

CURSED MATES

BY

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About the book

Nick Radford is a reluctant werewolf who's been fighting the Beast within for nearly 500 years. He's never killed a human, but the Beast is gaining strength and Nick may not be able to ward off his inner demon much longer.

Kyla Yaeger is an elite were-hunter with a scarred past. Her life's mission is to slay the werewolves that slaughtered her parents. Her quest has brought her to Maine, where she's been summoned to destroy the werewolf terrorizing the quaint little village of Heavensent. The last thing she needs is to get distracted by her mysterious—not to mention hunky—new neighbor, Nick Radford.

By the time Kyla learns Nick is her target, she's already fallen for him, making her task of killing him that much harder. She is torn between her love for him and her duty to kill her sworn enemy. Nick fights his forbidden love for Kyla, knowing she is duty-bound to kill him. Kyla and Nick must join forces to fight an even bigger threat—one that will destroy all humanity. Only by their combined powers, can they destroy the evil and bring an end to a centuries old curse.

An excerpt from the book

Prologue

England, the outskirts of York, 1530

The ancient witch began her chant. They were sacred words, passed from mother to daughter through the centuries since men had claimed this mystic ground. Her song vibrated through the small hut as the smell of burning peat filled her nostrils, and the iciness of the winter night burned her skin.

"Wood spirits, come to me, I beg. Hear the plea of your servant. Help me take my lord's pain as my own." Wisps of blue smoke curled around her, changing solid walls into mere shadows. Without warning, a sharp blade of pain shot through her veins. She welcomed it, had begged for it. His pain. Nicholas Radford. Her liege lord. Her body convulsed, and she cried out.

She lay over him and closed her eyes. "I beg you, mighty powers, keep my master from death, and show me the way to undo the Demon's curse."

Chapter One

Present Day

There was nothing angelic about Heavensent, Maine. Kyla Yaeger felt evil all around her, watching, waiting. A hell of a lot more was going on here than one werewolf. Her stiletto heels clicked on the sidewalk as she hurried up the street, but she couldn't outpace the feeling of malice. She had to block it out. Nothing could distract her from her mission. As an elite were-hunter, she had one job—slaughter the werewolf haunting this strange little town.

Anticipation of the next hunt pulsed through her. She hungered for it as an addict craved the next hit. Maybe someday she'd find the peace she longed for . . . but not until she had vengeance.

The fresh smell of pine from the surrounding woods wafted by on the slight breeze. The aroma brought the memory of that hunt in the Adirondacks. Foreboding chilled her. Her breath caught. Would she meet the black wolf again? This time, she wouldn't miss.

Quickening her steps, Kyla reached the homey-looking restaurant, a welcome touch of normalcy in this place tainted by wickedness. As she grabbed for the door handle, someone on the other side pulled the door open. Losing her balance, she wobbled in the entrance as a hand cupped her elbow, steadying her. An electric charge coursed up her arm.

"Sorry." The deep voice was definitely male, with a trace of a British accent, and so close to her ear she could feel his warm breath. She inhaled his scent of spice, familiar, yet exotic.

The timbre of his voice ignited a spark of recognition in her. She was eye level with a very masculine chest covered by a black T-shirt that stretched over hard muscles and defined biceps. Slowly raising her gaze, she met deep topaz eyes—eyes touched with sadness that spoke of pain and unbearable loss. Thick, black hair framed the rugged beauty of his face. The large, jagged scar on his neck saved him from being too perfect. She didn't know him, yet she felt as if she did.

How odd.

He stood holding the door, not moving. The awareness in his eyes gradually changed to shock, then fear. Rooted to the spot, Kyla couldn't look away.

A roaring noise filled her head, and pain stabbed her temples, signaling a vision. The man, the restaurant, the street wavered. Disjointed scenes flickered before her. A tall man, his face shadowed, his long, black hair blowing in a rush of wind, stood before an empty grave. She felt his crushing grief as if it were her own.

She blinked, and the vision left her. And so had the mysterious stranger. The restaurant door closed slowly behind her, leaving her alone on the sidewalk. She looked both ways down the street, but the man seemed to have disappeared.

"Hey, I thought you were going to get us a table. I found a parking spot a few blocks away." Todd, her best friend and business partner, sauntered toward her. He frowned. "What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost, or maybe a werewolf."

"I don't know what I saw." A shiver ran through her. Had the man with the topaz eyes caused her vision?

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Nick Radford drove his Jag fast, too fast, along the winding road that led from the village up to his cliff-top mansion. He rounded a sharp curve and glimpsed the churning sea. One tire hit gravel and spun. Fighting for control, he propelled the car back onto the road. Too bad he couldn't control his thoughts as easily.

