

With His Life
(A Rise of the Pride Short Story)



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Chapter One

The sun was still below the horizon when Talon Shaw awoke, but that wasn't uncommon for him. He wanted nothing more than to stay in bed on that cold February morning, but his job as alpha to the Shaw pride was never going to be a nine to five gig where he could call in sick or ask for vacation time. His family, the pride of panthers that resided on his land, needed their leader at all hours of the day and night, but that morning, he just wanted to hold his mate, Liberty, a little longer.

He rolled to his side, using his strong arm to curl around his mate's waist. The connection of their mating tingled across his skin when he drew her back to his bare chest. His beast rumbled at her scent. He'd never tire of that feeling, knowing Liberty was his forever.

The magic he was born with swirled around his body like a live wire. It wasn't very often he felt uneasy, but when he did, there was usually a reason. The fact that whatever his senses were worried about surrounded the love of his life only made him want to tell the pride to hold their needs of him for another day.

"Mmmm, Talon," Liberty mumbled with sleep fogging her voice, making the sound husky and warm. "What's wrong?"

Of course, she felt his unease. His magic wasn't only his, it belonged to his entire pride. When he was on edge, his people felt it through the connection of his blood. Most of the time, he kept the magic at bay, hiding some of his concerns. When he wasn't himself, the entire pride was affected. Today was going to be one of those days.

"My mystical mojo is all out of whack," he mumbled into her hair. Liberty had used the phrase when it came to his magic. When she'd first used it in reference to his powers, it pissed him off, but now he expected it from her, and actually thought it was cute. He couldn't fault her for being weird about him in the beginning since she had been born human.

"Why?" she asked, her voice less husky and more concerned in an instant.

"I just need to hold you." He evaded her question, rubbing his thumb over some exposed skin on her side. He paused for a moment, letting the warmth settle into his bones.

"You're not answering me," she scolded, twisting around so she was facing him. Her icy blue eyes bore into his. She'd always been able to read him much like he could read his pride. She had some of his alpha magic inside her, acquiring it from the blood share he'd done with her to save her life and change her into a panther shifter like himself. "Something's wrong."

Talon knew Liberty felt it...the worry over something that felt ominous. "It's me?" she gasped. "Are you feeling something bad about me?"

"I think so, Liberty," he sighed, tightening his hold on her waist. "I don't get this feeling often, but when I do, it's usually right."

“Is someone coming for me?” she asked, tightening her hold on his bicep.

“I won’t let anything hurt you,” he promised, using his forefinger to stroke her forehead before placing his lips against it. He closed his eyes and willed the feeling away, but it wouldn’t subside. When he pulled away, her eyes had completely changed over to the amber hue of her panther. The beast that lived inside his mate was just below her skin, wanting out to protect itself.

“Your worry is affecting the pride,” she warned, using her free hand to rub the center of her chest. “I can feel them.”

He felt it, too. The pride was awake earlier than anyone should be. Talon didn’t have to look at the clock to realize it wasn’t quite four in the morning. He sent out a wave of calm to his people, feeling their relaxed state come back at him. “I worry for you, and I don’t know why. It makes me uneasy when you are the cause of the doom and gloom I feel.”

“I’m going to be fine,” she promised after a drawn-out sigh, trying to calm him by stroking his arm much like he’d done with her forehead.

“What if you’re not?” he whispered, resting his forehead against hers as they lay on their sides in their mated bed. He felt the presence of his beast pushing at his human skin, the animal’s body rippling as it forced its way to the surface. Much like Liberty’s, the animal wanted out to protect itself.

If those without the alpha gene knew how hard it was to keep the beast at bay sometimes, he thought.

“You won’t let anything happen to me, Talon,” she replied. “You’ve always vowed to protect me, and you’ve kept that promise.”

“I will protect you with my life, Liberty,” he growled. “You and our cubs.”

A hard knock sounded on his bedroom door. The only one who would disturb him in his quarters would be his second-in-command, his best friend and brother-in-law, Winter Blue.

“Let me talk to Winter,” Talon whispered, placing a kiss on her cheek as he sighed heavily and climbed to his feet.

Leaving her in the bed was one of the hardest things for him to do. His beast kept demanding he return to her side, but Talon pushed mentally at the animal, trying to calm him much like he’d just done with his pride.

“Everything okay, boss?” Winter asked, standing at attention just on the other side of the double doors into his master suite. The large Guardian was on edge, feeling his alpha’s unease. With his arms crossed over his chest and his legs spread shoulder-width apart, Winter Blue was no one to mess with.

“Uneasy,” Talon replied, jerking his head slightly to indicate the feeling was centered on his mate, Liberty. “I’m not letting her out of my sight today. If anyone needs me, I will be here or in my office.”

“We will be extra vigilant in our rounds of the land today,” Winter noted. “Spend time with your mate and call me if something changes.”

Liberty combed out her hair, rolling her eyes when Talon wasn’t staring at her. He’d been stuck to her like glue since the day before when he’d woke with a feeling of doom that centered around her. While it irritated her, she was happy to have him around. Most of the time, she didn’t get to spend the daytime hours with him because he was always busy with pride business or she was working at her bar in town, *The Deuce*.

“I’m going into the bar today, Talon,” she stated after a heavy sigh. She’d never asked for permission from her mate for anything, and she wasn’t going to start now. As she glanced at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, Talon paused as he shaved. The blade froze at his throat for a few seconds before he sighed and lowered it to rinse in the sink. “I’m leaving our cubs with June and the other children. They need some playtime.” *And momma needs a break.*

“Why?” His eyes were throwing amber sparks, and from the aroma in the air, his mating scent had been activated. It took everything in her power not to roll her eyes again at his protectiveness, and she succeeded...barely.

