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Tryst SHIFTERS

Crystal Jordan



Season of Change: Fall

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Open Season

By

Crystal Jordan

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Open Season

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Dedication

For R.G. Alexander, Dayna Hart, Lillian Feisty, Jennifer McKenzie, Robin L. Rotham, Karen Erickson, and Eden Bradley. And special thanks to the ladies in the Seasons of Change series with me: Loribelle Hunt, Sara Dennis, and Shelli Stevens.

Chapter One

Strong male hands slid up Leigh's back to curl over her shoulders and pull her down to seat her fully on a long, thick cock. He was so big the stretch of it almost hurt, but she craved more, wanted him deeper, harder, faster. *More*. She closed her eyes and threw her head back, reveling in the sheer carnal bliss of a man's hands on her skin, his cock filling her. The muscles in her thighs flexed as she lifted and lowered herself on his pulsing dick.

God, it was so good. So perfect. So sweet. Nothing had ever been this good before in her entire life.

She knew it was a dream, so she let herself enjoy it. The fantasy called to the primitive lioness within her, and her fangs slid out as his hot scent flooded her nostrils, sank into her blood. Her nipples peaked tight, and she wanted his mouth there.

A smile curled her lips as her dream answered her unvoiced desires. His mouth closed over the taut crest of her breast and sucked strongly. Pinpricks erupted down her arms, and she shuddered at the sensation. Her fingers lifted to slide into the short silk of his hair. His wide palms cupped her hips, working her on his cock. She was so hot, so damp. Her wetness slipped down the insides of her thighs, and their flesh slapped together in the silent room.

"More," she pleaded.

He growled low in his throat, the sound of a dangerous feline caged. "Yes. I'll give it to you, baby."

Something about the voice tugged at her memory, but he rolled his hips beneath her, changing the angle of his deep penetration. She was swept away on the sensations rocketing through her body.

Her breath sobbed out, and they moved together towards orgasm, thrusting, grinding. Skin slipping against naked, sweaty skin.

"Yes, yes, *yes*." Something in this man called to her very soul. Mate. Her other half. Perfectly matched to her. A phantom possessing her dreams.

Desperation whipped through her. She was so close, so very close. She licked the salty sweat from his shoulder, sucking his essence into her mouth, tasting his flesh. His lips opened over her collarbone. She felt his fangs prick her skin. It was the only warning she had before he growled, buried the sharp points into her, and sucked at the bite. Her pussy contracted hard as she rocketed over into sudden orgasm. Her own fangs sank deep into his shoulder, mimicking the carnal possession of her dream lover.

They'd marked each other. *Mate* marked.

"Mine." His deep rumble was the last thing she heard before she collapsed, orgasm still rippling through her system.

So perfect. Too perfect to be real.

* * * * *

A small groan pulled her from deep sleep. Was that her voice? Her head pounded with fierce purpose, and her mouth felt as if she'd stuffed it with cotton before she went to bed.

The groan sounded again. And it wasn't coming from her throat. She sucked in a breath and caught a whiff of familiar scent. *His* scent.

Oh. Shit.

She sat up fast. Mistake. Her mind spun from the alcohol she'd consumed the night before. Those last four Jack Daniels shots must have done it. Or was it six? She'd meant to toast to making good on her escape from her ex-fiancé, and she'd gone a little overboard.

Obviously.

Pulling in a deep breath, she assured herself it couldn't get much worse than it already was, and if she hurried she might get out of here without him catching her. The coward's way out perhaps, but she'd never met a man who relished a hung over woman in the morning. This was her first one night stand—and her last—but she couldn't imagine it being much different from her other interactions with men.

Including Trevor.

She shuddered in disgust at the mere thought of her ex. Rubbing her hands up and down her arms, she was grateful that for once they were free of bruises, free of the marks of his abuse. The incredible healing abilities of a werelioness made them fade quickly, but Trevor had always made certain she was never without. Yes, he *always* provided for her. A bitter smile twisted her lips.

Her fingers clenched on her biceps. Thank God, she'd gotten the job at Still Waters. The resort was more than a thousand miles from Trevor and his hard fists. She'd never have to deal with that again. Not from any man. Her spine straightened. She'd had the strength to leave him, and she wasn't looking back. Her only regret was staying with him so long, but they'd gotten engaged when she was nineteen. Too young to know any better—to know that the cruel things he said to her weren't what she deserved. Too naïve to realize that the hateful words would escalate to physical abuse.

Using slow, deliberate motions that wouldn't set off the pounding in her head, she slid her legs over the side of the bed. The smoothness of the Egyptian cotton sheets on her skin made her shiver as a flood of memories flashed back from the night before. Her imagination must have been filling in some details because no man was *that* good in bed. She sighed, her mind dragging her back to one particular man—Trevor. She'd kept putting the date off for their marriage—not until she finished college, until they had some money saved up, until, until, until.

She might have stayed, might have married him, but she found out she was pregnant. The thought of allowing Trevor near a child was revolting. No way in hell would she raise her baby in that environment. So she'd put out quiet feelers for jobs. With a degree in public relations,

she could go anywhere in the werewolf community or vanish into the normal human population.

Pulling in a deep breath, she caught the familiar scent of Still Waters. So, wherever *here* was, it was on the exclusive werewolf resort. She wasn't sure which was worse—if she'd slept with a fellow employee or if she'd slept with a guest. Standing, she tip-toed to the bathroom to splash water on her face. She hoped his hearing wasn't as sharp as hers. Every drop of water that hit the basin boomed like an atomic bomb in her ears, but she couldn't walk around where anyone could see her with smudged make-up and wild sex hair. She refused to let herself look in the mirror as she shut off the faucet and went to gather her clothes from where they were scattered on the floor.

It was the extensive security of Still Waters that convinced her to take the job, and that the Lassiter family who owned the resort had a fierce reputation for protecting their own. A small cabin came with the position, so she could live on the grounds. She'd only been here a week, and already she loved it. Something about the place had put her at ease from the moment she stepped on the lush green property. She felt safe here, and it was a feeling that she hadn't experienced in so long it caught her off guard. She couldn't resist. The Lassiters needn't know why she came to Oregon so long as she did her job as the new public relations officer well. And she would.

Her eyes slid closed, and she fought a moan while the last horrible memories of Trevor paraded through her mind. She often woke up from the dead of night with nightmares of it.

She'd flown out to Still Waters six weeks ago for her interview with the Lassiters: Cole, Aidan, and their very pregnant sister Jada. There was another brother, but he lived in the south somewhere.... She forgot where. She'd have to look it up in case anyone ever asked. It was her job to always have the answers and deliver them with a smile. Even if the last thing she wanted to do was smile.

Swallowing hard, she laid a hand over her flat belly.

When she returned from her interview, it was to the hard blows of Trevor's fists. He'd found out somehow. He knew. Cold washed through

her body in tingling waves. Nausea clenched her throat. The memories wouldn't stop. Trevor backing her into a corner, his fists coming down on her repeatedly. His werebear strength overpowering her as it always did.

No escape. She couldn't get away. Not then.

Not even from the memories now.

Collapsing to the floor and hunching over, trying to protect the child growing within her womb. His boot drawing back to kick her. Blood pouring down her thighs to coat the floor in a dark, sticky pool. The blackness of unconsciousness taking her away. The feeling of gratefulness...so grateful to escape for even a brief moment the knowledge that she had failed to save her child. Failed.

She'd spent a week in a werekind hospital, telling the same lies that she had always told before to protect Trevor. He was sorry. He was always sorry after he hurt her, but this time she just felt numb, dead like the baby she'd lost. Hollow. A call had come in on her cell phone from Cole Lassiter asking her to come to Still Waters. Most of the conversation she couldn't remember. Most of the hospital stay had been a blissful, blank nothingness.

Trevor would have been wild with rage when he found she'd slipped from her hospital bed and disappeared. She didn't envy the nurses, but she didn't regret it. They had hospital security to protect them from him, and she had no one but herself. She had nothing left. Nothing but the job offer in Oregon, so she'd clung to that to get her through.

Her gaze landed on the man in the bed, jerking her back to the present. She stooped to gather her clothes in her hands, holding them to her breasts. Who was he? She wanted to get out of there, but she needed to know what his face looked like in case he remembered more than she did and they ran into each other later. God, how humiliating.

Padding on silent cat's feet, she clutched her clothes close to cover her nudity, and bent to look at him.

Horror exploded in her veins. She knew him. Aidan Lassiter. Her new boss. She needed to get out of here. He'd smell her on his sheets and have a damn good idea of what happened last night, but a good idea was a whole lot different than being confronted with your naked employee.

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She backed away slowly. She'd dress in the living room and hope like hell no one saw her leaving.

Then Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* pierced the silence of the room, and Aidan bolted upright in bed.

Shit.

Chapter Two

Aidan's eyes creaked open in the harsh morning sunlight. A naked woman stood frozen at the end of his bed, her eyes held a hint of panic as her gaze darted between him, his ringing cell phone, and the door. She was obviously trying to sneak out, her clothes in her arms. He dragged in a breath, trying to catch her scent, trying to remember what she might be doing in his bedroom. His nostrils flooded with the smell of her and him and sex. Memories flooded his mind from the night before.

Jesus, he hadn't—

He wouldn't have—

His gaze dropped to her collarbone as his hand lifted to his shoulder. An electric shock passed straight from the mark on his skin to his cock.

"Shit."

Her amber eyes widened as she followed his movement. Her hands fumbled her clothes, and she stroked her fingers over her collarbone. He groaned low, possession gripping his gut at the sight of his mark on her creamy flesh. His *mate* mark.

"Shit," she breathed.

This woman, this stranger, was now his mate. The thought rocketed through him, hitting him in the gut with the subtle force of a sledgehammer. How had he let this happen? He was a man who controlled everyone and everything, especially himself and his women.

His finger pinched the bridge of his nose as he tried to make what his instincts told him fit with what his mind knew.

