

LISA DANIELS

Bonded to

Panther

ANIMAL RESCUER

PANTHER HEROES OF MIAMI

Ó Copyright 2023 by The Publisher - All rights reserved.

It is not legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document either by electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is prohibited unless with written permission from the publisher. All rights reserved.

Respective authors own all copyrights not held by the publisher.

Table of Contents

Bonded to a Panther — Animal Rescuer

Prologue A Different Type of Hero

Chapter 1 Stress, Finals, and Feral Animals

Chapter 2 A Different Type of Encounter

Chapter 3 An Impromptu Massage

Chapter 4 Biting off a Bit Too Much

Chapter 5 Peering into the Depths

Chapter 6 The Depths Peer Back

Chapter 7 Out of the Frying Pan...

Chapter 8 Into the Fire

Chapter 9 The Ideal Patient and Less Than Ideal Situation

Chapter 10 One in a Trillion

Chapter 11 When Forever Seems to Short

Aftermath No Rest for Responders

**Bonded to a Panther Animal
Rescuer**

Panther Heroes of Miami

Book 3

By: Lisa Daniels

Prologue

A Different Type of Hero

The sound of a raised voice was the first sign of trouble, though it was easy to overlook in the crowded restaurant on a Friday. Children were running around largely unchecked as their parents looked too tired to do much beyond offering the occasional stern word. Young adults were already drinking and preparing for a fun night after a long week. A raised voice could just as easily be a parent reprimanding a child, someone looking for a friend who slipped away, or a patron getting a little over-excited in an argument. The tone and words were indecipherable as the sound of the voice quickly disappeared into the chaos of a busy Friday night.

Despite this, Phoebe glanced over to the door, more out of habit than any sense of concern. What she saw wasn't entirely uncommon — a man glowering at a member of the wait staff was pretty typical for nights when patrons started drinking early and their patience was low after a week full of work and deadlines. Not that it made it all right to treat wait staff poorly, but Phoebe knew to expect people to be on their worst behavior on a Friday. The scene probably wouldn't have even registered with her if not for the way the waitress was looking around, a nervous expression on her face. It hinted that there was something more happening than just an unhappy patron expressing a problem with the service. Phoebe couldn't help but frown at the interaction, even if she couldn't hear what was being said. The man was balling his fists and was entirely focused on the waitress, giving her the feeling that the two knew each other. It seemed very likely that a personal problem had followed the nervous waitress to work.

Maybe you should take it outside, Lucy, Phoebe thought as she resumed picking up the dishes from the table. She gave the family a big smile as she reassured them that she was paying attention to them.

“I’ll get your dessert orders in and soon you’ll have a great start to your weekend.”

When her eyes met those of the young boy, his face flushed a little as he smiled back at her shyly. It was a far cry from his more rambunctious behavior the first time he and his family had come to the restaurant. It didn’t take long before they made a habit of coming and asking to sit in her section, to the point that she was now accustomed to seeing them once a week. And Phoebe knew why — the boy had a crush on her. She suspected that this was why his parents came to the restaurant regularly, and she didn’t mind helping them get a bit of a reprieve on a Friday evening. High-energy children could be a lot of fun, but after a week of work and school, a little break to relax was a real blessing.

For a long time, she had helped her parents the same way, spending time with all of her adopted siblings. She always gave the boy in the restaurant a little more attention so that he would continue to behave, something that had earned her some pretty nice tips.

After reassuring them that dessert would be ready soon, she headed to the kitchen, picking up a couple of cups from a recently deserted table. As she turned from the table, Phoebe was startled by a loud crashing sound that rang out over the busy restaurant. She managed to hold onto her own dirty tray of dishes despite the sudden loud noise. Sliding her tray onto

the recently deserted table, she turned her attention to the entrance — to the location where she thought the sound originated. The expressions on the faces of Lucy and the man made it clear things were getting much more serious. The man seemed to be holding back rage as he stood inches from Lucy, who looked like she was close to tears. Phoebe may not have known exactly what was happening, but she was sure that she couldn't just stand by and watch whatever disaster was unfolding. As she passed the window for the kitchen, she slid the dessert order over to the counter, grabbed a new tray to help clean up, then hurried over to the door where Lucy was trying to clean up the mess as the restaurant's door started to close. A little knot of concern relaxed as she knew at least the man was gone. The attention always made those kinds of people hurry away — they didn't want witnesses to their cruelty. That left only helping Lucy clean up and getting her calmed down enough to finish the shift. Phoebe made a mental note of trying to talk to her coworker about the situation once the place was closed, even though she knew that there was very little chance Lucy would listen.

Coward doesn't even have the decency to help her. Oh, Lucy, this explains a lot about you.

Trying to keep the pity off her face, Phoebe squatted down and began picking up some of the things that had fallen off Lucy's tray. As she lifted one of the large chunks of broken glass, Phoebe was unaware that she was glaring at the door while Lucy's head was down. Most of the dishes were plastic — a restaurant with children tended to minimize potentially dangerous objects — but all of the containers for beverages were made of glass. A few broken mugs and glasses were

scattered around the floor. Grabbing the majority of the dishes, Phoebe had intentionally not said anything to Lucy, who was already apologizing for the mess to no one in particular. The poor waitress looked like she was about to cry as she hurried to try to collect everything quickly. Lucy's mousy brown hair was pulled back over her thin shoulders as she desperately tried to clean up without drawing any more attention to herself. Phoebe didn't know Lucy that well because the quiet waitress had only been there a few weeks, and it was becoming fairly clear why Lucy wasn't prone to chatting. Phoebe had trained her, and Lucy had always given the impression of being on edge, with a ready apology whenever she didn't do something perfectly, even when the problem wasn't her fault. Now it was pretty obvious why, and Phoebe had to work to keep from expressing what she was thinking.

Instead of talking about her suspicions about the man who just left, she smiled at Lucy in an effort to try to soothe her. "It's going to be one of those nights, huh?"

Lucy immediately started apologizing to Phoebe, her voice shaking as her eyes darted around, "I'm so sorry! I can handle it; you don't need to — ow!" She pulled her hand away from another part of the glass that she had been picking up, a bit of blood dripping onto the floor.

Phoebe pushed her tray out of the walkway where no one would accidentally step on it, then moved over to Lucy with a clean rag in her hand. "Here, let me see that."

Shaking her head, Lucy held her hand against her chest. "I — I — I can take care of it."

Her hands froze as Phoebe knew that she was going to have to take a different approach, “Come on, Lucy. It’s a great chance for me to practice what I’m learning at school.”

A tiny smile flitted across the nervous woman’s face. “It’s just a cut.”

“Right. So it shouldn’t be too bad, but it *is* a good bit more serious than a paper cut. That means it’s worth a quick check to make sure that it isn’t going to keep bleeding.” Her brain was whirling as she sought the leverage she needed, “And if it is a bit too deep, you’ll save a lot by not having to go to the ER.”

Lucy’s eyes went wide as she began to babble. “I can’t go to the ER! I could never afford —”

Realizing that Lucy was getting more agitated, Phoebe changed direction. “You probably won’t need to. But that’s why I need to check it out now. Get it cleaned up and give an initial assessment so you can decide what you need to do.” As much as she wanted to promise that she could take care of it, Phoebe knew that she couldn’t treat a particularly deep cut. If it was too bad, Lucy would need to get it treated by a professional, not someone who was still in school.

Finally, the poor waitress nodded her head and Phoebe began to look at the cut. It wasn’t too bad, so stitches wouldn’t be necessary. Still, if she didn’t put something on it, the fresh wound would almost certainly get infected. Once Phoebe gave her the news, Lucy stopped looking like she was either about to burst into tears or pass out.

As Lucy calmed down, Phoebe turned around to look at one of the other wait staff walking by. “Hey, Jackson.” He

stopped and looked down at her, “Could I get you to finish cleaning up?”

His eyes moved between Phoebe and Lucy, taking in what had happened. The answer seemed unnecessarily delayed when he finally said, “Sure. I’ll help out.” Then a slight leer hitched up the right side of his mouth. “Then I’ll need you to help me out.”

A shiver ran up and down her spine as the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. Jackson had always come across as creepy, and the way he was looking at her now was unnerving. Looking away, Phoebe decided to ignore him. “That’s all right. We can handle it.”

His feet came into view, making it clear that he was not going to just let it go now that she had his attention. “Aw, come on. I just need a bit of a favor.”

Keeping her expression as neutral as possible, Phoebe said, “I would hate to take you away from your work.”

“Oh, come on, Phebe. I just need a little something to help you.”

Through slightly gritted teeth, Phoebe managed to reply, “With Lucy and me currently busy, it’s probably best that you focus on taking care of customers.”

“Phoebe,” his voice was a little sing-songy as he said her name, and she had to hide a shiver of disgust. There was a long pause, and Phoebe realized that he was waiting for her to look up at him. Jackson had moved closer to her, putting her at a level where her face was near his crotch, something that she realized as her eyes met his.

The smirk on his face made it clear Jackson was having the same thought, and it was obvious that the guy was enjoying himself far too much. In her mind, she was throwing some of the broken glass at him. Frowning was the worst she could do, though, so as she looked at him she tried to let her expression tell him what she thought of him. Instead of giving him the satisfaction of speaking down to her from his current position, she turned her attention elsewhere, knowing that ignoring Jackson was the best way to get him to leave.

Phoebe watched as Lucy clumsily picked up more pieces with her uninjured hand. The way she was going about it made it likely that Lucy was going to injure her other hand if she wasn't stopped soon. Jackson hadn't quite given up on getting her attention either. At the same time, they couldn't leave a mess at the door, especially with kids running around the place.

Just as Phoebe was about to snap at Jackson, someone appeared beside her and started using a damp rag to mop up bits of food, glass shards, and sauce that had splattered on the floor. As she turned to look at him, the waitress immediately realized that it wasn't one of the other members of the staff. The man wore a nice suit and was clean-shaven. That was when she noticed that the other wait staff around her had fallen silent — both Lucy and Jackson were analyzing the situation with the appearance of the stranger.

He looked over at her with a smile. "I'll take care of this. You go on and take care of her." With the last sentence, he gave a little nod to Lucy, who looked like she was frozen. Her eyes were large as she stared at the stranger.

At first, Phoebe didn't know what to say. The annoyance and concern she had felt gave way to surprise, but she quickly recovered. "Thanks, but I couldn't leave the mess with you. That just wouldn't be right."

The stranger had already finished wiping up most of the liquid and mess, and he was looking for a trash can. Speaking while he looked, he replied, "Don't you have a potential patient who needs your attention more than arguing with me?"

"If I leave and you get hurt, I'll have two patients to —"

Her words were cut off as Jackson stepped forward, crushing some of the broken dishware under his foot. "Excuse me, but she didn't ask for *your* help."

The man in the suit didn't even acknowledge him. Instead, he focused on Phoebe, his brilliant gray eyes catching her off-guard. They seemed like the color of the sky just before a hurricane struck, and for a moment, Phoebe found herself getting pulled into them. Realizing that the man was talking to her, Phoebe pulled her mind back into the present. Unfortunately, all she caught were the last couple of words of a question. Given the kindly smile on the stranger's face and the annoyance on Jackson's, she felt she had the gist of what she was being asked. Nodding, it quickly became clear that she had been right.

The stranger's smile widened, but before he could say anything, Jackson reached out to try to grab the stranger's shoulder. "No. She won't. You can't —"

The gray-eyed stranger stretched out a hand, picking up a piece of a broken mug while getting out of Jackson's reach.

He looked at Phoebe as he reminded her not to hang around.
“Go ahead. I’ll finish this up, so you can focus on — “

Jackson’s expression was positively livid, his face a red that Phoebe hadn’t seen. “Buddy, you had better —” He stepped forward as the stranger moved farther out of reach, almost as if he were anticipating what Jackson was going to do and was able to make sure he was always out of reach. It was clear that Jackson wasn’t going to just allow someone to show him up, especially in front of her. Instead of fighting with the stranger, she carefully wrapped a hand around Lucy’s wrist to stop her. “Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up.” As she stood up, pulling the other waitress up with her, Phoebe looked at Jackson. “I’ll be right back.” She nodded at a table in his section that was getting particularly rowdy, “And it looks like one of your tables is trying to get your attention.”

She didn’t stick around as he turned to look. Phoebe pulled Lucy toward the staff-only area as Jackson hurried away, more interested in getting bigger tips since there wasn’t any reason to pick a fight with a customer if she and Lucy were gone. There was some risk that he would try to get them in trouble by telling one of the managers that they had let a customer clean up, but she lied by saying that the guy helping her was one of her friends. As long as she and Lucy didn’t leave the floor for too long, and there weren’t any more customer complaints than normal for a Friday night, she knew things should be fine. Not that she was worried about herself. If she did well tomorrow, she would be putting in her notice soon.

Shame. Jackson didn’t seem like a bad guy at first,
Phoebe mused as she let go of Lucy and pulled out a first aid

kit. Putting her focus on Lucy, she said, “Let’s get you cleaned up quickly so you can get back out there.”

“I’m so sorry, Phoebe. I didn’t mean —”

“None of that now. We can talk about things later. For now, I’m more interested in getting you fixed up.” She smiled at her shy coworker to let her know that she was just kidding before she said, “I don’t think I can take on your section and mine.”

Lucy looked a little distressed as she responded, “I wouldn’t ask you to take over my section.”

Putting on a look of mock shock, Phoebe said, “You prefer Jackson?” Before Lucy could continue in her distress, Phoebe patted her. “I’m just kidding with you, Lucy. It’s a good distraction from the pain.”

“What do you — “ Lucy looked down at her finger, which Phoebe was currently cleaning with a treated wipe from the kit. “Oh.” As soon as she was aware of what was happening, Lucy flinched. To Phoebe’s surprise, her impromptu patient gave a little laugh. “You should have kept joshing with me.”

Phoebe laughed. “It doesn’t help. Since the cut is still bleeding a little, keeping you calm is important. If you are upset, it can do you more harm than good.”

“And what does the pain do? More good than harm?” Lucy smiled a little.

Phoebe laughed. “Yeah, it does. When you feel pain, you know to stop what you’re doing because it’s probably causing the pain.”

Lucy nodded. “That’s one way to look at it. But it doesn’t feel good.”

“That’s the point,” Phoebe said, tilting Lucy’s finger to check to make sure she had cleaned up all of the blood. Satisfied that the wound was clean and wasn’t bad enough for a late-night visit to the doctor, she pulled out a waterproof bandage. “You’ll need to make sure to clean it at least twice a day. If you get it wet, make sure it dries before you put another bandage on it. And make sure you have a bandage on at work and when cleaning. It’s not deep enough to need stitches, but if you don’t take care of it, this can be a nasty wound.”

Lucy looked at her freshly bandaged wound. “It feels a bit tight.”

“You’re at work, so it’s necessary. Between clearing tables and bumping into stuff, you want to keep the wound from opening up and bleeding through the bandage.”

Lucy nodded as they headed back out to the dining area. After a quick cleanup of the first aid trash, Phoebe left to grab the dessert for the family before taking care of the rest of her tables.

It didn’t take long before Phoebe regained her rhythm. The rest of the night went pretty smoothly. After they closed, she pulled Lucy aside and talked about what had happened. It was clear Lucy was uncomfortable with the talk, but Phoebe had this reaction before — she had seen plenty of abusive parents over the years with foster kids in her home. And it was clear that Lucy was in a similar situation. All of the hallmarks were there from the short bit of interaction she had seen between Lucy and the man.

Lucy moved closer to the door, the desire to escape taking over her body. “Thanks for trying, but I — I’m — everything’s fine.”

Phoebe’s eyebrows pulled together as she worked to keep a neutral expression. “I get it. I do. But if you need somewhere to go, just let me know. I have an extra room that you can use while you need it.”

Lucy’s eyes moved around rapidly, making it very clear that she was concerned. “Tha — that — I don’t need it. Thanks, though.”

She didn’t wait for a response before hurrying away from Phoebe. With a heavy sigh, Phoebe turned and prepared to leave. It was only as she put her purse over her shoulder that she realized she never thanked the stranger. She looked around the nearly empty restaurant and frowned as she thought about the likelihood that she would see him again. A bit of guilt nestled in her chest.

Figures. The good ones never stick around. I wish I had at least thanked him for helping. The whole thing could have been so much worse.

With that, she headed home to get a few hours sleep before she had to go take her last test before graduation.

Chapter 1

Stress, Finals, and Feral Animals

Phoebe stretched out her arm, a yawn temporarily dulling the sound of her alarm. Her mind was trying to work through the haze as her hand smacked at the place where her phone should be. It took several tries, but she finally hit something on the phone to shut it up.

Why haven't we developed the psychic abilities to shut these monstrosities up already? Alarms have been around long enough as a torture device that we should have evolved something to prevent it.

Then the reality of the day sank in. Her body went into motion as the nerves kicked in and she knew that today was going to be pivotal. Today was her last test for her final semester. Her grades had slipped over the last year, making her graduation far less certain. If she didn't do well on the test today, she wouldn't be walking with the rest of her class. So many thoughts were swirling through her head, causing her stomach to churn in a way that almost proved to be an adequate distraction to the building anxiety.

Grabbing her outfit for the day, Phoebe hurried to the bathroom and knelt in front of the toilet. She pulled her long blonde hair onto a pile on the top of her head, holding it together with a couple of clips. She only just managed to get the second clip on her thick hair when her body heaved. The light dinner that she had the day before spilled into the toilet as her body shuddered. Glad that she had prepared for the inevitable — Phoebe had never handled big tests well — she sat up straight for a moment waiting for the inevitable. As she

expected, her stomach soon flipped over again. Gagging, she leaned over and waited for a few seconds before she relieved herself of more food. Reaching up, she grabbed a tissue to wipe her mouth. Once she had made a couple of passes around her mouth, Phoebe tossed the tissue into the toilet and flushed it. Not ready to leave quite yet — just in case — she quickly stripped her top off and tossed it into a full hamper. Her eyes were focused on the toilet as her stomach roiled. Robotically, she fastened her bra, then twisted it around to slip her arms into the straps as she waited to see if she was done. With a swift motion, she filled the D cups with her ample breasts, the weight pulling on her neck in a way that threatened to trigger the headache just waiting to start throbbing at the base of her skull.

Oh yes, exactly what I need.

Her thoughts didn't go far as she heaved again, mostly resulting in bile. With a shudder, she spat a few times into the toilet to get rid of some of the slime that had come up and as much of the taste as possible. She placed her hand on her stomach, almost as if she could will it to settle. After a few deep breaths, Phoebe rocked back on the balls of her feet, stood up, and flushed the toilet again. Hurrying to finish dressing, Phoebe dashed out of the small bedroom and into the kitchen. Even though she wasn't hungry, she knew that she couldn't entirely skip breakfast, not if she wanted to keep her stomach calm. It would have been best if she could have a nice breakfast, but her stomach wasn't going to allow for that in its current state. First, she took a couple of antacids, then she pulled a bag of bread out of the refrigerator. After popping a couple of pieces in the toaster, Phoebe swept the kitchen to

wait for that familiar popping sound. When she finished sweeping the floor, she filled a water bottle and slipped it into her book bag. As soon as the toast was done, she grabbed it, picked up her bag, and bolted out of the small apartment.

She reached the bus stop a few minutes later, her stomach already threatening to revolt as she took a bite of the very dry toast. The bites were small as she slowly focused on her breathing and getting her stomach to settle. To her surprise, the bus was running a little early, leaving her no time to eat the second piece of toast. Crumbling it up, she tossed it into a small green space where squirrels and birds would be able to get some easy food. The rest of her trip to school was uneventful.

Since her morning hadn't gone quite as she had hoped — no healthy breakfast — Phoebe arrived at class over 30 minutes before the test. Pulling out her notes, the student began going through the information from the last test, which she had only barely passed. Time flew by, and she was started by the instructor telling them to put their notes away and prepare to take the test. From there, Phoebe felt like she was living outside of time, outside herself.

When she finished the test, the nursing student couldn't have told anyone what questions were on the test. Like an automaton, she turned in the test, placing it on the edge of the desk. The instructor looked up at her and nodded in recognition that he had received her test. She nodded in return, then left the classroom feeling a deep sense of relief. From here on out, she would be at peace. Either she passed or she didn't. And just like that, her anxiety left her as she walked out of the classroom.