“I need to do payroll, and before you get all worked up, you can come with me,” she offered, hoping that was the white flag she needed to fly to keep him from blowing up with talk of protection and bad omens.

“I can’t go with you,” he replied, wiping his face off with a hand towel from the linen closet to his left. “I’ll have a Guardian drive you. I have to take care of some things here at the pride.”

“I can drive myself,” she huffed. While she loved his protectiveness most of the time, this recent bout was driving her insane. She’d gone through her life just fine before they had met, and now that she was a panther like him, Liberty had more weapons to fight off anything that came at her. The claws alone would tear a human to shreds. “It takes less than five minutes to get to the bar, and Dane is already there.”

“Liberty,” he warned, lowering his voice. “I don’t like this one bit.”

“I know,” she replied. “Doom and gloom.”

“This isn’t funny,” he shot back, his eyes glowing amber with the presence of his panther.

Liberty sobered, walking over to wrap her arms around his waist. “I’m going to be fine. Garrett hasn’t had any visions lately. I’ll be safe.”

Talon paused for the longest time, and Liberty was expecting him to finally explode into a rash of curses and denials of her request. It didn't matter anyway. She knew he wasn't going to deny her need to run her business. "I'll be carrying my gun."

His amber eyes dulled, slowly changing back into the icy blue of his human side. She knew she'd won when he leaned down to take her lips. She relished in the warmth of his tongue and the scent of his mating. It swirled around them as they embraced.

"I'd give my own life for yours," he vowed as soon as they pulled apart long enough to catch their breath.

"And I would do the same for you, Talon," she breathed. His mating scent was thicker in the air than it'd had ever been. There was no mistaking it.

"You call me if there are any problems," he ordered. She nodded in agreement and pulled him back to her lips to finish what they'd started.

Chapter Two

Liberty glanced in her rearview mirror as she drove away from the pride's home. Talon was standing on the porch with his thick arms crossed over his broad chest. He wasn't angry nor was he happy with her driving herself the five minutes to work. He'd given her the speech about calling him when she arrived and not to pull over for any reason. She agreed and left before he could change his mind.

She honestly didn't have far to go. It was only three miles to the four-way stop sign where the bar sat on the northwest corner of the two-lane highway. She made it there in under five minutes.

And no one jumped out of the woods to snatch her, either.

Pulling her warm winter coat around her body, she hurried out of her car to get inside. Usually, the cold didn't bother her, but today was different. Despite her willingness to go into work alone, she wasn't discounting Talon's uneasy feeling. As she walked toward the entrance, she kept her eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary. Liberty shook off the feelings of doom creeping into her bones. Talon's worry was affecting her, and there was no doubt it was part of his magic. The entire pride had been feeling it over the past two days. She had to work and ignore the feeling, or she'd never get anything done. Talon was a bit obsessed with her safety.

It was Wednesday afternoon and there were only a handful of cars in the lot for the lunch hour. The bell over the door jingled as she entered, and she nodded to her regular customers when some of them waved in her direction. Her father's old friend, Red, was at the first booth with a few of his buddies, nursing a beer. He nodded and smiled when she passed.

Cole was washing mugs, and the Guardian, Dane, was poised at the end of the bar like he was every time one of his mates was on duty. Their relationship had been odd to say the least. As far as she knew, there had never been a triad mating among their species, but Dane, Cole, and Olivia made it work.

Olivia was coming out of the kitchen area with a tray of food. She paused as Liberty stepped aside so she could pass. The smirk on the side of her mouth had Liberty wondering what she had to say. "What?"

"Don't forget to call the alpha." Olivia hurried past when Liberty narrowed her eyes.

"Jesus, did he notify everyone I was leaving the pride?" Liberty huffed as Olivia chuckled while she served Red and his buddies.

Dane was typing something out on his phone, and she was sure it was a text to Talon letting him know she had arrived. With an irritated huff, she made her way to the office where she composed her own text, letting him know she was at the bar and safely locked in her office. She didn't call him.

Payroll was a tedious task she actually loved. Her sister, Nova, hated it. With a shake of her head, Liberty got down to work, inputting the information into the computer program. The time clock app for her employees was down a few days ago, and she had to log their hours manually. Once she was done, all she had to do was finalize the checks and be on her way. At one point, she stood up to crack the window behind her desk to let in some cold air. The heat in the building was stifling, and she made a mental note to turn the temperature down on the furnace before she left for the day. Being a panther kept her warmer than when she had been human.

She didn't want to go back to the pride since Talon was going to be working with his Guardians. Even though it was the middle of the week, she figured she could get some time in waiting tables to help Olivia during the lunch rush until at least two in the afternoon.

Her keys rattled as she locked things up in her office, stopping by the kitchen window to check on her cook, Moe. "How's it going?"

"I'm right as rain, Liberty," he chuckled as he plated a grilled chicken breast next to some steamed veggies. "How're those babies of yours?"

"They're wonderful," she replied, smiling to herself when she thought of her cubs.

They spoke until he finished the order, and with a small wave, Liberty carried the tray out to the dining area of the bar. The scent of liquor and hot food made her stomach rumble. She hadn't eaten all day, because she was too busy snuggling up to her mate in the early morning hours. Yeah, she'd take that over food any day.

Once the table was served, she looked over at the clock, as several of the farmers entered for their lunch break. Cole and Dane were whispering about something over at the bar. She didn't want to know what it was so she made sure she was out of hearing range. Whatever those two were deep in discussion about wasn't any of her business.