"Who the hell are you?" His anger was more directed at himself than her, but her flinch told him she'd taken his tone as a direct hit. He bit back another curse.

He'd let a situation slip from his control. And he'd seen in his older brother Quinn what that kind of weakness, what letting a woman get under his skin, could do to a man. How *the hell* had this happened? And with a stranger.

Her face looked familiar, but he couldn't place her. She wasn't a guest. Of that he was certain, so how did he know her?

She swallowed and straightened. Her clothes shifted as she did, and he got a peek at one rosy nipple before she covered herself once more. A damn shame. He wanted to see more. And his body clamored an immediate agreement, his cock rising.

He had the distinct memory of what her skin tasted like on his tongue, and he craved more. A bone deep addiction.

"Leigh Granger."

He knew that name. He wracked his fogging brain, waiting for the synapses to connect in coherent thought.

Damn, but he needed coffee. And about ten aspirin. It had been a long time since he'd had so much to drink. He'd already had one too many by the time he'd seen her across the bar and approached her. He'd offered to buy her a drink and one had turned into...a lot. The rest was an alcohol soaked blur.

He narrowed his eyes on her face. Wide amber eyes dominated a face framed in a smooth mane of golden waves. She wasn't stunning or even beautiful, but something about her drew him to her. Her look was quiet, coolly enchanting. But it was her eyes that caught him. Haunted, pained, secretive. The whole package made him want to explore what was hidden from first glance.

She wouldn't be here unless she was werewolf or mated to werewolf. He winced. Well, now she was mated to werewolf, and the

prick of her fangs in his shoulder made her a shifter of some kind. "You're a..."

Blinking, she tilted her head to the side. Confusion filtered through her gaze for a moment before she grinned. "Lion."

The smile kicked him in the gut hard. God, she was lovely. And *his*. He swallowed. What should a man say to his mate?

Hell if he knew.

He jerked a thumb at his chest. "Leopard."

The grin bloomed into a charming smile. "I know, Mr. Lassiter."

That was it. He knew her now. He groaned, and the sound made hammers pound in his head.

What the hell had he done? He'd gone and mated with an employee. As the resort executive, he kept strict non-fraternization standards for himself with the staff and guests. Dalliances with either type of woman was a bad idea. He blew out a long breath. "The new head of PR."

"Yes, sir." Her spine snapped straight.

He'd been on vacation for the week she'd been here. Cole had called to let him know she arrived, but that's all he knew. Damn it. How had he let it go so far last night? It wasn't like him.

"I'll just..." Her voice trailed off, and she tilted her head toward the bedroom door. She turned as though to make good her escape, and rage flowed through his veins. Possession unlike he'd ever known fisted in his belly.

His mate.

He wanted her back in bed with him, wanted to memorize every detail of her lush body, wanted it with a fierceness he'd never known before.

Mate.

Everything in him screamed for her, this woman he knew nothing of. Lust, possession, and...something sweeter twisted tight in his chest. He tried to cut it off, to distance himself, to regain control. And failed.

"Wait," he snapped. His anger was unreasonable. He knew it, but it didn't seem to make a bit of difference in how he reacted.

She wavered in front of him, flinching at his harsh tone. Some emotion he couldn't identify flowed through her amber gaze before a professional mask slipped over her features. "Yes, sir?"

Another wave of anger rolled over him that she could keep her calm when he could not. Damn it. "*Aidan*. You'll call me Aidan."

Her chin bobbed down in a quick nod, and a small dart of fear flashed through her eyes. If he hadn't been staring at her so intently, he would have missed it. What was she afraid of? Him? He hadn't made a move toward her.

Was she afraid he'd fire her? He held back a snort. As if he'd let her go so easily. No matter how little he knew of her, she belonged to him now. *His*. She'd simply have to get used to it.

Dragging a hand down his face, he rubbed the back of his neck.

What a mess.

He hauled himself out of bed, and her gaze slid to his cock, which twitched and stiffened in response to her attention. He let a slow, hot smile curve his lips. She wasn't as immune as she was pretending. *Excellent*. He barely contained a purr.

"See something you like, Leigh?"

Her gaze jerked up to meet his, and a wild blush tinted her cheeks. "I, um, have to get to work. Right now."

"Have dinner with me. Six o'clock in the lounge." It wasn't a question, and he didn't expect an argument. No one but his siblings ever argued with him.

Her brows rose in response, she swallowed, and her gaze dipped to his erect cock again before glancing away. "I—yes, si—Aidan."

Turning, she bolted from the room. Within moments, his front door slammed shut behind her.

He forced himself not to go after her. He would see her later. It would do, for now. He needed to regroup, to regain some control. He wasn't the kind of man to let it slip through his fingers. Losing it would make him weak, make him vulnerable, and he couldn't allow that. Not ever.

When his brother's mate had died, Quinn had walked away from everything. The family, his responsibilities, his job running the resort. Everything. As second oldest, Aidan had had to step up and take over the reins. He hadn't asked for the position of heir, but he'd be damned if he messed it up over a woman. And he'd resented the hell out of his brother for the better part of the last decade for dumping everything on him and running. Weak, that's what it was. Not being able to cope, to handle himself, to maintain control.

He sighed. Things were complicated as hell with his brother. He'd heard Quinn's mate had been found alive, hidden by her family because they thought a wereleopard an unacceptable mate for a werewolf's daughter. As if a Lassiter was some throw away bastard. He growled. They hadn't really spoken in years, but his brother hadn't deserved that.

He scrubbed a hand through his hair and wandered into the shower. A cold shower. His dick still stood erect, aching with want for the woman who'd just fled his home.

He should have the maids wash the sheets; they reeked of sex. On second thought, he'd leave them. For now.

The cold tiles on the bathroom floor stung his feet. He twisted the dial to start the shower, his mind wandering back to his brother. Quinn hadn't come home when Celeste had been found. He still worked as some menial park ranger in Florida. Jada and Cole, his younger siblings, still had contact with him, but Aidan preferred otherwise. They hadn't seen each other at all since Quinn ran away. Aidan had never understood why his brother ran, and he doubted he ever would.

He was distracting himself with thoughts of his family problems. None of this would help him figure out what to do with the lovely slip of a woman he'd mated himself to in an alcohol-induced stupor last night.

He stepped into the shower and adjusted the water to as hot as he could stand it. To hell with a cold shower. The water sluiced down his body, washing away Leigh's scent. But it couldn't erase the mark on his shoulder, couldn't take back what their drunken recklessness had done.

He winced, a small part of him glad that Quinn wasn't here to harass him for having a one night stand and ending up mated like some regular human in Vegas with an Elvis impersonator.

A mate. What a nightmare.

* * * * *

A mate. What a nightmare.

Oh, God. Oh, God. What had she done? Leigh hadn't bothered to dress, she'd just dumped her clothes on Aidan's living room floor, shifted into her lion form, and made a beeline for the door. Her golden forelegs stretched before her, claws digging deep into the loamy earth as she raced toward her cabin in the early dawn light. The cool fog of the Oregon fall swirled around her legs, and the crisp air cleared the last dredges of alcohol from her mind.

And then she panicked.

Oh, holy Jesus. She'd never intended to mate with anyone after she left Trevor. How could she have bound herself to a stranger for the rest of her life?

No matter how safe she felt at Still Waters, it was superficial. Trevor would come for her. It wasn't a matter of *if*—it was a matter of *when*. How long would she get to pretend normalcy before he ripped her life apart once more and she had to run, to hide, to start over again? Fear skittered down her spine.

And now she was mated to Aidan Lassiter. Her stomach clenched at the thought, but the rest of her body loosened, heated. She shuddered, and a slow ripple of sweet desire filled her. Her snug wooden house came into view, shrouded in the morning mist, and she fled toward it as though her life depended on it. She'd just run from Trevor. Was she insane to want Aidan so much, so quickly? Nothing like this had ever happened to her before.

Matings among the werewolf couldn't be undone. Not ever.

She slammed the door shut to her cabin and slumped to the floor in the entryway. The doors had been specially designed for the resort to let shifters in their animal form get in.

Her heart raced, and her chest bellowed as if she'd sprinted a marathon instead of across a lawn.

She didn't think anyone had seen her. She hoped no one had. What was she going to do? She didn't know.

Shifting back into her human form—the hair retracting, her bones molding into human formations—she walked into the bathroom for a hasty shower. She had about thirty minutes until she needed to be in her office. She and her assistant both started work at seven. Stepping under the heated spray, she shivered as the water hit the mark on her collarbone. Her nipples crested as though fingers brushed over them in the lightest of caresses. Her breath caught. She'd never guessed a mated mark could be so sensitive. Heat flooded her sex, and she grew wet with want.

Aidan's face flashed through her mind, his jaw clenched, his features flushed, passion in his pale golden eyes. Her pussy spasmed. She wanted him. Right now. Would he try to touch her at dinner? Could she resist something that pulled at her very soul? Should she try to get out of it?

Somehow she doubted he would tolerate it. And, unlike with Trevor, the possession in his gaze didn't scare her. It comforted her, wrapped her in a feeling of belonging. How was that even possible? The total acceptance that filled her scared her to death. She'd been with Trevor for almost a decade and had never felt this way.

What was she going to do? The question nagged at her again.

Act as if nothing was wrong, as if nothing had changed. She was desperate to keep a low profile, to regain her balance. Last night was not going to help her with that. The Lassiters were public figures in the community. Still Waters was a world-renowned resort. Mating to one of the resort's owners was not a way to fly under the radar.

She was doomed.

Chapter Three

Aidan leaned back in his leather desk chair and pulled the file toward him. Leigh's file. They did a background check on all of their prospective employees. Most of them never knew how thorough that check was, and they didn't need to know. If they were offered a job here, they passed the check. End of story.

His intercom beeped. "Mr. Lassiter, I'm headed home for the day. Is there anything else you need?"

