

# Part II of Chapter One

By Holly Lisle

It's a long chapter, so I'll post part two now, and then part three later. It's broken up into about equal thirds. I'll note that the chapter seems to come to a satisfactory end at the end of this section. I'll also note that in the third section, ... well, things don't work out as Phoebe anticipates.

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*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. Each word of the computerized voice seemed suspended in molasses, dripping out one word at a time. Someone else with a terrible problem was going to call, and she was going to 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. She was supposed to capture addresses, 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 get them 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 1-954-998-8442."*

*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," the caller said. "I found you, sweetheart. You would not believe how far I've had to come . . . but I found you. And now I'm coming after you."*

*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 couldn't be him.*

*With shaking hands, she 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 got the shivers hearing those words 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."*

*"Ms. Rain, then. If you need to know, I'm sure they'll tell you. But we have our policy. I'm sorry."*

*She said, "Thank you, then," when what she wanted to do was scream, "Bitch!" and hung up the phone.*

*Michael was still there – 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 do anything they could to stand in her way.*

*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 she and Michael had been together. But they 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.*

*She 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.*

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