Nor was the test the only reason she had been so anxious over the last semester. She wasn't going to miss her classes after the way some of the other nursing students had found "No" a difficult concept to grasp. There were at least five who had repeatedly tried to ask her out on a date over the last three years. Without school, she wouldn't have to deal with them anymore. At no point in time had she had time for any kind of relationship, but that didn't stop some of the students from trying to convince her to give them a shot. As kindly as she could, Phoebe always turned them down because her personal life had no room for romance. Hell, she couldn't even maintain friendships, especially over the last year.

However, it had been her father's health that had been the biggest issue over the last year. She had grown up with a couple of very loving parents who couldn't say no to taking in more and more foster children, and they ended up adopting some of those children over the years. Even though they both earned good money, taking care of over a dozen children, many with some significant issues, was not an easy feat. Phoebe had ended up being the primary caregiver when she was in high school because she knew what the kids endured in their home lives before coming to her family's care. She had made their snacks, helped with homework, and talked openly with them, giving the kids whatever they needed. As she neared the end of her high school education, Phoebe had felt that she couldn't leave home because the kids and her parents needed her too much. Since she hadn't decided what career she wanted, Phoebe had gone to a community college less than a mile from home. After two years, she had earned an associate's degree in administration but realized that wasn't

even remotely what she wanted to do with her life. She then considered becoming a social worker but quickly dismissed that because she had seen firsthand how difficult that could be. However, it did start her thinking about how best to help others.

And that led to her entering nursing school.

She had been out of the house for two years when her father suffered a serious heart attack, leaving her family in a dire situation. For a few weeks, Phoebe had planned to quit her job and drop out of school to take care of him. She was learning to become a nurse, what better way to get practical experience? This had been her argument with her mother, but her mom had refused to let her daughter destroy her future. Phoebe had already put her life on hold after high school to help her family once. Her mother wouldn't let her do it again. Between the guilt and worry, Phoebe's grades had suffered. By the time she pulled herself together, she was failing a couple of courses. She had managed to get her grades up to passing before that semester finished, but it put her at a disadvantage when the next semester began, especially since she hadn't learned some of the concepts that she needed to know.

Finally, she was at the end of a very tumultuous year, and Phoebe just wanted it to be over. This was the last test, and it was in the subject that she had found the most difficult. That was why she was so nervous — she hadn't even had this much trouble before taking her nurse's exam, and that was for much higher stakes. Now it was all done. Some would say all she could do was wait, but Phoebe felt that all she could do was enjoy a few days of peace. No school. No homework. No

studying. Just work and family. Then she would learn what was to happen in her future.

Please, let this be the end of it. Eight years for a four-year degree is far too many years. I just want to start working in my field and spending more time with my parents.

Before she knew it, Phoebe was reprimanding herself for not taking school as seriously as she felt she should have. This was a well-worn mental path she had been taking ever since she turned 25 and still had not graduated. There was always an excuse for not doing more, for not doing as well as she felt she should have. Phoebe was never at the top of her class, but she had always done well in school. She had underestimated just how difficult nursing school would be.

Knowing that being alone at that moment was a bad idea, Phoebe decided to head back to her parents' house. There would be plenty there to distract her from the threat of focusing on her own self-disappointment. Hopping on the next bus that would bring her near her parents' place, Phoebe stared out of the window, her mind only half paying attention to what was going on outside.

As they passed by one of the marshier areas, her eyes landed on a figure dressed in a dull-looking uniform. Standing not too far from him was an injured dog in a highly defensive stance, the hackles running up and down the dog's back like a mohawk. The poor dog was close to a large tree with Spanish moss hanging low so that after a few seconds, she could no longer see the dog. Her eyes went back to the man, fully aware that he must be from animal services, and her heart sank a little. The areas around here still euthanized animals when

they didn't move quickly. Praying that she would be able to cover a pet deposit, she pulled the cord to let the bus driver know that she needed to get off at the next stop.

Several minutes passed before she could even see the next stop, so Phoebe knew that she was going to have quite a walk to get back to where she had seen the man and dog. Hoping she would make it back before they left, she put her backpack on and prepared to get off the bus. As soon as the bus started to slow, Phoebe stood and moved to the door, her hands holding onto the poles to keep her from falling during the jerky stop. The doors were only partly open when Phoebe pushed her way out onto the street and onto the sidewalk. She knew that the sidewalk would end soon, which meant that she was either going to have to walk on the wet road or in the soggy grass with puddles that hadn't yet drained from the last hurricane that passed through the area. The rain had stopped two days ago, so there was still a lot of standing water.

So much for the new shoes, she thought as she stepped as close to the grass as possible.

The cars passed close to the shoulder, soon forcing her to walk in the waterlogged grass. Since the stop had been a few minutes past the place where she had seen the pair, Phoebe ended up having to walk a ways to get to that spot. By the time she got back to where the man and dog had been, her shoes and socks were entirely soaked.

But the man and dog weren't there. Phoebe looked around at the surrounding terrain, and it was only after she looked at a large tree where the dog had been standing that she knew that she had reached the right place.

“Well, they couldn’t have gone too far,” she mused, her eyes beginning to look around for the vehicle that the man must have been driving. Eventually, Phoebe noticed a truck on the other side of a wide field and she frowned, wondering how he had made it that far in the amount of time since she had last seen him. Even though she wasn’t entirely sure it was the guy she had seen, Phoebe decided to hurry over to him anyway. She was already off the bus, so it would be at least an hour before she would be able to catch the next one. The major downside was that there was a small body of water nearby because the field looked waterlogged, and she knew it would be hard to get across the tall, wet grass. Thinking she detected some movement near the vehicle, she hoped that she wasn’t too late to stop the man from hauling the dog away to a shelter. At first, she looked for a path or some other way through the large, water-filled field, but quickly realized that this lot was not being kept up by any business or individual. Hoping that her exposed ankles and legs wouldn’t get too cut up by walking across the nearly waist-high grassy field, she stepped away from the field, her eyes trained on the movement in the distance. At the first sound of squishing, Phoebe adjusted her book bag out of a sense of discomfort. The friction of the bag on her back at least made her feel a little warmer as the first bit of water leaked into her shoes.

She was roughly three-quarters across the muck when her foot stuck. Pulling hard, Phoebe managed to get her foot out, but her shoe remained stuck in place. She balanced on her other foot as she looked for the movement that she had seen before embarking on this disgusting trek, only to realize that what she had seen wasn’t the man or the dog. Unable to tell

just what the person was doing, she decided she might as well keep going. After all, she was far closer to the other side of the field than from her starting point. It would be easier to walk along roads to get back to a bus stop, and from there she could figure out what to do.

Holding her shoeless foot out and behind her, Phoebe lowered her body carefully until she could grab the shoe. As carefully and forcefully as possible, she pulled up on the shoe in an effort to extract her shoe. She had just managed to get the shoe out of the muck when something caught her eye.

Standing about 20 feet away from her was something that she had initially thought was a log. But now that she was looking at it, Phoebe could see the eyes. They blinked at her as a form started to emerge from a more watery part of the field.

Oh, my...

Cutting off what she was about to think, Phoebe tried to short-circuit the idea that she was screwed. Even though there was no chance that she could outrun an alligator, Phoebe knew that she couldn't think like that. First, she thought about the man who had initially drawn her attention. Even if she were able to get his attention, she didn't think he would be able to do anything except call for animal control. And probably someone who could cart her off to the morgue.

Her second thought was to make as much out of the only weapon she had — the shoe that had forced her to stop. Throwing it with as much force as she could muster, Phoebe aimed for the blinking eyes. Not waiting to see how that went, she started running perpendicular to the alligator. She figured it would at least force the gator to have to shift a bit, instead of

making it easy by running directly away from him and giving the thing a straight path toward her. It didn't take long before she heard the movement behind her, and she knew she was being chased. Immediately, she started to run in a zigzag pattern to slow the thing down. Opening her mouth, Phoebe screamed to let the man near the field know that something was happening.

“Gator! Call for help!”

One of her feet sank into the mud, throwing her off balance. Tilting her body in the opposite direction, Phoebe tried to zag as she heard the creature getting closer. Something tripped her up, and a sharp pain shot through her leg. She let out a cry as she struggled to get away, her life flashing before her eyes. Her hands scratched at the mud trying to find some purchase to get up, but she felt like she was being sucked back into the muck.

Suddenly a deafening sound startled her. Terror gripped her as Phoebe's feet attempted to move faster, but her arms and legs didn't seem to be under her control. Flailing and slipping, she barely managed to right herself when her other foot sank into a large muddy patch. Unable to right herself, Phoebe went down with a disgusting squelch, breaking the fall with her forearms as she sank further into the muck.

As her body scrambled to get up, her head automatically turned to see how close the gator was. Instead of teeth coming at her, all she could see was the tall grass moving and the sounds of some kind of fighting occurring in the mess. Another loud roar caught her attention, and her body struggled to escape.

Stumbling up, she hurried as fast as possible toward the edge of the field. Between panic and her now slippery body, Phoebe found it nearly impossible to run without slipping. Feeling like a stupid girl in a horror movie, Phoebe tried to focus on getting away. Falling for what felt like the millionth time, she rolled and tried to push herself up, no longer concerned with mud getting into her hair, clothing, or backpack. In her panic, Phoebe failed to pay attention to the things around her. It was only when she pressed her hand against something sharp that she realized there was a sharp metal object that she had barely managed to miss. She had managed to stick her hand on it, and though she couldn't see much under all of the mud, Phoebe thought she could see the thing sticking out of the back of her hand.

Suddenly a shadow drew over Phoebe as she tried to stand again. "Hold up. Hold up!" A hand grabbed her upper arm and pulled her up, something that proved difficult as she was stuck on the sharp metal. A hand reached over and pulled her upper arm up, freeing the hand. Instinctively, she pulled away, then it sank in that the grip on her wasn't filled with teeth. Her heart seemed to stop as Phoebe tried to take in what was happening.

The voice was soft and low. "Hey, it's okay. You're going to be okay."

This time when she felt hands on her, Phoebe didn't fight it. Shock and fear mingled in her mind. "There's a gator!"

"Yes, but she's not going to bother you. She's not a threat to you now. I'll come back to move her somewhere safe

later, but for now I think we need to get you out of here.”

Phoebe allowed the man to pull her up and help her make her way out of the field. “I don’t understand,” she muttered.

“I was taking care of another animal, so it wasn’t too far away when you started screaming about the gator.”

Phoebe finally turned to look at the man who had run into the field to help her. Looking down at her was a pair of gray eyes that managed to stand out in a face framed by thick black hair. Something was banging on the chaotic thoughts in her head. “You were at the restaurant last night.”

The man continued to help her forward, but he gave her a frown. “What restaurant?”

Giving her head a shake, Phoebe decided to focus on getting out of the muck before trying to formulate any more unrelated thoughts. With his support, it seemed like it didn’t take any time before they reached his vehicle. A dog sat in a crate in the back, and something kicked into her brain. Believing she didn’t have much time, Phoebe said with as much enthusiasm as she could manage, “That’s my dog?”

The man looked between her and then up at the dog. “This is not your dog.”

“Yes, she is,” the lie sprang to mind easily. “I got her a couple of weeks ago. Haven’t figured out how to keep the dang collar on her.”

“Ah, well, this isn’t your dog.” He closed the door as the dog seemed to whimper.

“I said, she is my dog.”

“I did hear you, but I know that *his* family has been looking for him for over a week.”

Phoebe’s shoulder dropped. “Oh, thank God.” She put her muddy, uninjured hand on her chest. “I was afraid you were taking him to a kill shelter. If that were the case, I would be more than happy to adopt him.”

The man gave her a gentle smile. “I think right now you need to worry about yourself, starting with you looking like a creature straight out of the lagoon and a need to get all of that goo out of your wound.”

Phoebe held her hand out, but the movement caused intense pain in her hand. Cradling it to her chest, she tried to grit her teeth through it. “Yeah, I do need to get that cleaned up.”

The man ushered her around to the passenger side and opened the door. Instead of letting her climb in, he leaned over the passenger seat and rummaged around. After a couple of seconds, he emerged with a towel. “This should at least keep you from getting too cold.”

“And from keeping your vehicle from getting too dirty,” she gave him a half smile.

The man blinked at her. “What do you mean?”

Her eyes moved back to the seat, “Well, you said you were going to get me out of here, so I thought...”

The man looked back at the passenger seat. As he looked, Phoebe studied his face, and there was something familiar about him. Not just from the previous night, but he looked... she couldn’t quite place it. His face was thin but cut,

with high cheekbones that made his features stand out much more. Her eyes moved down to his shoulders, which weren't broad but were still quite muscular. His short-sleeve shirt showed off some well-toned arms, but not like those of a bodybuilder.

I've seen him on TV. Or some type of media.

The man turned back to look at her, a slight scowl on his face. "You don't have a car?"

It began to sink in — this guy didn't intend to take her out of the area. She didn't think that it would be right to ask him either. At the same time, she wasn't sure if she would be able to take the bus, and even if her phone worked (something that wasn't exactly guaranteed considering how much water and mud she had been in) who would let her into their car? Ridesharing was out and there was no one in her personal life who could help. She wasn't about to ask her parents for help, and she wasn't close to anyone else. The kids that her parents had adopted were either too young to drive or had moved away to start their own lives.

I guess I'll just walk home. Considering I thought I was going to be eaten by an alligator 10 minutes ago, a long walk home isn't going to be the worst possible outcome today. Might even help calm my nerves.

Giving the man a weary smile, Phoebe said, "Right. Right. It's been quite a day."

He responded by narrowing his eyes. "You forgot you had a car?"

She shrugged. “I’m in a bit of shock having just escaped being eaten.”

“I supposed.” He watched her like he wasn’t sure if he should just let it go.

“Thank you. For everything. For helping me last night and for saving me today.”

“Last night?” He tilted his head to the side, his skepticism changing to confusion.

Phoebe just smiled at him as she said, “Thank you.” Her eyes flicked down to his name tag. “Jace.”

With that, she turned and started walking along the road.

Chapter 2

A Different Type of Encounter

Phoebe hadn't made it very far when Jace pulled up beside her. He opened the passenger window and asked, "Do you need a lift to your car?"

She looked at him. "No, no. It's okay. The walk will do me good."

He moved his head to indicate the hand that she was holding up to her chest. "It would be best to take care of that before it gets infected. And you're losing a lot of blood. You shouldn't be walking a long distance just to be stubborn."

Phoebe bit her lip. "I wouldn't want to get your work vehicle dirty. I mean, you've got to take care of a dog, then take care of the gator before it becomes a problem again. I don't want to add cleanup to that."

"It shouldn't take that long to drop you off at your car. And I've had worse than mud and a bit of blood in this vehicle."

Phoebe sighed and pulled the towel closer around her, thinking about what he meant. Taking care of wounded animals probably did result in some incredibly detailed cleanup. Finally, she admitted, "I don't have a car."

The man watched her for a moment. "Why did you say you did?"

She just shrugged. "You seemed to think that I had one. And after you've done so much, I didn't want to ask for a ride back home."

Jace looked back at the field, then at Phoebe. “I’ll call someone else in to take care of her.” He leaned over and pushed the door open.” Hop in and I’ll take you to a care center.”

“Oh.” Phoebe looked at her hand, the pain of moving it making it clear that it was going to be a lot more significant than just a cut. “I suppose I should go to a facility. But I want to get cleaned up first. Do an initial assessment after making sure I’m not bringing in more problems to the facility.”

His eyes bored into her for a moment, then he said, “Would you prefer to go home and get cleaned up first?”

It almost felt as if she were getting a more practical test as her mind considered the best course of action. She definitely needed to get cleaned up, but it might be best if someone with more experience took care of it. Then again, it was possible that she had sustained other injuries that hadn’t quite registered yet. As she assessed her body for the first time, Phoebe became aware of a lot more pain, particularly in her left leg and her right ankle. Looking down, she remembered that she had lost her shoe, making walking home a horrible idea. Feeling a bit defeated, she sighed, then looked up at him. “I would appreciate a lift back home. After getting rid of this stuff, I’ll be able to see if I need more than just my hand treated.”

He nodded. Feeling very self-conscious, Phoebe put the towel on the seat as best she could to minimize how much gunk she got on it. When she tried to pull herself into the seat, she let out a sharp breath as pain shot through her arm from

her hand. Phoebe let go, nearly falling backward as she tried to stop the pain.

“Whoa.” Jace reached out over the seat as if he could stop her from falling. Quickly unbuckling himself, Jace hurriedly opened his door and rushed around the vehicle. Taking her elbow in his hand, he said gently, “Let me help you get in there.”

Feeling guilty about how much he was having to do for her, Phoebe had to suck it up and accept that she wasn't going to be able to do much on her own. “I'm sorry, Jace.”

He made sure she was seated, then pulled the belt out and leaned over her body, apparently unaware of just how close he was to her. Not only was he in her physical space, but he was getting mud all over his own clothing. Phoebe watched him, wanting to say something about not needing him to fasten her seat belt, but she also knew it wasn't true. If she couldn't pull herself up, which was a simple gripping action, there was practically no chance that she was going to be able to grip a belt and fasten it, especially with all the mud. Feeling terrible about how much she was having to rely on him, Phoebe repeated her apology as he backed up and prepared to shut the door.

“Why are you sorry?”

“I just... I feel bad. You keep saving me, which is just... that's got to get old for you.”

He gave her a blank look, then shut the door. Phoebe watched him as Jace quickly moved back to the driver's side. When he settled himself back into his seat, he began driving, not giving any sign that he had a response to her repeated

apology. Wondering if she should say anything, Phoebe was about to start telling him how to get back to her apartment when Jace finally spoke.

“You don’t need to apologize. I admit, rescuing humans isn’t typically in my job description, but I don’t mind it.”

Phoebe couldn’t help but grin as she looked over at him, “You usually save animals *from* humans, huh?”

He glanced at her, a small dimple appearing near his mouth along with a gorgeous smile. “Something like that,” he said, his eyes shining

Her hand began to throb, so Phoebe tried to put it in a position where it wouldn’t hurt so badly. Trying to hide the fact that she was in pain, Phoebe spoke a little louder, “I can understand. Sometimes humans can be absolute monsters. But most of the time, they just need a bit of guidance to think before doing things that hurt others.”

This got a snort from him. “More like you have to keep a collar on them, preferably a shock collar to show them just how effective those things aren’t.”

Though his tone was entirely serious, Phoebe couldn’t help but laugh, drawing a scowl from him. Waving her uninjured hand, she said, “Sometimes I can’t help but have similar thoughts.” She cleared her throat. “I mean, in what world can you expect good results by beating your child?”

“I wouldn’t expect that to yield good results.” He looked slightly offended by her words.

“Right?” She nodded. “That’s exactly my point. People tend to do things that are wrong because,” she held up her

pointer finger and middle finger on her uninjured hand to make partial quotes, “it’s ‘tradition’ or ‘the way things are done.’ But that’s a horrible reason for doing something that logically doesn’t make sense. And certainly when there is plenty of evidence showing it’s harmful. I mean, our medical practices are a perfect example. A hundred fifty years ago, bleeding people was the way things were done, and that literally helped to kill the patient.”

Jace still looked serious as he nodded. “Like Garfield.”

Phoebe paused, “The cartoon cat?”

Again the dimple appeared. “President James Garfield. Your 20th president.”

Phoebe pointed to herself, “My 20th president?”

“America’s 20th president.”

“Are you saying you aren’t American? Because if not, he’s also *your* 20th president.”

Jace gave a noncommittal half-shrug, then didn’t say anything else.

Thinking that the attempts at conversation hadn’t exactly fared well, Phoebe decided to tell him how to get to her apartment. He didn’t say much after that, and Phoebe had no idea what topics were safe since he had reacted somewhat negatively to a couple of subjects so far. When she wasn’t pointing out where to turn, Phoebe largely kept silent, which gave her more time to feel a lot of pain.

When they finally arrived, he hopped out. Phoebe fumbled with the door handle, but couldn’t quite get the door

to open. When he appeared at her window, she realized that he was planning to keep helping her. He opened the door, then took her elbow and helped her ease out of the seat.

Phoebe couldn't help but comment: "It almost feels like we're on a date since you are being such a gentleman."

He placed a hand on her lower back and guided her a little farther out of the way of the door. There was no obvious reaction to what she had said, so Phoebe figured he wasn't pleased with her joke. Figuring this was the time to say goodbye, Phoebe nodded her head a little. "Thank you very much, Jace. Without you, I wouldn't have been able to come home."