"They're trying to be sneaky," Olivia mumbled as she approached, jutting her chin toward her two mates. "I don't really like surprises, but I'm guessing they're going to do something for my birthday."

"Probably." Liberty rolled her eyes and started to clear a table. "These males are always such alphas, but when it comes to their women, they turn into big ole teddy bears."

"Who are you calling a teddy bear?" Dane's deep voice echoed across the room. A few patrons chuckled, and Liberty looked at Olivia, who was wide-eyed at being caught.

"Can't even whisper around here," she mumbled and picked up an empty beer bottle before she turned for the Guardian with a smirk lifting the corner of her mouth. "You, Dane. I'm calling you a big ole teddy bear. Maybe you should give up your Guardianship because of it."

"Excuse me?" he gasped, his own eyes going wide in humor. Liberty burst out laughing and waved off his fake anger as she slipped into the kitchen to wash the dishes for Moe. With her enhanced hearing, she could hear her pride member huffing over her comment even though they both knew she was joking. It made her smile even more.

The sound of a delivery truck cut off anything else she was hearing from the Guardian. She excused herself to unlock the back door and take inventory of the order she'd placed a few days ago.

"Mornin' ma'am," her usual driver, Nick, greeted. He was older than her, and he'd been delivering food to them since her father owned the bar. It was nice to see a familiar face anytime they had known her family.

A wave of sadness washed over her, but she quickly straightened her spine. Daddy wouldn't want her to behave that way. He'd taught her and her sister, Nova, how to fend for themselves in this crazy world. Little did he ever know that the world wasn't quite what he'd believed it to be. He'd already passed when the news of shifting humans reached the world.

"How's the family?" Nick asked, interrupting her thoughts, and boy did she need that. Thinking of her father caused little pinpricks of pain behind her icy blue eyes, and the last thing she wanted to do was cry at work. Dane would call Talon and all hell would break loose.

"We are doing great," she beamed. "How's Martha?"

"As beautiful as the day I married her." He blushed and handed over the packing slip. She carefully took it from him, aware of how close his hand came to hers. Touch from a male other than Talon would bring her pain. She always kept a pair of gloves Ranger had provided in her back pocket, but she'd forgotten to slip them on after opening the back door.

Nick released the paper as fast as he could, shoving his hands into his pockets. Liberty read over the paper and jutted her chin toward the back door. "Let's go inventory all of this so you can be on your way. Unless you'd like to stay for lunch?"

"I wish I could, Ms. Liberty," he said, offering her a smile. "I have three more deliveries left for the day, and all of them are north of town."

"No problem," she nodded, reminding herself that she still hadn't eaten.

Liberty leaned against the delivery truck while Nick lowered the pallet of goods with the attached lift. He stepped aside as she went over the items, checking them off with a pen she kept behind her right ear.

"Looks perfect," she replied and opened the back door to the bar, using a brick to prop it open. She left Nick to unload and headed off to her office.

When she got close to the door, her panther rumbled at the scent. Talon was there behind the closed door. She knew he wouldn't stay away from her for long.

"Couldn't stay away, huh?" She smiled as she opened the door, but it died the moment she took in his glowing amber eyes.

The alpha's face bubbled with anger. The beast inside him was pushing to be let out, and Liberty gasped when he crossed the room at an inhuman pace, wrapping his arms around her body and shielding her from a threat only he knew.

“Who touched you?” he snarled, lifting his nose to the air and scenting what she was assuming belonged to the male delivery driver.

“No one, Talon,” she scoffed, attempting to push him away. “I just checked in a delivery from Nick. You know Nick...the human delivery guy who has been here a hundred times before.”

“No, it’s not him,” Talon replied, his voice dropping even lower. “New scent, and I don’t like it.”

“Oh, good lord have mercy, Talon Shaw, back off. No one has touched me, and I’m sure you’re scenting a customer. What has gotten into you?” Liberty was fed up with his overprotectiveness. It was cute and silly back in the beginning, but after several years of being his mate, she was to the boiling point with it.

“My skin is twitching,” he replied, lowering his voice. Liberty kind of felt bad for yelling at him, but then again, she needed to put him in his place. “Something is coming, but the sheriff hasn’t seen any visions.”

“So, whatever this doom and gloom you’ve been feeling is not human? It could be a shifter problem, right?” She wanted to talk through this feeling he was having. She’d learned to talk things out with him on many occasions. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it made things worse.

“Garrett hasn’t seen *anything*,” Talon emphasized the words with his hands balled into fists at his side. “If it’s paranormal, we will handle it. With the government on our side now, we know it’s not them coming to collect us for studying.”

“Then, if it’s human, I can handle my own self,” Liberty blurted, instantly regretting it. Humans were weak. She could take out one twice her size if the need arose.

Talon’s eyes glowed with the presence of his beast. Oh, he was mad. Not just mad, mad...he was livid. “You are my mate, and I am the alpha. When I feel a threat coming for you, I will stop at nothing to keep you safe.”

“You can’t protect me from everything, Talon,” she sighed. “Please, you’re smothering me.”

“I’m being cautious,” he countered.

“I’m being serious,” she replied, raising her finger to point toward the door. “Get out of my office and out of my bar. I am fine. I will *be* fine.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” he exploded. “I will not leave. Not when there is some threat out there waiting to hurt you.”