Who was the woman at the restaurant? Her intriguing image flashed into his mind. Long, black hair and pale, fine-boned face. When he'd looked into those clear, green eyes, recognition, longing, and lust had shaken him. And then fear. But of what? She couldn't be real. It was the only answer. She'd been a dream. Or had it been a cruel trick of fate to remind him of all he'd lost, all he couldn't have?

The anguish that had been his constant companion for almost five hundred years burned in his gut. A bitter laugh escaped him.

He jerked the car to a stop in front of his house and jumped out. Trying to banish the picture of the black-haired beauty, he took the stone steps leading to the old manse two at a time. He knew he fought a losing battle, and his own sense of helplessness infuriated him.

He entered the cavernous living room, threw his keys on the nearest table, strode to the sideboard, and poured a glass of wine. He drank it in one gulp, then poured another.

Too restless to sit, he stalked to the window and stared at the darkening sky. His reflection looked solemnly back at him—the same face he'd known for over five centuries. The thick, black hair and high cheekbones hadn't changed,

but the gold eyes were now tarnished, light and hope long gone. Soon, the moon would be full, and the Beast inside would struggle for freedom, freedom to roam the deep woods, to run along the wild, winding path that led to the seething ocean below. Bloodlust stirred. The Beast craved the hunt. And Nick hungered for revenge.

He was tired, tired of the everlasting loneliness. He had no choice in that now. The Beast grew stronger with every full moon. He couldn't control it much longer. Soon, he'd have to leave the mortal world. But first, he had to destroy Montague.

The demon was close. His stench had begun to creep over the wilderness below Nick's window. The time for the final battle was near. Through the centuries, Nick's strength and powers had grown. He would destroy his enemy and send that demon shapeshifter back to hell where he belonged.

Regret for all he'd lost cried out deep in Nick's soul—a bittersweet yearning. But he couldn't completely extinguish the last flicker of hope. The hope that Antica's prayers would be answered, that his salvation would come.

"Stop it," he ground out. He pounded the stone wall until pain shot up his arm. "There is no hope."

A scuffling noise caught his attention and he turned. Antica. The ancient witch had saved his life and had been like a mother to him all these centuries.

"What has disturbed you, my son?" She gripped the black crystal hanging from a gold chain around her neck. "My crystal speaks to me."

Nick tossed back the last of his wine and set the empty glass on a small table. "I saw a woman in the village. I've never seen her before. Yet I felt as if I knew her." Trepidation shot through him. "I sensed danger from her as well." He couldn't tell Antica about the lust that had also stirred in him when he'd looked into the woman's eyes. She was danger and desire in one package. He should keep away from her. Yet he knew they'd meet again.

Fear crossed Antica's weathered face. "Is she a hunter?"

"I don't know. The most powerful of them can disguise their true nature." He turned away and leaned his forehead against the cold windowpane, fighting his despair. Immortality hadn't been all bad. It had its privileges. He'd amassed a great fortune, and through the Radford Foundation, he'd contributed to life-saving causes all over the world. He could leave this earth knowing he'd left a worthy mark.

And leave this earth, he would, for he had to die; it was the only way to kill the Beast.

Exhaling a resigned breath, Nick walked to the fireplace and grabbed the poker, stoking new life into the flames. The fire sputtered and popped in the huge stone fireplace. He inhaled the calming scents of pine and rosemary smoke wafting from the hearth. His gaze skimmed the walls, adorned with ancient tapestries, their colors muted now. Nick had moved Radford Manor from England to this safe corner of Maine. His lips tilted in a wry smile. Heavensent, Maine. Not so safe anymore. And far from heavenly.

"My crystal is telling me something," Antica said. "But it is not yet clear." She moved closer and pressed her fingers into his arm. "Rest. Your trips to Switzerland tire you overmuch."

He laughed, a harsh sound. "I'll have eternity to rest."

"No, Nicholas. It is not time. Wait. You will know when the time is right."

"It is time when I say it is time." He reached out to stroke her parchment-like cheek. "My powers are strong enough now to destroy the demon. I can take care of myself. Don't worry for me. It's time we ended this. And if God is merciful, He'll take my soul."

Her face tightened. "It will not end that way. The prophesy will prevail." She gave him a sad smile and rubbed the large, black crystal. "Another force is here, one that could destroy you. My crystal cannot see clearly. Perhaps it is the woman you saw today. Maybe she is one of Montague's."

Nick shook his head. "She is not with Montague. But she may be more dangerous."

