



His Guardian Panther

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Dr. Tom Barrymore thought he was pulling over on the side of the road to help an injured man, but what he discovered wasn't what he bargained for and he finds himself running for his life.

Sheriff and panther alpha, Luke Benson, had nearly given up hope of ever finding his mate, but when he stumbles upon him, the man is a few heartbeats away from death. He has no choice but to make a decision that will alter his mate's life forever. He'll do whatever it takes to convince the good doctor that they belong together, but first ... there's a matter of justice to seek against the men who dared to touch his mate, before they make another attempt.

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“Fuck! Fuck!” Tom cursed breathlessly as he ran. “What the hell did I just stumble upon?” A stitch formed at his side, but he ran through the pain anyway. “Fuck!” he yelled as he pumped his legs as fast as they could carry him. He swore that if he got out of this alive, he’d hit the gym more, having been slacking the last few months due to his busy work schedule.

It would be dark soon, but if he could just cut across the three miles of the forest to get to another highway, there would be lights and a gas station only about a half mile away. He could call the police.

And tell them what, exactly?

He wasn’t even sure he had seen what he had, although being of completely sound mind and not prone to hallucinations, he could not come up with another plausible explanation. He did know with absolute certainty that he was being chased. He only hoped he had put a far enough distance between himself and them to make it to that damned gas station.

Not far enough, apparently, Tom thought as they growled behind him, the sounds getting louder and louder with every thudding beat of his own heart.

Images of an injured young man on the side of the road on Route 9 assailed him. He had been heading to Waretown, New Jersey, to visit his parents in their new retirement home—a charming little community, surrounded by lush greenery, several indoor and outdoor pools, and a lake for boating and fishing. He’d been on the phone with his mother when he saw the young man. She’d been boasting about winning yet another game of Canasta as his dad was shouting in the background about misplacing

his tackle box. As a doctor, it had been his duty to pull over and help. He had sworn an oath, after all. He swiftly said goodbye to his mom, with a promise to call back as soon as possible, cutting her off mid-sentence.

What he did not expect and certainly went beyond any medical training he ever had, was for the young injured man to transform into a black panther before his very eyes and then for the panther's wounds to visibly heal themselves in front of him. The deep gashes fused together so completely that all that remained as evidence they had ever existed was the dried-up blood. Then, with pleading eyes, the young man-turned-panther, was seemingly trying to tell him something. That something turned into four large panthers, three black and one tan, approaching slowly as if toying with their easy prey, teeth bared, growling, taunting. Tom wasn't sure if they had been taunting him or the fallen panther, or perhaps both. Calculating intelligence had shown behind their glowing eyes, the kind a human would possess. He did the only thing his fight-or-flight instincts told him to do.

He ran.

Snapping back to the present, the predators surrounded him now on all sides and despite what he thought he saw or hadn't seen earlier, he was sure they were going to kill him. Although, it seemed, not just yet. One of them transformed into a man—a naked, muscular man, with chiseled features, brown hair, and cruel-looking, chartreuse eyes that were no longer glowing.

“What were you doing with my brother?” the man asked, practically spitting out the words.

“Your brother?” Tom asked before he let out a shaky hopeful breath. For the first time in the last surreal twenty or so minutes, he thought he might actually have a chance to live through this. He could explain that he had meant his brother no harm. “I-I’m a doctor.” His heart continued to thud loudly as the naked man’s stare pierced

him. “I was trying to help him.”

“Help?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. A disgusted sneer appeared on his face before he spat on the ground. “Has he recruited human filth now to help him? As if you could. He should have stayed and taken his beating like a man instead of fleeing like a little coward.”

“You did that to your own brother?” Tom was horrified. From what he had assessed earlier—the deep gashes, copious amounts of blood, and hideous bruises on the young man’s body—an ordinary human would have most likely died of internal injuries had he not gotten to a hospital in time, and even then it may still have been too late.

The panther guy sneered at Tom. “It’s nothing compared to what I am going to do to you for interfering in pack business, human.”

An ordinary human? Pack business? What alternate reality did he just step into?

Whatever shred of hope Tom had for survival quickly dissipated as the man and three panthers stalked closer toward him. Tom held up his hands. “I wasn’t interfering in anything. I-I have nothing to do with this. I was only trying to help him.”

The man smiled cruelly at him, tilting his head to the side. Then he threw his head back and laughed. “I believe you,” he said. “But ... we can’t have a meddling human running around telling people what he saw, now can we?” Addressing the other panthers, he added, “And he did ruin our fun, didn’t he?”

Tom had no time to ponder what fun he had ruined or what else they had planned to do to the leader’s brother, and before he had time to reply that he wouldn’t say anything, that no one would believe him even if he did, they attacked. He was only grateful the excruciating pain of teeth and claws ripping at his flesh were brief before

darkness fell upon him.

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“Benson,” Luke snapped when his cell phone rang. He was annoyed the call had interrupted his favorite song, “Comfortably Numb,” right in the middle of it. He’d been blasting it as he drove down Route 9 on his way home. He could have ignored the damn thing, but the call would have disrupted the song with its incessant ringing anyway, sounding loudly through the speaker system of his SUV. Besides, it was the station calling, and though he was technically off duty now, being the town sheriff, as well as alpha of the Waretown’s pack, meant there was really no such thing as off duty for him.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you, Sheriff Benson,” Deputy Garrett said in surround sound, “but Owen is here again. His brother beat him good. Owen thinks he’ll kill him next time.”

Luke rolled his eyes and huffed out an annoyed, harsh breath. “Where’s Lorenzo now?”

“You’re not going to like it, Sheriff.”

“Just spit it out, Garrett.” As if Luke needed another excuse to end Lorenzo, the self-proclaimed alpha of Ocean County.

The deranged Napoleonic panther had been challenging and winning town after town, gaining followers as he went, but none of the towns would acknowledge him as their ruling alpha. It wasn’t their way. The alphas governed smaller packs, shouldering responsibilities, and making decisions together for their counties and state. This system, successful in other states as well, helped to prevent such bullying tactics Lorenzo was inflicting. His own brother was trying to stop him, apparently almost

losing his life in the process.

