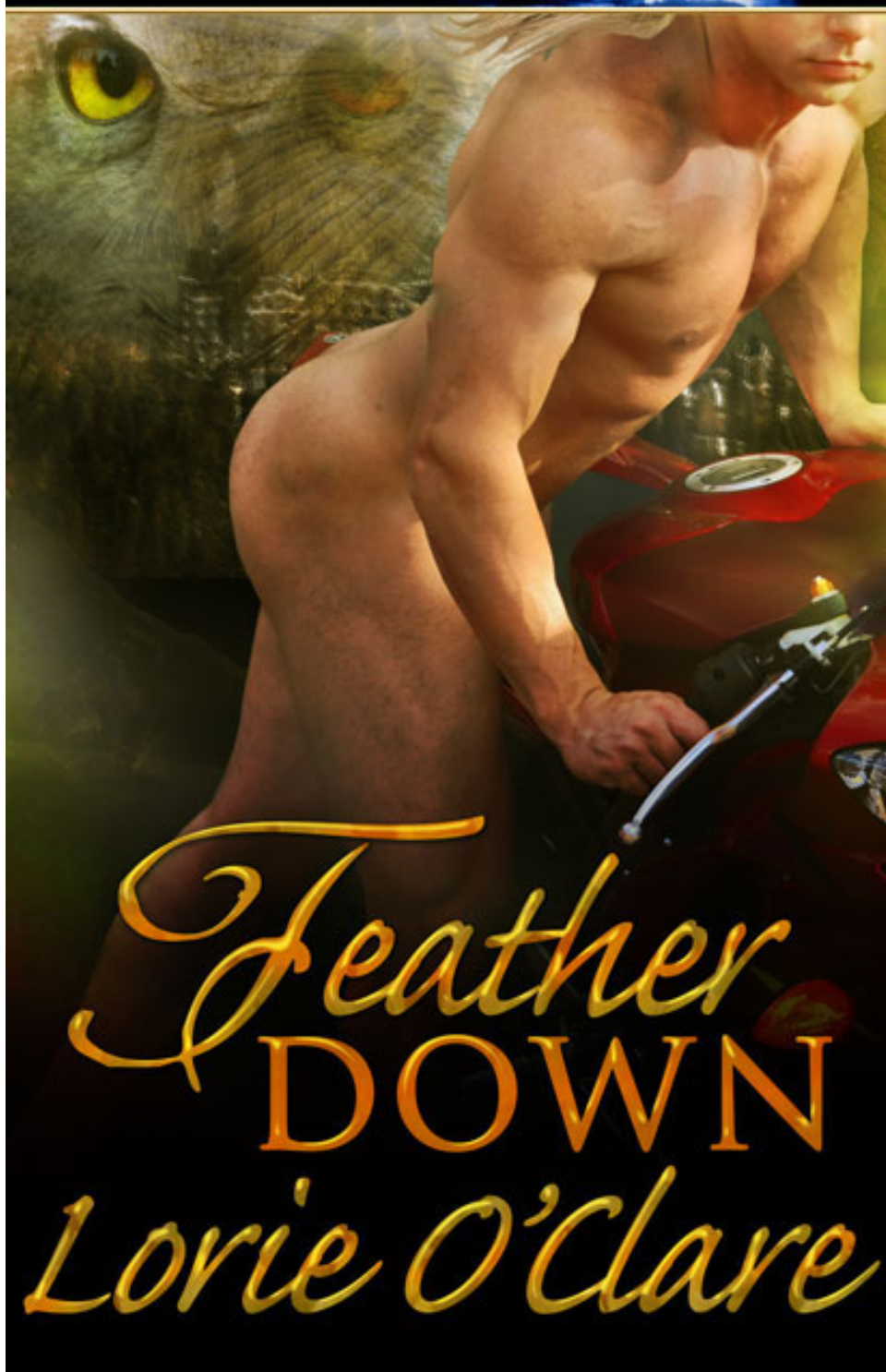


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Feather Down

ISBN 9781419923159

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Photography and cover art by Les Byerley

Electronic book Publication July 2009

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FEATHER DOWN

Lorie O'Clare

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Chapter One

Dover Down gripped the thick branch as a cold wind ruffled his feathers. The gray, heavy, low-hanging clouds didn't bother him, nor did the cold temperatures. The events transpiring below bothered him.

"The community is growing and with the uniting of strong litters, we'll make this town strong." Bart Rivers was a stocky male, his scent ripe with scorn.

Tore Mann would smell that scorn as easily as Dover did. Tore had his back to Dover and was a good quarter mile away, not that distance impaired Dover from eavesdropping.

"We're already strong," Tore growled.

Tore and Bart stood down the street from The Running Mate, a local bar and grill known to be the hangout for most leopards in Kenora. Dover held on to his perch in the tree at the far end of the block, out of view and scent from the two males and their serious discussion.

Bart sighed and rubbed his stubby fingers over his thick scalp. "She's mating age, and your mate's youngest littermate. Put her in a good litter or some ill-reputed rogue will come sniffing around and fuck her up."

Dover would bet Tore ached to tell him any rogue in Kenora would be part of Bart's litter.

"Darla is old enough to choose her own mate. I don't play matchmaker." Tore looked ready to stalk away.

"Good enough." Bart grabbed Tore's arm. "Just tell me you won't attack if I send Mick sniffing after her. They're the same age and my littermate's oldest. My nephew is a good male, best there is."

"I'm sure."

"Then you'll welcome him into your den?"

"That is up to Darla."

Dover had heard enough. Taking to flight, his wings gracing the air silently so not even the fine-tuned hearing of a leopard would notice his departure, he headed over town. He needed the long flight back to his nest to clear his head. What Darla did was her own business. She was of mating age, and although she hadn't mentioned it, it probably was time for her to find a good male.

That wouldn't be him.

It was something he'd always known. Darla was a leopard and he was an owl. In spite of her fiery spirit, the way her sensual curves were becoming more obvious as she

became full-grown, and her sense for adventure, not to mention their strong friendship that had grown over the years, they weren't now, nor would they ever be compatible. At least not to reproduce.

Incompatible. Not an option. He would never be able to give her cubs, and he wouldn't risk bringing freaks into the world. There were enough of them running around as it was.

Which was why he'd never tried fucking Darla. And damn, there had been some prime opportunities to have sex with her, especially lately. There probably wasn't another male on this planet who would smell desire on Darla and pretend not to notice it. She was his very dear friend, but lately it was taking a hell of a lot of concentration to keep it that way.

Darla had led a sheltered life, encouraged by her two older littermates and now their mates. Not many males came around Darla when she was younger without leaving with their tails between their hind legs. Her litter saw to it. No one was good enough for the youngest in the Sheridan litter. Which was why Dover had been honored when both of Darla's older littermates approved of Darla running with Dover as an escort. And for the first few years it had been a simple task, one he even enjoyed. The fiery-spirited little female leopard was always entertaining.

He wasn't sure when she turned from a lanky teenage leopard to having the soft, sensual, compelling curves of an unmated female. Worse yet, since Dover was the only male she'd been around, other than her littermates' mates, it made sense she would start flirting with him. If he were any less of a male, he would have taken advantage of her suggestive behavior. Sometimes being so damn honorable really sucked.

Dover soared through the frigid air, usually invigorated as the cold rushed through his feathers. The best thing to do was create space between them. It had been such an easy task keeping an eye on Darla. Both of her older littermates were mated and Darla lived with her oldest littermate Maurie and her mate Tore. Agreeing to accompany Darla on her runs, keep an eye on her over the years, was an easy task.

Or at least it started out that way. When had her scent first changed around him?

Chiding himself for not noticing the moment Darla's aroma turned sensual when they were alone together and not putting an end to any delusions the young, pretty female had was a waste of time. Dover didn't do delusions. He'd enjoyed more than one fantasy involving Darla, fantasies that would make some of his good friends want to watch him bleed out.

He saw clearly he'd allowed himself to grow too attached to her. And he feared Darla might be too attached to him. Which meant there was a situation to repair. He thought about it logically and the answer was simple.

Dover could brood over it for as long as he wished or he could resolve it. It wasn't his nature to handle a situation emotionally. There was a right way to do things and a wrong way. Only those led by their feelings and not facts focused on the gray area.

When he reached his nest, a cabin he'd purchased because of where it sat along Lake of the Woods, just north of Wheeler's Point in Minnesota, he still mulled over the pending consequences that would result from his actions. Landing on his perch, Dover stepped into the wooden alcove, his talons scraping over the floor as he moved into the secluded area.

The change ripped through him with a cruel vengeance, harsher than usual, as if in spite of telling himself how rationally he thought through a potentially disastrous situation, he still lied to himself. His flesh burned as he lowered his arms and stood naked in his alcove, feeling his senses dull with his human form. His acute hearing and incredible sense of smell he possessed in his feathers faded and he squinted, giving himself a moment to focus with his human eyes.

"Fucking hell," he grumbled, reaching for his boxers and stepping into them. Then walking barefoot into his living room, he opened his wood box and prepared a fire.

The problem might be easier resolved if there were any female owls in the area. Dover didn't doubt for a minute if he got laid all of this would take on an entirely different perspective. He really wasn't thinking right by dwelling on Darla like this. She might be hot as fucking hell, too damn sexy for her own good, but she wasn't his kind. He could fuck her. There wasn't any doubt he could seduce her. But it would be wrong. Darla would think something of it, and he wouldn't hurt her like that. Last he knew, there were some nests south of him, but they weren't owls he knew and he didn't have a clue if there were unmated females in the area.

The fire crackled to life and he stretched, grabbing his hair at the nape and heading to his bathroom to put it in a ponytail. He didn't bother staring at himself in the mirror. There wasn't any point focusing on the fact he wasn't getting any younger. Most owls had a mate at his age. Many had hatched a family as well.

"Thirty-one isn't old," he grumbled, passing his reflection in the mirror and heading to the kitchen when his cell phone rang. He groaned when he saw who was calling and for a moment convinced himself to send it to voice mail. "Hello," he said, answering it without listening to anything he'd contemplated in his mind since leaving Kenora.

"Dover," Darla's soft, sultry voice purred into the phone. "Where are you?"

"Home."

"Oh. I thought you were still in town." She sounded disappointed.

"I came home," he told her without further explanation.

"Okay. Well, Tore will probably be calling you soon."

She paused and he remained silent, waiting for her to tell him why Tore would be calling him.

"There is a situation," she continued, and then lowered her voice to a soft growl. "It's out west of here and I think he is going to ask you to go check it out. When he does, Dover, please suggest that I go with you. I can't stay here any longer."

"What are you talking about?"

"They're coming back. I hear them outside," she said, her voice so soft now it was a whisper scraping over his flesh. "Tore will call you. I know he will. Don't tell him I called but suggest I go with you as if it were your idea. They would let me go anywhere with you. It's perfect really."

It wouldn't be perfect if Tore were able to smell the feelings Dover experienced when he spent time with Darla lately. Fortunately, he could keep his emotions under wrap well enough to prevent anyone from sniffing them out. What sucked was he couldn't stifle his emotions from himself.

"You aren't making any sense," he told her, refusing to comment on how imperfect her going anywhere with him would be.

"You don't know, Dover. Tore thinks he can find a mate for me," she hissed, suddenly pissed off. "You wouldn't let him do that, would you?"

There was some background noise and the line went dead. More than likely Darla hung up on him so whoever entered her den didn't know she was on the phone. It saved him from answering her question. But it left him in more turmoil than he'd been in when he walked into his nest. His frustration stunk, which soured his mood further.

"It's so fucking simple," he hissed, clenching his teeth and storming into his kitchen. "Leave her alone. Stay away. Don't go around her anymore."

He really needed to find a female owl. Hell, a human would even work at this point. Someone to help him relieve the tension. More than likely a human would be a better choice. Any female owl who got a whiff of him right now would turn her tail feathers on him and walk away. And he wouldn't blame her a bit.

Dover opened his refrigerator, staring at its contents. He needed to do some hunting, although leaving his nest, searching for food, might be dangerous in his current state. Darla's soft whispers still lingered in his brain, making his cock hard and his desire for her grow even stronger.

Grabbing a beer, he considered heading into Wheeler's Point. Maybe spending the evening at the bar there. Pierce's Lair would be a fresh change of scenery. If there was trouble, he'd hear about it soon enough. It wasn't as if he needed to wait at his nest and suffer any longer. A shower and keeping his thoughts focused would help then he'd head into Wheeler's Point.

