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What's a Ghoul to Do?
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What's a Ghoul to do?

Mardi Ballou

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the wonderful readers out there—and to Lee, my first and always reader.

Chapter One

Rafe Graywolf scooped his gorgeous date up and kicked open his door. Her perfume fogged his brain as she nuzzled against him. Warm. Hot. His erection throbbed.

“I’ve been waiting all night to get you back here,” he growled.

Lana licked his neck with her talented tongue and his balls contracted.

Then he made his first mistake. He turned on the light and saw them, waiting. August Graywolf and Benedict Volpe. Triple shit. How had the two elders, doddering and past their prime, managed to get into his cottage?

That was when he made his second mistake. He almost dropped Lana. Though he managed to hold onto her, her whimper came from frustration, not sexual desire. The mood was now broken, erection now history. He set her down and encircled her with a possessive arm.

August cleared his throat. “We didn’t know you’d have company.”

Right. Like he was supposed to check in with them about his social life. Rafe aimed his death glare at his uncle. “Unlike you, she’s invited. As in, let me hold the door open for you. Tomorrow you can tell me why you busted in here while I was out.”

“We apologize for intruding, but we didn’t bust in.” Benedict held up a key.

August cleared his throat. “I’m afraid we can’t leave. A situation has arisen that needs—”

“You could have phoned.” Rafe exercised excruciating effort to hold together the shards of his temper.

“We didn’t want to leave a message on your machine. You didn’t answer your phone or your page...” Benedict was looking at his feet.

Oh, yeah. The vibration. He’d figured that was part of Lana’s charm. “Can’t I ever take a single night off? I’m sure there must be someone else who can handle whatever’s come up.”

“No,” August responded. “Maybe you should give the young lady cab fare home so we can tell you what’s going on.” August was Rafe’s uncle. He and his fellow elders had convinced—more like coerced—Rafe to take up the position of pack alpha. After all their effort to get him to change his life plans and become alpha, Rafe expected the elders to be grateful. Yeah right. They messed up his dates, bugged him twenty-four seven and kept demanding more.

“Absolutely not,” Rafe gritted out. He started to draw Lana closer, but she resisted.

“Maybe it’s for the best that I go.” Her husky voice gave him goosebumps.

Shit, shit, shit. This was the third date the two old men had messed up in the past two weeks. Rafe had told them, in short but expressive terms, that their interfering snouts were not welcome in his private life. As was all too clear, the message hadn’t gotten through yet.

“She’s staying and you’re going. Unless it’s life or death, whatever you want can wait until morning.”

“It’s life or death,” August whined. “We wouldn’t bother you for anything less.”

Right. And they had some swamp land to sell him. He folded his arms in front of his chest and adjusted his face into his most menacing frown. “State the matter or leave. Better yet, do both. Now.”

“We can’t speak of this confidential matter in front of someone who’s not a member of our pack,” Benedict enunciated each syllable.

Rafe didn’t believe a word either old coot muttered. On the other hand, could he take a chance? Maybe this time there was a modicum of truth in what they were saying.

“It’s okay. I’ll go,” his date whispered.

No. His body screamed in protest. He didn’t want to spend another night jawing with these two about pack politics and other crap that could wait for regular business hours. “I’ll get rid of them. Lana, I don’t want you to go.”

She fluttered her lashes and licked her pouty lips, but the mood was gone. The two old men stood hovering like vultures.

He drew her away from their prying eyes and bent close to whisper, "I owe you, big time. Next time, let's go out of town so these two can't find us."

She kissed her fingertips, then pressed them to his lips. "I'll count on it."

"Want me to call you a cab?"

"Nah. I have a buddy who will pick me up." She went through the door, leaving behind a whiff of her scent to torment him the rest of the night.

Feeling murderous, he turned to the two old men. "Talk. This had better be very good."

"According to the latest intelligence reports, a pack down from Vancouver is planning to set up shop here," Benedict started.

Another pack was moving in. This was life or death news? "Calling them 'intelligence' reports is a gross misuse of the word. And I fail to see why this news provoked you to torpedo another of my nights off."

His uncle shook his head. "This is the same bunch that tried to hone in on our turf twenty-five years ago. They're aggressive and ruthless. Last time, with your father leading us, we barely managed to repel them. All our sources say they're better prepared and more determined than ever before."

Despite himself, Rafe began to realize he should pay attention. He remembered when his father and the other males had to go on battle alert. The Vancouver pack, the Loups-Noirs, had come within a very short hair of defeating the Wentworths. Though the Wentworths won, males of his father's generation bore battle scars until the end of their days. His father, the pack alpha, had to struggle all his life to compensate for a painful limp.

Before Rafe assumed leadership, the elders had confided the shameful news that the other packs perceived the Wentworths as weak. They'd known he wouldn't be able to resist this challenge to the Wentworth honor. It fell to him to lead at this critical time when they'd have to rebuild their image and fight off the Loups-Noirs. Failure was never an option. Having dedicated himself to right what had gone so wrong, Rafe lived and breathed pack business. The threats they faced were not so pressing and immediate as to

justify the elders' intrusion. Still, since the night had been ruined, he might as well get to work.

"All right. Give me the reports." Neither of them moved.

"Come on. You got what you wanted. I'm now available to work on pack matters. So give me the reports and then you can go mess up someone else's date."

August looked at Benedict and nodded. Rafe's gut clenched. He braced himself.

"One more thing, Rafe. It's past time for you to choose your mate and get her established. Though most of the pack appreciates your taking on the mantle of leadership and approve of how you're handling things, there's always a group of malcontents. They've been talking, starting trouble."

Rafe winced. "I never promised to make everyone love me."

Benedict waved his hands in dismissal. "We're not saying you should. But, you see, they have a legitimate point, and thus they can complicate everything we're trying to do by directing everyone's focus the wrong way."

"Let's cut to the chase here."

August nodded. "The only way to silence the troublemakers is to take away their source of complaints. Namely, present your mate to the pack."

Damn. There it was, the real reason why they'd come. Well, he'd asked them to get to the point. "We've been over this before. I made it clear when I agreed to help out. I have no intention of hooking up with a mate now. Maybe in ten years, maybe never, but not now. You all agreed that would be okay because of the emergency."

"We've had to revise that stance. Your not having a mate is having a more harmful effect on the pack than we anticipated." August's lips trembled and his voice became quite weak.

Rafe bit back a harsh reply. Despite all his uncle's manipulative schemes and outright coercion, Rafe cared about the old man, about the pack. Still... "Judging from the way you reacted to her, I assume neither of you would consider Lana a suitable mate for the pack alpha."

Both men grew pale. “Are you planning to propose—” Benedict clamped his hand down over his heart as if to ward off cardiac arrest.

“I hadn’t given it a thought. But, busy as I’ve been, I’ve hardly had time to look for dates, let alone potential mates.” He furrowed his brow and then smiled, as if a great idea had just come to him. “It’s time to think outside the box. I need to update the pack’s ideas about the alpha taking a mate, starting now.”

“No sense being hasty.” August stroked his chin. “Let’s talk. You see, Benedict and I have come up with some surefire ideas.”

Determined not be railroaded again, Rafe sat down. He donned his psychological armor, folded his arms in front of him, and began to listen.

When she got to work, Lilith Graves checked for any news that had come in during the night. She sighed with a mix of contentment and a more complex emotion as she read the latest wedding announcement—yet another couple matched up by Fangly, My Dear. The agency her best friend in the world, Dominique LaPierre, had founded earlier that year was exceeding all their most optimistic projections. Dominique credited Lilith as the inspiration for the successful business, dedicated to helping beings from all the communities in the San Francisco Bay Area find their best possible matches. Though Lilith’s generous trust funds meant she didn’t need a job, she enjoyed her work at Fangly, My Dear and the office’s upbeat atmosphere.

Since Fangly, My Dear had come on the scene, Lilith would swear the percentage of happy couples in San Francisco had risen. Even Dominique, who’d sworn off relationships after a string of disastrous breakups, had found her soul mate. The most hardened cases succumbed to Dominique’s matchmaking formula—cutting edge high tech plus a good dose of old-fashioned white witch magick.

It seemed there was only one person in the San Francisco area they couldn’t find a match for—Lilith P. Graves. She tried not to identify with the kid who had her nose pressed to the candy store window but never got any goodies. Still, despite Dominique’s

efforts to find her a match, Lilith often clunked out of the system like a fifth wheel. She dreaded that her name would never grace a wedding announcement. Wedding? Heck, at this point she was more likely to travel to Mars than ever be a bride.

She sighed. As a vegetarian demi-ghoul—her dad was a ghoul, her mom a human empath—Lilith realized she presented a matchmaking challenge of Olympic proportions. Her mom, with her exquisite sensitivity to everyone's emotions, was not the problem. People often wondered how she'd gotten together with Lilith's father—a real case of opposites attracting since his ancestors included creatures who hung out in cemeteries and ate the flesh of the dead. Then there was Great-uncle Henry who'd shapeshifted into hyena form to munch on the occasional lost traveler. Lilith recognized early that Dad's side of the family was different. They'd modified their diet to fit into modern society, but the old stigmas stayed with them. Though she loved her ghoul relatives as much as her human ones, Lilith realized society relegated her family to the lowest link of the status chain. Outside their own group, ghouls were not considered particularly desirable because of their dietary choices. Understatement. On the other hand, her fellow ghouls didn't look too fondly on Lilith's commitment to vegetarianism.

She might hold the world record for being a one-date wonder. No one in recent years had called back for a second date. When she'd seized the initiative and contacted guys she'd liked, their excuses for turning her down were legion. Heck, a girl could develop a complex. A solitary tear made its way down her cheek. *Oh great. Now I am going to mess up my mascara and have to redo my face.*

Dominique breezed into her office, looking like she'd just won the lottery. "You'll never guess who's coming to us for a match."

"Who?" Lilith turned her head to wipe her tear away.

"The Wentworth Werewolves." Dominique rolled her eyes. "I can't believe it. That group has been dragging their feet on getting with the program. Now that they've come around and gotten a whiff of what we can do for them, they want us. I'm psyched."

"The whole pack has signed up for matches?" That would be a coup.

Her friend waved a hand. "Not yet. But they will. They're signing their alpha up. Imagine that, the alpha! Once we match him, it'll be a cinch to get the rest of the pack. Then our reputation will spread to other packs."

"What does that mean, 'they're signing their alpha up'? Isn't it his choice to come in? And isn't the alpha the big boss? How come he's letting someone else sign him up?"

Dominique shrugged. "I think you're looking at this the wrong way. You see, the alpha needs a mate. The Wentworths' alpha insists he can come up with his own mate, but he hasn't. He also says he doesn't want to follow the pack directives as to when he'll pick his mate. But according to pack rules, he needs to name his mate within a certain amount of time after he becomes alpha or he has to give up his office."

"Nothing like putting pressure on the guy."

Dominique eyed her. "That sounds a very pessimistic interpretation of his situation."

"Well, I don't get the impression the alpha is up for a match. That might make our job tougher."

"But we thrive on tough. As to reluctant candidates, remember what a tough case Antoine was? But look at him now. Not only is he one of our biggest supporters, well, do I need to finish the rest?" Dominique blushed, which didn't happen often.

Lilith adored her friend and was thrilled that she'd settled in San Francisco and found Antoine, the love of her life. Still, sometimes all that positive energy could be grating, like when her own chin was dragging on the ground and there were no imminent signs of change.

"When's the alpha coming for his intake?" she asked. Lilith figured focusing on business would improve her mood.

"In about an hour."

"Do you want me to handle it?"

"Since this one's so important, I thought we should both be in on it."

"Okay. Do you have any background info you want me to read first?"

"Check out the pack online. Their website includes information about their traditions, including the requirements for the alpha and his mate."

“Gee, Dominique, it just hit me. This alpha’s looking for his mate.”

“His whole pack is behind him on this.”

“That’s a heck of a lot more serious than looking for a date for him.” Even though many of their couples ended up in committed relationships, people usually started their search with regular dates—far less pressure.

Dominique nodded. “The alpha isn’t looking for social connections. From what the pack’s representative said, the alpha has no problem getting dates. But if a candidate isn’t going to work as a mate, we’d be wasting everyone’s time setting them up.”

“What’s his name?”

“Rafael Graywolf. Everybody calls him Rafe.”

“Rafe. I like that. Rafe Graywolf. His name sounds sexy.” Lilith went to her desk and got the website up. She didn’t know any werewolves. Given her vegetarianism, she figured there’d be the same kind of obstacles to socializing with them as there were with the hugely carnivorous ghouls.

The Wentworth Werewolves were an old San Francisco pack with roots going back to before the 1849 Gold Rush. Just like many old San Francisco families, over the years they’d amassed great wealth and social standing.

The website featured photos of Rafe in both forms. He had the most amazing, piercing eyes, a gaze that compelled her even in a mere photo. As to his powerful body, as man and wolf, his sleekness and strength... It wasn’t just his name she found sexy. She sighed and pushed that thought aside. Business is business, she reminded herself.

According to what she read, the requirements for the alpha’s mate were quite rigid. Rafe had to look outside his pack for a bride. Being noble both by blood and by his position, Rafe had to choose a female of a rank equal to or higher than his own. As the agency designated to locate a mate, Fangly, My Dear would have to adhere to all the specifications. Much as both she and Dominique enjoyed challenges, setting up a search with so many stated parameters would be frustrating.

As she gazed at Rafe, Lilith sensed working with this man would be far more complex than she could imagine. She couldn’t deny that he appealed to her in ways no

one else had in a long time. With a pang she realized she wanted to be matched with him. Talk about a direct route to disaster. Almost all the other shifter groups viewed ghouls in a negative light. Many times in their long history, the other shifter groups—werewolves, all the were-cat groups, even were-snakes—had tried to overcome their own rivalries to unite and expel ghouls. In fact, werewolves had the reputation of being the ghouls' fiercest enemies—and had tried the hardest to remove them. The werewolves had never made peace with having ghouls in the shifter community. As an alpha, Rafe was an uber werewolf. Even if she could somehow catch his interest, no way could he become involved with her—at this point, not even for one date.

Lilith tore herself away. Mooning over Mr. Inaccessible Alpha would be a sure path to depression. She needed to get to work and help Dominique find him a perfect match—and, no, it wasn't her. But her hormones raced and her heart yearned. She opened her arms wide to the universe and invited love to come her way.

Rafe Graywolf raced through the woods. The underbrush snapped and low branches tore at his face as he tried to outrun the frustrations of a long, sleepless night. If only he could stay in wolf form and turn his back on his complex responsibilities.

At age thirty-three in human reckoning, he was young to be an alpha, but he expected the pressures that went with the job would age him fast. Though his family had a long tradition of leadership, he'd assumed it would be years before he had to take his turn. The sudden, unexpected death of the previous alpha, his Uncle Jack, had started the pack's downward spiral. Then, under the acting alpha's regime, the pack had responded weakly to two bouts of aggression and lost a hefty percentage of their funds in bad investments.

With everything falling apart, there was no way Rafe could have turned down the elders when they'd tracked him to the East Coast and begged him to return home. The way they'd put it, only he could save the pack. The call of family and tradition had seduced him away from his very satisfactory life as visiting professor at a major

university. As a guest of an old Massachusetts pack, he'd been able to limit participation in shifter politics to a level he found tolerable.

All that changed when the Wentworth delegation had arrived and guilted him into becoming the pack alpha.

He'd returned home. In the two years he'd been away, the pack's situation had deteriorated almost beyond recognition. Teeth clenched, he'd set to work. In a short time, things began to improve. He even allowed himself to make tentative plans to return to the East Coast and resume his interrupted life there.

But Rafe hadn't paid enough attention to the details of his agreement with the pack. How had he overlooked the loophole naming him alpha for life? The real clincher for him was the thin veneer that separated success and disaster for his pack. After he learned of the horrors they would face if he didn't remain to follow through on the changes he'd made, he couldn't let them down.

Which led him to where he was today—signed up with a dating service to find a mate. Of all the ridiculous scenarios he'd ever imagined getting caught up in, none compared to a dating service. For a mate! According to the elders, he was supposed to settle down with this woman for life. It was the wolf way. *Grrrr*. He'd seen other good men laid low by the life mate thing and sworn it wouldn't happen to him—at least not until he was too old to care. But his uncle had started on him by invoking flattery and guilt. In Rafe's hands, his paws, whatever, lay the precarious future of the Wentworths. They needed to publicize that his appointment as alpha was for life—just like a prison sentence for a major crime—or their enemies would pounce.

To achieve maximum effectiveness, he needed to share his throne with *the* mate. The fate of his pack hung by this thread.

If he heard those words once more, he wouldn't be responsible for his actions. Just then a piercing whistle set his nerve endings on edge. The microchip implant he'd agreed to rendered him on call to his pack even when he'd taken his wolf form and was desperate for solitude. If they were once again summoning him to deal with a trivial

matter, fur would fly. On the other hand, they all knew the story of the boy who cried wolf—

Swallowing a groan of frustration, Rafe returned to the designated meeting place, also the place where he'd stowed his gear, assumed an aggressive stance and glared. In moments, two messengers flanked him. They pawed the ground and emitted three short barks, signaling that they'd need to transform back to human form in order to convey their message. Crap. Rafe had been hoping they could simply communicate whatever the hell was going on in wolf form, after which he'd take off again. The need to revert to human form meant the message was complicated or that he'd need to handle the current crisis pronto. Maybe both.

Rafe completed his transformation first. He'd managed to pull on his jeans before the other two realized they didn't have clothes. Judging from the nervous expressions on both men's faces, neither had been too eager to come after him and he could see their nakedness added to their unease. He looked from one to the other. Two brothers, barely out of their teens, John and Keith Volpe. With a grunt, he tossed them extra clothes and shoes from his Jeep and waited till they'd dressed before speaking.

"What is it, guys?"

"You have an appointment," John mumbled.

"An appointment? With who? The governor of friggin' California?" It had better be at least that important.

The two brothers looked at each other. Evidently, Keith had drawn the short straw and had to talk next.

"Don't know. Your assistant told us to get you. She said you need to clean up. Something about Fangly..."

