

*Sheridan's*  
*Fate*

by  
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## PROLOGUE

Pain, beyond anything she'd ever felt, seared Sheridan's body. Her stiff neck burned, and her chest constricted as her whole system convulsed. She tried to cough, but the pain overwhelmed her. The heat on her skin seeped further into her body. *This is it. I'm dying. No one can live through this.*

Hands pulled at her, voices came and went, one moment startlingly close only to shift and grow distant the next. Sheridan tried to move her arms, to make the voices understand that she needed help, needed someone to stop the agony, but nobody listened. She tried to call out, but her mouth was dry, her tongue stuck hopelessly to the roof of her mouth, making it impossible for her to create the tiniest squeak.

Eventually, and Sheridan didn't know if it had been minutes or days, the pain subsided as she finally just shut off. As Sheridan relaxed, the voices around her seemed to grow more frantic, but she finally found some comfort. She couldn't understand why this break from the torment would upset anyone. Couldn't they see she was finally through the worst of it? All she needed was some sleep, a little rest, and then she'd speak to them, answer all their insistent questions.

Sheridan floated, content and without any discomfort, and a childhood memory of a shiny yellow balloon made her smile weakly. The balloon danced up, up, and bounced against the ceiling. Sheridan looked up at her mother, beautiful and laughing as she helped Sheridan manage the bobbing balloon. Falling through soft clouds, clutching at the string unafraid, Sheridan listened to her mother's voice. "Hold on. Don't let go now. Hold on."



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“Damn it, what the hell’s going on here?” the physician growled and gazed at the monitors above the woman’s still body. He didn’t like what he saw. “Push more Ringers, we need more fluids in her.” The medical staff swarmed around the bed in an organized chaos, administering medicine and carrying out orders.

“Temperature 106.5. BP 60 over 40. Respiration 85, shallow. Pulse 140, fluttering.” The nurse to the physician’s left rattled off the information, her dark eyes concerned above the mask.

“She’s septic.” He bent over the woman on the bed, his trained eyes taking in the signs of shock. “Her kidneys are failing, and other organs are shutting down as well. We need to regain control. Prepare her for dialysis and intubation.”

Another nurse pressed an oxygen mask over the woman’s face and began to compress a breathing bag. Leaning over the patient, she looked shocked at how fast the woman had deteriorated. “Hold on,” the physician heard the nurse whisper. “Don’t let go now. Hold on.”

## CHAPTER ONE

I told you after my last assignment, no more working in private homes. Ever.” Lark Mitchell ran a hand through her short, light brown hair, as she glowered at the employment agency director. Having known Roy Vogel for seven years, Lark recognized the corpulent man’s amicable, convincing look.

“Lark, please hear me out,” Roy said, his face serious as he sat behind his desk. “Trust me, I know what you said, and I respect it—”

“I don’t think you do, since you’re asking me to do it—again!” Lark heard her own voice escalate and took a deep breath to calm down.

“This is different. I promise. No nosy relatives, no God’s-gift-to-women dads, and more importantly, three times your last salary.”

The money didn’t tempt Lark anymore. She had made enough over the last seven years to render her financially independent for at least a decade. Right now she enjoyed being back in Texas. Her last assignment in Dubai had taken its toll on her, because she had been on call more or less around the clock. “What do you mean, no relatives? Who is this person and why do they need a physical therapist?”

Roy shrugged, his familiar grin showing he was pleased that he’d managed to stir Lark’s curiosity. “I can’t provide you with any details unless you choose to take the assignment. Patient confidentiality. All I can say is that this is a high-profile, extremely well-paid job, which would make it possible for you to take a long break from everything once you’re done.”

Lark rose, nervous energy making it impossible for her to remain in her seat. “And where is it?”

“Right here in San Antonio. Alamo Heights.”

*Ah. Old money.* “And for how long, initially?”

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“One year.”

“I’d want it stipulated in my contract under what circumstances I could quit and still be paid throughout the ongoing month.” *I can’t believe I’m even thinking about it, even discussing terms!* The fact that it was in town, close to her family in Boerne, made a big difference. After a two-month extended leave, Lark had begun to climb the walls, and not even helping out in her mother and stepfather’s gallery did any good.

“Of course. Anything you want to put in there. They really need someone with your experience and expertise.”

“No working on weekends. I want to be able to go home to Boerne then and be with my family.” Lark glanced over at Roy, to make sure he knew she meant it. “I can make a few exceptions, if there’s an emergency, but I want a five-day working week.”

“You’ll still be putting in long hours,” Roy said. “I can probably negotiate your conditions for weekends off, but the patient requires a lot of help and training.”