"God damn it," he complained when his phone rang again. He knew who it was without looking. "Yes," he said, his tone placid, belying his emotions as he waited for Tore to speak.

"Are you busy?" Tore asked, his deep baritone all business.

It wasn't an owl's nature to lie. For the most part it never crossed his species' minds to tell a falsehood since sensing the truth to the matter was as easy as voicing it. But spending so much time with other kinds, mainly leopards and werewolves, who were aggressive and more eager to fight than make peace, put the thought in his head. Tell Tore he was busy and he'd be off the phone.

"What's wrong?" he asked, holding off on his answer to the first question until he knew what Tore was about.

"We're fine." Tore must have guessed Dover would worry about his litter. "I got a phone call earlier from Kane Masters. There is trouble out his way."

"What's wrong?" he asked again, although his thoughts remained closer to home. If Tore believed Dover would worry about his den, then the leopard might suspect Dover's growing feelings for Darla. Tore was a sharp leopard and an honorable one. If Tore suspected the friendship between him and his mate's youngest littermate had moved to a new level, at least on Dover's side, possibly he would suggest Dover leave for a while.

"Apparently there is some fighting going on between the Cariboo lunewulfs and the leopards in the mountains where Kane and Jin are living now. I know this wouldn't concern you, and I wouldn't even mention it to you, but it's being howled that a parliament is fairly well established in Banff. Kane says the tension is so thick between owl, leopard and werewolf you can smell it clear down to Seattle."

"Shit," Dover hissed, staring at the moisture building on his bottle of beer as he held it in his hand. "There is a sanctuary north of Seattle. It's run by owls."

"I've been there," Tore offered.

Dover remembered that he had been, in another time when another battle had been fought. It seemed years ago and the peace that followed had been welcomed and embraced by all species. Apparently peace was short-lived. But with such violent races, it wasn't surprising. He didn't understand why a parliament would be out there though. Owls didn't fight, not with leopards or werewolves. There was no reason to instigate bloodshed with a species who craved the kill.

"Kane is a new hunter," Tore continued.

"His skills are fine-tuned," Dover reminded him. "As well, Jin Rose was a hunter for years."

"She is Jin Masters now," Tore corrected him. "And I don't doubt either of their abilities to fight with honor."

"More fighting would possibly escalate the problem instead of resolving it."

"Killing those who bring dishonor on others is never a problem," Tore growled.

Dover knew better than to debate the ethics behind maintaining honor with a leopard. He might as well fly against the wind. The results would be the same. He would get nowhere.

"I could fly out there," Dover offered, deciding not to wait for Tore to ask him.

"I have a very huge favor to ask," Tore said slowly.

Dover thought agreeing to fly out there was the favor. "What's that?"

"Would you take Darla with you?"

Chapter Two

Dover stared at the magnificent mountains that threatened to swallow the town of Banff whole. They were silent guardians, immovable sentinels, providing protection, and at the same time, apparent by how they looked, they were equally dangerous. He offered them his silent respect before diverting his attention to those walking past them on the busy sidewalk.

"I didn't know there would be so many humans here," Darla said under her breath when they passed a group of tourists and crossed the street.

"Banff is a ski resort," he told her, focusing on a group standing outside one of the shops down the street.

"Dover," Darla whispered, placing her small, warm hand on his bare arm. If he stiffened from her touch, she didn't appear to notice. Gold flecks danced around her pretty green eyes when she looked up at him. "There's a group of owls ahead of us."

Two males and three females, all appearing younger than Dover, stood outside what appeared to be a nightclub of sorts. The bright purple awning wasn't much different than what other stores along the street sported. He didn't answer Darla, instead kept his attention on the males. For the most part owls were non-aggressive, although their curiosity smelled stronger as he and Darla moved nearer.

"You aren't going to say anything to them?" Darla frowned when they reached his bike, parked on the side of the street in between two cars where he'd left it when they'd decided to walk the length of the downtown district of Banff and find a place to eat. "They're standing there watching you."

"I don't know them," he told her, although the information was unnecessary. Darla knew that already.

She held his hand when he helped her onto his Harley but easily smelled her aggression spike when she looked past him. Dover turned and faced another group, all males, and leopards.

"What are you doing with the female, owl?" one of them asked, his snarl proof enough he wasn't pleased to see the two of them together, although he also stunk of the urge to start a fight.

"I am her escort for her litter." Dover glanced at each of the males, a brooding lot who appeared bored and more than willing to find entertainment if none would be offered them. Dover and Darla weren't going to be their diversion.

"Why the hell would she want an owl escorting her?" another of the males snarled, stepping forward as he spoke. "Who are you, female?"

"That's none of your damn business," Darla growled. "And I'd rather be with a male who has manners than a rogue who has no clue how to behave in public."

Dover ignored the growls that followed, climbing on his bike in front of Darla, acutely aware of her snuggling up against his ass as she wrapped her arms around his waist. He roared his bike to life, glancing in the direction of the owls, who were blatantly paying close attention to the exchange. When he made eye contact with one of the females, the tallest in the group, she hummed and clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. The other females surrounding her immediately started giggling, but the female who'd just sent him a sexual invitation didn't look at them. Her large gray eyes never blinked as she made the sound once again.

It was a soft sound, a humming and clicking of her tongue as her lips parted and she stared at him with beautiful gray eyes that were sensual and full of curiosity. He didn't pick up on her scent with so many leopards nearby and their strong aggression overbearing enough to even drown out the smell of the engine underneath him. He didn't doubt the owls surrounding her heard her erotic invitation from their reaction, giggling and nudging her. But the leopards were too focused on the possibility of creating an altercation to notice the female standing down the street, turning Dover on with her sexy invitation.

Dover's insides swelled, his cock hardening. A breeze off the mountains moved down the street, lifting the female owl's long, silver blonde hair off her back and causing it to brush over her slender shoulders. A small group of humans, indifferent to the snarling leopards or the attentive owls, walked past the female and her friends, laughing and chattering among themselves, as if they were the only species on Earth. When he breathed in a deep breath, anxious to pull her scent into his lungs, learn and memorize it so he could sniff her out later, Dover instead got a mouthful of the smell of humans.

One of the leopards said something and Darla's nails dug into his waist. The leopards wouldn't hear the subtle invitation the female owl sent him. She stared at him with soft gray eyes, suddenly appearing amused. It was as if she knew she tortured him and then taunted him by intentionally managing to keep her scent from his nose. There was an elegance about her in spite of her blatant sexual suggestion. It had been a long time since Dover had seen a female eagle hawk, the same breed as him, and this female was hot as hell. He studied her a moment longer, willing her to cluck her tongue again. Maybe his need for a female had reached a point where his mind was playing tricks on him. She flashed thick lashes at him, the corner of her mouth twitching, but didn't cluck her tongue again.

"Where are you headed?" the male leopard who'd spoken first asked.

"Nowhere." Dover ignored the spiciness in the air from their anger, proof the leopards believed he held out on them. "We're here to see friends and will be staying in Banff while we visit them."

"Who are these friends?" the leopard demanded, scowling. "Are they leopard or owl?"

Dover didn't see any reason to keep the truth from them. "Kane Masters," he offered, keeping his tone and scent neutral and relaxed.

An uncomfortable silence followed only for a moment and Darla squeezed his waist, anxious for him to leave or let her off the bike to fight.

"Tell me your name and where you're staying, owl," the leopard growled, his threatening whisper enough to make the owls watching the scene play out shift uneasily. "I will tell Masters of your arrival in Banff."

"How hospitable of you," Dover said, nodding to the leopard as if he just offered a generous favor. "We'll seek him out once we're settled."

"Female, if you crawl into that owl's nest he won't have any feathers left to fly out of here," one of the males growled.

"Where I come from, a female does as she pleases and is honored and respected. When she decides to take time to tame some rogue male, he'll be the first to know."

"As long as that rogue doesn't have feathers," the leopard closest to him snarled.

Two of the leopards growled, one of them curling his lip as he took in how Darla tightened her grip around Dover's waist.

"If he has feathers, he wouldn't be a rogue," Dover explained, maintaining calm as he saw no reason to get his own feathers in a ruffle stating the obvious. He pushed his bike out of the stall, shifting his attention off the males and onto the traffic, or lack of it, as he accelerated and left the group watching them as they headed down the street.

It took a bit more strength than he thought it should to keep going when he overheard the leopards snarl and yell at the group of owls. It wasn't too often Dover heard owls yelling. So he was surprised to hear a male owl shriek at the leopards. None of them were his problem and he didn't have any reason to care about the female just because she had a moment of fun with him in the middle of the street. Instead he forced himself to analyze the scenes he'd just witnessed. There was definite unrest in this town, the different species squaring off, and none of them appearing ready to back down.

* * * * *

Dover reclined on one of two queen-sized beds in the motel room, already knowing how the scene would play out. It would be rude to turn on the TV until the arguing was done.

"This isn't why I came out here." Darla's soft-spoken purr would fool most leopards and appeared to this time too. "And I can't believe either of you care what everyone in this town thinks of me and Dover any more than I do," she added, pacing at the end of the bed with her pale, long hair floating down her back.

"Actually, we care very much what everyone in town, and surrounding it, think." Jin Masters stood in front of her mate, arms crossed, and shot Dover a furtive glance before focusing on Darla. "Your litter called us, and with the town already reacting to

your arrival, we all agree it would be best if you came and stayed with us. It doesn't mean you're a prisoner, Darla."

Darla spun around, her hair flying over her shoulders. Her spicy anger filled the room as she sucked in a deep breath, forcing her perfectly round breasts to press against her sweater. "If I'm not a prisoner, then I can decide where the hell I sleep at night," she hissed.

As quickly as her anger spiked, it disappeared, the flush in her cheeks fading when she exhaled. Darla controlled her emotions exceptionally well for such a young female. Dover knew it came from running with her two older littermates for years, helping other leopards escape an oppressed life. But as well, her older littermates were fiery-tempered, ill-mannered females. Darla learned to cope and tolerate both of them by maintaining her emotions. It was a manipulative quality that could prove dangerous to many, especially with her youthful, innocent appearance.

"Which is why we're here," Jin said, not missing a beat and matching Darla's soft purr without the anger. "To help you see the seriousness of the crisis closing in around us and how your staying here with Dover will escalate the problem. I know you want to help and not hinder the situation."

"Don't patronize me." Darla sounded uncharacteristically cold. "You know, I probably would have gone with you if you hadn't just belittled me. Get the hell out of my motel room."

Darla pointed to the door at the same time her cell phone rang. Dover turned his attention to her duffle bag, still sitting on the floor by the door, when the others stared in that direction as well. Darla marched around Jin and Kane and bent over to pull it out of her bag. Kane shifted his attention to Dover in time to catch him staring at Darla's perfectly curved ass and how nice it looked in her blue jeans.

Dover met Kane's speculative gaze, refusing to allow the male to intimidate him into changing his ways because some of his species had decided it wasn't proper for him to acknowledge and enjoy the view an unmated female offered simply because she was a different species.

"Hello," Darla said, sounding incredibly exasperated. Her spicy scent returned as she stood with her back to all of them, staring down, which forced her long hair to shroud her expression. "You do realize I'm old enough to make that decision for myself."

Dover clasped his hands behind his head, watching Kane and Jin watch Darla. It was one of her littermates on the phone, more than likely Karma since Darla seemed to listen to her more than Maurie, her oldest littermate. He managed to make out a few of the words coming from Darla's cell phone, enough to know the persuasion was running deep.

"I know. Yes, I know. Good hunting." Darla hung up her cell phone, staring at it a moment before bending over and securing it inside her duffle bag. She straightened slowly, taking time to gather her emotions and put them in check, and pulled her hair

back behind her shoulders as she stared at everyone watching her. When she spoke, she focused on Dover. "If I'm going to stay with these two, why don't you also?" she asked, her voice once again its soft purr.

Kane started to speak but Dover interrupted him. "It's worth considering. Tonight though, I'll stay here. Go with these two. Enjoy some hunting tonight. I might fly up and check on you, but I'm also going to get a feel of the town."

"What you saw when you arrived is very characteristic of how things have become," Kane offered, apparently deciding the discussion over where Darla would sleep was over. "If anything, it was rather tame. The fights are becoming more regular. Humans are staying out of the matter for now."

"It's not their fight," Jin interrupted.