Fangly? *What the hell is Fangly—*

Then he remembered. That was part of the name of the matchmaking agency the elders had set him up with, like he was some weeping wallflower who needed a matchmaker to get him a date.

He started to growl his refusal to go back with them, but stopped when he saw John and Keith cringe. Rafe didn't consider terrifying the young part of the job description for alphas. Besides, his current mess wasn't the messengers' fault. Determined to assert his identity and have "no" mean "no" to his people, he'd make sure the right people got the message.

Rafe dismissed the young brothers, who looked relieved to go on their way alone. He envied them and their freedom.

Then, determined to reassert his own, Rafe got into the Jeep and drove back to his office.

When he arrived, the full band of elders awaited him.

August pounced first. "Where have you been? We had to twist arms to get you an intake appointment on such short notice." He looked Rafe up and down, seeming to take issue with his well-worn jeans and flannel shirt. "You can't go to Fangly, My Dear dressed like that. First impressions count."

Rafe folded his arms in front of him. "I don't recall agreeing to meet with Fangly, My Dear or anyone else tonight. And I'm going on the record now, when I'm out for a run, don't interrupt me for anything less than a major disaster—at least of six-point earthquake magnitude."

The four elders looked at each other as if acknowledging they were dealing with a dimwit. Benedict Volpe put a reassuring arm around August's shoulders. "We have discussed this. We realize that, as alpha, your plate is full and you haven't given top priority to the matter of a mate. But the time has come. If you don't choose a suitable mate, adversaries will have an opening to attack you."

Rafe could feel his mouth curl with contempt. "We've been through this, numerous times. We all agree that after everything I've accomplished in a short time to pull the Wentworths back from the brink of disaster, potential rivals have no strong platform."

All four elders shook their heads. "Rafe, you've accomplished wonders so far. But, as you young folks say, it's time for a reality check. There are packs just waiting to devour us and our resources. Granted, you put out the initial fires with your first round of

action. You still have to realize, my boy, that there's no time to sit back and take stock. That was just a first round and our enemies are far from defeated. We're still vulnerable to hostile takeover, especially once the enemy gets to know you. Your not having a life mate is a major chink in our armor rival packs can exploit."

"I do not need to go to some dating service," he gritted out.

"We're not talking about you escorting some *girl* to a party," Benedict pointed out. "A life mate is serious. You haven't found her on your own and we're running out of time. This service, Fangly, My Dear, has an excellent reputation. Though they haven't been in business long, they've made several noteworthy matches."

"For losers," Rafe hissed. "Do you really want the Wentworths to get the reputation of needing some service to get us dates?"

August shook his head. "You've got it wrong, Rafe. Fangly, My Dear is a high-class, cutting-edge operation. An expensive one. Our trusting them with the search for your life mate shows we're up to date with current trends and we're not afraid to invest in our future. It's more proof the Wentworths are top-notch all the way. Now, go change."

Rafe wondered what it would take to win any battle with August and the other elders. "My going to Fangly, My Dear would be one of the five most ridiculous ideas I've ever heard."

"It's a done deal," Benedict claimed.

"What does that mean?" Rafe asked.

"It means," August said, "we've already leaked the news of your going to the community."

Rafe felt a throb in his right temple. "On whose authority?"

August didn't waver. "Mine."

Marvelous. So much for any illusions as to who was in charge. "This wasn't your best idea," he muttered so just the two of them heard.

The older man shrugged. "Nothing else seemed to work. Go. Change into one of those elegant suits you brought back from the East Coast."

"I'm not changing."

At least August seemed to recognize when to fold so Rafe could hold on to a few delusions. Fifteen minutes later, August, Benedict and Rafe were on their way to Fangly, My Dear in August's Cadillac. Rafe thought with longing of the woods he'd been running through just a short time before.

In addition to reading up on the Wentworths online, Lilith and Dominique read up on shifters, especially the population in the Bay Area. "The more I read, the more fascinating Rafe sounds," Dominique said. "Though I still think this situation is too big for one person to handle, something's come up—and I need to leave you alone to handle Rafe. You're the only one I'd trust to take him on single-handedly."

"What's come up? Is it something serious with your family or Antoine?" Lilith knew Dominique didn't walk away from her commitments for anything less than life or death.

She shook her head. "Nothing like that. Antoine's running into some snags with his half-way house for new vampires project. After one near disaster, he finds it's not as easy as he'd thought to get them started on a social life—and he's actually asked for help. This is one offer I can't refuse. I know I can count on you."

"Just another day at a big city dating service. Ho hum." Lilith tried to keep a straight face, but she knew her pretended casualness wouldn't fool Dominique. Lilith's sense of excitement at the prospect of meeting Rafe had her nearly bouncing off the walls. She had to keep reminding herself that this was *work*. Talking with him tonight was just part of her job. Right. On the other hand, she owed it to Dominique to remember she was a professional.

Determined to keep a wide emotional distance from Rafe, Lilith nonetheless wished she could have slipped back to her condo to change into clothes that would make her feel beautiful and desirable. Since she couldn't, she made do by snagging a few minutes to work on her hair and makeup. Next, she practiced asking the familiar intake questions, lowering her usual speaking voice to sound sexy. She also reminded herself that this was business and she was a professional.

Rafe was late. Watching the clock pass the appointment time, Lilith couldn't sit still. Her nerves were strung out, on the verge of snapping. When the phone rang, she jumped. Too agitated to answer—what if he was calling to cancel?—she let voice mail pick up. She held her breath until she'd listened to the message. August, Rafe Graywolf's uncle, said they'd been delayed but should be at the office in the next fifteen minutes.

Lilith listened to the message three times. Rafe wasn't coming alone. He'd have his uncle with him. Of course that fit with everything she'd read about family being the foundation of shifter society."

Lilith thought about her own family. Much as she loved them, she couldn't picture going for a dating service intake interview with any of her relatives—especially from her dad's side. The image of one of her cousins shifting into hyena form during the intake gave her a much needed laugh and helped her relax a bit—at the perfect time.

Just then, the shifter group arrived—three *mature* men and one total hottie—burst into the office suite. All her talk to herself about caution and the impracticality of becoming interested in Rafe except as a client evaporated as soon as she laid eyes on him. His physical beauty crashed over her like a tidal wave on an unprotected beach. Her knees buckled. She willed herself not to become tongue-tied and tried to tear her gaze from his.

Silence. Since this was her office and she was the professional in charge, it was her job to move things along. She just had to figure out how to pry her lips apart and act normal.

One of the older men cleared his throat. Lilith swallowed hard.

"Thank you all for coming here. My partner Dominique LaPierre, who couldn't be here tonight, and I are thrilled to take part in the search for Rafe's soul mate. Please don't hesitate to contact us with feedback, questions or whatever comes up. Now, before we start, does anyone have any questions?"

August spoke first. "We need to be very clear about the need to find a suitable life mate for Rafe. She must be able to take her place at his side as he leads the pack. Of course, with a blood line like his, Rafe must choose a worthy, suitable mate."

Lilith watched Rafe through this entire speech. Though his face remained neutral, her instincts said something far different was going on below the surface. Then Rafe turned and winked at her. For just a moment, it was like the two of them formed a unit, a couple. Her heartbeat sped up and her breathing got funny. How pathetic. A mere wink got her hot and bothered, fired her up her imagination and her senses, and almost had her panting. Talk about inappropriate. She really needed to get a life.

Thank the goddess she could busy her hands with her keyboard. No one could see how much she was trembling while she banged away at the keys and managed to pay full attention to whichever man was speaking. When the elders fell silent, she turned to Rafe.

“Now I’d like to hear from you. I need specifics. First, I’m going to ask some questions. These will enable us to create an accurate, thorough profile. Then we can talk about what you’re looking for.”

Rafe stretched his long legs out in front of him. His full, generous lips tightened into an almost grimace. Lilith, who had inherited empath genes from her mom, had grown quite adept at identifying who did or didn’t want to be in their “hot” seat. Like Dominique, she didn’t relish working with a client who didn’t want to be there. When a client seemed reluctant, for whatever reason, she or Dominique would have a good talk with him or her—and with whoever was applying pressure. But this situation was unique. The older men had warned the Fangly staff that Rafe would be a hard case—but much more than individual preference was at stake. The very fate of the pack demanded that all the players, especially Rafe, fulfill their designated roles.

Lilith remembered all the tales she’d loved while growing up. Princesses and princes in marriages arranged to ensure dynastic survival seemed romantic when they didn’t involve real beings. The reality was grim, not glamorous.

“Anything you’d like to ask before we start?” Lilith focused on Rafe.

She loved how his facial muscles moved—also how they looked in repose.

“The elders are leaving first, right?”

The older men sprang to life and began to voice objections.

“This is Rafe’s choice,” Lilith told the hovering men. “If he’d feel more comfortable speaking only to me, I’m sure you’ll understand and leave the room.”

August pursed his lips. “If we’re here, we can make sure Rafe’s answers present an accurate portrait.”

“Geez, Uncle August. You trust me to guide the pack but you think I can’t answer a few questions about myself?”

Anger and frustration seemed to simmer right below the surface. Lilith wouldn’t want to be the target of those feelings. Part of what she had to do was defuse his negativity about the whole process.

Benedict put a hand on his friend’s shoulder to stop him from responding. “It’s not that, Rafe. But the two of us know you and know enough about what’s involved to provide the most accurate profile. Why don’t you let us help you?”

Rafe rolled his eyes. “I think you two have helped me enough to last a lifetime. Now why don’t you cool your heels in the outer office so we can get this over with? I do have other business to take care of and standing here arguing is just wasting my time.”

The elders left the room.

Lilith asked, “Rafe, who is your personal hero?”

He shrugged. “In spite of what you’ve just witnessed, I’d say my heroes are the males of my pack. My ancestors, all the leaders and alphas who’ve brought us to where we are today.”

Nothing unexpected in that answer.

“Who’s your ideal woman?”

He winked at Lilith again. “When you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.”

If only.

Chapter Two

This interview was not what Rafe expected when the elders set him up at Fangly, My Dear. Lilith P. Graves—her full name was spelled out in brass on the wooden plaque at the front of her desk—had caught his eye the moment he had stepped into her office. A blue-eyed blonde with sexy lips and a curvy body he wanted to get his arms around and his teeth into, Lilith appeared to have no idea of the monumental erection her scent aroused.

When he caught her eye, she blushed—making him even harder as he imagined all kinds of delicious ways to turn her even redder. He licked his lips.

“Why do I get the impression you’re not taking any of this seriously?” she asked.

Serious? Poor Lilith. She seemed determined to come up with some result to make the elders happy. Fun as it was to give her a hard time—he’d love to give her the hard time of her life—Rafe didn’t want to frustrate the poor woman any more than necessary. Too bad the two of them hadn’t met somewhere—anywhere—else. Talk about the roles they were required to play... “Come on, Lilith. You’re an intelligent woman. I don’t believe you or anyone else can plug in a formula and make effective matches, plus there’s the simple fact that *I don’t want a mate.*”

She frowned, bringing adorable furrows to her forehead. “I thought alphas are required to have mates in order to rule.”

“True,” he admitted. “I intend to have a mate. When I choose one, it will be for life. But as I’ve told my uncle and Benedict and the other elders, I’ll choose my mate when I’m ready. You see, until recently I had no idea I’d be the alpha for my pack this soon. To deal with an emergency situation, we all have had to be flexible, bend some rules and traditions. I know the elders think it’s crucial for me to have my mate now because that’s what all the other alphas have done. I see this as one more example of our need to be flexible and find new ways.”

“You’re doing such a fabulous job for the Wentworths, they should be willing to accommodate you,” Lilith murmured.

“Right. You’d think they’d appreciate what I’ve done and not try to coerce me into doing what I don’t want to do yet.”

“Okay,” she said. “Rafe, your situation is unique. We’re pledged to respecting our clients’ rights, first and foremost. Since you’re our actual client, your wishes take precedence over the elders’.”

“Thanks for that. I appreciate your understanding. I know you have a business to run. There has to be a way for us to satisfy the elders and not waste my time.”

“I hope so. They won’t be happy if we don’t find your ideal mate pronto.”

“I’ll deal with that. I’ll make it clear that despite your brilliance and diligence, I’m the problem. No worries. I’ll answer your intake question. I’ll even call the ladies you set me up with and go out with some of them. But, as far as lifetime soul mate choice goes, I’m in sole charge—on my own timetable.”

“Fair enough. No one can guarantee they’ll fall in love for life on command.”

“Right. Speaking of orders, I’m starved. Right now, I want to order dinner. Come with me and we’ll finish this intake over food.” He grinned at her as she once again blushed.

Lilith couldn’t believe her ears. Rafe had just asked her out, sort of. Not exactly as in a date, but beggars weren’t choosers. She hadn’t seen that coming, but her usual empath senses seemed way off when it came to Rafe. This had never happened before and she had no idea what to expect. Later, when she had time to think, she’d have to figure out why her sense wasn’t working. Later. Right now, he’d asked her out. She wanted to jump up and yell, “Yes!”, but then she channeled Dominique and pulled herself together. “That’s not our usual practice.”

He shrugged. “I understand your business is new enough not to have a lot of established practices in place.”

Good one. “I think that sounds like a great idea.” Her voice sounded serene. She was going out with Rafe Graywolf. Even if it was only to conduct an intake interview, she could almost consider it a date.

His grin came slow and easy. “I take that as a ‘yes’. Lilith, as you’re doing me the favor here, where would you like to eat?”

Huh. She couldn’t see Rafe going for Vinnie’s Veggie Garden or any of her usual haunts. Weres went for red meat, cooked rare. Stifling her usual “ewww” at that prospect, Lilith reviewed a roster of possibilities. No way could she endure a steakhouse. Then it struck her. She had to be upfront with him about not only what kind of food she ate, but who she was. “Before we go any further, I need to tell you some things about me.”

A wicked grin lit up his face. “From the expression on your face, I’d expect you to confess to being a serial axe murderer or something along those lines.”

At the moment, she’d prefer that identity to the one she was about to reveal. “I’m a vegetarian.”

He cocked a brow. “So you won’t ask to sample my barely singed filet. Can’t say I understand why anyone would want to be a vegetarian, but I like a bit of mystery in women. Is that it? Are you ready to go?”

If only. “One more thing. The reason why I’m vegetarian. You see, I’m a demi-ghoul, on my dad’s side. If I weren’t a strict vegetarian—”

That rattled his cool. Lilith could see the precise moment when the truth of her identity registered—the moment he jolted back in his seat. What a moment for her empath skills to kick in. On the other hand, it wasn’t like this had never happened before—or wouldn’t happen again. Lilith held her head up and locked eyes with Rafe. She loved her family, both branches. Any guy who set a speed running record in his sprint away from her wasn’t worth—

“That’s a new one for me, Lilith. Anything else you want to mention?”

He wasn’t running. She straightened her shoulders. “I’m also an empath from Mom’s side of the family.”

“Great. Then you realize I’ve got to eat pronto or I’ll get crabby.”

Her mind scrambled to come up with the perfect place to satisfy their needs. “Italian or Mex?”

“Italian,” he snapped back.

“Cassio’s?”

“In North Beach? Sounds great.”

“But what about the elders waiting in the outer office?”

He looked at his watch and made a face. “They’ll have to get their own dinner. I’ll let them know. Ready to go?”

Rafe whipped out his cell, had a quick conversation with an elder and then phoned for a reservation. Before she could think of anything else to hold them up, they were out the door.

Seeing Lilith shuffle the lettuce, olives and cheese cubes of her vegetarian antipasto around her plate, Rafe figured she wasn’t very hungry. At least she seemed to enjoy the excellent sourdough bread and Chianti. He, on the other hand, practically inhaled his steak and pasta.

He wondered what was bothering her. Lilith was an intriguing mixture of shy and sophisticated. *Sophisticated* wasn’t hard to come by in San Francisco, but Rafe met very few people he’d consider shy. He liked that about her. He also liked the way he felt near her. Warm. Hot. She appeared to have no idea how damn sexy she was. He wanted to nuzzle the porcelain skin of her long, delicate neck. She brought out a mix of lust and protectiveness unlike any he’d ever felt. Pleasurable as these emotions could be, he also sensed he should be on his guard with her. Lilith P. Graves had him experiencing emotions very new to him. Most of all, though, she turned him on. He wanted to brush the blond curls back from her ivory cheeks and kiss the path they traced.

She’d cleared a spot on the crowded table for her papers and pen. “Before we have dessert, I thought we could get these questions out of the way.”

He nodded to her still almost-full plate. “You didn’t eat much. Didn’t you like the antipasto? Do you want to order something else?”

“Busted. Now you know my guilty secret. I loaded up on the bread. It’s my weakness and they just kept replenishing our basket. I couldn’t resist.” She smiled.

Talk about not being able to resist. The animal in him wanted to reach across the table and grab her, lay her down and ravish her. Of course, he had his inner animal well under control now. It wouldn’t do to frighten her off, send her screaming into the night when she saw the power of his lust unleashed. His cock, fully erect for what felt like days, throbbed. He knew in very precise terms what he wanted for dessert.

Right now, though, he had to divert his blood supply from his erection back to the head on his shoulders.

“What is the physical description of your ideal woman?”

“*You*,” he whispered so softly, she almost didn’t hear. “I like beautiful women.” She shouldn’t have needed the words to know what he felt, but her empath skills had deserted her just when she needed them most.

She rolled her eyes. “Can you be more specific. Eye color, hair color—that sort of thing?”

He grinned. “Let’s see. Curly blond hair, down to about where you have it.” He pointed to her. She gripped the pen with such focus, he wanted to slip it from between her fingers and suck on each one. “Big blue eyes that are true windows to the woman’s soul. When I look in her eyes, I want to read her soul.”

That netted him a look before she wrote.

“What about body type?”

“Female,” he growled.

“Short, tall, willowy, more rounded—“

“Stand up so I can see.”

Wonderful blush. She turned so red, he’d have sworn her blush must extend from the roots of her naturally blond hair clear down to her toenails.

“Rafe, get real. You have to stop kidding around, or we’ll be here all night.”

He lounged back in his seat. "You have other appointments?"