“There’s always a threat to me,” she reminded him. “We are shifters, and the humans know us. There will always be someone out there who doesn’t like us, wants us locked up in cages or completely eradicated from the face of this planet. At this time, we haven’t had any new threats, and that tells me that I can work...in my own damn bar...without you breathing down my neck! Now...get...out!”

“One of these days, Liberty Shaw,” Talon began his warning, but never finished when he scooped her up into his arms and kissed her silent.

The press of his lips was as demanding as his alpha commands. She knew he worried, but it was her place, as his mate, to remind him when he was going a bit overboard. When his tongue pressed against her bottom lip, urging her to open for his demands, she gave up with a sigh, liquifying in his arms.

“You’re so feisty,” he whispered when he finally released her long enough for them to catch their breaths. Liberty immediately missed the dominance of his lips on hers. No matter how many times they disagreed over things, they always made up. Always.

“I know,” she replied, pulling him back to her lips again. She always loved how they reconciled after an argument.

His mate was going to drive him to an early grave. She was so damn independent. His life centered around her and her safety, but she wouldn’t allow him to be overprotective. Accepting her need to run the business on her own was hard. He’d compromised with her early on, stationing a Guardian there to watch over things every day they were open. Cameras were eventually installed and monitored at the pride’s home.

Liberty accepted it, but he knew she didn’t like it. His mate appeased him most of the time, talking him through some of his worry and concern over her being out on her own. There were times when he sent a Guardian to follow her into town and, as far as he knew, she never noticed them.

Or, she never told him she knew.

As he exited the office, Talon closed the door tight and found his way out to the bar. He wasn’t going to leave just yet. The scent he’d noticed when he came in still lingered in the air. When he found Dane at the bar, he could tell the male was uneasy as well.

“That scent still lingers in here,” Talon acknowledged.

“Someone in here is going to cause trouble,” Dane replied as he scanned the crowd that had gathered for lunch.

“I haven’t heard anything from the sheriff,” Talon noted.

“Where is he, anyway?” Dane turned on his barstool to face the alpha. Talon accepted a beer as it was pushed in his direction by Cole.

“Working human crimes.” Talon shrugged. “You know he doesn’t come by for a friendly visit.”

“That he does not,” Dane chuckled. “That angel only shows up when trouble is coming.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing.” Talon shrugged again and nursed his beer, waiting on his mate to appear from the office. He knew she would probably glare at him when she saw he was still in the building, but he didn’t care.

He’d vowed to protect her the moment they had mated, and he planned on sticking to that for as long as he had air in his lungs and the blood of his ancestors pumping through his veins. Earlier in the day, once his duties to his pride were met, he’d shifted and ran in the woods behind his home to release some tension he and his panther were feeling. After a small snack on a wild rabbit, he’d found his way back to his home and dressed so he could come to the bar. It didn’t matter if he knew she was safe with Dane watching over *The Deuce*, Talon had to check on her.

“Humph,” Liberty groaned when she entered the bar, turning toward the dining area and ignoring his presence. Dane chuckled, but quieted when Talon growled low in warning.

Talon’s presence in the bar wasn’t ignored. The patrons settled, knowing the local alpha wouldn’t react well to any misbehavior in his mate’s establishment. Lunch rolled into dinner, and Liberty worked without stopping to talk to him. She was in her element, and he didn’t stop her while she helped wait tables or pour drinks at the bar.

A plate of food was placed in front of him, and a smile played at the corner of his mouth. His mate might’ve been irritated with him, but she still cared enough to make sure he was fed.

“Thank you.” He nodded and picked up his silverware, noting how she’d added a piece of pecan pie beside his dinner plate. He’d never really cared for desserts until he mated Liberty. She’d forced him to try her pie at one of the family gatherings before the Fall Equinox, and he’d fallen in love with its taste. “Liberty?”

His hand landed on her wrist as she turned away. After a deep sigh, she faced him and smiled warmly. “I’m not mad at you.”

“I know,” he replied, pulling her to his lips. He gave her a quick kiss and released her so she could continue to work. As she walked away, he mumbled, “I love you more than my own life.”

Chapter Three

I love you more than my own life.

Liberty heard her mate's whispered words, and they gutted her. She'd felt bad about ignoring him for the last few hours, but she was working. It wasn't that she was mad at him being there. No, in fact, she loved it when he hung out at the bar. The problem was when he was around and in his protective mindset, his mating scent drove her wild.

Liberty couldn't just drop everything and take him back to her office for a little afternoon delight. She had to run her business and keep focused. It broke her heart, but she promised to make it up to him once they arrived home. There would be time for that after the pride settled in for the night, and she couldn't wait for that time to come.

Della was scheduled to come in at five, and after that, Liberty could head home for the night. She could take the next few days off to appease her mate until his bad feeling went away. After that, she could return to her normal schedule at the bar.

Commotion at the door indicated some of the Guardians coming in after their shift at the pride. Axel, Diesel, and Ranger grabbed the booth by the pool tables in the back. Cole slid over their usual drinks as she approached the bar and bumped her hip against Talon's side.

"Go spend some time with your Guardians," she suggested, resting a hand on his forearm. "Be Talon for the night and not the alpha."

Talon wiped his hand over his face and answered her with a nod, slipping off the barstool to meet with his men. She tried not to watch him walk away, but it was hard. She loved him with a passion she couldn't even explain.

Someone added quarters to the jukebox and the music played just loud enough to blend with the hum of voices around her. She checked on a table and cleared another one while the panthers relaxed for the evening.

Della arrived a few minutes early, grabbing her apron from the peg by the kitchen door. "It's getting busy in here." Her waitress jutted her chin out toward the front of the bar. A group of five men entered, grabbing the booth by the door, and behind them was another group of six.

