

The Crystal Key

PSYCHIC SOLUTIONS, MYSTERY #3

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Ariel



23:10 GAMECAM1: *LARGE ANIMAL IN PINE?*

Ariel Ives-Jackson frowned at the notation. Large animals did not normally occupy this sparse South Carolina piney wood. Imprecision could be life-threatening when one lived alone.

She brought out the binoculars, but in the darkness, she only saw branches swaying from a heavy weight. The pine was half hidden by an ancient oak. Her house security cameras didn't reach beyond the yard.

The game cameras in the woods were on a separate circuit that she'd installed herself, but the pine was too distant to see clearly.

Frustrated, she continued her routine, playing through the videos on each camera in order. The paths through the woods to the pond at night made for better entertainment than television.

23:15 GAMECAM2: *fawn losing spots*

23:46 GAMECAM3: *opossum joeys almost full grown; female carrying another litter?*

01:15 GAMECAM1: *no movement sighted*

At precisely 01:30 she double checked her security video and returned to work. The darknet was busy tonight. She followed a trail of illegal-cryptocurrency and sent the route to her contact.

At 05:00 she stopped for breakfast. As she buttered her toast and fried her egg, the game camera nagged at her. *What if there was a bobcat?*

Therapists had said she needed to regularly modify her routine if she ever wished to pass as neurotypical. *I could watch the video while eating.*

Ariel studied her toast and tea. She didn't like crumbs on her desk or sticky things near her keyboards. She finished her toast and egg, refreshed her tea mug, and carried it and her paper notebook to the massive computer desk filling half her front room. Carefully setting the mug on a coaster on a side table away from her keyboard, she switched on the feed from game camera number one, so she had a larger zoomed-up image.

05:32 GAMECAM1: *large branches moving*

That was slightly better, less imprecise. Perhaps changing her routine sharpened her mind.

She usually went to bed at 06:00, just as dawn lightened the sky at this time of year. But dawn would be a good time for a big cat to go on the prowl. She'd seen coyotes and foxes at dawn.

Her security lights went off on the east side of the house as the bright August sun rays hit them. Ariel enlarged the image on her wide-screen monitor. Definite movement. A flash of blue caught her eye. *Blue?*

Uneasy, she opened up all her house security cameras on the big monitor, then ran the game cameras on a second screen.

I'll have to tell Dr. Shaw I stayed up past bedtime. That's progress, isn't it?

06:33 GAMECAM1: *branches moving. More blue!*

At 06:35, her house security cameras all shut down, turned off by hands other than her own.

Ariel slammed the desk with her palms. *That bastard!*

Only two people besides her knew how to turn off those cameras. One of them had been missing for months—the one who knew her routine best, the one who knew she normally went to bed at 06:00. *The one who had installed her keypad and set the password.*

She'd thought he *understood*.

Furious, she loaded the gun she used on unruly wildlife. She swung the game camera positions to the path toward her back door. She knew how to protect herself.

As soon as the jeans-wearing Cajun staggered through the shrubbery guarding her yard, she snapped a photo with GAMECAM3 and shot it off to the two people who would have heard the alarm when her security went off. The third damned person she had trusted to send messages to was now at her kitchen door, punching in her security code.

If he thought she'd gone to bed, she had a little surprise for him.

She waited in the shadowy corner of the kitchen until the door opened,

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and she had a good view of his blue tank top. He was more brown and muscled than ever. With his hair grown out into unruly curls and his face metal removed, he was barely recognizable as the bald, tattooed soldier who'd entered her life over a year ago. Without compunction, Ariel shot him mid-chest with the full force of her water blaster.

All six-foot-two of giant rat collapsed like a decompressed accordion.

One



“EVANGELINE MALCOLM CARSTAIRS ON A YACHT!” SITTING ON A DECK CHAIR overlooking gray Atlantic waves turning pastel with dawn, Evie took a selfie of herself in the bright pink hot pants she had found in her Great-Aunt Val’s wardrobe. Rather than downsize, her aunt had left Evie to recycle all the things she no longer wanted. Beat thrift store shopping. “I grew up in a trailer park and your family owns a *yacht*. I should probably go scrub the toilet.”

“The head,” Damon Ives-Jackson corrected. “And my adoptive father owns the yacht because he stole people’s money. My real father was a desert rat.”

A fact they’d only discovered a few months ago, but not one that changed their cultural divide. Their moral and emotional gaps were less simple to define given Jax was an honest lawyer and seeker of justice, and her family descended from a legacy of women who did what it took to survive. The months it had taken to reach this level of companionship had been entertaining.

Evie snorted at his description of his genius biological father and stretched out her leg so she could study her newly polished toenails. “Yeah, a desert rat who owned a silicon mine, a microchip company, and was both a lawyer and engineer. My daddy pounds nails for a living. And your *mother* was a political analyst. Mine reads crystal balls. Let’s face it, dude, we are

not compatible." Although they'd done a fine job of *compatting* in the yacht's luxurious quarters last night.