She turned away. "It's not that. I promised Dominique I'd get you to focus. The sooner we can get the forms done, the sooner we can input your responses and start finding matches for you."

"You're the exact image of my perfect woman. To answer your questions, just describe yourself. You're what I want, physically, socially and whatever other 'ly' you're looking for."

She pursed her gorgeous full lips. "Look, Rafe. It's not that I'm not flattered. Heck, what woman wouldn't be? We can't forget, though, this isn't about us flirting and playing around. I understand where you're coming from about choosing a mate and I've agreed to help. Still, we at Fangly, My Dear have made a commitment to locate suitable candidates for you, even if you end up rejecting them all. We want the candidates to seem feasible. Please, cooperate."

"I am, Lilith. I want to go out with you. From where I'm sitting, you're the exact image of my perfect date, even if I didn't get your name from a dating service. Will you go out with me?" Though Rafe realized Lilith's family background made her unsuitable to be his life mate, and that his pack would never accept her in that role, he couldn't deny how attracted he was to her. He wanted her more each moment they spent together, even if she was a demi-ghoul. He had to be with her or he'd spend the rest of his life sure he'd missed out on something major.

She blushed even harder and batted her eyelashes. "This is so unprofessional. Not at all what I had in mind when I agreed to have dinner with you for your intake."

He waved away her objections. "Are you hiding behind your professional persona to say no?"

"God, no."

"Do you want to see me? Because Lilith, I want to be with you." He took her hands in his, dislodging the pen and crumpling several papers.

A series of emotions flitted across her face and he could smell the conflict brewing in her. All her pheromones told him she wanted him. She wanted him to fuck her and,

though she was far more inhibited than he was, the notion of them taking each other amid the debris on the table turned her on. Her desire floated around her like an aura he could almost touch.

“Rafe, yes. I want to be with you. But I’m not a suitable candidate to be an alpha’s mate and that’s what I’m supposed to be helping you with.” Her voice choked on the last words. Though he hated to cause her distress, he reveled in how much she wanted him too.

“Please. I must be able to input your answers in the morning. Please respond to my questions.” Her eyes grew large.

“Come back to my place. We’ll be much more comfortable there.”

“Your place?”

“Yes. We can be alone, with no distractions. I’ll answer all your questions and then you can stop worrying about those forms.”

She thought for a moment. When she licked her lips with her little pink tongue, he knew she’d made her decision. “All right.”

He paid the bill and got them out of Cassio’s. Thank the gods, it was only a short drive to his place.

Everything was spiraling out of control. Dominique would never find herself in such an impossible situation. Even though Lilith’s rational mind kept screaming that she should put a halt to what was happening right now, her heart and libido stomped all over the fading voice of reason. She wanted to be with Rafe Graywolf tonight. No way she could deny it, to herself or him.

He had to be the ultimate bad boy. Bad boy, bad wolf, bad client. He was trouble on two legs—sometimes four—and nothing good could ever come from letting herself be vulnerable to him. He could wreck her life, or at least seriously derail her for a long time. He could definitely make a hash of Fangly, My Dear and thus not only ruin the business, but destroy her friendship with Dominique. She could lose everything that was

meaningful to her just to spend time with Rafe Graywolf. Lilith had to wonder if someone had been grinding up “stupid” pills and sneaking them into her food.

Still, she wanted to be with him. Though he went through women like other men went through newspapers, she could somehow believe that whatever happened between them would be unique. She could see herself playing Juliet to Rafe's Romeo—minus the nasty ending.

All he'd done was invite her to his place and she was rewriting Shakespeare to describe her emotions. She needed to get some perspective. He was flirting with her. He'd been coming on to her from the start, but he did that the way other men breathed. Of course, starved as she was for masculine attention, she ate up whatever he dished out. Rafe fed his huge ego off her obvious response.

Well, she needed to get them both back on track. She had a job to do and Rafe knew his limits. Flirting was fun, but she had to be sure neither of them took any of it too seriously. She had to be the grownup here, because he wasn't about to be.

First, she had to tamp down the ridiculous attraction she felt for him. Heck, a man this great looking and successful had women thronging to his side. No way could Lilith P. Graves compete—especially when the competition was beautiful, successful pack princesses, suitable candidates to become his mate for life.

“My humble abode.” Humble? Not. Rafe's large cottage in the woods north of San Francisco surprised Lilith, mostly because she felt at home the moment she stepped across the threshold. Oversized, comfortable furniture filled but didn't crowd the living room. Judging by the artwork, Rafe had excellent, if eclectic, taste. Lilith wanted to linger over each piece, but time was fleeting.

How many other women had he brought back here with him? Whatever. At least she could be sure she was the only one who'd ever come with an intake questionnaire from a dating service. She always did want to be unique.

Rafe came up close behind her. She could feel his hot breath fan the nape of her neck before she turned to face him.

“Mi casa es su casa. Make yourself comfortable.”

Yeah, right. As long as he stood that near her, *comfortable* wasn't an option.

"Can I get you a drink?"

A gallon of ice water might be a good start.

"We really need to finish the questionnaire," she murmured. "And it's getting late. I have to get home."

He got right in her face. "What's your first question?"

It's about the questionnaire. She swallowed hard. "What is your most important value?"

Instead of answering, he kissed her. His lips, full and well-formed, brushed across hers with unexpected tenderness. The element of surprise caught her off-guard and intrigued her. Though she should have known better, she pressed her lips back to his, which evidently was all the invitation he needed to begin a deep plunder of her mouth.

His powerful arms drew her to him as their mouths tangled. Was that his heartbeat or hers? In his embrace, she lost track of boundaries. He felt so strong, so sheltering, as she burrowed in his embrace. Her legs pressed against his, which he'd splayed in an effort to diminish the difference in their heights. She stood on her toes to reach up to him, but he still had to tilt his face down.

He ground his erection against the sensitive area of her lower belly and groin. She wanted to have him in her hot, wet pussy. She'd creamed so much already, the silk of her panties bunched up into her folds like a tease. She needed to feel him there, to wrap her legs around him and have him plunge his dick deep into her. Shivering with excitement and anticipation, she surrendered to the moment and the man.

Lips still latched to hers, he began to massage her back. The erotic friction of his hands on her, kneading her muscles and rubbing her, brought her to the edge of an orgasm. A hair trigger away from becoming a screaming meltdown, she imagined herself on a speeding train, out of control on lightning tracks.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered when they broke apart. Though her head told her he'd said the same words to many women and would say them to many more, they lodged in her heart and took root. He found *her* beautiful. He wanted *her*. Right now, it

didn't matter what had come before or what would come afterward. For this moment, she was beautiful to him. She would cherish his words always.

For a moment, she tried to find a way to tell him to stop what was inevitable between them. Before she took him into herself, her rational voice chided, she still could hold something back. Once they became intimate, she would be lost.

She didn't care if she stayed lost forever. At this moment, she was ready to toss everything aside but the burning need for them to be together. He wanted her—completely, passionately, all the ways she'd always dreamed of being wanted. She could read his heart and soul with a startling clarity, each desire lit up with the light of absolute understanding. And she matched him in ardor. More than anything in the universe, she longed to expend her passion, her desire, on this man.

"I want to make love with you." His whispered words penetrated her soul.

"Yes."

Hand in hand, the two of them ran to his bedroom. His king-size bed beckoned. In moments, he'd tossed back the blue and beige quilt to reveal pale blue cotton sheets. He tore off his clothes, then drank her in with his eyes as she gave up on a sexy strip and got naked.

Usually, she felt shy about being naked with anyone, but tonight was different. With Rafe she had the strangest desire to display herself with pride, to offer herself. The way he devoured her body with his gaze, Lilith could have sworn he was responding to her whacko emotions. Under Rafe's intense scrutiny, she unfurled herself, opening like a blossom at last encountering sunlight. His gaze warmed her. Though she didn't make it a practice to jump into strange beds, her leap into Rafe's bed felt exactly right. Kind of like Goldilocks. *Oof*. She wished her mind wouldn't play such weird tricks on her.

"I want to savor your beauty with all my senses." Rafe towered over her in his naked glory. Impossibly, the man appeared even more gorgeous in the actual flesh than she'd imagined. His body was the ideal. Not even Michelangelo could have sculpted such magnificence. Lilith couldn't decide what she wanted to do more—look or touch. Not to

mention taste and smell. Like a starving woman invited to a rich one-time only banquet, she went into glutton mode and prepared to feast.

“I must touch you, now,” he growled, climbing in alongside her.

Touching his skin set off electrical impulses within her. Before now, she’d never realized how much pleasure could come from simple skin-to-skin contact. Was it the wolf in Rafe that made him feel so different to her fingertips? Realizing this magnificent creature, this total man, contained within him a different nature took her breath away, exciting and terrifying her. She was completely out of her depth. But more than breath itself, she craved the erotic intimacy their being together promised.

“Lilith Graves, you are a very special, beautiful woman,” he murmured, tracing the contours of her body with his fingertips.

She closed her eyes and focused her whole being on the moment. His masculine scent—pine and forest and something she couldn’t name but found appealing—made her head spin. She wanted to remember that scent always, to imprint it within her so she could conjure it up, so she could summon up the sense memory of being with him every day for the rest of her life.

His breath seared her as he nuzzled the space between her breasts. She always felt self-conscious because she was bigger than most of the models in fashion magazines. Though people always said men liked big breasts, she hadn’t found that to be true—until now. Rafe suckled one nipple with gusto while he fondled the other and appeared not only to accept but to appreciate her as she was. She moaned with pleasure in response to the way his hand and mouth moved, the things he did to her with each movement and breath. Most of all, she loved the way he savored her and awoke her to the wonders of her body. She’d never before realized how sensitive her breasts were, or how direct the connection was between her areolas and her clit.

“Mmm,” she murmured. Her fingers wove into Rafe’s thick black hair. With his ear near her heart, Rafe had to be able to hear what he was doing to her, how her heartbeat sped with arousal. His skin heated her everywhere they touched, as if he wanted to share his inner fire with her.

Never one to remain passive, Lilith reached for Rafe's flat, taut belly. Her hand immediately encountered his huge pulsing erection and they both moaned at the erotic contact. Rafe Graywolf was exceedingly well formed. His cock felt like velvet skin over a marble core. He responded to her slightest movement. With the thrusts of his hips and his deep growly moans, Rafe let her know how much she pleased him.

"You are one delicious lady," he whispered. Using his talented tongue and teeth, he began to nibble the sensitive flesh of her breasts. She shivered. Moving with infinite slowness and deliberation, he began to work his way down her aroused body with his teeth and lips. At the same time, he caressed her vulva, his fingers darting to her clit, along the folds and on a foray deep inside her.

Goddess, she'd never before been so wet. She wanted him so much, he had to sense it in every fiber of his being. When his mouth touched her pussy, she had to hold tight to keep from flying off the bed. The pleasure of his tongue on her clit, his strong, sharp teeth nibbling at the soft, sensitive tissues and licking her wetness had her at the edge of a high precipice. Waves of pleasure radiated through her, from her feminine core outward, threatening to force her off that edge.

"I want you, Lilith. I want you to ride my cock until we both holler from the sheer pleasure of me being deep in you."

Hearing him put his desires into words almost brought her to tears. The fragility of the moment, of the bond between them, staggered her. This was the first time she'd ever experienced such perfect communication with any other being—as if their bodies were created for just this moment. She regarded her thought as silly, a mind blip caused by extreme arousal. There was no such thing as destiny, right? Yet her body thrummed with the wisdom that every moment in her life, all she'd ever been or done had led her to this exact time, this place, this man.

"I want you, too, Rafe." Her brain scrambled for something more memorable to say, but she came up empty. All she wanted now was to focus on him, on them, on what they could be together.

"I'm coming in," he groaned.

“Yes, oh yes,” she breathed.

With a grunt he got to his knees and, in one smooth movement, wedged himself between her legs. He held his dick in his hand and Lilith nearly fainted from the pleasure of looking at him. Where was a camera when a girl needed one? Heck, she wished her eyes could become a camera to record the image of Rafe offering her his huge, hard penis. She’d have a special time each day for the rest of her life when she would dream over his picture and feast her senses on her memories.

With total focus, he positioned his glans between her folds and the contact set off sparks of pleasure that nudged her out of control. The pleasure of divine friction coupled with his scent shot through her. The way he sucked his breath in, with her empath senses going at full tilt, she could feel him experiencing the same level of sensation and delight.

“You feel so fantastic,” he rasped. “So wet and warm, so welcoming.”

“You’re totally welcome to come into me.” Her voice sounded surer and steadier than expected, considering how much she was quivering.

Now he braced himself with one hand on each of her hips and wedged the head of his cock the smallest bit into her. “Ohhh.” This was the first time she’d ever had such a sense of intimate connection with a lover.

Too slowly, he worked his way into her. Every bit deeper opened her up to a whole new world of ecstasy. To her astonishment, the sense of intimate connection grew deeper as he claimed each inch of her.

“I feel like I’ve just found my missing half,” he whispered.

Goose bumps sprang up on her arms and her back, despite the warmth the two of them generated. By sharing this profound intimacy with her, Rafe was inviting Lilith to a whole new dimension of being, one she’d never even imagined. He was showing her who he was and taking in the deepest knowledge of her. By participating with him in this almost mystical union, she welcomed him and agreed to their bond, the first time she’d ever felt this close to anyone—as if they’d become one. That realization scared and awed her.

When Rafe had penetrated to the deepest bit inside her, he lay perfectly still. Despite the impetus to move, to give themselves up to the full erotic pleasure of being together, she tried to follow his lead and remain still. If they stayed joined like this, they could prolong this magical joining. Could it ever be enough for her? Thinking that, she tilted her hip a fraction. He groaned and put his hand on her to still her.

If only she could turn off her mind and be in the moment. Despite the perfection of their being together, Lilith couldn't keep doubts at bay. After all, the ecstasy of their contact might blow her mind, but it might be just business as usual for Rafe. An unwelcome wave of jealousy surged through her, threatening this exquisite moment. It couldn't be this amazing for him with anyone else, could it? Lilith turned her head to clear away the disturbing thought. Just for now, she willed herself to turn off her mind and stop the questions that tormented her. No matter what, she would focus on being in the moment, allowing no thoughts of the past or the future or Rafe with another woman to intrude on the magic ride of the present.

Rafe grunted something and Lilith was afraid she'd messed everything up with her usual insecurities.

Then he said, "Much as I would love to remain like this forever, I've got to move. I've got to explore how it feels to plunge my cock in and out of you, to touch all the beautiful places inside you." He ran his strong fingers down her side, raising shivers wherever he touched.

"I want to feel the way you maneuver your cock in me," she whispered back. She had her legs wound around him and he was so deep in her she imagined he could go no further. Nonetheless, she laid her hands on the firm cheeks of his ass and pressed him to her. To her wonder, this tightened their contact and sent new sparks of pleasure shooting through her.

In complete joy and togetherness, their rhythm perfectly in sync, they played out their intimate dance. They each touched more and more of the special places that rewarded their intimate exploration with ecstatic sensation. Lilith fell helplessly, ecstatically into the erotic mystery of being one with Rafe.

Chapter Three

Rafe had been attracted to Lilith from the moment they met, with an intensity that made previous attractions seem trivial. Though he'd made love with more women than he could remember, nothing about being with Lilith resembled any of his other experiences. The uniqueness couldn't be due to her being part ghoul, could it?

He was out of control, not at all a familiar experience. Holy shit. If he'd known making love with her would push his buttons to this extent, would he have given in to the erotic impulse—or run like hell? A woman like her, an interlude like this, could ruin him for being with other women. Talk about timing. Why had this woman come into his life just when he could no longer play around, when he had to search for his soul mate?

The way they moved together, the perfect rhythm and synchronicity between them, sparked a wild idea. All his instincts screamed that Lilith Graves was his mate. Except, how could that be? Lilith was possibly the most inappropriate woman in the universe to be a pack alpha's mate. For crying out loud, she was a *ghoul*, the absolute bottom of the evolutionary chain. To add insult to injury, she was a *vegetarian* ghoul. Not even the most flea-bitten, god-forsaken pack would lower themselves to accept her as their alpha's mate.

Though his rational inner voice kept arguing against the physical attraction that drew him to her, an overriding sense knew there was something more. Try as he might to be logical and listen to reason, he couldn't focus long on this glimmer of future trouble. He couldn't focus on anything that interfered with their being together. Right now, he'd be happy to stay forever in the pheromonic haze of their erotic coupling.

In addition to how he felt when he was with her—like he was bigger, stronger, handsomer and more fascinating than all the super heroes combined—he got off on the power of the chemistry between them. It was like they were the only two people in the world and they could happily recreate their own personal Eden.

Rafe took no small pride in pleasuring his sexual partners. That was one reason why they always wanted to come back for more. Besides, pleasure for pleasure fit with his notions of fair play. With Lilith, though, that impetus took on a whole new dimension. Pleasuring her became a mission he had to fulfill. Her reactions mattered because she did.

“Rafe,” she whispered, stretching his name to several syllables as her body prepared to rise to her release.

The way she called his name, the way she clutched him, her graceful erotic dance—every nuance combined to sweep him up and carry him along in a flood of sensation. Now that he was sure she’d come first, he could let up on his iron self-control—he could unclench his teeth and begin to allow the gathering force of his own orgasm.

“Lilith,” he murmured, stroking her hair. His thrusts and plunges into her became deeper, faster and ever more frenzied. The heat between them crackled and sparked, raising the stakes. Such intensity couldn’t last, but before the flames subsided, he sensed they’d be forever singed in a mutual fire.

With Lilith now fully focused on the release she’d been building to, her face took on an especially sweet expression, almost peaceful. Rafe wanted to lick her rosy cheeks, her full, pouting lips, but he feared he’d burn her and scar her with the searing heat of his arousal. Later, he’d tongue her, taste her everywhere he longed to. For now, his own sexual wild ride threatened to engulf them. His cock had grown larger than ever before and, once he began to come, he’d explode into her, flooding her with the come she’d stimulated.

“Oh, oh, oooh.” Lilith shuddered to a full-body climax that shook the earth and stars. He cherished each tremor and wanted to catch her moves and hold them to him. Breathless and stunned, he registered with shock what this woman did to his breathing and his heartbeat.

