

# *The Aura Answer*

PSYCHIC SOLUTIONS MYSTERY #5

PATRICIA RICE





# One



“LOOK AT THIS, JUST LOOK!” SHORT, BLOND, AND NORMALLY SERENE, GRACIE FLUNG a stack of colorful paperbacks on the plastic protecting the bed from slimy, shredded wallpaper remnants.

Evie was supposed to be the one with ADHD, not her cautious schoolteacher sister. From her perch on the ladder, Evangeline Malcolm Carstairs studied the cute covers of kittens and snow-covered houses with bloody knives on the porch and assumed they were cozy mysteries. Even a non-reader could work that out.

What did mysteries have to do with anything? Maybe Gracie wanted more for Christmas? Given that a tree had crushed the roof of her sister’s bungalow shortly after Thanksgiving, Gracie really didn’t have a place to put more books.

“Annd?” Evie returned to scraping flocked wallpaper from the guest bedroom of Great-Aunt Val’s Victorian.

The house belonged to their aunt, but Evie had been appointed caretaker. The structure was genuine late 1800s, the décor, pure 70’s clutter. Living here alone since Val married and moved to Atlanta, Evie had never cared about the muddle. Except, this past year, her life had taken a few drastic turns, and more space was required. Someone had to take charge, and as chief dog walker and useless ghostbuster, she elected herself.

She hadn’t realized once she removed decades of old boxes and furniture that the walls would be quite so hideous.

Gracie—legally Grania Malcolm Carstairs Jenkins, but Evie’s self-effacing sister wouldn’t claim that grandiose moniker—pointed at the colorful books as if

they were alive and squirming. "In every one of those books—the heroine *inherits a house*. What's with this business of inheriting a house from complete strangers or unknown family members? Maybe we should look for bones in the attic and write about them!"

Evie sort of got where Spacey Gracie was coming from. Having to beg for housing from her dysfunctional sister in an already over-crowded household had upset Gracie's tidy, home-loving Cancerian nature. Gracie wanted to be snuggled up in her neat little bungalow for Christmas.

But Evie wasn't much of a reader, so she dismissed the rant. "I think we have to knit or bake to qualify as book detectives."

"Or renovate old houses!" Gracie shouted, gesturing at the paper-pocked walls. "Pris bakes. I sew. That ought to count. You can renovate the house."

"Thought that was what I was doing." Evie studied the half-stripped wallpaper. Whoever had put the stuff on meant it to last forever. "Aren't those books all about librarians dropping dead because the mayor wants to turn the library into a nightclub. . ."

Gracie glared.

Oh right. Evie had already had former Mayor Block arrested and thrown in jail on land fraud, after she'd uncovered the murder of her ward's parents by one of Blockhead's contractors. But she was the furthest thing possible from a librarian.

"Fine. You can be my Watson. Write my stories. Make me pretty and smart and sound like I know what I'm doing. You have over two weeks of Christmas vacation to do it in." Evie put down her scraper when her phone warbled "I Got You Babe." Everything in this house was old, including the ring tones.

Jax didn't even greet her. "You'd better come down to the courthouse and persuade your mother to picket somewhere else. There's an ugly counter-protest group gathering, and some of them are armed. Apparently Block has called a news conference."

Normally, Jax's voice thrilled Evie to her toes, even after all these months together. But this was her fiancé's angry, frustrated lawyer voice. She vaguely recalled he was representing the current mayor in some war over zoning and licensing at the courthouse today, and her mother was supposed to be there supporting their cause. Mavis had her reasons for getting involved, although they tended to be more emotional than logical.

Why would former Mayor Block be holding a news conference? Shouldn't he be in jail? *Irrelevant, Evie, focus.*

"If Mavis has the whole coven with her, I'm unlikely to be much influence,

unless they're singing Christmas carols," Evie warned. "I can kill a carol in two minutes flat."

Her mother's friends weren't actually a coven. Malcolms might be called witches by the ill-informed and superstitious, but her family simply had extra abilities others didn't recognize as normal. Evie saw ghosts. No witchcraft there. And the people who frequented her mother's Psychic Solutions shop for herbal remedies and tarot reading simply had different fantasies than men like the former mayor with his delusions of power.

