

Midnight Rain – Chapter One

By Holly Lisle

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Phoebe Rain sat with her back to the bar that divided the kitchen from the dining room, watching the first traces of pink creeping across the Florida sky. She shuffled the tarot cards on the table in front of her, and shifted on the kitchen chair. Her right knee was hurting again, but she didn't dare get up to stretch. Her call volume had been steady all night as soon as she moved away from the table, she knew the phone would ring. Out west, where it was still dark and the insomniacs were pacing the floors, people were still looking for psychic comfort to get them through the night.

She smiled sadly at that. Sometimes she wished she, too, could have a little companionship, a little comfort, in the lonely hours before dawn. But she wouldn't consider paying Psychic Sisters' Network prices for it.

So she straightened her right leg the way the physical therapist had taught her, concentrating on contracting the muscles as hard as she could, then relaxing them completely. Fire lanced out from the joint as she forced it to do what she wanted, burning down into the calf muscle and up into the thigh. She tightened the muscles again, gritting her teeth against the pain, and when it became too intense to tolerate, relaxed. One more time then the phone rang, and she grabbed her pen and depressed the headset switch on the phone, and

lowered her foot to the floor.

" Fifty-five . . . minute . . . yes . . . club," a recorded voice said as she wrote down the time. 5:57 AM. She glanced at the flowchart again, noting the script she had to follow, and said, "Thank you for calling Psychic Sisters Network. My name is Ariel, and my extension number is 723884. May I have your name, please?"

A nervous-sounding woman said, "Clarise."

Phoebe wrote down the name. "Clarise, I need your date of birth." The woman sounded older than eighteen. The birthdate she gave would have made her late thirty-something.

" Okay, Clarise," Phoebe said, scooping up the tarot cards. She shuffled the round deck and cut the cards with her left hand while she said, "I read tarot, and what I would like for you to do is focus on the question or questions that you wish to have answered. While you're doing that, I'm going to concentrate on you and begin a general reading for you. Is that all right?"

" Yes," that timid voice said.

" Fine." Phoebe put a card on the table. "The first card in the reading is the Significator, which tells us who you are right now. The card that comes up for you is the Hierophant at about one o'clock. This card says that you are under oppression in some way that some person or some organization is telling you how you should think, how you should act, what you should believe" Phoebe paused, then asked, "Does that sound about right?"

" I . . . yes." That soft, scared voice. "Yes. About right."

Phoebe put another card down. "The next card is the Three of Swords, straight up. This card refers to your Atmosphere that is, to what's going on with you right now and it indicates a

disagreement. It can either be an argument you're having inside your mind, where part of you wants to do one thing and the other part wants to do something else, or it can be an actual physical argument with other people. Because it comes up in the upright position, I read this struggle as being very painful for you."

"Painful" Clarise said thoughtfully. "Yes." And then, under her breath, so that if the phone connection hadn't been so clear, Phoebe wouldn't have heard the words at all, "You should see the bruises."

Phoebe's stomach knotted.

A picture flashed in front of her eyes then, as if she were looking at a movie screen. This call wasn't some cheerful girl wanting to know the sex of her unborn baby, or whether she ought to take that new job offer. In Phoebe's mind, Clarise became suddenly and terribly real: pale, about thirty pounds overweight, her lank brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, fly-away tendrils brushing the corners of her mouth. Hunched over her telephone, speaking in a soft voice not because it was her natural voice, but because she had grown accustomed to listening for the sound of footsteps behind her. Something in the back of Phoebe's mind said that Clarise lived in a nice house in a nice neighborhood. And that the people who knew her didn't know about the private hell that lay behind her go-to-Publix dress and her Taurus station wagon and her brief appearances at parent-teacher conferences and the Presbyterian church on holiday Sundays.

Clarise wanted comfort, wanted someone to talk to and she sought it from a complete stranger at a four-dollar-a-minute psychic hotline because the only kindness that hadn't come back to haunt her had come from strangers.

Phoebe kept putting the cards on the table, reading their meanings by habit, while most of her attention focused on

trying to come up with something genuinely useful to tell Clarise. She wanted to be able to say "Everything in your life is going to turn out great," but the cards were falling ugly. In the Recent Past, the Ten of Swords reversed wanting to die rather than have what had happened to her before happen to her again, and not being able to die, even though the horrors had returned. Phoebe studied the cards for a moment, noticing that there were two Daughters and a Son in the layout.