"No. Thank you." There was nothing anyone could do for him. This he had to do for himself.

Leigh. Her name rolled through his mind, more powerful than the most pungent alcohol. Addicting, enticing. *Mate.*

"Very good, sir. Good night." His secretary chirped. As a canary-shifter, she couldn't help it, though it had taken some time for him to get used to her chipper personality. Jada thought it was good for him, and he'd long since learned when to let his sister have her way.

He cleared his throat. "Have a good evening."

Leigh would meet him at the lounge in half an hour. It was where they'd been last night before they'd gone to his place. He ran the tip of his finger around the rim of his scotch. Last night. He sighed and sipped the drink, thinking. He'd read her file four times today, trying to wrap his mind around the woman. He needed the facts to be prepared. When he was with her his body reacted, and his mind shut down. He wanted to know the woman's past, know everything about her. He supposed he

should feel guilty for the advantage his position gave him, but he couldn't. The thought of facing her unarmed, stripped of all control, was more than he could handle. He needed to know.

The pieces were a jumble. Her parents' death dates were there, the length of her relationships, her school transcripts. He saw a dedicated student, a woman who excelled in every job she'd ever had. It had been what had made them hire her. The rest of the file, the personal details, was what disturbed him.

The number of trips to the hospital, the moving to different cities when too many emergency room visits raised questions, the fear that filled those amber eyes when he'd gotten angry this morning, lead to one simple conclusion: Leigh had been abused.

Rage made his fingers tighten on the tumbler in his grip until the glass cracked. He eased his hold before it shattered. Her ex had beaten her, hurt her. Bile rose in his throat, and his stomach heaved at the thought of her in pain. The connection he felt with her was bone deep, inescapable. It scared the shit out of him.

So, here he was, desperate to learn more, to regain his perspective. Spending the day apart from her, deliberately not seeking her out, hadn't lessened the grip of this unknown feeling in his chest.

"Trevor," he growled. The file gave the werebear's name and address. Leigh's former address. He'd already had his sister's husband, Antonio, begin tracking the man down. He'd never threaten Leigh again. Whatever else happened between them, as mad as it all seemed, she was his responsibility. His mate. He swallowed.

How had she wound up with a man like that? Why hadn't her family protected her? If anyone had lifted a hand to Jada, he would have ended the man. And if he hadn't, Cole or Quinn would have.

Who had protected Leigh? No one. What kind of strength would it take to survive? To leave?

The woman was a puzzle. All he had were dry facts. He needed more. He was going to have to get the rest from her.

Anticipation punched his stomach. More. Would the need ever ease? Would it get stronger as they spent time with each other? God help

him if it got stronger. He knew next to nothing of the woman, but it felt right. All of it did. He forked a hand through his hair. He felt as if he was being jerked in forty different directions. It was crazy, and he couldn't pull himself back from it. So, he had to move forward. But he wasn't giving up control for any woman.

Leigh would just have to get used to that.

Decision made, he stood, flicked the file closed, straightened his tie, left his office, and walked out the front doors of the main lodge toward the lounge. The lodge had the same rustic feel as the rest of the resort, but was palatial in proportion. The whole resort was designed to blend into the natural woodland surroundings. The lounge had the same wooden elegance as the lodge, but none of the formality. Small, round tables filled the space between the long bar and the stage for live music.

He caught sight of Leigh already sitting at one of the tables, her body strung in a tense line. He knew the moment she smelled him, because her shoulders flexed and her chin jerked in his direction, but she didn't look at him.

Right. So that was the way she wanted to play this. Fine.

He approached the bar. "Hi, Katie."

The buxom red head behind the curve of polished wood smiled a welcome. "Wow, two nights in a row. This is a first. To what do I owe the privilege?" Her eyes cut to Leigh, and a knowing grin kicked up the side of her mouth. "Or should I say *who*?"

He cocked a brow. "You shouldn't."

"Noted." She nodded, sobering. Katie had been with his family since her mother came to work for them as a maid. She'd never left, just moved around in their staff until she landed in the lounge. Business had never been better than when she ran the place, and she was fiercely loyal to his family. "What can I get for you?"

"What's she drinking?" He didn't specify further. Katie knew exactly who he was talking about.

"Just seltzer water right now." Her shoulder lifted in a shrug. "Couldn't tempt her with anything else."

Leigh needed to relax, but not as relaxed as she'd been last night. No hard alcohol for either of them tonight. "Wine, then. Red."

Katie dipped behind the bar and came up with two glasses and a bottle. He hooked a finger around the neck of it and tugged it from her hand. She arched a brow, but said nothing and handed over the glasses. "I'll send someone out to take your dinner order."

"You do that." He grinned and saluted her with the wine bottle.

"Yes, sir."

Leigh's head tilted to the side as he approached. "Does everyone always obey you?"

"Yes." He hooked the chair opposite her with his foot and sat down. Setting the glasses on the table, he poured them each a generous serving. "Have you had a chance to look at the menu?"

"I have it memorized."

He glanced up to meet her eyes. "Oh?"

"I'm in public relations. I make it my business to know everything about Still Waters that the public might ask about. I don't like to be caught off guard." One slim shoulder lifted in a shrug.

"Nor I." He sipped his wine and just let himself look at her. A tailored blue pinstriped suit did nothing to hide her lush body. He wanted to strip her and bury himself in her sweet, hot pussy until she screamed out her release. As she had last night, her desires calling to his. "I wonder what else we have in common, my mate."

She hissed out a breath. "Do you have to say that quite so loudly?"

"It's a fact, Leigh. This isn't open to interpretation." And he wouldn't let her hide from it. They needed to deal with this head on. There was no pretending it hadn't happened. And he sure as hell wouldn't let her deny the connection between them. He forced himself to grin. "Mate in haste, repent at leisure."

Taking a gulp of her wine, she waited a moment before speaking. "We don't even know each other."

"I imagine time will take care of that for us."

A waiter approached and took their order. Aidan topped off their wine glasses before he sat back. Perhaps if he appeared at ease, she would follow suit.

She pulled in a deep breath and picked up the conversation where they'd left off. "We could hate each other."

"I doubt that. And we can get to know each other tonight and tomorrow night. Neither of us is going anywhere." He leaned forward, bracing his forearm on the table. "Tell me, do you want children?"

She blanched, all the blood draining from her face. "I—I always thought so."

"What happened?" Something was there. A sore spot for her. Could she have children? He'd never contemplated having them, but it seemed a good place to start the personal questions. Wasn't that something mates should know about each other?

Her eyes went blank. "I miscarried a baby. Not long ago."

"I'm sorry." His gaze met hers. "Are you all right?"

"Fine." She moved as though to rise.

He snapped a hand out to close around her wrist. She sucked in a breath at the contact, and an electric shock went running through him. Her amber eyes softened, heated. Her breasts lifted with each slow breath, and her gaze stayed locked with his. She licked her lips, and his gaze dropped to watch the sensuous movement. The moment stretched, heavy with meaning. "Stay," he said softly.

The waiter set their plates in front of them, and Aidan nodded to dismiss him. He faded away and left them to their meal.

"Eat." She settled in her chair and obeyed. They ate in silence, and her tension seemed to ease by degrees when he asked no more questions. Watching her was a visceral pleasure. His teeth ground every time her full lips closed over her fork. He could picture those lips wrapped around his stroking cock. He'd like to fist his fingers in her silky hair. Her tongue flicked out to catch a stray drop of wine, and he barely contained a groan. His dick rose hard and full in his slacks, rubbing against his fly. He shifted in the seat, trying to ease the strain. Jesus, the woman was going to kill him.

When her gaze flicked up to meet his, she flushed and glanced away. She swallowed, her hands shaking as she reached for her wine glass. "You're staring."

Her scent filled his nose, intoxicating. She was turned on. He could smell her desire. He wanted to taste it, too, feel her come against his mouth. "And you like it."

"Yes," she whispered. Her scent intensified, and he growled low in his throat.

"Are you finished with dinner?" Standing, he stepped away from the table.

She rose, but glanced at his plate. "You haven't eaten much."

He let his desire show in his eyes as he swept his gaze down her body, zeroing in on her hard nipples outlined by her blouse. "I wasn't hungry...for food."

Her eyes closed and pulled in a ragged breath. "Aidan, I—"

His hand closed over her elbow, savoring the delicate feel of her bones beneath his fingers. "Let's go."

"Where?" She followed along beside him, taking two steps for every one of his. He checked his stride to allow her to keep up.

"I'm going to walk you to your cabin."

"Oh. Okay." Her voice sounded dazed, and need pumped in his veins as her scent surrounded him, aroused him. The darkness of night had settled over the resort while they'd eaten, but he could see just as well in the dark as the light. Better, usually. When they mounted the steps to her porch, he spun her to press her back to the door and lifted her chin until she met his gaze.

"I'm not going to fuck you, baby. You said we should get to know each other better. Let's start here." She needed to know he could maintain control. After what he suspected Trevor had done to her, she needed to know she could trust him to never hurt her. He had to keep himself in check. Last night's slip was caused by too much alcohol, nothing more.

He lifted his hand and sifted it through her golden waves. So soft and silky. His thumb stroked along her jaw. She swallowed and closed her eyes. He dipped forward to kiss her, his mouth settling over hers. His

movements were a gentle caress, his tongue moving along her bottom lip before slipping inside to taste her. So good. She tasted as sweet as he remembered. She moaned, the sound filling his mouth. Heat flooded his veins, drove him wild. He cursed softly and started to step back when her fingers clenched in his lapels, pulling him back to her.

"More, Aidan." He watched the rise and fall of her breasts as she panted for breath. She arched, pressed herself firmly to him, and rubbed her stiff nipples over his chest. "Please."

Groaning, he complied. He swooped down to capture her mouth once more, his palm lifting to cup the weight of her breast. His cock ground against the soft juncture of her thighs.