"But give them time. I know how humans are, and they'll stick their noses into the matter and try creating laws to control all the species."

"Which will only result in humans getting killed," Jin said, finishing his thought.

"Are the werewolves keeping their noses out of it?" Dover hadn't smelled any but knew there were packs in this area. "I'd heard before we came out here it was the leopards and werewolves fighting."

"Do they ever?" Kane snorted. "They'll pick a fight between leopard or owl just for the sport of it. There was a situation just over a month ago with a female leopard and a Cariboo lunewulf. Several were killed from both sides."

"So we have owl, leopard and werewolf turning on each other," Dover said, his hands still behind his back. He crossed one leg over the other, relaxing on the bed while he imagined this scenario peaking at its worse before anything got better. "Is there any reason for all this fighting? Owls don't fight for the sake of bloodshed."

"Neither do leopards," Jin snapped.

Dover didn't bother pointing out she was blatantly lying. He shifted his attention to Darla, who now stood behind Kane and Jin, studying their backsides. When she caught Dover looking at her, she rolled her eyes at Jin's comment. Darla had spent enough time with Dover that she wasn't quick to defend her own kind. Jin, on the other hand, spent time only with leopards. Her loyalty lay with her species and that was it. Kane's expression and determined scent showed he felt the same way as his mate.

"My question still stands," Dover pointed out calmly. "Why are they fighting?"

"For control," Kane answered without hesitating. "Each feels they are the species who should be in charge of Banff and the surrounding areas."

"Interesting."

"Why do you find this interesting?" Jin demanded, pushing her fists into her narrow waist.

"Because it doesn't seem apparent as to why any one species would want to control the other. It's always been each species for themselves. What is changing?"

When Kane laughed, Dover looked at him, puzzled and unable to feel the leopard out by smelling his emotions, which actually did smell amused.

"Owls are supposed to be so damn wise and all-knowing, yet you ride into this town with a female leopard strapped to your back and ask what is changing?"

Dover nodded once, understanding. "I don't live under the delusion that she is an appropriate mate, however." He ignored Darla when her jaw dropped. "If we have others who are believing they can crossbreed, then we might actually have a problem."

"I've already spoken with leaders from the leopards and werewolves," Kane offered.

"You won't have a leader among the owls," Dover said, although he was fairly certain Kane would already have knowledge on the bureaucracy of how owls worked. "It would depend on how many nests are in the area as to how many representatives there are here."

"No offense to your kind, but it wouldn't matter if you did have a leader here. Owls don't take orders well." Jin simply glared at her mate when he frowned over her comment. "It's true," she insisted.

"But owls are shrieking louder than usual lately. Maybe if you could get to know some of them and convince them to stay out of leopard and werewolf affairs, then we could handle things better," Kane said.

There was no advantage to pointing out if feathers were ruffled there was a damn good reason why. Dover nodded and decided he would head into town as soon as they left and see what there was to see. Something had upset the owls. It shouldn't be too hard to figure out what. Leopards and werewolves were notoriously known for baring their teeth and claws over any discrepancy or argument. That should make it easy to learn what those arguments might be.

Dover hugged a reluctant Darla goodbye.

"Promise you'll come see me tonight," she whispered when she leaned into him, stretching her youthful body against his as she went up on tiptoe.

"I'll do my best," he told her, her soft hair stroking his flesh as he looked over her shoulder at the pensive stares Kane and Jin gave him.

Dover showered after they left and then donned his leather jacket, preparing to head out to his bike and take a closer look at the town. His Harley rumbled under his legs as he gripped the handlebars and kept a close eye on either side of the road and once again cruised the main strip of Banff. The town was fairly alive for midweek, although many parading up and down both sides of the street were human.

When he reached the block where they'd encountered the leopards and owls earlier that day, cars now lined that side of the street. Most stores were closed, but the large purple awning over the entrance to the bar where the owls had stood earlier appeared to be open and doing a fair amount of business. The smell grew stronger when he neared the purple awning.

Dover slowed, the obvious rumble of his bike grabbing the attention of those around him. It was something he was accustomed to, and a price he never minded paying to ride his Harley. Sneaking up on anyone wasn't his style, unless they were prey.

Dover's attention shot down the street when the female owl who'd clucked her tongue at him earlier rounded the corner. Her round gray eyes widened at the sight of him. Then, rather surprisingly, she did an about-face and disappeared.

Instead of parking as he'd considered, Dover accelerated, ignoring the car behind him that honked its disapproval when he cut back into traffic. He edged around the corner, spotting the female who was already halfway up the block. It didn't take much to catch up with her.

Dover pulled in several stalls ahead of her, forcing her to slow and acknowledge him, pick up her pace and walk past him or retreat again. One glance at the look on her face was enough to show him she mulled over all her options. He smelled her curiosity, her arousal, as well as her hesitation. This hot little hawk owl, with her sultry, large gray eyes and her long, flowing silvery blonde hair, met his gaze with a feverish stare that sent an explosive rush of need through him with almost a cruel vengeance. A small voice in the back of his head kindly pointed out there was no harm in picking up this female. Society approved as long as she wasn't mated. Dover would find that bit of information out soon enough.

He slipped his bike into neutral and leaned forward, relaxing his arms on the handlebars. "Do you always ignore males after initially greeting them so warmly?" he asked, not half as curious as his question implied, but it was a good opener.

"Fuck you," she hissed, her soft, eloquent-sounding voice adding to her graceful appearance.

"That was the invitation I thought you offered," he said, watching her features tighten when she knew she was being played with.

"There was no invitation. Go on to your female leopard." The female picked up her pace, walking past him and moving around a few humans who ignored her as they continued without giving him a glance either, or without a pause in their conversation.

Their presence did little to drown out the compelling aroma that trailed the female. Her scent was even more enticing than he'd imagined. It was rich and sweet like syrup with the faintest hint of something spicy. Breathing her in, Dover understood so much more about her nature. This female was a distraction, an incredible flirt, and although she wanted simply to tease and torture, the enticingly rich aroma wrapping around him indicated she tortured herself possibly more than him. Her craving for him, her invitation extended earlier, were real. The indifference she attempted to pull off now wasn't.

Her long hair flowed past her shoulders, ending mid-back. She filled out a pair of blue jeans in ways Darla never would be able to do. Her long legs were made to wrap

around a male and her lithe body swayed beautifully as she picked up her pace, leaving him with a view she had to be very aware she offered.

Dover glanced over his shoulder this time, making sure he didn't cut anyone off before accelerating and catching up with her. "The female leopard has already joined the litter where she is staying while we're here."

"I'm sure she is anxious for you to come to her."

Dover remembered Darla's parting words to him. "She is simply a friend." He wondered at his determination, which had just started today, to convince all around him there was nothing, nor would there ever be, between him and Darla. Prior to arriving here he'd refused to honor any comments about him and Darla with a response. It hadn't mattered to him what anyone thought. Yet now he was acutely aware of how much it meant to him to convince this female Darla wasn't a threat.

She shot him a challenging glare over her shoulder as she kept walking. It was enough to say she knew his thoughts and didn't buy his line. Dover considered driving on, continuing with his exploration of the community. He could very easily learn a lot of what was going on around here from this female though. That was all the encouragement he needed to continue trailing her.

"Stop and talk to me." Dover seldom took advantage of antiquated mating rituals to insult and banter with someone of the opposite sex in order to get her in his nest. He didn't want to insult this gorgeous creature. He wanted to know what she knew, and the best way would be to let her know as much.

"Why would I want to do that?" Obviously the female preferred the banter and insults.

"Because you're as curious as I am," he told her, barely accelerating as he paced her while she continued walking on the sidewalk.

"You know me that well, do you?" she snapped, marching around the corner when they reached the end of the block.

Dover drove alongside her. "Not yet, but I will soon."

She stopped, fisting her hands against her waist and glared at him as the night breeze slapped strands of hair across her face. "What is it exactly that you want to know?"

Even with her expression pinched into an aggravated glare, she didn't smell angry. If anything, her alluring scent compelled Dover to press harder. The female was interested in him. Her large gray eyes grew darker, but the longer she held eye contact, the richer and sweeter her scent became until finally she dropped her attention to somewhere around his chest and then to his bike.

Dover took advantage of her diverted attention to study the swell of her round, large breasts through her knit sweater. She wore a bra but it didn't prevent him from seeing her nipples harden, and he doubted it was from the cold breeze wrapping around both of them.

"Many things," he told her truthfully. "But let's start with your name."

"Lana Halk."

"I'm Dover Down."

"Now you will answer a question for me."

Dover nodded. But then Lana frowned.

"You really aren't from around here, are you?" she whispered, her soft, calm voice relaxing along with her expression. More than likely she showed her true nature for the first time as her curiosity spiked and her focus returned to his face.

"Did I give the impression I was?" He stared deeply into her sensual gray eyes, finding warmth and incredible compassion there. It was a comfortable place and one he could so easily drown in and remain content with her provocative nature drawing him in closer.

Lana shook her head slowly, taking time to brush long strands of hair from her face. "But I figured you would have at least learned about the nests here before arriving. My name means nothing to you though. That is interesting but as well I still haven't asked my question since your reaction, or lack of reaction, to my name confused me."

Dover didn't comment but waited for her question, simply taking note to learn what she assumed he already knew about her nest.

"Have you fucked that female leopard?" she asked without ceremony.

"No," he told her, seeing no reason to hold out on the truth.

"But you want to," she prompted.

Dover didn't lie and he saw no reason to start doing so now. "Not anymore."

Chapter Three

Lana needed to get the hell out of there. Her brothers had already ordered her to stay at her nest and not hang out downtown after dark without an escort, one they approved of.

Not that she cared a bit what any of her brothers ordered her to do.

Times were getting rough, relations strained, and none of that was her fault. She wouldn't be sent to her nest as if she were a fledgling.

Why did she have to sit at home when there was so much going on? Owl rights mattered to her as much as they did to anyone else in her nest.

"Your showing up with a leopard female won't get you an audience with the owls. You might as well go join the den you sent the female to." Lana wasn't sure why she told him this. She wasn't in any hurry for him to quit chasing her.

"I'm here because of the unrest between species," Dover told her, his deep gray eyes so incredibly captivating.

"Your approach is pretty fucked up." She glanced down the street. Her brothers were probably in one of the clubs, watching the leopards and werewolves.

Lana had planned on finding them and flying with them, no matter how they shrieked it wasn't safe. She could take care of herself as well as any of them. Suddenly though, seeing this male she'd seen this afternoon took away the incredible urge she'd had to learn more about all the aggression she was smelling in town lately. It was replaced with a new, very different urge.

"What approach would you recommend?" His actions were typical of a hawk owl, his calm reserve so similar to that of her brothers. Dover didn't sound stressed or even condescending. And the way he never took his gaze off her would be disturbing if Lana weren't used to her brothers treating her the same way.

In spite of his similarities to her brothers, at the same time he was nothing like them. Dover Down was tall, muscular, beyond distracting, and his sex appeal was off the charts.

She took her time inhaling, identifying each lingering scent as it passed through her nose and into her lungs. He smelled of the leather he wore and of the exhaust from the bike he sat on, but neither prevented her from breathing in his unique aroma. Dover Down smelled confident—it was his strongest characteristic. At the same time, he wasn't insulting her or mocking her with his question. He smelled sincere.

"Unless you can go back in time, there is no recommendation. You've already appeared in front of leopards who will judge you for how they saw you first, with the

unmated female leopard wrapped around you as if she were laying claim for all of us to see."

Dover cocked one eyebrow and tilted his head slightly, studying her. His straight, long hair was pulled behind his head neatly in a ponytail, and the silver highlights streaking through his blond hair showed he'd reached full maturity. Definitely old enough to find his female in life and build his own nest. If he had a mate, he sure as hell wouldn't be traipsing around with a female leopard. Female owls, no matter where they were from, were possessive of their nests and the males who helped build it with them.

"I'm here to observe, not try to change anyone's viewpoints." He continued studying her. "Where I come from, owls and leopards get along. We get along well enough that a litter would trust me with their unmated female, ask me to take her with me across the country, to prevent her from being mated to leopards they don't feel are best for her. They trust me implicitly because I am an owl and she is a leopard. I would protect her with my life."

"Interesting," she mused. "So you are her protector, yet you've already deposited her with a litter in this area. Or are you simply passing responsibility on to another?"