"The problem is the kids, isn't it?" she said. "You can't take them; he has money and power and position in your town, and . . . you don't."

A soft gasp. "Yes."

"And you can't leave them; they're your children."

A snuffle. A muffled sob. "I have to do something. He's good to them as long as he has . . . me . . . to take his anger out on"

But Clarise believed that if she left, he'd hurt them. And if she tried to take them, he'd hurt her. They were his power over her. And he was killing her with them, with the things he held over her, killing her with her own inescapable love a little more every day.

Phoebe gave Clarise an 800 number for a national women's resource center, and suggested that Clarise look through her local phone directory for the addresses and phone numbers of local women's shelters. And she offered as much sympathy as she could. She kept her voice upbeat and tried to find something positive to tell Clarise, but Clarise already knew that she needed to get out of the house. She knew she needed to take her kids and run to someplace safe, but she couldn't imagine finding a place where he couldn't find her.

And I am not the person to tell you that you're wrong for being terrified, or for staying put.

Phoebe's knee throbbed, a painful reminder that sometimes when a woman ran, her abuser followed.

When Clarise finally hung up, Phoebe sagged. She didn't want to take anymore calls. Not for a while, anyway.

She picked up the other phone her home phone, which wasn't dedicated to the Psychic Sisters Network and dialed the number that connected her to the system. She wanted to log off before another call came in, and if she was going to get off at all, she needed to do it fast.

" Welcome to the Psychic Network Center," the recorded voice on the other end said. "You must have a touch-tone phone to interact with this system. At this time, please enter your ID number."

She punched in 7-2-3-8-8-4 and waited.

The system felt slow to her. Call volume might be high, or maybe a lot of other people were trying to log on or off at the same time.

" The number you have entered is 7-2-3-8-8-4. If this is correct—"

Phoebe punched 1, cutting a hundredth of a second off of her log-out time. Her other option would have been 2, had she entered her number incorrectly, as she sometimes did when she was really exhausted.

Don't ring, she told the Network phone. Don't ring. Don't ring. Just let me get off the system.

" Now enter your password."

" 9-4-7-7-5-2."

A long pause. Hurry, she thought. Come on. Hurry.

" The number you have entered is 9-4-7-7-5-2. If this is

corr—”

She punched 1.

” To hear the daily message, press 1 now. Otherwise—”

She pressed 2. The computerized voice seemed suspended in molasses, dripping out one word at a time. Another Clarise was going to call, and Phoebe would have to take the call because she was technically still on the system. She wouldn't be able to finish her log-off, and she'd have to try again, and again. She didn't dare refuse calls if she didn't answer each call by the second ring while she was logged on, she'd lose her job.

And she had to have the job.

There was no way to cheat. Every call showed up in the computer log, as did the numbers clients called from, the length of time they stayed on the phone, and God only knew what else. Phoebe was supposed to capture addresses by requesting them and then writing them down, but she suspected even that was only for legal purposes; the Network could probably have gotten home information on clients from any of a number of databases, simply by backtracking the phone numbers. She figured the reason she was supposed to have the callers give her the information was that, if the clients gave their addresses to her, the Network had implied consent to use them.

” The computer shows that you are currently logged on at 1-954-9—” and droned out her phone number.

I know where I am, she thought. Let me log off.

” To log on—” the final prompt started, and she slammed her finger against the 2.

” I'm off,” she whispered, and waited for the voice that would confirm this.

Before it could, the Psychic Sisters phone rang.

" You are now logged off the system, and will not be receiving any further calls until you log on again," the computer voice said. "If this is correct—"

She pressed 1 and hung up, and the Network phone rang a second time. "Shit," she whispered. She depressed the headset switch on the Network phone with a sense of resignation. "Fifty-five . . . minute . . . YES . . . club," the voice said.

She put the smile back on her face. It would be the last call, anyway. No more would come through. She said, "Thank you for calling the Psychic Sisters Network. My name is Ariel, and my extension number is 723884. May I have your name, please?"

She marked in the time the call started, then waited. "Hello? Are you still there?"

She heard a chuckle. "I thought you were psychic, Phoebe."

That voice. It couldn't be.

" I found you again," he said. "I found you, sweetheart. You would not believe how far I've had to come . . . but I found you, just as I promised I would. And now you're going to come back to me. Walking or crawling – you're going to come back."