She whimpered and tried to climb him. A wildfire blazed in his blood, her hot, wet scent spurring him on. He gripped her rounded hips in his hands, pulled her up to brace her against the door. Her legs wrapped around his waist, and she moved on him through their pants.

Their mouths mated with each other in rough abandon, nipping, sucking. It felt so amazing. A few more minutes and he would come in his trousers. A few more minutes and he'd take her right here on the porch, breaking his promise to her.

Damn it.

"Stop, Leigh." He tugged her legs down, and let her slide down his body. They both groaned. He made himself let go, but had to grip both sides of the doorframe to stop himself from reaching for her. "Go inside."

Confusion and lust spun together in her hooded amber eyes. She swayed toward him. "But—"

"Go. I'm hanging on by a thread here, baby. I said I wasn't going to fuck you, and I meant it." She turned, fumbling with the latch until the door opened. He winced when it shut in his face. Still he didn't move for long moments as the blood rushed through his veins. His hands fisted, and he ran his tongue down one of his protruding fangs. Lust tangled in a tight knot inside him, and he forced his feet to turn for his house. He stopped on the wide deck outside, not wanting to go in alone. Her scent would be there, on his bed, in his bathroom. Her clothes would still be dumped on his living room floor where she'd left them this morning.

No. He stripped down, shifting into his leopard form as he did. He needed to go for a run before he could face a night in his bed without Leigh. One night he'd had with her, and already he didn't want to sleep without her. Racing for the underbrush of the forest that surrounded the resort, he let his tan and black spotted paws stretch in front of him and ran without aim or purpose, just with the burning need to leave his troubles behind for a moment, clear his head so he could *think*.

How the hell was he going to deal with this? It was unacceptable. How was she doing this to him? He barely knew her, and she laid him out. She was under his skin, and he needed to figure out what to do about that before he touched her again.

Too much was up in the air. Too much uncertainty. He didn't like it. As much as he wanted to possess her, this *thing* between them possessed him just as fiercely. He was skating dangerously close to losing control of himself.

He forced himself to picture Quinn's face when he'd found out his mate died. Aidan didn't want that. He never wanted to give so much of himself to a woman that he couldn't function without her. Not even Leigh. *Never*.

* * * * *

So close. Leaning her forehead against the closed door, Leigh gripped the doorknob in her hand so hard it shook. She'd almost had sex with him, and her body wept juices that showed how very ready it was for more of Aidan's possession. If he hadn't stopped them, they *would* have had sex.

Damn him.

But she knew sleeping with him would only make it worse for both of them when she had to run. Dread skittered over her nerves, stretched them tight. What would Aidan do when he found out exactly what kind of mess he'd mated himself to? She shuddered at the thought of his anger. She couldn't blame him. She would be angry in his position.

And what if Trevor tried to hurt Aidan? She knew from experience just how dangerous the werebear was when he was provoked. And even when he wasn't. The thought of Aidan hurt sent horror spinning through her. No. She couldn't let that happen. He was too important, too vital. She didn't want to examine why, but she knew it was true.

She had to leave before this went any further. She ignored the fact that they were already mated. That wouldn't stop Trevor. It would probably make it worse for everyone.

Oh, God. *Calm down.*

She forced herself to pull in a deep breath and think clearly. What she smelled sent her panic spiraling into terror.

Trevor. Here. In her cabin.

But, no. Even he couldn't have found her so fast, could he?

She took another deep breath. There was no denying the sour, musky stench of werebear. One specific werebear. She'd know his stink anywhere.

The last of the sweetness of being with Aidan tonight drained away.

Trevor had found her. It didn't matter how little time it had taken him. She had to run. There were no other options.

She froze, waiting for the slightest noise to tell her if he was still here. His scent was fading as though he'd come and gone. But he could be outside waiting for her. It would be just like him to lay in wait and savor her panic.

He was toying with her. Anger and fear flashed through her, but she shoved them back. This wasn't the time. She had to think now, had to get out of here before he caught her. Before Aidan got caught in the crossfire.

Walking forward on shaking legs, she stepped on broken glass. It crunched under her shoes. Her eyes swept over the room. Even in the weak light coming from her kitchen she could see the place had been violated, ransacked. The furniture was shredded by bear claws, the mirrors and knickknacks that had come with the place crushed beyond

recognition. She stepped into her bedroom. More destruction, this time including her clothes, make-up. Everything she owned.

She fished her cell phone out of her purse and punched in a number she'd programmed into speed dial the day she'd arrived. "Hello. I'd like to order a cab, please." She forced her voice into calm as she gave them her address. Twenty minutes. More than enough time to do what she needed to do.

The floorboard of the hall closet lifted. Inside was her stash of cash, a small backpack with clothes and toiletries, and a wig she'd put on after she left. Her heart pounded, and sweat slicked her palms, but she made herself sit and wait for the cab. Made herself *not* call Aidan.

She would walk away clean, no excuses or explanations. There was nothing she could say that would make him understand. She didn't see him as the kind of man who would let his woman leave him, no matter how short their acquaintance. And she didn't see him as the kind of man to forgive. Once she left here, it was done. Finished. If she had any regrets on that score, she'd just have to tell herself that sacrificing Aidan meant he'd be safe.

She'd already failed her child; she wouldn't survive failing her mate, too.

Gravel crunched under wheels as headlights flashed in front of her windows. She peeked out the window to see if it was, indeed, the cab she'd called. She took a deep breath and heaved a small sigh of relief when she didn't smell Trevor anywhere nearby. Jerking the door open, she sprinted for the cab, slid in, and locked her door behind her. "The airport. Now."

A wizened old man glanced in the rearview at her as he sped away from her cabin. "Yes, ma'am. You late for a flight?"

"Something like that. Please hurry." She twisted in her seat, watching as Still Waters faded into the soft fog of the Oregon night. Rain began to fall, obscuring her view, but she stayed that way, gazing out the back window until they turned onto the highway.

Her heart stumbled in a painful, broken beat. *Aidan*. God, she hoped this kept him safe. Her eyes pinched closed, and she prayed harder

than she ever had in her life. She swallowed back tears. Please let him be safe.

Chapter Four

Two weeks had passed since she'd run from Trevor. From Still Waters. From Aidan. Her soul cried out for him, twisting her on the sheets of cheap motels night after night. She couldn't sleep, couldn't rest. When she did, she dreamed of him, wanted him. She'd bounced all over the Pacific Northwest on buses and planes, wherever her cash could take her. Portland, Vancouver, and now Seattle.

And Trevor had found her. Again. She knew he would. She'd made herself easy to track this time, hoping to lure him away from Still Waters. It worked. And now that she knew he'd followed, she needed to shake him loose. She just hoped she could. No more hiding among the werekind. She'd have to make her way with humans. Only then might she have a chance.

He was waiting for her outside her motel. She could smell him. Her heart hammered in her chest, and sweat dampened the back of her shirt. She pulled her pack over her back and tightened the straps. Creeping down the back stairs, she slipped into the kitchen. Smiling at the staff, she walked fast enough that no one bothered to question her. After she opened the backdoor, she peeked out to look both ways and try to see if Trevor was out there. In this traffic, she'd go farther, faster on foot.

Darting out of the door, she jogged down to the end of the alley. Rain fell in a steady downpour and had for days now. She was soaked within a few minutes. She peered around the corner...and she saw Trevor. He stood at the back entrance of the motel, waiting for her. And he'd seen

her. Spinning around, she sprinted down the alley to the front of the motel and out onto the sidewalk.

The deep roar of an angry bear split the loud sounds of city. It spurred her to new speed. She desperately wished she could shift into lion form, go faster. *Faster*. She needed to run faster. Her heartbeat jackhammered. Sweat slid down her face with raindrops to sting her eyes. She didn't bother to wipe it away, just ran. Glancing back, she caught a glimpse of Trevor's face, mottled red with fury. Her feet slapped harder down on the wet pavement as she sprinted.

She turned a corner and slammed into a broad chest. A familiar broad chest. Aidan. Tears welled in her eyes; she was so relieved to see him. But, oh holy Jesus, Trevor was right behind her. "We have to get out of—"

Her words trailed off when she actually looked at him. Oh, shit. Out of the frying pan, into the fire. His jaw flexed as he gazed down at her, silent rage darkening his face. He glanced over her shoulder, then back down at her. A hard hand closed over her upper arm. She jerked back, and his grip tightened. "Get in the car, Leigh."

"You don't understand."

"Get. In. The. Car. Leigh."

She swallowed, turned, and climbed into the passenger seat of a sleek black BMW. Her door locked, and she had a feeling if she tried, she wouldn't be able to get out. He wasn't letting her escape.

Bastard. But her panic had receded. As angry as he was, she didn't think he was angry enough to hurt her. Not like Trevor would if he caught her. Of the two, she'd rather deal with Aidan.

He looped around the car, popped his door open, and slid behind the wheel. The car purred to life, spinning away from the curb. She craned her neck to see behind them, searching for Trevor through the rain-blurred windows. "Where are we going?"

He ignored the question. "You're not very good at running, Leigh."

"Well, I went to college, not spy school." *Asshole*. Her fists clenched in her lap, but she kept that sentiment to herself. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safe. Don't worry."

"The hell you say. I'm worried. That man—" She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "That man will kill me without blinking. He's spent weeks hunting me down, and he's not going to give up. And since he got past the world-renowned security of your resort, you'll forgive me if I have to question your definition of *safe*." Her chest heaved as the words rushed out.

He snorted. "Are you done?"

"Fuck. *You*." Rage exploded in her veins, and she felt her fangs slide out before she hissed at him.

His fingers stroked down the wheel, and he didn't even bother to look at her. "I believe that's what got me into this mess."

Hurt slammed into her, hitting her like a hard slap across the face. She gasped at the harshness of his words. They were true—she knew they were. But coming from her mate, they clawed at her soul. Her mouth snapped shut, and all the fight drained out of her. She looked out the passenger side window as Seattle sped past in a blur of stoplights.

