

# The count so far – 1898 today (plus, the final third of Chapter One)

By Holly Lisle

It's going well. I haven't had a huge amount of time to write; some days are just like that. But I've hit the flow of the story pretty well each time I've been able to sit down with it, and I've manage to cover a lot of ground.

I have to quit for a bit now, but I'll come back and shoot for the last 1400 or so words. I don't think I'll have too much trouble getting them – I have a good idea what I want to do with the next section.

And here's the last third of Chapter One. I won't be posting any more complete chapters, but I thought this first one would make a nice teaser. You don't get to meet Alan ... but I'll make sure you at least get to see him in action before I finish the book and send it off.

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*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. Dead kids. 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 the woman in the New Age shop and the man who'd hired her 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She didn't have any credit cards and all her mail went to a drop box, and both her home and Psychic Sisters phones were unpublished unlisted, but her driver's license had her correct address on it – he might have managed to obtain her address from that.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 6:18 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 6:17, so any call that came through at 6:18 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. Had he

taped it and called directly to the phone? How much did he know about her?

It might 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, at that point, been in a coma for more than a year.

It might 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 trouble. She looked at the four walls that surrounded her, at the big window with its drawn shades, 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, and 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. In a daze, she

*hobbled down the walk.*

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And that's it. The end of Chapter One as it stands right now.

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