“There was a human,” Garrett began hesitantly. “Owen said he tried to help him, but Lorenzo and his gang went after him.”

“Goddammit!” Luke slammed his hands down on the steering wheel. Going after a human went way too far even for Lorenzo. “Call a meeting,” he ordered Garrett. “Looks like I’m going to have to challenge the fucker after all.” Luke knew he was one of the few who could stand against such a dominant alpha, he himself being more dominant than most, and he would have no choice but to kill him. He and his pack would then have to kill any of Lorenzo’s followers who didn’t submit to Luke’s rule. Once he gained back the county, he’d appoint the true successors of the alphas Lorenzo had killed.

Luke was about to pop a U-turn and head back to the station when he saw a black Mercedes abandoned on the shoulder. “I’ll check back with you later,” he told Garrett and then ended the call.

He pulled up behind the Mercedes and ran the New York State license plate. The car was registered to a Dr. Thomas Barrymore, Cardiovascular Surgeon at Mount General Hospital in New York City. Luke got out of his car just as the last rays of the sun were setting behind him, and he walked toward the good doctor’s vehicle. All four tires were slashed. Peering inside, he saw that the keys were still in the ignition, and a suit jacket, duffle bag, and a leather computer bag were in the back seat. He flared his nostrils and took in the smell of a lightly scented woodsy aftershave and immediately began to track its owner into the forest. About a mile in, he picked up Lorenzo’s scent as well as three of his usual companions, and blood ... lots of it. The same aftershave he’d detected by the doctor’s car lingered in the air, as well as another underlying scent that drove his panther wild as he neared even closer to it. Already running, Luke picked up his pace, the man, not just the panther, frantic now.

He stopped dead in his tracks when he came upon the horrifying scene. The doctor had deep, large gashes all over his body, a few limbs were splayed out in odd directions indicating that they were broken, and his face, particularly near his eyes and lips, were swollen from being pounded in with a heavy force. The stench of the man's blood, however, did not overshadow the now very pungent smell that had driven his panther wild. Luke kneeled over the form of the battered man on the ground who was undeniably his mate. He felt the pull of the mating bond completely now that he was so close to him. His skin tingled, like an itch that would only be scratched once he sealed the bond with his claiming mark.

He also felt something else—a fury running so deep in his soul that it may have embedded there until he ripped the men responsible to shreds. His rage was primal, lethal, and had it not been for the faint beating of Dr. Barrymore's heart, Luke would have easily caught up to the fleeing panthers and obliterated them. The four of them were already dead anyway. They just didn't know it yet.

Luke had minutes at most before the doctor's heart would cease to beat at all. He couldn't lose him, not now when he had just found him, and not when he had all but lost hope of ever finding his true mate.

A panther is either born into a pack or they join one, seldom ever leaving. Packs are stronger together and the stronger the pack, the less likely a tyrant like Lorenzo can infiltrate. And mates are sacred, a true mate even more so since there is no guarantee of ever finding one if your true mate isn't in your pack, or someone you manage to come across. Some shifters, after falling in love, would choose to bestow a claiming mark, forming a mating bond, and ultimately forsaking ever finding a true mate. Luke had always refused that fate for himself. None of his past lovers could ever compel him to cast aside finding the one who would complete him and his panther, the one who would make the alpha side stronger, and the one who he would not close himself off from like he had done countless times in the past.

He pushed back the doctor's bloodstained, golden-brown locks and rested his hand against his cheek. "Forgive me," he whispered, nearly choking on his words. "This isn't the way I imagined claiming my mate." And then Luke bent his head forward and tenderly kissed the doctor's neck before sinking his teeth deep into him.

When he was done, when he felt the mating bond snap into place, and the itching of his skin was replaced solely with longing, he cradled the doctor's body in his arms and stood up.

Even with his face swollen, as he carried the approximately five-foot-ten man to his car, Luke could see that he was beautiful. His thin but surprisingly quite solid and muscular frame lay limply in his arms, but already the gashes began to heal and the heartbeat grew stronger by the minute. The puffiness on his mate's face also lessened as he neared his vehicle, revealing prominent cheekbones and a square jaw with day-old stubble.

He gingerly laid his mate down in the back seat of his SUV and went over to the Mercedes to get the doctor's things, placing them in his own car before calling Garrett. "I found the human," he said into his cell, not elaborating on what the said human was to him. "Taking him to my place for protection now. Oh, and I need a tow truck." He informed Garrett of the location of the Mercedes and then added, "Have it brought over to my house when it's fixed."

"What should I do with Owen?" Garrett asked.

"He needs round-the-clock protection until his brother is dead," Luke said, the last part through gritted teeth. He had never craved vengeance as much as he did now and he'd deliver it with a force unlike any Lorenzo had ever seen. He was sure of it.

He heard a groan coming from the back seat just as he was about to start the car. When he turned to look behind him, he saw the doctor's eyes fluttering open. Eyes

the color of emeralds looked at him as if unseeing before they shut again.

A fierce protectiveness washed over Luke like a giant tidal wave. He only hoped his mate would forgive and accept him after what he had done.

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Tom ached all over. His mind slowly threw back images at him—dark and twisted images of him being torn to shreds by wild animals, which weren't simply just animals. He should have felt nothing at this point because he should have been dead. Slowly, he opened his eyes and found his vision slightly blurred. He groaned as his ribs protested when he tried to sit up.

“Take it easy,” a rough male voice said, the sound coming from right beside him.

Again, Tom tried to sit up, but this time strong hands held his shoulders firmly to keep him from sitting. “You're still healing,” the voice spoke again. “Take it slow at first. You'll feel a little sore for the next day or two, but the pain should be easing up now that you've rested.”

“What's wrong with my eyes?” Tom asked, still having trouble focusing his vision.