"I'm sorry. I would never have dragged anyone into this on purpose. I hope you believe that, if nothing else."

He cleared his throat, and she could feel his gaze on her, but she refused to look. What more could she say? She had no excuses. Alcohol soaked bad judgment wasn't good enough for putting someone's life in danger. She closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the glass. All the weeks—years, if she were honest with herself—of fear and tension caught up with her, rolling over her in a wave of exhaustion. It was hopeless. She'd never escape Trevor. She was a failure at hiding.

A warm, strong hand wrapped around hers, tugging it from her lap. She twisted in her seat to look at Aidan. He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a soft kiss to her fingers. "Forgive me, baby. I shouldn't have snapped at you."

She blinked at him, surprise darting through her. He didn't seem the kind of man who even knew what an apology was, let alone how to offer one gracefully.

"I'll keep you safe, Leigh. No matter what, we're in this together." He slanted her a quick glance before focusing on the road.

"You shouldn't have to be stuck with me. No one should. You can still walk away."

He arched a brow that clearly meant to question her sanity. "We're mated. I can't walk away from you."

She closed her eyes, her shoulders sagging in defeat. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm not."

"What?"

He heaved a sigh and ignored her question again. "We're going to a lake house my family owns. It's where we used to go during summers when I was growing up to escape and have some down time."

"A retreat from everyone else's retreat?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"Yeah. The resort is our business, not our vacation."

"I understand." She let herself smile. "I love it there, though. Still Waters."

"Good, because you'll be spending the rest of your life there. Except when we're on vacation."

"Aidan..." Wariness slid over her. She wasn't even sure enough to plan for the next day, let alone the rest of her life. She just wanted to survive long enough to die of old age. That wasn't too much to ask, was it? "I don't—"

"I do. We're mated, we're going to get through this, and then we'll figure the rest out." His thumb slid in soothing circles over her palm, and she relaxed into the soft leather seat, while the car's heater wrapped her in warmth.

She blinked slowly. When was the last time she'd slept? She shook her head, trying to force herself back to wakefulness.

"I'll keep you safe, Leigh. I swear it."

She shouldn't believe him. She barely knew him. Maybe it was the mating that made her want to trust implicitly, no questions or doubts. But she *felt* safe for the first time in forever, her fingers cradled in his strong hand, his big body radiating assurance. She was desperate for that, for some small chance at hope. She couldn't do this alone anymore. She was always alone. A wave of self-pity washed over her, and she couldn't seem

to push it back as she usually did. She pressed her lips together to keep from crying.

His thumb massaged her hand in slow circles. "Just relax now. Nothing will happen to you while I'm here. Try to sleep."

It didn't seem she had a choice. She obeyed the soft command. She wanted to believe him. She wanted to matter to someone besides the obsessed Trevor. She wanted to be safe. Just for a little while, she assured herself. For a little while she'd take advantage of what he offered before she ran once more. It was selfish and stupid, but she needed him. Aidan.

"Sleep," he said again. Her body relaxed bonelessly into the heated seats and within moments the world had faded to nothing but the soothing swish of windshield wipers and the rocking of the car. Safe, protected, cherished.

* * * * *

Fury pumped through Aidan's veins as he watched Leigh curl up in obvious exhaustion. Dark shadows smudged her eyes. What had she been through these past weeks? His jaw clenched as he fought the urge to shake her for running from Still Waters. It was done now, and he had her back. His brother was meeting them at the lake house, and he suspected Trevor wouldn't be far behind. A nasty smile curved his lips. His brother was the head of security at the resort, and he was damn good at his work.

Aidan took a circuitous route to the lake, just complicated enough that it should take Trevor a day or more to track them, but not too difficult that he wouldn't be able to find them. And then he could face whatever Cole had planned for him. Aidan didn't trust himself to deal with the man, and he had enough to handle with his runaway mate.

Still holding her hand in his, he sucked in a deep breath and caught Leigh's sweet smell. Some small pressure let loose in his chest. More than the blind rage he'd felt when he found out she ran was the terror he couldn't stop. Antonio was the one who'd told him, and he'd seen her trashed cabin. A cold chill ran over his skin at the memory. Trevor could

have killed her, kidnapped her, and Aidan couldn't have stopped it. He would never allow that to happen again. Never.

Whether he liked it or not, wanted it or not, she was vital to him. And he'd damn sure keep her safe. No more running. He pulled in another breath, waiting for the reality of her safety to sink in. Cole had tracked the cab company down that she'd used, and they'd been following her ever since. And following Trevor while he tracked her.

He turned the car down the long gravel drive that led to the lake house, the bumpy ride waking Leigh up. She jolted up right, startled to wake in an unfamiliar place. Panic flashed over her face. He squeezed her hand tight. "We're almost there, baby. Everything is fine."

She pushed the soft fall of her hair out of her eyes and glanced around just as they broke into the clearing in front of the lake. "It's beautiful."

"It is at that." He peered up at the house through the windshield and pulled the car up to the front to park. The big place had been built in the Victorian era and looked like something out of a San Francisco postcard, only with weathered paint.

He'd had the house stocked with enough dry goods that they'd be comfortable, but not so much that it was obvious to Leigh that he'd planned this. He was positive she would never agree to him using them as bait or waiting for Trevor to come to them. She'd gone to a lot of trouble to get away from the werebear and, if Aidan had his way, she'd never have to see the man again. If Cole and Antonio's plan worked out, Leigh might not ever know that they were bait. And that would be just fine for Aidan.

"Stay here and let me check things out."

"You don't think—"

"No. But I won't take a risk with you." He took her chin in his hand and pressed a fast, hard kiss to her lips. Damn, but he wanted more. That little taste wasn't nearly enough. Later, he promised himself. Later he would have her. Over and over until he burned off the fear that sat like an anvil on his chest for the past two weeks.

Grabbing an umbrella from the backseat, he handed it to Leigh. Flipping his collar up, he tugged his own overnight bag from behind the

passenger seat, popped open the door, and jogged to the house. His key slid into the lock, and the knob turned in his hand. He took a breath and found only the musty scent of age, and the newer smell of himself. He hoped Leigh couldn't tell the difference between the scent of him here yesterday to drop off supplies and the scent of him here now. He made a quick tour of the house to spread his smell everywhere.

Then he stepped out onto the porch and waved her in. She hopped out of the car, opened the umbrella, and hurried up the steps. He wrapped her in his arms, wanting the feel of her soft curves against him. She laid her cheek on his chest. "How far are we from other people? I smell others."

"Not too far. There are cabins nearby, people who live here year round." And a team of security experts who were patrolling to try and catch Trevor, but he kept that information to himself.

He pushed her into the house and shut the door firmly behind him. She dropped her bag beside the door and went exploring. He watched the slow sway of her hips as he followed her into his old bedroom. His cock hardened, straining the fly of his jeans. That bed needed to be put to good use. He'd have to check in with their security detail after nightfall, which was soon, thank God. And then she was his. All night.

Anticipation clenched his gut. He'd missed her so much. It was insane, and he didn't give a good damn at this point. He'd had two weeks of hell to know that he wouldn't let her leave his side for the rest of her life. And he intended to see that it was a long, long life.

Her stomach gurgled loud enough for him to hear it, and he chuckled.

"Hungry?"

She blushed and slapped a hand over her flat stomach. She'd lost weight in the last few weeks, he noted. It made him angry all over again, knowing that she'd suffered even that small amount.

He spun on a heel and led the way into the kitchen. He pulled soup out of the pantry, opened the cans, and dumped it into a pot on the stove. "Should be done in a few minutes."

She sat on one of the stools at the kitchen island and eyed him warily. "So...are we going to talk about it?"

His mouth opened and then snapped closed. "No. No, we're not. I'm pissed as hell at you right now, and anything I say will only make it worse. So let's get you fed and then go twelve rounds about how *stupid* it was for you to run."

"You don't understand what he's like."

He arched an eyebrow. "You think that makes this all right?"

"No."

"Good." He turned and grabbed some bowls out of a cupboard, rinsing them out in the sink before dishing them up a generous helping of soup. They ate in silence, and she constantly glanced up at him.

He swung wildly between wanting to shake her for running and wanting to bend her over the island and claim her until she knew she was *his* and could never leave him again.

She pushed back her empty bowl and met his gaze. "Okay, I'm fed. Let me have it."

He chuckled. She was the perfect woman for him. He was never letting her go. Ever.

"I know about Trevor. I know he used to beat you. I'm guessing he had something to do with the baby you lost, and I cannot believe that you'd be foolish enough to throw yourself in his path *alone* by running. You should have come to me, damn it. I would have taken care of you."

"I can take care of myself. But, you know, it's funny. Trevor used to say the exact same thing to me." Her eyes narrowed to dangerous slits.

A low snarl ripped from his throat, and his hand slapped down on the countertop. "Do not ever compare me to him. I would never hurt you."

"I know." She didn't flinch away from him, even though he was bigger than her, stronger than her, and obviously angry.

Good. She was learning to trust him. As she should.

Still, he tilted his head and asked, "Do you?"

She sucked in a breath, but never looked away from him. "Yes. I know not every man is like my ex. My father wasn't."

He let the comment about her ex go for the moment and latched on to the information about her family. "Tell me about him."

"Who?" Confusion shone in her amber eyes, and she looked at him for a few moments, obviously trying to determine what his angle was.

He smiled to throw her off even further. "Your father. Your family. Tell me about them. How the hell did they let you end up with Trevor?"

"They didn't." She shrugged and looked down at her folded hands on the counter.

"No?"

She shook her head. "My parents were both only children, and we were never close to the rest of their families. So...it was just the three of us. They died my freshman year of college in a horrible car accident. A ten car pile up with a semi hauling gasoline. It exploded. No one survived."