“Is he, or she, elderly?”

“No.” Roy checked his computer. “Thirty-eight.”

“Any other people employed to help with ADL?”

“She has a live-in staff of three, but as for the Active Daily Living training, that’s the physical therapist’s responsibility, together with an occupational therapist, who’s available when necessary. There’s also always a nurse on call.” Roy frowned at his document. “Apparently, the patient is reluctant and impatient when it comes to aides and training, traumatized by the repercussions of the illness.”

Lark’s interest grew with each word, since this sounded like one of those challenging cases she used to find fascinating, and so rewarding, when she was a new physical therapist. Lark had dreamed of helping people regain a good quality of life, making them more independent and facing a new future. This case was beginning to interest her, despite its conditions.

“Very well,” Lark agreed, intrigued, but apprehensive because she hadn’t stuck to her plan.

“Excellent!” Roy beamed. “I’ll recommend you and call ahead. As far as I understand, they want you to start right away. Ms. Ward has been without a PT for more than two weeks, and you know that’s not good.”

"Ms. Ward?" Lark straightened in the chair. "As in *the* Wards?"

"Ward Industries, yes. As high a profile as you can have here in San Antonio, I imagine. You'll be working out of their Alamo Heights mansion, of course."

"Of course," Lark echoed as her mind reeled. The Wards had lived in San Antonio since Texas became a republic, and the term "old money" was never truer. "So, when do I begin?"

"Barring hang-ups, you'll start Monday."

Today was Friday, which didn't give Lark much time to prepare. "I need to read Ms. Ward's medical records."

Roy scratched the side of his neck. "Ah, hmm, that may be a problem. Ms. Ward's pretty careful with information regarding her condition. You'll receive a full report once you get there, and I have to warn you, you'll find extensive confidentiality clauses in your contract. Ms. Ward's assistant specifically told me about this issue. Guess she's big on privacy, and who can blame her?"

"I suppose, with her background." Lark nodded, wondering what had happened to Ms. Ward. Vaguely, she remembered how the media circus had focused their attention on the Wards a few months ago, but she couldn't recall exactly what they'd reported. It wasn't the first time the Wards had been in the media's focus. "I won't sign anything until I know how extensive the confidentiality clauses are." Lark glared at Roy. "You know my work ethics. I take them very seriously."

"Believe me, I know, Lark. The Wards have been pretty badly burned during the years. The tabloids never seem to give them a break, and the business magazines are after them for other reasons."

"All right. When would they expect me?"

Roy checked his watch with exaggerated movements before assuming a sheepish look. "Your interview, which is only a formality, is in ninety minutes."

Lark sat up. "You've got to be kidding me!" Her thoughts whirled. Was she prepared? Dressed well enough? Presentable? She looked down at her tailored slacks and short denim jacket. *Yeah, presentable enough. This is Texas, not Dubai or the Côte d'Azur.*

"Don't freak out. They're only twenty minutes from here by car. You have enough time if you want to spruce up, I'd think," Roy said. "You're pretty as you are."

Surprised at Roy's unexpectedly familiar remark, Lark slowly

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shook her head and smiled. “Why, thank you, sir. Not true, but I guess I don’t send herds of cattle stampeding, at least.”

Roy looked as if he meant to say something more, opened his mouth only to close it again while shaking his head.

“I rest my case.” Lark grinned and checked her watch. “Okay, eighty-five minutes now. Better run.”

“Good luck. I know you’re the best one for this job.” Roy got up and shook her hand. “Call me later.”

Lark agreed and left the agency in deep thought. Uneasy that she’d gone back on her vow never to accept another assignment to work in yet another wealthy private home, she pulled out her cell phone and dialed her parents’ house. Her stepfather, Arthur, answered.

“Hi, Dad,” Lark said and pressed the phone closer to her ear, “you’re not going to believe this.”

“You’ve got a new job,” Arthur said, sounding matter-of-fact.

Lark smiled, despite a faint feeling of dread. “Yeah, I do. But at least it’s in town.”

“San Antonio?”

“Yeah. Alamo Heights.”

A moment’s delay. “A private home?”

“Yes. I know what I said—”

“Are you sure about this, Lark?” Arthur’s worry was obvious. “It’s only been a month.”

“I know, I know.” Lark reached her Lexus and climbed inside.

The Bluetooth system in her car radio kicked in, and Arthur’s voice came through strong over the speakers. “Just as long as you know what you’re doing.”

“I know, Dad.” Lark pulled out into the busy rush-hour traffic. “I guess Roy made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.” Feeling her grip on the steering wheel tighten, Lark forced herself to relax. “It really sounds like an interesting case. And good money.”