Right before he came, Rafe always had a moment when his inner wolf surfaced, fueling his orgasm with the powerful force of his dual nature. Though he didn’t take on the physical aspect of his wolf self, for a time his heart beat doubled and his full soul

soared. Then, after he gave himself up to his climax, as he lay in the glow of erotic satisfaction, his selves completed the journey to unity.

With Lilith, his wolf self lingered far longer than ever before. Reeling from all the shocks of their lovemaking, Rafe had no idea what to make of yet another first he was experiencing with her.

“How are you?” he crooned softly in her ear.

Rafe’s breath tickled her ear. Lilith couldn’t believe she had any nerve endings left to register sensations, but his warm breath proved she did. “Yum,” she whispered back in brilliant response. Judging by his smile, he wasn’t looking for brilliance just then, which was good.

Lost in a tide of pleasure with the merest touch of confusion, she fell back against the pillow. Her usual experience in the past was to find the after-loving moments to be a letdown, probably because she usually felt that she’d once more been with the wrong man. But with Rafe, who’d been the wrong man from the very first, Lilith couldn’t bring herself to regard anything about him as less than right.

She had seriously underestimated how being with him would impact her. All she’d wanted, she told herself, was to break her long sexual dry spell. Rafe, who was totally out of her league for several million reasons, had seemed like her dream candidate for a quick but meaningless fuck—assuming they ever got that far, which had been a bit of a fantasy for her. But, goddess, she’d gotten far more than anticipated. Would the most amazing orgasm in her life turn out to be her biggest mistake ever?

As they clung to each other, limbs entangled, cocooned in the mutual musk of incredible sex, Lilith wished she could turn her mind off. Most of all, she wished she could make what they’d just experienced last. She’d never before made love with a shifter. Although she’d heard the same wild stories as everyone else, she hadn’t believed them. When she and Rafe had come—their orgasms so close they’d been virtually simultaneous—Lilith could have sworn she’d sensed the life force of a big, powerful wolf hovering around her. She should have been scared, but instead, its presence seemed the

most natural thing in the world. Heck, she'd shivered with disappointment when the sensation dissipated before she could examine it.

"I sensed the wolf," she whispered to Rafe. "Your wolf...you."

He brush kissed her lips. "He wanted to get to know you," he confessed. "And he will, but that wasn't the right moment. He likes you, a lot."

"Really? Is that usual?" She blushed, which was stupid considering how intimate they'd just been—still were. In some ways, lying with him like this felt even more intimate, considering that she had his leg between hers, wedged against her pussy, still creamy and sticky with his come. Yet asking the question made her blush.

He traced her areola, coaxing the nipple to bud into delicious hardness. Her lower belly clenched in renewed arousal. Lilith had always considered her ghoul self practically a nympho, which her human self made behave. Now, in contrast, she suspected Rafe was arousing both her inner girl and her ghoul. And considering that she'd just come, she'd have expected to need some recovery time. She felt good to go again and that just had to be completely wanton.

"No, it's not. Lilith, nothing about my being with you is usual. To be honest, I don't know exactly what to make of what's happened between us. My gut tells me that nothing you and I do together is wrong. You've hit me like a meteor from outer space, lady, and I can't ignore that."

He'd had that effect on her too.

And then she remembered. The questionnaire, the friggin' questionnaire. She was with Rafe to help him fill out the intake interview questions so she could help locate his perfect mate. Not her. Everything she was doing tonight threatened her agency, her job there and maybe most importantly, her friendship.

Still, what was happening between her and Rafe seemed even more important than her forever friendship with Dominique—which stunned her. Until now, she'd never have believed that anything could be more important to her than that friendship. Of all the inappropriate, unprofessional and disloyal behaviors. How could she have let this

happen? How could she have fallen into bed with the most unavailable client in the universe?

The return of her thought processes sent Lilith's spirit plummeting back to Earth like a rogue elevator, down from the fuzzy, dreamy height of her fantasies.

Conflicting voices raged in Rafe's head—a variation on the usual “angel” and “devil”, because this time, it wasn't at all clear which was the devil's voice. Was it the one behind the loud chorus urging him to extend his intimate interlude with Lilith? He loved everything about being with her like this, the two of them floating in their own unique world, buoyed by the incredible affinity that had sprung up between them. Being with her felt anything but wrong. On the other hand, the voice of reason, the one programmed by the elders, provided a much different message—“Run!”

So why wasn't he moving?

Rafe ran his eyes over Lilith's luscious body. Her clothes camouflaged her lovely body—sinfully hiding her sexy curvaceousness. Of course, not even the most tailored garments could disguise her feminine attributes, thank the powers of the universe. Lilith was one of those women who looked more tempting *au naturel* than clothed. And all her loveliness was on display for him and him alone.

Who could blame him for wanting to hang around?

Even as he feasted his eyes on her, Lilith drew away and started scrambling to gather her tossed clothes. Seeing her beautiful face now unsmiling, composed into a serious, professional expression, Rafe felt the room temperature, though not his own heat, drop several degrees.

She threw on her shirt and slacks, made adjustments to her makeup and ran her fingers through her wild tangle of hair. Then, before he could protest, she picked up a sheaf of papers and a pen. “The intake interview,” she said, her voice so tiny and soft, even with his super sensitive senses, he almost couldn't hear. “I came here to conduct the intake interview.”

He leered at her. "I don't believe that was on your mind when you were coming right here." He patted the mattress next to where he lay and savored her blush in response.

She closed her eyes and appeared to be counting to ten, or maybe one hundred. Bloody hell, she was so stunning, especially now, when she was unaware of the effect she had on him. She appeared caught up in the work at hand, to conduct the ridiculous interview.

Her lashes fluttered as she looked down at the paper. "What are the three top qualities you value in a romantic companion?"

Was she serious? Did she really expect him to answer that question in such a cut and dried manner? Judging from the expression on her face, she did. He aimed to please. "Let's see. I want my romantic companion, interesting choice of words there by the way, to be totally like Lilith, completely like Lilith and exactly like Lilith." His lips curved up in a smile as he reached to touch her. She ducked out of his way.

"I don't think you're being at all serious about this matter." She laid down her pen without having written a single word.

He went over to her, cupped her chin and raised her face so they were eye to eye. "You don't? Hmmm. What do you base your opinion on?"

She rolled her eyes and wriggled free. "Rafe. Your pack has hired Fangly, My Dear to provide you with dates who are viable candidates to become your mate." Her face melted in a wistful expression that wrenched his heart.

He bent very close to her. "Right now, Ms. Lilith Graves, from where I'm sitting, you're the most viable candidate I'd want to spend quality time with. Part of that quality time includes not talking about or thinking about any other woman but you. Cripes, I thought women didn't like having their dates divide their attentions and focus on others."

Bloody hell, she looked so stricken, so sad, he wished he could take back his remarks. After he'd seen the naked pain in her eyes, she ducked her head and looked down. She'd better not cry. He could not stand it when women cried. He willed her not to cry.

Trying to resume the same light, bantering tone he'd used before, he continued, "But you're insisting I should speculate about women I haven't even met—and don't want to."

Head still down, she sighed. When she raised her head, he saw she'd teared up. Oh, shit. She'd ignored his telepathic request. Not tears. He could deal with screaming, yelling, jumping up and down—even full-fledged diva tantrums. But tears? He could handle anything except tears. If the tears filled her beautiful eyes and spilled down her cheeks, he'd feel like a complete bastard. He'd want to lick each one away. Gritting his teeth, he gently wiped the unwelcome moisture away with his thumb and then with a kiss. She drew back and shook her head.

"Don't, Rafe. You're only making it worse."

"What? What am I making worse?" She was the one who seemed determined to short circuit the electricity between them and channel their energies elsewhere.

"I'm not even in the pool." She sobbed the last word.

"What pool? Who's talking about swimming? Hell, if that's what you want, we can head to the ocean, skinny dip."

She half-laughed, half-sobbed. "The pool of possible candidates to be your mate," she ground out. "You know it and I know it. Aah, this was such a mistake."

He didn't like what she said, not one little bit. How could Lilith call anything about their being here like this tonight a mistake? They'd been so perfect together, without any of the usual awkwardness or tentativeness people felt their first time. "No, it wasn't. Whatever else you believe, that's not true."

"Yes, it is." In a graceful movement, she drew away. He reached for her, but she darted out of his range. "It was stupid of me to think I could conduct your intake, especially here, with the two of us alone. I should have known better, should have told Dominique to take charge of this one. The smart, ethical, professional thing to do when one feels personal involvement is to withdraw. Contrary to all wisdom and even simple common sense, I ignored this truth. Now I've made a fool of myself and made Fangly, My Dear look unprofessional. Your pack will want their money back and we'll get a negative reputation in the area."

“Whew,” Rafe said. “Hard on yourself, there, Lilith? As in, do you always take total responsibility for everything? If you do, I’d strongly suggest you stop. Even as my pack alpha, I realize I’m not responsible for everything that goes on.”

She actually wrung her hands. He took them in his to stop her.

“Rafe, I’ll admit I was attracted to you.”

“Glad to hear it. Attraction’s mutual.”

She sniffled. “I’m glad to hear that. But, you see, I should have realized this attraction might interfere with the completion of my assignment, my sole reason for coming here.”

“Baby, it takes two to tango. And to tangle the sheets.”

Another blush. He wanted to lick the hot redness from her high-boned cheeks and then lose himself in kissing her, but in her current mood, he figured she’d probably rebuff him and say words they’d both find regrettable. He could sense her fragility and realized he had to proceed with caution to keep from messing up even more.

“Since you’re the alpha of your pack, I am not a candidate to be your mate. We both know that.” Her voice sounded strained, as if each word she caused her pain. The longing in her eyes scraped at his soul. In that moment, he knew how much she longed to be a possible mate for him. His heart clenching, he could admit to himself that he longed for the same thing.

However, neither of them could ignore the truth. Lilith P. Graves was a ghoul. Even a demi-ghoul carried the full hereditary taint of that species. She was related on her father’s side to creatures who fed on the flesh of the dead, graveyard grovelers. Also shifters who’d become hyenas and used their obnoxious laugh to trick the unwary before killing them and feeding on them. Lovely Lilith had hinted that she reined in her own ghoulish potential by being a strict vegetarian. If she ever slipped and just sampled the meat his pack favored, she could morph into a hideous monster like her father’s relatives. So despite her spirit, her personality, her beauty and a hundred other desirable qualities, she was automatically excluded from consideration. Something about that reality was so fundamentally wrong, Rafe wanted to howl out his rejection of this injustice.

Though he could howl and protest until he was purple and blue in the face, the pack would never acknowledge Lilith as his mate. He had to have a mate to be an effective alpha for his pack—he'd come to accept that. And only he could guide his pack through the current turbulent times.

So, did the question come down to choosing between his pack and the chance to be with a woman who jolted him like a lightning strike to the heart? Why did he have to choose?

Lilith put the papers aside. "Tomorrow, I'll have to tell Dominique I failed, that I wasn't able to guide you through our intake interview. I'm sure she'll contact you to reschedule. And now, I should leave." She heaved a huge sigh and began to weep, more quietly than before.

Distressed and unwilling to let her walk away, Rafe took her in his arms. "None of that's important, baby. I don't want you to leave."

She held herself stiffly, resisting him for a moment, before she let herself melt against him. "Rafe, this is so wrong, but I can't tear myself away from you. It's like my legs have turned to rubber and refuse to support me."

He ran an eager hand along her thigh. "Your legs feel wonderful to me, except for one problem."

"A problem?" she echoed.

"Yes. You're wearing too many clothes. It's so much nicer when we can be skin to skin."

She sighed again. "It's the dumbest thing I've ever done, being here and then compounding it by staying. Rafe, I don't want to go. I don't want to go."

He traced her fine features with his fingertips. "So we're agreed on that. Stay with me, Lilith. I want you here. Nothing else matters."

"Oh, you're wrong there. Everything else matters. But Rafe, let's make it special for us. Let's agree. Tonight doesn't count. I'll stay here with you just for tonight. After that, we'll both forget whatever's happened between us." She locked eyes with him and, at that moment, he'd have promised her the world.

“Lilith, I can never forget you. I’d never want to forget you.”

“You have to, Rafe. To be the alpha your pack requires, the alpha it’s your destiny to be, you have to find your mate and be with her alone. I won’t get in the way of that.”

Every word she said dug into his heart like a knife. With her, he felt all the complications and conflicts of being his pack’s alpha and of being a man. How much simpler if they could both assume wolf forms and freely live their animal natures. But Lilith, despite their soul affinity, wasn’t any part wolf. She was part ghoul. She could never be his mate for all the parts of his journey.

Though he wanted to resist, he had to agree with the wisdom of her insight. They would have to snatch whatever chance they could to be together. She could never be his officially.

Lilith hadn’t signed on for this. When she’d longed for an end to her current dry spell, she’d envisioned being caught up in a fling, maybe with some romantic fringe benefits, with a man she could share a no-strings good time with. Who needed the complication of this irresistible attraction to someone so wrong for her he might as well have come from another planet?

After tonight, Lilith knew she’d have to take a firm, irrevocable vow to avoid being alone with Rafe. After tonight. But she lacked the strength to leave him just yet, so she gave herself up to his caresses, to the hot passion of his touch. She wanted him and oh, goddess, he wanted her. If only that could be enough.

Rafe was right. Being naked with him felt right and as natural as breathing. How silly of her to try to form a barrier between them with her clothes. After all, it was a barrier neither of them wanted.

When she looked in his eyes, Lilith knew it would be easy to lose herself, just to drown in their dark depths. So easy.

His hands caressed the outlines of her face. Funny, it was new for her to regard herself as beautiful, as completely feminine, desirable and desired. She was living the

romance Fangly, My Dear advertised to attract clients. She wanted this romance too, but she was the one client Fangly would never be able to service properly.

For right now, she could leave such sad thoughts behind. Her body celebrated being with Rafe. As if she were some latter day Sleeping Beauty, he awoke her with his sensuous touch. Only with him did she begin to understand that her whole body was an erogenous zone. This was true for her only with him—one of the many fantastic discoveries she made in his arms.

He tenderly kissed her closed eyelids, his touch light as a butterfly wing compared with the fierce strength of his embrace. As she lay, mesmerized, Lilith would have sworn he ran his tongue over every inch of her body, tasting, sampling, sniffing, marking her as his. Hyper-aware, she experienced every lick and nibble as if in slow motion. She visualized him scrawling his name all over her body in permanent ink, his claim bright for all to see.

His vibrant presence heated the bed and the air around them. Even if she'd wanted to try, she could not shield herself from the magnetism of his energy. Her response took root deep in her belly, in her pussy and in her heart. The warmth of her responding desire for him spread through her with the relentless determination of a conquering army.

"Lilith, you are so beautiful to me," he murmured. "I could drink in the wonder of you day and night and never want anything else."

She chuckled. "I think that wonder could wear thin when your appetite for solid food kicked in."

"Not when I have you to feast on." His fingers tweaked her nipple, followed quickly by his eager mouth.

Overwhelmed by sheer beauty and simplicity of their being together this way, Lilith stroked his head. They had to try to compress so much life and love into their short time together, her mind skittered over all the experiences they'd never have time to share. For no good reason, she suddenly grew playful and wanted to lighten the intensity between them. She cleared her throat. "Will you have fries with that?"

He started to laugh, which broke their physical connection. Eyes wide with surprise, he asked, “What? You say that with such authority. Did you once work in a burger joint?”

There was so much about each other that they’d never have enough time to talk about. “The fate of the liberal arts major? No, I actually never had to hustle burgers.”

“A pity, but only because you would look devastating in a grease-stained uniform. Of course, I’d immediately want to strip the uniform off you and—”

On that note, he slid down and buried his face in her hot, slick folds. She squealed with delight and her whole body reverberated with the erotic shock of the touch of his tongue on her sensitive, intimate places. Wanting to hold him to her forever, she ran her hands through his hair and pressed him to her there.

Chapter Four

He wanted to feast, to take his fill of her—but he could never have enough. Lilith's sweet feminine musk surrounded him as he moved between her legs to pleasure her. He loved her exquisite responsiveness, the way she reacted to his moves.

His cock was already full, achingly erect. Too bad he couldn't figure out a way to pleasure her with his tongue and his cock at the same time. Neither in man nor in wolf form could he perform such an act of magic which meant he had to devote himself to each sensuous delight in its turn. First the tongue, then soon, so soon after, he'd plunge his burgeoning dick deep inside her.

"Rafe." Lilith practically sang out his name. Despite the many other times he'd made love or had sex with or just plain fucked other beautiful women, this was the first time he ever understood the meaning of the word *intimacy*. Only now could he begin to appreciate the very special bonds that unite a man and a woman in their own particular world. Only between her legs and in her heart, could he find a refuge of comfort and respite—the fulfillment of physical and emotional hungers.

He and Lilith were completely intimate. If he had to answer her silly intake interview, he'd list the possibility of *intimacy* as the most desirable quality in any relationship with a potential mate. Hell, the word *intimate* contained the word *mate*. He'd never realized that before, but the connection pleased him. He would need an intimacy at least as complete as what he felt with Lilith with any woman he'd consider taking as his mate for life. Anything less would dishonor them both and the institution.

"Oh, Rafe," Lilith sighed, her breath like the flow of a sweet gentle breeze refreshing him. She maneuvered her lush, lovely hips so her clit slid between his lips and she gasped. "Mmm," she groaned in extravagant response.

What turned him on more, the musk of her taste or her rich scent? Fortunately, he didn't have to choose. With her, he could have it all—only not for much longer. He

needed, wanted to come deep inside her. He tingled with the anticipation of his release, but his lady's pleasure must be first.

So, though he adored the richness of having his nose and lips pressed against her core, he needed to lead her to the climax she appeared to be very near. He swept his tongue across her clit and stroked her sweet, hot folds. With a hiss and a groan, she began to quiver and tightened her hold on him, quaking with the sheer raw power of the build-up to her orgasm. Then she whimpered his name, again and again—music to his ears as she expressed her need.