"And Trevor?" How had someone like her, beautiful, smart, and sweet, ended up with an asshole who abused her? His hands fisted at the thought.

She sighed. "He was a mistake. I thought he was like my father. But Trevor was a selfish bastard. My dad was just a dominant man—he would never have done the things to my mom or me that Trevor did. That I knew he would do to my child. My dad would have died to protect his family, would have done anything to make us happy. And we knew it. We *always* knew he loved us." Tears welled up in her eyes when she looked up at him, and it ripped his heart out. "It's just...when they died I was so lost, so *lonely*. I would have sold my soul to have someone care." She choked on a sob. "Isn't that pathetic?"

"Not pathetic." His voice came out as a gritty rasp. His hand actually shook when he reached to push her hair back from her face. "I'm sorry, my mate. Sorry for what you went through, sorry I didn't know you then, and sorry I couldn't save you. But I can promise you this: I am nothing like Trevor, and you'll never be alone again."

He opened his arms, and she dove for him, her arms wrapping tight around his waist. He breathed in her scent, savored the softness of her hair under his chin. He closed his eyes and just held her.

She snuffled against his T-shirt. "Don't let go. Just—just for a little while."

"For as long as you need." For the rest of her life.

His. All his.

He sat back on his stool and pulled her into his lap. She curled against him and cried. It killed him a little, every one of her sobs stabbing into his chest. He hugged her tighter, helpless to do anything to erase the horror she had known.

Her sobs quieted to low hiccups. He stroked her hair, ran his fingers through the silken locks, and massaged the back of her neck.

She sighed and purred softly in pleasure. "Thank you."

"Any time." Night had fallen while they sat in the kitchen.

Damn it. He hated to leave her alone even for a few minutes, but he needed to check in with Cole, make sure everything was going smoothly, and that Trevor hadn't shown yet. It should be at least another day before he did, but Aidan wasn't willing to take that chance. Not that Leigh would really be alone. There was a security team surrounding the house, camping out in the woods.

"I need to make a run around the property. Just to make sure everything is safe for the night. Will you be all right by yourself?"

She tensed, and the fear came back into her face. He cursed himself for putting it there, but he didn't have a choice. Cole and Antonio wouldn't hesitate to come in, guns blazing, if he didn't keep to their schedule. They'd assume something was wrong. She gave a tight nod.

"Hurry. The storm is getting worse."

He stroked his thumb over her cheekbone. "A little rain never hurt anybody, baby. I'm locking the door behind me. *Do not* open it for any reason. I'll be back in a few minutes. Don't worry."

Chapter Five

Lightning streaked across the night sky and rain poured down in pounding torrents. Leigh paced in front of the window. Where was he? Aidan had been gone for fifteen minutes already. Anxiety knotted her belly. Where was he?

Fifteen minutes wasn't that long, was it? Her hands trembled as she shoved them through her hair and gripped the long strands. Another jolt of terror shot through her. God, he mattered too much to her. Already. She wanted to blame it on the automatic connection of mating, but she couldn't. It was everything. The sex, the way he came after her and refused to let her disappear into oblivion, the way he protected her, the gruff way he cared. She was brutally honest with herself, didn't allow her to cop out of what her heart knew.

She was in love with him. Her chest tightened, and tears pricked at her eyes. It was the worst possible timing, but she couldn't deny it. Not what he meant to her and not her own feelings. The wonder of it wrapped her in sweet warmth.

What she wouldn't give to survive this and have fifty years with him—her mate. Her body had known him the moment they'd met in the bar. He was meant to be hers, and she was his.

Yes.

But being with her was going to get him killed. Her stomach turned, and a tear slid down her cheek.

Hopeless. It was all so hopeless.

She wanted to stay with him forever, but it could be a death sentence for him. And she didn't think she could survive losing him that way. But what could she do? He'd already found her once. And the hours since had only drawn them closer, made the connection deeper. He'd find her, no matter where she ran. And Trevor would be right on his heels. She pressed shaking fingers to her eyes.

She loved Aidan so much. The sweet pain of it flooded her. Sucking in a deep breath, his scent filled her nose. Aidan. She ran the few steps to the door and threw it open.

The tawny and black spotted leopard materialized from the dark. He shook his coat off on the porch and walked in. Predatory grace reflected in his every movement, and his golden eyes tracked her like succulent prey. His body stretched and flowed as he shifted back into his human form. His naked human form. His cock curved up in a long, thick erection.

"I told you not to open the door."

Eyes locked on his cock, she shut the door and felt coherent thought spinning out of her grasp. "I knew it was you. I could smell you."

"Look at me." Her gaze snapped up to his face, and a flush heated her cheeks. A slow, hot smile curved his lips as he leaned back on the dining room table. His arms folded across his wide, muscular chest. "I told you not to open the door."

She swallowed, excitement exploding in her veins. Her body ached with a need so deep it made her shake. It had been so long since he'd fucked her. *Weeks.* "I—"

"Come here." His voice purred in a guttural order.

Her heart hammered so loud she could hear it. Wetness slicked the lips of her pussy, and she squeezed her thighs together to ease the burn between them. "I don't—"

"Now, Leigh. Come here."

Her legs shook as she stepped toward him.

He didn't move from his relaxed stance against the table. "Strip."

What would he do to her? She wasn't afraid of him. She knew deep in her bones that he would never harm her. Anticipation of whatever he

had planned to pleasure her with hummed through her. She shimmied out of her jeans. Her fingers shook as she slipped the buttons from her shirt. Shrugging, she let it drop to the floor. She wasn't wearing a bra, and Aidan's eyes flared at the sight of her naked breasts. Her nipples hardened almost painfully.

She grinned and repeated his words back to him from their first time together. "See something you like?" Had it only been a few weeks ago? So much had happened since then.

He straightened, his arms dropping to his sides. He nodded to where he'd been leaning. "Bend over the table."

Shock stopped her breath, and her eyes widened. Excitement twisted inside her like a wild thing. "W-what?"

"Trust me." A wicked grin pulled at his lips. "Bend over the table."

Her breath heaved out in torturous pants, and eagerness hummed in her blood. Oh, God. Her knees felt liquefied, as if they couldn't hold her weight. She set her palms on the table to brace herself so she wouldn't fall. She squeezed her eyes closed when she felt his heat wrap around her. He was right behind her, but not touching her. Her pussy clenched on nothingness, aching to be filled by his thick cock.

One of his fingertips grazed her ass cheek, and she jerked in response. More. She needed *more*. Still he only touched her with the one finger, letting her know that he was in control of her pleasure. And his. He dipped between her legs, stroking over her swollen sex, her hard clit. "I love the feel of you, Leigh. Hot and wet for me."

"Yes," she said on a soft breath. God, she needed him. That one finger was driving her mad. "Please, Aidan. I want more."

"No." His finger withdrew from her pussy to tease the insides of her spread thighs. She choked on the want clawing inside her. "You'll never run from me again, Leigh. You're my mate. Mine. Do you understand me?"

Her heart clenched at the quiet possession in his voice. Her breath shuddered out in quick gasps, and she fought to focus, to think. "I did what I thought was right."

"What's right is us staying together. We're *mates*. I can't protect you if you run off." A leopard's hiss filled the room. He stepped close to her, the head of his cock brushing the lips of her pussy.

His hand settled on the small of her back, arching her as he slid all the way into her soaking pussy. Her eyes closed as the love she'd so recently acknowledged and the burning need for him these past weeks coalesced into something sharp and painful. "Aidan."

"Say that you're mine, Leigh. My mate. Always. Mine." He pulled out of her until the bulbous ridge of his dick caught on the edge of her pussy. Then he slammed back in. Hard and fast.

"Oh, God. Aidan." A moan tore from her. He set a deep, pounding rhythm that took her right up to the edge of orgasm, but didn't push her over. She twisted in his arms, but the way his hips shoved her against the table caged her movements. He worked inside her, pushing her closer and closer. Taunting her with the glimmer of release.

He covered her hands with his, pinning her down, surrounding her, dominating her. She couldn't escape him. *Oh, yes.*

He growled in her ear as he bent close. "Never leave me again, Leigh."

"I won't." Her back bowed, and she tried to push her hips back, tried to take him deeper, faster. *Something.* Anything to push her over the edge. She needed it, needed him, needed the surcease that only he could grant her. Her mate.

"Swear it." He shoved all the way into her. And stopped.

A cry ripped from her throat. He couldn't deny her now. Desperation slammed into her. She was so close. So very close. One more thrust of his hard dick and she would come. Her claws slid out to rake the table, the lioness within fighting for supremacy. She opened her mouth and hissed before she gave him what he wanted. *Anything* to make him move. "I swear. I'll never leave you. I'm yours. Yours, yours, *yours.*"

Turning her head, she bit his arm. Hard. He roared, his hands clenching around hers as he pounded forth inside her. She orgasmed, her pussy tightening in rippling waves. She threw her head back, and an animalistic scream erupted from her. Still he thrust deep, and deeper still.

She was so full, and he was so big, that she came once more. Starbursts exploded behind her lids as he went wild on her, in her. Yes. She loved this—him working in her almost to the point of pain, where she skated the very edge of agony and ecstasy. “Yes. Aidan. Yes.”

“Leigh.”

She collapsed on the smooth wood of the tabletop, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. Aftershocks of orgasm still ripped through her system. A soft sob escaped from her throat.

Aidan’s hands went around her, his fingers pushing her hair back, running over her body. “I—I’m sorry. Don’t cry. Please. Did I hurt you, baby? I just...lost it and—”

A watery chuckle slipped free. She turned in his arms to cup his handsome face. He looked so panic stricken. She shouldn’t enjoy it, but it was nice to see him not so in control for once. It made her feel better, as if they were on the same level in this crazy situation that fate and a bottle of Jack Daniels had thrown them into together. “I liked it. I like that you’re not always in control. That I can push you into losing it. In fact, I love it. Let’s do it again.”