“You know, that shouldn’t influence your decision, sweetheart.”

“And it didn’t. I mean, that wasn’t the main thing. Roy has no idea how much I’ve put away, so he tried to make that the selling point. But really, Dad, something about the fact that my new patient has no close family intrigues me. At least that’s what the tabloids report about her family situation. I know very little for sure, but something told me that this person truly needs me.” Lark knew that if anyone understood this

point, Arthur would.

“All right, Lark. I trust that you know what you’re doing. Wait a second...what?” Arthur spoke to someone in the room with him. “Your mother wants to know if you’ll be back for dinner today. I’m cooking.”

“I’ll be there. I’m on my way to the interview now, but it shouldn’t take all that long. I’ll be home by five, six at the latest, depending on traffic.”

“All right, sweetheart, see you then.”

Soft country rock music replaced Arthur’s deep voice automatically as the speakers shifted to her favorite radio channel. Patsy Cline’s voice filled the car, soothing Lark as she drove toward Alamo Heights. Uncertain of who, and what, to expect, she sang along with the lyrics of “Crazy.”



“Fuck!”

Sheridan harnessed the overwhelming desire to toss the Pocket PC phone across her office, and instead she placed it carefully on the large desk in front of her. Leaning back in the wheelchair, she rubbed her aching neck while she tried to calm down. She was pretty sure that her staff had heard her profanity, which made her cringe. Known for her ice-cold perfectionist approach and the fact that she never let anything faze her where business was concerned, Sheridan was sure the people around her saw this lack of self-restraint as a sign of weakness.

Her staff acted increasingly cautious around her, which only confirmed Sheridan’s suspicion that they thought she definitely had lost some of her usual composure. She noticed something in the way they acted around her—wary, and with a look of infinite pity in their eyes.

A knock on the door made Sheridan straighten up so quickly in her chair that her neck smarted again, sending flashes of pain up the back of her head and down her shoulders. Refusing to moan or twitch under the sharpness of the ache, Sheridan folded her hands in her lap. “Enter.”

“Ms. Mitchell to see you about the position as physical therapist.” Erica, her secretary, stood in the doorway.

“Ah. Well, send her in.”

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Erica stepped aside and a slender young woman with short, light brown hair entered. The sun streaming through the panoramic window ignited golden highlights as Ms. Mitchell pushed longish bangs out of her eyes. She strode across the room and extended an almost fragile-looking hand toward Sheridan.

“Ms. Ward, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Lark Mitchell. Roy Vogel of Vogel Health Professional Agency sent me.”

“Of course. Please, sit down.” Sheridan motioned toward the chair across the desk from her. Lark Mitchell sat while she unbuttoned her denim jacket. She wore a crisp cotton top underneath, its sheer material barely revealing a white bra. Embarrassed for the way she stared at the other woman, Sheridan found it impossible not to sound annoyed as she continued. “Mr. Vogel assured my assistant that you’re the best among the best, Ms. Mitchell.”

“Lark, please. And yes, I’m good at what I do.”

“Very well. Lark. Mr. Vogel faxed us your résumé only a few minutes ago. I browsed through it. Impressive.” The words came out staccato, and the pain in Sheridan’s neck and shoulders threatened to turn into one of her awful headaches.

“Thank you. I know I will be able to make life a little easier for you, Ms. Ward.” Lark leaned forward, examining Sheridan with kind brown eyes. “Forgive me, but you seem to be in quite a bit of pain. May I help you with that? I mean, right now?”

Stumped, and amazed at Lark’s audacity at skipping any preliminaries, Sheridan didn’t answer.

“Ms. Ward?” Lark seemed to take Sheridan’s silence as a yes. She rose and rounded the desk. “Is it your neck?”

“How did you know?” Sheridan mumbled under her breath, bracing herself for the searing pain she feared would be unavoidable even at the lightest touch. She knew from experience how she paid the price for any manipulation by a physical therapist.

“Your posture. Let me know if this hurts too much.” Lark skimmed warm fingers along the rigid, swollen muscles that led up from Sheridan’s shoulders and attached to the base of her skull on either side of her spinal column. “Oh, yes, there’s the problem, right there.”

Sheridan held her breath, determined not to show any weakness, no matter how bad the pain became. Lark found the sore spots at the base of Sheridan’s skull and began to massage them with mild insistence.

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For a few seconds the pain peaked and Sheridan nearly pulled back with a growl, then suddenly it became duller and the whole area nearly numbed. Lark's thumbs pressed the sore spots harder against the base of Sheridan's skull, as if flattening the ligaments.