Labeling her mother's friends as libtards and tree-huggers for protecting a pond and family cemetery from development might be a stretch, but the *coven* did consider their job of defending nature seriously. The mayor had paid the price for seeing dollar signs and ignoring angry constituents.

Poor Jax had spent his teenage years in city suburbia, with normal parents and country club memberships and yachts. He was still adapting to Evie's rural neighbors.

"No Christmas carols that I hear." Jax sounded decidedly not merry. "Even the bell ringer stopped. I can't see if one of the guns held him up."

"Protesting zoning with guns seems a little. . . out of context?" she suggested, hoping he was exaggerating.

He sighed in exasperation. "Judge Satterwhite chose today to consider your ex-mayor's plea to be let out on bail on some sort of holiday leniency. Judge Rhodes is hearing Lorraine's zoning case in the other courtroom at the same time. If I were paranoid, I'd call the timing collusion. The conspiracy nut-jobs are still screaming that Lorraine stole the election. These aren't just local loudmouths, and this really isn't about zoning. Pry Mavis and her friends out before someone is hurt."

*Oh crap*, if the mob wasn't about zoning, it was about hating on their new Black transgender mayor. Former mayor Block might be a thief, but he was white and male. Of course all the rubes wanted one of their own back. Evie started down the ladder. "Mavis *knows* things. She must have known the crowd would turn ugly. She's not protesting, she's standing guard over her soul sister."

On the other end of the line, Jax cursed more colorfully than she did. "The sheriff doesn't have enough men to hold back a mob. And I don't think a lot of old people waving signs will help."

Holding the phone in one hand, Evie swiped sticky paper off her overalls with the other. "I'll see what I can do, but your best option is smuggling Lorraine out. Mavis and Company will follow her."

"We're working on it, but there are news crews all over—*Lorraine, get back!*"

A loud crack sounded through the phone before the line went dead.

That crack had sounded an awful lot like a gunshot.

“Jax?” Alarmed when she received no answer, Evie shoved her phone in her pocket and rushed for the door. “Riot in progress. Gotta go. You can be the renovator who solves mysteries,” she shouted back at her sister. “I don’t have time.”

“You have wallpaper in your hair!” Gracie shouted back.



TRAINED IN COMBAT, JAX REACTED INSTINCTIVELY AT THE FIRST LOUD CRACK FROM above and shoved the current mayor toward Reuben. Acting as bodyguard, the ex-Marine and computer nerd pushed Lorraine against the wall, providing a six-foot shield of muscle.

In a downpour of plaster to the second-floor rotunda, the courthouse ceiling collapsed.

Jax yanked short, white-haired Judge Satterwhite out of the raining chunks and back toward his courtroom while trying to see through the dust cloud descending on the melee of the news conference in the center.

Who had Block? He’d been at the podium. . .

A female reporter shrieked. Jax watched in disbelief as a stuffed comforter—sleeping bag?—plunged through the opening in the ceiling, landing smack on top of the former mayor. The bag must have contained something heavier than feathers because Block crumpled. Whatever it was, was small. Block was large. This did not compute.

Ancient plaster thickened the air while cameras rolled, and reporters shouted into microphones. After checking to be certain nothing else plummeted from above, Jax abandoned Satterwhite to his courtroom and the mayor to Reuben’s care. Beneath the gaping hole, he joined the sheriff and his deputy in pushing the crowd back. The collapsed former mayor was now hidden by the gruesome sight slipping from the sleeping bag.

The slight male body was pretty obviously a corpse, even if the stench wasn’t as strong as it might have been had it been midsummer and not December.

At a nod from the sheriff, a female Jax didn’t recognize dropped to her knees to shove aside the filthy comforter and examine Block, who wasn’t moving, cursing, or blustering as any normal man might had a corpse fallen on his face. Had he had a heart attack? Block was in his sixties, stout, and under a lot of stress. Jax prayed he was alive.

Still in his robes, Judge Rhodes warily appeared in his courtroom doorway to assess the situation. Younger and more athletic than white-haired Satterwhite, he wisely retreated from the reporters.

Wearing one of her quieter dark wigs and a sedate suit for her meeting with the judge and town council, Mayor Lorraine Ward didn't scream but watched warily from behind Reuben. The same couldn't be said of a news reporter shouting into her microphone about dead bodies.

