

Today, I'd like to finish a full chapter – about 3500 words.

By Holly Lisle

And just for fun, here's a teaser – the first 1200 words of Chapter One:

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 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, and 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.

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 them and cut them 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 the back of 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-Harris-Teeter 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 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 sniffle. 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.

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