She tugged him down for a deep kiss, standing on tiptoes to get closer. After a long moment of his lips playing over hers in a dance of lips and teeth and tongues, he stepped away and blinked down at her. “Whatever makes you happy, baby.”

“It does.” *You do.* She didn’t say it out loud, but it was there in every stroke of her fingers, every caress as she pulled him back to her. *I love you. Don’t leave me. Be safe. I need you forever. I love you.*

Hours later they lay curled together on the couch. She was sprawled across his chest, panting from another round of sex. The man was insatiable. And that was just fine with her. Yawning, she closed her eyes. She shivered as the sweat on her skin chilled. He tugged a blanket off the back of the sofa and threw it over them.

He chuckled. “Was it good for you, too, baby?”

She snorted and bit his nipple lightly. He jerked and snapped his arms around her, rolling her under him. She giggled until she saw the mask of rage that slid over his features.

"It was great for me...baby. Thanks for asking." Trevor's voice sounded from across the living room. Horror streaked through her. No. God, no. Not him. Not here. Not with Aidan so close.

Tears welled in her eyes as she looked at his beloved face. "Aidan, I—"

"Shh," he whispered. "Later."

Only there might not be a later for either of them, but she said nothing more as he hauled them both to their feet to face the man who'd done so much to hurt her. She fumbled with the blanket, pulling it tight around her body.

Trevor's hair hung in dark, greasy strands down his back. He ran his tongue over his teeth. "My little lioness. It was so good to hear you purr, darling. Too bad it's with him. You'll be punished for that. Later. For now, let's deal with this little...*pussy*."

"Touch her and die." Aidan stepped in front of her, but she moved to stand beside him.

"That's a pretty bold statement for a stark-ass naked man with no weapon." Trevor's shaking hand clenched on a handgun, his finger poised on the trigger, and Leigh fought not to flinch. Please, *please* don't let him shoot Aidan. It was her worst nightmare come to life. Her mate, the one man she was destined for, could die right here and now in a wash of blood and rage from the one man she'd thought she could escape.

"We're mated, Trevor. I know you can smell it on us. And you know I'm not talking sex. Mated. You can't undo that." Her heart raced. Cold sweat formed sticky and clammy on her scalp. Her stomach churned with a dread unlike any she had ever known.

How could she stop this? What would make Trevor stop? She knew the answer to that question. Nothing. Nothing she had ever done, including run like hell, had ever stopped him.

"Oh, that's all right, Leigh." His hand steadied the gun, aiming it at Aidan's chest. Even werewolf, with their faster healing abilities, couldn't survive a bullet to the heart. "I know just what to do to make your mate disappear. A widow isn't mated, is she, Leigh? A widow can be claimed

again. Because we both know you're mine. I was patient for years, Leigh. I was good to you."

"Good to me? How many times did you put me in the hospital, Trevor? How many times did you beat me until I couldn't stand?"

Her hands balled into fists. Fury exploded through her that he would even suggest touching Aidan. She would never let that happen. She needed to get him away from her mate. Stepping forward to draw his attention, she made sure to stay just out of his arm's reach. His eyes followed her as she made herself an open target. He swung the gun to aim it at her, but she didn't think he'd shoot her. Not yet. Not when he took such pleasure in the sound of his fists hitting her flesh. He liked her fear and helplessness best, and beating her was how he savored it.

"There's a problem with your little plan. I'd have to claim you as mate, too, Trevor. And I'd rather die."

"That can be arranged." A rusty chuckle slid from him. "You still don't understand, do you? If I can't have you, no one will. Not him, and not some guy somewhere down the road. It's me or no one."

Hate twisted with the terror inside her. The bastard had murdered her unborn child, and now he wanted to strip her mate from her. No. Hell, no. She was through running. She'd run and cowered before, and it hadn't saved her, hadn't saved her baby.

Her heart tripped at the thought of her lost child. *Don't think about it*, she ordered herself. *Focus*. She'd never have another chance for more children if she and Aidan didn't make it out of this. And she'd be damned if she let Trevor win again.

A low snarl exploded from her throat. "What are you waiting for, then?"

She flicked a glance back at Aidan, but he wasn't there. When had he moved? Her gaze scanned the room for him. Trevor seemed to notice the big wereleopard's absence at the same time she did.

Aidan dove for Trevor in his leopard form, his jaw snapping around the other man's wrist. She hit the floor as the gunshot rang out. A sub-bass bear's roar chilled her blood, and when she looked up she saw the two huge predators now circling each other. Trevor's shaggy brown

coat stood on end as he roared. Aidan snarled and swiped a paw out to claw Trevor's nose. Blood gushed from the wound, and he charged the leopard. They went crashing through the front door and tumbled out onto the porch.

Leigh grabbed the gun off the floor and ran after them. She danced around the fighting animals, trying to see a clear shot to Trevor, but they kept moving in a blur of dark fur. Damn, damn, *damn*.

No way would she risk hurting Aidan.

Aidan leaped on top of Trevor, digging his claws deep into the bear's back. Trevor reared back, slamming Aidan into the porch roof. They both toppled sideways, and she couldn't get out of the way fast enough to avoid them. She hit the porch railing hard and slumped to the wooden floor, dropping the gun. Spots swam in her vision for a second.

"Leigh!" Aidan appeared beside her, human once more, and his arms wrapped around her. "Baby—"

She saw Trevor scoop up the handgun and point it at Aidan's back. "No."

Lunging forward, she shoved Aidan out of the way as the gun went off. She couldn't lose him. She tensed and waited for the hot pain of a bullet in her back. But Trevor missed. Aidan's arms enfolded her, rolling them away from the spray of splinters as the bullet slapped into the wood. Trevor ran forward, the gun rising to aim again.

"Aidan, behind you!"

Aidan kicked out, catching Trevor in the knees. The gun rattled away and both men scrambled to get to it first. They wrestled for it, grunting as fists hit bone and sinew. They tumbled across the porch until they hit the railing.

A single shot rang out, and then there was nothing but silence. No birds called. Not even the rain fell. Dead silence. She'd never understood the meaning of the phrase until just now.

A scream of absolute agony ripped from her throat. "*Aidan.*"

Her heart stopped for the longest moment in history as both men collapsed in a heap. She swayed on her feet, her whole world focusing on her mate.

A sob of relief clawed its way free when he moved. Slowly, but he moved. He groaned and rolled to his feet as Cole sprang up the steps and on to the porch, a deadly looking weapon drawn.

And the only thing she could think was Cole shouldn't be here. He should be in Oregon. "H-how did you get here so fast?"

Chapter Six

"Cole." Aidan nodded. His chest heaved as he stood beside the fallen Trevor. He looked to Leigh, assuring himself that she was all right. He closed his eyes for a moment. Thank God. Thank *God*.

"Aidan." Cole jerked his chin at a tall, dark man who walked up the steps behind him. His sister Jada's husband. "You got him, Antonio?"

"Yeah. I always get stuck with garbage duty. Explaining this to the authorities is going to be a barrel of laughs. I could be home with my wife right now, but nooo, Cole's got me running around in the rain." Antonio hauled Trevor's body upright and flipped him over his shoulder before walking out into the night. "Hasn't anyone ever told you people cat's don't like to get wet?"

Cole ignored him and cocked a brow at them. "You two all right?"

"You could have gotten here a few minutes earlier." Aidan grunted, thrusting a hand through his hair.

"You did just fine on your own." He sighed and ushered them back into the house. "We were distracted when one of our men didn't check in on schedule. By the time we found what was left of him, the gunfire had already started going off. We got here as fast as we could."

"There's more of you?" Leigh's gaze flashed to him, her mouth hanging open. "You knew Trevor was coming. You set us up as bait."

He slanted a glance at his brother. "Give us a minute."

"This is going to be all over the werekind papers tomorrow. Aidan Lassiter disappearing after a secret mating stirred up a shit-storm

already." Cole grinned. "Have a nice night. We'll see you back home." He stepped out the door, pulling it closed behind him.

A few minutes of tense silence passed before the roar of an engine started and faded into the distance. They stared at each other, neither moving.

She pulled in a deep breath, and he couldn't help but stare for a moment at the way it lifted her lush breasts. His cock hardened. Would his reaction to her ever ease? He hoped not.

"I'll put together a press release when we get back, try to minimize the damage."

He blinked, and blinked once more. Anger bubbled up inside of him, rolling to a slow boil. After what they'd been through since they'd mated, *that* was all she had to say? His hands were still shaking from seeing her ex hold a gun on her. Shoot at her. A centimeter to the left and he would've lost her. It hit him again like a fist to the gut. He hissed. "You think I care about the damn media? Are you all right?"

"I—yes, I'm fine." Confusion spun in her amber eyes. A strange blankness settled over her face. Shock, he realized. "Are you?" she asked. "You look...fine."

Two strides took him to her side, and he cupped her shoulders in his palms. She trembled in his grasp, her pupils huge as she stared up at him. He shook her lightly. "Talk to me, Leigh."

Tension ran through her muscles, and she jerked away.

"I was so terrified, and you set him up. You used us as *bait*. And you didn't tell me." She drew back her hand and slapped his chest. A sob heaved her chest, and she hit him again. And again. He pulled her to his chest. She tried to hit him once more, but he caught her wrists, pinning her to him. She broke, collapsing against him, tears streaking down her face to dampen his chest. "I was so scared, Aidan. I thought he was going to kill you. I can't—I c-can't—"

He buried his face in her hair. "Shh. I have you. It's all right."

She sniffled and pulled back, smacking his chest again. Fire blazed in her amber gaze. "You used us as bait, damn you."

"I did." He couldn't deny it. Once he'd found her, he knew Trevor would keep coming for her. And he wasn't a man to run and hide. "You couldn't run forever, Leigh."

"You could have been killed."

"You damn near were," he growled. Remembered terror speared him. He'd forever have the image burned into his memory. His mate in danger, helpless to save her. His jaw flexed.