Out of habit, Jax tried to count heads, but it was impossible. This was a busy courthouse with two courtrooms in use and a news conference in progress. Whoever had scheduled the former mayor's hearing at the same time as the current mayor's conference had an evil mind. The entire town council—all Block supporters—had brought their own cheering sections and were now crowding around their downed leader.

Outside, a mob shouted for Block's release. . . *Crap*. Block didn't look to be going anywhere soon.

Jax stepped in front of a news camera. The sheriff had the same thought and began gesturing for the news crews to be removed. They protested.

"The man is due some privacy," the sheriff shouted. "Put down your cameras."

The woman examining Block shook her head sadly and stood.

*Shit, crap, hell, unmerry Christmas*. Jax couldn't see the bodies clearly through the mob and the sleeping bag, but he was pretty damned certain the crack he'd heard before the corpse fell hadn't just been the ceiling. If there was any chance at all that Block had been shot. . .

The mob outside was demanding Block's release from custody and reinstatement. If the news of his death got out, shouting would escalate to a real riot. Lorraine's life could be in serious danger. Not to mention Evie's mother and the rest of her. . . coven. Although he was pretty certain there were more than thirteen old hippies out there swinging signs protesting Block's release and supporting Lorraine's zoning law—counter to everything the mob wanted.

The sheriff shouted orders to clear the area around the bodies in the center of the rotunda and set up a perimeter, making it official. Not one body—two.

As if the mob had already heard the news, a howl of fury bellowed from below.

Jax gestured Reuben toward the door of the courtroom they'd vacated only moments ago. "Judge's chambers. Lock it."

Shaking his head, his former military intelligence officer pointed upward, confirming what Jax had suspected. "Active shooter. I'm going in."

He was no longer Reuben's commanding officer. When Lorraine didn't countermand his suggestion, Jax held up a hand to make him wait and reached for his phone. It rang before he could open his contacts.

"The state better be sending riot gear," Evie's voice spoke in his ear.

Damn, he regretted calling her down here, but if her mother was out in that mob. . . At least neither of them were inside the courthouse. They both despised Block and would be instant suspects. "How do we get into the attic?"

Evie had grown up in Afterthought and knew everything, even when she shouldn't.

"On second floor there's an employee-only closet that ought to be locked but probably isn't. Look for pull-down stairs in the ceiling. Attic's full of guano. Wear a mask. Why?"

"No time to explain. Get your mother out *now*." While Lorraine took her elegant self into the courtroom with the white-haired judge and several bystanders, Jax gestured at Reuben, indicated the employee door, and pointed upward. "The scene is about to go ballistic."

Reuben jogged off, a tall black nerd in a business suit, wearing a topknot and tribal scars. People hurriedly stepped out of his way.

"Is Lorraine okay?" Evie demanded in his ear. "Because Mavis is down here talking burning brooms, and you really don't want her going there. She's screaming about black clouds forming."

*Shit.* Mavis's black clouds were always an ill-omen, if only because she made them so. "Have her march the brooms up Main Street, away from the courthouse. Lorraine is fine, but no one else will be unless we distract the mob." Jax was making this up on the fly as he jogged back to help Sheriff Troy control the scene.

He was quite positive that Block hadn't died from corpse assault.

"I like the way your mind works, honey sweetikins. Stay safe and wait for the fire engines." Evie shouted at someone and cut off.

Evie never called him pet names. She was upset. *Fire engines?*

He probably shouldn't encourage Mavis's rare rages, but he hoped that would divert Evie, at least.

Knowing what Jax had sent Reuben to do, the sheriff scowled, but two deputies and a bailiff were barely enough to threaten news crews into standing back, much less the entire town council, Block's lawyer, and some powerful supporters. Someone had to look for a shooter, and Rube was trained.

The shouts outside became bellows as the mob crashed through the front doors. The old courthouse only had a few security guards and a metal detector that wouldn't stop anything but wheelchairs. At least the employee Christmas tree in the hall below was artificial and couldn't burn.

At the escalating chaos, Troy hurriedly escorted the rest of the council members after Lorraine into Judge Satterwhite's chambers. Jax gestured at the bailiff, and he herded the reporters and bystanders across the hall, toward Judge Rhodes' courtroom. Rhodes didn't emerge from his office to object. The TV news



crews resisted. Block's lawyer and a big man in cowboy boots shouted protests. Jax didn't care.