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Todd stopped the Jeep in front of the small, seaside cottage he and Kyla had rented. "A blue cottage with a white picket fence. Quaint. Of course, what else would it be? What is it with werewolves? The Adirondacks and now a backwater town in Maine. Why do they pick the most God-forsaken places to hang out? Would it kill them to haunt Milan for a change? Or Paris. Think of the shopping."

Kyla laughed and unbuckled her seat belt. Todd, the brother of her heart, always knew how to lighten her mood as she battled the inner demons that bedeviled her even more than were-creatures. She opened the car door and jumped out. Standing on the walkway, she scanned the small house—a true fairytale cottage nestled in thick woods and perched about thirty feet above the ocean. It would be their home while she searched for the werewolf terrorizing the area. Since Todd wasn't a hunter, he'd work on the new video game their software company had already contracted.

The Jeep door slammed as Todd got out and came to stand next to her. She raised her arms in a stretch. "It was a long drive from Manhattan. I'm glad we stopped to eat before settling in." Thinking of the restaurant brought to mind the handsome stranger she'd nearly bumped into. Throughout dinner, she hadn't been able to shake his image or the vision he seemed to have triggered.

Fighting to relax her tense muscles, she turned to Todd. She had more immediate worries. "There's something weird about this village. You must feel it too."

He shook his head. "I don't feel anything. Don't worry. You can handle whatever's here." He yawned. "It's late. Let's get our stuff into this gingerbread house."

As he turned toward the car, his gaze swept upward. "Holy shit. A wolf's lair if I ever saw one."

"Wolf's lair?"

"Radford Manor," he whispered in reverent tones. "Eerily authentic." He pointed to the gothic mansion clinging to the cliff above them. "That's the setting for our next game."

"Radford Manor." She followed his gaze and froze. "You know that place?"

"I'm a computer geek. I do my research. Why do you think our games are so kick-ass popular?"

Kyla strained her eyes to take in the grandeur of the dark stone monstrosity high above them. Turrets speared into the blue-black sky. Rugged and ominous, a menacing sentinel, the house seemed to command everything around it. Her whole being trembled as cloudy memories surrounded her.

Memories of what?

The hairs on her neck bristled against her sweater. She had seen this mansion before. Those turrets were familiar. She knew gruesome gargoyles, hidden by the darkness, stared from the rooftop. Thirty-four cracked, uneven steps led up to the parapets of the cliff house. The only thing she didn't know was how she knew all those details. She stiffened against the knot of panic that formed in her chest.

"They brought that stone by stone from England," Todd said. "It's positively ancient."

Ancient. Pain, sudden and intense, pounded in Kyla's temples. For the second time that day, she saw the empty grave. Instead of the shadowed man in her first vision, the face of the handsome stranger from the restaurant flashed before her. A powerful force slammed into her, taking her breath. The vision disappeared.

Struggling for air, she lifted her eyes to the stone building. One small light flickered in a high window, a siren luring her. Wind gusted around her, a forewarning of unknown forces gathering, waiting, in the dense woods.

"What is it?" Todd asked, concern in his voice. He grabbed her arm. "Did you have one of your visions? Your face is as white as that picket fence."

"Forget it. Just my imagination doing crazy things." She yanked free of him and pulled open the car door to haul out her suitcases.

"You've been jumpy as all hell the last six weeks." He dragged out his own suitcases and followed her up the brick walk to the door.

Kyla put the key in the lock and turned it. The door unlocked with a loud click. "Six weeks ago was the Adirondacks," she said, twisting to look at him. "You know what happened there."

"Damn it, woman, quit beating yourself up over that."

"My hand trembled." She looked down at her hands, searching for renewed strength. "My hands don't tremble." The memory of that hunt in the Adirondacks haunted her like a horror movie with no end. She'd missed. She never missed.

Heaving a shaky breath, she pushed open the door and strode into the small living room. Placing her luggage on the rag rug, she faced Todd. "Something's wrong. I've felt it since the Adirondacks. The feeling got stronger in Geneva. Something's out there, Todd. And I don't know if I can conquer it." She tugged at the suddenly tight neckline of her sweater.

Todd pulled his suitcases into the living room, then straightened and met her gaze. "You're the group's best werewolf hunter. You always get your beast."

A shiver of foreboding swept up her spine. "Not always."

"You bagged the alpha in the Adirondacks. That's what Hunter-Wolf sent you to do." Todd shrugged. "So you faced another werewolf and he got away. So what? Don't sweat it."

She rolled her shoulders to release her tension. "But there was something different about that werewolf. He wasn't like the others. I felt more danger and darkness from him. What if he wasn't a werewolf at all, but something much worse?"