

### Ridley's Deck

The air was thick with humidity, even as the sun was beginning to set. Cicadas screeched all around as the summer day transitioned to night. Between the rows of tightly packed houses, a lone car passed through the neighborhood without even slowing down. Four different kinds of music and at least three TV shows were audible through open windows as Ridley stepped out for fresh air. Ridley swung her free hand, smacking a few bugs away from her cup of coffee. She pushed back her dark, curly hair and reached into her back pocket, pulling a slim cardboard box out of her back pocket of her ripped jeans.

Ridley sat on the porch step, thumbing through her deck. The last week had been a difficult one to get any sort of reading on, but she could only hope for the best. The cards fluttering over her thumb, Ridley closed her eyes and focused on the sound of her fingers running over the stiff deck. She set down a couple of the cards and did a quick reading, things still too cloudy for her to understand. She scolded her cards for not being clearer but went back to running her thumb across the deck, as if stroking a beloved pet.

She had been practicing with the deck for a few years. The strange thing was, she'd never gone out and purchased the deck, nor had the deck ever really been something she believed in. Her mother was a devout Catholic and chided her for believing in such foolish things as tarot. Yet the cards just started showing up. None of them had the same back, were drawn by different artists and had different themes. Some were stiff and brand new; others were flimsy with crumbling edges. Gradually, a full set of cards had slowly dropped into her hands.

The Empress slid out of a book Ridley was reading one day. The Six of Swords was found in her glove compartment while she was looking for her registration. The Fool had randomly turned up in her backpack while she was going through airport security. Weirdest of all, The Chariot had appeared in the same envelope as her acceptance letter to the local community college. Ridley had been a little confused, but the cards never really scared her. They were familiar and trusting in her hands. The deck appeared one card at a time every week over the last couple years, never giving her a moment to completely forget their presence in her world.

Once she had a full deck, Ridley had started to practice readings. They were fairly casual and without all the flair that she normally associated with the practice. She would

sometimes add a bit more drama for first-time readings for friends, but it was a more relaxed affair when she was doing a reading for herself like this one. While she never heard voices, she was always sure of what the cards were saying.

Each card seemed to have its own personality. Death was sullen but surprisingly uplifting at times. The Lovers were a bit overbearing but were generally tolerable. The Empress, her first, was her favorite. It was a beautiful woman with long, blonde hair and a demeanor that reminded Ridley of an older sister. If she ever absently thumbed through her deck, she would always catch sight of the Empress as she passed by in the blur. If The Empress ever appeared when she did a reading, Ridley felt as though she was being watched over by her, the appearance of the card comforting her.

Ridley's Grandma Loraine had been interested in the supernatural since before Ridley was born and encouraged her readings when the cards first started appearing. This led to large stacks of half-read books about tarot, numerology, and mysticism interspersed between her field hockey gear and makeup. It startled people at first, but Ridley never felt ashamed enough to let the cards go. The deck of 78 was just too familiar, more of an extension of her mind after the years spent collecting them. She'd do readings for friends and strangers at bars, more as a party trick than anything. She rarely left the house without her deck and shuffling them was a nervous habit that helped her slow her rushing thoughts. Ridley always trusted the cards when they said not to do something in her own life.

Flipping through her cards again, finding The Fool, The Tower and The Six of Cups. Ridley cursed and shuffled the cards again. The Empress came up and Ridley paused, focusing on her face. Sighing, Ridley set the other cards aside. The Empress was right; Ridley was trying too hard and trying to get answers that the cards couldn't provide. Trying too hard to find the truth of a question was only going to cause things to be cloudier. For now, the present was Ridley's time. It was the shrieking cicadas, the heavy air and the smell of warm coffee keeping her grounded.