"Damn," Liberty mumbled as she headed out to grab the drink order from the first group. She wanted to head home, but it looked like she was going to be working a double. She shooed Olivia and Cole out of the building once her other bartender, Luke, arrived.

As the next hour flew by, she refilled the Guardian's drinks and made her way over to the group of five human males who'd come in earlier. They'd began to get a little loud, but that was nothing out of the ordinary. Loud, drunk men she could handle.

“Another round?” Liberty asked as she approached the table. They had one sober guy in the group, so she wasn’t going to cut them off unless they got too out of control. With her mate across the bar, she was sure they wouldn’t.

“Yes, ma’am,” the one closest to her said with a slur. “And how about your number, too?”

“I’ll get you a beer,” she deadpanned as a customer started an old country song on the jukebox. “The other order isn’t available.”

Her eyes flickered to her mate, but he was talking to Axel about something and his enhanced hearing hadn’t picked up the male’s flirting. Good thing, because with Talon being overprotective, any advance toward Liberty would set him off. She didn’t need any problems from her mate while she worked.

After she refilled their drinks, Talon motioned for her to come to the booth where he was posted, sipping his own beer. A tingling of something pricked at the back of her neck. Her hands tightened at her sides unconsciously. She felt nervous the closer she got to her mate.

Shaking herself and the weird feeling, Liberty chalked it up to the mystical mojo her husband projected to his pride when he was uneasy. “Hey, handsome,” she flirted, but her words ended on a heavy sigh. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he replied, his mouth turning down at the corners. “I...I’m just ready to take you home.”

“Still feeling the doom and gloom?” she asked, resting her hip against the side of the booth and his arm. She eased her fingers through his hair, eliciting a soft purr from his beast. He loved when she played with his hair, and sometimes it calmed him. She was hoping to calm him enough to let her finish out the shift. There was no way she could leave the bar until closing time tonight. It was just too damned busy.

“Yes,” he stated with a nod.

“Want something else to drink?” she asked, hoping to get his mind off it for the next hour. After that, they could go home and snuggle for an hour or two before bed.

“Another cold beer would be great, love,” he replied, taking the bait. She kissed his cheek and headed toward the bar to give Cole an order for her mate.

She didn’t make it past the table with the flirty, drunken men.

“Hey darlin’,” the drunkest one drawled. “Come sit on my lap.”

Fire burned her skin the moment he wrapped his dirty fingers around her wrist, jerking her body toward his. With a screech, Liberty fell into the male’s lap, and the only thing she heard over the sound of her pain was the roar from her mate across the bar.

Talon's beast sat just under his skin, pacing and growling low in his throat. His mate was working to help out before the bar closed for the night. He wasn't happy about it, but he compromised by calling off all meetings at the pride for the last half of the day so he could go sit at *The Deuce* to be close to her.

He tried his hardest not to watch her walk away to put in an order for his drink. Liberty was an independent woman, feisty as hell, too. She liked his dominance, but only in the bedroom. He came to terms with that once they'd mated and married according to human law.

Her blood-curdling scream from the front of the bar brought him out of his thoughts. Talon's head snapped around on his shoulders, immediately finding his mate in the lap of a drunk human male.

A roar sounded from his mouth as he came to his feet. His beast pushed so hard at his human skin that it bubbled along his arms, the human hair disappearing as fur appeared. His eyes were glowing amber, and his canines extended to sharp points as he stalked his prey.

"Let me go!" Liberty snarled, her own canines obstructing her speech. "No, Talon! He's human!"

Talon wasn't himself. His panther was in control, and his Guardians snarled from the push of power he radiated. Someone had touched what was his and caused her pain.

Liberty shoved the male, hard, knocking his chair backward. She was on her feet before the human male landed on his back. Talon's eyes locked on the threat and he reached for the male, dragging him up by the front of his plaid shirt. "You hurt my mate."

"I don't see a ring on her finger," the drunk male replied, his dirty lip turning with a smirk.

"Didn't you read the sign as you came in the door, asshole?" Talon snarled, twisting him around and pointing at the sign Liberty had made. In big, bold lettering around a cartoon drawing of a panther's snarling face, it said:

Panthers Play Here!

Don't Touch the Females.

Everyone who came into the bar knew not to touch any of the women who worked there. It'd been a rule Talon had insisted Liberty post at the bar if she and the other mated females were going to continue working there.

"Yeah, I read it." The human shrugged. "You need to let me go or I'll press charges despite your stupid sign."

"Oh really?" Talon warned, baring his fangs. Liberty inhaled through her teeth at the pain and burning from being touched by the human, and Talon needed to get this male out of the bar so he could tend to his mate. "I'd advise you and your friends to leave before there is more trouble."

He released the male and took a stance in front of his mate as they gathered their things. He wasn't going to take his eyes off them until they were out the door. All but one of them was intoxicated, and he wouldn't put it past the male to try and retaliate. It wasn't the first time they had to kick someone out, and it wouldn't be the last. Talon was already on edge, and the only thing keeping that male alive was the fact that he was human.

Talon used his senses to scent his Guardians, needing to know where each of them were stationed throughout the bar. Dane was to his left, standing between him and Liberty. Diesel was to his right, poised and ready to defend if the need arose. Ranger and Axel were at his flanks, standing close enough he could feel the males' body heat. All of their panthers were agitated, and he sent out a magical call to calm them as the humans left the building.

"Liberty," he growled, stalking toward his mate. "Office, now."