Dover straightened on his bike, his expression not changing but his tone dropping a notch. "I never ignore responsibility," he almost growled. "The leopard is a hunter, and in fact the one who requested I fly around and learn the town of Banff."

"So you're here on behalf of the leopards. Are you going to spy on your own kind?" She hardly believed it of him even if she had only met him. His integrity and determination smelled too strong for him to be a traitor. There was something about getting him riled though that excited her. And her comment hit yet another nerve.

Lana held her breath, waiting to see if he would actually lose his cool and get angry. Just thinking of what he might be like if his feathers were ruffled got her a bit too hot. She shouldn't be so turned-on by a male she didn't know at all. What very little she'd learned in the last few minutes was by far not enough to judge him, let alone be turned-on by him. Nonetheless, she couldn't deny the attraction, and it was growing stronger every second she stood talking to him.

"If I were going to do that I would definitely need an accomplice, someone already familiar with the land."

Lana realized she held her breath as she searched his face, noticing the slight twitch at the corner of his mouth when he quit speaking. Now he was playing with her and only because she'd just tried trapping him. She checked her temper quickly, exhaled slowly, and forced herself to calm down before commenting. The last thing she would do was allow this incredibly distracting male to capture her emotions. He wouldn't play her for a fool simply because she tried doing that to him.

Loud voices sounded at the end of the block and the smell of young male leopards on the prowl, their pungent odor a mixture of lustful thoughts and alcohol, flooded the air around them. She quickly identified three of the five of them as the males who'd

growled at Dover earlier today when he'd pulled into the stall with the female leopard on his bike.

"Come here," Dover ordered, his soft whisper audible only to her. "Now!" he commanded, his tone more severe than even her brothers when they were pissed. "They will attack you for talking to me."

"I can handle myself," she said, knowing damn good and well taking on five young male leopards would be a suicide mission.

Lana didn't realize she'd taken a step toward Dover when he grabbed her arm, yanking her against him and then pulling her onto his bike behind him. The male leopards had moved down the block faster than she imagined they would.

"Can't decide which female you want?" one of them sneered.

Dover turned the bike around sharply, forcing Lana to wrap her arms around him tightly just to keep from slipping to the side. There was enough room on the seat for both of them, but nonetheless her inner thighs brushed against rock-hard muscle. His smooth, thick hair tickled her chin and she breathed in the masculine scent of aftershave, mixed with coconut-smelling shampoo and Irish Spring. Lana never would have guessed how erotic that mixture of smells could be.

"Since you don't know me, I can't imagine why you care so much what female I'm with." Dover's calm tone held an authoritative edge that even the leopards noticed.

"You'd be smart to keep your claws off our females," another one of the males roared, his words slightly slurred either from alcohol or the change aching to come forth inside him.

"I will protect any female who needs it, regardless of her species, and if you had honor, you would do the same."

"Are you suggesting we run without honor?" the leopard snarled, his teeth growing longer as he spoke.

"Not at all. But if your question implies you wouldn't protect any female, then you are claiming not to have honor."

The five males were moving around the two of them, circling the bike and obviously preparing their attack. Lana's heart pounded so hard in her chest she couldn't breathe. She hadn't wanted to stay in her nest tonight and miss out on the action. But she sure as hell hadn't bargained on getting trapped into this kind of situation. If Dover egged them on any further, they would change and attack even though they were in the middle of town where humans could still be out and about.

She ran her hands down his back, not thinking about the act until her fingertips acknowledged the smooth, cool leather. It was more than the outfit that made the owl though. There was a charge of energy surrounding Dover, something that cried out *beware*.

Owls were better at concealing their scent than any other species, but sitting this close, moving her arms around his waist, every breath she took filled her lungs with

Dover's unique aroma. He smelled of confidence, calm domination and something darker, something that chilled her to the bone yet started a burning heat deep inside her womb. It became more of a distraction the longer she sat behind him.

"I'll show you fucking honor," the leopard yelled, taking quick steps toward the bike and pulling Lana out of her thoughts.

Dover accelerated, and although two of the males lunged at them, they ended up falling on their faces on the asphalt in the street when Dover made his bike roar and they sped down the street.

"Why the hell are you stopping?" Lana shrieked, looking nervously up and down the street when Dover turned the bike and slowed into a stall on the corner. She didn't see anyone she knew, but it would only be time that would prevent this from becoming a fiasco if they didn't leave now.

"I'm not here to start fights with anyone," Dover told her, glancing over his shoulder only long enough for her to see his profile remained calm, controlled.

Lana, on the other hand, was sure her panic was etched in every line on her face. She was holding on to Dover for dear life even though they were no longer moving. When she let go, running her damp palms over her tousled hair, she smelled her anxiety mixed with a rich smell of lust. His powerful-feeling body brushed against hers, torturing every nerve ending in her when he moved forward and then climbed off the bike.

"Stay put," he instructed.

"Like hell!" Lana hated how out of control her nerves were. This gorgeous owl was so close he would see her frazzled sense of being and immediately be turned off. Why the hell couldn't she have met him in one of the clubs when her hair was in place and her reserve under control?

Dover grabbed her arm, his grip firm and his touch searing her flesh. The amount of control emanating from him forced her to gulp in a deep breath of cold night air as she stared into his compelling gray eyes.

"I can't protect you if you don't do as I say," he informed her, searching her face as he spoke. "Stay on the bike and I promise no harm will come to you."

"You don't know my nest," she whispered, wondering why the hell she said that. She didn't answer to any of her brothers.

"True. But I will." The confidence in his tone caused her insides to flip-flop. "Now stay where you are. I'm not going anywhere."

"What are you doing?" Changing the subject helped her keep her thoughts off how his cool hand still wrapped around her forearm.

He let go of her, his fingers brushing over her flesh before he dropped his hand to his side. Dover was tall, a fully mature owl, and more than likely highly respected wherever he came from. He held himself in a manner of a male accustomed to receiving honor from any who approached him.

"Treating our leopard friends with respect," he told her, already turning his attention to the males who were approaching warily.

"You should run, owl," the thick leopard in the lead snarled, his arms inches from his sides and his hands balled in fists. "Fly if you dare."

The leopards with him strutted toward the two of them, growling and hissing as they approached.

"I wouldn't dishonor you and deny you your fight," Dover informed them calmly, not moving from in front of his bike and partially blocking Lana's view of the group approaching. "Not to mention, we haven't extended formal invitations."

The leopards continued growling as they slowed and faced Dover. Lana could see the length of the street in front of her as well as down the side street both ways. A few humans walked along the sidewalk, barely giving them any notice. If anything, when they did spot the group, they picked up their pace, unwilling to be part of any argument.

"You're about to tell us who you are, right now," the thick leopard growled.

He was mostly blocked from Lana's view by Dover's tall body and broad shoulders. Possibly his leather coat made him look larger than he was, and his dark blue jeans were straight cut, showing off roped muscle that pressed against denim. His black boots didn't have any heels, not that he would need to do a thing to add to his height. Dover stood well over six feet and all five leopards together didn't look as intimidating as he did.

"Dover Down, from Kenora," Dover announced with his clear, controlled tone. "And you are?"

"From Kenora?"

"Kenora is a small town off Lake of the Woods in West Ontario."

"Why are you in Banff?" the thick leopard asked, refusing to honor Dover with a return in introductions.

"Leopard, you will honor me by introducing yourself." When Dover lowered his voice, the baritone seemed to stop the breeze.

Lana braced herself, all too aware of the steel muscles that made his ass look hard and firm. She already knew his coconut-smelling hair was soft, thick, and she loved the length. But it was more than his physical appearance that commanded the moment. Dover didn't smell nervous, aggressive or scared. If anything, his calm scent was stronger than the adrenaline rushes she picked up coming off the five leopards.

"It is you who are honored to meet me," the thick male growled, although it seemed some of his fierceness waned. "I am Randy Young, the oldest of my litter. These are my littermates Rafe and Rick."

There were grunts but Lana couldn't see which ones he pointed to, not that she cared all that much. She was growing rather comfortable sitting on the bike, her perch feeling solid and secure. Not that she had a clue how to move this thing if she needed to

make a quick escape. Nor would she try. If she were forced to, Lana could fly off this thing and race toward the clubs. There was safety in crowds.

Dover told her he would stay close though and she believed him. She also didn't mind the view a bit. Maybe she couldn't see the leopards that well, but she had one hell of a good view of Dover's backside. Between sitting on his bike, which quietly vibrated as her legs were spread across the seat, and drooling over buns of steel, she was getting quite soaked. If she weren't careful the males in front of her would wonder why she smelled of lust when they were so close to breaking out in a fight.

"I am not the oldest," one of the other leopards said. "But my older littermate leads this town."

"I didn't know Kane Masters had younger littermates," Dover interrupted, his chillingly cool tone as close to animosity as anything she'd heard out of him yet.

The uneasy silence that followed the next minute made her curious. Lana leaned to the side, immediately catching the leopard's attention. Dover shifted his weight, blocking her view of the males again, and their view of her. He was keeping her out of their line of vision on purpose.

"Don't tell me you don't honor the hunter among you?" Dover asked.

"Leopard affairs are none of your business," the thick male, Randy Young, snarled.

"Unlike you, my new friend, I don't judge a male by his species but instead by the power and knowledge he carries with him daily."

Lana stiffened at his words. How often had she told her brothers they shouldn't judge other species without knowing them individually? Dover put into words what she'd tried more than once to make her nest see, and the other nests around them.

When Dover turned around, moving to her, the intensity in his expression stole her breath. He was a lot more pissed off than he let on. She couldn't smell his anger but even in the dark, with little light on either of them, his gray eyes appeared to glow. He grabbed the handlebars and climbed on his bike, his hard ass pressing against her crotch.

"The female I brought into town is staying with Masters and his mate. When I check on her, I'll let him know I was honored to meet your litters," Dover announced. "And know this, I'm here to learn why leopards and werewolves in Banff suddenly feel a need to control the other species around them. I'll be curious to learn the answer."

"Sniff it out and learn the owls are the ones trying to run the other species," Randy Young howled, and Lana stiffened.

Dover didn't haul ass out of there but instead accelerated slowly and drove straight ahead. Lana could have reached out and touched the leopards surrounding the bike if she wanted. None of them said a thing and stepped back only far enough to allow Dover to pass. Although she'd heard every word of the conversation, she wasn't sure she'd be able to tell anyone how he so successfully gained those leopards' respect, but he'd done it. Dover was definitely a male she wanted to know better, a lot better.

It was interesting. He'd been here a day. Already he questioned what her brothers had been discussing for weeks now. The unrest growing between leopards and werewolves in Banff and the surrounding mountains was becoming more than a curiosity. A war would break out between all of them, and over what?

Lana didn't understand it. There was no gain for either leopard or werewolf to manipulate the other. They all lived together, and had for generations. It made as much sense if they were suddenly to decide to try to control humans. There would be no benefit, no gain in such actions. All that would happen would be one species being pushed until they couldn't take it any longer and then retaliating.

Realizing she'd been lost in thought and that her arms were once again wrapped around Dover's solid torso, Lana looked up, taking in their surroundings. Dover slowed and turned into a parking lot.

"What are you doing?" She looked around at the quiet, dark park. Swing sets and other objects human children played on sat idle in a grassy area.

"I won't dishonor you by taking you to my motel room and I'm not ready to take you to your nest yet." Dover parked his bike and climbed off, reaching for her.

There wasn't any way for Dover to know they were in a part of town where her brothers seldom came. It was more the tourist side with fancy restaurants and businesses that catered to those who wished to spend money. That didn't make her any less nervous as she sniffed the still, cold night air.

"Hey!" she cried out when Dover grabbed her, pulling her off his bike as if she weighed nothing.

"Where is the female who clucked her tongue at me this afternoon?" he whispered.

Where was that female?

Among her friends, Lana was cocky. She always had been. There were no worries. As Dover's arms wrapped around her and she felt his hard, muscular body press against hers, she realized the brothers she dreaded seeing right now were also her safety net. Being a Halk gave her power. She was free to act as she wished and no one would touch her. Dover didn't know anything about the Halks.

His mouth found hers and the butterflies she'd experienced earlier in her gut turned into a warmth that swelled and traveled until she clung to him. Lana was sure her legs would go out when he impaled her mouth. Never before had she known a hunger coming from a male like what she tasted with Dover.