When she turned to walk away, Phoebe was surprised to hear footsteps following her. Turning to see what was happening, Phoebe looked at Jace just a couple of paces behind her. "Oh, you don't have to come any farther. I should be able to handle it from here."

"You're hurt. I don't think it would be a good idea to leave you on your own. Since you can't grip a car door handle, it is unlikely you will have much luck with a house door handle."

His logic was sound, but she felt guilty. Phoebe countered his logic with her own argument. "You can't leave a dog in your vehicle. Not in this humidity."

"I've got someone coming to take care of him."

This was definitely news to Phoebe. There was no point where she had seen a phone in his hand, and he certainly hadn't radioed anyone. "How will they know where to go?"

“I let them know where the vehicle is.” The way he said it made it seem like that was the obvious answer.

As much as the student nurse wanted to ask more questions, she wasn't sure what to ask. He had no way of letting anyone know where he was, but he was equally certain that someone was on the way. There were simply too many questions, and Jace didn't seem particularly interested in answering any of them. For a brief flash, she thought it was strange that he was following her into her apartment, but the thought wasn't accompanied by any fear. Jace had a particularly unique presence that put her at ease. Perhaps because he seemed fairly oblivious to social norms, but he also lacked any obvious desire to harm people. It was strange to think that he was able to assess a situation like what she had been in and take care of it, apparently without thinking twice about going in to take on an attacking alligator, but he seemed to be lacking when it came to conversations. His responses to her attempted conversation had seemed like he wasn't accustomed to talking to other people. Then again, as someone who worked with animals, it wasn't likely that he *did* spend much time with people.

Fumbling in her pockets with one hand, Phoebe realized that she didn't have her keys. “Oh, no,” she let the words out in a whisper. “Oh, no, no, no. I can't have lost them.”

“What's wrong?”

Her hand began to pat all around her body, “I lost my keys.”

“Is this your apartment?”

Phoebe turned to look at him, not able to comprehend his question because it made very little sense. “Yes, this is definitely my place.”

Jace looked around, then gently he took her shoulders and guided her out of the way. She stared as he knelt down in front of her door and put his eye up to the keyhole. Though he seemed at ease, Phoebe couldn't help but look around them as it started to dawn on her what he was doing. Feeling very exposed and worried that they might get in trouble, she very much wanted to stop him, but she didn't think that anything she said would actually help.

“Um, Jace,” her voice was low as her head swiveled to make sure no one saw them standing like a couple of thieves outside her door.

By the time she looked back at him, Jace was standing up, his hand on the door. “Let's get you cleaned up.”

Phoebe just stared at him, wondering how he managed to get inside so quickly. Breaking into places didn't seem like a likely required skill for someone who dealt with animals. Feeling a bit apprehensive about the situation, Phoebe looked around her again, then followed him into the apartment. She entered the main living area, but Jace wasn't in sight.

“Jace?” She called out a little apprehensively.

His voice sounded from her bedroom. “In the bathroom.”

She blew out a breath of air before heading into her room and into the bathroom. Though uncomfortable, it wasn't for any of the reasons that she would usually be nervous.

*Why is he walking around my place so comfortably?
HOW can he be so comfortable?*

When she walked through the doorway, her thoughts were quickly forgotten as he pulled her over to the sink, the water already running and warming up. He grabbed her wrist, causing a warm sensation to go through her body. Feeling a flush rising in her face as Jace pulled her carefully over to the sink, Phoebe forgot anything she wanted to say. Her eyes followed the muck as Jace placed her injured hand in the water. As the warm water ran over her hand, she felt as if she were being enveloped by the sensation.

Somewhat lost in the sensation, Phoebe was startled when Jace spoke. “Don’t worry about cleaning up. I’ll take care of it once I’m sure you are all right.” He wasn’t looking at her as he spoke, instead focusing on making sure the mud and debris washed away from the wound.

Her eyes looked at his face while his attention was fully on her hand. Not wanting him to do anything else for her, Phoebe shook her head. “No. I can’t let you clean up. This is my place. I’ll handle it.”

“You’ll need to take a shower once we make sure your hand is clean.”

The implications of this declaration was definitely not something she was expecting. Her immediate reaction was to laugh at the idea he would be in the bathroom cleaning while she showered. Considering his slightly off response so far, Phoebe decided to take his offer seriously. “Um, thank you for the offer, but I’m not comfortable with you being in here while I shower. I don’t know you.”

He turned and looked at her, his gray eyes shining. “Oh. Would that be... bad?”

“Yes. I haven’t... I don’t shower with people in the room.” She gave him a half grin to cover her embarrassment. “I grew up in a big family, and the bathroom is like my... place to get alone time.”

He began to nod slowly as if the idea made sense to him. “Alone time. I guess people need that?”

“At least I do.”

He began to nod faster. “I understand. Once your hand is cleaned up, I’ll let you have alone time before cleaning up the bathroom. Then I can take care of the tub, too.”

“That’s not necessary. I can clean up...”

“No. You are hurt, so you shouldn’t get your hand dirty. I’ll take care of it. By the time I finish, my vehicle should be returned so I can leave.”

“Oh, right.” The fact that he had someone pick up his vehicle meant that he didn’t have a way to leave, even if she still had no idea how anyone could possibly have been alerted to his situation. “I’m sorry you are stuck here.”

“I don’t mind. Even if I don’t often help humans doesn’t mean I’m not willing.”

There it was again, and this time it was not a mistake. Jace had mentioned humans a couple of times, almost as if he weren’t one of them. Hoping to make a joke out of it, Phoebe said, “Humans, huh? Such a weak little species.” She tried to punctuate it with a laugh, but all he did was nod.

“It certainly is true.”

Taking the conversation in a slightly different direction, she said, “Did something happen to make you feel so down on your own species? Maybe seeing too much cruelty toward animals?” When Jace’s eyes bore into hers, Phoebe started to ramble. “I’m a nurse, so I’ve seen how horrible humans can be. I mean, I’ve been tempted to renounce humanity myself. Well, I’m hoping to be a nurse. I took my final today — before the alligator — and if I did well, I’ll be able to actually get a job as a nurse. So, um, you know, I can understand...”

“My opinion has always been the same when it comes to humans. My job has not affected it at all.” Jace’s voice was even. “And I have not been down on my species.”

“Oh, okay.” She bit her lip, unsure what to say.

They were silent as he continued to clean up her hand, then moved up her arm a bit. As pain started to make its way up her arm, Jace broke into her thoughts. Quietly, he explained, “I want to make sure that you don’t get mud in the wound while you are in the shower. Sorry it is taking a while.”

“It’s fine. I appreciate all your help. I’m not quite sure how to repay you for everything you’ve done so far. I mean, I don’t understand why you are helping me so much because this definitely isn’t part of your job.”

“Do you only do things that are part of your job?” Jace didn’t look at her as he asked. Instead, his attention was on her wound and making sure that the mud didn’t get in the wound.

“Well, no. But I also don’t tend to go this far out of my way for people while I’m at work.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Right now, I’m just a waitress, so there’s only so much that I can do while I’m working. Like, I can’t leave work if someone is drunk and shouldn’t be driving.”

His head whipped around, and Phoebe felt his eyes judging her, “You let drunk people drive home?”

“No, I order them rides. Sometimes when they are drunk, I just request a car from my phone.”

“You pay for their rides?”

“Well, yeah. I don’t want to let people leave drunk and pose a risk to everyone else. When people are too impaired to make a good choice, it’s a good idea to step in and minimize how much harm they can do to themselves. And definitely to others.”

As if this were the right answer, Jace beamed at her. “That’s definitely the way it should be. Unfortunately, too many humans tend to just let it go.”

Phoebe couldn’t help but frown as she started chewing on her lip. Finally, she decided to risk it. “There you go talking about humans like it doesn’t apply to you. Why is that?”

His attention was back on the wound making it difficult to tell if he was kidding when he replied, “I’m not human, so it’s an outsider perspective.”

Laughing nervously, she said, “Ah, so aliens have made it to Earth, huh?”

“Not as far as I know.” He let go of her hand and stepped close to her. “I’ll help you take your clothes off so you

—“

“NO!” She took a couple of shuffling steps away from him. “You can’t remove my clothing. That’s too - too - just no!”

Tilting his head, Jace looked at her. “Would you prefer a makeshift bandage so that you don’t get your wound dirty by removing your clothing?”

Looking at her hand, Phoebe was surprised to see that the wound didn’t look nearly as bad as she had expected. She thought that whatever she had placed her hand on had gone all the way through. Closing her hand still hurt a little, but she couldn’t see any bone or anything. And there was no injury on the outside of her hand. “Sure,” she agreed, her thoughts not entirely on her response. Phoebe’s mind was still trying to process what she was seeing. “Um, thank you.”

“All right,” he agreed. Jace pulled one of the towels off the small rack over the toilet and carefully pulled her hand toward his chest. Standing in such close proximity, she realized how tall he was. Being so lithe and sinewy made him look less imposing, but Jace must have been over six feet tall. Standing at about five-foot-four, Phoebe realized that she should definitely feel threatened by this man. Standing in her bathroom. After breaking into her apartment.

But she didn’t.

Gingerly, he wrapped the towel around the wound, saying nothing as he worked. When he finished, Jace wordlessly moved over to the shower and turned it on. Finally, he left the room.

I'm not quite sure what is going on.

Phoebe looked at her hand again. Since that morning, so much had happened, and as far as she knew the day was only half over.

I hope that the rest of this day is relaxing because I don't think I can take any further escalation.

Removing her clothing, Phoebe held her uninjured hand into the water. The feel of the warm water made her close her eyes and moan. "If I weren't covered in mud, I would love to take a long bath." Feeling a little better, Phoebe allowed herself to relax for the first time since she woke as she stepped into the water and let the mud and gunk start to run down her body.

Chapter 3

An Impromptu Massage

The initial sensation of peace and relaxation didn't last long as the pain began to prick at her consciousness, especially from her leg. Knowing that she needed to remove the mud from the top down — otherwise, she would have to keep washing her lower half — she pulled her hair back with her uninjured hand. Then she turned and faced the water. Closing her eyes, she was glad that she had replaced the showerhead with something that had different pressure levels. She reached up with her uninjured hand and adjusted it to increase the pressure of the water. Moving her head around, she guessed when the mud was off of her head, then shifted a little so that the water struck her throat and collarbone.

Carefully, she turned and moved to make sure that every part of her torso was clean before starting on her arms. Once she felt that her upper half was largely mud-free, Phoebe reached out and grabbed a clip from the back of the sink. Hoping that it would hold her incredibly heavy hair, she clipped a large mass on her head, then began soaping up her body. As soon as she was satisfied with the cleanup, she moved around to get the rest of the mud from her lower half, something that took a lot less time. Again, she soaped up and made sure that everything was clean before tackling what she knew was going to be the hardest part of the shower — her hair.

As she cleaned her legs, she noticed some angry red marks toward the bottom of her leg, but the skin wasn't broken. Unable to figure out what happened, she figured it was

either an allergic reaction or she had struck something and it would be bruised the next day. Making a mental note to check on it, Phoebe decided it was time to move on to the task she looked forward to the least.

Turning so that her back was fully in the stream, Phoebe arched her back, then removed the clip. A bit of the muck trailed across her shoulder as her hair fell into the stream of water, Phoebe adjusted slightly so that the water rinsed the mud off her. Then she stepped away and arched more so that her hair couldn't touch her easily. For a few minutes, she stood holding the position, allowing the water to remove as much of the gunk from her misadventure as was possible without her using her hands. A couple of times, she moved her head to try to shake out a bit of debris, but after a while she knew that she would have to actually touch the mess on the top of her head.

She started by running her uninjured hair through the now incredibly heavy hair pulling down on her neck. A little too late, she realized that she needed to remove some of the strain on her neck as the headache that had threatened her that morning finally started to creep through her head.

Oh, good, that is just what I need: more pain. At least there is nothing pressing for me to do today. Maybe I'll sleep until work. Then there will be no worry about my thoughts straying or anything else going wrong.

For the next fifteen minutes, she tried to clean her hair. When Phoebe felt that just rinsing it wasn't going to do anymore to help, she reached for the shampoo. Of course, she knocked it over because she still had the hand towel wrapped around her hand, making it harder to grasp the bottle. That's

when she realized that a real cleaning was going to be incredibly difficult. Wondering if she should just get it cut, Phoebe unwrapped her hand, then grabbed the bottle with her uninjured — and nondominant — hand. Gingerly shifting it to her injured hand, she tried to squeeze the shampoo into her hand. This proved to be incredibly painful. Instead of trying again, she placed the bottle under her arm, then did her best to squeeze out the shampoo into her nondominant hand. Losing a good bit down the drain, Phoebe finally felt she had enough to get started. Wiping the handful on the top of her head, Phoebe reached up with her other hand to start washing her hair. As soon as her hand touched the shampoo, the nursing student began to whimper. Pulling her hand to her chest, Phoebe tried to collect herself so that she could try again. Every time she touched her hair, pain shot through her, causing the poor woman to cry out or whimper.

Deciding that she wasn't going to be able to do anything about her hair with her injury, Phoebe did her best to get the shampoo out of her hair with her uninjured hand.

When she felt that she had done as much as she could, Phoebe shut off the water and grabbed a large towel for her head. She then wrapped up her hair, followed by her body. Realizing a bit late that she hadn't brought any clothes into the bathroom — of course, she hadn't, given the state she was in when she arrived, Phoebe knew that she was going to need to step out to dress.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, then opened the door a crack.

No one was outside of the door. “Jace?”

His voice came from the living area. “Yes?”

“Could you please close my bedroom door?”

There was a pause. “Okay.”

Seconds later, he walked into the room and shut the door. He then turned to look at her, as if waiting for something.

“Um, I mean, could you be *outside* of my room? With the door closed.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

He was gone and the door was closing by the time she finished thanking him. Moving into the bedroom, she decided that the best she could do was to pull a dress on over her hips. Trying to get anything over the towel on her head was never easy. With an injured hand — she wasn’t going to consider using it again.

Slipping into a sundress, she opened the door. Jace appeared in front of her with several cleaning supplies in his hands. Without a word, he walked past her and headed to the bathroom.

“Jace, I don’t want you to clean up. You’ve already done far too much.” She trailed along behind him.

“My van still hasn’t been returned, so I don’t have anything else to do.” He watched her passively.

Phoebe considered her position. She was hurt, and she was incapable of cleaning her hair, what were the odds that she could clean up her home?

Oh my... I just walked through my place with mud all over myself. I've probably got a massive cleanup in the living area, too.

Her eyes went to the floor, but there were no signs on the hardwood that she had tracked anything into the home. She bit her lip and looked at Jace, who was still watching her. Giving him a slight nod, Phoebe finally conceded. "I'm going to have to find a way to pay you back for everything."

"I don't mind helping. You don't have to pay me back for anything."

She had heard that before, especially from some of the students in her classes over the years. Some of them had tried to guilt her into dating them by helping her when she was having trouble. That was how Phoebe learned not to trust others for help. Leaving him to clean the bathroom, Phoebe went back through her small place to see how bad the damage was.

There was no sign of mud or her earlier ordeal. Slightly confused, Phoebe went to the front door, again finding nothing to indicate that she had tracked anything into her place. It was becoming clear just how Jace had spent his time waiting for her to get out of the shower and for his vehicle to be returned.

Feeling even more guilty, she returned to the bathroom. It hadn't been that long, but already Jace had cleaned up nearly the entire thing.

"How did you clean it so quickly?" Those were the first words out of her mouth as Phoebe's eyes found it hard to process just how clean the bathroom was. She knew what it

looked like when she had left, and it seemed like an impossibly short time for what he had accomplished.

He looked up at her. “I work with animals, so I have a lot of experience with getting rid of messes quickly.”

“If I had the money to hire you to clean, I definitely would. Except I don’t usually have much of a mess.”

“I noticed,” he said, picking up the rest of the cleaning supplies. “I’m going to see if my vehicle has been returned yet.”

Not sure what she was supposed to do and feeling more out of place in her home than Jace apparently felt, Phoebe decided to see just how bad her hair was. Carefully removing the towel, her hair fell down in a massive mess of debris, mud, and tangles.

“I should probably just chop it all off,” she murmured, her eyes moving over her ruined hair.

“I could help so you don’t have to.”

Phoebe was startled by the soft voice coming from the door. “Jace! You scared me. “

“I’m sorry. That was not my goal.”

“No, no. It’s probably my fault. I was focused on, well, the disgusting nest that used to be my hair.”

He looked it over. “I’ve seen far worse.”

Phoebe looked over at him, her mind going in two directions. Part of her wanted to say no. That was probably the right thing to say, not only because she didn’t know him, but because he had already done far too much for her, starting by

saving her from an alligator. But a larger part of her wanted to take him up on the offer.

She loved her hair and didn't want to cut it, even though several times over the course of her life she had been forced to: once because a bully at school had put gum in it, another because one of her young siblings had done it when she was sleeping. The last time she had to cut it short was because the ends had caught on fire after one of her siblings had tried to make a surprise meal for her parents without help and ended up starting a fire. Her associations with short hair were all negative, and if she could avoid cutting it, she definitely wanted to.

Grimacing, she asked, "Are you sure?"

Jace nodded. "You'll probably be the easiest shampoo I've ever had to give."

Despite everything, Phoebe couldn't help but laugh. "I imagine animals aren't particularly happy with bath time."

A smile caused his dimple to appear. "At least you aren't going to fight me and leave me more soaked than you."

Phoebe chuckled. "That's very true. I will stay as still as possible so you can focus on the mess."

He gave her a soft smile. "I'll go get a chair."

Phoebe nodded. "I was thinking that I needed to put a bathing suit on, but, yeah, it would probably be easier to take care of my hair in the sink.

"Yes. And you won't have to sit in the mud."

“I hadn’t considered that.” Phoebe couldn’t help but smile. As Jace passed her, she stopped him with her hand. “Thank you, Jace. I will find some way to repay you for everything.”

He shook his head. “It’s not necessary. Like you, my job is to help. Since I like you, I don’t mind helping you.”

Phoebe stood still as he continued out the door to get a chair. Her mind raced through what he had said.

What does he mean by he likes me?

Her heart fluttered, but she fought down the idea that he meant anything besides finding her to be a decent person. Especially after the negative things he had said about humans.

Jace returned and set a small chair in front of the sink. “Go ahead and sit down.”

Phoebe moved over and sat down as Jace picked up the shampoo and conditioner. “I’m going to tilt you back, but you don’t need to worry about falling. I’ll make sure you are balanced.”

Feeling incredibly self-conscious, Phoebe sat down. The feel of the warm water on her head felt amazing, then Jace started to run his hands through her hair, gently tugging at the tangles. Fighting back the urge to moan, Phoebe found herself getting lost in the way his hands felt on her head. She had never had her hair washed by someone else — not since she was too young to do it herself. Her body was responding in ways that Phoebe could not have anticipated, especially the sensations she felt in her chest and between her legs. Ashamed and afraid of what Jace would think if anything showed on her

face, Phoebe kept her eyes closed, trying to imagine anything that would disrupt the thoughts she was starting to harbor about the man who had spent so much time helping her.

True to his word, Jace kept her balanced, something she only remembered when he righted the chair. “That should keep you from having to cut it,” he said as he picked up another towel and gently began to dry her hair.

Unable to look him in the eyes, Phoebe pulled away. “Thank you, Jace. I can take it from here.”

He stepped back. “Okay.” His eyes stayed on her for a moment, then he said, “I’m going to go check to see if my vehicle is back.”

Phoebe acknowledged this as she used the towel to work on her hair.

From the living area, she heard Jace’s voice. “My vehicle has been returned. Do you need a lift to the clinic?”

For the past 20 minutes, Phoebe had entirely forgotten about her hand. Looking down at it, she knew that she needed to get it checked, but it felt almost normal now. Staring at it, the young woman walked toward the front door, “No. It isn’t too far. I can get there to have my hand checked out.”

She looked up to see Jace at the door, his hand on the doorknob. He gave her a small half smile. “All right. Good luck.”

There was so much to say, but Phoebe didn’t have time because he was gone almost as soon as he finished his sentence. Unsure what had happened to make him so eager to leave, Phoebe went to the door to lock it.