"Not seeing a large difference between political analysis and crystal balls." Setting aside his phone to sip his mimosa, Jax admired her preening display.

That he *noticed* her gave her a thrill. Intelligent men tended to disregard her as a petite flake—which came in handy upon occasion, admittedly. But a girl liked having her special man pay attention when she fixed herself up.

For their final yacht date, Jax was wearing funky linen trousers tied with a rope. And no shirt. Although she admired his sculpted muscles, she envied his ability to brown nicely in the sun. Her redhead's skin didn't. Which was one reason they were out here at dawn.

Wariness tinged his reply. "So, you're saying we should break up because your family isn't rich, even though my family is dead, and I'm nearly dead broke? If you're looking for excuses, we could go with your family having lived in the same town for four centuries while mine has no roots."

Well, yeah, when he put it that way. . . "You grew up with country clubs and *yachts*. I grew up with witches with attitudes. You could be a hotshot lawyer if you didn't hang around with me."

He settled back to sip his drink and presumably ponder her complaint. "My adoptive father stole his clients' funds. Your family holds witch parades and drives out a corrupt mayor, then supports a transgender candidate to take his place. And you are altruistically suggesting that we give up the best sex I've ever had, so I can have yachts and belong to a country club?"

Evie tried to wrap her ADHD-afflicted brain around that. "Well, if it's all about the sex, okay, we're good. A bad influence for Loretta, maybe, but kids have to learn adults make mistakes too."

"And now we're a mistake. You really know how to make a guy feel special." Jax reached his muscular leg over to her lounge and rubbed his toes up her naked leg.

Evie gave up. "I'm done trying to save you from yourself. I'll miss our weekend getaways now that the yacht has been sold. How is your dad doing these days?" Evie nibbled at her cranberry bagel, snapped photos with her phone, and toyed with the deck chair adjustment. Sitting still wasn't exactly a habit she'd ever developed.

Jax grimaced. "Stephen has sold the house, his cars, his partnership in Stockton and Stockton, and now the yacht. He thinks that will be enough to pay off the clients he owes, plus court fees and so forth. Living on social security and a pension will be good for him."

"I'm glad you agreed to be his character witness. Your aura is brighter for it." Evie breathed deeply of the salt air and admired the ball of gold rising over the surf while catching surreptitious glimpses of Jax's awesome pecs. She'd known he was no weakling since that first day she'd done her best to maim him last spring. Since then, she'd had time to learn just how those hard muscles felt up close and personal.

She tingled all over and wondered if they might have time for one more round before they had to go home. . .

Since the meathead was being his usual dutiful lawyer self and checking his overnight mail, she figured she ought to act like she wasn't a sex maniac, pretend she had a business, and check hers. It was just. . . she could do three things at once while he was concentrating on one. She slid her bare foot over to rub his and opened a message from one of her neighbors.

Jax leaned over and blew in her ear just as she whistled and sat up straight, nearly taking off his nose. She waved the phone at him. "Look! This might be a realio trulio case! *Her grandmother may not be her grandmother!*"

Undaunted, Jax nibbled her ear—until his phone sounded an alarm, then beeped. "Hold that thought." He flipped to his text messages, cursed, and showed her the screen image.

Roark! The last time they'd seen him, he'd been hightailing it out of town in pursuit of happiness or Sasquatch. Or maybe both. "What on earth is he doing?" Evie grabbed the phone to study the background. The big Cajun was creeping around Witch Hill? Why?

Jax was already out of his chair. "The alarm was Ariel's security being cut off. The image is from Ariel."

"How did she take that photo if her cameras are cut off? Why would he cut her security?" Following him up, Evie began gathering their breakfast dishes while her thoughts spun with worry for both Ariel and Roark. "He looks awful, but maybe that's just the shadows? Will she be okay?"

Jax returned the text with a brief word or two. Evie knew his neurodivergent sister didn't process long communication. The phone didn't beep back, and he cursed some more. No communication was worrisome—but not unusual.

"I'll clean up. You try to reach Reuben. He was pulling together more propaganda for the mayor's campaign late last night and may still be asleep." Running down to the cabin, Evie did a hasty scrub of their dishes and dashed back to strip the linens while Jax paced and tried to wake up people who could reach Ariel faster than they could.

Ariel was as close to a non-verbal Crystal Child as Evie would probably

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ever meet. Her aura was crystal clear, and she was so sensitive to conflict that she'd retreated inside herself and might break like pricey glass if pushed too far. Psychiatrists had other words for her, none of them right.