Stepping up the speed and intensity of his tongue thrusts, he almost missed the first tremors of her release. Vocal as she was at other times, Lilith now turned surprisingly subdued, as if she focused all her energy on the sheer physicality of coming. She announced herself with a series of sounds, soft and almost incoherent, a primitive language of desire sated. As her release grew in intensity, her heartbeat and blood flow increased, surrounding him with sensation.

She sighed and whispered, "Oh my God, thank you."

He raised himself and buried his face into the warm spot where her shoulder joined her chest. He could happily lose himself in her musky scent. "You're magnificent," he growled.

She fluttered her lashes. "You're pretty terrific yourself," she whispered. And then he heard her sharp intake of breath. "Oh, God, I'm being so selfish. I can't believe it. You must be on the verge of a case of blue balls."

Despite his crushing need to be in her, he threw back his head and laughed. "Blue balls? Where'd you dig that up?"

She tried to sit up, but he was so all over her that she couldn't. "I know it's selfish not to think about your partner's needs."

Geez, where was she coming from with this anxiety? He'd always heard ghouls were the most selfish, self-absorbed beings in the universe, but Lilith was incredibly selfless—even generous. He rubbed his dick against her leg, which radiated shock waves of

pleasure through his groin. With super self-restraint, he stroked the side of her face with his thumb. “You’re the most giving person I’ve ever met.”

She smiled at that. “I want to touch you.” She started to reach her hand down in the direction of his cock.

Too much. He’d reached the end of his self-restraint. With a groan that was half howl, he swung them both around so she was straddling him. Looking up at her beautiful face, Rafe felt his heart go into a funny hammering rhythm. “Baby, I want you to touch me and I want to touch you back. I want us to touch on every level known to man or beast. But we have to hold back on that right now so I can get inside you.”

He bent his knees and she sat propped up, leaning back against his thighs. There was her gorgeous feminine core, teasingly nudging the head of his cock. It didn’t take much nudging at all to convince him to plunge into her from below—especially when she raised her hips to provide him full access. “Oh, baby,” he rasped as his cock wedged fully, deeply into her. She surrounded him with her sexy warm heat of welcome and they were transformed into male and female in the primordial forest. All they’d ever need was each other.

She looked beautiful as she perched, legs wide open to him in erotic invitation, straddling him from atop his groin. Her full breasts swung in provocation with each move, the nipples and the areolas winking at him any time he deigned to open his eyes. He longed to reach up and cup a breast and claim possession of her that way, too. First, though, he didn’t want to disrupt the rhythm of her movements, so he settled for resting his hands on her hips.

“You fill me so completely,” she whispered. “I was always so empty before you. Now I know what it means to be complete.”

His heart wrenched at her words. A woman like this should never be so neglected, never left alone and empty. She moved in a tight circle around his cock, rotating her hips first one way and then the other. Pleasure shot up and down his penis, through his balls and seized control of his body. Hell, he felt like an enormous, throbbing cock with just

one goal in life—to reach an explosive orgasm and a depth of satisfaction unlike any before.

A man could get used to this. But a pack alpha? How could it be—to find this degree of rightness in the arms of the wrong woman? A demi-ghoul vegetarian. This woman could never be anything to him but a lay, a one-night stand. He bristled at the prospect and couldn't bear to think of her in such terms. Though he couldn't choose her to be his mate, he refused to treat her with any less respect—even in his thoughts—than he would his mate. Maybe he'd choose a mate his pack would accept and have Lilith as his mistress.

No. That was not his way. Not the way of the alpha. Not what Lilith deserved. Besides, having a woman other than his mate, even a recognized and acknowledged mistress, did not fit with his understanding of having a mate for life. However, this was all he could offer this woman, who made his body vibrate with divine ecstasy.

“Rafe, I don't know what you're doing to me. Before you, I was amazed if I had one orgasm in a night. With you, I can't stop coming. I feel like I've turned into a fountain, gushing like some natural wonder all over you.”

He winced at the nuance of apology he heard in her words. If he could do nothing else for her, maybe he'd leave her with the assurance of her beauty and how much she had to offer any man who was free to offer her the best. “More like a blushing fountain.”

She turned even redder.

“Ah, Lilith, you have no idea who you are and what you bring to a man.” He cupped her chin. “I wish I could give you that, wrapped up with a ribbon. Know who you are, Lilith Graves. Know that any man would be lucky to call you his mate.”

He could feel her blood course more rapidly through her veins, deepening the crimson of her cheeks. “Rafe. Tonight with you is the best gift I've ever had. With you I have a taste of all that life could be.”

“I wish it could be more. My inner beast wants to drag you into my cave and keep you there, away from all others. But I can't offer you—”

The possibility of any other male experiencing *his* Lilith the way he did would be intolerable. If he ever got wind of another male being intimate with her, Rafe would have to kill him. Lilith was his.

Except. Except he couldn't be hers in the same way he demanded she be his. *She's a demi-ghoul.* He had to remind himself of this inalterable fact again and again and again. He could stake his claim on Lilith, but she couldn't reciprocate. He couldn't give himself to her. Did he really intend to condemn her to a solitary, celibate life? Is this what he wanted for a woman he lov—dangerous turf.

These thoughts should have put him off, but instead, he became more turned on. It didn't take much imagination to realize he might never again be with this woman in this way—hell, in any way. If the pack leaders really got on his case, he'd have to give priority to finding a mate—and walk away from Lilith. Instead of cooling off, his desire for her ratcheted up. If he could be with her only this one night, it would have to be one neither of them would ever forget.

Lilith squeezed his balls, which amped up his erection. He wanted her to come again before he gave himself up to his release. He reacted without thinking, scooting his balls away from her talented fingers with a sharp intake of breath.

Confusion skittered across her face. "Shouldn't I have done that?"

He raised a brow. "Yeah, Lilith. You need to avoid providing such pleasurable touches which risk pushing me off the cliff."

She studied him. "It felt good?"

He chuckled. "Sugar, saying your touch feels good is like calling the Mona Lisa cute."

"Really?" She grinned before letting her fingers resume their previous play. At least this time he was prepared, so he didn't jump. And he didn't come. Yet.

"I don't want to come before you." Though he'd planned to deliver this sentence in a normal voice, his clenched teeth somewhat distorted his expression and his intent.

Her laughter pealed merrily. "You won't. I just came before... A short time before."

"Yeah, but that was by mouth. I want you to come again with me in you."

She licked her lips and the sight of her tongue ratcheted up his arousal. His cock throbbed within her, and he knew he wouldn't last much longer. "But," he gasped, "if you keep doing things like that, I may not get my wish."

She bucked her hips slightly forward, surrounding him with softness and warmth. "I'd hate to disappoint you," she murmured.

"God, Lilith, nothing about you could ever disappoint me." He put a hand at the top of her rear crease and began a gentle exploration of her there.

"You say and do all the right things." Moving with erotic grace, she swayed her ass from side to side so the pressure of his touch intensified. He enjoyed a woman who liked to get her ass stroked. Moving his fingers playfully, he explored her crease and darted his fingers down to her opening. She stiffened.

"Maybe you shouldn't touch me there."

"Why not?" He didn't remove his hand just yet. If she came up with a valid objection, he would move away. But he'd bet she'd never experienced this kind of stimulation before and was letting modesty inhibit her.

"It's not nice." Considering that she had relatives who were ghouls—talk about not nice—Rafe found her scruples a bit unexpected. Yet again, Lilith was turning out to be a surprise to him. He needed to find the balance between opening her up to newness and not offending her sensibilities. Right now, though, the way her body was responding to his touch, he figured her objections were more formalities than indications of actual distress.

"*Au contraire*, my little one. It's very nice and you're very nice. If I weren't otherwise occupied, I'd kiss you back there."

Her mouth twisted as if she was going to say, "Ewww." He lubed her with a wet finger and then played around her hole. Despite her scruples, her face reflected pleasure. In fact, this seemed to be the touch she'd needed to get her moving toward her orgasm.

A fast learner, Lilith tried the same maneuver on him, wedging her hand under his butt—a tight squeeze. When he felt her wet finger trace the outline of his cock, Rafe cried out with pleasure, which made her smile. He tightened his grip on her ass and began to

speed up his in and out pistoning. At the same time, his finger rode the opening of her back crease.

“Oh, Rafe,” she purred. “It feels so amazing being with you like this—” Her voice broke as the urgency of need impelled her forward.

She trembled in his arms with the force of her release and he heaved a sigh of relief. At last, he could allow himself to come—before he exploded.

She gripped his hips harder with her legs and panted out her release. That was it. With the force of the big bang, he came and came and came. As the satisfaction of his release filled his body, Rafe yearned to hold on to the intimacy of his bond with Lilith. With a pang of regret, he clung to each sensation as the intensity began to recede.

Hook, line and sinker. Falling for Rafe Graywolf would be the easiest thing she’d ever done. Easiest and stupidest. Stupid, stupor. As Lilith lay on top of Rafe in a stupor that reduced her IQ to negative numbers, she willed herself to stop obeying her most primal instincts and start thinking. So what if she’d experienced the sexiest, most erotic interlude of her life? Aside from how fabulous she felt in Rafe’s arms, there was nothing right about their being here together—and far too much wrong. Talk about potential for damage. Rafe could hurt her in ways that hadn’t even been invented yet. She needed to gather up her clothes and her dignity and get the hell out. She definitely wasn’t the right person to conduct Rafe’s intake interview. How wrong she was bordered on the ridiculous. That was exactly what she would tell him, as soon as she could pull herself together enough to put some physical space between them. She now realized the futility of any other plan.

Summoning the remnants of her strength and will, she dragged herself off him. The separation hit her like a cold shock as air rushed to touch her all the places where she and Rafe had shared skin contact. It reminded her of when she’d tried to eat ice cream with a cavity in her tooth—only a hundred times worse.

“Where are you going?” Rafe reached out an arm to draw her back to where she’d been, on top of him.

She swallowed hard. "I have to get going." Her voice seemed soft and meek, despite her intention to sound determined. He'd intuit, for sure, how easy it would be to talk her out of leaving.

Eyes locked with hers, Rafe sat up. She adored the look of his body—along with the taste, smell and feel of it, and then there was the strong, silent stealth of his movements. His voice set off eruptions of goose bumps along her arms and legs. All her senses flourished in his presence, except common sense.

"Stay." He freighted that one simple word with a universe of meaning. He leapt out of bed and took her arm in his powerful grip. She snuck a peek at where his hand clamped onto her arm, his tan against her porcelain skin and she had to pretend she didn't welcome his touch.

No way could she let herself continue with what they'd started. She wrenched away from him and closed her eyes in an effort to resist his charm. "Rafe, I can't." The words, each like a burning stone, came from her gut. "Look, this—"

He took her hand in his and her eyes flew open. She had to break the contact so she could say what she had to. When he held his hand out to her again, she shook her head and forced herself not to meet his glowering gaze. "I can't. What we just did was beautiful, but we both know it shouldn't have happened and can't be repeated. We each have lives filled with other demands."

"You say we know that, but *we don't. Those are your words.*" There they both stood, still naked, the scent of their recent sex filling the air. She needed to continue looking away from him and shutting down her senses or she'd be lost. With great effort, she held herself aloof.

"I really mean it. I have to go." Her voice scarcely a whisper, she was begging.

"You were going to stay with me tonight." His voice was pitched so low, she had to strain to hear him.

She wished that could be. There was nothing in the universe she wanted more. If only there was a way she could stay with him until whatever spark there was between them played itself out. But she knew now that she couldn't. The longer she spent alone

with him, the more impossible it would be to break away. “Rafe, I’ve gotta go. I’m sure you understand.”

He exhaled hard and shrugged, and she could sense him begin to withdraw behind a wall. What a time for her empath self to wake up. Still, she needed those skills even if what they told her hurt.

“Sure. Use the wolf guy. Then when you’ve had your jollies, leave.”

She shivered, his words shocking her like a punch. They had no possibility of being able to fulfill each other’s needs in the real world and he knew it as well as she—maybe better. “You’re joking, right? You have to be, Rafe.” She could scarcely get the words out. “I’m not like that. You know that’s not how things happened. You have to know that.” Damn it, angry tears sprang to her eyes and her throat closed as if she were choking.

“Oh, yeah?” He cocked a brow and his voice sounded flippant, sarcastic. “I know what I see. Damn it, Lilith, I thought we had something special. I know what my senses are telling me, but you’re saying I can’t rely on them. That for the first time in my life, I can’t rely on scent, sight and touch, but should believe the words you can hardly bring yourself to say.”

She sniffled back the coming tears the best she could. “You know why I came here.” Her lip trembled, but she forced herself to continue on. “The words aren’t any easier for me to say than for you to hear, but they’re necessary.” She failed in her attempt to smile, then bit her lip and turned her head. “I’m not the person to service your account in a professional way and for that I apologize. I’m going to tell Dominique to take over. I’m sure she’ll call you first thing in the morning.” Compared to the emotions and intensity of their lovemaking, their real-life roles and responsibilities seemed to fade in significance. She had to cut off that train of thought pronto.

“I don’t want you to leave,” he growled in his best big-bad-wolf mode.

“I know. I don’t want to leave, but I have to.” Lilith could sense that though he didn’t say anything about not doing an intake interview, Rafe hadn’t forgotten about it.

Despite the emotional charge of this moment, Rafe wasn't losing sight of the duty that led him to Fangly, My Dear for an appropriate match.

Amazed and alarmed at the speed with which dejection took the place of elation, Lilith scooped up her clothes and rushed to the nearby bathroom.

He called through the door, "If you insist on going home, let me take you. It's late."

She sniffled again. Dignified, not. "It's okay, Rafe. I got myself here. I have no problem getting myself back home at any hour. Heck, I go out alone lots. I'm used to it."

Silence. She came out of the bathroom only slightly the worse for wear. Okay, a lot worse for wear. Rafe had thrown on jeans and a gray sweatshirt. His long feet were bare and even his toes looked sexy. Shit. She had to stop thinking like this or she'd be in major doo-doo.

All she needed to do was get out the door. She'd made it this far, so completing her exit shouldn't be an impossible challenge. She just had to get over her desire to linger, to hear one more word, to share one more kiss or touch.

He stood and watched, devouring her with his eyes. He didn't say a word. He didn't have to.

It was the hardest thing she'd ever done, but Lilith got herself to Rafe's door and put her hand on the knob. Then, swallowing back tears, she opened the door and stepped out into the dark night.

He let her go.

After a sleepless night and oceans of coffee, Lilith dragged herself to her office the next morning. Though Dominique had never been other than sweet, generous and understanding, Lilith dreaded asking her friend to take over Rafe's intake interview. She imagined how the conversation would go. Her friend, who was rational, in contrast with Lilith's current insanity, would want to know why she didn't want to complete this particular assignment. Lilith couldn't begin to figure out how to explain. No matter how

understanding Dominique was, she would probably have a difficult time dealing with Lilith's unprofessional—to put it mildly—conduct with Rafe.

To make an awful situation even worse, Lilith looked like hell this morning—an accurate reflection of how she felt. Sleep or tears—or the damning combination of both—brought all her ghoulish genes to the forefront and made her resemble a cross between a frog and a troll. Red eyed and nosed, she had charming oversized bags competing for space with the black rings and shadows beneath her eyes.

Dominique took one look at her and could obviously see that something was wrong. “What is it?” She put a sympathetic hand on her friend's arm. “Are you sick? Maybe you should just go home and take care of yourself. I can handle anything that comes up.”

Lilith shook her head. She should have known better than to think she could fake being okay with Dominique. The question remained, how much truth should she tell her friend? She hated putting Dominique in an untenable position *vis-à-vis* Rafe and the Wentworth pack. On the other hand, she knew Dominique had an unerring sense of how to zero in on what was going on. “I'm okay, fine to stay and work.” The way her voice wobbled, she couldn't possibly sound convincing, which Dominique's skeptical look confirmed.

“You don't look or sound okay. Tell you what. Get yourself some coffee and come chat with me. If you feel okay, fine, stay. But don't hesitate if you need to go home. I looked over the schedule and there's nothing pressing here today.”

Dominique's kindness and concern nearly pushed her over the line to tears again. “I'm really all right and I don't want any more coffee.” She made another feeble attempt at a smile. “If it's okay with you, I just want to work. That would be my best medicine. Since I look worse than I feel, I'll hide in the back office if anyone comes in.”

Dominique waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. “Fine, of course you can stay. Don't worry about how you look. You're being tougher on yourself than anyone else would be, as usual. Any time you want to talk, I'm here.”

She nodded.

“How did you make out with Rafe Graywolf's intake interview last night?”

That was it. That question was all Lilith needed to lose her tenuous hold. Unbeckoned and unwelcome, more tears filled her eyes. She hadn't braced herself for the impact of hearing his name, though it was only logical for her friend to ask.

The flood arrived quick and hot. Even worse, Lilith found that she couldn't bring herself to say what was going on. Heck, she couldn't talk at all. Any time she tried, she started sobbing again. Eyes now full of worry, Dominique, took her by the arm and steered her inside her office. She handed Lilith a much-needed tissue, which she demolished in nanoseconds. Dominique got the box ready. When Lilith had calmed down enough to catch her breath, Dominique said, "Please tell me what's wrong. Maybe I can help. Is it about Rafe? Did he do anything last night to hurt you?"

How was she supposed to answer? On the other hand, she'd better set the record straight right away. She didn't want Dominique to think Rafe had done something hurtful—Fangly, My Dear had a zero tolerance policy for disrespectful behavior. "No, nothing like that." She shook her head to indicate she wasn't going to say anything more right now.

"How about I make you a cup of tea? Nice, soothing herbal tea. Then, when you're ready, you can tell me as much or as little as feels right."

Lilith didn't want anything more to drink, but she also didn't want to keep turning Dominique down. "Okay," she whimpered.

While her friend bustled and hummed, Lilith pulled herself together. She couldn't believe what a girly girl she'd been acting like with all the tears and sighs and shuddering. Enough. If she didn't stop soon, she'd undo all the good Rafe's fantastic lovemaking had accomplished for her.

Dominique brought back two cups of chamomile tea. One day real soon, Lilith would confess that she despised chamomile tea. But for now, she sipped the hot brew and let it calm her.

