sway of the curtains behind the counter, Jax cursed. He'd been so focused on the woman he thought was the culprit, that Medusa had escaped—probably with his runaway ward. Propping his hands on the old-fashioned wooden counter, he vaulted over the top and raced through the storage room to the open door of the back exit.

ONE



ONE HOUR EARLIER:

ARETHA FRANKLIN'S "RESPECT" BELLOWED FROM THE OLDIES CAFÉ. WHISTLING her theme song to ward off developing premonitions of trouble ahead, Evie Malcolm bounced down the post office steps, shoving a suspiciously official-looking notice into her back pocket. The April day was too lovely to succumb to paranoia.

"Gertie's ex must be back in town," she told the golden retriever sniffing the scrumptious odor of simmering gumbo. The café owner and her ex were from New Orleans, but Gertie never cooked Creole unless he was in town.

Observation—her means of survival.

Honey snuffled and trotted on, leading her past the café and the empty lot Mavis had been filling with azaleas for years—without permission from the absentee owner. Evie suspected her mother buried charms and talismans beneath each plant for reasons known only to her. A good witch never told.

At this hour, traffic was light. The Harley roaring down Main Street could be heard three counties over. Evie glanced up expectantly—sure enough, the mayor's son was on his way out of town again. She glanced toward city hall—serious black cloud hovering.

The official city notice burned a hole in her pocket. The mayor had a

murky aura these days, but tax notices came from the county courthouse, didn't they?

"If Tobias is mad at his dad again, trouble is brewing." The mayor's son had a young soul, but he was usually one of the good guys.

Honey yipped, not because she understood, but because she had food for brains, and they were nearing home. "I could find out what's brewing if people would simply give me a little respect," she told the dog.

Respect wasn't happening. Evie had lived here all her life, and people thought they knew her. They didn't, really, but she understood their limitations.

Despite the small-town mindset, she loved her home of Afterthought, South Carolina. Once a farm town for sharecroppers, it was now the county seat and a tourist destination for city dwellers. The sun sparkling off the windows of the Victorian brick shops and the colorful pots of ivy geraniums decorating the old-fashioned lampposts depicted a fantasy of serenity that big cities didn't offer.

But it was a fantasy, she knew. She saw the dark undercurrents others couldn't.

Orange curls bobbing against her sunglasses, Evie danced to the tune of Aretha down the brick sidewalk. Outside her mother's shop, Evie let the golden retriever pause to admire the Siamese cat lounging on the window sill.

The entire *county* population didn't amount to more than five thousand people—a great place for growing up, a lousy place to find a job.

Correction, a great place for finding jobs like dog walking, a lousy place to apply her real talents. At a hundred pounds, Evie wasn't cut out for more than poodle-walking. And ghost-hunting, although that wasn't precisely a booming business. With a sigh, she tugged her mother's retriever into the Psychic Solutions Agency and Gift Shoppe.

Honey yipped a happy greeting at the plump woman inside.

Garbed in a flowing multi-colored caftan, Mavis Malcolm glanced up from the tarot cards spread on the counter, her misty blue eyes an exact match for Evie's. "There's a turbulence in the air, dear," she reported. "The Magician approaches."

The mayor's murky aura and Tobias's angry departure had already warned her of approaching trouble. Evie glanced at the tarot spread on the counter to better interpret her mother's warning. The card showing Hermes lay smack in the middle—the *Magician*, emblem of new adventure and bringing light out of darkness. Also a troublemaker. *Not* what she needed.

"Maybe the Magician is His Honor, the Right Royal Mayor Blockhead, and he's sold the town for a nuclear dump." She handed over the envelope from the post office. "If he can condemn an entire trailer park, then he's probably declared this neighborhood a disaster zone."

The trailer park condemnation still rankled. Mavis had to sell her double-wide and move in above the shop. The mayor and his council had been granted eminent domain for a pharmacy, which the town badly needed. Somehow, the deal had been bungled and now the homes of dozens of seniors had been reduced to a parking lot used mainly by officials at the county courthouse.

"That boy is bad, I'll grant, but he's a jester, not a Magician." With her graying hair pinned up in a business-like chignon, Mavis slit open the envelope and frowned. She tucked the notice into her pocket without further edification.

"We're not busy." Mavis emerged from behind the counter to take Honey's leash for her morning coffee break. "Lock up after me, and maybe the Magician will pass through without stopping."

"Not busy" was a chronic problem for an agency marketing tarot reading along with ghost busting, animal psychiatry, clairvoyance, and a colorful array of crystals and gewgaws. The gewgaws kept them in groceries. Still, Mavis's premonitions had to be taken seriously. She was good at what she did. Black clouds over city hall and the arrival of a dealer in change were potentially more ominous than lack of business.