The deputies taped off the dust-covered bodies. Jax didn't recognize the tattered corpse and didn't give Block a second thought once he realized not much of him could be seen. He'd testified against the former mayor but had never known him personally as Sheriff Troy must have. The older man looked grim, but he simply did his job, slamming the courtroom door after the reporters and placing a bailiff in front of it.

Unfortunately, no man could hold back a riot.

Jax stuck in his earbuds and grabbed a roll of yellow police tape. He hit his cell contact for Rube's security partner, Roark, and started down the stairs with the roll.

Roark answered with a curt, "Where are you and where do I need to be?"

Jax tied tape on the lowest baluster on the first landing. Security still held the mob trapped at the roadblock of the metal detector. They couldn't see him at this angle. "Reuben in attic. Mayor in judge's chambers. I'm taping off stairs. Evie should be encouraging Mavis to march down Main Street. What do you see?"

Roark lived with Jax's sister about a mile out of town, but the beauty of a small town like Afterthought was that anyone could be anywhere in minutes. Communication was key.

"I see flaming brooms," the Cajun replied in what sounded like awe. "They are actually marchin' through da middle o' town with *flaming brooms*. Dozens of old ladies. A few doddering gents. Couple on motor scooters. They're swinging the brooms at. . . Holy shit, they just set someone's hair on fire!"

Jax groaned. Evie hadn't been kidding. "As long as they're in the middle of the street and not breaking into the courthouse, we're good. This place is a tinderbox. Evie mentioned fire engines?" Jax created a spiderweb of knotted yellow tape at ankle and knee height up the stairs and tied it all off on top. They'd need to cut each and every strand to get past the trap without breaking a few necks.

One of the deputies had grabbed a second roll of tape and was preparing the back stairs the same way.

"Both da sheriff's cars out front. No more manpower arriving except ladder truck pullin' in the parking lot on the side. Let me get back to you. I gotta punch this *couillon*." Roark's voice cut off.

"Are you carrying?" Troy shouted over the cries below. He'd brought out one of the news photographers to take the photos his forensics team would have taken had they been able to get inside.

"Ricochet factor, nope. Are the state cops on the way?" Jax entered a court-

room and tugged at one of the antique wooden benches. It weighed a ton but wasn't bolted down, so he began dragging it into the rotunda.

Troy joined in, and they hauled the barrier to the front stairs. "It could take the state hours to organize, if only out of sheer obstinacy. The governor hates Larraine. We have a few cars coming in from Charleston. I've called for fire hoses."

"Smart move. Mavis is setting hair on fire."

Troy snorted but didn't comment on Mavis. He'd known her for a lifetime.

Jax continued as they returned for another bench. "The ladder truck arrived. Can we evacuate people before they bring out the hoses?"

"If they're not afraid of heights. You got a disguise for Mayor Larraine? Because if that mob sees her. . ." Troy helped him position the second bench at the back stairs.

Jax understood. Larraine was nearly six feet tall in heels and not exactly a shrinking violet. He punched up Reuben's number. "Finding anything?"

"Shooter's gone. There's a trapdoor exit onto the roof and an old fire escape. Someone's been living up here. Looks like work is being done on electrical. Floorboards are ripped off. Gaping hole where our corpse must have been sleeping on the insulation between the rafters."

He'd process that at a later date. "Do you think you can get the mayor down a ladder truck without anyone recognizing her?" Jax positioned the bench across the stairs and looked around for more obstacles.

"Judge's robe. I'll be right down."

Gunshots fired below. Screams, cursing, and smashing glass—the mob must have breached the metal detector. Shouts of "Free Mayor Block!" echoed up the stairs.

Had the former mayor been alive, he'd have been grandstanding for his supporters right now and the mob might have retreated. This mob had been planned.

Jax glanced at the bodies surrounded by yellow tape. He'd like to shout back *Bring a coffin and you can have him.*

Instead, he took the police baton the sheriff handed him and waited for the first of the mob to stumble over his spider web.

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**Patricia Rice**

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Book View Café  
304 S. Jones Blvd. Suite #2906  
Las Vegas NV 89107

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