It was only when she looked down as she locked the handle and the deadbolt that her eyes were drawn to her chest. She wasn't wearing a bra because she hadn't even thought of it in her rush to dress. What made it worse was the fact that her nipples stood out in the thin fabric. Embarrassment swept over her as Phoebe realized what likely drove him to rush out of her place.

Unable to deal with one more thing, Phoebe decided that the only thing she wanted to do was to hide under her covers and sleep — if she could shut down her brain from this latest turn of events. Knowing that she couldn't, she headed to her room to put on a bra and go to the clinic to have her hand checked.

Chapter 4

Biting Off a Bit Too Much

The next year went by in a blur as Phoebe found out she had passed the nursing exam, had a high enough GPA to graduate, and started to get offers for nursing positions. Her family threw a small celebration for her, one with cake and a whole lot of love. All her siblings and many of the foster children they had helped over the years came to congratulate her, and several of them seemed to be interested in becoming nurses themselves.

Once everyone started heading home, Phoebe decided to stay the night to take over the cleanup and kids for the evening. Her parents were slowing down and the party had taken a lot out of them. When they tried to help, she sent them to bed with the promise that a couple of the kids would help her. As she and the kids set to work, Phoebe was grateful that soon she would have only one job and no school, freeing up more time to help her parents. Phoebe didn't intend to move home, but she hoped to be able to buy a place close to them. Some of her siblings liked to visit her at the apartment, but it was a bit of a trip for them. If she could buy a house within easy walking distance, she could give the kids a place to take a break because she knew that sometimes the house got to be a little too much. Without school or training, she would be able to focus on her life again.

At least, that is what she hoped.

The initial graduation euphoria began to wane as Phoebe found that all of her job offers were for the night shift, and she didn't seem able to land anything that would let her work

during the day. While she had expected that she would get a lot of offers for the night shift, Phoebe hadn't anticipated *only* getting offers that required her to work at night. On the occasions where she heard back about her applications to daytime shift positions, she kept getting pointed to other open positions for the late shifts. It was as if no place was willing to put a new nurse on the day shift, which made very little sense. The night shift was certainly less busy, but it also meant that the nurses needed to have a much better idea of what to do.

Uncomfortable going into a position where she would have to fight sleep while trying to learn a critical job, Phoebe decided to keep looking. As a result, she rejected all the early offers. She knew there were daytime positions available because several of the students in her classes had managed to get day work before graduating, but for whatever reason, she wasn't having that kind of luck.

Months passed, and she began to consider that she may not have a choice *but* to take a nighttime job. She wasn't ready to give in and accept one of the positions yet, but soon she would have to start paying back her student loans. The busy season at the restaurant was about to start, so she knew that she would be able to earn enough for a few months. But the same time, she was concerned that the longer she stayed away from nursing the more out of touch she would become with the field.

Hoping to find another way to get a daytime position, Phoebe started volunteering at a local clinic. That at least was in her field and she was there during the day, even if she wasn't getting paid. Most of what she did used what she had learned in school if only minimally. Still, Phoebe knew that

she was not only networking, but getting to know the clinic's messy and overly complicated software. With several of the nurses talking about retiring, she was hopeful she might be hired to take over one of their shifts.

When a full 10 months had passed since graduation, Phoebe knew she couldn't keep holding out for what she wanted. She had continued to work at the restaurant to earn money, but soon that would slow down and her finances would get tight.

Phoebe knew after being passed over that being a volunteer simply wasn't enough to get her a job on the day shift. For that, she needed the experience. And it looked like working at night was the only way to get it.

As disappointing as it was, Phoebe finally gave in and applied to a couple of positions at the clinic to work overnight. On the plus side, those shifts paid more because of the undesirable hours and as soon as Phoebe applied, she was hired. As she guessed, she wasn't even considered for the two open positions on the day shift because one of the administrators had told her so. As much as that bothered her, Phoebe knew that it was just a matter of putting up with her situation until she had enough experience to be considered for better shifts. Besides, she wasn't quite sure if she would even consider staying at the clinic at that point. On the one hand, they had been open about not even considering her. This hurt since they knew her situation. However, she could understand their positions on some levels. She had just started working as a nurse and her experience was limited, and many more patients did come through during the day.

As much as she disliked her current situation, if she could stick it out for a year or two, she knew she would be able to get a shift that would allow her to spend more time with her family. And the extra pay would make it easier for her to save for a house. Phoebe reminded herself of this when she went in for the first night. What surprised her was that she was one of only three nurses who worked that shift.

Since she volunteered during the day, she hadn't been aware of just how few people were on the night shift. Some places rotated their nurses so that everyone would have to take the late shift, but not this clinic. That meant that she would either have to get hired to the day shift if another position came open, or she would have to quit and move to another clinic. Given how much trouble they seemed to have filling the three roles, she figured that leaving would be her best option.

Thoughts for another time. Right now, you need to stay awake, Phoebe's mind warned her as she tried to review the procedures for that first night.

It was something she would have to remind herself of several times over those first few weeks as she fell into an uneasy schedule. Even though it was a lot more stressful than she had expected, Phoebe kept in mind that she was getting a lot of experience that she hadn't had as a volunteer, especially when it came to the overly complicated software and how to handle some very difficult situations. With only two other nurses on staff, it was like a trial by fire. There weren't many patients at night, but when there were, it was always something serious: A child with a high fever, someone with a broken toe. And then there were the kinds of problems that come from nighttime activities and human curiosity. Within

the first month, Phoebe ended up having to take care of some post-sex injuries that she hadn't known were possible. She couldn't help but blush as she helped one man who had managed to hurt his member when he got too vigorous with his partner. That had led to some ribbing by the other nurses, but she managed to get through it with most of her pride intact. She had been taking care of kids for a long time before doing her clinicals and other training, so she wasn't entirely unfamiliar with the male anatomy. It was just different to actually have to talk about it in terms of an activity that she hadn't experienced. At least that meant that what she was saying was completely fact-based — patients weren't getting her opinion. The night shift afforded her a look into a world that she had never thought about.

As her initial fear over working at night began to abate, Phoebe finally felt comfortable putting in her notice to her job at the restaurant. Her last day would be near the anniversary of her graduation, and she hoped to be able to do more for Lucy before she left. As if she could sense it, Lucy had taken to mostly avoiding Phoebe. Several times over that year, Lucy had come to work with clear bruises and once even a black eye. Of course, Lucy always had flimsy excuses ready, but Phoebe had seen the man and Lucy several times and she knew exactly why Lucy had those injuries. She had witnessed the guy slapping Lucy on a couple of occasions, and once he had literally kicked the poor woman out of his car. Phoebe had been too far away to do anything, and when she tried to involve the police, Lucy had gotten hysterical. If Lucy wasn't willing to press charges, there wasn't much that Phoebe could do. For months, she had largely tried to leave things alone so

that Lucy didn't feel so uncomfortable at work, but there was no reason to stay silent now that she was about to leave. If she didn't, Phoebe knew that she would feel guilty if anything should happen to Lucy, knowing she could have done something about it.

With just a couple of nights left before her final day at the restaurant, Phoebe was more attentive when she went to work — mostly because she knew that it was the end of a phase of her life. She was trying to pay attention to the little things that had made up her daily life for years. As she walked from the bus stop to the back entrance, some movement caught her eye. Once again, Phoebe saw the guy hitting Lucy as they sat in his car. Running up to the driver's side, she threw the door open and grabbed his arm. Lucy fell against the passenger door as the man turned on Phoebe. His eyes looked completely dark as he glared at her.

“What do you think you are doing, bitch?”

“Get out of here before I call the cops.”

Instead of listening, the man got out of the now open door as Lucy pushed her door open and scrambled out, pleading with him not to do anything.

Picking Phoebe up by her shirt, the guy was up in her face. “I'll show you what happens to women who don't understand their place.” Before she could do anything, he pulled his arm back, then slammed his fist into the side of her face. When he drew his arm back again, Phoebe kicked forward hard, connecting with his stomach. In his shock, the man bent over as he expelled air and tried to figure out what had just happened. As he hesitated, Phoebe balled her hand

into a fist and brought it down hard on the arm dangling her over the ground. This forced him to drop her. Before he had a chance to recover, Phoebe brought both hands up together like a hammer, connecting with his face and sending him backward into the open door.

She didn't wait to see what happened to him. Running around the car, Phoebe grabbed Lucy's arm and pulled the terrified woman into the staff entrance. She couldn't quite make out what the guy was saying, partly because of the ringing in her ears and partly because the door closed, blocking out his words. Racing to the staff break area, she finally let go of Lucy. Grabbing her phone out of her pocket, Phoebe called the police as several other members of the staff came in to see what was happening. To her annoyance, Jackson was among them.

Ignoring the questions and Lucy's hysterics, Phoebe dialed 9-1-1. When Lucy began asking her what she was doing, the new nurse turned her back on her coworker, knowing that Lucy would do would plead for her to stop. Within minutes the police arrived, and Phoebe met them to file a report. Lucy might not be willing to file a report or press charges, but there was nothing preventing Phoebe from doing it. He had punched her in the side of the head. She told them about what had happened and told them that the place had cameras that probably caught the encounter.

Lucy seemed to fall apart as she realized that her partner was not going to get out of this. She switched between worrying about what would happen next and apologizing to Phoebe for the guy. Though she was definitely putting Lucy in

a tough position, Phoebe was also giving her a way to start getting out of the incredibly unhealthy relationship. Fully aware that she couldn't force someone to leave or change the way they thought, she had seen firsthand that sometimes people needed to know that other people care, that they did have people who would support them. And Phoebe wasn't about to let such a horrible creature get away with punching her. That was the kind of escalation that could only end badly for any woman in his life.

Despite feeling guilty for Lucy's state, Phoebe had to get to work. After trying to minimize the swelling and bruising to her face, Phoebe adjusted her hair to largely cover the worst of it. In the dimly lit restaurant, it was unlikely that many people would notice the marks on her face. The problem was going to be the next couple of days because that punch was definitely going to leave discoloration, and working at a clinic, there were bound to be questions.

When she could, Phoebe checked in on Lucy, who seemed too shaken to work. At some point, Lucy left, and Phoebe feared she had gone to try to bail the guy out. Still, she hoped that maybe Lucy had decided to pack some clothes and leave.

As things got busier, Phoebe didn't have time to think about what had happened. The restaurant was unusually busy for a Thursday, probably because people had the following Monday off and a lot of them were taking Friday off to go somewhere. She was grateful for the work, both because it meant more tips and because it kept her from worrying about Lucy. She put on a good front for the family with the son who had a crush on her. They were sad to hear she was leaving, but

the parents congratulated her on finding a more permanent job. It felt a lot like she was saying goodbye to people, and Phoebe allowed a bit of sentimentality to creep into the night. She had the next night off, then her final shift would be on Saturday afternoon.

By the time she was ready to leave, Phoebe was feeling much better than she had when she had arrived. As she left, the nurse was saying goodbye to some of her coworkers that she probably wouldn't see again.

As she headed to the bus stop, a small voice called out to her. Phoebe turned to see a slight woman step out of the shadow.

“Phoebe?” The woman asked just as Phoebe realized who it was.

Taking longer strides, she approached. “Lucy!” She looked down and saw that the woman was carrying a suitcase. “Oh, my goodness! How can I help?”

The woman's eyes moved around furtively. “Um, I don't have anywhere to go.”

“Come with me. You can stay at my place for a few days.” She took the bag and began ushering Lucy toward the bus stop. “I can get you in contact with some shelters and —”

Lucy pulled away at the mention of shelters. “No! I can't go to any of those.”

“They are there to help, so —”

She shook her head vigorously. “He's a part of the system. If I go to a shelter, he'll find me.”

Phoebe paused as her mind whirled. “Okay. I’ll see what else I can find. You can stay with me as long as you need to.”

Again she started to usher Lucy forward. As they walked under a streetlight, she saw something shimmering on Lucy’s face, and Phoebe knew she was crying. Putting an arm around her, Phoebe tried to comfort the poor woman. “I can help you find a new job, put you in contact with some social workers from a different area, and see about getting you somewhere safe.”

Lucy sobbed. “Thank you. I don’t — I don’t...” A hiccup interrupted her. “I don’t know how you can help me after what he did to you.”

“I have no problem helping you. What he did wasn’t your fault, Lucy. Let’s get home, then we can talk if you want.”

The trip home was thankfully uneventful. Neither of them realized as they hopped on the bus that they were being watched by someone in the shadows. As the bus pulled away, he turned and strolled away from the parking lot.

Chapter 5

Peering into the Depths

The day after the event, someone showed up at Phoebe's apartment wanting to talk to her about the previous night. Refusing to let them into her place, Phoebe was able to get the guy to leave fairly quickly.

The next day a lawyer showed up claiming to represent Lucy's partner, Leonard. Getting rid of him was much more difficult as it appeared that Leonard had money. A lot of money. Though she managed to get rid of the lawyer after nearly 20 minutes of arguing at her door, Phoebe realized why Lucy had been so hesitant to leave, not that she was going to push her guest for the details. Clearly, her partner had the means and money to make her life miserable because she left him.

The rest of the day went smoothly as Phoebe worked her last day at the restaurant without any problem.

True to her word, the next day, Phoebe helped Lucy get another job working with the janitorial staff at the clinic. Though she was still remarkably shy and withdrawn, Lucy seemed a bit happier than she had at the restaurant. The problem was she still refused to press charges against Leonard. Not that it mattered much since Phoebe was able to press her own charges.

A couple of weeks later, and several more harassing visits from people representing Leonard, Phoebe decided to try to talk to Lucy about what to do next. She made a large meal on one of her rare nights off, so when Lucy came home, there was plenty of food waiting for her. Over the years, Phoebe had

learned it was better to have these kinds of talks earlier in the day — trying to talk after a long day of school or work was more likely to result in the other person shutting down. Still, she had to try and there weren't many opportunities to talk to Lucy. They didn't work the same schedule, so the early part of the day was pretty much out of the question.

When the young woman walked through the door, she stopped and stared at the table. Phoebe gave her a smile from the sink. "Go get cleaned up, then we can eat."

Lucy nodded, then headed to the small bathroom attached to the guest bedroom. Phoebe gave her time to eat, opting to engage in small chit-chat before going in for a more serious discussion. When Lucy looked happy, Phoebe took her plate. "Would you like dessert?"

"Oh, no. I couldn't. I'm positively full." The young woman's smile was beautiful and she looked at peace.

Steeling herself for the discussion, Phoebe sat down. As soon as she opened her mouth, there was a knock at the door. She turned to look at the clock. "Are you expecting anyone?"

Of course, Phoebe knew the answer even before Lucy shook her head. "No one knows I'm here except the people at work."

Phoebe hadn't told her about the visits. Then again, the visitors who came about Leonard were there to talk to her; they almost certainly didn't know that Lucy was staying with her.

Tensing up, Phoebe rose and headed to the door. After peering through the peephole, she hurriedly opened the door.

“Jace!” She beamed at him, then realized there was a tall man standing next him. He was a solid-looking man who was wearing far too much clothing for Florida. Her eyes went back to Jace, then she held up her hand. “Look! All better.” She opened and closed it a few times.

He nodded slowly and smiled showing his dimple. The man next to him looked down as one eyebrow shot up. Then the stranger held up a badge, “Good evening, Ms. Parker. May we come in?”

“Of course.” She stepped out of the way as Lucy let out a little cry.

“No!”

Jace looked momentarily in shock. Then he held up his hands. “It’s okay. I’m not here to hurt you.”

Phoebe looked between them. “It’s okay, Lucy. I know him. He helped me last year.”

Lucy got up from the table, her eyes wide and full of fear. Suddenly, she was gone, and in her place stood a mountain lion with the same color fur as Lucy’s hair. Instead of attacking, the large cat shot off toward the bedrooms.

Shocked, Phoebe turned back to the two men, but Jace was gone. Only the stranger remained. “Dear God, but these people are just —”

Phoebe’s eyes were wide as the man spoke like this was little more than an annoyance. Turning, she planned to run after Lucy to try to calm her, but she was stopped by the stranger who grabbed her arm. “Jace has this. I’m actually here to talk to you.”

“Wait,” she said, holding up a hand, “why are you acting like this is normal? Did she just turn into a mountain lion?” Shaking her head, she crooked a finger at him. “Show me that badge again.”

The man frowned, then pulled his badge out. Placing it over a notepad, he showed her. Phoebe leaned forward. “You’re well out of jurisdiction, Detective. And unless something happened to Leonard, this isn’t a case that requires any more police than the ones we’ve already spoken to.”

“You’ve no idea how out of my jurisdiction I am. And I’m not here about Leonard. Well, not... exactly.”

“How did you guys even know that Lucy was here?”

“We didn’t. If we had, I can assure you, we would have taken her out a lot sooner. Though it does explain a lot of recent activity.”

Phoebe’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean you would have taken her out sooner? I’m not letting you guys do anything to her. She’s already been through enough.”

The detective nodded. “You are quite right about that. But you are entirely mistaken if you think she’s safe here. By now, Leonard and his family know exactly where she is. And that means that even if we do get her somewhere safe, you are now in danger.”

Rolling her eyes, Phoebe said, “Please, I’m not going to be cowed by some pampered spoilt brat. He can’t do anything to me from jail, and his family has money, so they aren’t going to waste it on some woman they don’t know. At worst, they will keep trying to pay me off to get me to drop the charges.

They aren't going to be stupid enough to kill someone who stood up to their son over something so minor."

"Minor?" The man looked amused. "You think this is minor? How do you know Jace?"

It seemed a complete non sequitur, but Phoebe saw no point in lying. "He rescued me from a gator about a year ago."

"Really," he said, the detective's eyes widening a little. "And exactly what were you doing taking on an alligator? Is fighting alligators normal in Florida?"

"I wasn't taking it on. I was *trying* to save a dog from being carted off to a kill shelter and encountered the gator while trying to enact my own rescue. Jace did something to the gator and got me to safety."

"He didn't mention that he knew the occupant here."

"The occupant? Maybe someone takes their job a little too seriously, Detective New York."

He shrugged. "When you work with homicides, it's best to always take a job seriously. And you can call me Gavin."

"Oh, Gavin. It sounds so informal for someone trying to be serious."

"You can call me Detective Ott if you want to be —"

Phoebe's mouth dropped open. "You're Detective Gavin Ott?" She missed the shadow that passed over his face. "The one who solved the — um —" Phoebe snapped her fingers a few times. "That old serial killer case a while back."

"Ah." He took a deep breath. "Yeah. Got that loser behind bars. Got my sister to thank for that one."

“Your sister? Oh, is that why you became a cop? Did he kill her? Because if so, I’m so —”

“No,” Gavin shook his head. “Nothing like that. She’s happily married now. It was just a bit of... revenge on her part.”

Phoebe gave him a look that said it all, but she still asked, “Is it revenge for her or for you to get a serial killer behind bars?”

“Yes,” he nodded. Turning his attention to the notepad, Gavin made it clear he wasn’t going to discuss himself any further. “Well, I’m actually here to talk to you about Leonard’s family since you are stuck in this swamp now.”

“Why are you here about that? This is not your jurisdiction, and you are no federal officer. It seems questionable for you to be talking to me about any of this. There are no serial killers or —”

“It’s tied to Mr. Brager’s death.”

This caused her to pause. “I don’t follow your logic. Unless you suspect that Leonard and his family had something to do with that now that Storm Edevane has been cleared.”

Gavin cleared his throat. “You certainly pay attention to the news.” His eyes moved over her and she knew that he was trying to find another approach likely because she wasn’t supposed to have been so aware of the latest investigation into Brager. When he started talking, Gavin went to the one thing she wasn’t expecting. “Well, you probably noticed that Lucy isn’t exactly human.”

It was something that Phoebe had been trying to push out of her mind because it seemed entirely unreal. “I was hoping that I was hallucinating because I’m not ready to process that quite yet.” She looked back toward where Lucy had gone. There hadn’t been any sound from that area. “What are they doing? Where did Jace go?”

“He’s taking care of her.”

“And what exactly does that mean to you guys? Taking care of her? Is this a mob thing or something?”

“I thought it was more cartels this far south. Mobs tend to be more common in my city.”

“Oh, you’re funny, Detective.”

He gave a little shrug. “I’m just going by what Storm told me. And since he’s part of the Coast Guard, I figured he had some idea about what the threats were.”