Even the wool sweater she wore suddenly didn't do enough to protect her. And it wasn't the cold she needed protection from. Dover stirred sensations inside her she wasn't sure another male had ever touched. His hands pressed into her back, moving lower, making her acutely aware of how he touched her. When he cupped her ass and then squeezed, he growled into her mouth.

Lana sighed. God, it was the strangest sound coming out of her mouth. She wasn't submissive by nature and Dover's demanding nature should irritate her, not create a fire inside her she was damn close to insisting he put out.

His cock was harder than steel, throbbing between them. Odd how it matched the pulse growing stronger inside her with every beat. Its length and thickness distracted her, making her fingers itch, and she curled her hands into fists against his shoulders. She could reach between them, lower her hands and stroke it, control when it jerked. As if he read her thoughts, Dover tightened his grip on her ass and pushed her against him, closing any distance between them as he crushed her into his body.

Lana forced her hands flat over the smooth, cool leather of his jacket. Then grabbing his shoulders, she gulped in air when he left her mouth, nipping at her lower lip and then her chin. One of his hands moved to the small of her back and then her hip. He feasted on her neck, forcing her head back.

She blinked, relaxing and letting her head drop back. She barely focused on the black sky overhead and million stars creating tiny sparks of light overhead. Dover was so tall, so perfectly built, and her body seemed to mold against his as if they were made for each other. This stranger, this male she'd never laid eyes on before today, knew how to touch her, how to kiss and nip at her body. Sparks ignited inside her, more powerful than all the stars overhead, and the swelling inside her reached dangerous levels.

Dragging another ragged breath deep into her lungs, Lana tried regaining control of her lust-filled brain. He would have her out of her clothes and bent over his bike in minutes if she didn't manipulate the situation in a different direction. Worse yet, the way her thoughts were headed, she wanted him to do just that.

And wouldn't that just be perfect. All the owls of Banff needed was to get a whiff of the youngest Halk having sex in a neighborhood park with a stranger to their area. That would go over so well. Her brothers would explode. Dover wouldn't live through the next day.

Those thoughts sobered her brain. Lana let her hands slide to Dover's chest, pressing her palms flat against the smooth, dead flesh that covered his torso. Lowering her head when she inhaled, she tasted his scent in her mouth before it lined her insides. There was no getting away from his commanding yet somehow soothing aroma as it wrapped around her.

"Enough," she whispered, her voice hoarse. Even as she took a step backward she kept her hands on his chest. "We've got to stop."

"Do you live nearby?" Dover asked, brushing her hair from her face and over her shoulder.

"Not really."

"Do you live alone?"

Lana thought of the small, one-bedroom apartment she'd recently moved into in the apartment building her oldest brother now owned. Her parents had owned it and their nest had been the top floor until her father and then mother passed away. Each of her brothers had their own apartment in the building and up until recently she'd lived with her oldest brother. After months – years – of begging, Lana was finally allowed her own nest.

"Yes. I have my own nest."

"I hear your pride," he whispered, brushing his knuckles along her cheek.

His gray eyes were a rich, beautiful shade as he watched her carefully, appearing interested in anything she might share with him about her.

Lana wasn't ready to let him know how closely her brothers guarded her. "It's a nice nest," she offered, shrugging and backing away from him. As she turned to the park, needing distance from him but really not ready to leave yet, she bit her lip to keep from asking questions to know him better. Instead she remained silent, hoping he would offer her information about himself.

"How old are you?" Apparently he was more interested in knowing her than in sharing anything about himself.

"Twenty-three. You?"

"Thirty-one." Dover slipped his hand around hers, taking it in a firm grip as he walked them toward the swings. "What do you do for work?"

She never really considered managing the complex her nest owned as work. "I help run the apartments that I live in."

"Maybe you can get me a small apartment there while I'm staying here in Banff."

"Maybe." She didn't know how her brothers would react to Dover. Probably a lot better if they didn't think his living there would jeopardize her honor.

They reached the swing set and Lana sat in one of the swings, thinking it would create a space between them and allow them to keep talking. Dover walked into her though, grabbing the chains and pushing the swing backward as he faced her. He pushed the swing until her feet would leave the ground or she would slip off the swing. She wrapped her legs around his thighs, watching his dark gray eyes probe deep inside her and feeling the heat he'd created kissing her flame to life.

"I want to know you better." His calm, quiet tone matched the intense, controlled expression on his face. "A lot better." Dover let go of the chains and dragged his long fingers into her hair.

"One kiss has brought you to that decision?" she challenged.

"One kiss has shown me I need more." He brushed his lips over hers, not closing his eyes but watching her, their faces so close he was a blur. Dover grabbed her lip between his teeth and tugged, releasing her slowly and then kissing her again. "And your behavior since first seeing you this afternoon makes me want to know what makes you act as you do."

"And how is that?"

"So full of confidence yet hesitating as if you were shy."

Lana couldn't help laughing. His cock was suddenly hard as stone, this time pressing against her pussy. Their jeans were the only thing preventing him from entering her. The length of his shaft, throbbing and growing between them, had her feverish and soaked in seconds.

"I doubt anyone who knows me would say I'm shy." Her voice was huskier than it was a moment before.

Dover didn't act as if he noticed. "How would they describe you?"

"How would those who know you describe you?" she asked, tired of talking about herself.

"They would tell you I'm the one who fixes things."

"Fixes things?"

"Yes. If something is wrong, I fly around, check it out and then put things right."

"Is that why you're here?"

"Yes. It is." He brushed his lips over hers again, tightening his grip on her hair as he tilted her head and deepened the kiss.

Lana's insides were on fire from raw, out-of-control lust. At the same time her stomach twisted nervously. Her brothers would fly into a tirade when they learned Dover was here to "fix" the problem they'd intentionally started.

Her world was tilted sideways as she sat in the swing with her legs wrapped around Dover. She felt gravity drag her hair over her shoulders and it hung toward the ground. Lana wasn't sure when her arms wrapped around his broad shoulders but she was helping to deepen the kiss. Her pussy was so damn wet her jeans would be soaked, and the smell of lust hung heavy around them.

With every breath she was getting drunk off him. His fingers massaged her scalp but at the same time tugged on her hair enough to create a sting. The sensation rushed through her, shooting down her middle and straight to her pussy as if she were being shocked. His cock throbbed between them, a powerful yet silent reminder of where this could go. And the way he kissed her, so thoroughly with so much intensity, it was as if he were starving for her. That knowledge empowered her and at the same time terrified her.

Lana dragged her hands across Dover's shoulders and then moved between them, needing to feel flesh instead of leather. When she pressed her hands against his chest, roped muscle twitched under her touch. She wasn't sure if he wanted her touching him or if he was just getting hot, but Dover shrugged out of his coat, letting it fall to the ground behind him without a care as he began dragging his mouth down her neck.

"Much more of this, my sweet owl, and we're going to make a scene this park might not have seen before," he growled against her collarbone.

Shivers rushed over her body, not only from his breath torturing her but from the meaning in his words. Lana didn't make scenes. She was mouthy, daring, cocky and aggressive, but always within the net of protection offered by her nest. It was one thing to fly with confidence when she knew she could never fall. Her brothers were always there to protect her. But they weren't here now. Thank God!

"Who's to say what this park has seen?" she said, letting her head fall back and blinking at the world behind her upside down while Dover moved to her breasts.

Dover lifted her sweater and then moved her bra, exposing her breasts to the cold night air. Immediately his hot mouth landed on one of her nipples. The contrast was enough to push her to the edge and she felt the swelling inside her reach a painful, dangerous point.

"Crap!" she hissed, digging her nails into his arms and then holding him there, the pleasure washing over her too incredible to allow it to end anytime soon. "Oh God, yes."

Dover growled or possibly mumbled something. She wasn't sure. He moved from one nipple to the other, sucking and nipping at her puckered flesh while sparks ignited before her eyes.

There was a tug at her waist, lifting her. She swore she lay horizontal above the ground several feet, on her back. It was an odd feeling since she was in her flesh, but at the same time so perfect. This male owl, who before today she'd never laid eyes on, had flown into her world and it made sense she would experience the sensation of flying, and in her flesh. The whole thing was so bizarre, so unpredicted, anything normal at this point would seem grossly out of place.

And she didn't want normal. Lana didn't want anything predictable. It would cause reality to crash in around her. For the moment she wanted this. She wouldn't worry about any repercussions.

Dover unzipped her jeans after unbuttoning them. Then his hand pressed against her abdomen, sliding under the denim until he found her soaked heat.

"My sweet owl," he crooned, his deep baritone stroking her senses as his hand stroked her pussy.

Lana arched into him, hating her clothes that restricted his movements. When she made her decision, she refused any thoughts to enter her mind that might change it. Lifting her head, she stared at him as he continued feasting on her breasts. Dover was so tall, so powerful and well-built. If she'd ever taken time to imagine what a perfect male owl would look like, she would have envisioned him. His calm resolve, his controlling nature, and the way she was sure he never allowed his feathers to get ruffled no matter the situation appealed to her as much as every inch of his sexy body.

"Let me up," she told him.

Dover raised his head, his gray eyes so round and perfect, and searched her face without revealing his thoughts. "Okay," he said slowly, straightening.

His silver blond hair was slightly tousled. Apparently at some point she'd grabbed his head and caused several strands to fall free from his ponytail holder. They hung around his face, falling past his chin. Dover continued holding her as he brought her to an upright position in the swing.

Lana slipped out of it, turning before he could control her movements. With her back to him and leaning into the seat of the swing, she shoved her pants down her legs.

"Fuck me," she instructed. "Do it now. Don't wait any longer."

His hands moved around her waist, bringing his body against hers once again. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Fuck me now," she told him, glancing over her shoulder and meeting his sensual stare.

Chapter Four

Dover gripped her bare hips. Her flesh was smooth, silky and warm. Lana smelled so damn good, her scent as intoxicating and enticing as the view she offered. Not to mention her order to be fucked. He found it interesting how she changed position though, transforming their rather intimate foreplay into something more crude, distant and completely physical. He wasn't sure if her actions were premeditated but was curious to find out.

"You are so gorgeous," he said, running his hands over the curve of her ass.

"Dover, now!" she insisted.

He squatted, putting himself eye level with her ass, and spread her open then kissed her just under her ass. If he hadn't been ready for her reaction, he might have been knocked on his rear.

"Shit! What the hell?" Lana cried out, lunging forward, but the swing grabbed her, sending her backward toward him.

Dover braced her, keeping a firm grip on her soft, round hips. "Hold still," he commanded, and dipped into her soaked heat.

"Oh God," she wailed, her long hair floating over her shoulders and blocking his view of her face. "Shit. Dover," she added, although didn't continue.

She gripped the chains on the swing, her back arched while her legs locked in position. Dover had a view any male would kill to enjoy for just a minute. He planned on taking a lot more time than that. He pressed into her soaked flesh with his thumbs, opening her farther for him, and then began feasting on some of the best-tasting pussy he'd ever had the privilege of enjoying.

Lana shivered and narrow muscles constricted in her perfectly round bottom and slender thighs. He dipped into her heat with his tongue and she constricted around him, leaning backward as she attempted to bring him deeper inside her.

"Dover, oh my God. That feels so good," she whimpered.

She was no longer begging for him to fuck her. In spite of turning around, giving him the impression she didn't want anything personal, they'd created an intimate moment. He moved his fingers down her smooth, nicely shaved flesh, watching the moisture make her flesh glisten. There weren't street lights around them. He and Lana were shrouded in darkness. If it weren't for his acute ability to see in the dark, he would have missed out on a beautiful sight.

"You're so beautiful, Lana. Do you know that?" he asked, hating to close his eyes as he ran his tongue between the folds of her flesh.

"Yes," she whispered, although the admission didn't sound conceited, but more as if she would agree with anything he said at the moment.

Dover chuckled, knowing he controlled the moment and wanting more than anything to bring her to the edge. He wanted to give her pleasure in a way she hadn't received it before. It was all a part of knowing her better. And he ached to learn everything she knew.

He didn't focus on how getting close to her would be to his advantage in learning more about this community. Dover could find out what he needed to know in order to determine what happened to turn leopard and werewolf against each other. Instead, the way Lana reacted to his mouth, squirmed when he dipped inside her and so many tiny muscles constricted and fought to drag him deeper inside her while he continued feasting, drove him to devour her further.