"You think I care about the danger to me? You could have—I was almost responsible for—" A low whimper of pain pulled from her throat, and her eyes slid closed.

He knew that pain. He felt it himself. For her. Lifting his fingers, he tangled them in the soft strands of her hair. He needed to touch her, to make her understand what she meant to him. Regret bit deep as he thought about losing her without her ever knowing what she'd come to mean to him in the past few weeks. No matter how fast their mating had been, he'd never regret it. Never. "I care. *I* care about the danger to you. I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry you almost got hurt. Jesus, I'm so damn sorry."

She threw herself into his embrace, wrapping her arms around him.

Yes. Oh, yes. He needed to touch her, feel it to his bones that she was unharmed.

"Aidan."

"Leigh." He picked her up, cradling her slim form to his chest. Mounting the steps, he carried her to their room and laid her on the bed. He dragged in a slow breath, pulling her scent to him. Soft, feminine woman. Feline. His mate. Aroused for him.

She arched her body under his gaze. She reached for him, her fingers brushing over his chest. Her nails raking his nipples lightly.

His breath tangled in his chest.

"Please, Aidan. I need you now. I need you so much."

He groaned, lowering himself over her. He wanted to be gentle, to cherish her. To show her what words could not. She'd had enough words from Trevor. For years. Nothing he said could prove what he felt. He wasn't even certain he could put the depth of it into words. He'd never felt something like this for any woman. Only Leigh. Bracing himself on his

elbows above her, he leaned to the left to raise his right hand and run his fingertips over her hip. Her breath caught, and her thighs parted as she arched herself in offering. A hot smile curved her face, and she bit her bottom lip. His chest banded tight in emotion just looking at her.

Only Leigh.

She twisted under him, groaning when he slipped his hand up to cup her breast. His lips brushed over hers, and she opened for him. Their tongues stroked together. She moaned into his mouth and a punch of lust hit his gut. She bit him, her fangs sliding out to scrape his lip. The tang of blood in his mouth drove him wild, her taste shoving him over into feral need. His cock had been hard the moment he touched her, but her excitement fed his. His cock was rigid, full to bursting. He wanted her. Craved her.

Trailing his hand down her torso, he pressed his fingers between her legs. He stroked over her hard clit. She cried out and clamped her hand over his wrist. He pulled back to look down at her. "Something wrong, baby?"

"Not a thing." One side of her mouth kicked up, and she shoved his fingers deeper into her pussy, into the hot channel. He groaned, his cock jerking.

"Damn, baby." Heat slammed into him, tightening his gut as he moved his hand on her. Her wetness coated his fingers. The musky scent of her arousal sent him skating to the ragged edge of his control.

Her hips squirmed, working his digits inside her. He thrust in, angling his fingertips until he—*ah, yes*. That was the spot that made her scream. An animalistic shriek ripped from her throat. Her pussy flexed on his fingers, and her knees closed over his forearm. He stroked inside her over and over, loving the clench of her inner muscles on him.

"Aidan." Her voice caught on a soft sob. "I love your hands on me. I love the feel of you. Make love to me. Please."

He needed no more encouragement than that. Yes. Oh, yes. He growled low, all the pent up need inside him ripping free. Moving over her, he settled between her soft thighs. The silk of her flesh slid against his hips as she wrapped her legs around his flanks and made him groan.

Guiding his cock to the wetness of her core, he sank to the hilt within her. Her sweet warmth clenched on his dick. He swallowed and closed his eyes to savor this moment. The band around his chest tightened further.

Her claws slipped out to curl into his back, raking down his skin. Oh, *God*. His hips bucked hard, slamming home. She screeched and arched to rub her nipples over his chest.

"You feel good, Leigh. So good..."

"Yes. More. Please." She lifted her head, offering her lips to him.

He took her mouth hard, thrusting his tongue into the moist cavern. Desperation rode him hard as he ground into her. Her scent, her hot skin was too good. Too much. Her soft, excited moans into his mouth drove him on. He felt as if his head were going to explode.

Her hand moved to cup his jaw, a smile on her lips. "So perfect."

Oh, yes. Perfect. Sweet relief wrapped around his soul that she was safe, and she was here, and she was his. Something inside him loosened and broke free at the knowledge. He *needed* her. He couldn't live without her. He opened his mouth and finally found the right words for it, this emotion that slammed into him like a tidal wave when she was near. "I love you, Leigh. I'll always love you."

A tear streaked down her cheek as she bowed in his arms. Her sex fisted on his cock rhythmically. "I love you, too. My mate. My Aidan."

"Yes." He clenched his jaw to fight the orgasm, to draw it out for her, for them. Slipping his hand between them, he worked his fingers over her clit. His fangs slid out as control spun from him. Only Leigh. Only Leigh could strip him bare. He threw back his head and roared.

Her pussy flexed on his cock so tight that he could feel the deep contractions. The lioness within her shrieked as the orgasm took her, calling to his leopard. He loved watching her come, the hot flush of satisfaction on her face. He shuddered, held her close when he collapsed on top of her him, and rolled so she lay on his chest. Her arms curled around his neck, and she buried her face against his neck. They panted together, just holding each other as they came down from the rush.

"I love you, Aidan." Her body relaxed, and her eyelashes brushed over his skin when she closed her eyes.

Within a few moments, her breasts moved against his chest, lifting in the deep rhythm of sleep. Good, she needed to rest. His hand cupped the back of her head, and he turned to lower her to the mattress.

He stroked her golden locks away from her face. She was so lovely.

His chest tightened with that almost familiar band of emotion. Now he knew what it was.

Love. Deep and lasting. Mated love. *Yes*. It was so right. It shook him to the very core.

He had no control with her, and it scared the hell out of him. But he wouldn't walk away from her for anything. Ever. He'd learn to cope with the fact that she made him crazy. She'd thrown herself in front of a damn bullet for him. Fitting his body to hers, he lay beside her, seeping himself in her scent, in the feel of her silky skin.

She curled on her side away from him, her back pressed to his chest. He sighed, contentment winding through him. He closed his eyes, letting relief wash through at the knowledge that she was all right, that she was safe.

He'd set them up as bait, but Trevor wasn't meant to get past Cole. The werebear was never supposed to be near Leigh. Aidan swallowed hard. Losing her would be more than he could handle. He'd never survive it. Needing her so much terrified him, but there was no denying it now.

How had his brother survived? Quinn had lost his mate, and he'd watched the soul leech from his brother. Now he knew why. And he knew there was one more thing he needed to do tonight. Rising silently from the bed, he scooped up his cell phone and punched in the speed-dial for his brother in Florida.

"Hello?" Quinn's deep voice boomed through the phone.

"Hey, Quinn."

"Aidan?" His brother's tone sharpened. "Is everyone all right? Jada and the baby?"

"Yes. They're all fine. Jada's not due for another couple of months." He swallowed, uncertain how to put to words what he was feeling. Things had never been easy between him and his older brother. A natural rivalry had turned into an inability to connect, to communicate somewhere along

the way. "I—I'm getting married. I mated to a werelioness. Her name is Leigh."

There was a long pause on the phone, and Aidan thought his brother might have hung up. Then he heard a sigh crackle the phone line. "Congratulations."

"I didn't call to tell you that."

Quinn grunted. "No? Well, get it said, brother."

A chuckle pulled from Aidan's throat. That was Quinn. No patience, just the facts. "I wanted to say...that I'm sorry." He blew out a breath. "I thought that you were weak for leaving after Celeste died. Or we thought she died. I didn't understand why you left, why you walked away from everything."

His gaze landed on the smooth curves of his mate lying naked in his bed. Her soft breasts rose and fell in the slow rhythm of deep slumber. He sighed. Was there anything sweeter than watching your woman sleep? The thought of losing her, of how close he had come to the grief his brother had known for eight long years, almost drove him to his knees.

His voice came out a harsh rasp. "I'm sorry, brother. I didn't know what it could do to a man—loving a woman."

Quinn snorted. "It'll rip your heart out. And that's if you found the right one."

"I did." A small smile curved his lips. "I want you and Celeste to come to the wedding."

Another long pause greeted that invitation, and Aidan swallowed. Regret pierced him. Too many years had passed, too much had come between them for his brother to ever come back home. He reached out and curved a hand over Leigh's silky hip. Just touching her was a comfort.

"We'll be there." He started at the sound of Quinn's voice. A soft feminine murmur sounded in the background. Celeste. His brother's mate. Quinn chuckled in response to whatever she had said. "I have to go. Celeste...needs me."

Sure, she did. Aidan grinned. "Tell her I said hello. And have fun filling all of her...needs."

"A man's work is never done." Quinn's voice took on a long-suffering tone. Celeste sounded an obvious protest at that, but it dissolved into a giggle. "Bye, brother."

"Bye." He clicked the button to turn off his phone, and Leigh sat up in bed.

A small smile curved her lips, and she reached for him. "Come back to bed."

He slid in next to her, pulling her into his arms. She cuddled up to him, dropping back into sleep. Contentment wound through his chest. Perfect. He let himself go, let himself enjoy this one quiet moment with her.

His life stretched out before him, open to amazing possibilities that weren't even there two weeks ago. Thanks to Leigh. He never would have imagined anyone like her as his mate, never would have allowed himself to touch her if he hadn't gotten drunk that night.

He shook his head and smiled. Life was one hell of an amazing thing that way.

He closed his eyes and drank in the scent of her.

His mate, his heart, his soul.

Author Bio

Crystal Jordan only began writing about a year ago, after she finished graduate school and needed something to fill the hours that used to be consumed by homework. What started as a hobby has quickly become a new career. She now writes paranormal, futuristic, contemporary, and erotic romance. Additionally, she is a member of RWA and its erotic romance chapter, Passionate Ink. She also belongs to the award winning author's resource Web site and forum RomanceDivas.com, where she serves as a moderator and Paranormal Co-Liaison.