“Storm? Do you know him? Are you the reason why he’s been cleared, and now you’re hunting down the person who *is* responsible?”

Gavin looked at her, not liking that she brought the conversation around again so quickly. So he used the same tactic against her. With a half-smirk to make her feel uncomfortable, Gavin said, “He’s of the same type as your guest.”

Phoebe shifted on her feet a little, uncomfortable again, “So... some kind of human-cat mix?”

“A shifter. Yes. Cat shifter to be more accurate.”

“Oh.” Phoebe had no idea how to respond to that, so she stuck with something noncommittal. A noise behind her stopped their conversation.

“We still need to talk to you, Ms. Parker, but for now, I think getting Lucy somewhere safe is the more pressing issue.” Jace’s voice was calm and even as he walked into the room with his arm on Lucy’s shoulders and her bag in his hand.

“She’s not going anywhere if she doesn’t want to go.” Phoebe moved forward. “Lucy, you can stay here for as long as you want.”

“That would be a particularly bad idea. For both you and for her,” Jace said. “I appreciate you wanting to help, but this is something well outside of your capability.”

Phoebe knew that something was going on that she couldn’t understand. Everyone in her apartment seemed entirely accepting of what had happened as if it were normal for people to turn into cats. It felt like she was suddenly moved into a different reality, so it was all Phoebe could do to keep her mind from overloading. Taking it in stride, she said, “I can appreciate that this is a bit out of my depth, but I promised to take care of Lucy, and I’m not going to —”

“It’s okay, Phoebe,” Lucy said softly. “Mr. Edevane’s family is much more powerful than Leonard’s. I will be fine.”

Phoebe stared at the slight woman, then her eyes slid over to Jace, who was pointedly not looking at her. She had never heard of him specifically, but she knew the name Edevane. “I’m sure he can.” A part of her felt entirely foolish and stupid for what had happened a year ago, and the shame of

how she had felt after he had left took on a whole new meaning. Turning, she strode to the door. As soon as she reached it, she yanked it open, causing Gavin to have to move quickly to avoid being hit by it. “It was a pleasure to have met you all. I wish you the best, Lucy.”

Jace led Lucy out first, carrying her small bag as she seemed to press herself against him.

He’s probably quite used to that from women, the thought was bitter, and Phoebe did not like that was where her mind was going.

Gavin stepped through the door, then turned.

Before he could speak, Phoebe said, “It was a pleasure to meet you, Detective Ott. I wish you the best.”

“We still need to —”

“You guys can do whatever you want, but don’t involve me in it.”

“You involved yourself when you —”

“I was helping an abused coworker. You guys said it already. The rest of this is out of my depth. If you need anything else, contact the local police because they have everything on file from that night. There is no need for any of you to involve me further in this f-ed up mess.”

“F-ed up? Not big on cursing are you?”

“Oh, look at those impressive detecting skills.”

He gave her a withering look. “It’s so quaint to hear a grown woman talk like a child trying to get away with mild cursing.”

“You’re an ass,” she said, then started to shut the door.

Gavin held up a hand. “Wait. You have to know that you are in a considerable amount of danger. You —”

“Figure that out yourself, Sherlock? What impressive detecting. I can see how you earned your name.” Phoebe didn’t wait, slamming the door shut and locking it before heading into the kitchen to clean up. She knew that he was going to try to tell her that she couldn’t handle it, that she had no idea what she was getting into, and a host of other reasons why she needed to put up with them for now. The fact that they hadn’t even tried to get her to leave was proof enough that it was a lie. If she were in real danger, things would have gone much differently.

That didn’t mean she wasn’t going to be careful. As she cleaned up the kitchen, she considered visiting her family on her next day off. There was far too much food for one person, and it would disappear quickly at their house. Then again, if Leonard’s family was going to be a threat, she wondered if she should avoid her family for a while. No one had pieced together that Lucy was there, no matter what Gavin thought, because none of the visitors had ever asked to talk to Lucy. Once or twice they had asked Phoebe if she knew where Lucy was, which she always denied. She didn’t feel compelled to tell the truth to people who kept harassing her. Now that Phoebe knew a bit more about Lucy, she suspected that the men might have been there to *see* if Lucy was visiting her. The only reason that Lucy had been found was that she had thrown open the door to two strangers. Of course, she had thought that Jace was safe, but she was now second-guessing her thoughts about him. She didn’t know him at all.

And Lucy was under his care.

Shaking her head and hoping that the... cat woman was safe, Phoebe tried to put all of that out of her mind. After all, she had more than enough to worry about without learning more about that world.

If she were being honest, Phoebe wanted to forget what she had seen. She didn't want to think about another species living around her. Especially if more of them were like Leonard.

When the police called later that night and told her that he had made bail, Phoebe knew that things were about to get a lot more interesting. But not in a good way.

Chapter 6

The Depths Peer Back

After that phone call, Phoebe realized that she no longer felt safe in her apartment. Between her case against Leonard, an important member of a prominent family in Miami, and the realization that cat people knew where she lived, Phoebe had no desire to stay in the same place. She felt far too exposed with everyone knowing her current residence. With her lease up at the end of the month, she wouldn't have to worry about paying extra to get out of it. The biggest question was where could she go?

I'm going to look for somewhere closer to work. Maybe if I can spend less time traveling between work and home, I'll get more rest so I'm not so tired when I feel it is safe to visit family again.

Though she hadn't been planning to move anytime soon, Phoebe wasn't entirely unhappy by the idea of a sudden change in environment. The place had never felt like home, and over time it had come to be associated with stress and disappointment. Now she could add a sense of paranoia. The day after Lucy left, she brought home empty boxes from work and started packing up her stuff.

Over the next couple of weeks, whenever people knocked on her door, Phoebe refused to answer. She had told her family that she was trying to adjust to her new job, so they probably wouldn't see her for a couple of months while she finished transitioning to being a night owl. That meant that it wasn't her relatives who were knocking. And she knew that it wasn't the police because they would call to let her know they

needed to talk before showing up, and they usually preferred to talk at the station. Since only a few people had come to her door unexpectedly before Lucy stayed with her, Phoebe had little doubt that whomever was knocking wanted to talk about either Leonard or Lucy, and since she had nothing more to say to anyone on those two subjects, Phoebe ignored the knocking by putting on headphones and going about her business.

Lucy's sudden departure had included some other fallout, too. Because she had helped Lucy get a job at the clinic, Phoebe looked bad when she left suddenly without giving notice. She just stopped showing up, which put Phoebe in a bad position, especially since Lucy hadn't been working there that long.

Phoebe hadn't told anyone about Lucy's situation, mostly because that would mean talking about the case with Leonard and she had no interest in discussing that at work, so she had kept Lucy's history a secret. Accepting the blame and apologizing profusely, Phoebe was happy that there weren't any significant consequences. However, she was shunned by the janitors, who blamed her and some of the staff made the occasional snide comment about her reliability. Fortunately, Phoebe wasn't bothered by any of that. The only real disappointing thing was the fact that she wouldn't be able to recommend any of her siblings or the foster kids for jobs at the clinic. Now, anyone she recommended would likely not be considered. She was able to work through this by reminding herself that her time at the clinic was very likely going to be limited anyway. Once she had the necessary experience to get a daytime shift, she was probably going to get a job somewhere else. It hadn't taken long to realize that was

probably why nurses left the night shift at the clinic — they were pretty much stuck on that shift once they accepted it. None of the nurses who worked during the day worked for the clinic previously, so Phoebe couldn't help but feel that leaving was inevitable for her.

Still, things weren't entirely bad. One of the few positives about working the night shift was that if she could stay awake, Phoebe had all day to look at new places. With only two and a half weeks left before she needed to be out of her place, she needed to dedicate a good bit of time to apartment hunting. When she was home, she primarily spent her time packing. Fortunately, she was able to find several good places. This meant she had options instead of feeling like she had to go with the most affordable, which had been how she ended up in her current place. The new job and the booming season at the restaurant allowed her to save up over the last few months. Money was one of the few things that were not a problem at the moment. It was a nice change, although she wished she could enjoy it a bit more.

Life seemed to get back to normal, or as normal as possible when moving. Then it suddenly wasn't.

Nine days after Lucy left, Phoebe was heading home, her mind going over the two places she was considering. She had reached the bus stop, her mind almost entirely focused on the future, when a gruff voice spoke behind her. "Do you have any idea how annoying you humans are?"

Phoebe turned and saw a tall stranger. He had dark brown hair and deep brown eyes. More importantly, he was standing a bit too close — and she had not heard him walk up

behind her. Immediately, Phoebe had some idea of what he wanted. In no mood to put up with more harassment, she said flippantly, “Humans couldn’t possibly be any worse than you shifters.”

There was a low snarl and the man looked like he was about to spring, but whatever he was going to do was interrupted when the bus pulled up in front of them. Glaring at her, he said, “It’s only a matter of time before you’ll learn not to mess with us, human!” He spat the last word out, then turned and stalked away.

Rolling her eyes, Phoebe refused to show the fear she felt at the threat. Stepping on the bus, she knew that she was going to need to be warier when she was coming and going from work.

More importantly, she was wondering if she should start looking for a new job. Clearly, they had figured out where she worked, which meant that they had probably followed her from home. Since she wasn’t opening the door to them, it made sense that they would try to talk to her when she would have a hard time avoiding them.

Leaving certainly wasn’t ideal because she hadn’t been at the clinic long. If she left now, it would reflect poorly on her, especially since she had more time volunteering at that facility than she had been employed.

Maybe I should try for a daytime job. I haven’t gotten much –

Her thoughts were interrupted when as the bus turned her eyes spotted a vehicle following a little too closely. It was a dark, expensive-looking car with tinted windows, a vehicle

that definitely hadn't been there when she'd gotten on the bus. After considering her options, Phoebe decided to get off at a random stop to see if the car continued to follow the bus or if the person stopped to talk to her. First, she watched to make sure the car was staying with the bus, which it clearly was after a couple of miles. Her plan meant getting home even later, but Phoebe wasn't about to lead the car to her place.

They may know where I live, but I'm not about to let them just walk up to the door with me. I've already had so many people stop by who represent Leonard. I know that they could just come to my place if they wanted to, so either this is an escalation, or it's something else. Either way, I probably need to stop by and get some mace in case that it's necessary. Does mace work on big cats? Maybe I should look into bear mace. I think that works on everything. But would they have bear mace here?

Her mind was going through different possibilities when she pulled the cord to signal she was getting off at the next stop. Unlike the last time she had an impromptu stop, this time the grass was at least dry, something that caught her attention as she looked over a golf course with some obvious sand traps and small ponds. She got off the bus and walked toward the back. When the bus pulled away, she watched as the car passed her, and she could just make out that the driver was watching her as she stood by the road. It wasn't exactly remote, but the stop was not in a bustling area — just in case things went south.

As soon as the car was out of sight, Phoebe jogged across the street and down a little to the bus stop going in the other direction. A wave of tiredness swept over her, reminding

Phoebe that she wasn't quite acclimated to her current schedule. Pulling out her phone, she looked up the bus schedule, hoping that it wasn't going to be too long before the next one came by. When she looked up the way the bus had gone, she noticed the dark car turning the corner heading back her way. Frowning, she debated moving out of sight. There was a small woodsy area behind her, and it would probably hide. Quickly, she dismissed the idea, though, because this wasn't exactly a bustling location. Wondering if cat shifters had an enhanced sense of smell, Phoebe decided to stay where she was as the car approached her.

The window rolled down and the driver leaned over and said. "Let me give you a lift."

"Are you serious?" she asked, giving him a look.

His smile caused a chill to run up her spine, "Of course, I'm always willing to help a pretty lady in need of rescue."

"The time with that kind of talk would work on a woman was the '70s and '80s, y' know, the golden era of serial killers. I'm not getting in a car with some stranger who spouts a lot of cliché bunk."

The man pulled off his glasses, his bright green eyes shone in the little light entering the car. "I'm trying to be nice here. Now get in the car."

"I'm telling you, get lost."

The man reached into his jacket and pulled out a gun. "I said get in the car."

Phoebe didn't have to think much. Her body immediately started running toward the back of the car,

making it harder for him to aim at her. She heard the cursing as she crouched low to the ground.

“Look bitch, I don’t have time for this.”

She could hear his door open. Staying low, Phoebe moved back toward the passenger side. Opening the door quickly, she hopped into the car and locked it. Moving over to the driver’s side, she looked out at the man snarling at her just outside the car. Quickly opening the door, she slammed it into him several times, knocking him off his feet and causing the gun to go skittering across the road. Once she was out of the car, Phoebe kicked the man in the stomach as he started to get up, knocking him back to the ground. With that, she ran toward the golf course. It was almost guaranteed that she would encounter someone if she could get to the course.

Phoebe was close to the fence when she heard a roar from behind her. It was all of the confirmation she needed. Fighting the urge to turn and look, she reached the fence and began to climb it. A few seconds later, the structure shook as something slammed into it behind her. She lost her footing, but not her handhold. Something swiped at her foot, but Phoebe ignored it and continued to hurry over the tall fence. Once on the other side, she turned and looked at the man now standing on the other side.

“Looks like you should have gone for your gun, honey,” she purred at him. “Such a bad kitty to go attacking women standing on the side of the road.”

The man grabbed the fence and snarled at her, “You are going to be sorry for what you’ve done. If you don’t drop the charges —”

“That spoiled brat will actually have to suffer the consequences?” She sneered at him and said mockingly, “Poor little rich boy has to send out his kitty goons to handle me. Maybe I should be flattered.”

The man leaned forward, a bit of sun glinting off of his teeth. “If I get my hands on you —”

“You’ll what?” A third voice interrupted. Both Phoebe and the shifter turned to look at someone strolling toward them from the road. “I dare say your master has overplayed his hand.”

Phoebe stiffened a little. “Thanks Jace, but I don’t need you to save me anymore.”

He stopped and looked at her. “I’m not here for you.”

“Good.” With that she turned and started walking away. Both of the guys started talking at the same time, but she couldn’t make out what was being said since they talked over each other. Pulling out her headphones, she blocked their voices by turning up her music and walking farther into the golf course.

Chapter 7

Out of the Frying Pan...

Knowing that she needed more than just her wits, Phoebe did something she never wanted to do — she went to a store to arm herself. She knew that she didn't want a gun. Even if her siblings didn't visit her, Phoebe didn't want to have to choose between killing someone or getting killed. She was a nurse for a reason. What she wanted to do was to be able to disarm any more attackers. The problem was that she wasn't sure exactly what would work on something that wasn't human.

That's why she ended up at a specialty shop instead of going home. A place that had some out-there devices that could be used as weapons. She spoke to the owner for over an hour, lying and saying that she was working for a rescue place that might need to knock out large animals. Phoebe walked out of the place with some strange things that she hoped she would never use, though after that day, she had a feeling she wasn't going to be that lucky. She also had a taser and, to her surprise, they did have bear mace. It was an odd collection of stuff she wouldn't have imagined needing a month ago.

Aware that it would be risky to go back to her home, Phoebe decided to stop by a shop where she could pick up some extra clothing and scrubs, then head to a hotel for a few nights. Clearly, Leonard's people knew where she worked, but if she stayed in more populous locations, they would be more limited in what they could do. Abduction wasn't impossible, but it was a lot more difficult in a crowd. And Leonard's men didn't seem to be the brightest bulbs in the box. She dropped a couple of the devices in her book bag — Phoebe had gotten

used to carrying them around instead of purses, and she preferred them now.

The problem was that she worked the night shift, and that meant she was on her way home during the least busy period of the day. In the dark.

I'll probably need to wear my steel-toed boots home from work. Those will help to put down any attackers pretty quickly, she considered as she pulled up stores on her phone that carried scrubs.

She had spent about a year working at a site that required steel-toed boots, and she didn't miss how heavy they were. But she knew that she could have winded her attacker earlier if she weren't wearing soft nurse's shoes.

Then again that means going back to the apartment, and I'm not going to do that for a few days. Hopefully, I have everything I need. Just need to keep being aware of my surroundings.

Her mind was racing because Phoebe knew that things were only going to get worse. There was no point in going to the police with this. She was dealing with cat people. What was she going to say that wouldn't sound insane? Sure, she could say that Leonard was sending people after her, but she had a sneaking suspicion that some of the police were paid off so as not to further compound his problems. The only reason she had been successful before was because of the video footage. There was no video for this attack. It was one more reason to stick close to the populated areas — there were video cameras everywhere.

But she still had to take the bus to get around. That meant some less populated areas. And of course, some of the trip was done in the early hours of the morning before the sun had risen.

I miss the time when my biggest problem was finding a day job, Phoebe thought with a hint of irony.

It had been serious at the time. But now the night shift gave her a good reason to stay away from her family for a bit. Leonard and his guys didn't seem to think about her as someone who had people who cared about her. They weren't the kinds of people to consider that she *had* a family whom they could exploit to get to her. All she had to do was to keep her distance to protect them. She opened her phone as a bus pulled up in front of her to take her to the next stop. Pouring as much into the email as she could, Phoebe told her parents that she was going to need a few months to adjust to the time change because she was having trouble. She told them if she wasn't contacting them, it was because of this. Of course, there were some risks to this approach. Primarily, if she went missing, her family was the most likely to report her disappearance to the police. The people at the clinic weren't too impressed with her at the moment. If she were to stop showing up, they might just chalk it up to her being "flaky like her friend," and just ignore it.

Several hours later, Phoebe walked to a hotel, opened the door to her room, dropped the bags on the floor, and flopped face-down on the bed. She was asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

A loud banging sound woke her sometime later. Her groggy mind tried to process her surroundings as the banging continued. It took a bit for her to realize where she was. Her tired eyes looked at the clock next to the bed. With a groan, Phoebe pulled a pillow over her head.

“It’s just after 2. Whoever the dirty thoughtless jerk banging around out there is, he needs to quit it,” she grumbled into the pillow. When the sound didn’t stop, she pulled out her phone and stuffed the headphones into her ears. Her fingers fumbled for the controls on the side of the wire until she hit the play button. She had to turn up the music a bit more, but soon it drowned out the noise outside her room.

Phoebe fell into a deep sleep, missing the room’s phone ringing a little while later.

When her phone went off at 6:45, Phoebe moaned under the pillow. She hit snooze and fell back to sleep immediately. This happened several times over the next hour. It was only when she peeked out from under her pillow and realized she only had 15 minutes to get to work that Phoebe sprang into action. Her thoughts were her own as she scrambled around the room. There was no time to eat, so she ignored her stomach’s growling. Throwing on a pair of new scrubs, she yanked her door open.

A figure fell backward into the room, filling up the doorway.

Phoebe looked down into Gavin’s face as he stared up at her. His voice was thick as he said, “What the f—”

“No time for you,” she said as she carefully stepped over him and out of the room.

“Ms. Parker, this isn’t —”

“I’m late, so you —”

Despite the fact that Phoebe was running down the hall, Gavin appeared beside her, “You will be late if you don’t stop and listen.”

She turned and melodramatically blinked at him, “Aw, are you actually here for me this time?” With that, she shoved the door to the stairs open and hurried down them.

Gavin easily kept pace with her as she raced down three flights of stairs. “Ms. Parker, I don’t think you understand —”

“A man tried to jump me at the bus stop when I left work. Another tailed the bus and pulled a gun on me when I waited for the next stop. I managed to take him and then outrun him, so I think I have a pretty good understanding of everything that’s going on.”

She quickly opened the door to the lobby and hurried out with Gavin behind her. He grabbed her arm. “You need to stop and listen.”

Phoebe turned and said through gritted teeth, “You need to let go of me before I start yelling.”

Gavin looked around at the people watching them. He let go of her arm. “All right, but you need to —”

Phoebe didn’t bother to stop to listen. She walked as fast as she dared until she reached the hotel exit, then once she was outside, Phoebe start to run toward the clinic, which, fortunately, was only a few blocks away.

Managing to arrive one minute before her start time, Phoebe pushed the hair out of her face. Standing up straight, she hurried back to the bathroom to quickly clean up. A minute later, she joined the nurses from the earlier shift as they prepared to leave. The night wasn't particularly eventful after that.

When she left early the next morning, Phoebe debated if she should find another place to stay that night.