"You're going to come for me," he let her know, licking the taste of her from his lips while continuing to stroke her sensitive flesh with his fingers. When he pushed two fingers inside her, the way her muscles clamped down against him made his cock burn with a fever more intense than he'd known in years.

"Fuck me and I will," she said, letting go of one of the chains to brush hair from her face as she looked over her shoulder. "Fuck me now, Dover. I'm so ready."

"I know you are," he said, fighting for calm when it was all he could do not to jump to his feet and bury himself in her heat. "Come for me now and I promise you'll come again when I fuck you."

"God. Dover. Are you always this difficult?" There wasn't any anger in her tone, more like desperation.

"Usually," he told her, and fought a smile when she growled.

Stroking the soaked walls of her pussy with his fingers, he began fucking her, moving in and out and loving the hell out of how tight she was.

"How many males have enjoyed this?"

"That is none of your business," she snapped.

This time he couldn't fight the grin. He suspected very few. Lana wasn't the skilled seductress. She probably wouldn't be making him harder than stone right now if she were. Her pure, natural manner and her open eagerness to have what she wanted offered him all the information he needed to know.

"How many females have you done this with?" she countered, panting as she spoke.

"Not many," he told her willingly. "I crave sex as much as any male but that doesn't mean I'll accept the offer of every willing slut."

She tried straightening. "I'm not a slut!" she hissed.

He kept her still with a hand on her back. "Nor will you ever be," he assured her. "Not with me or any male." Shoving deep inside her with his fingers while stroking her back silenced her, almost.

Her panting turned to moans and he felt every inch of her tighten.

"That's it, my sweet little owl. Give me everything," he encouraged.

Lana was beyond speaking. Instead, she cried out, arching her back, and her long hair drifted down her back as she let out a low, cooing sound. It was the most beautiful cry Dover ever heard. A fever ignited inside him he couldn't control. For the life of him he didn't remember pulling his fingers out of her or standing. His cock was freed from his jeans with little effort. And when he impaled her, bright lights exploded inside him and he couldn't focus on their source or anything other than the incredible sensations washing through him as he buried his dick deep inside her pussy.

He wasn't going to make it long. Dover hadn't lied to Lana when he told her there weren't many females in his life. Quite a few had offered their services over the years. But he'd been very busy helping leopards with important quests. Owls were adamant about keeping a peaceful existence between themselves and the other species in their worlds. And what he knew about himself above and beyond all of his commitments, a slut just didn't turn him on.

Maybe he'd always craved a female just like Lana. Maybe he'd craved Lana and didn't know the complete package until he spotted her. Dover wouldn't deny the attraction was mutual the moment they saw each other. He was very aware his growing distraction with Darla immediately faded the moment he saw Lana. And although he was pretty sure he never would have carried out any physical need with his good friends' youngest littermate, there'd been no doubt when Lana had clucked at him.

As he built momentum, holding her waist and keeping her in place as she gripped the chains of the swing, he knew he'd never felt better inside a female. There had been a few over the years, single owls who he thought had appealed to him. None of his encounters had ever developed into anything beyond a few casual meetings.

This was definitely a casual meeting. Dover had picked her up on the street and knew when he first saw her he would fuck her before returning her to her nest. Fucking her tight, hot pussy, thoughts of taking her home didn't appeal to him. He couldn't dwell on what would happen when they were done while enjoying her. Even a moment's thought of being alone once again didn't appeal to him.

Dover pondered seeing her again, taking this hot night of sensual pleasure to the next level, and his cock swelled painfully. Her tight muscles wrapped around him, drawing him deeper into her velvety heat. She would suffocate him alive, ignite the fever inside him into flames he wouldn't be able to extinguish. And as the burning exploded and he felt the release deep inside him move quickly to the surface, there wasn't any doubt in his mind he would keep Lana close to him.

"Little owl," he rumbled, keeping any other words that might slip out in a moment of passion from surfacing. "Come for me again."

"Dover," she said, her voice rough and raspy. "Shit. Dover."

When she turned slightly, looking over her shoulder, he managed to focus his blurred vision on her face. Her large round gray eyes were now laced with gold and her

flushed cheeks showed the level of passion also burning inside her. But as she let go of the chain, reaching for him, the cry that escaped her lips branded his flesh, his soul, and damn near captured every inch of him. She wasn't able to touch him, but the way her pussy constricted around his cock, sucking him even deeper into her smoldering heat, it was as if she took a hold of him, dragging him into her command and claiming everything he was.

Lana didn't look away as she came. Her lips formed a beautiful small circle and for a moment her eyes turned completely gold. They glowed in the darkness, and in his fogged state of lust, he imagined his eyes probably looked very much the same. This was a level of intimacy he would never have been able to share with any female who wasn't an owl. But beyond that, he would argue no other female at all would have brought him to this level.

"That's it, Lana," he managed. "Everything you have, sweetheart. Everything."

"Give it to me," she demanded, as if taking his thought from him and finishing it for him. "All of it. Now."

There wasn't any strength inside him to argue with her or deny her request. Dover spilled his come deep inside her smoldering pussy, feeling her tight muscles pump him and drain him until it was all he could do to continue standing.

"God damn, little owl," he said, his voice raspy. Dover bent over, remaining inside her as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him.

He held her, cradling her, and Lana relaxed completely, sated although she continued breathing heavily. He buried his face in her neck, her soft, silky hair stroking his feverish flesh. As her body brought him to a roaring climax, it now offered comfort and peace. It was an odd sensation. Fucking Lana had calmed all his concerns, released his physical need, but as well, released tension he hadn't been aware he'd carried with him until that moment.

Dover held Lana tight against him. And she didn't fight him off. Instead, completely relaxed, he swore he heard her coo, a sound females released when they were incredibly pleased. The sound made him hard again, his body immediately reacting to her and incredibly willing in spite of his mind knowing to take her again this fast would possibly make her sore. He forced himself to relax, working to move his thoughts to what would happen after he dropped her at her nest.

"I want to fly," she whispered.

At first he wasn't sure he hadn't imagined her saying that. His cock was still doing the thinking for him. The truth of the matter was they barely knew each other. Owls were more protective of their own than any other species. They were more intelligent and more astute. So when he felt the change ripple over his flesh, he managed to gain control of his needs and return control of his mind and body to the head on his shoulders.

"You tempt me, little owl," he told her, kissing her nape.

It took all the strength he had to slowly pull out of her. Maybe it was his imagination, but it really felt as if Lana constricted around him, doing everything she could to prevent him from leaving the welcoming heat her body offered. Her pussy was the perfect nest, a safe haven he'd just discovered and immediately claimed as his own. Even telling himself he would enjoy her again very soon didn't help the sinking sensation of regret as he pulled out of her and felt the frigid night air attack his soaked cock.

"There is a towel on my bike," he told her, dressing himself quickly. He would shower later but would honor Lana by allowing her to put herself together properly, or at least as well as she could for being in a park. Dover wouldn't return her to her world in disorder.

He picked up his leather coat and put it over her shoulders before leaving her at the swing and hurrying to his bike to gather what he could to help her clean herself.

"Thank you," she said, not looking at him as she accepted the small hand towel he kept under his seat along with some other supplies in case of emergencies. He also brought a bottle of water and offered it to her once she was dressed. When she accepted it, her flushed face glowed from a female very happy and well fucked. "I don't want to take you to your nest." The words slipped out before he was allowed to weigh them for her reaction.

Lana's eyes were gray once again, but when she looked up at him quickly, bringing the bottle to her lips, streaks of gold added to her beauty when her face lit up. Again she looked away, suddenly appearing shy than she had been since he'd first met her. Dover saw more proof Lana didn't do this sort of thing on a regular basis. She was out of her element, unsure how to react in a situation she wasn't often in.

Something swelled inside him he immediately identified as a protector's instinct, a dominating, aggressive sensation telling him she needed his protection and his reassurance all was well and safe. He ached to remain with her, learn more about her, and grab more opportunities to see those gold flecks appear and her cheeks flush.

"We'll take that flight soon. Maybe tomorrow. But it would be proper to return you to your nest tonight." The words were harder to say than he thought.

But when Lana really appeared disappointed, he argued with himself, keeping her with him a bit longer wouldn't hurt anything.

"You can drop me off downtown." When she handed him the bottle of water, her expression was masked. Her scent carried his and an appealing aroma of satisfaction. But when it was suddenly laced with something that smelled almost like trepidation, she turned from him as if she smelled it too and didn't want him identifying it.

"Who is at your nest that would disapprove of me taking you there?" he demanded, damn sure he hadn't misread her from the beginning but determined to know the source of what he just smelled.

Lana laughed. "A whole flock of danger," she said, her words bitter. "It's nothing against you personally," she added quickly, looking very determined when she combed

her hair with her fingers and met his stare head-on. "No single male would be welcomed."

Hearing that made him feel better than she would ever understand. "I take it very few males are allowed close to you."

Her laughter was almost sad. She was completely dressed now but still clung to his coat. Dover wouldn't tell her how continuing to wear it would brand his scent deeper into her pores. It appealed to him too much that she carried his scent.

"I already told you I'm not a slut." She tilted her head, her expression defiant and her emotions so easy to read.

"Nor will you ever be." He pulled her into his arms, sliding his hands under his coat and hugging her as he kissed her forehead. "And your nest will accept me. I'll see to it."

"You're either a fool or not accustomed to losing a situation." Lana laughed softly, leaning her head back and searching his face as she continued smiling.

"If I deny being a fool, I'm confirming I am one," he explained, loving how her entire face lit up when she was happy.

Lana shook her head slowly, clucking her tongue, although the lower tone she made in her mouth wasn't the same as the sensual mating sound she'd made earlier today. "You're quite the owl," she admitted, twisting out of his arms.

Dover let her go reluctantly, her praise meaning more than he would let on. It was too soon to make her nervous with suggestions of committing to more time together. For now he would need to simply take that time, get to know her and then voice any feelings or thoughts that continued to exist after some time passed.

"Regardless of your praise, I'm not going to simply drop you off downtown. You'd be a prime target to those leopards."

Lana headed to his bike, slipping out of his coat and handing it to him. "There's something I need you to accept," she began, her arm outreached as she waited for him to accept his coat. "I understand now you are experiencing this overwhelming sensation to protect me. And I'm flattered."

"I'm not suddenly overwhelmed with a need to protect you," he argued.

Lana climbed on to his bike when he took his coat. "I can smell how strong it is. But that isn't the point," she said, waving her hand in the air as if she could dismiss his argument by physically pushing it to the side. "I'm not just trying to impress you when I say I can take care of myself. I really can. You don't know this but I come from one of the oldest nests in this area. I have three older brothers. And I have more nests I'm related to than I care to count. Trust me, there is protection surrounding me at all times, even when I don't want it. And with all that protection, I'm still smart enough to know when to fly out of a situation and when to shriek my opinion."

Dover didn't see any point in telling her how lucky she was to have so much support and love surrounding her. Lana didn't speak of all the nests she was related to

with ill will. Telling her what it was like to have no nests around him, not knowing anyone in the town he lived in, wouldn't have the needed impact on her. Not to mention, there was no reason to make the comparison.

What he heard though was Lana didn't need to worry about where she flew or who she challenged. There would always be someone nearby to fly by her side. More than likely that was why she so easily flirted with him earlier then appeared shy when they were alone. She'd known there was no way Dover could have gotten near her today and hadn't anticipated riding with him to this park tonight.

"I'm glad to hear that," he said, instead of pointing out what she made clear to him. Dover put on his coat and breathed in her scent that still clung to the leather. "That will make me feel better dropping you off at your nest."

She sighed heavily, shaking her head at him. "Dover, you're forcing me to hurt your feelings. You can't take me to my nest. My brothers will do worse than throw a fit, they will probably throw you out of town."

He considered this for a moment, hearing she didn't want him leaving town, and also noting the truth in why she wanted to be taken anywhere but her nest. Dover also saw clearly that Lana apparently didn't have many males flying around her. That truth lodged the deepest inside him. Instead of climbing on his bike in front of her, he moved next to her, dragging his fingers through her silvery blonde hair. Lana relaxed her head, allowing him to cup the side of her face and tilt her head as he leaned in to her.

"Then I will fly through the proper channels and meet your nest on terms they respect," he informed her.

Lana's soft gray eyes were so pretty. She licked her lips, not answering, although the smell of her desire once again turned him harder than stone. If he didn't take her to her nest soon, all his talk of honor and respect would be just that. Already taking her to his motel room and keeping her warm, sensual body next to his all night sounded really good.