She flung a shirt up at Jax, who wiggled it on while punching keys on the phone. The man could multi-task when needed. She threw the rest of their things into the Harley's saddlebags, gave the cabin a swift check, and joined him on deck. He grabbed her waist, kissed her as if he meant it, then dragged her to the gangplank. Well, so much for a last minute quickie.

This had been a fascinating summer, but idylls had to end. Her luck with men generally never lasted even this long—which made her wary, if only for their ward's sake. Jax had been too busy this summer setting up his new office to look for anyone more his type. That didn't mean Evie dared dream that the illusion would continue. Which meant she needed to assert her independence.

"If I had my own car, I could stay here and look into this granny case." If she had an actual job, maybe she wouldn't mind so much when he moved on. She ran to keep up with his longer legs.

"Buy your damned Miata. Loretta is a billionaire." Loretta being their ten-year-old ward. "She shouldn't be riding around town in a broken-down utility van or a bicycle."

Said the lawyer climbing on his Harley, Evie thought grumpily as she joined him. "I've saved the reward money and the allowance I receive from the trust. I have enough for a down payment without dipping into the kid's money."

"I know—she's family." He repeated the argument they had regularly over their orphaned ward. "But her *family* used to own three high-end cars." He climbed on and hit the motor, drowning out further argument.

But Loretta's parents had *earned* their wealth. Evie hadn't. She still felt guilty accepting the allowance, but buying groceries for Loretta and the tribe the kid now called her family cost more than Evie earned. As long as she spent the money on Loretta, she could handle it.

If she had any credit, she could take out a car loan. But dog walkers and psychic problem solvers had difficulty obtaining credit for some odd reason.

Afterthought, South Carolina, a town with a population smaller than some mega-church congregations, was inland, roughly halfway between Charleston and Savannah. On a quiet Sunday morning, it took them a little less than an hour to drive home.

"Reuben's van is gone." Jax leaned the bike against her Victorian carriage house and unbuckled their bags.

"Doesn't mean anything. He could still be at the mayor's. Check your messages." Evie hurried up the back steps of the huge old house her great aunt had left in her care. If Reuben wasn't here, who was watching Loretta?

Her mother, of course. Owner of the Psychic Solutions Gift Shop, Mavis greeted them with the wave of a spatula and the smell of burning pancakes. Reading crystal balls didn't include reading pancake recipes. "Just in time, dear. There are atmospheric disturbances over Witch Hill."

"Yeah, they're called Roark LeBlanc." Evie leaned over and gave Loretta a kiss on her braided hair. The kid was in her favorite seat at the breakfast banquette, frowning at burned pancakes covered in syrup and chocolate chips. "Throw them out," Evie whispered. "You should have told her about the frozen ones."

Running away from her pricey boarding school, the kid had landed on Evie's doorstep a few months back looking for her parents—who were spirits desperately clinging to their only child. Since Loretta was heir to their fortune, Jax, as their executor, had followed close on her heels. It had taken some untwisting of palpable disbelief to convince him that Loretta was another psychic Malcolm and belonged with Evie, the dog walker.

Having happily settled into Evie's chaotic family, Loretta added canned whipped cream. "Nah, these will do. Reuben's bubble was really twisted when he ran in and out a little bit ago. What's wrong?"

As an Indigo child, Loretta's declarations were often perceived as strange, but Evie interpreted the *bubbles* she saw as a person's soul. The kid was pretty good at nailing character. As part of Jax's former military intelligence crew, Reuben had a *lot* of issues to work through. Roark, his former partner before he vanished, was one of them.

"Roark showed up at Ariel's. We'll let Jax handle it. I think Sensible Solutions has a genuine case." Evie showed the kid her phone, then rescued the rest of the pancake batter from her mother.

Had Roark crushed his personal Sasquatch or the beast trounced him? And why in the name of the goddess had he gone to Jax's hermit sister?

"Shouldn't one of us go with him?" Mavis asked worriedly as Jax dashed back out.

"Ariel is less than five minutes away. If he needs us, he'll let us know." Shy Ariel did not need spacey Mavis fluttering around.

Solid as Gibraltar in her colorful caftan, her mother settled on a counter stool. "Your Aunt Ellen claims she's won a Cadillac. I'll believe it when I see it sitting in her driveway."

"Another one of those magazine giveaways?" Evie guessed. Her aunt's

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subscriptions provided the local library with all the magazines it could use and then some.

“Most likely. They’re always sending her junk from some contest she’s won. Pris needs to take the mail away from her. My sister is losing her marbles.” Said the woman who’d lost her home because she didn’t read mail that she’d psychically determined to be unpleasant. Mavis poured syrup on the pancakes Evie set in front of her.

Evie tried not to worry about Ariel and Roark while her family ate. She thought she almost pulled it off until her phone beeped with a text message. She grabbed it back from Loretta and opened the app.

HELP was all it said—from Jax’s sister, who never communicated.

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