He wasn't angry with her, but he was surely on edge. This was the first time a male had actually assaulted a mate with no regard for the rules set in place at the bar. Oh, some of them had been bumped into on accident, and that was something the males understood, but for that human to go to such extreme made Talon see red.

"Okay, Talon," she whimpered, clamping her lips tight to keep from crying out from the pain of being touched by an unmated male. She walked over to the bar and set her apron on the bar top. He didn't like her that far away, and his beast growled low in his throat when she was out of his reach. "Just calm your beast first. Your eyes are glowing more than I've ever seen them."

Talon nodded to his Guardians, letting them know they could stand down. Dane returned to the end of the bar where he stayed perched most nights his mates were working, but since they'd been sent home for the night, the male was there strictly on Guardian duty until Talon and Liberty left the building. Axel, Diesel, and Ranger found their way back to the pool table to continue their game. The alpha took a deep breath and faced his mate, who was looking at the entrance to the bar.

A blast of air at Talon's back had him turning when the male's scent returned. As he spun around, the male had reentered the bar, but this time he held a gun out in front of him.

"You bitch!" The sound of the gun going off sent Talon into action. His body leapt with super-human speed to the space between his mate and the male. Screams surrounded him as he fell to the floor, not landing on his feet. Pain bloomed in his chest as Liberty's blurry face appeared in front of his.

"Talon!" she screamed, but the sound was far away and muffled.

Liberty slid across the floor, immediately covering her mate's body with her own the moment he dropped to the floor. Blood stained his white shirt from where the bullet had entered his body, right below his heart.

The sound of his gasping sent her into a panic. "Call the healer! Someone help me!"

Her eyes searched the males around her, seeing Axel on the phone with who she hoped was the healer. The human customers had all moved to the back corner of the bar and someone had stopped the music, giving the bar an eerie feeling.

Dane was at her side with bar towels, shooing her away so he could press them to the wound. "We need to see if the bullet came out his back."

Talon tried to speak again, protesting when Dane pushed him over. A heated curse fell from the Guardian's lips, and Liberty didn't have to ask if the bullet was out.

"You saved me," she cried, trying to fight through the pain of the human touching her and the panic of her mate fighting for his life. "Damn it, Talon."

"Always," Talon mumbled, still gasping for air. It was obvious the bullet had punctured his lung, and she was thankful for their fast healing abilities, but with the bullet still in his body, it could cause problems.

"Move!" Harold's booming voice sounded, and Liberty had never felt so much relief at having one of her pride show up so quickly.

When she moved to give the healer room to check over Talon, Liberty looked up to see Axel and Ranger holding the male against the wall. Diesel was holding the gun and talking to the sheriff.

The angel must've used his powers to get to the bar as soon as the call went out. Sheriff Lynch caught Liberty's gaze as the healer and Dane lifted Talon to take him out the door. Her hard-set stare told the lawman, and the protector of her pride, she wanted that man alive.

"Liberty, we have to go," Dane hollered.

She rushed out the door, stopping as she approached the sheriff. "He's mine!"

Sheriff Lynch didn't reply, but she knew he would abide by their set of laws. Shifter law was now a real law, but it only pertained to the supernatural. The government had stepped in and made rules regarding their safety. The shifter community was considered a new species of both animal and human, and those came with all kinds of rights. The male who'd shot her mate should be going to a human jail and prosecuted by them, but Liberty wasn't going to let him make it that far.

She couldn't crawl in the back of the healer's SUV without touching another male. She needed to have Talon's touch to ease her pain, but she couldn't get to him at the moment. Another wave of fiery pain lanced up her wrist as she closed the passenger door. Axel was behind the wheel, and the look of sorrow on his face broke her heart.

“He’s going to be fine,” she blurted. “We’re all going to be fine.”

Gods, she hoped she wasn’t lying to him.

“It’s not just my alpha,” he swallowed hard, “it’s you, our alpha’s mate. Seeing you in pain physically hurts us too.”

“You worry about getting your alpha to the pride, and I’ll be okay,” she promised, steeling her spine to show the pride she was not to be doted over. Talon was the one who was fighting for his life.

Thankfully, the ride to the pride took less than five minutes. That was one of the perks when owning the bar. They lived very close.

Harold and Dane rushed Talon into the healer’s cabin. It doubled as the pride’s clinic. The first room on the left was set up for emergencies and was the place she’d given birth to their first cub.

“What can I do?” she cried as Talon’s eyes popped open, landing on her. Liberty felt her heart squeeze in her chest. His eyes were a weird mix of his panther and his human side. She’d never seen them in that state before, and it scared her. The beast and human side were at war, trying to repair his body.

“Lib...touch,” he demanded, trying to roll out of bed to come to her. She shook her head and wrapped her arms around her waist, putting pressure on the areas the human’s skin had touched her own.

“The healer has to get the bullet out, boss,” Dane reminded him. “You’re losing too much blood.”

“My mate...” The sound of Talon gasping for air caused tears to well up in her eyes. She needed his touch, but he needed to be operated on more.

“Luna can sedate me,” she blurted, looking for the healer’s mate. Luna came into the room with a tray full of items. Liberty tried not to look at them, but she noticed the syringes and scalpel immediately.

“Already prepped, Liberty,” she said, setting the tray next to Harold. The female removed the syringe and approached her. “It not enough to knock you out, but it’ll be enough to make the pain bearable. I have more if you need it.”

Liberty knew exactly what she was saying. Anytime a mate was in pain, the other mate would go feral. They thought she was going to lose her shit seeing Talon on the table.