"Are all the tears about Rafe?" Dominique asked when they'd both taken few sips.

Lilith, who still didn't completely trust herself not to break down, winced and nodded.

“I hate to intrude where you don’t want me, but I must know. After all, our clients trust us to screen out undesirables. If he’s done anything to hurt you, if he’s in any way a creep, tell me. I assume he didn’t assault you. There are other, less egregious ways a person can inflict damage. I don’t care if he’s alpha of the Wentworths or the freakin’ king of San Francisco, if he’s bad news, he’s out of here.”

Warmth spread through her at her friend’s generosity and concern. Too bad the situation between her and Rafe wasn’t simple. “You’re on the wrong track if you think my bizarre behavior this morning is because Rafe did anything wrong.” If only he hadn’t done so many things right. “He’s quite wonderful and he’ll be a dream match for the right person.” At least she was able to get those words past the giant lump in her throat—something she could do right.

“The bad news is, I wasn’t able to complete the interview. I apologize for that and promise I’ll never again be so unprofessional. Please, you do the interview.” She swallowed down more of the tea.

Dominique appeared surprised and confused. Lilith could understand her reaction, since conducting an intake interview was usually no big deal. “I can’t believe you’re so upset this morning because he didn’t cooperate for the intake form. He seemed macho, but I didn’t think he’d be that difficult. That’s not it, though, is it?”

Lilith put down her cup and sighed. “No.” More tears started to come and she swallowed them before she resumed. “You see, I can’t help Rafe complete the forms because...” She sniffled and scrubbed the tears away, then started again. “Because I’ve gotten personally involved with him.”

Her voice had risen into a squeak, but at least she’d gotten the hateful words out.

Dominique sat still for a moment, obviously mulling over what she’d just heard. “You and *Rafe Graywolf*?”

Lilith nodded. “I know it was a totally wrong, stupid thing to do. But once we were together, it was like we got caught up in something bigger than both of us.” She made a face. “Yuck, that sounds like such a cliché. I can’t believe I said it.”

Her friend shook her head. “I can’t believe you did it.”

Lilith snorted. "I know. My behavior was unprofessional and inappropriate, not at all the image for Fangly, My Dear. Ah, heck. If you want, I'll resign."

"Resign? Why in the world would I want that?"

"Because I, uh, got involved with a client?"

Dominique rolled her eyes. "You don't remember when Antoine signed up as a client so he could convince me to see him again?"

"That was different."

"Don't be ridiculous. My concern here isn't that you and a client got together. Goddess, I'd be thrilled if Fangly, My Dear did bring you and your soul mate together." She waved a hand as if to sweep away Lilith's objections.

"You would?"

"Oh, yeah. My concern is the particular client. Rafe Graywolf is about the most unavailable guy on our list. What with him being the alpha of the Wentworth pack. We know he's looking for a mate with very specific qualities. You, my darling friend, wonderful as you are, don't fit the required profile."

Like any of this was news to her. "Exactly."

Dominique hugged her. "Lilith, you'd be a fantastic life mate for any male. Heck, any one you'd pick would have to count himself one of the luckiest men in the world because you're wonderful. That said, Rafe has constraints on him... Those have been clear from the start."

"I know all that," Lilith sniffled. "We both do. Unfortunately, that particular slice of reality wasn't enough to keep us apart last night. He had me so knocked for a loop, for the first time ever, my empath skills failed me. I'll have to talk to Mom to see what's up about that." She swallowed hard. "Most of all, though I knew it was wrong, I managed to shut out the voice of reason. So did he, at least for a while. But we can't keep pushing away the real world forever." She shook her head. "I think I'm starting to fall in love with Rafe Graywolf. Oh, Dominique, what am I going to do?"

Chapter Five

“The Treglio pack is making noises about breaking our agreements and starting up a consortium with some other packs,” the elder droned on.

The painkillers Rafe had had to resort to this morning hadn’t yet managed to quell his monster headache. If he had to listen to one more speech he might go stark-raving mad and start leaping around the room, tearing the place apart. That would sure throw the elders for a loop. An insane out-of-control spree might almost be the perfect remedy for what ailed him—if he couldn’t have what he really craved, Lilith. He’d wanted to spend the night with her, wake up with her. He so didn’t want to be at this council meeting this morning when he should be at her side, convincing her to be with him.

After Lilith had left last night, after Rafe had failed to convince her to stay, his emotions had dropped him into an overwhelming cold emptiness. He’d transformed into wolf form to run off some of his frustrations, but the expected release from his emotions hadn’t come. He’d run and howled, chased other wolves and been chased by them—everything that usually worked. Though he’d done everything he could to exhaust himself, he was still wired.

Just before dawn, he’d at last managed to fall into a fitful sleep. No surprise, though, he’d woken up far from rested. With her by his side, he’d have been able to sleep even without going into wolf-in-the-woods mode. Okay, so they would have spent half the night making passionate love, which brought its own kind of exhaustion. Good exhaustion. At least between bouts they might have gotten some decent rest. Then he wouldn’t have felt like warmed-over shit from the pit of hell this morning.

It was all her fault. When would those damn painkillers start to work? His head throbbed on the edge of exploding. Hell, it wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. It was just the way things were. He needed to find and marry a life mate who could rule alongside him, the perfect alpha’s wife. Lilith was a demi-ghoul. A

vegetarian, which kept her inner ghoul at bay but complicated the situation for the leader of the pack. Those were the bald facts. Nothing could alter them. Nothing could be added to or subtracted from this equation to fix their situation. End of story.

The men around the table were looking at him in expectation, as if he had some magical formula to make the Treglio pack toe the line and live up to their agreements. Hell, he didn't blame them for looking to him for leadership—and he didn't even blame the Treglios, who were out to take advantage of perceived weakness. Business as usual. The miracles Rafe was supposed to perform as alpha weren't materializing—and there was no reason to expect anything to change. He'd heard the whispers. He couldn't even run his own life, couldn't settle with a mate. Maybe it was time for everyone to realize his becoming the pack alpha had been a huge mistake. If that happened, he and Lilith...

"What would happen if we just told the Treglios to go their own way, do whatever they think is best for them?" he asked. "What if we all agreed our previous accord is now null and void? That would just formalize the reality of the split that's happening."

The shocked gasps around him answered that question, but he kept pushing. "What exactly does having the Treglios allied with us accomplish? Why should we put any energy into keeping them in our orbit?"

One of the elders cleared his throat. "The Treglios may not do us any good per se, but letting people break away from our accord would hurt us."

Murmurs of agreement.

Rafe massaged his right temple. "Can you explain?"

"It's a fundamental principle of leadership. To remain in control of our position in the shifter community, we need to be able to count on the loyalty and support of other packs."

"Even when those packs are pretty much running on fumes?" Rafe figured with deadwood like the Treglios, the intelligent action would be to cut them loose and let them drift. Though holding on to their dubious allegiance cost the Wentworths far more than they were gaining, convincing the elders seemed on a par with planning a trip to Saturn.

He hated to see his pack waste so much energy on minor matters when a far greater danger—the imminent arrival of the Loups-Noirs from Vancouver—loomed. “Let’s move down our agenda to more pressing concerns. We can come back to the Treglios later.”

By the time he’d heard the latest, Rafe got into gear. The renegade pack had swept through Washington and were now in northern Oregon—headed directly to them.

Time to go into battle mode and kick some Loups-Noirs butt. For the first time since he’d become pack alpha, Rafe understood in his gut why he had to lead.

Dominique looked up from her computer screen and frowned. Even though Lilith swore she’d given up on her impossible dream of being with Rafe, she’d been moping around the office for hours. “Try to cheer up. Despite all the obstacles to your being together, my gut and my witch’s instinct indicate you and Rafe are the real deal. We’ll just have to find a way to make this work.”

Lilith didn’t want to hear any of it. Maybe obstacles didn’t matter in a hundred cases, but she and Rafe were number one hundred one.

Dominique shook her head. “I don’t know how to convince you, but trust me. When there’s a soul-deep connection like there is with you two, obstacles tend to disappear. But first of all, you’ve got to believe.”

Lilith got teary. “You don’t know shifters like I do. I’ve studied their community dynamics. They treat ghouls with such contempt. It’s like they consider us lower than the dirt they wipe off their paws.”

“And you put up with that from any group?”

Lilith shrugged. “I suppose ghouls haven’t had the best PR.”

“You think witches have?”

Lilith couldn’t help remembering that only a short time ago, Dominique had been anti-witch, denying her connection. “You’ve never been perceived in as bad a light as ghouls.”

“Tell that to the witch hunters and all the witches burned or drowned.”

“Sorry.” Lilith grew hot with embarrassment. It wasn’t like her to be insensitive.

Her friend shrugged. “Come on. I sure as heck hope you don’t believe any of the nonsense the ignorant or the biased put out there. You know, the crap about the vampires being the nobility of the paranormal world. It’s more like they have the largest, fattest advertising budget and know how to manipulate the media. I know you can see through the hype.”

Lilith nodded. She also knew all the promotion in the world wouldn’t rehabilitate the public image of ghouls fast enough to make a difference for her and Rafe. It would take several centuries or so to rehabilitate ghouls. Maybe she could help with some PR. That would be more productive than obsessing over Rafe or passively watching him hook up with his life mate—barf. “It’s a moot point.”

“Well, I’m going to give Rafe a good talking to when we meet for his intake interview. I’m almost tempted to tell him and the pack to get lost.”

“You can’t. It’s not his fault his duty forces him...”

Dominique shook her head. “As long as we’re alive, we have choices. Sometimes, even afterward... Actually, I haven’t been able to reach Rafe this morning.”

Lilith bent over her friend’s computer screen. “I wonder what’s going on. In the background material I read something about another pack posing a danger.”

“Really? I didn’t realize there were many other packs around here. From what I understood, the Wentworths are the head of a kind of consortium, which would make Rafe the alpha in charge of all of them. Pretty rare for a young, single guy. The common practice is that they’re mated before they become alphas.”

Lilith winced at the word *single*. “That’s why he’s got to take his duties so seriously,” she said in a soft voice.

Of course, a leader with such responsibilities needed to have a refuge, a place to go to escape the pressures and let off steam. Rafe had hinted that taking his wolf form allowed him some of that space. Lilith knew lovemaking with the beloved of one’s heart and soul provided another crucial outlet. The way the two of them had made love the

night before. Her pussy creamed and her nipples hardened at the reminder. What wouldn't she give for even a few more moments of that intense intimacy? How she longed to touch him, to feel his touch bring her alive.

She had to stop her mind from wandering down such dangerous paths. Rafe Graywolf couldn't be hers. Now, with Dominique unable to contact him, she had to wonder if she'd lost him as a client for Fangly, My Dear. How unfair would that be to her friend? Heck, to both of them?

"Wait, look at this. The local packs have gone to a full-moon alert."

Lilith bent over Dominique's computer screen and stared at the updated message flashing on the Wentworths' home page. "What does that mean?"

"According to what they have written here, it's the pack equivalent of preparation for a major turf war."

Lilith gasped. "Do you have any idea what happens in pack wars?" As alpha, Rafe wouldn't be the kind of general who issued orders from the rear. He'd be right in the midst of the worst fighting. What if Rafe was seriously wounded in battle—or worse? What if she'd never saw him again? Her stomach clenched and fear grabbed hold of her nerves.

Her blood coursed through her with glacial iciness. She had to go to him. Now. She had to tell him...to tell him...what? She had no idea. She'd figure it out when she was with him.

She straightened up and ran to the office door.

"Where are you going?" Dominique asked.

"I have to see Rafe before...before he leaves."

Dominique nodded. "Of course you do. Maybe when you're together again, you'll be able to figure things out."

Lilith snorted. She was leading with her heart, not her head.

Once they began to mobilize for battle, Rafe was amazed and impressed with how fast the suits and the old codgers sprang into action. He'd thought the lack of activity and the years of passive paper shuffling had sapped the men's vitality. Now that they had to unite as they prepared to face the approaching enemy, Rafe sensed a new energy of purpose and animation in his pack—all for the good.

His own blood coursed through his veins at an accelerated speed. Leading his men into battle made all the crap that went with leadership worthwhile. The diplomacy and maneuvering, the politics, bored him. If he had a regret, it was that they had to move with no warning—which meant no time to contact Lilith before they left.

Maybe it was better that way. They'd be better off making a clean break, accepting that they had no future. Except that just the thought of her sped his heartbeat up even more than the coming battle, not to mention the relentless hard-on. When it came to Lilith, he turned into the randiest, rawest high school boy. The young and the horny. He was too old to act like either, but his body refused to behave.

The pack followed the guidelines Rafe's dad had laid down for preparation for warfare. He'd been an amazing alpha. Bloody hell, Rafe missed his father, especially right now. He'd give just about anything to consult with him, even for only a few minutes, about all the questions filling his head. How to lead so all his men came back safe and whole? How to balance toughness and compassion through the challenging times ahead? As to Lilith, what would his father tell him? Follow his heart, his head, neither?

Less than an hour before they were going to leave for Oregon, his cell rang.

"Someone here to see you," a voice announced.

He really didn't have time, but then he saw it was Lilith.

Rafe looked so harried, Lilith almost regretted coming. The last thing she wanted was to be one more unwelcome chore for him to deal with. No sense beating around the bush. "I understand you're leaving very soon."

He nodded. "A situation we'd been watching just went from potential to actual trouble. We can't wait any longer."

She closed her eyes and recited a little charm Dominique had taught her to keep him safe. “I’m sorry.”

He put his hand on her arm, unleashing an electric storm to course through her. They both gazed at each other and said nothing, silently communicating more than a thousand words could have expressed. Even though she knew it was impossible, she wanted to go off with him, somewhere they could be alone. Who was she fooling? She wanted him to throw her down on the ground and cover her with his body, to make wild monkey love to her here, on this very spot where men were getting ready for battle.

Or, even better, he’d lie on the ground and invite her to take his erection. He’d grab hold of her hands and pull her to him so she could straddle his powerful hips, drawing his long, thick cock into her. She could see he was already hard for her. Despite the chaos surging around them, a wave of reassurance soothed her. He wanted her. Even though they couldn’t do anything about satisfying their desires, knowing that he wanted her helped.

“I didn’t want you to go without a chance to say good-bye.” Though tears began to well in her eyes, Lilith forced herself to exercise control. She didn’t want Rafe’s last image of her to be tearful. She wanted him to remember her smiling, the two of them happy. She wanted to give him a reason to come back.

His eyes said so much. She melted, drowning in their depths.

“I’m glad you came. It means a lot.” He put her hand over his heart. “I’ll come back. To you. When the battle’s over, when we’ve won, I’ll come back and we can be together.”

His heart was beating so hard. Just like hers. “I’m not asking for any promises,” she whispered. “I just want you to know I’ll be thinking of you all the time.”

Neither of them wanted to be the first to break the contact, but Lilith realized they were attracting attention—none of it friendly. People were looking at her like she was some cheap whore trying to distract their alpha at the worst possible time. Goddess, she couldn’t allow herself to get emotionally bent out of shape just because other pack members were glaring. At this moment, other people’s opinions didn’t matter.

When two old men came over looking as if they intended to drag Rafe away, Lilith admitted to herself that she had to let go. Grateful she'd had this chance to be with him, even though they hadn't been able to share even a decent good-bye kiss, she backed away.

They'd have walked into the ambush without the advance scouts' work. Rafe knew better than to waste time and energy on remorse about almost leading his men into such a lethal trap. *Almost* didn't count. The viciousness of the enemy, the readiness of the Loups-Noirs to resort to treachery—the upcoming conflict looked more and more like a major battle. He needed to focus on kicking their butt, booting them all the way back to freakin' Vancouver, but he couldn't shake the last image of Lilith's face.

He signaled for their convoy to stop right before they crossed the border into Oregon. Fortunately, one of the forested places that attracted few weekday visitors would do. The men who'd come with him parked their vehicles and circled around Rafe.

"We'll transform together and run as a pack." His blood heated and coursed along with the usual pre-battle adrenaline rush.

"But shouldn't one of us remain in male form to get more troops here?" Buck Gravatt, runner-up for alpha, asked. Rafe considered, then rejected Buck's suggestion. He needed all his men in wolf form to take on the greater numbers of Loups-Noirs. They'd have the element of surprise on their side—and the determination to defend their turf. The Loups-Noirs were not going to get past them and add the Wentworths to their empire.

No matter how many times he accomplished the transformation, there was a moment of shock, of newness. Additional adrenaline began pumping as his muscles contracted. His snout grew and his backbone altered to accommodate the needs of his wolf's body. In a matter of minutes, he was firmly cocooned in his fur, claws and teeth, ready for aggression.

As he and his men raced to meet the enemy, one last thought of Lilith flickered before him. How would she feel if she could see him now? How would she react to this side of him, the animal he would never let anyone tame?

That was his last thought before the Loups-Noirs sprang. The Wentworths were outnumbered, but not outclassed. When Rafe realized all the enemy had in their favor were superior numbers and primitive savagery, he knew his side would win. He made short work of the first attacker, a wolf whose huge bulk encumbered more than aided him. Though Rafe preferred to wound rather than kill, it was soon obvious that the Loups-Noirs were out for the ultimate defeat. Disgusted with the violence the enemy demanded, he tore out the throats of three wolves before checking to see how the others were doing.

After a short, quick battle, the outcome was clear—the Wentworths would defeat the Loups-Noirs. Then Rafe realized Buck was in trouble. A snarling beast had him pinned beneath his paws and was lowering his head for the kill. No matter how Buck moved, he couldn't outmaneuver the enemy. With a growl, Rafe launched himself at the attacker. Tearing at him with claws and teeth, Rafe managed to get the surprisingly strong wolf off Buck so he could go back on the attack. To his amazement, Rafe saw that the attack on Buck had been the Loups-Noirs' last gasp. Though carnage filled the forest floor, all the Wentworths would be returning home to celebrate their victory.

He heard the crack of thunder moments before the hot burning sting hit and everything went black.

Chapter Six

“Rafe Graywolf, leader of the Wentworth pack, has been shot. We’ll keep you updated as more news comes in.”

