

The Rainbow Recipe

PSYCHIC SOLUTIONS MYSTERY #4

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One: Pris



HALLOWEEN PARTY

AFTERTHOUGHT, SOUTH CAROLINA

"BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE ARE BRAINLESS." PRISCILLA MALCOLM BROADHURST ADDED THE last smear of crab and caviar to a potato crisp and garnished the lot with dill. "*Brainless people have no minds to block.*"

Repeating that mental refrain, she checked her blurry reflection in the stainless steel refrigerator door to make certain no strands of wiry hair escaped its thick layer of gel. No one could call *her* beautiful. But in honor of the occasion, she'd aimed for *colorful* and added orange dye to the natural white streaks.

Normally, she enjoyed Halloween. Normally, she would be thrilled to cater to such a prestigious crowd. Normally, she wasn't down three staff members with flu and could stay in the kitchen, where she belonged.

She needed a kitchen of her own. This catering business was growing old.

Counting the dollars that tonight would add to her savings account, she heaved the heavy tray to her shoulder and practiced mental blocking. "Hate this, hate it, hate it," she chanted under her breath as she shoved through the door from the ginormous company kitchen into the crowded lobby of Lorraine Fashions.

The noise of a few hundred guests high on champagne and excitement inundated her senses. Mechanical witches cackled. Paper ghosts flashed before her

eyes. How the Samhain had the nerds created those? Shouldn't men with PhDs and engineering degrees have better things to do?

More earth-bound creatures in creative costumes milled and laughed and snatched glasses and appetizers from passing trays. The party was just warming up.

Lorraine Ward, mayoral candidate and owner of this high-end clothing company, had invited every voter in Afterthought, South Carolina to her Halloween fundraiser, plus out-of-town sponsors and media.

The potential for impressing clients who could finally take Pris's catering business to the next level didn't unnerve her as much as the rising tensions and mental vibrations of a few hundred people jammed all in one place.

Wearing spectacles and a floppy witch's black hat, her prescient Aunt Mavis lurked outside the door. "Block them, child," she ordered. "You know most of the braying asses, and there's trouble afoot tonight. You'll need your wits about you."

Pris had lived in Afterthought all her life, so yeah, she knew how to mentally block the braying asses. But so many people at once, combined with the unfamiliar fancy-schmancy gathering over by Lorraine's platform. . . She really didn't need to know about trouble afoot. "Halloween brings the freak out. Should I avoid the Barbie dolls occupying center front?"

Most of the local attendees were sporting their favorite homemade costumes. Pris and her staff wore formal black and white. The Beautiful People by the podium flaunted clothing so elegant that they might as well be costumes in this crowd of farmers and small merchants.

"They're my competition," Mavis replied grimly. "If they represent the changes Lorraine means to introduce to town, I may vote for Hank."

Mavis adored Lorraine and had encouraged the flamboyant designer to run for office. If her aunt was resisting change—her psychic vibrations must be almost as painful as Pris's mental terror. And it wasn't officially Halloween yet.

Cousin Evie arrived in time to catch the discouraging words. "La Bella Gente is not your competition, Mom. You sell herbal remedies. They sell olive oil lotion and soap. A high end boutique like theirs will draw shoppers from the city. They're good for business."

Financial advice from an orange-haired genie in purple diaphanous drapery was a little hard to swallow, but Pris added her reassurances. "I'll wager the Beautiful People don't own a single crystal ball or tarot deck. You're safe, Aunt Mavis. And if I'm to stay employed, I should probably take this tray over to them."

Jaw clamped hard, mentally blocking braying asses as instructed, Pris wove

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through the costumed crowd carrying her tray of gourmet appetizers, and focusing on Lorraine's VIPs. The men ranged in age and height, but they were all dark-haired and wearing expensive suits. The younger two had the rugged, square-jawed facial structure and poise of male models.

