

The Prism Effect

PSYCHIC SOLUTIONS MYSTERY #6

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One



"SASQUATCH." IDONEA MALCOLM LIFTED THE MEWLING RAGDOLL KITTY IN HER palm and tied an *I need a good home* ribbon on it. Useless, she knew, but the kitten would have fun pulling it off.

Iddy was officially a veterinarian, but unofficially, her clinic overflowed with unwanted pets. The county needed a shelter. She desperately needed more space. If only the gods really did provide. . .

"Yeti," Loretta, her cousin's about-to-be adopted ward, countered, picking up Sasquatch's furry litter mate to tie another ribbon. "No one will adopt kittens named Sasquatch and Yeti, and then I can take them home."

"Evie would kill me, and then you couldn't stay here while she's honeymooning, and Jax will murder us both if she calls off the wedding." The judge had said Loretta's adoption couldn't go through until Evie and Jax were married, so the kid grimaced at the warning.

"Besides, *Yeti* isn't any worse than *Iddy*." As a vet, she was called Dr. Malcolm by strangers, but the entire town of Afterthought knew her as Iddy, Slate Cooper's weird bastard daughter.

"What was your mother thinking?" With her shoulder-length brown hair enlivened by purple streaks to match the frames of her glasses, the precocious eleven-year-old tapped into her notebook computer. "Idonea, meaning *suitable* in Latin, Norse, *to love again*. . ."

Iddy could have said her mother was thinking with her lower parts, but Loretta was a little young to understand. Slate Cooper was every woman's

wet dream. As a father, he sucked. He'd hied himself off to Hollywood at the first opportunity, seeking fame and fortune. He'd achieved infamy, anyway. All Iddy had ever received from him was her height and presumably Native American coloring. Her father's claim to Cherokee heritage could easily be as much a lie as everything else that came out of his mouth.

Apparently, he hadn't been lying when he'd told her mother a film production company would be coming to town, though. He probably had been lying when he said he'd sent them here. Her mother had curled her graying hair and bought a whole new wardrobe just in case he arrived with them.

In this past week, the film company had blown into town like an April storm, practically redesigning Afterthought's historic Main Street. No one had mentioned Slate's name. Iddy was staying out of it.

Shrieking a warning, La Chusa flew in the back window Iddy left open for her. The raven glided around the examining room, skillfully avoiding hanging fluorescents and walls of cages, while setting the other birds to squawking. Polly Parrot erupted in her usual stream of invectives. The macaw had outlived her owner, a Navy man whose daughter had small children and couldn't take its foul—beak.

"La Chusa, perch," Iddy commanded, slipping off her confining lab coat while trying to focus on the bird's warnings. Ravens could learn words and think to some extent, but La Chusa projected mental images best. "Quiet. Let me see."

Wide-eyed, Loretta cuddled the kittens and waited.

What little Iddy could translate from the picture she received had her reaching for the tranquilizer gun and shouting at her almost-niece. "Call Sheriff Troy. If this is the film crew's idea of producing footage, I'm stopping it. Tell him a bull is heading in the direction of town, chased by a herd of wanna-be cowboys."

Loretta was already on her phone, while simultaneously typing a group text alerting the family on her notebook computer. Iddy didn't have time for a family freak-out. She grabbed tranq darts and ran out through the empty reception room. It was too early for clients, thank the goddesses.

Crossing the gravel parking lot, Iddy opened her mind to seek the bull's panic and caught images of more than one terrified animal—*shoot, sugar*. The morons really did think they were cowboys. Where did they find the horse?

Wishing for the umpteenth time that she had enough space for cattle, she threw open her gate. Her parking lot and tiny paddock were the last piece of open space between the farms to the west and the town to the east.

Afterthought wasn't large. Once past her place and the feed store, the highway ran by old bungalows and became Main Street. Downtown wasn't crowded at this hour, but there were still cars and pedestrians.

She backed up and parked her heavy Tahoe at a slant across half the highway. Climbing out, she opened a bag of grain in the paddock and checked that there was water in the trough. She could hear the roar of engines racing toward her, and she worked faster. What the *Hades* did they think they were doing?

The poor beast's panic was so great that her mental probes didn't connect. Sensory stimulation needed. She inhaled the scent of fresh grain and water, conveying welcome aromas with her calming reassurances.

The rampaging bull charged over the hill, a rider on horseback on his flank, crowding it to the side of the road. A massive Ram pickup and two motorcycles roared and maneuvered around each other in an effort to what? Start a clown derby?