"Now tell me who will be at your nest standing guard for your safe return?" he asked.

She looked away first, and if he weren't focusing on her so closely, he wouldn't have noticed the brightness in her gray eyes dim. Dover tugged on her hair when she attempted straightening.

"Tell me, Lana," he encouraged. "I can only honor you if I am prepared to greet and introduce myself accordingly to whomever plays sentinel for such a beautiful owl."

"Dover," she said, sucking in a deep breath while color washed over her cheeks. "There won't be anyone at my nest. I told you already I live alone."

He turned her face to his, moving his fingers under her chin, and pressed his mouth to hers. When she didn't fight him or discourage the kiss, the fire, which still burned passionately in his veins, ignited into flames he wouldn't be able to put out. Dover took what she offered and devoured the rest of her, stroking her neck and then cupping her breast. Once again they were confined in her bra, but the way she arched into him,

gasping into his mouth as he impaled her with his tongue, was enough to show him her need for him was as strong as the craving burning him alive.

Dover ended the kiss and raised his head, catching her with her eyes still closed and her mouth swollen and puckered. Her hard breathing caused her breasts to press against her sweater. He let go of her and climbed onto his bike, deciding any further discussion at this point wouldn't get them anywhere. Lana made her situation clear. He didn't smell any deception but only craving and curiosity to know him better. Her scent matched his and that was encouragement enough to let things be as they were this evening. Time and knowledge would move them forward.

The bike roared to life and Dover headed out of the parking lot, glancing over his shoulder when they stopped at the first intersection. The sleeping neighborhood around them offered the illusion of the two of them being alone. He didn't know the town yet though, and although the area smelled predominantly human, he kept his guard up, watching the shadows around them as he glanced at her.

"Where is your nest?" he asked.

She exhaled loudly, looking at him warily. "Head north and I will direct you," she finally conceded.

Dover nodded, refusing to let her smell the intense wave of satisfaction that washed over him. They'd just bridged the gap to trust. It was a step toward knowing her better. It wouldn't be tonight, but he would know this nest of hers.

Chapter Five

Lana hurried to her door as the loud knocking persisted. Holding the towel to her head so it wouldn't slip and release her hair, which she'd just washed, she gripped her bathrobe with her free hand and gulped in a breath as she reached the door to her apartment.

Her stomach twisted as she smelled her brother Rock. Although his name was Laurence, and they'd grown up calling him Laurie, he'd picked up the nickname Rock in his early teens due to his stubborn nature. Lana usually loved it when Rock stopped by and enjoyed flying with him immensely. If she hadn't just gulped in a strong, lingering aroma of Dover, who apparently matched her brother's stubbornness since his scent wouldn't leave her, even after showering when she got home last night and then a hot bath just now. She'd even used her rose-scented bath chips, and that smell hung heavily in her apartment. Along with Dover's.

Lana unlocked her padlock and pulled her door open as Rock's fist was raised to knock again. He strutted past her into her apartment, his chest puffed out and hands fisted at his side. Although many complained about how ripe his cockiness smelled on him, Lana always found his thick aroma rather appealing. It was a comforting if not reassuring scent she'd always enjoyed, until now.

Rock turned and faced her when he'd reached the middle of her living room, his incredibly dark gray eyes almost black as he shifted his attention from her to the contents of her room.

"There is a new male owl in town." He didn't bother with social chitchat, but that was Rock, most definitely the drama king of the nest. "He was seen downtown yesterday with a female leopard who is also new in town."

Rock didn't know she'd been with Dover. The wave of relief that attacked her almost made her dizzy. Lana drew in a deep breath and released it slowly, maintaining her calm stature as she headed across the room to her small kitchen.

"Coffee?" she asked. "And who is this male who has your feathers ruffled?"

Teasing Rock would only piss him off. But knowing he didn't come here to berate her for an evening of pleasure lifted her spirits to where she didn't care.

"You were downtown yesterday. We've already heard from your friends, and you were with them. Tell me about this male."

She searched her memory, trying to determine if any of the owls she'd flown with yesterday would have seen her with Dover. Other than possibly Gena or Shelly mentioning Lana clucked after him, she was positive they didn't see her talking to him later.

"He did come into town with a female leopard." Lana kept her back to him, grabbing two mugs and pouring coffee.

When her front door opened without anyone knocking, Rock left her kitchen, greeting Beel in her living room. Her second oldest brother was the only one who never remembered to knock when coming to her nest. After living here almost six months, Lana had given up trying to train him to understand this was her nest and rated his respecting her privacy. Suggesting he might walk in on a compromising situation if she weren't alone didn't help. When she'd said as much to Beel, he'd informed her he would never knock and that would ensure she would never do anything he couldn't walk in on.

"I'm going to get dressed," she announced to both of them.

Her brothers didn't quit talking to each other. They were worked up about this new male owl in Banff, which she should have anticipated. So now she needed a strategy.

Lana recognized the gentle knock a few minutes later and faced her bedroom door, pulling her sweater over her head as her Aunt Opal pushed the door open while still rapping on it. Her Aunt Opal and Uncle Reece were close to her and her brothers while growing up and had stepped in with extra concern for Lana after her parents passed.

"What do you know about this male owl?" Aunt Opal always reminded Lana of her mother until her aunt spoke. While Lana's mother had been the authoritative dynamo, her oldest sister was soft-spoken, if not meek in manner.

Lana pulled her sweater over her breasts and adjusted the collar. She studied her aunt's face, determining her best answer while pulling out her hair and combing it with her fingers. When Aunt Opal's expression changed, Lana knew she'd taken too long to answer. Her aunt closed the door without making a sound and then leaned against it, studying her niece.

"What do you know about him?"

"Not a lot." Lana hurried to finish dressing, finding the shoes she wanted to wear in her closet and slipping them on her bare feet. The sun shone through her windows but she didn't let that fool her into thinking it was a warm day outside. Nonetheless, she didn't feel like exerting the energy to put on socks and find her boots. "I saw him downtown when I was with Gena and Shelly."

Usually mentioning Shelly was enough to pull Aunt Opal off any conversation. Shelly's nest wasn't exactly considered reputable. Apparently news of a new single male in Banff smelled stronger than an ill-reputed nest.

"Did you speak with him?" Aunt Opal walked to Lana, reaching for her hair and stroking it from her face. Even her hands reminded Lana of her mother and she closed her eyes, willing her mother to be the one standing in front of her right now. It would be nice having her mother's strength, that unbreakable determination Lana so often wished she possessed. "Is that who I smell on you?" she whispered, breaking the vision of Lana's mother in her mind.

Lana opened her eyes, meeting her aunt's gaze head-on. Aunt Opal was an ally. Lana smelled a lecture on her aunt's lips, but there wasn't anything she could say Lana hadn't already considered. She'd spent a sleepless night ever since climbing off that bike outside her complex, pondering how what she'd done with Dover would have an impact on her life. And how she wanted it to impact her life.

"Yes." Lana gave her aunt a firm look. "I met him yesterday and spent time with him last night." There, she'd said it. Let the facts create what reactions they would.

"Interesting." Aunt Opal clasped her hands in front of her, dropping her gaze to the floor. This is where she strongly differed from Lana's mother. Her mother would have something to say, not simply accept the truth without dishing out her opinion on the matter.

Lana took advantage of her aunt's silence. "And I'm not going to be berated by my brothers and uncles for my choice in who I spend time with. I'm grown and raised well by a wonderful nest. They will respect me and believe I'm capable of good decisions."

Aunt Opal suddenly smelled sad. "So often you remind me of your mother." She reached out again and stroked Lana's hair. "Go tell them what you know. They will spit and hiss and their feathers will be ruffled. I have no doubts you can handle them."

Her aunt's faith in her helped, but Lana wasn't as confident she could handle her brothers. Fight with them, sure. Get pissed as hell at them, definitely. She gave her aunt a quick hug, knowing she allowed her to get an even better smell of how strongly Dover's scent was buried in her flesh.

Rock and Beel were still talking adamantly in her living room and Uncle Reece reclined in the overstuffed chair next to her couch. The tension in the room was almost as thick as the anger that threatened to explode. Her brothers were wound tight.

"We already have proof he is in line with the leopards," Rock said, his baritone so soft it was enough to send chills over her flesh. "Everyone questioned says the same thing. He drove into town with an unmated single leopard. And she was very protective of him."

Lana swallowed, meeting Beel's gaze when he shifted his attention from his brother to her. They were condemning Dover without knowing him. She would need to endure their wrath and speak out or there would be no allowing Dover into her world. It would be the easier route to forget him, take the wonderful memories from last night and fly with that. One of these days she'd acknowledge her life would be much more peaceful if she flew along the easy road.

"Uncle Reece, has anyone brought you coffee?" she asked, interrupting her brother's tirade.

Rock and Beel looked at their uncle as if just noticing his presence. Rock turned on her first.

"He knows where the coffee is. What do you know about this owl?" he demanded, his hiking boots booming against her hardwood floor when he cleared the distance

between the two of them. Then scowling as he searched her face, his irritation easily drowned out any scents she was emanating. "Who do I smell on you?" he hissed.

"I'm surprised you can smell a thing from how terribly you are spicing up my nest with your outrage." She waved her hand in the air, dismissing him, and headed into her kitchen to get her uncle coffee. It didn't surprise her both her brothers were on her heels when she pulled down more mugs. "And I'm not going to share with you anything about my personal life when you're both ready to attack."

"A male owl flies into town with an unmated female leopard and you suggest there is nothing to get mad about?" Beel's quiet tone might fool some, but his face was flushed red, causing his gray eyes to look rounder and, if possible, angrier.

Lana walked between them, carrying two mugs filled with hot coffee. She smiled at her uncle, handing him a cup, and then met her aunt's worried look when she offered her coffee.

"We are already in agreement that mixing breeds is morally and ethically wrong." Her uncle's soft-spoken voice still held enough authority to silence the room. "You are referring to the male and the leopard as unmated. Learn your facts before you start clawing at flesh."

"Exactly." Lana grinned at her uncle and then spun around to take on her brothers. "Dover isn't here to take sides. But you're hooting loud enough to draw curiosity from breeds across Canada."

"Dover?" Beel and Rock said at the same time.

Lana wouldn't blush. What she did with her life was her own damn business. She held her ground, standing tall and keeping her voice calm, just as her mother used to do.

"He escorted the female leopard to Banff so she could stay with a den here and avoid a mating her own den doesn't approve of. You're behaving exactly how you condemn others for behaving, and until you both calm down, I don't see any reason to discuss any of this further with you."

She planned to walk out of the room, head to her bedroom and close her door. The only way she could handle her brothers was if she kept her cool. If she started hooting and flew into a rage, she would lose this battle, not to mention her own honor. Life wasn't always fair and she was grossly outnumbered with three brothers. Inevitably they would side against her, especially if it came to her being interested in a male one of them didn't suggest she fly with. As if she would ever date an owl because one of her brothers told her to.

As she headed for the hall, the sudden pounding on her door made her jump. She stifled a cry, her heart lodging in her throat. Both of her brothers gave her curious glances as she instead started for her door. She stopped in her tracks when Heath, her oldest brother, opened the door and filled the doorway with his commanding presence.

"Who is the male who dropped you off last night?" he asked, his thick, husky low tone matching how her father spoke just before he dished out punishment for some inexcusable act.

"How much time did you spend with that male?" Beel demanded.

Even Uncle Reece put down his coffee and leaned forward in his chair, his hardening expression bordering on strong disapproval.

Lana loved every single member of her large family. She thought the world of each and every one of them. And nothing struck deeper than scorn, or any or all of them thinking anything dishonorable of her.

"I haven't done anything wrong," she stated, focusing on her oldest brother.

Heath didn't move inside her apartment. "Then you shouldn't have any problem telling us what you did last night and who the male was who rode a motorcycle loud enough to announce his presence long before he pulled up in front of the complex and let you off at the door."

She knew it would have been impossible for Dover to show up here regardless of the time without at least one of her family noticing him.

"His name is Dover Down. He is from Kenora," she began, and then decided she needed some of that coffee she'd offered everyone else. "I met him downtown briefly yesterday afternoon and then last night when a handful of leopards got out of line, he stepped in to save my honor."

"So he honors you in front of a bunch of leopards. But what happened after that? If he then dishonored you..." Rock hissed.