"God." Sheridan's self-restraint crumbled for a few seconds. She had not expected any relief, only more pain, and unless it was sheer coincidence, this demonstration might prove Lark's skill, compared to that of the other physical therapists she'd fired, one after another. "Thank you."

"I suppose you've tried heat to alleviate some of these stress symptoms?" Lark asked as she returned to her chair.

Sheridan glanced at the small hands that had manipulated her with such strength and proficiency. "I used a special heat lamp, a Japanese invention." She shrugged, again stunned at how loose her shoulders felt. "Didn't do much good."

"Well, I'm more for the low-tech solutions that I know work, rather than fancy equipment that regular people can't afford anyway."

"I'm not regular people." Sheridan nailed Lark, who didn't even flinch. Her self-confidence was quite impressive.

"Not so very regular, when it comes to your circumstances. Very regular, when it comes to your body. We can all become ill, Ms. Ward."

"Sheridan. If you're going to be my PT, you need to call me by my first name. I get enough of the title thing at work." Hardly anyone called her Sheridan anymore. Sheridan wasn't sure why she suggested that Lark use her first name. She hadn't even thought to bring the subject up with her predecessors.

"Sure, Sheridan. That will actually make our work easier."

"Oh? How so?" Sheridan knew her raised eyebrows could make any one of her employees nervous.

"I may have to pull rank and be really tough at times, and using your first name makes that a whole lot easier. It's my experience that no matter how good our intentions are, most patients reach a point when they just can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, to speak in clichés. It's up to me to see it for you and keep you on track."

Nobody had ever cared to explain that point to her, or, Sheridan mused, perhaps nobody had *dared* to explain it. "I don't intimidate easily, Lark," she said and clasped her fingers on the desk.

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“It’s not a question of intimidation, but more of persuasion.”

Lark’s voice, clear and unwavering, made something stir inside Sheridan. It didn’t sit well with her, this feeling of embryonic trust, and she pushed her shoulders up, disregarding the renewed pain her action caused.

“All right. I take it that it’s no problem for you to start right away? My assistant suggested you’re...between jobs.”

“Right away, as in Monday.” If Lark caught onto the needle prick, she didn’t let on. “I wish to discuss some of the conditions in my contract—”

“You can do that with Erica. She’s familiar with my terms and can answer any administrative questions you might have. I wish you could start tomorrow.” Sheridan was eager to test this new physical therapist and discover sooner rather than later if she was as incompetent as the previous ones. She fully expected to be let down.

“Tomorrow is Saturday, and I don’t work weekends, unless you have an emergency.” Lark spoke clearly, but not unkindly.

*Oh, for heaven’s sake.* “I see. Very well. Until Monday, then.” Sheridan wished she could rise to show that their meeting was over. Instead she waved her hand dismissively and pulled the Pocket PC phone to her, tapping it twice with a stylus.

“Thank you, Sheridan. Have a good weekend.”

“You too,” Sheridan replied, careful not to look up. For some reason she was furious and felt as if her nerve endings were exposed to the world. She couldn’t risk showing even a hint of frailty, not to anyone. If she had to be perceived as a corporate witch, so be it.

When Lark didn’t make a sound, Sheridan finally glanced up from her phone, only to find her new physical therapist gone.



Lark found Erica pleasant and easy to deal with, unlike her boss. Sheridan seemed anything but easy, and Lark had to admit this might prove to be her most challenging case to date, even counting the Henderson twins. The thought of the identical twins, born with identical birth defects and subjected to multiple surgeries during their seven-year life span, made Lark smile. The twins had become as precious as her nieces and nephews.

“Ms. Ward employs three assistant nurses, who between them tend to her around the clock. She doesn’t use them as much as she could,” Erica said apologetically. “Ms. Ward is a private person, very independent. She prefers to manage on her own as much as she can.”

Lark had noticed that. The tall, pale woman in the inner office had tried to act as if nothing was amiss in her life, and she probably had no idea how obvious this charade was to Lark. When she first met a new patient, she could read between the lines. She saw pain where others saw false bravery, and she spotted the cause, whereas others chose to take things at face value. *It’s easier to assume that things are just as fine as the patient implies.*

“Let me call the housekeeper, who can show you around. That way, you can check out your room and make sure everything is as you like.”

“I wasn’t sure yet if Ms. Ward wanted me to live here or commute from Boerne.” In fact, Lark was relieved that she was going to be a live-in PT, since she anticipated that she was going to need her energy for things other than sitting in the “parking lot” that I-10 turned into every rush hour.

“Ms. Ward was absolutely clear on that point,” Erica said, her hand hovering over the receiver. “She always sets high standards for her employees and demands twice as much of herself. Her former PT didn’t live at the mansion, and Mrs. Ward was constantly frustrated when she had to wait more than an hour for the PT to get here. It was hard for the rest of us to watch her suffer a lot of unnecessary pain.” Erica looked darkly at Lark.