“They ... um...” The man paused briefly. “Your eyes are adjusting. Stop looking frantically around the room and focus on one object instead,” he suggested.

Tom did exactly that. He focused solely on the man with the deep, rich-timbered tone, who was currently hovering over him. Dark blurry hair soon became a detailed jet-black disarray, as if the guy in front of him had been repeatedly running his hands through his hair. The two blurry orbs that came into focus next were electrifyingly blue eyes framed by thick black lashes, making the eyes even that much more intense. He had a long thin nose, slightly hollowed-in cheeks, a closely cropped beard, and full thick lips currently pursed in what seemed like concentration. The man was beautiful, and God, he smelled so fucking delicious, like sandalwood and something else he couldn't put his finger on.

“Better?” the stranger asked, giving him a lopsided smile.

Tom nodded in response, momentarily stunned into silence. Finally, he cleared his throat and asked his burning question. “How the hell am I still alive?”

The man’s smile fell. “I saved you.” He cast his eyes downward for a moment and cleared his throat. “I ... had no choice.”

He had no choice?

“Here, let me help you sit up,” the man said as he carefully maneuvered Tom into a seated position with propped-up pillows behind him. “Try focusing on other objects one at a time.”

He did, and like the gorgeous man’s face, everything else started to come back into acutely sharp focus, and faster with each object going forward. He looked down at his own naked chest to see bruising that was already turning an ugly purple color. Some of the bruises were even yellowing. As he focused on objects further away, they strangely became extremely sharp as well ... without the need for his glasses. He couldn’t even remember what he had done with them in his frantic state to get away from those animals chasing him.

For the first time since opening his eyes, the fuzz was beginning to clear, and he was able to fully take in the room he was in. It was a bedroom, most likely the stranger’s bedroom and not a hospital, like he should be in, with dark-oak furniture, navy-blue drapes that had sunlight streaming in through them, a flat screen hanging on the wall directly in front of the bed, and some clothes strewn around a brown leather armchair.

Tom took in a deep breath, and though his body ached, he didn’t think he had ever felt more alive. “I should be dead,” he muttered while shaking his head.

“I couldn’t let that happen,” the stranger said. His voice sounded pained.

“I’d like to know who to thank for saving my life,” Tom said, putting his hand on top of the stranger’s.

“I’m Luke. Luke Benson. Sheriff of Waretown.”

“Well, Sheriff Benson, I’m Tom Barrymore and I thank you. I owe you my life.”

“Don’t thank me until you know everything.”

“What do you…” Tom started to ask, but then his skin began to itch at the same time an odd feeling began to form in the pit of his stomach. “What—”

“You need to bite and claim me,” Luke said. He then reached out and touched Tom’s neck in a spot that made shivers run up and down his spine. “Like I claimed you. Then the itchy feeling will stop. Your animal recognizes me as his mate, just like mine recognized you.”

“My what?” Tom was flabbergasted. “You’re like them? You turned me into one of them?” He practically yelled the accusation.

This couldn’t be happening. Yesterday, monsters did not exist and now this man with the gorgeous eyes was telling him that he was one of them. Despite how much he wanted to pretend the stranger was fucking with him, that this was some joke, images of human men morphing into animals assaulted him. The evil he saw in their eyes as they taunted him, mercilessly beat him, was not something he would ever forget. Nor would he ever forget the broken man he tried to save, the one whose own brother had bloodied him up without remorse.

He wanted no part of any of this.

The sheriff looked at him with pleading eyes. “I had no choice. You were so broken when I found you with barely a few beats left in your heart. I couldn’t lose you.”

“Lose me?” Now he was yelling. “You don’t even fucking know me!”

“I recognized you as my mate when I found you. Stop... Let me just explain.”

Tom swatted Luke’s hand away and began to get out of bed, ignoring the protestations of his body. “Where the fuck are my clothes?” he asked as he finally stood up, only to realize he was stark naked. He grabbed the bedsheet and covered up his dick. “Did you—”

The sheriff growled. He actually fucking growled and then he got in Tom’s face, towering over him by a good five inches and spoke low, his voice angry. “When I fuck a man, I make sure he remembers it. Your clothes were torn to shreds. I cleaned you up and sat watching over you all night to make sure I’d be there if you woke up and felt disoriented. I didn’t touch you.”

Tom swallowed loudly and sat down on the bed. The sheriff backed up a little to give him space and stood there looking at him with his arms folded. Tom actually felt bad for accusing the man who saved his life, albeit turning him into a monster in the process. Being a scientist, he had absolutely no rational explanation for any of this. Seeing was one thing, but understanding the how part of it—how this world that he stumbled into could even be possible was daunting. People should not be able to transform into animals. His wounds should not have been able to heal on their own or at all for that matter, given their severity. He suddenly felt very lost, not being able to explain, nor understand. It was frustrating.

“What does that even mean ... that I’m your mate?” he asked just as his arms began to itch again. Ignoring the need to scratch, he mimicked the sheriff by folding his arms across his chest. Despite his anger and frustration, he couldn’t deny his curiosity

or his attraction to the sheriff.

Was it the so-called “mate” thing that was pulling his strings now? he wondered. Though he had to admit that if he met Luke under normal circumstances, he would definitely be attracted to the man.

“It means that whatever fates are out there, they have deemed us worthy of being mated for life. Shifters are more intuitive than humans. I guess you can equate it to knowing when you have found the one.”

Tom snorted. The last time a guy told him he wanted forever, Tom had found him in their bed ... with two other men. To say that he had serious trust issues now would be an understatement. From his experience, the men who made declarations to him were the ones who hurt him most. He had learned quickly to guard his heart like a fortress.

“Don’t I get a say in any of this?”

Tom watched as the sheriff’s full lips quirked into a breathtakingly cocky smile. He immediately had to drop his hands to the bedsheet, surreptitiously trying to restrain the bulge underneath it. Damn traitorous cock. The sexy-as-sin sheriff only smiled wider.