Oddly, for a boutique selling lotions, only one woman accompanied them. Tall, Hollywood-thin, the long-haired blonde in designer black wearing a fortune in ancient-looking gold around her neck appeared to be suffering from dyspepsia. Or maybe she was just drunk, since she kept clutching the arm of a shorter, older man. She occasionally smiled tightly at her entourage but didn't appear to be enjoying herself. One of the men had apparently snatched a bowl of almonds from the buffet to offer her. If that was her supper, no wonder she was thin.

Pris frowned as the blonde took a large swig from a shot glass. For many reasons, her catering budget had deliberately allowed only champagne—a few expensive cases followed by increasingly cheaper sparkling wines.

She had not provided shot glasses or hard liquor.

Holding the tray over her head, Pris edged through the animated crowd while dodging dinosaur tails and vampire capes. Perhaps, if she learned the strangers' wavelenghts, she could block them. Did they speak Italian? That would help. She didn't.

In testing her theory, she sought the newcomers' vibrations. The first few intense spikes she received were basically incomprehensible except in terms of emotion. Despite their promotional material about their Italian origins, though, she caught a few distinctly Angle-Saxon curses.

The whole crew came off as anxious, when they should be relaxing and celebrating their introduction to their new neighbors. And maybe the woman was actually in pain. Someone seemed to be anyway.

Maybe she should sympathize instead of scorning them for their pretty faces. After all, it hadn't been easy for these outsiders to set up a European boutique in a rural town like Afterthought. Half the town's inhabitants considered all Italians—and most Yankees—to be fascists. The town council had been opposed to the newcomers on the general principle that *all* strangers were suspect—and like Aunt Mavis, they feared competition.

Out of sheer mule-headedness, Lorraine Ward had bought a building for the boutique and rented it to the new company. That had been a risky move for a mayoral candidate, but Lorraine was more invested in her agenda than winning elections.

It would be a shame if the strangers really were Mafia. They were emanating a lot of unhealthy vibes.

As Pris approached the newcomers, she decided the blonde's smile had more

to do with Botox than strained relations. Was this the one the newspapers were calling Lady Katherine?

A sharp-nosed woman she recognized as a Charleston reporter approached the group at the same time as Pris. The mental tension escalated. The blond lady grabbed a handful of almonds.

"Lady Katherine," the reporter gushed. "I'm so glad you've finally agreed to an interview. Your lotions. . ."

Pris blocked out the rest of the sycophantic speech. Lowering her tray to offer her appetizer creations, she suffered an intense flash of panic, followed by a familiar image. *Dante!* What the. . .

Pulse pounding, Pris shot a quick glance over her shoulder.

Dante couldn't be here. She'd have known it instantly. The uptight Indiana Jones wannabe gave off masculine vibes so substantial it was a wonder he didn't cut a swathe through any room he entered. He'd returned to Italy weeks ago.

All she saw was her cousin Evie's partner, Jax, in a stupid Sherlock Holmes deerstalker hat. Related to Dante, he had similar features but not enough to confuse anyone who knew them well. Taller and more suave than his American relation, Dante was an English-Italian archeologist who flew around academic circles. She didn't think it possible for a fashion model to know him.

Lady Katherine seemed to be gasping for breath, as if in shock from what she was seeing? Still, she released her grip on the pendant and managed to help herself to Pris's caviar.

Pris realized she should have asked Evie about the strangers' auras. Out of sheer curiosity, she warily lowered her mental barriers a little more. Someone had very murky vibrations, but she couldn't differentiate them enough to tell if they were male or female.

Cut it out, Pris, she warned herself. *Concentrate.* Her future kitchen depended on good reviews.

While the reporter nattered, Lady Katherine took another swig from her shot glass, then bit into her appetizer, practically inhaling the whole thing as if starved. Nothing delicate about this lady.

Pris passed the platter to the gentleman hovering next to the lady.

A rush of excruciating pain—followed by strong bolt of triumph—pierced her mental block. Pris staggered, the agony so intense as to be almost physical. Her tray tilted, releasing all her carefully created confections onto polished shoes.