After she’d spent another fitful night of almost no sleep, Lilith bolted upright in her bed. When her clock radio woke her with this horrible news, at first she thought she was having a nightmare. Rafe shot? Not possible. She shook her head in an effort to clear the cobwebs and wake up fully. Then her phone rang. Hand trembling, even before she picked up, she knew she was about to hear the unbearable. *Shot* didn’t mean *dead*, right? Maybe his injury was minor, exaggerated by the news...

She had to pick up the phone and face whatever.

“We just found out about Rafe’s injury.” Dominique’s voice came over the wire. At least she’d said *injury*, not, goddess forbid, *death*. Lilith shuddered.

“I just heard too.” To her amazement, her voice was steady, unlike her nerves.

“I’m so sorry. What can I do to help?”

Just like her friend, to come up with a practical response when the world was falling apart. “I need to know everything.” Her voice wobbled with the realization of what *everything* might mean. Maybe she didn’t really want to know after all—

“I already called the pack’s information line and checked their website. They’re not giving out much information.”

That didn’t bode well. “I need to find out where he is. Words aren’t going to do it for me. I need to go to where he is, see for myself, touch him, feel him breathe.”

“Yeah, I know.” Dominique fell silent. “Funny, I just tried a new spell on my computer a day or so again. You describe a being, the computer tells you where he is. I’ve got it geared up right now—”

Lilith appreciated the prompt offer. “Thank you. That would be—” Now the tears came. She might as well get them over with before she saw Rafe. She didn’t want to weep all over him. Salty tears might aggravate his wound...

“As soon as I find out where he is, I’ll call you back. Meanwhile shower, eat some breakfast, drink coffee and get yourself beautiful. I’m sure seeing you will be just what Rafe needs.”

Eat breakfast? Right now, that seemed almost as impossible as the directive to *get beautiful*. On the other hand, she owed it to Rafe to present her best self to him—even if all she’d get to do was say good-bye.

Rafe couldn’t believe he’d been shot. From what the men had told him, the impact of the bullet forced him to go through his transformation in record time. As soon as the others realized what had happened, they’d taken out the gunman. One of the Loups-Noirs had retained his male form, adding human firepower to the arsenal of lupine fighting skills. This was a grievous violation of the shifter code. When the Council of Shifter Packs gathered for their annual meeting, the Wentworths would add their accusations to the growing list from other packs. The Loups-Noirs would face shifter justice. The prospect of that pack’s future punishment didn’t stop him from wanting to tear the bastard shooter’s throat out.

Aargh. Right now he couldn’t tear off a hangnail. He hated feeling this powerless, but he’d been lucky. The bullet lodged in his upper arm, not his head or heart or any vital organ.

Even more important, getting shot was like a swift, painful wake-up call. The bullet reminded him that life was finite—and he needed to figure out exactly what mattered most to him before he wasted any more time. Lilith. Being pack alpha. Though he hadn’t wanted to be pack alpha, now that he’d led his people through a crisis, he knew this was the place for him. Lilith was his soul mate, but would the pack ever accept her? His head pounded worse from the need to choose than from his wound.

He'd led his men into battle and ultimate victory, even taken a bullet. They'd stopped the Loups-Noirs—it looked like permanently. With no immediate threat to his pack and some glory, he had breathing space. Now even the Treglios were mewling that they wanted to be back in the Wentworths' good graces. Smart move.

He didn't have to stay on as alpha. Buck had been primed to be alpha and would be ready in a heartbeat to take over if Rafe stepped aside. Though he hadn't been the man to lead during an emergency, Buck had lots of ability as an administrator and he'd shown himself to be a heroic fighter. With him in charge and their situation stabilized, the pack would be in excellent hands for the foreseeable future. Since he already had his life mate, Buck and the pack wouldn't have to face that hurdle.

Rafe hated like hell to give up, but he had to face reality. He couldn't have Lilith and be alpha. He toyed with the idea of asking her to wait for him. A year or two. Or ten. Right. That would be a great thing to do to the woman he loved. Loved. He loved her and that meant he wanted her to be happy—even if that meant she'd be with another man. He gritted his teeth at the prospect, but he could no more ask her to wait than he could stop being a wolf.

Just then, Lilith and Dominique burst into his hospital room.

Breathe, Lilith reminded herself. *Breathe*. He was alive, but so pale her heart lurched when she looked at him. Despite his loss of so much blood, he looked more gorgeous than ever. Lilith wanted to grab him and hug him breathless, but right now he was weak and she had to be careful not to hurt him. His unaccustomed vulnerability both scared her and made him more precious to her. “Are you all right?” she asked as she ran over to the bed. The huge bandage on his arm blocked her access.

“Lilith.” He looked from her to Dominique. “So what, you’re here to do the damned intake interview?”

Though she could appreciate that he felt good enough to joke, this particular one twisted her guts and heart like a knife thrust.

Dominique's eyes flashed with indignation. “When we heard the news, we panicked. I offered to bring Lilith up so she could see for herself you’re all right.”

“How’d you find out where I am? This location was blanketed by top secret security.”

Lilith paced. She couldn’t believe he was wasting time talking about routine security matters when he’d almost died. Didn’t he feel it, too? Or had the taste of battle cemented his commitment to being the perfect alpha? “Some witchcraft she has up her sleeve,” she muttered.

Dominique glared at her. Lilith, who usually tried to respect her friend’s discretion about her witchcraft, was making a hash of things by flapping her big mouth, but she didn’t care. The way things were going, Lilith would probably manage to alienate both her lover and her best friend before she left this room.

He raised a brow. “I’m impressed, Dominique. I’m also relieved to realize it took extraordinary means. We didn’t figure on shielding our online presence against witchcraft, which shows me a weakness in our thinking. Thank you. Speaking of weakness, I’m tired of lying around in this bed. I’m getting up.”

Lilith held her hands out to him. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Rafe.” She put one hand on his uninjured arm and the other on the forearm not too far from where he’d been shot. A wince crossed his face. Rafe’s pain ratcheted through her and nearly brought her to her knees. Powerful empathy, a quality she got from her mother, surged through Lilith, making her one with Rafe. She remembered hearing that love multiplied the power of the empathy— She’d think about that later. Right now, she had a stubborn, vulnerable man to deal with. How could he think of getting out of bed when he felt this awful? Him and his macho stuff...

Rafe shook her hands off as he lurched to his feet. He wobbled for a moment before he stood, solid and strong. Lilith saw he’d replaced the traditional hospital gown with low-slung pajama bottoms that rode his hips where she wished her hands could be. “If you’ll excuse me for just a minute, I’ll get dressed. Then you two can help me blow this joint.”

“Rafe,” Lilith protested. “You shouldn’t even be out of bed, let alone coercing us to get you out of here.” She looked to Dominique for support, but her friend just shook her head.

Walking on less-than-steady legs, Rafe made his way to the small closet where he had his clothes. He reached for the hangers, gasped, stepped back and sat on the bed. “Would one of you ladies be kind enough to hand me my stuff?”

Lilith wanted to order him to get into the bed, but she realized she might as well save her breath. Without a word, she handed him his jeans, T-shirt and leather jacket.

He grinned and she knew she couldn’t deny him anything—even the insanity of leaving the hospital in his condition.

When he was in the bathroom and they could hear water running—she hoped to the goddess he wasn’t getting his bandages wet—Lilith apologized to Dominique for her slip of tongue.

Dominique waved away the apology. “It’s all right. I know where your head is and where it isn’t. Lilith, my dear friend, you don’t sense it this time, do you?”

“Sense what?”

“The way Rafe feels about you. It’s kind of ironic, how you know what everyone else is feeling, all the time. But now, when it really counts, your power fails you.”

Lilith figured Dominique would say or do anything to make her feel better and discounted her hopeful words.

Far faster than she expected, he came out of the bathroom. “I couldn’t get the T-shirt over the damn bandage,” he grumped. He’d gotten the jeans on and had the leather jacket slung over his shoulders. She wanted to throw him down on the bed and straddle him. Judging from the bulge in his jeans and the look on his face, it wouldn’t take much to persuade him.

“My shoes,” he said. “On the floor of the closet.” He looked deep in her eyes. His gaze turned from smoldering to wistful—and any appeal to sanity she could summon up crumbled. “Could you help me get them on?”

“Of course.” She got the leather loafers out. No socks.

He perched at the edge of the bed. She hunkered down and took one of his feet in hand. The man had the sexiest feet and she'd love it if he'd use his toes to... She cleared her throat and forced herself to stop playing with his feet and her fantasies. He was in a rush to move on, probably to take up more of his alpha duties. After all, the pack's alpha couldn't take more than one day off, even after being shot.

"I don't think it's a good idea for you to leave like this, without the doctor's okay." Dominique's voice sounded firm, authoritative.

"I take full responsibility," Rafe said. No surprises there. Lilith figured *Full Responsibility* was his middle name. "I have a lot to do."

"You were joking about that intake interview, right?" Dominique asked.

"No. I can answer your questions as you drive me back." Rafe had evidently regained power in his legs, for he strode out of the hospital room with both women following in his wake.

Despite Dominique's words, all Lilith sensed from Rafe was a determination to go forward with his life. She swallowed hard and willed herself not to cry. She knew getting shot had convinced him to make a life or death decision—what if he'd decided his future wouldn't include her?

If Dominique hadn't been in the room with them, he'd have made love with Lilith right there. Not that he'd ever objected to voyeuristic sex before, but everything changed when it was him and his mate. What he and Lilith had together was too rare and compelling to be treated with anything but the utmost respect and care. So, no witnesses to their erotic intimacy. Whatever happened between them would play out exactly that way—for the two of them only. He'd fight to the death any man who tried to interfere with them or intrude on their bond.

He clenched his fists and growled at the mere thought of someone attempting to disrupt the sacred connection between them. Despite all he'd heard of pack lore about how a man felt about his mate, he'd never completely believed this phenomenon existed.

Until Lilith. She made a believer out of him as she opened up a whole new universe he was ecstatic to have discovered with her.

Now he began to think about the future in a whole new way. They'd complete the formal mating rituals of his pack—even include any from her tradition if she wanted—and then she'd be part of his family. Family. Children. Huh, he'd never thought about the children he would father.

Of course, their specialness would extend to their children. He didn't know whether to shudder or smile when he thought about any offspring they might have. Half-shifter, quarter-ghoul, quarter-empath. Their children would be unique. Now that he'd been with Lilith, he knew that no one else could be the mother of his children.

The pack wouldn't accept Lilith as the alpha's mate. He'd made his choice. If he couldn't be alpha and have Lilith, he wouldn't be alpha. After the bullet shot, he knew there was no contest. He'd choose Lilith, no matter what he had to give up or change.

Lilith and Dominique wouldn't let him drive. Any other time, he'd refuse to get in the car until one of the women gave him the keys. This time he growled because he thought he should, but he was just as glad to be able to take it easy. Leaving the hospital exhausted him. In the backseat, where he could sprawl in an attempt to get comfortable, he caught a glimpse of Lilith's profile. Since Dominique was going to conduct the interview, Lilith would drive.

Why wasn't Lilith protesting about him even going through the charade of the interview? He knew being a demi-ghoul had messed with her self-esteem. Still, as his mate, even when he was ex-alpha, she had a community status to maintain. She had to walk tall. Though he hated to hurt her, he couldn't help wondering how long the interview farce would have to proceed before she "got it", before she realized she was the one?

"What is your top priority in choosing the being who will be your mate?"

Rafe sucked in a breath as a wave of pain rippled through him. "Shared values," he replied. "She should also be beautiful."

He thought he heard Lilith sniffle. Damn. She had to realize how beautiful she was.

“How do you define ‘beautiful’?” Dominique continued after she’d typed his answer on her keyboard.

“‘Beautiful’ refers to the woman inside and out. My top choice would be a blue-eyed blonde who cares so much for other people, sometimes she forgets to care about herself.” Lilith snuck a look at him. She had one perfect brow raised and he could see she was starting to wonder about what he was saying... He’d love to know the exact moment when she realized...

“Describe your ideal date—as in, where would you go and what would you?”

He laughed for the first time since before the battle where he got shot. It felt so good, he decided to do it again. “My first response is X-rated, so I’d better skip ahead to the second. Let’s see. I love excellent food, fine dining and romantic settings. So, I’d take Ms. Perfect out for dinner to a fine restaurant in a gorgeous place. Everything classy and subdued. We’d drink champagne and I’d sink my teeth into the biggest, rarest steak in the place.”

Lilith kept her face turned resolutely to the road. He quickly added, “Of course, I’d never fail to respect my date’s food choices and preferences—even if she was a bloody vegetarian.”

Lilith let out a whoop and nearly drove them off the road. Cripes, he hadn’t meant to have his answers kill them all. He just wanted to let out enough information so his mate one would know...

“I see,” Dominique went on as if nothing unusual had occurred. “And have you given any thought to which group your date or mate should come from?”

“Lots. My mate will be a vegetarian ghoulish empath—and my mind is made up. No wiggle room.”

Lilith drove to the shoulder of the freeway and turned off the ignition. “Dominique, I think you’d better drive.”

She slid out of the front seat and got in to the back with him.

“You’re sure?” his mate asked, her eyes wide with wonder and the smallest tear in the corner. He wanted to lick that tear away.

“Never surer in my life,” he murmured. Despite his aching arm, his cock had sprung to full erection the moment she’d opened the door.

She wanted to kiss him hard. Oh, bloody hell, she wanted to do a lot more than kiss him, but she’d have to settle for that now, with Dominique in the front seat. Not to mention his injuries.

With great care not to jostle his arm, Lilith put her arms around his waist and brushed his lips with hers. He responded immediately, probing her mouth with his questing tongue.

When they came up for air, she withdrew. “I love the way your lips glisten from my kiss. So much better than the glisten coming from tears.” She trembled as his warm breath caressed her.

“What about your being the alpha?” Her voice quivered.

He stiffened slightly and she was afraid he hadn’t thought things through until he told her his thoughts. “I’ve paid my dues. Now that we’ve gotten rid of the Loups-Noirs, I figure things will be stable for a while. Buck can do the job. He’s always wanted to. So say yes.”

Lilith grinned. “I don’t know. Maybe you should persuade me some more.” She licked her lips in invitation. From the look in his eyes, she understood that he knew exactly how to convince her. “It’ll be three hours until we get back to the city. That’s too long. I know the perfect place for us and it’s a lot closer.”

“Sounds like heaven,” she sighed.

He nodded and whispered, “I’ll take care of everything.” More loudly he said, “Dominique, if you could exit the freeway at the next ramp. There’s something Lilith and I need to discuss.”

“I live to serve,” Dominique muttered.

“Where are we going?” It didn’t matter what he’d answer because if he wanted her there, she’d go.

“To my lair,” he said in a menacing big-bad-wolf voice.

She had full body goose bumps at the prospect. They exited the freeway. “Which way next?” Dominique asked.

“At the bottom of the ramp turn left, then right, then pull over.”

In moments, they were on the shoulder of a deserted road. “Thanks, Dominique.” He reached for the door.

“Wait a minute, Rafe. Where are you taking Lilith? Do you want me to wait for you?”

“That’s not necessary. Thanks for everything. You can head back to the office and close my file.”

Lilith’s heart fluttered. Though everything about being with Rafe glowed with romance, somehow she hadn’t expected anything so romantic happening today.

“Lilith, are you cool with this?” Dominique asked. “Should I mark your file ‘closed’ too?”

“I didn’t know I had one.”

“You do. And I’m not going to leave you here with Rafe unless it’s what you want also.”

“More than anything else in the world.”

“Romance is great, guys, but how are you going to get home?”

Rafe growled. “I’m in charge. I’ll get Lilith home when we’re both ready.”

Heck, right now she didn’t know or care when that would be.

Dominique waved as she drove off.

“So, Rafe, what and where is your lair?” They were in a wooded area. It always amazed her how woods and meadows could exist a short distance from the freeway.

He led her to a lone picnic table and sat her down. “I know it sounds like a joke, but this is my special place, somewhere I’ve never shared with anyone else.”

Lilith recognized the great significance of what he was laying before her. Not only the terrain but everything about being with Rafe was new to her, a heady atmosphere she could get drunk on just from breathing the rich air. “Thank you for inviting me in.”

Rafe put her hand over his heart. "I want you in every part of my life. Lilith Graves, I want you to be my mate. For life."

She wouldn't cry. "Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent. You're what's most important to me. I needed bullet shot to make everything clear. It is now. With you in my life, everything else will fall into place. Without you, nothing would matter. So, I'll resign. Buck Gravatt will be a great alpha."

Though a little internal voice inside her questioned if he weren't making too great a sacrifice, her heart and her gut were screaming one word—"yes". Without any further hesitation or reservations, she accepted Rafe.

With Lilith by his side, he felt healthier and more whole with every step he took. The pain in his arm became a distant memory, along with emptiness, doubt and any hesitation about the rest of his life.

"Come on," he encouraged her. "We have to walk a bit, but it'll be worth it."

She came with him so willingly. He hoped she'd always look at him with that same glow of trust. Please, forces that be, never let anything extinguish that light. He could sense her getting tired as they got closer to his lair, which involved climbing an easy hill. He'd have to help her get stronger.

Just after they'd stopped so he could rest, they came to his special waterfall. She stopped again, her face lighting up. The beauty of the sound and sight of the falling water had first seduced him to settle here. Impatient to show her the rest, he drew her onward to the small cabin he'd built himself. Just a kitchen, bedroom, small front room and bath. He knew and loved every inch. Over the years, he'd completely outfitted the place so he could spend days here with no need to leave. No telephone, no TV, no computer. He did have electric lights and a few basic appliances. It was an easy lope—just ten miles—down the road to the general store for perishables. Or not. There were enough canned and powdered foods for them to stay weeks.

"It's perfect," Lilith whispered, though there was no one near to eavesdrop.

He sensed that she understood everything about the attractions that drew him to this spot. "That was exactly what I hoped you'd say. Did I tell you about the bedroom?"

“No. But I can’t wait to hear.” She chuckled.

“I’m much more into showing.” He ran with her to the bedroom, which a huge king-size bed dominated. Luckily, he’d done a reasonable cleanup last time.

“Life mate, let’s seal our agreement in the best possible way.” He drew her to him for their first embrace in his special place.