She cut the call off and sat staring at the phone.

It couldn't be him. There was no way. None. But if it was him –

It can't be him.

Her first impulse, even all these years later, was to call home. To beg her father to come get her.

Her dad would have been there as fast as humanly possible. He would have stood between her and the nightmare. But her father, her mother ... her younger sister Nicki – a late-night drive through a wild storm, wet leaves on a winding Ohio back

road, and bad brakes in an old car had taken the three of them away from her forever. Their passing had marked the beginning of Phoebe's hell.

But she did have another call she had to make.

With shaking hands, Phoebe dialed a number that she'd memorized a long time ago, a number she had always hoped she would one day forget.

The woman's voice on the other end of the phone was calm and no-nonsense. "Mercy Cove Total-Care Home, long-term-floor-can-I-help-you," she said.

Phoebe shuddered, the memory of all the times she'd heard those words suddenly sharp and ugly. She looked around her townhouse, at the triple-deadlocked front door, at the windows screened from the outside world, and she listened to the emptiness of the place. Just her. Just her – and that had seemed safest. Best. Only now it just felt vulnerable again.

" I'm just calling to check on the status of one of your patients. M-m-michael Schaeffer."

" May I ask who's calling, please?"

" Phoebe Rain." A pause, then the reluctant, "Used to be Schaeffer."

" Phoebe . . . Schaeffer." The sound of a metal rack rotating, a heavy thud, a softly muttered imprecation she hadn't been intended to hear. "Okay. Just a moment please." Phoebe waited some more, while pages were riffled, while two voices spoke, while judging from the sudden silence – a hand went over the phone mouthpiece. Then the voice came back on the line, markedly cooler. "I'm sorry. We only give out information on our patients to family members."

" I'm his ex-wife."

" Yes, ma'am. Your name is not on the list the family approved."

Of course it wouldn't be. Her ex-in-laws would have seen to that.

" It's important," she said quietly. "I just need to know if his condition has . . . changed."

" I suggest you call his family, Mrs. Schaeffer."

" Rain. Ms. Rain." Either I'm Mrs. Schaeffer and you give me the information, or I'm Ms. Rain, and you don't, she thought. You don't get to have it both ways. "He tried to kill me once. I have to know if he could try to kill me again," Phoebe said, fear adding a note of hysteria to her voice.

" Ms. Rain, then. Please call his family for information. No matter what the circumstances, I absolutely cannot give any information to you. I'm sorry," she said. But she didn't sound sorry.

Phoebe said, "I understand," when what she wanted to do was scream, "Bitch!" She hung up the phone.

Michael was still at Mercy Cove – otherwise the woman on the phone would have simply told her he was no longer a patient. But whether he could have called her – whether he might once again be a danger to her – that she couldn't tell. That secret lay in the nursing home in Ohio.

She couldn't find out about him as Phoebe Rain, or even as Phoebe Schaeffer. If she called again, she was likely to be told they couldn't give out information no matter what name she gave – she would guess, remembering her in-laws, that they would have requested notification if she called. They hated her for what she'd done to their son. They had never believed a word of what she said he'd done to her. She imagined that they would use any tool available to them to stand in her way.

No way in hell would one of them tell her how he was doing.

If she had only thought to identify herself as Laine Schaeffer, Michael's sister, she could have gotten information. Laine and Michael had never been close, and with Laine all the way out Oregon, they'd had almost no contact in all the years Phoebe and Michael had been together. But Laine and Michael hadn't been enemies. Phoebe guessed that Laine would be on the list to get information, even if it was a privilege she never chose to use.

Phoebe sat for a moment, staring at the little gray headset phone she used for the psychic line, thinking. The phone call had come through with a network prompt. Which meant it had gone through the system.

Which meant the network's computer had logged the originating phone number.

She smiled slowly. Which meant that whoever had called her, she had him.

She checked the Network's employee contact line number on her phone list – she'd only had to use it once before, when her priority rating had inexplicably slipped to 89,000-something. A man who called himself Therian answered.

Phoebe identified herself and said, "Can you do a check on the last call that came through for me? I need to take the phone number to the police. The caller used my real name, and . . . threatened me." Her throat tightened as the pictures flashed through her mind: blood on the chalkboards, terrified young faces, screaming; blinding pain. She cleared her throat, got her voice back, said, "I can't afford to ignore this."