Hair prickled on Evie's arms, and she frowned. She was sensitive to the temporal disturbances caused by spirits crossing through the veil, but even though Afterthought's downtown dated to the Civil War, it boasted very few ghosts. Evie had laid most of the local spirits to rest over the years. She probably just needed to put a sweater on.

She waved her mother off, flicked on the television for a weather report, and didn't lock the door as suggested.

"Mrowr?" Pyscat, the Siamese, sat up in the window and tilted his head questioningly.

"Magician, from the tarot deck." Flipping to the cable weather map, Evie saw no storms on the horizon. "He explores the world in order to master it. Very powerful card."

"Chainnnnch." Psy snarled, expressing his disapproval. Ever since Evie's vet cousin had experimented with teaching the cat to communicate, the Siamese had had an opinion on everything, or maybe she was hearing her own thoughts. The cat leaped from the window to stalk the store's perimeter.

"Without change, there is no progress," Evie countered, flicking off the TV.

"To whom are you speaking?" a polite voice asked from the open doorway.

Damn, that's what she got for talking to cats. Scare off the clients, why don't you, Evie?

Plastering on a smile, she studied the visitor blocking the sunny day. Goose bumps chased up and down her arms. Black clouds, magicians, and now this.

A serious child with wide blue eyes concealed behind black-framed Harry Potter glasses waited for a reply. The child wasn't the problem.

The apparitions sticking to her warned the turbulence had arrived.

"I talk to myself a lot," Evie replied.

Ghosts usually stayed with *places*, not people. Either the spirits or the child possessed some powerful voodoo. She didn't dare drift into the dangerous subconscious state she needed to fully read auras until she understood the situation. "What can I do for you today?"

Wearing her mousy-brown hair in fraying braids, the sturdy child entered the shop with a heavy backpack and glanced around in curiosity. Studying a photo of a haunted antebellum mansion Evie had cured last year, she answered politely. "I am looking for Evangeline Malcolm."

"Who's asking?"

"That's a defensive response," the child said in a tone far too mature for her—ten, eleven?—years.

Beneath the counter, Psy snorted knowingly. Evie nudged the cat with her toe. She had reasons for being defensive.

The child produced a manila envelope from her backpack and laid it on the counter. "My name is Loretta Post. Evangeline is my guardian."

Evie choked on her tongue. The turbulence had definitely landed. Skirting around the insane idea of anyone appointing ADHD-afflicted *her* as guardian, she settled on the impossible. "Post? A Post hasn't deigned to cross the boundaries of Afterthought in. . ." She paused to think about it. "Since great-grandmother Letitia Malcolm ran off with. . ." She squinted, trying to call up the family lines.

"Evan Post, my great-great-grandfather."

"Whatever. Posts don't make Malcolms guardians of their children. They barely acknowledge our existence. Besides, lawyers would be involved. Where are your parents now?"

Looking like a small adult dealing with a dense child, Loretta slid the

envelope toward Evie. "Lawyers *are* involved. They say my parents are dead and I know they're not. That's why I had to come alone. Lawyers want my money."

Ahhh, the poor kid. The first stage of grief was denial, and this was a major case if she'd ever seen one. She wanted to hug Loretta's skinny shoulders in sympathy, but the shadows clinging to her sagged with despair. Not promising.

"How did they die?" She added hastily— "Or not die."

"They *said* my parents died in a boating accident." Loretta studied the crystal ball on the counter while choosing her story.

Evie appreciated her efforts. Malcolms learned to fudge the truth early and effectively, if only to live in semi-harmony with their neighbors. Evie waited for the rest of the lie.

"But I know they were coming here to Afterthought. They told me so."

"Their ghosts told you?"

Loretta glared over the top of her glasses. "My *parents* told me. Over the phone. *Before* they supposedly died."

That part of the story needed a little work. "Posts don't come to Afterthought," Evie reminded her.

"They do if they want to sell land," Loretta countered. "Posts own half the town."

"You learned that online, didn't you? The county assessment records are all on the internet these days."

"The point *is*," Loretta insisted, "they weren't on their yacht like the lawyers said. The lawyers are lying. Do you think they could be hiding my parents in a cabin in the woods until they hand over all their money?"

"That's one possibility, I suppose." So was putting them on a rocket to outer space. Probability and possibility did not necessarily equate. And judging by those shadows. . . How could she possibly make the kid accept that her parents might be ghosts? Evie's parenting skills were on a par with her credit record—not so good. "But you gotta understand—I can't look into your story without making a few phone calls to check things out. What's the name of your school?"

Loretta picked up her backpack with an expression of disgust. "You can't call them," she said flatly. "You can't call *anyone*."

Evie felt an icy shudder of premonition and opened her inner eye to Loretta's aura. "Why?"

"Because the lawyers are trying to kill me."

Loretta's aura flared the clear blue of truth.

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