To her horror, the blonde slumped to the floor, her shot glass rolling to Pris's feet amid the caviar.

Two: Evie



HALLOWEEN PARTY

AFTERTHOUGHT, SOUTH CAROLINA

"I LIKE THE HAT," EVIE WHISPERED SEDUCTIVELY, TUGGING ON THE SHERLOCK Holmes flap-eared cap Jax wore as his version of a costume. "Where did Loretta find it?"

Their eleven-year-old ward had more money than should be legally allowed and still haunted the local thrift store.

"I think Dante found it for her when he stopped in England. It smells of mothballs. Am I mistaken, or does your cousin Pris look as if she swallowed a prune pit?" In a tailored black suit that molded to his brawny shoulders, Damon Ives-Jackson would fit in nicely with the Beautiful People Pris approached.

That Jax hung out with *her*, Evangeline Malcolm Carstairs, the town dog walker, instead of the seductive newcomers, proved his rare intelligence. More probably, he was hooked on her nearly transparent genie costume. He had a healthy appreciation of their sex life. She followed his gaze.

Right before their startled eyes, Lady Katherine collapsed in a writhing heap at Pris's feet.

They both reacted automatically, following their own dissimilar instincts. Evie aimed for her cousin, waving her arm in the family signal for circling the wagons. Jax whipped out his phone while barking orders into his mic to Lorraine's security team. She left him calling Sheriff Troy and an ambulance.

Evie narrowed her eyes as her cousin surreptitiously used a linen napkin to scoop up a small glass rolling on the floor, hiding it on her tray. Pris might look like a gel-haired punk ditz, but she was scary smart in ways no one understood.

While people hysterically shouted for doctors and to give the lady space, Evie's family angled through the crowd, forming a circle around La Bella Gente's staff and the pale blonde twitching spasmodically on the polished floor.

"Kit-Kat!" The anguished cry was distinctly British, from one of the shorter, but no less stylish, gentlemen. He fell to his knees at the woman's side and attempted crude CPR.

CPR didn't work well with convulsions. Mavis shoved her way in and knelt beside the victim, taking her pulse. Lady Katherine's eyes rolled back in her head and her twitches of agony halted. Evie didn't need to see the almost imperceptible shake of her mother's head to know the lady's life had just ended with a final shudder.

Evie had never watched a person die. Molars locked and shaking, she waited to see if a spirit rose, but in her experience, it took time for a life essence to coalesce into visibility. Trying to focus on ghosts did not stop tears from running down her cheeks. She didn't even know the woman, but she'd been alive and seemingly healthy just a few minutes ago. How was this possible?

A slightly paunchy older gentleman hauled the weeping young man back, whispering in his ear. The younger one shook his head frantically and tried to pull away. A taller, darkly handsome man took his other arm and murmured what sounded like reassurances. Evie couldn't hear what he was saying but she understood auras.

The frantic young man displayed clear red in his root chakra, passionate if not entirely affectionate.

The taller man exhibited a muddy green in his heart chakra—he was jealous or resentful of someone in this scenario. He didn't strike Evie as caring about the woman on the floor at all. His gaze was fixed on the gaudy necklace around the victim's throat—but Evie's family forced everyone back.

Black hovered around the older man. That could mean any number of things, none of them healthy or showing compassion for the dead woman or her lover.

The auras of the two male model types were murky with gray and brown, concealing their better selves in guardedness and distrust. That poor woman chose her friends badly.

Six-feet tall in sky-high heels, Lorraine Ward sailed into the melee wearing a Cher-length black wig and a costume with more beads and spangles than the performer ever wore. For Halloween, the mayoral candidate had apparently foregone her usual sophisticated elegance, flying her rainbow flag, and letting her

inner drag queen shine. Anyone attending tonight would have no doubt of Larraine's gender identity. That was one of the reasons Evie adored her—she was bluntly honest and so very not a politician.

With the authority she'd developed fighting her way to the top tier of the fashion world, Larraine ushered the crowd toward the buffet. With their departure, Jax and the security team set up a dressing screen to block off this portion of the lobby.