“You’re going to tell me you don’t like men?” the cocky bastard asked. “Or is it that you’re still in the closet?”

Tom rolled his eyes. “I came out to my very supportive parents in high school and I’m proud to live my life as an openly gay man.”

Tom knew from a young age that he was gay. He started dating in his sophomore year of high school and when in his junior year, after getting serious with a guy who ended up breaking his heart six months later, he decided to sit his parents down and

tell them he was gay. His mother simply gave him a look that said she already knew. His father replied with an “okay.” His mother later grilled him about his dating life and offered up sage advice when he told her about the boy that hurt him. He couldn’t help but wonder what they would think about him now suddenly being able to turn into an animal.

“Maybe I don’t want this damn itch to dictate who I should be with,” he continued with exasperation as he finally gave in to scratching his arms. “Or maybe I’m just not attracted to you.”

“The bulge you’re trying to hide says otherwise.” The bastard actually waggled his thick, dark, heavenly eyebrows at him.

He got up from the bed, frustrated, no longer caring about his modesty. “I need to think.” I need to get the fuck away from his delicious scent before I beg him to fuck me on all fours right now. “I need some”—he cleared his throat—“space.”

The sheriff’s gaze traveled down to his long and erect cock. He couldn’t help the groan that escaped him as Luke first licked and then bit his own bottom lip, keeping it trapped there between his teeth.

He wasn’t sure how long he stared at the sheriff’s mouth, but then he spotted his duffle bag along with his other personal belongings on top of the dresser and went over to it. Without turning around, he was about to ask Luke to give him some privacy, when the other man said, “I’ll just give you some space.” The door gently closed behind him.

When he was dressed, he found his phone, still partially charged in his laptop case, and he quickly texted his mother, saying he would be arriving later than expected and for her not to worry. He was feeling particularly thankful for introducing his parents to the art of texting, since he was sure they would catch on that something was off if

he had spoken to them instead. He also found his glasses amongst his things, put them on, and gathered the rest of his stuff before exiting the room.

“You look like Clark Kent in those,” Luke remarked when he saw him. “I like. Found them in your center console.”

“It seems like I don’t actually need them anymore.” Most people would probably jump at the chance of having perfect vision sans Lasik surgery, but for Tom, it was just another reminder that his world would never be the same again—that he would never be the same again.

“Shame,” Luke said, seemingly oblivious to Tom’s inner struggle. “The glasses really work for you. Maybe you should keep them anyway ... pop in some nonprescription lenses.”

Instead of responding to the sheriff’s comment, Tom took the glasses off and slid them into his inner jacket pocket. “You have a number for a cab?” he asked, despite his fear of going back for his car to the spot that changed his life forever.

“Your car’s outside,” Luke said. “My deputy dropped it off this morning.”

“Thank you, Sheriff.” Tom walked toward the front door, a sense of mild relief washing over him. The sheriff followed, but before he could open it, Luke placed his hand on his shoulder.

“It’s not safe for you out there, Doc.”

Tom whirled around, removing Luke’s hand in the process. “Why not? The animals who did this to me no doubt think I’m dead since that was their intention. Besides, I think I’ll be able to defend myself a little better next time.”

Tom could see that Luke was growing angry again. “You won’t be able to stand against Lorenzo, let alone his men. He’s an alpha, like me. Extremely lethal. There’s still a lot you need to know. If he finds out you lived, he’ll want to know how and he’ll come after you. He’ll smell me all over you and realize that I’m your mate and then use you as my weakness when I challenge him. This is far from over.”

“I don’t want any part of this,” Tom snapped. Attraction and the mate thing aside, all of this was sprung on him, without giving him a say in the matter. He wasn’t used to this feeling of not being in control. The last time he had felt this helpless was when he lost a patient on the table, one he was confident he could have saved. Normally, he was great under pressure, easily being able to formulate a course of action, but now he had nothing.

“I just want to get back to my life before all of this,” he said, gesturing between himself and Luke. He didn’t miss what seemed like a flash of hurt streaking across the sheriff’s face.

The fleeting emotion on Luke’s face morphed quickly into one that looked like frustration. “And what happens when your big kitty wants to stretch his legs, hmm? You weren’t born a shifter. You need guidance, and a place to let your panther roam free.”

“So, what are you saying?” Tom interjected with a frustrated tone of his own. “That I’m supposed to give up my life’s work? Live like an animal?” He was shouting now. “Be part of some barbaric standoff you’ve got going on? I saw what that Lorenzo did to his own brother.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you. I swear,” he declared fervently. “You don’t have to give up your life either. Once this is all over with Lorenzo, you will learn how to adjust to your panther side and incorporate him into your life. And maybe you’ll stop trying to deny the connection you feel to me.”

“I just met you five seconds ago,” Tom said, this time his voice sounding more astonished than anything else. He wouldn’t deny the connection, but he wasn’t ready to admit it or face it yet either. He turned, and this time, he opened the door and strode outside toward his car with purpose. He ignored the sexy growl he heard coming from the sheriff, thankful that said sheriff could not see how much the sound had just turned him on. He then got into his car, and sped off, uncaring that he just peeled out of there like some rebellious teen.

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“Garrett,” Luke snapped into his phone after the doc sped away. “I need men on Dr. Barrymore at all times. His parents live in the retirement community off Eden Court. He’s probably headed there now. My reluctant mate is going to get protection whether he likes it or not.” He was completely unabashed at having researched all about the good doctor while he slept.

“Mate, Sir?”

“That’s right. And I shall be exceedingly pissed off if any harm should come to him.”

“Copy that, Sheriff.”

Before Luke ended the call with his deputy, he informed him that he was heading back to the station shortly. Garrett had also set up a meeting, as Luke had requested. The enforcers of his pack would be there tonight, as well as Owen, and the rightful alphas who were robbed of their beloved leaders. Word would be sent out to Lorenzo after the meeting that the challenge would take place tomorrow. If he didn’t show, he’d basically forfeit what control he had garnered. Luke was certain that would not end up being the case.