This is getting ridiculous, she thought as she left through the back door, hoping that no one was waiting for her outside. *I'm running away from everyone, and this time it didn't even take a few hours for one of them to find me. How in the world am I supposed to get a good night's rest?*

Deciding to stop somewhere for food before heading back to the hotel, Phoebe entered a diner and sat in a booth toward the back. She ordered an omelet and hash browns and ate it quickly, though her stomach protested after not having been fed anything for over twenty-four hours.

Phoebe was just polishing off her food when something across the street caught her attention. Trying to focus her tired eyes, Phoebe watched a couple of kids playing around in a small green space made for that kind of thing. Given the time, she figured they were waiting for the school bus. The momentary sense of normalcy made her smile as she watched them just running around having fun.

She paid her bill and headed out, feeling that at some point things would return to normal. Once she reached the hotel, Phoebe decided to return to her apartment. If they knew

where to find her anyway, she might as well have the comfort of her own place.

As she made her way to the bus stop, she had the feeling that someone was following her. It was someone she didn't recognize who was dressed in a way meant to be inconspicuous but who was doing a lousy job of it. Phoebe figured it was again someone working for Leonard. Short on sleep and patience, she decided to go home anyway. The guy got on the bus with her and sat behind her, making it blatantly obvious what he was doing. Phoebe had spent years dealing with the unpredictability of kids and teens, so she was somewhat surprised by how predictable some adults seemed to be. It was like he wanted her to know that he was following her. And her next stop was one that would be in a more remote area. If she didn't want to take several detours, she was just going to have to deal with him approaching her at the next stop.

Phoebe pulled the cord and prepared to get off the bus. After she stood up to leave, the man rose and followed her out the doors. She started the short walk to the bus stop where she needed to be for the next bus. It wasn't too much of a walk, less than half a mile, so she reasoned it wouldn't be too bad.

Unfortunately, the man made his move as she was walking toward the stop. He wrapped his arms around her at the same time a car pulled up beside her. But this time, Phoebe was prepared. Pulling the small taser out of her pocket, she thrust it into the man's stomach. She felt a little of the jolt, but he quickly released her. Her body was tingling as he dropped her and staggered to the side. Phoebe glowered at the car but realized two things: It was a van with room for more than just

four people, and three men were getting out of it as she watched. She knew she didn't stand a chance.

Not good, she thought.

Realizing she didn't have a chance in a fight, her best bet was to run. Not that she had much chance against those things. Still, it was that or just let them take her. With the small taser now out of charge, she chucked it at one of the guy's heads. She was vaguely pleased to hear it connect as she pushed the guy who had grabbed her into the one walking in the front.

Turning on her heels, Phoebe began to sprint out onto an open field and toward the woods. There was no winning. If she stayed near the road, the driver who was still in the car could quickly catch her. So could anyone else who was still in the van. Running from the road meant a car couldn't get to her, but these were cat people. She knew all they had to do was shift and could easily chase her down.

At least they can't run you over, she thought as her legs pumped in an effort to get as far away from them as possible while they regrouped.

She knew it wouldn't take long, but any distance she could put between them and her was better than nothing. Soon enough, she heard the roars coming from behind her, and Phoebe knew that she was now being hunted in a way that she had never imagined.

Almost enough to make me miss the gator. At least she didn't have malice. Probably.

To her surprise, Phoebe managed to reach the trees before any of the men caught up to her. Dodging branches and jumping over brambles, for a fleeting moment she thought that she might be able to lose them. So far, she has been successful.

Then she saw a pair of dark eyes gleaming in the area in front of her. Phoebe tried to swerve to the right, but she saw another figure stalking toward her.

Not good, she thought as she realized that they hadn't been trying to catch her in the field. They were trapping her in the woods, surrounding her so that she wouldn't have anywhere to run.

Grabbing her bag, she pulled out the first device her fingers fell on. Phoebe registered what it was from the feel of it in her hands — the tranquilizer gun. It was the closest she would come to getting a gun, and she almost hadn't bought it. Now she was grateful that she had. The problem was that she would need to reload after shooting. Her hand floundered in her bag trying to get the other tranquilizers as she pointed it at the big cats circling closer to her. It was impossible that she would be able to take them all down, so if they were interested in killing her, there wasn't much she could do.

Suddenly, all four men shifted into human forms. "You can get one of us, but you'll never get all of us."

"Hey, if making one of you miserable is the only thing I can do, I'll make sure not to miss." She tried to keep an eye on them as they continued to circle around her. Flexing her finger on the trigger, Phoebe tried to determine which one was the biggest threat, but it was impossible to determine given they

wouldn't stand still and they seemed interchangeable. It was likely there wasn't a best option.

"Don't worry, human. You don't need to fear us," one of the men said menacingly.

"Yes, we aren't here to kill you," said the one moving directly in front of her.

The one to her right replied, "That's right. You get to take Lucy's place until Leonard finds a new mate."

Her mind tried to process what they were saying. "A sex slave? You think you are going to make me his sex slave?"

All four of them laughed. "Something like that. A creature like you isn't worthy of being anything more."

"And you don't think that the police are going to find it odd that I disappeared before he has a chance to go to trial?"

This got another laugh before one purred, "The police aren't going to worry about some little woman who went missing after work. It happens all of the time. You'll just become another statistic."

With all of the answers she needed, Phoebe knew they had given her a lot more reason to fight. She wasn't about to let them take her to the creature that had attacked Lucy, then her. He wasn't going to get to use her like that.

Deciding just to fire at whichever one was directly behind her, Phoebe spun around and prepared to fire as the man stopped walking toward her. Their group was so predictable. Keep her focused on the ones in front so the one behind her could sneak up on her. She pulled the trigger before he had a chance to move.

Then the forest shook.

Chapter 8

Into the Fire

For a second, Phoebe thought that she had bought an actual gun, as the sound of something loud sent her body into an immediate sense of fight or flight. The man she had shot was on the ground, but she couldn't see any blood. Then she realized that the other three men were no longer paying attention to her. Instead, they had moved together and were looking toward the darkness farther into the wood.

Almost as if in a nightmare, Phoebe watched as a large shape emerged from the forest. Slowly, her mind started to process what she was seeing as the thing roared, and again the ground seemed to shake as a bear came barreling toward them.

The three men shifted, then took off in different directions. The bear turned and started chasing one of them. Seeing her chance, Phoebe turned and darted in the opposite direction away from the bear. Her legs pumped again as her brain screamed at what she had seen. As she ran toward nowhere in particular, she heard roars from behind her. Some were the cat shifters, while the louder, more terrifying sound was the bear.

When the roars sound farther away, Phoebe stopped long enough to dig through her bag for the bear spray.

Why is there a brown bear in Florida? Did it break out of a zoo or something? Are there more wild animals here?

Her mind was racing as she began running again, the can of bear mace in her hand. She hadn't seen any of the cat shifters since the bear appeared, and she hoped that they would

be a much better draw for the bear. With no knowledge about those four-legged creatures, she just had to hope that she reached somewhere safe soon. Black bears were all over the state, but they largely stayed away from major cities like Miami. They were also a lot smaller than the brown bear, which looked like it was about double the size of the native bears.

Suddenly, she felt the roar coming from directly behind her, and the sound made her knees buckle. Going down hard, Phoebe tried to roll as she neared the ground, but ended up in a large thicket. Extracting herself as much as possible, she hurried out, grabbing the can of bear spray as she went.

As soon as she was out and looked up, Phoebe found herself facing a bear. Her hand clenched around the can as her body seemed to shut down. Nothing seemed able to move as the creature looked at her. A part of her brain felt like the thing was glaring at her. Then it roared again.

Grabbing her ears, Phoebe couldn't help but cower. Something about the animal in front of her seemed angry, and she had no idea what to do. A part of her wanted to run and hide, but she knew that she wouldn't make it very far. Not that her body was even in a state to let her try.

"Stop it, Gavin." The familiar voice came from nearby, and Phoebe turned to look at the source, her thoughts trying to understand what had just been said. Jace stepped into the area between her and the bear. "She didn't do anything."

Right before her eyes, the massive bear morphed and shifted, squeezing into the much smaller body of the large detective. And he looked pissed. Pointing at her, Gavin said,

“It’s her fault. If she would have just listened this morning, I would have been there instead of Kole.”

“Then you would be the one in critical condition.”

“Better me than my younger brother! He’s got his mate and a whole life in front of him.”

“Are you saying you don’t?” Jace shot back.

“*I’m* the one who chose a career that takes people down. *He’s* the one who saves people.”

“And so does Phoebe. She’s a nurse.”

“She’s a stubborn, pigheaded woman who refuses to listen to reason.”

“At what point did you explain anything to her?”

“She never gave me a chance!” Gavin bellowed.

“Did you ask her to listen, or did you tell her to listen?”

“If she would have answered her door at the hotel — or any of the days when I stopped by to visit her apartment — I would have asked.”

“And when did you actually see her?”

“She was in a rush and wouldn’t even give me the time of day! How was I supposed to talk to her about anything?”

Even from where she was standing, Phoebe could tell that his face was red with rage. Unable to follow most of what they said, she did understand one thing. “Who’s Kole and why is he in critical condition?”

Gavin glared at her. “Don’t you dare say his name.”

Feeling that things were calm enough for him to take his eyes off Gavin, Jace turned and looked at her. “Kole is his brother. He’s been seriously hurt. But,” he said, turning to look at Gavin, “I don’t understand why he doesn’t heal himself. I know that you bear shifters have the ability to do that.”

“He can’t! And no one knows why!” There was real anguish in Gavin’s voice, hidden behind the anger.

“How did he get hurt?”

Gavin glared at her and gritted his teeth. “He was shot seven times. There was no chance those cowards could have gotten close to him for a real fight.”

Phoebe frowned. “Where was he shot?”

Gavin growled, “That’s not your concern, human.”

Jace held a hand up toward Gavin. “Stop, Gavin.”

Suddenly the bear was back and he was charging.

Then Jace was gone. In his place was a huge black cat that was whipping his tail back and forth. As soon as Gavin was close, the large cat swiped at his face, knocking the bear off balance. Turning his attention to the cat, Gavin roared and charged again. The cat jumped out of the way, moving farther from Phoebe. As her eyes began to take him in, the nurse thought she was looking at a lion. There was a massive mane around his head and the body looked like something from a wildlife special on the savannah. But a black lion? This didn’t seem right, and she was in a dark part of the woods.

What she could see was the way the cat easily dodged the bear, leading him around until the bear seemed to slow down. With the last charge, the cat jumped up and bounded

against a large rock. Turning gracefully in the air, it landed on the bear, knocking them both to the ground.

Nearly as soon as they hit the ground, the two animals turned into humans. Jace was holding Gavin down with his arm around Gavin's neck. "Settle down, Gavin. None of this is helping."

Unable to stop herself, Phoebe said, "He was probably poisoned." Both men looked up at her from the ground. "Your brother. There are plants around here that hinder healing. If Leonard's men were able to use that and enhance the qualities, it might be making it hard for him to heal."

"What do you know about any of this?" Gavin growled.

Jace was looking up at her, his grip relaxing a little. "I don't think it's a plant, but I think you are right. Leonard's family owns a pharma company, and I wouldn't put it past them to have created something that was meant to harm instead of help."

"So I just have to watch my brother die?" Gavin asked.

"No," Phoebe said, shaking her head. "One of my last classes focused on necrotic venoms and toxins that harm. Because of the brown recluse spiders, it's important to understand what's happening. Anyway, if we can figure out what's happening, we can probably help."

Jace was nodding as both he and Gavin stood up. Brushing himself off, Jace said, "Gavin, can Kole force the bullets out?"

"No."

Phoebe spoke up. “I don’t know what that means, but I’ve extracted bullets before. Depending on where he was shot, I may be able to help.”

Jace was nodding again. “Good. I’m afraid none of us have any clue how to do anything of the sort.”

“Explain on the way,” Phoebe said as she shoved the can back in her bag. Both men shifted back into their animal forms, then Jace moved in front of her. “Um, what are you doing?”

Jace responded by swishing his tail as Gavin tore off out of sight. It took a moment, but Phoebe realized he was waiting for her to get on him. “I have never ridden a horse. Never learned how to ride a bike either. How am I supposed to hold on?”

Jace made some low growls that she couldn’t interpret. Knowing that time was critical — someone had been shot seven times and no one knew what to do — Phoebe put the fear flowing through her. Closing her eyes tightly, she threw her leg over his back, wrapped her arms around his neck, and squeezed as she felt his body begin to move. Terror gripped her as those powerful muscles moved under her body, reminding her how much more fragile she was than the two shifters she was with. For that ride, she absolutely understood their condescension towards humans — how fragile they must seem compared to species that were able to take on these powerful forms.

In an effort to distract herself from the fear, Phoebe tried to imagine what shifters were doing around the world. It seemed probable if not inevitable that they were world leaders,

controlling the humans around them. Then her mind began to wonder as she felt Jace start to move faster. The feel of the breeze caused her muscles to tense as she forced her mind to think about other things.

What other kinds of shifters are there? Whale? Bird? Or are they all mammals? How did they even come about? Evolution has never resulted in that kind of variety or flexibility. How would that even work?

As her mind wandered down a much safer path than paying attention to what was happening to her in the present, Phoebe missed the way the world changed around her. The bear and the lion ran through populated areas, managing not to attract any attention. She missed the gorgeous scene of the ocean just an hour after sunrise.

It was only when they began to slow down that Phoebe started to open her eyes, then immediately squeezed them shut again. When Jace stopped, Phoebe's body was so clenched up, she wasn't sure if she was going to be able to let go.

Then Gavin's voice barked at her, "Get off him, human."

Phoebe released her grip and sat up. Unable to steady herself, she slid off of Jace's back, her legs feeling incredibly weak.

"I got you. It's okay." Jace took her arms and helped her to stand up. "Can you walk?"

"Who cares?" Gavin snapped. "Carry her if you have to."

He stormed off, leaving Jace and Phoebe standing outside a large building. Though her voice was weak, Phoebe whispered, “Are there medical supplies in there?”

“No,” Jace said. “Let me know what you need, and I’ll make sure someone gets them.”

Thinking about everything she and the other nurses had used, Phoebe listed a set of tools and supplies. When she finished, the nurse realized that Jace had carried her all of the way to a room inside the building. “How did we get here?” She asked.

He gave her a soft smile. “I carried you. One of my brothers is going to get the supplies.”

“What? How? You don’t have a phone or anything.”

“Don’t worry about it. Right now I need you to pull yourself together. We have a very important man who needs to be treated, and his life is absolutely critical to us getting things moving in the right direction.”

“What do you mean?” Phoebe asked. “All life is important.”

“I have a feeling you might not have agreed with that sentiment a little while ago.”

She smiled a little. “I only have non-lethal weapons. No killing. But a bit of pain is always good for some people.” Standing up as straight as she could with a body still reeling from over an hour of intense stress, Phoebe said, “Is anyone here a doctor or medical professional?”

“Unfortunately, the only person here with that kind of background is Kole.” He gently took her arm and led her to a

door. “We can all heal ourselves, so the practical skills aren’t necessary. And cat shifters can heal others, so this is not a problem that we’ve encountered before.”

Phoebe didn’t have a response to that, so she kept quiet.

“If he’s still awake, Kole can probably help you through it. He’s an EMT with a very bright personality.”

Phoebe looked up at him. “Somehow I doubt he’ll be particularly cheery under the conditions.”

“You are about to meet one of those incredibly rare individuals who seems to be unable to do anything besides be happy.”

“That must be a lot of work,” Phoebe said, not knowing anyone like that.

“It’s his defense mechanism. I have a feeling it’s going to be in full effect now. Be prepared for him to be in much worse shape than he seems. If hasn’t passed out by now.”

Phoebe nodded as Jace opened a door into an elegant-looking apartment. They walked a few steps, then her eyes took in something that initially made no sense.

A bunch of men were standing around a table with their hands on... she couldn’t see what they were doing.

One of them turned to Jace and said, “You are finally here! Felix is getting the stuff. Are you sure you know what you are doing, Jace?”

“I didn’t ask for the supplies, Greyson. I bought a nurse who has worked with bullet wounds before.”

A weak voice from among the men spoke up, “Ah, finally someone I can relate to.”

Two of the men moved out of the way, giving Phoebe space to step up to the patient. Completely naked and covered in blood was a gorgeous man with kind blue eyes that looked like they were about to gloss over.

“He’s about to go into shock,” Phoebe said, pulling her shirt over her head and walking over to the sink to wash her hands. The guys stared at her as she started barking out orders. She didn’t have nearly as much experience as a nurse, but Phoebe had years of experience taking charge. Soon, the guys were scrambling around trying to make sure that her orders were carried out.

From his place on the table, Kole looked up with a weak smile, and said, “As usual, humans to the rescue, huh?”

Phoebe smiled down at him. “No need to lie to me, Mr. Kole. You are no human, and you are constantly out rescuing people.”

His laugh was weak, but still made her feel warm. “Tell my brother something.” He looked up at her with his eyes getting glossier.

“You aren’t going to die, Mr. Kole. I won’t allow it.”

“Who said anything about dying? I just want Gavin to stop being an ass.”

Despite everything, Phoebe couldn’t help but laugh. “I think that needs to come from someone other than the human he was trying to attack not long ago.”

“See?” Kole smiled at her. “He *has* to stop being an ass.”

With that, Kole slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 9

The Ideal Patient and Less Than Ideal Situation

Everyone began to scramble around her once Kole went silent. A few minutes later, a tall, well-built man in nothing but red swim trunks came into the room. “I have the supplies!”

Jace grabbed them and strode back to Phoebe. He pulled out the individual items, and Phoebe went right for what she needed to remove the bullets. She knew where they were, and fortunately none of them were in his head or neck. Three were in his chest, two in his abdomen, and one in each leg. Quickly sterilizing the tools she needed, she sent a couple of the guys to prepare some of the ones she would need soon. Going for the one close to his heart first, Phoebe carefully dug in and pulled out the bullet. “These are old.” She looked up. “They shouldn’t do much damage on their own. The problem is we need to find out what they put on them to prevent healing.”

Jace spoke into the confusion that met her words. “Do you have any ideas about what it could be?”

Phoebe kept her eyes on the next bullet. “I took a class on it, but haven’t seen anything like this up close. Well, besides a couple of recluse spider bites.”

“That’s more than the rest of us have.”

Phoebe racked her mind while keeping her hands working, “Start with necrotic toxins. Those attack the tissue and eat it up. If that is what is happening, it would make sense *why* you can’t heal him. There is something actively working to keep the tissue from repairing itself, then it spreads to the areas around it.”

A couple of the men took the first bullet to start running tests as Phoebe dropped the second into a container. “Other than that, I don’t think there are any other toxins that could cause these kinds of problems. Perhaps there is some vegetation that might prevent healing.”

Jace spoke up, “Nothing local to this area. There are some in western Asia that might apply, but there are strict import regulations. It would be difficult to get them into the country.”

Phoebe nodded, “All right. The only other things I can think of are bacterial or viral.”

Jace paused, then nodded. “That makes sense. What kinds of tests can be run for those?”

“I don’t know, Jace. I’m sorry.” Phoebe pulled out the third bullet. “Apart from the second one, none of these wounds seem to be deep. I think the problem is blood loss. Does anyone know what his blood type is?”

The question was greeted with silence. Fighting the urge to look up at them, Phoebe kept her eyes on her work. “Can someone find Gavin and ask him?”

Jace shook his head. “He says he doesn’t know.”

Phoebe couldn’t help but look up at this. “He’s not here. How do you —”

Jace shook his head. “Now’s not the time. How do we find out his blood type?”

“With the right machines, it should only take about twenty minutes.”

“What machine can do that?”

“I don’t know the official name. If you can collect a sample, any doctor’s office can test it.”

Jace sent someone else off to take care of it. “How is he doing?”

“He’s still alive, but his pulse is getting weaker. As soon as they find out his blood type, we need to start getting the blood into him.”

“Gavin says he can donate.”

“That’s kind, but does Gavin know his blood type?”

“No, but they are brothers.”

“Being blood relatives doesn’t mean they are the same blood type. If you give Mr. Kole the wrong blood type, it will kill him.”

The room fell silent. Jace stood beside her. “How do we find the right blood?”

“Once we know what his blood type is, we just need to find a match. The Red Cross has blood, but if someone here can donate, that will go much faster.” Then Phoebe paused. “Actually, we don’t have to wait. I’m O negative.”

“What does that mean?”