In her wake, Larraine left the local GP, who stooped down to examine the body.

Pris caught Evie's elbow and whispered, "Any ghost?"

Evie shook her head. "I've never been on the scene when someone dies. I don't know if their spirit immediately departs or what happens, sorry. What did you sense?"

"Triumph," her cousin replied grimly. "Someone in the vicinity felt triumph just before she collapsed. We need to find out who gave her the limoncello."

"The what?" Evie asked before sensing someone listening in. She turned and frowned at the nondescript frump she recognized as the Charleston columnist covering the party.

Jax stepped behind Evie to firmly direct the sharp-nosed journalist toward Larraine at the other end of the room. She protested, but security moved in, and the reporter fled.

Security consisted of Evie's partners, Jax's former military intelligence team. Reuben and Roark were even taller and broader than Jax and far scarier looking, even though they'd attempted to dress up. That meant removing nose rings and bones in top knots and wearing long sleeves to hide the tats—although Rube was also wearing a vampire cape. Muscled Roark's shirt clung to his chest and bore a bat signal.

With her usual disregard of this blatant display of masculinity, Pris answered Evie's question. "Limoncello, basically lemon juice with 40% alcohol. I'd die if I drank it too, but I'm guessing the taste would disguise anything short of a nuclear bomb." Pris surreptitiously passed her the shot glass wrapped in linen. "I don't want to be involved. Give this to Troy."

Evie could hear the sheriff's booming voice approaching. He would have been patrolling close by for a shindig this large. She took the glass and hid it in the arms of her gauzy genie sleeves.

Jax returned and held out his hand. "Let's give whatever you and Pris are hiding to Troy, then try to direct the journalists to better topics."

Evie stood on tiptoe and kissed his tense jaw. "I do love you even when you're being an obnoxious lawyer. I need to talk to Troy first."

Jax's protective streak practically glowed luminescent, but he reluctantly waited at her side until Troy arrived. The sheriff consulted with the physician, nodded at Mavis, and warily noted the rest of Evie's family circling the scene. "All right, folks, there's nothing further we can do here. Who is the lady's next of kin?"

The lady's entourage remained silent.

Jax all but growled under his breath. Looking as if he'd swallowed acid, he stepped forward. "Vincent, give the sheriff the lady's information. He's a good man, just trying to help."

Evie's uptight lawyer lover had been working with La Bella Gente to establish the proper legal papers for running an American company. He didn't say it, but Evie could tell he didn't like them. He wasn't really a corporate lawyer and had only taken the job as a favor to Lorraine.

Hoping Lorraine wouldn't be caught in the backwash of this nasty incident, Evie lurked while the sheriff set his men to taking notes from the newcomers, with Jax's aid. Judging by accents, they were apparently British. Interesting. She'd thought it an Italian company.

She waited until the medics arrived, and Troy stepped away, before cornering him.

"You're all but humming loud enough to be an alarm," Troy said in disgruntlement when Evie approached. "What do you have to make my life more difficult?"

She handed him the linen-wrapped shot glass. "She was drinking from this when she dropped. She was surrounded by bad vibes. We don't think this was natural."

Troy sighed and slid the napkin-wrapped glass into an evidence bag. "Doc says she had a heart attack. She may have been surrounded by Mafia for all I know, but that doesn't mean she was murdered."

"You want to wait until I start seeing ghosts? Any evidence will be gone by then. You're the only man we can trust to take a deeper look." Evie batted her lashes at him, knowing full well they had no effect. Sheriff Troy was old enough to be her father and knew Evie's ploys too well. She just kept it up for practice.

"I can't imagine what evidence we can find with a party this size trashing the place, but I'll keep my eyes open. Lorraine was just asking for trouble bringing in these strangers." Troy walked off to talk with one of his men.

Evie saw the vague formation of a murky pink glow above the body as medics lifted Lady Katherine to the gurney.

She hoped Jax was telling Troy that the lady wasn't a lady but a tramp.

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