When he finally arrived at the station, Owen was there as well. At least he wasn’t being stubborn about accepting protection. And his deputy had been right about the fact that Lorenzo would kill his brother next time. The guy looked little better than his doc did—bruising on all the visible parts of his body. Fortunately for Owen, having enough time to run from Lorenzo and his gang to shift and heal faster, had saved his life.

He put his hand on the young man's shoulder and said, "We'll stop him, Owen. I swear it."

"I know his weakness," Owen said. When Owen told him what that weakness was, Luke knew he'd take pleasure in using it against Lorenzo. When Owen revealed it to the others at the meeting later, murmurs of hope rang around the room.

Luke spoke next. "If I should fail, you must find another alpha to challenge him. He needs to be put down." He was confident in his abilities, especially given that now this went beyond just regaining back territories. This was personal for him. He yearned to sink his teeth deep into the bastard's throat and separate him from it. He wasn't arrogant, though. As dominant as Luke was, Lorenzo would not be an easy opponent to defeat.

"We have confidence in you, Luke," Morgan, a true alpha successor, said. Luke knew it was personal for him, too. Lorenzo had challenged Morgan's father and won.

They then talked strategy and numbers. Lorenzo would be bringing his faithful three along as well as others, none of whom could be trusted to let this be a fair fight should the outcome look like it would be favoring Luke. And Luke himself would not be opposed in this situation to fighting back just as dirty, even if it meant an all-out war could break out. It was definitely not what he wanted, but they were past the point of diplomacy or a fair fight.

Just as Luke was about to end the meeting, his phone buzzed in his pocket. "We lost him, Sheriff," Cody, one of his enforcers, said in his ear. He didn't need to see the man's face to know that right about now, he was cringing, waiting for the onslaught of ire from his alpha to be directed toward him.

Luke happily obliged. "What the fuck do you mean you lost him?" he barked into the phone. "I gave you and Mills one fucking job to do for the next twenty-four hours!"

“We think he was onto us,” the panther explained, struggling with his speech. Luke’s dominance had been felt even through a cell phone, no doubt. “He gave us the slip.”

Luke hung up on him, furious, not to mention worried for his mate. He had programmed the doc’s cell phone into his own last night and proceeded to call him now, several times, but each time the call went immediately to voicemail.

“This meeting is adjourned,” Luke snapped before he abruptly stood from the table and wordlessly left the station.

Tom didn’t go to his parents’ retirement home. He called his mom from the car and told her that something came up at work and not to worry, then veered off the highway and checked into his hotel. What if he really was still in danger? He couldn’t bring that down upon them. First, he needed to make sure that those thugs really did believe he was dead. And second, he just needed some time to process the last two days.

I could shift into an animal, I supposedly have a mate, and someone tried to kill me.

I should be dead right now.

As he paced his hotel room, contemplating his new life, the itching in his arms became more intense and something inside of him was tugging, clawing—a primal part of him wanting to be free. The walls around him felt as if they were closing in, his breaths came faster, but still he struggled for more air.

His knees buckled, he fell to the floor. The sound of growling startled him until he realized the sound was coming from him. He needed to get out of there and fast.

With inhuman speed, he bolted from the room.

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Luke got into his car and drove to the last location Cody and Mills had texted to him before the call came in that they had lost him. It was the Waretown Hotel on the very end of Main Street. He knew the owner of the hotel well and he had no trouble obtaining a key to his doc's room, a room he found sans his mate, although his belongings were still there. Luke then went to the underground parking lot and discovered the Mercedes. He was grateful the doc's car was at least not out in the open for anyone to report back to Lorenzo about it. There were no signs of a struggle in either the room or the car, something else Luke was exceedingly thankful for, which corresponded with his enforcer's report that his mate had really given them the slip.

Luke caught his mate's faint scent, this time without any aftershave, and followed it out of the parking lot, to the back entrance of the hotel, and then further out into the deep woods behind the paved area of the hotel's property. Several yards in, Luke saw the clothes Tom wore this morning in a neat pile atop a fallen branch. He had pretty much guessed what had happened then. The doc may or may not have caught on to being followed, but his panther would have wanted out for the first time, so much so that he may have turned involuntarily had he not willingly succumbed to the change. Luke had warned him that he needed guidance, and he so wished he had listened.

He couldn't care less at the moment if his mate would continue to be stubborn. Luke stripped and dropped his clothes in a pile next to the doc's, shifted, and then sped off after him. A few minutes later, he came face to face with the most beautiful black panther he had ever seen, so black, in fact, that his sleek, shiny coat looked like the color of dark-blue midnight against the darkness of the forest and the moonlight streaming in. His emerald-green eyes glowed as they gazed at him. Luke could tell he was a little frightened.

Cautiously, Luke approached the timid panther. He nuzzled him before playfully nipping his ear and then made a chuffing sound in lieu of laughing when his ferociously adorable mate growled at him. Perhaps he felt stuck in his animal form, Luke thought.

Luke shifted back into his human form. "It'll be as easy as breathing to change back and forth once you get used to it," he soothingly explained to his mate. He sat down cross-legged in front of the doc and grabbed his reluctant mate by the scruff. "You are mine, Dr. Barrymore, and I mean to keep and protect you. Let me show you how fucking good you and I can be together."

Luke lifted himself up to his knees and placed his other hand on the panther's side. He stared intently into the glowing orbs and ordered him to shift. The panther, instantly recognizing not just a command from his mate, but from his alpha, immediately changed back into a man.

"How did you do that?" Tom asked him, his voice sounding gruff and shaky.

Luke was pleased that the doc made no move to remove his hands this time. "I'm your mate, Thomas," he replied. "I'm also your alpha. It's natural for you to want to submit to me."

"And what if I don't want to?" Tom asked, although he lacked his earlier petulance.