“I’m fine, just give me the shot,” she huffed, pulling her sleeve up so Luna could give her the injection. Within a few seconds, the medicine began to work, allowing Liberty to focus on her mate.

“Better?” Luna asked.

“Much, thank you.” Liberty brushed passed the healer’s mate and reentered the exam room. He had just placed an oxygen mask on Talon when she narrowed her eyes on the Guardian, Dane. “I want to be in here.”

“Liberty,” Harold warned, his voice deep despite the mask over his face. “I have to get this bullet out so he can shift and heal. I can’t have you going feral when I cut him open.”

Luna slid the x-ray panel over her mate, the whirling sound of the machine was faint to her enhanced hearing. Once the female was done, she hurried out the door to check the images. She returned moments later and clicked on the computer in the room.

“Damn it,” Harold growled as he studied the x-ray on the screen. “That was too damn close to his heart. I hope you have this male in custody.”

“He’s being detained as we speak,” Axel snarled from the door. Liberty glanced up and saw several Guardians outside the room, standing at attention as they protected their alpha from a threat. The males were doing the job they were trained for, and at the moment, Liberty wanted to thank them all. Having them there made things a little easier.

“I need everyone to leave,” Harold ordered, looking over her shoulder at Dane. “Take Liberty with you.”

“No,” she snarled. “I’m not leaving him.”

“I will sedate you if I must,” Harold warned. “I’m not your mate nor am I your leader, but you are in my clinic. My rules apply here, and I need you to leave.”

“Fine,” she barked and stood when Dane came to her side.

Chapter Four

It had been an hour and Talon was still in surgery. The medicine Luna had given her was working, and she knew she had about two hours before her body started burning it off.

“Where’s the male?” she asked the Guardians who were hovering around her in the front room of the healer’s cabin.

“Sheriff Lynch has him,” Axel replied. “He wants to speak to you when everything is clear here.” She knew the Guardian meant Garrett wanted to talk to her once they knew Talon was going to be okay.

She pulled her phone from her back pocket and headed for the front door. When one of the Guardians started to follow, she held up her hand in warning. “I need privacy.”

“No further than the porch,” Dane ordered as she headed out the door.

To her surprise, the remainder of the Guardians and the entire pride was camped out on the healer’s lawn, waiting for word on their leader. They gasped as she exited, the mass of them surging forward as a unit toward her. She was the alpha’s queen for a reason. They gravitated toward her even though she didn’t have the magic her mate had inherited from his father.

“He’s in surgery to remove the bullet,” she announced. “I don’t know anything else.”

When they calmed, she jumped off the porch and headed toward her home, ignoring Dane’s demand she stay close. Liberty needed privacy to make this call.

“Garrett,” she said the moment the lawman answered the phone. “Why didn’t you see this coming? This male is human and you were put here to protect us from them.”

“Liberty, I don’t know why,” Garrett sighed into the phone. “I hadn’t had any visions of harm coming for the pride, and I sure as hell didn’t see anyone pulling a gun in your bar. If I had, I would’ve diffused the situation before it ever started.”

“What’s done is done,” she conceded, knowing that questioning the gods wasn’t going to change the fact Talon had been shot. Liberty guessed that even among the paranormal there were flaws. “Shifter law needs to be in place for this, and I want that male brought to my land.”

“There were human witnesses,” Garrett reminded her. “I can’t just let you have him. We have new laws I must adhere to when it comes to humans and the shifters, Liberty. You know this.”

If her eyes could turn red from anger, Liberty was certain hers would be glowing.

“I don’t give a damn about the laws, Garrett,” she snarled, feeling her canines extend. “You need to stage an escape and bring that male to me. It is my right as Talon’s mate to end his life. You have half an hour to get him to the back of our property line. Meet me in the clearing.”

She didn't give him a chance to reply and hung up the phone. She understood the males' need to protect their mates and the ones in their pride now. Talon was fighting for his life because he jumped in front of a bullet meant for her. It was her place to kill the male for his actions, and her beast was out for blood. She may have been born human, but the animal inside her ruled the need to gut the male with her panther claws, and that was exactly what she was going to do.

"Liberty!" Dane called out, running toward the main house. "He's awake and he's asking for you!"

She ran toward the healer's home, feeling the strength of her pride as she passed. The scent of blood and antiseptic overshadowed Talon's presence, but she was relieved when she found him sitting up in the bed.

"Liberty, come," he ordered, holding out his hand. "Let me heal you so I can shift to heal myself."

She went willingly into his arms; careful of his injury. There were stitches on his chest where the healer had sewn him up. Talon's arms around her was the most amazing feeling in the world.

"You're okay," she sighed, kissing his neck. "God, Talon, why did you do that?" She was still in shock that he had thrown himself in front of a bullet. They all had superhuman speed, but Talon's display was faster than she'd ever seen a shifter move.

"You are the love of my life, Liberty Shaw," he began, tucking his finger under her chin to get her to look into his eyes. What she saw there was his love for her and his family...his pride. "I told you I'd always protect you, and that meant giving my life for yours should that day ever come."

"Don't ever do that again," she fussed.

"Shhh, let me hold you for a few minutes," he cooed.

"You need to go outside and shift." They could live through things most human bodies wouldn't handle. Like being shot in the chest. No matter their healing abilities, shifters still needed to go through a pattern of shifting to kick it into gear. Talon would be outside for at least two hours going back and forth between human and panther while the damage to his body repaired itself.

"I'm going," he promised, kissing her lips. "After I'm done, we will take care of the male who tried to kill you."