Seeing a rifle sticking out of the truck's back window, Iddy allowed rage to roll over her. She didn't do fury often, but to shoot a poor animal for doing what comes naturally. . .

Stepping out on the highway, she raised her tranquilizer gun and aimed it at the vehicles.

To her relief, the cowboy on a terrified roan spotted her open gate and angled the bull in that direction. With fury shutting out any admiration for the movie star action, she held her dart gun on ready. She concentrated on thoughts of grain and water to lure the bull.

Her oversized SUV funneled the bull toward the paddock and blocked the pickup and bikes from interfering. The posse of clowns stopped in the far lane to shout and wave their weapons.

"Better call off your men or I'll shoot them," Iddy told the rider, relaxing her mental lures as the bull followed the scent of food. She continued aiming her gun, daring the morons to come closer.

"Be my guest," she thought he shouted over the roar of powerful engines. The rider slammed the gate after the bull limped into the paddock.

Or maybe she just hoped they were on the same wavelength. Once in a while, it was nice to imagine sensible men existed. She'd seen little evidence of it.

Exhausted, the animal trotted over to the grain as if that had been its goal all along.

The battle had taken mere minutes. Sirens were just now screaming from

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town. Iddy eased her gun to her side, ready to lift it the second anyone went after that poor bull.

Even though he was wearing a linen suit and gator boots that screamed city slicker—or movie star—the cowboy on the roan swung down with expertise.

He was broad, almost barrel-chested. And tall. She was five-ten, and he towered half a foot over her, with an unshaven jaw and a black expression to match his overlong black locks. Holy smokes. This glowering, square-jawed beefcake resembled her father thirty years ago—a very good reason not to lower her guard. She held her gun steady at her side under his simmering anger.

He looked her up and down, making her much too aware of the skimpy T-shirt and jeggings she usually wore under her lab coat. She was skinny. She knew that. But she wrestled cattle and hundred-pound sacks of grain for a living. She was no weakling.

She glared back. “What the hell did you think you were doing? Holding a rodeo?”

A deputy’s car halted on the road shoulder on the far side of her Tahoe. Recognizing the man climbing out, she tossed him her keys. “Got it under control, Cal. You might want to interrogate the clown squad over there.”

The giant in linen gestured at his crew to move on. They were already hastily making U-turns.

Not bothering with the posse, Cal used her keys to pull the Tahoe off the road, then strolled over with his notebook out. “Disturbing the peace at this hour?”

“Escaped cattle,” the cowboy said curtly. “The production crew must have left a gate open.” He gestured up the road.

Production crew, right. Iddy rolled her eyes. “All that, and they weren’t even filming?”

Now that authority had arrived, Loretta popped out of the office, waving her ever-present computer notebook. “You’re with Mackie Productions!” she crowed. “Has Betty George arrived yet?”

The grim giant acknowledged her bespectacled niece with a nod. “Miss George arrived last weekend. And yes, I’m with Mackie.”

He said it with such distaste that Iddy watched him a little closer. His expression didn’t reveal anything as he handed a business card to the deputy. “Caden Garcia. I’m the line producer, just trying to keep everyone legal.”

“How many animals are there and who is in charge?” Iddy demanded.

Caden Garcia of Mackie Productions raised a dark eyebrow.

Before she could spit in his arrogant brown eye, Cal spoke up. "Dr. Malcolm is the county animal control officer. If you'll be using livestock in your production, you need to check in with her."

"Malcolm?" The linen-suited cowboy changed his attitude. "Dr. Idonea Malcolm? I was told I should consult with you."

It was her turn to raise a haughty eyebrow.

He nodded acknowledgement. "I apologize if we started out on the wrong foot. I have family familiar with this area, and your name was mentioned as an animal trainer."

His family mentioned her? Not her father? She could believe that.

"What family?" Loretta asked eagerly. "My father has California family. You're from California, aren't you?"

Recently orphaned Loretta really loved calling Evie and Jax her mother and father. Holding the dart gun with one hand, Iddy squeezed the kid's skinny shoulders with the other.

A little warily, the stranger replied, "I'm told I have a distant cousin, Damon Ives Jackson. I was hoping to call on him."

The deputy sighed and shoved his notebook in his pocket. Loretta jumped up and down, shouting, "I knew it!"

Iddy didn't share her excitement. Jax's California relations usually called on him when any weird problem popped up along this coast—*because of Evie*. She wasn't about to become one of her cousin's psychic solutions.

"You arrived just in time for the wedding," Iddy warned. "I'd suggest you call Jax before you mention whatever your problem is, or he's likely never to speak to your side of his family again."

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