"Don't you?" This time Luke didn't give Tom a chance to respond. He tugged him close to his body and kissed him hard on the mouth. He tightened his hold on his mate's neck while he moved his other hand to thread through his thick soft hair.

The doc moaned when their tongues finally collided, and he threw his arms around Luke, deepening their kiss. Luke had kissed many men before, but all prior experiences now paled in comparison to the one he was currently sharing with his

mate, as if they'd been mere practice in learning how to deliver the perfect earth-shattering kiss that had him and the doctor panting and moaning. He couldn't get enough of him.

Their feverish make-out session turned into longing for much more. Luke began to trail kisses down the doc's stubbled jaw to his neck. He felt Tom shiver when he licked and then kissed the claiming mark he had bestowed upon him.

"Do it, Doc," Luke said against his neck. "Claim what's yours."

Luke pulled back to look his mate in the eye and tilted his head to the side to expose his neck. He was sure that the newly formed panther could not possibly fathom just how significant the move was. A dominant alpha never submitted to anyone, save for a mate. It was one of the most sacred trusts given to another being by an alpha.

The doc appeared hesitant at first, but then he asked, "What do I do?" His words came out barely above a whisper.

"Bite me," Luke said. "Then drink until you feel the bond snap into place."

His doc hesitated a moment more, and then in a move mimicking the one Luke had done, though he had been unconscious for it, his mate leaned in and softly kissed the side of Luke's neck, before biting down. The sting of the bite was coupled with pleasure. Now that the bond would run both ways, it would be stronger, their connection even more intense, but without the scratchy feeling for either of them. He felt the doc's tongue instinctively swipe at the puncture wounds on his neck. Though it was an unnecessary act since the aftereffect of the bite was painless and the wound would heal quickly on its own given his strong panther genes, the gesture was still very much appreciated. He took his mate's mouth in another searing kiss, before ordering him to turn on all fours.

“I can’t wait,” he said. The need for his mate was past the point of primal now. “I’ll be sure to explore every inch of your body later, but now I need to have you, to fucking fully claim you.”

He growled appreciatively after his mate’s easy compliance had him revealing a perfectly round, tight ass. He spread the doc’s legs wider with his knee and took a moment to enjoy the view of the man who clearly took care of his body. His muscles were well defined, his back toned, and his legs muscular and lean like a runner’s.

Luke leaned over to deliver open-mouthed kisses to both sides of his neck in turn, placing his own body flush against his mate’s—chest to back. He knew he couldn’t hold off much longer. His cock was an iron rod against his belly, the head turning purple with pre-cum glistening on it. He trailed hurried kisses down Tom’s back all the way down to the ass he had just been fervently admiring, and he beamed with unadulterated male pride when the doc moaned and arched his back as Luke rimmed his puckered hole. He delivered a few more passes with his tongue, this time reaching around to stroke his mate’s cock. The sounds of pure ecstasy coming from his mate egged him on.

He kissed up the doc’s body, this time until his mouth reached his ear. “We can’t carry anything that requires protection,” he said before giving him a gentle nip. Then he slipped inside of him in one long stroke that had the good doctor crying out. There would be no barriers between them.

“Oh, fuck, yeah!”

“You like the way my dick feels inside of you, mate?” Luke asked.

“Fuck, yeah!” Tom repeated, exhaling loudly.

“Good, because I plan on pounding your tight ass quite often.” Luke groaned as the

doctor's ass squeezed his cock. He felt so fucking good, warm, welcoming his long and thick appendage as if it were made to fit perfectly.

His mate pushed back into him as Luke thrust forward, their heavy panting breaths and gravelly moaning sounds reverberating around them. Luke kissed Tom's shoulder blade and then thrust up harder, faster, chasing the nirvana he saw within reach. His balls tightened. He could feel himself getting ready to let go, but he was determined for his mate to go with him.

Luke reached around, grabbed the doc's shaft, and stroked him as he continued to thrust into his ass. Only when his mate cried out, spurting his hot seed into Luke's hand, did Luke let himself go inside his mate. "Ah, I love your ass," he said, moaning in ecstasy immediately after.

When the shaking finally stopped, Luke pulled out of his mate and drew him back against his chest, embracing him tightly. "That was so fucking amazing."

The doc brought his arms up in front of him, placing them over Luke's, and leaned back against him. "It's never felt like that before," he admitted. "That intensity has never been there before with anyone."

"And there never will be," Luke said in Tom's ear, adding a possessive growl. But then he, too, had to admit, "It was never like that for me either."

"You're not a monster, Luke."

"What?"

"That's what I thought you turned me into at first." The doc turned in his arms to face him. "But you're beautiful. The animal side of you is beautiful, too."

“Not all of us are like Lorenzo and his gang,” Luke said.

“I know that now. The young man ... I think he tried to warn me.”

“Owen.”

“Is he okay?” Tom asked with genuine concern.

“He’ll be fine. Everyone will be fine after tomorrow.”

“What happens tomorrow?” His mate now turned completely and faced him, sitting back on his haunches. “What are you going to do?”

“I challenged him,” Luke replied. He then explained what it meant to challenge another panther. The fight would end when one opponent submitted or found himself dead, and in this case, though submission would never be given from Lorenzo, it wasn’t even an option. His extensive crimes against several packs, along with going after a human, and the mate of another shifter, called for his execution. His doc did not look pleased hearing this explanation.

“Thomas,” Luke began, his voice gravelly, “the only way I can keep you safe is to kill him. He nearly killed my mate, not to mention the countless others he has killed.”

“But he’s like you,” Tom stated. It wasn’t a question.

Luke cupped his mate’s face with both hands and kissed him sweetly on the lips before bringing their foreheads together. “If he kills me, I know he’ll come after you again for sure. I’ll have that extra incentive and I will not fail you.”

Luke was about to suggest they head back to his place for the night when something in the air had suddenly changed. They were no longer alone.