Therian sighed heavily. "It will take me a minute."

" I have all night ... well, morning."

She heard him sigh again before he put her on hold. She found

herself listening to bad, digitized New Age music; she blocked it out by trying to figure out how the caller had located her. No one except for Ben Margolies in the New Age shop, who'd recommended her, and the woman at PSN Inc., who hired her, and whose name she didn't even know – whom she had never even met except for a single phone interview – knew she worked as a psychic for the Network. Getting her extension number was simple – she gave that out at every call, hoping that her readings would be good enough that she would develop a clientele of regulars.

But knowing that she was the person on the other end of it – how could anyone have discovered that Ariel the psychic was Phoebe Rain? She'd been careful never to give her real name out. The caller had said he knew where to find her. Did he? He might. She didn't have any credit cards and all her mail went to a drop box, and both her home and Psychic Sisters phones were unpublished unlisted. But her driver's license had her correct address on it he might have managed to obtain her address from that. It still wouldn't explain how he'd reached her through the Psychic Sisters. They didn't have a directory the only way a caller could get a specific reader was to have called her once before and to have copied down her number. The odds of the man with Michael's voice having gotten her and having recognized her had to have been right up there with winning the big prize in the lottery.

But somebody won that, too, didn't they? Sooner or later, someone took it home.

With the feeling that her luck had run out, she stared at her phone and waited.

Therian came back on the line. "The last call I have for you is from Idaho. Our database lists the caller as Clarise. The phone number—"

Phoebe cut him off. "Clarise called at 5:57 AM. I want the one

that called at 6:28 AM.”

” The last call I show for you is at 5:57 AM.”

Phoebe shook her head. “This came through the system. Fifty-five minute YES club prompt, I did the opening script, he didn’t give me his name. He used my name, said . . . what he said, I hung up on him. It’s got to be there.”

” I’m checking. But I show you logged off at 6:27, so any call that came through at 6:28 would have been dialed directly into your number.”

” I’m telling you, I got the system prompt. And the phone rang before I finished logging off,” Phoebe said, but then she realized that it hadn’t. She’d punched that final 2 that completed her log-off, and the phone started to ring the instant after that, though before she got confirmation from the system that she was off. Perhaps she really had already logged herself off, if only by nanoseconds.

” I’m sorry,” Therian said, “but the last call that came through the system for you was the one from Idaho.”

Phoebe sat there for a moment, eyes closed, with her fingers pressed against her temples.

” Okay, thanks,” she said at last.

” Sorry I couldn’t help. Why don’t you call the phone company and see if they can look into this for you?”

” I’ll do that.” She hung up.

She sat staring out her window, wondering how the caller had managed to get a prompt from the Psychic Sisters Network on his call if he hadn’t called through the 900 number.

It might really be Michael, though she couldn’t imagine how that could be. The last she’d heard of him, he’d still been in

a coma. Had been in a coma for more than a year. She'd stopped keeping track at that point – everyone she'd talked to and everything she'd researched insisted that anyone in a coma for more than a year wouldn't be waking up. Not that she slept any better at night for knowing that.

It almost had to be someone else; someone who could imitate Michael's voice and who had reason to hate her. To want to hurt her.

Maybe someone from the school. One of her fellow teachers. Or one of the parents.

Her skin crawled, and she tasted bitter fear. No matter who had found her, no matter why he had called her, he was the nightmare she'd been waiting for – the one that she'd known in her gut was coming. She looked at the four walls that surrounded her, at the big window with its drawn shades, with only the angled glass at the top open to the sky, at the sliding glass door pinned shut and also shaded. No one could see in, but suddenly she felt like a bird in a cage with the snake coiled just outside, studying her through the bars, looking for a way in.

She had to get out.

She rose, hurried, unthinking, and knives tore through her right knee, pain so white-hot she whimpered and fell back into her seat, tears flooding her eyes. She grabbed the table with both hands and pulled herself up, fighting the pain, trying to get on top of it; she grabbed her cane with a sense of defeat. In the last few months, she'd been making trips without it. But not this time. The damned leg felt like it might give out at any moment. Maybe that was just anxiety, which always made her pain worse, and maybe it wasn't.

She grabbed her purse and her keys and threw open all three deadbolts, stopping on the other side only long enough to make sure all of them were locked again. Scared, shaking, unsure of

what to do next, she hobbled down the walk.

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