“I can give blood to anyone. O negative is the universal blood type. Since I don’t think that we have time to wait, as soon as I get this bullet out, we’ll hook me up and start transfusing my blood. You will need to get another medical professional for that. I can’t keep working on him and providing blood.”

“We don’t know any medical professionals,” Jace said. “And given the situation, we aren’t comfortable bringing in too many humans.”

“It’s to save his life,” Phoebe reminded him.

“I understand but,” he sighed, “Kole didn’t want us to bring anyone in. He wanted to fix this himself.”

Phoebe looked at him. “And you guys didn’t think that was a bad idea?”

“Not until you pointed out that he was probably poisoned.”

Phoebe shook her head. “Well, if you guys insist, I need some other stuff to start the transfusion, then I’ll walk you through what I can. I can’t give more than two pints, so I’m going to rely on you guys to monitor it in case I pass out.”

“Why would you pass out?” One of the guys standing nearby asked.

“It’s a normal reaction to giving blood. A lot of people pass out, especially when you aren’t particularly big.”

“Is your life at risk if you give blood?” Jace asked.

“Only if you guys don’t stop after two pints. Usually, they stop at one pint but I don’t think that will be enough given how much blood he has lost.”

This was met with silence, but Phoebe was too focused on what she was doing. She told Jace what she would need for a transfusion, then she finished removing the last bullet from Kole’s torso. As she did, Phoebe showed Jace what to do so that he could focus on the bullets in his leg. “Usually, I

wouldn't be too worried about them because the ones in the body tend to do the most damage. But if the bullets are poisoned, we can't leave them in."

"Why don't you remove them?"

"I need to start preparing. And I want to start cleansing the wounds. There are a couple of things that should be safe to use. And, no, I don't expect they will clean out the poison. The point is to keep the wounds from becoming infected. Depending on the results of the tests, we'll need to get special ointments, medications, or something else to get the poison out of his system. Hopefully, none of it travels through the blood, so the treatments can be localized."

"What happens if the poison gets into his blood?"

"What needs to be done depends on what the poison is. That's all further complicated by the fact that you guys aren't humans, so I can't say exactly *how* things will affect him."

For the next half hour, they worked to tend to the wounds and Phoebe set up the equipment for the transfusion. She had only helped with a couple and had never actually participated in one that was done in person.

One of the guys stopped her as she prepared to start.
"What about any diseases you have?"

She looked at him. "I'm clean. No blood diseases."

"When was the last time you were tested?"

"Um, when I was a kid. I had anemia once, so I learned to make sure to get enough iron. Haven't had a problem sense."

“What about sexual disease? Some of those can affect him, right?”

Phoebe looked at him, debating just how much to say. Finally she went with the truth. “I’ve never had sex, so it shouldn’t be a problem.” She turned her attention on her work as the room again fell silent, except for the heart monitoring machine she had hooked Kole up to.

One of the guys said, “This is no time to try to act innocent. You started this by stripping.”

Phoebe looked up at him. “Considering I was running through a forest getting attacked by cat people, then by a massive bear, my shirt was more of a hazard than a help. The dirt and debris could have caused him problems. Ideally, we would have clothing for this, but there wasn’t time. And I don’t have any interest in pretending to be innocent. I *am* interested in making sure Kole lives. Now let’s get started before we lose him.”

Soon the blood was being drawn from her, then run through a process, then into Kole. It didn’t take long before she started to feel cold and sleepy. “Could I get a blanket, please?”

“Suddenly feeling a sense of modesty?” One of the guys said, laughing.

“I’m cold because I’m losing blood. Please bring me a blanket, otherwise, the process might start to slow down.”

That got the guys moving. Jace approached her, though, holding a blanket between his hands. “Is there the right way to place this one?”

“Just make sure you don’t put it over the tube. I don’t want to knock that.” Her eyes felt heavy and she felt her words start to slur a bit.

From nearby, a weak voice said, “Well I’ll be damned. So that’s what it feels like. Can’t say that it is nearly as uncomfortable as I had thought.”

Phoebe looked up into the gorgeous blue eyes. “Welcome back, Kole. Would you do me a favor?”

His eyes went from his arm, up the tube, to the machine, and down to her arm. “Are you B negative?”

“O negative,” Phoebe murmured as she felt someone take her hand.

Beside her Jace said, “Her hand’s cold. Is that normal?”

Phoebe looked at Kole, “Keep them focused, please? These guys are like a bunch of toddlers running around a paint factory.”

The sound of Kole’s soft laugh was the last thing she heard as she felt herself slip into unconsciousness. Whether from the blood loss or the lack of sleep, she didn’t know. What mattered in that moment was that Kole seemed to be coming around.

She was vaguely aware of people getting louder around her, but Phoebe went in and out of consciousness as the guys moved around her.

At some point, Jace softly touched her shoulder. “Ms. Parker?”

“Mmm?” she asked, unable to open her eyes.

“You were right. It seems they were using something that acts like a necrotic toxin. How do we treat that?”

Moving her tongue around her mouth and trying to move her jaw, Phoebe said, “If the tissue is affected, it needs to be removed. I don’t think that is necessary since,” she smacked her lips. “May I please have some water?”

“Of course. Why isn’t it necessary?” Jace pushed her on the last idea.

Trying to refocus her mind, Phoebe furrowed her brow over her closed eyes. “The wounds didn’t seem to be getting bigger. It might be his ability to heal himself, but I think that whatever they used simply didn’t work that way. Use some antibacterial and antifungal medication since we don’t know what kind of necrotic toxin they used. And he should probably get a tetanus shot if he isn’t current.”

“I’ve never had one,” Kole’s voice was about as loud as hers. “Guess that’s another new experience I’ll have in Florida.”

Struggling, she managed to open one eye. “Ah, think of it as a human experience you get to have.”

He tilted his head a little, even though his head was resting on a pillow. “Hey, that’s a good point. I’ll get to feel human for a bit.”

She smiled and closed her eyes. “It’s good to see you doing all right.”

“It’s all thanks to you,” Kole said.

With that, she once again drifted off. There were a number of loud noises not long after that, but Phoebe couldn’t

figure out exactly what was going on. She felt as if she were floating as she sank into a much deeper sleep.

Chapter 10

One in a Trillion

The sound of something beeping woke Phoebe. Automatically reaching out, she tried to turn off her alarm.'

“Hey, hey, hey, what do you think you are doing?”

Phoebe froze as she realized there was a warm body behind her own. Her mind began to race as she tried to remember the last thing that happened to her. Her eyes were open as she tried to spin around and look.

“Calm down.” A hand rested on her arm. “You only recently stabilized. If you get too excited, you might crash again.”

“What happened?” Phoebe asked, her body stiff. She felt the weight move behind her. Turning, she looked up at Jace. He walked away from what was a bed, and to her relief, he was fully clothed. She looked down at her own body and her memory started to kick in. “How’s Kole?”

Jace had walked into the bathroom and turned on the sink. Moments later he walked out and approached the bed. He crouched down and held out some water. “He’s doing all right. It’s going to be a rough recovery for him, but if anyone can do it with a smile, it’s Kole. How are you feeling?”

Phoebe tried to sit up, but she felt lightheaded so she lay back down. “Like death warmed over,” she muttered as her head began to ache.

“Here.” He put the water down and sat on the edge of the bed. “Let’s get you into a sitting position so you can drink some water.”

His hands were warm as he helped Phoebe into a sitting position. She looked around the room, her face feeling hot as she tried to pull the blanket over herself. She tried to remember why she felt ill, and she asked again, “What happened?”

“Kole said you crashed. I’m not quite sure what that means, but your heart stopped for a bit.”

Phoebe tried to remember. “I was...” She shook her head, “I don’t remember anything after...” Her memories were hazy as he held the glass up to her mouth and tilted it a little so she could drink.

“You gave too much blood. It adversely affected you,” he said, pulling the glass away. “I’m afraid you warned us of that, but it happened faster than we expected. One minute you and Kole were talking, the next you were gone. Boy, did he move fast when he realized what was happening.”

“I died?” Phoebe looked up at him.

“For a little bit. Getting you unhooked took a bit longer than it should because everyone started running around like idiots. Kole actually got upset and took over, though he wasn’t in great shape for that either.”

“Poor Kole,” Phoebe sank down into the bed. “He can’t even get hurt without having to work.”

“Yeah. But he got angry when Gavin came storming into the room and started complicating things. I didn’t know that Kole could get angry, and I am starting to believe what happened on the ship. I think the only reason those two didn’t

come to blows was because Felix hauled Gavin back out of the room.”

“What did Gavin do?”

“I lost my connection to him when you... crashed. It was the only thing keeping him out of the room so you could work on Kole.”

Phoebe put a hand to her head. “What do you mean your connection?”

Jace looked at the door as he sat down on the side of the bed. “I’m not supposed to talk about it with outsiders, but considering everything you’ve done, I think you’ve earned it.”

“Oh, good, another thing humans can’t know, huh?” she asked sarcastically.

A smile crossed his face, bringing out his dimple. “By outsiders, I mean anyone not in the family. It’s not your species that’s the problem, but the fact that you aren’t one of us. The only reason that Gavin and Kole know is because they are here to help with... another problem.”

“Brager,” Phoebe mumbled as that first conversation with Gavin came back to her.

“Yes,” he replied slowly. “Gavin actually came down for something else, but we asked him to help with that since he was here when Brager was assassinated and Storm was framed for it. After what happened on the cruise ship, my family came to me to ask for my help to keep up communication without needing devices.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Phoebe said, resting her head back on the headboard.

“You know that the Edevane’s are important in Miami, but we are the ones who keep the peace among the cat shifter families. A while ago, we were asked to step in because the infighting had escalated. Then someone attacked us by killing Uncle Brager.”

Phoebe looked at him as Jace seemed to stare off into space. “He was your uncle?”

Jace nodded. “He was the only one in the family I was close to.” He turned and looked at her. “I’m illegitimate. The half-brother of the brothers who run the Edevane family. Usually I’m not asked to do anything because, well, I’m a reminder of their father’s failings. He didn’t love my mother, and he often told me that when I was growing up.”

Phoebe watched him, and her heart started to ache for him. “He must have been a horrible father.”

“Not to my brothers. My experience was just different because I was a reminder of his failings. He had a lot of affairs, so —”

Phoebe couldn’t help but speak up, “So his sons take after him, huh?”

Jace looked over at her. “We don’t know that yet. It’s only recently that they started to take mates. And Storm definitely wasn’t like that. The rest of them, yeah, they tend to be a bit promiscuous, but they are mostly trying to get it out of their systems I think. Before they settle down.”

“You may be giving them too much credit,” Phoebe said.

“It’s possible,” Jace acknowledged, “but I’m a reminder why they need to be careful.”

“Well, not you. You’re not the one who made a mistake.”

Jace looked at her. “I’m the reminder of what can happen. Shifters have a lot more control over their... ability to reproduce. The fact that I’m here shows that my father wasn’t in control. Anyway,” he said looking toward the window, “my mother’s family is a unique set of cat shifters.”

Phoebe frowned. “You were a lion when you shifted.”

Jace looked at her with a sad smile. “Yeah. I’m not like my brothers at all when I shift.”

“You actually look a lot like them when you are human.”

Jace chuckled. “My father’s genetics were dominant on that one, but his genes were never going to change what I am as a cat. My mother’s genetics dominate there.”

“Hopefully, she was a lot kinder than your father,” Phoebe said, putting a hand on his arm.

Jace looked down at her hand with a quizzical expression. “No. Well, maybe,” he said, shrugging. “She died during childbirth. She was barely an adult when she got pregnant, so her body wasn’t able to handle a cub. She went into labor early and died before I was born. The doctors considered just letting me go, too, but my father insisted they save me. I was definitely a runt when they finally got me out, but I was healthy.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?” Phoebe asked. “Not that I mind, I just don’t understand why you would tell this to some human who is going to walk out of here and probably never see you again.”

Jace scratched his head. “I’m getting to it.” He picked up the water just as she began to think she was thirsty. “Here.”

Phoebe put her lips on the glass, realizing how dry they felt. “Wow, I feel like I’m dehydrated.”

Jace nodded. “Worse than that. You were blood starved, but you should make a full recovery in an hour or two.”

Laughing, Phoebe said, “That’s not how human bodies work. We can’t just repair ourselves in an instant. Our bodies take a lot longer to heal.”

Jace nodded. “That’s why you are so much more fragile.”

“That’s right. We are fragile humans,” Phoebe said, settling down onto the bed.

Turning away, Jace put the glass down, then resumed his story. “My mother’s family was unique because lions are more reliant on their pride. Most large cats aren’t particularly close to their relatives,” he said. “I’m sure you noticed the interesting dynamic out there with my brothers and cousins. They are close, but they all live their separate lives, only spending time together when there is family business. My mother’s family was much closer, and part of that was the ability to telepathically connect with others as a way of communicating without having to talk.”

Phoebe looked at him. “I would argue that you are delusional, except...” She thought back over her interactions with him. “So that’s why you didn’t need a phone or radio or *any* kind of communication device.” She looked at him for confirmation.

“As long as I have permission, I can connect with others. Well, permission isn’t necessary, but I prefer not to invade people’s heads if possible. Breaking the link can be difficult.”

“So... you can telepathically communicate with anyone you want, even humans?”

He nodded. “But until you, I didn’t know that. I only started using that ability recently when my brothers dragged me into all of this.”

“Are you bitter about it?”

Jace sat back and reflected. “No. I was perfectly happy living my own life taking care of animals. They are so much less complicated and need more help. They are a lot more appreciative than humanoids, too, so I typically enjoy getting them out of rough situations.”

Phoebe couldn’t help but smile. “Animals can be pretty rough, too. I mean, when they are hurt, they can do a lot of damage when they lash out.”

Jace shrugged, “It’s just a matter of getting them to calm down and then fixing them so that they can get back to living.”

“Wait, you can heal others, right?”

“Yes, and that does include animals. When you were trying to save Jessie, she had been hit by a car and was nearly

dead when I got to her.”

“She looked fine when I saw you from the bus.”

“She was ready to fight, so it took a bit to get her to trust me. She’s doing great now. Enjoying the farm and helping with some of the smaller animals.”

Phoebe sat and pondered that for a bit. “You live on a farm?”

He nodded.

“Do you bring home most of the animals you rescue?”

“It’s a sanctuary. I have a lot of help, so it isn’t like it’s just me running around taking care of hundreds of animals.”

“Hundreds?” Phoebe’s eyes widened.

“Sometimes, yes. But they come and go. The ones who are too hurt to be released and domesticated animals who don’t usually live alone either stick around or we find them somewhere better for their situations. Birds go to bird sanctuaries, stuff like that.”

Phoebe nodded. “It must be nice living where you work.”

Jace looked over at her, and with a smile he said, “It means you are always able to work.”

“You don’t seem to mind,” she said, a smile on her face.

“No, I don’t. Animals are easy to deal with. It’s the humanoids that cause me grief most of the time.”

“I can see how that is a problem. Dealing with humans, I know how much of a pain we can be. And from what little

I've seen of shifters, well, temperamental seems to be the best descriptor for them."

"Yeah, that's been my experience with them."

"So you and your brothers... you don't have much to do with them?"

"Not until recently. Except for Brager. He made time for me and taught me a lot. He let me practice my telepathic connection with him, even though it definitely hurt in those early days. It nearly scrambled his brain once. He would have ended up in a dire situation if I hadn't already mastered healing by that point. As it was, that was our secret until I just told you."

Phoebe looked shocked. "Why... did you tell me?"

Jace cleared his throat. "Because it was a similar to when I connected with you. You actually died for a few minutes."

Phoebe's eyes widened. "Minutes? How many minutes? It doesn't take long for a person to suffer brain damage and —"

Jace put a hand on hers. "Yes, you could have been — probably would have been — but by connecting with you, I was able to repair most of the damage."

Phoebe stared at him, unsure what to say.

He continued, "You are the first human I've connected with without permission, and it is far more complicated than connecting with one of my own. And you were dead when I initiated, so that was well outside of my usual experience."

“Are you all right?” She looked at him trying to follow what he was saying. “That... couldn’t have been easy on you.”

“Well, we owed you that much. You went into the transfusion trusting us, and we failed. You gave over three pints because we were more focused on Kole than on you. A couple of the morons even tried to consider just letting you go.”

Phoebe’s heart sank. “They were willing to let me die?”

“Well, you already were. They didn’t want me to try to bring you back because of the risks.”

“What risks?”

He waved a hand. “You had already done far more than anyone expected. In fact, no one had planned on bringing a human into it. They would have kept running around like idiots until he died because Kole insisted he could handle it if they would keep healing him. Gavin went out to find the guys who shot Kole, which he did.”

“The guys who were chasing me?” Phoebe asked.

“Yeah. They’ve had a busy day. Well, hard. Gavin made sure that Leonard has a lot fewer guys to send out.”

Phoebe swallowed, remembering what the detective looked like when he glared at her in his bear form. “I think he’s spent too much time around humans with the way he acts.”

Jace let out a loud laugh, and she watched as the concern left his face for a few moments. He was absolutely gorgeous when he laughed. Feeling a little flutter in her stomach, Phoebe started pushing that thought aside. When he

stopped, Jace smiled at her, his dimple prominent. “Yeah, he does. And obviously he —”

The door opened and someone unfamiliar poked his head into the room. “What’s happened? Are you okay, Jace?”

Still smiling, Jace turned. “It’s fine, Felix. We were just talking about Gavin.”

Phoebe watched as something flashed in Felix’s eyes. “Don’t get me started.” An easy smile spread over his face. “Do you need any help?”

“No, I think we are fine,” Jace replied.

Felix looked at Phoebe. “I’m glad to see you are all right. The healing may take a bit since he brought you back, but it looks like you are nearly back to normal.”

Phoebe smiled. “Yeah, nearly normal. A bit lightheaded but nothing a bit of rest won’t fix.”

Felix nodded. “Well, I’ll leave you guys alone. Jace, when you are done, we will need to talk.”

“Of course,” he replied.

“And I do apologize ahead of time. A couple of our brothers are still being assessed, so you will probably have to be an intermediary to get things to calm down.”

Jace sighed. “I would expect nothing else.”

Felix leaned his head on the door. “I wish...” He shook his head. “I want you to meet Harlow this evening.”

A crease formed on Jace’s brow. “Really? Why?”

Tilting his head to the side, Felix said simply, “You are my brother. You should get to know my mate just like the rest of the family has.”

Jace stared at him silently, and Phoebe wondered if they were communicating. Felix lowered his head for a moment, the smile slipping for a fraction of a second. Then he smiled again. “I’ll leave you guys be. I’m sure you both need more rest.”

After the door closed, Phoebe looked at him. “Why are you recovering?”

Jace looked at her. “I had to find you. It was... tiring.”

“Find me? What do you mean?”

His shoulders sagged a little, then Jace sat up. “Phoebe, you died. Your consciousness was gone. I had to locate you and bring you back.”

She stared at him unblinking. “Does that mean... you died?”

“Not exactly. Kole said it would probably qualify as being brain-dead?” Jace looked at her as if he was not familiar with the term.

“Oh,” Phoebe sank into the bed. “So... you put yourself at risk of death to make sure I didn’t die.”

“You put yourself at risk to keep Cole alive. It seemed only right to make sure you didn’t pay for wanting to help us.” He looked her in the eyes. “I don’t believe collateral damage is ever acceptable.”

“Wow,” Phoebe said, sinking down on the bed. “This is a lot to take in.”

He patted her hand. “Yeah. Not quite the way you want to wake up after what you’ve been through.”

“No kidding.” She looked at him. “Thank you. I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t need to say anything. We owe you a lot more than just keeping you alive. If Kole had died, it would have upset more than just his family. It could have resulted in something far more devastating if the shifters started fighting outside of their species.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Phoebe said. Then she shrugged when he looked at her.

Leaning over he kissed her on the forehead. “You averted what could have been a war. So thank you. Now it’s probably best if you get to sleep.”

He stood up and started walking toward the door, when he swooned a little. Sitting up quickly Phoebe started to get out of bed. He held up a hand. “No, no. I’m fine.”

Her mind racing, Phoebe started to understand why she had woken up with him at her back. “I’m not the only one who needs to rest. Come back to bed. I promise to try not to freak out when I wake up.”

He turned to look at her, not sold on the idea.

“As a nurse, I have to say that being brain-dead is not great for the body. You should probably get some bed rest.” She slid over to the other side of the bed, “Come on. I insist.”