She hugged him back so hard she took his breath away. When they broke apart, he showed her the large picture window opposite the bed and the huge skylight over it. He loved having sunlight and moonlight pour into the room and to have all the wonders of nature surround him—them—here. He held her hand as they surveyed the magnificent panorama. Then he took her in his arms and branded her with a searing kiss.

“Oh, Rafe,” she moaned.

His vegetarian empath demi-ghoul. He embraced all she was with gratitude and lust. His cock, half-erect since he’d first laid eyes on her, demanded precedence. With a thrill of dawning recognition, he realized there’d be many times for the two of them to make love here, in San Francisco or wherever the hell they wanted. There’d be many times to take it slow and wring every drop of pleasure from their union.

Right now, though, he needed fast and hard—and he sensed she did too. With his body and soul, he’d make her his. His teeth grazed over the soft skin of her face. Showing zero patience or finesse, he got them both naked. He needed to imprint her taste and scent on his inner man—and inner wolf.

He suckled first one breast, then the other, promising himself another time he would linger to savor her sweetness. At this moment, however, urgent needs had to be met.

“We have to be careful of your arm,” she whispered.

“I’ll be fine.” He’d have promised her anything.

“This will be best.” She pushed him off her and got to her hands and knees. “Take me from behind.” She looked at him coyly, the round plump cheeks of her ass glowing with invitation.

He groaned.

“I’m so wet for you. I just want you to fuck me and fuck me until I’m seeing stars.”

What was this? He'd expected their lovemaking to be a romantic interlude, but his mate was taking charge—and pushing them for a ride on the wild side. He loved that about her, too.

His cock close to bursting, he slid between her legs and right into her slick channel. Later, he'd taste her there and drink her up. But now, ah, the way her heat and tightness surrounded his dick had him ready to explode before he'd gone all the way in.

His stomach pressed tight to the crease between those gorgeous cheeks, Rafe willed himself to make this last, at least until he'd pleased her. With his good hand, he reached between her legs so he could fondle her clit and massage her plump pink folds while he drove into her from behind. She anchored them both on the bed, which rocked with the increasingly rapid rhythm of their erotic dance.

Lilith pressed her clit against his fingers and rotated her hips. "That's it baby," he panted. "Do what feels good. When you move your ass like that, you give me so much pleasure. I want the same for you." He gasped the last words, lost in a haze of sensation.

"Like that," she panted. She lifted her head and leaned back, changing the angle of the penetration and bringing him perilously close to the edge.

He did as she asked, so grateful that she told him and showed him where she wanted him and what she wanted him to do.

Far too soon, she was there. Her lovely pussy contracted around him and she called his name as she gave herself up to her release. He wanted to change position now, to experience her ass with his cock, but his arousal and her sensuous response were too great. Totally lost in her, he exploded and pumped his essence into her again and again and again.

Both of them shuddering with the power of their come, they fell together on the bed, which now bore their musky scent. This was where he needed to be to heal, not in some sterile, lonely hospital bed. Here, with this woman, his mate for life, Rafe knew he was complete.

Epilogue

Lilith was more nervous and excited than she'd ever been before—and why not. This was the most important day of her life.

“You look gorgeous,” Dominique chided her. “But if you don’t stop pacing, you’ll wear a hole in the carpet.”

Dominique, her attendant for today’s ceremony, looked amazing—as always.

“I just can’t wait until it’s over.”

Her friend rolled her eyes. “Before you know it, it will be over and you and Rafe are going to leave for your extended honeymoon. I can’t believe you won’t even tell me where you’re going.”

“If I tell you, they’ll be able to force it out of you,” Lilith said. “If you don’t know, even torture shifter style won’t be enough to break you down.”

“I guess you’re right, though it’s hard for me to believe the council would resort to such underhanded tactics.”

“Believe it.” Lilith snorted. “As pack alpha, Rafe is on call twenty-four seven. Even though Buck Gravatt is covering for him while we’re gone, we’d still get constant calls.”

Dominique shrugged. “I guess by now you’d know the lay of the land.”

“I do. Rafe and I thought the council would let him step down when we announced our plans—in fact, we were sure they’d make him step down. Fat chance. They actually changed the by-laws to let me be his life mate. Can you imagine that?” She’d made herself a sacred vow she wouldn’t let tears ruin her mascara.

“Yes, I can,” Dominique whispered. “Because you’re worth it.”

Lilith swallowed back a sniffle as she hugged her friend. The music started and Dominique got into the procession behind the other attendants. Lilith knew Rafe was waiting for her at the end of the aisle so they could be joined together forever.

The procession began to move and she had to remind herself to breathe. Just a few more minutes.

“You’re sure this mutt’s the guy for you,” her father growled as he came over to take Lilith’s arms. As handsome as she’d ever seen him in the tux her mother had managed to convince him to wear, her dad squeezed her hand.

“I’m sure, Dad.”

He muttered something in his ghoulish tongue.

“You promised, Dad. You’re on your best behavior today, right? For me?”

He muttered something more then did something Lilith had never seen before—wiped away a tear. She kissed his scaly cheek.

“I’m real proud of you, hon,” he rasped. “So is Mom. You want this guy, fine. But he’d better treat you right, or—”

Glancing down the aisle to where Rafe stood looking handsome and impatient, Lilith knew she’d found her perfect mate. “Thanks for saying it, Dad. It’s time.”

Her heart nearly bursting with joy and pride, with excitement at the future they were about to start, Lilith took her father’s arm and glided down the aisle to Rafe.

About the Author

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She's his match—but he's not in her business plan.

Byte Marks

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A Fangly, My Dear story.

Hereditary witch Dominique LaPierre has always refused to use her powers, especially when it comes to business. Until now. Her new company, a computer dating service that hooks up the San Francisco human and para communities, thrives on crossing that boundary. Business is great despite opposition from the arrogant and conceited Antoine Thierry, a leader in the vampire community. And, to her irritation, she finds she's got the hots for him.

Antoine doesn't like or trust witches. Nor does he like the growing power of technology; real vampires, in his view, don't need it to have a social life. Besides, if he can't control the game, he doesn't want to play—except with Dominique. The heat between them could melt down any hard drive. She pushes his buttons on every level, from the board room to the bedroom. But he's holding out, especially when she looks to him to support her new business.

Antoine wants it all. His way—and his woman.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Byte Marks

Just a few moments in Antoine Thierry's company helped Dominique understand the phrase *hypnotic vampiric gazes*. It took an effort to tear her eyes away, especially since she *wanted* to keep looking at him, no matter what games he was playing to rivet her attention.

"How long will you be in San Francisco?" His words flowed into her and took up residence in her most intimate core. This was nuts. All he'd asked was a simple social question.

"My original plan was to stay a week, but I'm flexible."

His eyes glittered, and she winced at the possible erotic images *flexible* could evoke. Great. Why did she tell him that? It was as if she were saying, "Hey, guy, I'm available."

She wasn't. After her break-up with Mark, she'd decided it would be a long, long time until she put her heart on the line again for any man. If ever. Logic told her Antoine Thierry was a heartbreaker. She sensed he could damage her in ways that would make Mark's abandonment look like a romp at the beach.

"I'm glad to hear that. A week isn't nearly long enough to sample all we have to offer." He looked toward Lilith, who nodded in confirmation.

Time to nip this in the bud. "Though I'm between businesses right now, I still have obligations that might require me to cut short my vacation."

He had the most amazing, expressive eyes. "San Francisco is known to charm visitors into changing all sorts of plans."

He took her hand and rubbed one finger along the lines and flesh of her palm. The simple motion, perfectly acceptable in and invisible to mixed company, felt downright erotic. Dominique figured she should pull away, but she didn't know how to do that without looking ungracious, so she let him continue and struggled to hold on to her senses. She swallowed hard. "I'm sure Lilith has made lots of plans for us."

"I would consider it a great privilege if you would allow me to give you a special tour of the city tonight. I guarantee I will show you a San Francisco few tourists ever get to visit." He continued stroking her palm and part of Dominique wanted to agree to anything he was offering.

But then reason returned. She was Lilith's guest, for crying out loud. Antoine's invitation had not included her best friend—the same best friend who'd just been crying on her shoulder about her lack of a social life. How crummy would Dominique have to be to abandon Lilith on her first night in the city?

She managed to extricate her hand. He seemed to sense the instant she started to withdraw. "That's very kind and generous, Mr. Thierry."

"Antoine," he murmured again.

"But you see, I've just arrived. In my part of the world, it's late. I'm sure jet lag is going to strike with a vengeance any minute." There. She'd managed to come up with a polite and plausible excuse without using Lilith as a shield.

"Of course the invitation includes Lilith," he said smoothly.

Now he mentioned that. It was okay. She could still claim jet lag. For the rest, Dominique sensed something dangerous about Antoine Thierry. She wasn't scared of him as a vampire. But as a man, he threatened her hard-won equilibrium. After the recent disaster with Mark, she valued staying well-balanced. "If Lilith wants to go with you, that's fine. I expect after this drink, I'll be ready to call it a night."

Lilith laughed and shook her head. "No offense, Antoine, but I can see you any time. Dominique and I have a lot to catch up on. But I will take a rain check on that tour. I bet you could show me things most natives haven't seen either."

"Any time." Antoine, looking the height of elegant nonchalance, nodded. "I look forward to spending more time with both of you. Welcome to my club. I hope you will be my guests here often. And now if you'll excuse me—" In moments he'd vanished into the dense crowd.

"Are you really tired?" Lilith had drunk about half her virgin Bloody Mary.

Dominique had to stifle a yawn. "Yeah, much more than I thought I'd be. I'm ready to call it a night."

They finished their drinks and made their way through the room, now much more crowded than earlier. They returned to Lilith's car, which she'd managed to park a mere three blocks away.

Enroute back to Lilith's, her friend said, "Antoine seems quite taken with you."

"He struck me as a major player. I imagine he pulls that same Don Juan act with lots of women." Dominique squirmed.

"He hasn't pulled it with me, but I agree. He likes the ladies, and it's usually reciprocal. That said, I think he appeared genuinely taken with you. So what did you think? Would you go out with him?" Lilith chuckled.

Dominique knew her friend would not let her change the subject without getting an answer. In fact, if she tried to put Lilith off, the stubborn Taurus would dig in and insist on a response. "Please. Like I don't have enough complications in my life. The last thing I need is to get involved with another player."

"Oh. You never told me that about Mark."

“I wanted to spare you. Anyway, as I’m not into bicoastal relationships, it’s a moot point. I live in Boston, Antoine’s in San Francisco.”

“I’m not asking if you’re interested in a lifetime commitment. Just about going out with him while you’re here. Heck, you could have a fling. He strikes me as the perfect guy to have an intense but meaningless affair with.”

Dominique shook her head. “I meant what I said. I’m on an extended hiatus from any kind of social life. I’m not about to change my mind for Antoine Thierry.”

“I think my lady protesteth too much.”

Dominique was about to protest some more when Lilith pointed out there was no need. “I won’t bug you any more about him. But have you ever been out with a vampire?”

“No,” Dominique admitted. “You haven’t either, have you?”

“Oh, yes,” Lilith said.

“How come I didn’t know about that? Since when do you hold out?”

“It must have been while you were tied up in one of your business deals. Unfortunately, the whole thing didn’t last long—just like all my relationships. But you know what? It’s true what they say. They are the most amazing lovers.”

Of everything Dominique didn’t need to hear tonight, Lilith’s comment topped the charts. “You’ve been with lovers from enough groups to make a judgment like that?”

“Almost,” Lilith said. “Pretty much everyone I want to date except shifters.”

“It doesn’t sound like your social life is as sorry a mess as you were saying earlier.”

Lilith snorted. “Any statements I make are based on my excellent memory, not recent experience.”

They’d arrived back at Lilith’s place. Dominique found her friend’s situation intriguing enough to stir thought processes. Besides, concentrating on problem solving would occupy her mind. She needed to keep from focusing too much attention on Antoine Thierry and imagining herself between the sheets with that sexy vampire.

Some love can last a lifetime—their love was destined to last longer.

Hunter's Edge

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Angel's first words to Kel were I'm going to marry you. She was seven at the time. He was eight. And he didn't laugh when she spoke the words. Best friends as children, lovers as young adults, they had an unexplainable bond. Their future looked set. Until the night they were attacked by a creature that couldn't exist.

Angel survived the attack—barely. But Kel didn't. Or at least, nobody thought he did. His body was never found and Angel's life would never be the same.

The attack might not have killed Kel's body, but it sure as hell killed his heart. Twelve years later, there's one part of his former life that he can't move past. Angel. He can't let her go, but he can't have her either. She doesn't even realize he is still alive.

But when a threat surfaces, Kel's willing to do whatever it takes to protect Angel. Even if it drives them both to the edge of insanity and back.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Hunter's Edge

Do something.

Closing his hands into fists, he muttered, "I can do this." Hell, all he'd wanted do for twelve years was hold her again. No reason he couldn't manage it now, right? He settled down on the couch, sitting behind her. She was sitting sideways on it, with her legs drawn up to her chest, huddled in on herself. Nestling up behind her, he slid his arms around her waist and tucked her against him.

She was cold. Too cold. Nuzzling her neck, he whispered, "Come on, Angel. Snap out of it."

The rapid, irregular beat of her heart was clear to him as if he'd had a stethoscope pressed to her chest. Sliding one hand down her arm, he closed his fingers down on her wrist. The thready beat had him swearing. Scooping her into his arms, he strode through the house, searching for her bedroom. The dog followed along behind him and when Kel

laid her down on the bed, the dog jumped up as well and stretched his length out against her side.

Kel let the dog be. As cool as Angel's body was, she needed heat from somewhere and she wouldn't get it from him. There was a fat quilt folded down at the end of the bed and he tossed it over Angel. As the dog wiggled up to poke his nose out from under the blanket, Kel lay down on the other side of her and wrapped his arms around her.

Snap out of it, he thought. If she didn't soon, he was going to have to get her to a hospital. Most of the Hunters received crash courses on emergency first aid and as far as he could tell, she was in shock. She hadn't been physically hurt—

No. You just pretty much ripped her heart out. Kel didn't mind feeling guilt. Sometimes it was the *only* thing he did feel. But the weight of this was too damn heavy, crushing him. Easing her over onto her side, he curled his body around hers and pushed up onto his elbow, staring her profile.

"Do you remember that summer you broke your arm..."

He talked. Seemed like he talked for hours. He might have given it up after the first few minutes, but her body no longer felt so cool against his and her heart rate slowed down, taking on a more regular rhythm. By the time he got to their last summer, she had a faint blush of color to her cheeks and her gaze would flick his way for a minute, then just bounce away.

"That night you moved out of your mom's place...remember that?"

Her lids lowered over her eyes, shutting him out. Pressing on her shoulder, he guided her onto her back. A soft breath shuddered out of her, but other than that, she made no response. Kel took her hand and twined their fingers. His voice was harsh as he muttered, "I remember it."

Damn, did he remember. *You need to find something else to talk about, man. Fast.*

But before he could wrest his attention to something other than that first night they'd made love, her lids lifted, revealing heated, hungry eyes.

"I remember." She laid her hand on his cheek. "Are memories all I'm ever going to have of you, Kel?"

"Angel..."

She shook her head. “Never mind. That’s answer enough.” She started to wiggle away, but the dog’s weight kept her from moving away too fast. He brushed a hand over her shoulder but she jerked away. “Move it, Rufus.” At the sound of her curt voice, the dog shoved his mammoth weight upright and leaped off the bed.

Kel watched as she headed toward the door, the rational voice of common sense telling him to let her go. Disappear from her life. She’d be better for it.

He didn’t remember leaving the bed. He didn’t remember crossing the room, or barring the doorway. He didn’t even remember reaching for her, but he must have, because she was pressed up against him, his hands gripping her upper arms. She had her palms pressed against his chest, keeping him at bay. He held back but it took a measure of control he wasn’t sure he had.

“Go ahead, Kel. Disappear. I know that’s what you want.” She stared at him, her blue gaze icy and cold. She tried to twist away from him but he wouldn’t let go—couldn’t seem to manage it.

“You think that’s what I want?” he rasped, dipping his head and pressing a kiss to her neck, just below her ear. Her scent was strong there, warm, soft and female and he wanted to lose himself in it. The rapid beat of her heart was a siren’s song and he could almost imagine how she’d taste, could imagine pressing his mouth to her neck, his teeth piercing her silken skin...

Instead of doing it, though, he lifted his head and stared down at her. “Can you really believe, even for a minute, that I’d wouldn’t do anything to have you back in my life?”

His words had little effect—if anything, her gaze became more aloof. She flashed him a hard-edged smile. “Doesn’t look that way from where I’m standing. Let me go, Kel. Despite what your nudist friend thinks, I’ll be fine.”

“Nudist... Toronto.” Narrowing his eyes, he studied her face. “You heard him.”

“Yeah, Kel. I heard him—sort of. I took a mental trip but that doesn’t mean I’ve completely taken leave of my senses.”

I only wish I had...maybe life would be easier that way. Insanity sounds a lot easier. That or just plain dead.

Angel never spoke the words aloud. But those words echoed between them. She paled and jerked against his hold as his eyes flew wide. He snarled and wrapped an arm around her waist, locking her against him as she struggled. “Damn it, Kel, let go of me.”

“Not going to happen, babe,” he growled. Reaching up, he fisted a hand in her hair and jerked her head back, forcing her to meet his eyes. “You don’t think like that, Angel. You hear me?”

A sneer curled her lip. How such a derisive expression could be so damned appealing, Kel would never know.

“You can’t tell me how to think, *babe*.” Her voice was deliberately scathing, deliberately insulting.

His control stretched tight, he tried to let her go. He needed to do just that—get some distance between them before need, love, lust and fear got the better of him.

But his body wasn’t listening to his head’s commands and instead of letting her go, he shifted, turned, pressed her back against the door. Leaning into her, he slid one hand up and rested it over her neck. His thumb lay in the hollow of her neck, feeling the silken softness of her skin, the warmth of life rushing just below.

“I said, *don’t*,” he muttered as he dipped his head and pressed his mouth to hers.

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