Liberty nodded, giving her mate a sense of peace, but inside she was ready to take care of that herself. Garrett would be in the clearing soon, and she would slip away while Talon was shifting.

Dane and Axel followed Talon out the door, and she had her chance to go. A few of the pride members watched her as she left, heading toward her home. With everyone on the west

side of the land, waiting on their alpha to heal, she could head into the forest on the other side of the main house and the old Guardian dorms.

Once she was clear of any prying eyes, Liberty slipped quietly into the woods. It was time to punish that human male for almost taking away her true mate.

Her trek through the woods was fast and quiet. She'd pulled at her beast to give her the stealth she needed to meet the sheriff without the pride knowing. She was essentially breaking the law, but at that point, she didn't care.

"Liberty," Sheriff Lynch greeted. He'd been her friend for the longest time, but he'd been in her life for another reason. She now knew all of his secrets, and the sheriff knew theirs. The friendship was a weird one, but it was solid.

"Leave me alone with him," she snarled, jutting her chin out toward the pole that sat in the middle of the meadow. The male was handcuffed there, his body slumped over as if he'd been knocked out. "I need to wake him up."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Garrett asked, his brows pushed down in worry. "How's Talon?"

"Do you mean, 'Where's Talon?'" she huffed. "If you're going to get my mate involved, then I do need you to leave. It is my right to end this male's life for the crimes against my mate."

Liberty ignored Garrett's harsh curse as she marched up to the human male, unleashing her claws and backhanding him across the face. He jerked awake with a scream to rival her own. She knew touching him would cause her pain, but her anger overrode any sensations she might be feeling.

"You will pay for shooting my mate," Liberty warned. "Shifter law is a lot different than your human ones."

"You're nothing but a shifter whore anyway," the male spat. "We all know about your type."

"My type?" She'd had women in the bar looking for a Guardian more times than she could count. This male thought she was like those women. Boy, was he wrong about that.

"You want one of those things to change you into what they are so you whore yourself out until you find one that'll keep you, and look at you, Liberty, you got the leader."

"I am not like those women, and you better not use the word 'whore' in reference to my name again," she warned.

"Doesn't matter," he shrugged. "You're going to kill me anyway. How's your man, whore?"

"You son of a bitch!" she exploded, her beast pushing so hard for release, she let her.

The animal's body vibrated with the need to kill the human, and the scent of fear coming off of his skin made the panther hungry.

“Liberty!” Talon’s voice registered, but her animal’s sights were on the male.

The panther pushed at the human’s mind, insisting they make the kill now before the alpha had a chance to use his magic to stop them.

Curses filled the night sky as she pounced on the male, wrapping her canines around his throat. He didn’t yell nor did he fight as she crushed his windpipe with one quick bite. Her sharp nails dug into the soft flesh of his belly, spilling his insides onto the grass beneath their feet. Liberty’s panther tasted the male’s blood on her tongue and growled low in her throat at the taste of victory.

Talon shifted for a ninth time, laying on his side as a human. His breathing was still staggered. The bullet had punctured his lung and shattered a rib, but otherwise, he was going to be okay.

“Ten minutes, then you can shift again one last time,” Harold informed him. Talon nodded and closed his eyes. He wanted nothing more than to get this over with so he could go to his house and hold Liberty for the rest of the night...hell, for the rest of the *week*. He wanted to see his children and hold them just the same. Realizing he could’ve been killed that quickly bothered him more than it should, but there was no way in hell he was going to let that male shoot his queen.

He didn’t know what had happened to the male, but he remembered seeing the sheriff at the bar as he was being carried out to Harold’s SUV. He’d passed out right after that.

When he shifted one last time, his panther’s hearing caught the sound of his mate crying out. It was a cry he knew; one he’d already heard once today. It was the sound of her being touched by a male who wasn’t her mate.

“Where’s Liberty?” he yelled as he shifted to his human self, reaching for the clothes someone had brought outside for after his healing shift.

“I don’t know,” Dane frowned. “I thought you’d sent her home.”

The scent of human blood drifted across his nose when the wind changed directions. He didn’t need to ask any more questions as to her whereabouts. He knew exactly where she’d gone.

When Talon and his Guardians arrived, they found the human male handcuffed to the pole in the meadow at the back of the property, four gashes across his cheek. His mate was stalking him as if he were her next meal. It didn’t matter that he called out to her, his mate was set on the kill, enforcing ancient shifter law and not the kind the human government had given them the approval to use.

Her beast knew what to do, ending the male’s life.

The moment she shifted, he scooped her up and brought her hand to his lips. “You should’ve worn gloves.”

“That’s all you’re going to say?” she asked, accepting his shirt when he offered it.

“You were doing what I would’ve done had you been the one shot,” he replied, taking her into his arms again. He looked over her head and saw the sheriff standing on the edge of the meadow. With a nod, the lawman disappeared, leaving the alpha and his mate with the dead human and a few Guardians.

“I wanted to gut him at the bar,” she huffed. “That way, it would’ve sent a message to the other humans *not to touch my Guardians.*”

Talon chuckled and lifted her into his arms. “I’m going to take you home now and make love to you, my feisty little mate.”

“I like that idea very much.” She winked and held onto him as he made his way back to the main house and their mated bed.

The End

About Theresa Hissong:

Theresa Hissong is the bestselling author of the Rise of the Pride series. She writes paranormal romance, rockstar romance, and romantic suspense.

She enjoys spending her days and nights creating the perfect love affair, and she takes those ideas to paper. When she's not writing, Theresa spends her free time traveling and attending concerts all over the United States.

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