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Tom saw the sudden panicked look on Luke's face. He flared his nostrils and took in four additional scents and understood why. He was still trying to get the hang of his acute senses, but it seemed that they were kicking in quickly under pressure. It was them—the four panthers who pretty much snuffed out his life, his old one anyway, and in just minutes, they'd outnumbered him and Luke.

“Fuck!” Luke growled. “My cell phone is with our clothes.” He stood and Tom followed suit. Luke then placed a hand on his shoulder and said, “Just stay behind me.”

“Like hell I will!” Tom said sharply. He was like them now. Maybe not an alpha like Luke and Lorenzo, but he'd be damned if he didn't go down fighting this time.

There was no time for Luke to argue with him. The four panthers arrived—three black and one tan. All four men quickly transformed into their human selves. Lorenzo was about to take a step forward, and when his gaze landed on Tom, he froze, shock clearly written on his face. He flared out his nostrils and sniffed the air, no doubt coming to the conclusion Luke had said he would earlier, that he was the sheriff's mate.

“What an interesting turn of events,” Lorenzo said. “I hadn't realized that we left you alive, but it's a mistake we don't intend to repeat.”

Luke practically roared beside him. “You're right, Lorenzo, because you'll be dead shortly.”

“Now, now, Sheriff,” Lorenzo taunted. “I had given you a gift, after all, though it was

unintentional. I gave you time with your mate.” He turned to Tom. “And you experienced what it felt like to be more than just a filthy human.”

“The only filth I see here is you,” Tom spat. “You tried to kill your own brother.”

Luke placed a hand against Tom’s chest, as if sensing that he was about to charge the vile Lorenzo. He kept it there as he turned to address the other alpha. “What are you doing here, Lorenzo? The challenge was for tomorrow ... in front of witnesses. I thought you’d be pleased.”

“Yes, I received your little message, but since we happened upon your scent and found you now, why wait? As much as it would please me to kill you in front of witnesses, it will be just as pleasing to deliver your head, as well as your new mate’s head, to your pack. I think that will prove just as much a victory.”

Luke smiled, a devilish gleam in his eye that had the effect of wiping at least some of the smugness off Lorenzo’s face. “Is that how you defeated your other opponents, then? Ambushed them because you’re too much of a pussy to attempt a fair fight?”

Tom could see that Luke’s words definitely hit below the belt. His words had Lorenzo fuming. The accusation appeared to have had some merit. This revelation wasn’t as shocking to Tom as was his own lack of fear at the moment. He had never felt such a desire to rip someone to shreds before, and it was as daunting as it felt exhilarating. In fact, he wanted to sink his teeth into some panther shifter flesh in retribution almost as much as he wanted to annihilate the lot of them for threatening his mate.

Tom didn’t have to wait long. Lorenzo’s men closed in on them. “Let’s fight fair now, then, shall we?” Lorenzo circled Luke as the other three panthers stalked closer to Tom. “Your mate can watch you die, and after that, I want you to know that my men and I will take pleasure in killing him slowly.”

Luke charged Lorenzo and the two of them became locked in a fierce battle, both opponents seemingly equal in their skill. Before Tom had a chance to react, the remaining three panthers held him down on his knees. Luke, while distracted, took a major blow to his face.

“I’m all right,” Tom called out. He stopped struggling. Instead he sat there, letting the three men hold him down. They were mesmerized by the fight as well it seemed. More importantly, Tom hoped his silence would be proof enough for Luke to know that the three panthers were not hurting him at the moment, allowing Luke to focus.

The longer the fight progressed, the more equally matched it really seemed that the two alphas were. And then, Tom caught an almost imperceptible nod from Lorenzo, one that Luke clearly had not, and Tom roared from the pain of deep claws penetrating his back. The pain was nowhere near what he had felt the day prior, when he was still human, but it hurt nonetheless, and it served its intended purpose as another distraction. He watched in horror as Luke fell to his knees, sporting several of his own gashes across his neck and chest.

Luke looked over at Tom and smiled, but Tom yelled, “No! Get the fuck up!”

Luke didn’t. He took blow after blow, and Tom knew it would be all over soon. He saw that Lorenzo was growing tired as well, and when he let up for just a moment, Luke began to crawl over to Tom, making Lorenzo throw his head back and laugh. “How precious,” he said. “He wants to bid his mate goodbye.”

Tom pushed against his captors, scratching, and clawing in the process, and when Lorenzo laughed harder, the men briefly let go, allowing him to go to Luke. He pulled his mate up to his feet and when he looked into his eyes, something in them indicated that he wasn’t as beaten down as he was apparently feigning to be. In seconds, it wasn’t Lorenzo that Luke fell upon, but the man who had been the tan panther. He fastened his claws deeply into the man’s stomach before turning him in a

choke hold with his free hand to face Lorenzo, whose eyes widened in fear.

“Uh, uh, uh,” Luke said to Lorenzo in an almost singsong like voice. “You or your men take another step, and I rip out your mate’s throat.”

Tom watched as Lorenzo swallowed hard. For the first time since crossing paths with the sociopathic panther, he saw real fear there.

“You haven’t claimed him for fear of others discovering your weakness,” Luke said. “But I know who he is to you. Actually, my entire pack knows now as well as the true successors of the alphas you killed. There will be nowhere for you to hide, Lorenzo.”

“Let him go,” Lorenzo bellowed.

Luke ignored him and continued to speak as if he hadn’t just heard Lorenzo’s outburst. “You understand the sacredness of mates, and yet you were so easily ready to kill mine knowing what he was to me. You killed so many in your quest for power, taking them away from their mates and other loved ones. And these three stooges”—he inclined his head toward his captive and then jutted his chin out toward where the other two were standing—“they eagerly go around on these killing sprees right alongside you, even taking pleasure in hurting others. You’d kill your own brother, probably sell your mother’s soul to the fucking devil if it meant getting what you want.”