“I have no problem with staying here,” Lark stated calmly. “In fact, at the beginning of a case, if I can be available when I’m needed the most, my job is easier and the patient benefits. Apart from the physiotherapy program I’ll design for Ms. Ward, I know how crucial the working relationship is between a seriously wounded or ill patient and their PT.” Lark knew she sounded serious and confident, but inside she wondered if Sheridan Ward really could be counted among the average cases. She seemed to be the one to call every single shot, including her own treatment.

The housekeeper, who introduced herself as Mrs. D, looked nothing like the stereotype for her line of work. Tall and slender, with iron grey hair, she could easily model mature women’s wear. “Welcome,” Mrs. D

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said and shook Lark's hand firmly. "Come with me, and I'll show you to your suite."

*Suite?* Lark had lived in several luxurious homes, and so far her quarters had been everything from a room above the garage to a bungalow on a wealthy Arab family's estate. This was, however, her first suite.

The mansion boasted a wide marble staircase as well as a spacious elevator.

"The elevator was installed for Mrs. Olivia Ward, Ms. Ward's mother. No one used it much before Ms. Ward became ill. Now...I guess it's good that we kept it in working order."

Mrs. D's voice became muted, and Lark saw what she interpreted as true worry in the housekeeper's eyes. She knew words were not enough and merely nodded as they walked up the stairs.

In the middle of the north wing, Mrs. D held open the door to a large living room. "Here we are then," she said and motioned for Lark to step inside. "I'm sure you'll be comfortable here."

"I'm sure I will." Lark studied the room that held both contemporary as well as vintage furniture, all in mint condition. Dark red walls, floral wallpaper on the ceiling, and accents in gold and black, together with an open fireplace, made for a cozy, warm ambience. A door at the far end led into a large bedroom, with a king-size four-poster bed as the focal point. The fireplace opposite the bed and the room's moss green, gold, and ivory color scheme made the room seem like something out of a Victorian novel.

"Your bathroom is over there," Mrs. D said and pointed toward a door in the far left corner.

Lark entered a white and gold bathroom consisting of a Jacuzzi tub, glassed-in shower stall, two pedestal sinks, and a toilet behind yet another door. White marble, faintly lined with light grey streaks, created a stunning effect.

"It's beautiful. I'll be beyond comfortable." Lark found her surroundings opulent, but knew better than to voice such thoughts. The rich and privileged took these things for granted and found it curious, almost suspicious, if a person revealed her more humble beginnings by being too impressed.

"Excellent, Ms. Mitchell—"

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“Lark, please. We’re going to be working under the same roof for a while.”

Mrs. D frowned. “I don’t mind being on a first-name basis, Lark. It’s just that I’m Mrs. D to everyone.”

“I have no problem with that.” Lark smiled broadly. “I should get going. Lots to do before Monday.”

“Monday?” Mrs. D. looked surprised. “I thought you were starting tomorrow.”

“No, Monday. I won’t be working weekends unless Ms. Ward’s condition requires it. Here’s my cell phone number, in case you need to reach me. Don’t hesitate to call if something comes up.”

Mrs. D. regarded the business card that Lark handed over. “Very well. I appreciate that you are so clear and up-front about this arrangement. It makes it so much easier to plan for Sheridan’s care.”

“Good. We have an understanding then.” Lark smiled and placed a gentle hand on Mrs. D’s arm. “Thank you for showing me around. The rooms are lovely.”

“You’re welcome. Let me walk you to the door.”

“No, that’s all right. I’m sure you have a lot of things to do. I’ll find my own way out.” Lark hoisted her bag onto her shoulder. “See you Monday.”

Lark walked through the broad hallway and down the marble stairs. Passing the half-closed doors to Sheridan’s study, she couldn’t help but stop and glance inside. Sheridan sat in her state-of-the-art wheelchair by the window, apparently lost in thought. Her fists lay tightly curled on the armrests, and something about her profile startled Lark. As forceful as Sheridan had come across during their conversation, she now looked vulnerable and frail.

Instinctively, she knew that if Sheridan realized that Lark had seen her during an exposed moment, their future working relationship could be damaged. She stepped away from the door and headed toward the main entrance. Pushing the heavy oak door open, she walked down the limestone stairs to her Lexus.

Lark thought of Sheridan, sitting in solitude by her window, perhaps even watching her drive away. Suddenly eager to return to the Ward mansion the following Monday, Lark accelerated down the driveway toward the automatic gate.