“I can go to another apartment and — “

“We both know that if you walk out of that door,” she said, pointing to it, “you are going to get swamped by your family who feel guilty like Felix. They won’t understand that you are not healed or that you need rest because you guys don’t know what it’s like when you can’t instantly fix yourselves. Before you have to go face all of them, come rest up.”

When Jace looked at the door, still debating what to do, Phoebe realized what he needed to hear. “It would help me to have you close.”

Jace’s eyes went back to her, then something flashed in them. “It might be a bit of a risk since you are obviously doing better.”

“Far less risky than anything else we’ve done today,” she responded with a half-grin.

He smiled, the dimple appearing just long enough to get her attention. Jace walked back to the bed and slipped under the covers. Rolling over, Phoebe said, “Would you mind warming me up a bit? I’m feeling cold.”

She felt the mattress shift as Jace moved over to her. Then his arm slid over her hip, and he pulled her back to his chest. Phoebe put a hand over his, then fell asleep to the feel of his body, a new sense of calm washing over her.

Chapter 11

When Forever Seems Too Short

Phoebe slept for over a day; her body exhausted from everything she'd been through in the last year, not to mention the last couple of months. Between starting work on the night shift, leaving her restaurant job, and dealing with shifters, Phoebe had experienced more in the last two months than she had in years. And when she woke up over 24 hours later, she still felt groggy and like she could roll over and drift back to sleep.

“Phoebe.” Jace’s voice was close by. “You can go back to sleep if you’d like.” The bed sank a little as she tried to open her eyes. “But you should know that you’ve been asleep for over a full day.”

Her eyes opened slowly, then they widened. Phoebe began to try to sit up, but he put his hand out. “I called your work and let them know you were sick. They weren’t happy, but they preferred you not to come in if you had something contagious.”

Phoebe lay back. “Thank you, Jace.” She cocked her head. “Wait. How do you know where I work?”

He screwed up half of his face and grimaced, then he tapped his head. “I know a lot about you now. Before the other day, I didn’t even know your first name.”

With her stomach sinking, Phoebe nodded. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

He moved a little closer. “And I feel very guilty leaving you in your apartment that day and for not remembering you at

your work the night before. You recognized me and tried to thank me, but I didn't even try."

Giving a half-shrug, Phoebe said, "It's all right. You were just doing your job."

"Actually, I was at your work that night because of Lucy."

Phoebe looked up at him. "Why? Are you her ex or something? Were you worried about her being with Leonard?"

"Nothing like that. Felix got in touch with me a year or so ago because he was being forced to get involved, something he had been fighting for a long time. Being serious is something he hates to do. But he's good at running things, and he knows how to delegate. Even though we had never spent time together, he had a rough idea of what I could do, and he suspected that Leonard's family was among the many families trying to reposition themselves. I admit I was not interested in helping him or anyone else in my family after they pretty much foisted me off on another family to raise. Then I saw what was happening to Lucy."

Phoebe sighed. "I know what you mean. Watching her was heartbreaking."

Jace looked at her. "You've seen that kind of stuff before, so, of course, you didn't want to watch your coworker suffer. She does have a couple of kittens, you know?"

This gave her a second to think through what he was saying. "You mean... she's a mother?"

He nodded. "I got her kittens out. They weren't Leonard's, so they were in significant danger being in his

house. But she wouldn't leave. That was the first night I approached her, but it took a while to convince her to let me take her kittens."

Phoebe thought about those weeks after her first meeting with Jace. At that point, she had been focused on her grades and finding out if she passed her classes. She hadn't paid much attention to anyone else, so she couldn't remember Lucy seeming more upset than usual. "I had no idea."

"Good. She didn't need anyone else bothering her, so it is good to hear that she was all right during that time. It's rough when a mother is separated from her kittens so early." He shook his head. "She's fine now, but I want to apologize to you for ignoring you during that time."

"It's okay. I think I embarrassed myself that day. It was..."

He put a hand over hers. "You didn't do anything wrong. And I was attracted to you, too. That's why I left so quickly."

Phoebe looked at him, completely clueless as to what to say.

Jace stood up and headed toward the door. When he turned to look at her, Phoebe thought his cheeks looked a bit pinker than usual. "Feel free to stay and rest for as long as you need to. The clinic thinks you have the flu, so they are waiting for you to call to say when you will be back to work."

"Wait, Jace." Phoebe leaned forward a little, holding the sheet over her chest. "I'm hungry."

"Oh, right. What would you like?"

She smiled at him. “Surprise me?” He smiled back, then she announced. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“Okay. I’ll have the meal ready by the time you’re done. Take your time and relax.”

Once he was gone, Phoebe slipped into the bathroom.

After a long, hot hourlong shower, Phoebe left the bathroom feeling refreshed and very relaxed. Jace was making up the bed. “Oh good. Um, I kept your food warm.”

He moved around the bed and picked up a plate with a cloche on it. “I hope you enjoy it.”

Phoebe started eating, and the pair were chatting when there was a knock on the door. A second later, the handsome face of Kole peered in.

Phoebe stood, but he waved at her to sit. “Please, don’t get up on my account. You need to eat after your ordeal.” He came and sat on a comfortable chair near them. “I wanted to thank the woman who saved me, and to let you know that I am at your disposal should you ever need help.”

With a big grin on her face, Phoebe said, “You are an EMT in New York City. I feel certain that —” She stopped talking as Jace and Kole exchanged a look. “What? What are you two saying?”

Jace looked away, his cheeks tinged pink, but Kole simply laughed. “Oh, dear. I’m the second most-degreed person in my family. Maybe the first since Gavin stopped.” He leaned forward and pointed at Jace. “He tells me you are a nurse.”

“I don’t see what one has to do with the other,” Phoebe said, looking between them.

Kole smiled. “I started a couple of companies, including one that launched this.” He handed her his phone.

Phoebe stared down at a fairly new app designed to help domestic abuse survivors. Her eyes widened as she looked up at him. “You... that’s your app?”

He beamed. “Yep. Got a couple of tech degrees, but figured I preferred to work with people instead of machines all day. But in my free time, I enjoy doing things like this.” His expression got serious. “As an EMT, I see a lot of DV situations, and I can’t show up at all of them in New York, let alone around the world. If I can do something to help, then I do, which brings me to the second reason I am here.”

Phoebe looked at Jace for an explanation but his eyes darted to Kole, who winked at him. Jace let out a heavy sigh. “Since you aren’t happy with your current job and you want to be on a day shift so you can help your parents, Kole is hoping to build a center here in Florida to help people caught between the human and shifter worlds.”

Phoebe frowned, then she closed her eyes and shook her head. “I don’t... “

“My apologies for throwing names at you, but...” He took a deep breath. “My brother Storm has a mate, Dakota, and she’s working with Kole and his mate, Harper, to develop something to help shifters like Lucy who were sold to more prominent families and shifters who were born without the ability to shift.”

“Wait, you can be a shifter but not be able to shift?”

“Yes. Since cat shifters end up with humans a lot, it is more likely that some of our children are born with only one form. And there are some cat families who abandon their children when those children can’t shift.” He looked at Kole and they exchanged a dark look, then Jace resumed. “Harper and Dakota are working on an organization that is kind of a branch of the app, but with a very specific focus. And they are going to need medical professionals. especially when they start with rescues.”

“You are already rescuing kittens.”

Jace nodded. “That was only Lucy, though it wasn’t the first time I did that. Until last year, I’ve largely ignored shifters and humans, but now,” he sighed, “I don’t think I can keep ignoring them now that Kole and Gavin have told me about what they’ve learned.” He rubbed his hands together. “It actually made me feel ashamed.”

“Oh, poor little bastard,” Kole said, patting him on the shoulder, which earned him a stern look from Jace. “Hey, I understand. Both of my parents are still alive and I couldn’t even tell you what they look like now. More importantly, I don’t care.”

Phoebe looked at him “Don’t shifters care for their children?”

The two males looked at each other, then Kole looked at her. “Don’t *humans* care for their children?”

“Well, I mean, sometimes, but — oh, right. I see. Okay. Point taken. And yes, I would love to help in any way I

could.”

“Great,” Kole said, perking up. “Here you go.” He handed her a piece of paper. “This is all of the information you need, including your starting pay.”

“When do I start?”

“I would say whenever you want to,” Kole said with a shrug. “I suspect you will want to familiarize yourself with the app. Then if you want to take some time to find a new place, get situated, and settle into your life with Jace, I...”

Phoebe and Jace both grimaced, then she asked, “What are you talking about?”

At the same time, Jace said, “You are overstepping.”

Kole gave a melodramatic sigh as he stood up. “And so we’ve reached my last reason for being here. Since you are both too inexperienced and foolish to say so, I will say it: Phoebe, Jace wants you to be his mate.”

Jace stood up, his fists balled, his voice threatening as he growled the word, “Kole!”

“What?” Kole asked innocently. “She already thought yes nearly every damn day since she met you. But you’re both so foolish you want to fight it.”

Phoebe’s face flushed red and her heart felt like it was about to explode. Jace looked at her, the shock obvious on his face. “Really?”

The butterflies started stirring in her as she looked at her hands and nodded. Then she looked at Kole, the heat in her

face making her look sunburned. “How on earth did you know?”

Kole’s expression softened as he looked between them. “Who do you think anchored him while he was out looking for you after you died? It gave me a lot of insight into both of you fools when he finally connected. Sly little panther, sneaking into your thoughts.” He smirked at Jace’s obvious discomfort, but Kole continued. “And it made me miss my Harper that much more. Now if you will excuse me, I have a mate to monopolize for as long as possible because the last few days have been quite traumatizing and I want to be pampered.”

He didn’t wait for them to respond. The room was completely silent as Jace and Phoebe looked at each other, neither of them knowing quite what to say.

Finally, Jace sat down. “I don’t want to pressure you into anything.”

Phoebe looked at him. “Did he say you were inexperienced, too?”

“Considering what happened with my parents, I’ve had no desire to find anyone. I figured being alone was better than what my father had done.”

Phoebe took his hand. “What he did wasn’t your fault.”

Jace looked at her hand, then slid his other hand over hers. “You would know. You keep taking up your parents’ responsibilities because they keep trying to help but no longer have the ability to do so.”

His hand gripped her, and Phoebe felt warm surge travel up and down her spine. “Kole called you a panther.”

“Yes.” Jace moved her hand so that the palm was facing up, then he began to gently stroke it.

“I saw you in the forest. You’re a lion.”

“Ah.” he moved his chair a little closer to her, his eyes focused on where their hands were touching. “The term panther doesn’t refer to a specific breed of cat. It’s used for any large black cat because that is not the norm, especially for lions.”

“Oh, I didn’t know,” Phoebe said, only half responding to his words. Her eyes were on his face, tracing his features.

He looked into her eyes. “Yeah, most people don’t.”

Hesitantly, Phoebe leaned forward. Jace responded by leaning toward her. They moved forward until their noses were almost touching. He tilted his head to the side a little as he brought a hand up to her chin. Softly, their lips met. Jace’s hand stroked her chin and down her neck a little. Phoebe moved forward a little more, deepening the kiss.

Jace stood up, and Phoebe followed him, not wanting to lose the connection. His voice was husky as he murmured, “I don’t want to rush you.”

“I don’t want to waste any more time waiting. If the last few weeks have proved anything, it’s that life can end far too easily.”

“Are you sure?” he breathed between kisses.

She smiled back. “Are you?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

Jace pulled her to him, one hand sliding up her back and the other moving down over her hip. Phoebe leaned into him, standing on her toes to stay connected. He lifted her off the ground and moved gently to lay her on the bed. Looking down on her, he said, "I..." his eyes searched hers. "I've never felt so connected to anyone before."

Phoebe stroked his face. "Me either. Since meeting you, I've felt safe and comfortable. It's strange."

"No," he shook his head. "That's supposed to be what happens when a shifter meets their mate. Forever doesn't feel like long enough."

"I can understand that sentiment." She pulled him down on top of her, kissing him as she tried to pull his clothes off. Jace moved away a little, leaving her feeling cold and lonely for a brief moment, but her eyes were taking in his body as he removed his clothing. She had seen numerous naked men as a nurse, but this was different. Jace's body was perfect. When he removed his pants and slid off his briefs, her eyes couldn't believe how big he was.

"Oh, my," she murmured.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'll be careful."

Phoebe shook her head. "I know, it's just... It's just a damn good thing you'll be my last because you are perfect."

He began to remove her clothing, allowing his hand to brush her skin in slow strokes with each item that he removed. When he started trying to remove the bra, he had some trouble. Smiling, Phoebe arched her back and leaned into him as she unfastened the hooks. His eyes seemed to roll back in his head

at her touch, but as soon as the bra was undone, he began kissing her shoulder as he removed one strap, then he repeated the move for the other. He then kissed his way down her belly as he slid his fingers under the top of her panties. Suddenly, he tore the side and threw what was left of it to the side. He began to kiss her hips; his mouth open as his tongue slid along her skin. Phoebe arched up into him. His hands moved down the front of her legs, then up the backs, pulling them apart as he kissed up her body and started sucking on one of her nipples. One of his hands gingerly cupped her other breast as he put the weight of his body on hers.

“Please, Jace. We can go slow later. Right now, I just want to feel you.”

His eyes looked at her with a mixture of lust and love. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. Slowly, he kissed up her neck, driving her a little crazy as she waited. When his mouth touched hers, Phoebe felt pressure between her legs, a pulsing sensation as he placed his head at her opening. Slowly, he pressed into her, just a little, then pulled out. That was enough to make her throw her head back and whimper. Jace held her upper body to him as he kissed the side of her neck, pressing a little further her this time, then pulling out.

“Oh, Jace,” she murmured, her hands tangling in his hair. “Oh, Jace,” she said as he began to push into her again. This time he went considerably deeper, but did not pull out, instead sliding his shaft in and out of her. “Oh, Jace!”

She was almost screaming now, and he covered her mouth with his. In response, Phoebe slipped her tongue into

his mouth, hoping that he was getting half of the pleasure out of the experience she was getting. He was only a little more than half into her when she first orgasmed, her body tensing around his shaft, causing Jace to stop. He buried his face in her neck as she scratched his back in response to the sensation. When she started to calm down, he slid further into her, this time a bit rougher. Phoebe reacted by moving her hips to bring him in deeper. Her hands slid down his back, and she tried to push him all the way in.

Jace pulled back for a moment, nearly coming out of her, then he thrust into her, fully sheathing himself inside her core. When she started to scream, he again covered her mouth. She began to suck on his tongue as her body clenched up again.

Seconds later, he pulled away from her. "I'm so sorry," he said, his eyes wide.

"What? What happened?" She sat up suddenly concerned.

"I..." he swallowed hard. "I just... I couldn't stop myself from..."

She looked down and knew what he meant. With an understanding smile, Phoebe took his hand. "Do you not want kids?"

"I don't know. I've never thought about it. But what about you? They definitely weren't in your plans."

She sighed and pulled him down onto the bed next to her. Stroking his face, she said, "I'm not against the idea. I just never found someone who might be worth having children

with. But the idea of having a family with you,” she said, beaming, “I’m game if you are.”

Jace’s expression was hard to read, then he relaxed. “You are going to be a fantastic mother. And I want to be whatever you need to be happy.”

“I want you to be happy, too,” she said, running a hand along his impossibly perfect pecs. “This shouldn’t just be about one of us, you know.”

He licked his lips while looking at hers. “But I know what you are, and I am nothing near good enough for you.”

“Funny.”

“What is?” He looked at her with concern.

She kissed his forehead. “I feel the exact same way about you.”

He pulled her against his body, stroking her back. “It’s happened so fast. Are you sure you are all right?”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “We did meet over a year ago, so technically, this has been building. Besides, we did have a cheat to get where we are right now.”

He blinked. “Kole?”

Phoebe laughed. “No, I mean we’ve been connected in a much more intimate way. And I can honestly say that I was drawn to you from the beginning. You are modest, sweet, shy, and sincere. Those are hard qualities to find these days.”

He stroked her head and kissed her again, “And you are everything I thought was impossible to find.”

Threading their legs together, the couple fell asleep.

Aftermath

No Rest for Responders

Three months had passed since the chaos that had nearly killed her, but Phoebe was thriving. Her new job was challenging, but easily the most rewarding one she had ever had. She loved working with Dakota, and the two spent a lot of time hanging out even when they weren't working. Harlow started to join them on their outings, and she introduced them to their friends. For the first time in her life, Phoebe was making friends outside her family, and yet her family life wasn't suffering because of it.

Jace had bought her a house near her parents, but they also had a set of rooms on his farm, which was a very good way of describing his home. Phoebe thought it was much more like a castle, but she was happy to use whatever terms he wanted.

When they realized that she was pregnant, he made sure to set them up on the ground floor so that she never had to use the stairs. It wasn't a surprise that she was pregnant either since they didn't make any effort to prevent it. She was a little apprehensive, mostly because she wasn't sure what to expect from a shifter, but she was equally certain that it was going to be the best experience of her life. They hadn't exchanged "I love you's" yet, but they didn't need to. Just from the way he touched her and took care of her, she knew exactly how he felt.

They were at their house, setting up the nursery when Jace suddenly stopped what he was doing. Stepping out of the

room, Phoebe could hear him say, “Hold on, Felix. Slow down. What happened? No, take a breath, and —”

There was a pause.

Then he walked back into the room. “We need to go. And can you bring some of your medical equipment?”

“What happened?”

“Leonard’s family and two of the others have openly attacked one of the other cat shifter families using the same poison they used on Kole.”

Phoebe shook her head as she hurried into the bedroom to grab her bag. Jace had been trying to get her to go back to school to become a doctor, and she was now seriously considering it. She would have much more authority in these situations, and she could do a lot more for Kole’s company if she were a doctor instead of a nurse. Rattling off what she would need to Jace, he relayed it to Felix.

As they got in his car, Jace finished listing off everything Phoebe had said, making sure he was speaking out loud so she could verify he was asking for the right things. When she nodded at him, Jace smiled as he started the car.

“That should do it, Felix. And I know you don’t want to hear it.” Jace paused, and Phoebe could imagine that Felix was arguing on the other end of the connection. “I don’t care, Felix. You know that you have to bring Levi into this.” There was another long pause. “I understand, but there may not be much for him to come back to if he doesn’t get involved.”

Sitting beside him, Phoebe asked, “What is it?”

He held up a finger to her. “I realize that, but this is an escalation that requires his skills.” Jace was silent for a moment, “Well, think of it this way, how is he going to feel knowing that you left him in the dark about this? And how is he going to feel when he learns you turned to *me* first.”

There was a silence, and Phoebe imagined Felix getting upset on the other side. He didn’t like being wrong. Finally, Jace smiled and looked at her as they drove out of the neighborhood. “I know, I will tell him that I’ve only just learned of it, too. I can locate him if you need.” Another pause. “Well, yes, I do realize that he is quite a long way away, but he’ll still be easier to track down than Phoebe was.” He snorted during the next pause. “I’ll let you know what he says, but let’s wait until after we’ve taken care of this. It’s probably best that he doesn’t try to come back feeling panicked... Yep... See you there.”

Phoebe sat back and rubbed her belly, then took his hand. “It’s never boring with you.”

He looked over at her as he squeezed her hand. “I’ll make sure you stay safe.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’m safe. You are the one who might do something reckless.”

He gave her a look. “I think that our track records say otherwise.”

She giggled. “I suppose so.” Phoebe put her head back against the headrest. “I love you, Jace.” He looked over at her and let go of her hand to wrap his arm around her.

Kissing the top of her head, he murmured, “I love and adore you, too.”

“Hey, I didn’t say adore,” she said, poking him in the side.

With a laugh, he tapped her head. “You thought it very loudly.” Then he fell quiet. “I’m sorry for everything we are dragging you into.”

Phoebe waved away the apology. “As long as I’m helping people, I’m happy. And knowing that it helps *you*, well, it’s nice to have a little leverage.”

He sighed and glanced over at her before looking at the road. “If things weren’t so dire right now, I would pull over and show you leverage.”

Giggling, Phoebe patted his arm. “If we aren’t too tired after this, I would love to see how you plan to apply your own leverage.”

He growled, then pressed the pedal down a little more as they headed to the latest emergency.

If you loved this story, click here for the series page:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CFZJQLCS>



To visit Lisa's author page click here:

<https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B01MRPVLWCW>