Lorenzo stayed silent, though his eyes were blazing, and in a move quicker than anyone could have anticipated, Luke tore out his captive’s throat, leaving no doubt that he would not have a heart still beating to save. And then even quicker still, Lorenzo roared as Luke dropped the lifeless body to the ground. Before Lorenzo could react, Luke was on him. “You almost took my heart when you nearly killed my mate,” Luke roared in his face. “Only fitting that I take yours.” He meant it both literally and figuratively, it seemed, when Luke ripped out the other alpha’s still

beating heart from his chest. Lorenzo fell to the ground, knees hitting the dirt first before the rest of him slumped over on his side.

Luke flung the heart near Lorenzo's body and turned to the two remaining panthers. He spoke only to Tom as he looked at them. "I think it's time I teach you how to hunt in your panther form."

Tom could almost smell the fear coming off the two men. They quickly shifted and bolted in the direction they had come from. Tom, meanwhile, approached Luke and then kissed his shoulder when he reached him. "I thought I would actually lose you for a moment, and it scared the ever-loving shit out of me."

Luke grabbed him by the nape of the neck and kissed him fiercely, and then he brought their foreheads together after the kiss had ended. "I'll have to make sure you won't lose me, then," Luke said in a breathy whisper.

The two men shifted into their panther forms and chased after the men who Luke had proclaimed were already dead the moment they had laid their hands on his mate.

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“Oh, yeah! Fuck, baby, don’t stop.”

Tom had absolutely no intention of stopping. Not until he watched Luke come undone from the blowjob he was currently giving him. He wanted to make the man’s body quiver, to feel his balls tighten in the palm of his hand, and to swallow every drop of cum that Luke would give him.

He was actually quite surprised at his current stamina given the fact he had been on the receiving end of such euphoria just moments ago. He still hadn’t quite recovered from it, but he felt too needy for his mate to wait it out.

Luke let out a loud moan and threw his head back when Tom added a twist to his shaft while he was busy sucking on the head. Tom loved the taste of him, couldn’t get enough. After four months of being together, each time with his mate was better than the last.

His dick was beginning to harden again as he watched his enraptured mate’s facial expressions. Luke sat at the edge of the bed with his legs on the floor, spread wide enough to fit Tom’s frame in between. He reclined back resting on his elbows, naked, save for his open, white button-down shirt that he gave up on removing as soon as Tom’s lips and tongue made contact with his cock.

Tom licked up and down Luke’s shaft before sucking him back into his mouth and all the way to the back of his throat. He felt Luke’s legs tremble and then he was fisting the sheets as he let go, spurting his hot seed into Tom’s waiting mouth. He loved his salty taste and eagerly swallowed every drop.

Luke fell back against the bed and Tom wasted no time crawling up his body to kiss his mate on the lips. He tasted himself as well as Luke as their tongues and lips explored one another. After a while, he felt Luke hardening again, and his own cock was now once again painfully erect.

In the blink of an eye, Luke had Tom on his back, with his legs up on Luke's shoulders. Ever since he was turned, Tom discovered that not only had he senses that were much sharper, but his body was quite a bit lithier as well. His legs didn't protest when Luke leaned in for another kiss, or when his legs were brought closer still to his body as his mate began his sensual assault to his neck and chest.

Finally, just as Tom was about to protest that he couldn't take anymore, Luke grabbed ahold of his thighs and slowly pushed inside him. When he was fully seated inside, Luke set a slow and steady pace.

Tom loved this position, even more so when Luke leaned a little bit more forward. Not only was the angle pretty damn intense, but it allowed him to look into his mate's eyes as they both took and gave their pleasure. Those same beautiful eyes electrified as they often ran side by side in their animal forms. The sheriff really was a beautiful man in any form.

"I love you, Luke," Tom whispered as he gazed at him. It was the first time he had said those words without fear or doubt that they would be used against him or wouldn't be returned. And if he was being honest, it was the first time he truly meant them.

"As I love you." Luke leaned in and kissed him languidly as he continued to slowly thrust inside of him.

Only when he felt his orgasm building, did Tom encourage Luke to go faster. Never breaking their kiss, Luke entwined their hands and placed them over Tom's head as he pumped harder and faster. Tom no longer felt the need to control everything in his

life, welcoming his own willing surrender to his mate. He surrendered further as Luke's command for him to come brought about his orgasm crashing into him, and then he heard his own name being called out repeatedly as Luke came hard inside of him. Luke collapsed on top of him, burying his face in Tom's neck after giving his claiming mark a gentle kiss.

"I think we may need more than a few minutes to recover this time," Tom said after both had stopped shaking.

Luke chuckled in response, pulling out of Tom at the same time. They lay there side by side, holding each other for a while before Luke spoke. "We have a lifetime. I think it's fine if we have to wait more than a few minutes." He gave Tom a gentle squeeze and then a kiss to his forehead.

A lifetime sounded so completely right with his sheriff. He hadn't given up his life at all, still working at the hospital, while living in Waretown with Luke. The hour and a half commute was worth it when he got to come home to his mate rather than an empty apartment, and living closer to his parents, both of whom fell in love with Luke after their first meeting, was another added benefit. He decided that coming out as a panther shifter to his parents may be too much for them in their golden years. He wasn't worried about acceptance, but finding out that the world you knew did not exist wasn't something he wanted to risk with his parents.

What surprised him, however, when he first returned to work, was that he discovered a doctor he worked closely with was also a shifter—wolf. They had scented it on each other immediately. Tom had pulled him aside and briefly explained how his new shifter status came about. He learned that the wolf was born a shifter, but his mate, a nurse at the hospital, was made just like him. It helped having someone at work to share his secret with—made the new world he had to get used to just a little less strange.

The packs, though they were still grieving for their senseless losses, were restored to

living normal lives again, rather than in fear. After learning that Lorenzo had been defeated, along with his sycophantic thugs, his followers had all surrendered.

Tom was grateful every single day for his new life, his second chance, and for a lifelong partner who was the other half of him. It wasn't just his body saved that day by his guardian panther, but his own heart. And Luke had entrusted Tom with his.

Tom was a heart specialist, after all, and he vowed to always keep it safe.

The End