In her opinion there wasn't anything dishonorable about what she did last night. Lana left the room, hating how her legs were suddenly shaky. She hissed through her teeth when there wasn't enough coffee for another cup and started a fresh pot, willing her heart to quit thudding in her chest. She would control this situation. Rock was being an antiquated hypocrite. If he seriously believed he was dishonoring all the females he had casual sex with, he wouldn't be able to hold his head high in their community. And Lana knew he believed himself an honorable male.

"It's imperative you tell us everything you know about this male," Beel said from behind her, his tone soothing. His ability to sound calm when he was irate didn't fool her. He smelled as if he'd already made up his mind about Dover.

"It's also imperative you honor me as a grown female," she said, keeping her voice equally as calm as she stifled her emotions so they wouldn't smell. "Believe that I wouldn't spend time with a male if I didn't sense good in him." When she turned around, both of her brothers stood in the doorway, studying her with brooding expressions. "Trust me to understand how honor smells and how deceit stinks. If Dover had possessed any condemning qualities I sure as hell wouldn't have allowed him to drive me to my nest."

"Then as an honorable male he would wish to seek you out again, meet your nest, seek out their approval so he could spend more time again." There was a challenge in Rock's tone that left a bitter smell in the air.

Lana glanced longingly at the coffeemaker, willing it to brew faster. She really didn't feel like taking on her brothers. There wasn't any getting out of it, especially now. They'd gotten a whiff of another male in their territory and now all their feathers were bent out of shape. She wasn't foolish enough to be deceived. Dover could be a god and they still wouldn't approve of him. And it wasn't just because they might judge him not good enough to fly with their only sister, but because of that ripe aroma known as testosterone. No male enjoyed another flying in and messing with what they viewed as their own.

"He offered to meet you. I told him I would talk to you first."

"He offered to meet us?" Heath pushed his way past his younger brothers. "How far did you allow this encounter with this male to go, Lana?"

The coffeemaker was brewing slower than it ever had. She gave up on relying on caffeine to help her through this argument and instead shoved the three of them out of her way and stormed down her hallway. They followed her, their heavy footsteps creating irregular beats in her narrow hallway until they reached her bedroom. Once again they all attempted to fill the doorway while she walked over to her dresser. Then picking up the crumpled piece of paper she'd retrieved out of her pocket when she'd come home last night, she straightened it and studied the block letters printed above Dover's phone number.

"He left his cell," she told them. "I promised to call today after speaking with you."

Heath entered her room and reached for the paper. Something told Lana to hang on to it. When she hesitated, he yanked it from her hand and stuffed it in his pocket without looking at it.

"If you want to believe we're treating you as if you were still a fledgling, then go right ahead. That isn't the case though. You aren't going to see this male again."

"Like hell."

Heath held his hand up, mimicking their father when he pressed his lips into a thin line, a sign in their childhood they'd pushed him as far as they dared. Heath wasn't her father though, and he didn't have final say over her in spite of what he might believe.

"If and when I can clear his name, prove to myself this owl isn't here to start trouble, we can discuss this further. No male will fly into this town and touch one of our own and believe he can do so without repercussions."

"You make it sound as if he's done something wrong, and trust me, he hasn't."

"Lana, I can smell him on you. Your hair is damp from your bath. His scent is embedded in your flesh and it wouldn't be from just giving you a ride home on his bike."

Lana's outrage damn near consumed her. She shook in her effort to control emotions that begged for release. "Out of my bedroom, now," she whispered, pointing to her door and almost shaking in her effort to remain calm. If she let her anger show or broke down and started crying out of frustration, the dishonor that would follow would be impossible to handle. And already her nest had turned her being with Dover into something going to war over. "And don't you ever again imply any action of mine is dishonorable."

"Lana," Heath said, backing up as the other two disappeared into the hallway.

"No!" she hissed. "I'm not even going to try to count how many times I've smelled a female on you. Last I heard, you weren't announcing creating a nest with any of them."

"Don't even try to compare —"

"I'm not going to stand here and listen to you while you stink up my bedroom with your hypocrisy. I think you should leave now, Heath." She pulled her anger in, shoving it out of her way and kept her tone cool as she gave him a hard stare. "If I hear you approached Dover and in any way suggest he's dishonored me you will regret it. Am I making myself clear?"

"You're not going to side with a male you've known for a day over your own nest." Heath stood in her doorway now and glanced toward the living room, the expression on his face suggesting he wished his brothers wouldn't bail on him and instead would stand ground alongside him as he took her on.

It gave Lana strength. She would never turn against her nest. Not ever. But she wouldn't allow anyone in it to make them appear fools either. Heath made a valid point, but he wanted to control her as he did when she was younger. He wanted to be able to tell her to stay away from any male he wasn't certain about. Yet he didn't have a problem seeking out female after female. It was common knowledge Heath flew with just about any willing female and no one suggested he tuck in his feathers.

Lana held out her hand, impressed when she wasn't shaking, although her heart continued thudding painfully against her rib cage. "And you aren't going to humiliate me," she said, softening her tone and focusing on a gentle, soothing sound in her voice. Any owl knew more was accomplished with a whisper than a shout. "Give me back his phone number."

"I'm going to contact him, Lana."

"Then do it right now. I want to hear that you don't start squawking in a way that would dishonor me."

When Heath's expression narrowed in on hers, she knew she'd revealed more than probably she should have. There wasn't anything wrong in being interested in Dover though. It didn't mean anything other than her curiosity was piqued. That and she couldn't wait to fuck him again.

"Very well," Heath said slowly, pulling his cell phone from his belt and then the piece of paper with Dover's cell phone number on it. "It might be wise to see how this

owl behaves in your presence. I'll make the call but you will be quiet while I'm speaking with him. Agreed?"

Lana licked her lips, staring into her older brother's eyes. He wouldn't do anything to hurt her, not intentionally. She exhaled, knowing more than anything, Heath wasn't her enemy. Lana nodded, trying for a small smile, and sat on the edge of her bed, feeling a wash of excitement knowing in the next minute or so she would hear Dover's voice. Even if she didn't speak with him, she would know where he was, possibly what he was doing, and if she guessed right, she would also see him again in the very near future.

Tiny hairs prickled on the back of her neck, her anticipation creating enough energy inside her to call forth the change. She wasn't a fledgling. The change was easy to control, especially as she also worked to slow her heart rate and remain calm. Thinking the situation through would take less effort if her mind was clear and her manner relaxed.

Lana listened to the phone ring once and then twice. Heath held his cell to his ear, although even in her human form, Lana's hearing was much better than any human's. She also heard the soft voices in the other room, their speculative chatter stealing her attention momentarily. Someone started down the hallway. It smelled as if Rock tried approaching. Heath stepped out of her bedroom momentarily, gestured for her brother to remain in the living room, and then reentered her bedroom just as the line on the other end quit ringing.

"Hello," a female said.

Lana bristled, her spine sparking as irritation and something else, a sensation she wasn't familiar with, attacked her with cruel spontaneity. Who the hell was answering Dover's phone? And he'd told her it was his private cell, a number where she could easily reach him. Goose bumps raced over her flesh, an uncontrollable urge to change and fly, releasing her mounting rage until she found the female who dared feel she had the right to answer his phone and claw her eyes out.

"I need to speak with Dover Down." Heath was watching Lana carefully. There wasn't any picking up his scent or detecting his reaction to a female answering. His face was emotionless, chiseled in stone.

"He's outside cutting firewood. Is there a message for him?" the female asked, her calm, relaxed tone irritating as hell. She spoke as if all were right with her world and answering Dover's phone was something she did all the time.

"I need to speak with him. I will call back. When is a good time?" Heath asked, his voice as calm as if he were chatting with a good friend.

Lana, on the other hand, felt her blood boiling in her veins. She didn't look at Heath but instead stared in front of him, focusing so intently on the female's voice on the other end of the line, she swore she heard her exhale softly.

"May I ask who this is?" The female sounded wary.

"Tell him Heath Halk needs to talk to him."

"Okay."

Silence lingered through Heath's phone, and when Lana glanced up at him, she caught him watching her, his expression lined with concern. Rock and Beel were discussing a new construction project with Uncle Reece in her living room. Lana didn't hear her aunt and wouldn't be surprised if she'd made herself comfortable in Lana's kitchen, more than likely cleaning something. Lana hated it when her aunt did that, even though her aunt assured her cleaning made her feel at home. It still made Lana feel as if her nest wasn't clean enough. There was no way she'd check on her aunt right now though.

Her brothers in the living room laughed at something her uncle said at the same time a male voice spoke through the phone. Lana wanted to scream for them to be quiet and barely managed holding her tongue as she sat at the edge of her bed.

"This is Dover Down. Who is this?" a deep baritone asked.

"I am Heath Halk, oldest son of the Halk nest and owner of the Parliament complex where you dropped my sister off last night." Heath's slow, deep drawl would have been comical if it weren't for the harsh expression that came across his face as his scent changed to a musky, pungent smell.

"You honor me with your phone call, although this introduction would hold more weight in person." Dover's calm-sounding voice made it impossible to tell if his request to meet Heath was sincere or not.

Lana already knew he wanted to meet Heath. But now, with knowledge a female was probably standing next to him, Lana hated the thoughts that attacked her brain. She prayed she hadn't been used so Dover could guarantee himself an introduction to the owls in this community who carried all the weight in making decisions that affected the entire town of Banff as well as the smaller surrounding communities. She studied Heath, holding her breath, waiting for his response.

"Do you require a more formal introduction?" Heath demanded, his tone malicious although he didn't smell angry.

"Nothing is required at all," Dover answered easily. If he detected Heath's harshness in his question he offered no indication. "It is a lot easier to learn about an owl when they can be seen and smelled. And I'm quite sure you'd like to know the level of my sincerity as a male. Not to mention my scent reflects my nature on me better than when smelled on someone else."

Lana's jaw dropped while her cheeks suddenly burned with embarrassment and humiliation. She couldn't believe Dover would speak so blatantly about his intimacy with her, and to Heath, voicing the matter as if it were open for discussion. Her heart lodged in her throat as she fought not to pounce off the bed and grab the phone from Heath. No one spoke about her as if she were a tool, used without remorse, simply to gain leverage in opening communication with her nest.

As Lana fought to swallow, to remove the lump swelling to where she could barely breathe, she saw gold lace Heath's gray eyes. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen her brother so irate he couldn't control his emotions.

"Explain right now why you would speak so crassly," Heath whispered, his tone chilling Lana's blood. "My sister has said nothing to indicate you've dishonored her. Yet without even meeting face-to-face, you willingly reveal how your feathers lie."

"Interesting." Dover's tone didn't waver in spite of the blatant insult.

"We'll see how interesting you find things when we meet," Heath stated.

"I'm not sure this meeting will be necessary." Dover's words shot through Lana's heart as if it were just pierced.

"How is it that you suddenly have rank in this community to make that decision?"

"I'm not of this community at all, therefore there is no rank."

"Yet you would mark a female from my nest and the very next day reside with another female without concern for your own honor? Our nests don't honor owls who behave like that. You might be right about not meeting. Furthermore, it very well could prove necessary that you leave town." Heath's anger filled the room with its spicy scent.

Lana watched him, terrified. She woke up this morning wondering when she'd see Dover again and now, as she listened, he would be flown out of town before she could learn anything about him. The memories of one incredible night weren't enough, regardless of what she heard now. She needed to see him again, to know without doubt if he possessed the honor she smelled in him last night or if he were truly a rogue.

"Lana possesses an honor and beauty worth knowing. I know that from spending time with her. I wouldn't know that if I didn't take that time. Where I come from, owls don't pass judgment on each other without seeing how they fly, breathing in the truth of their emotions and learning first-hand the thoughts in their head. It's a sad state of affairs when you would pass judgment on me without ever laying eyes on me from conclusions that hold very little fact."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means, Heath Halk, just because a female answers my phone doesn't mean she is in my nest. And just because Lana carries my scent doesn't mean I've ruined her reputation."

Chapter Six

Dover gripped the thick branch with his talons and surveyed the incredible mountain range before him. He'd needed time, space to sort his thoughts. Knowing Lana's den judged a creature sight unseen explained a lot about what he was smelling in this part of the world. Since arriving here he'd already smelled more than he anticipated. Serious trouble hung heavy in the air and it would be difficult to fly through it before long.

Kane Masters, with whom Darla was now staying, had his paws full with the leopards in the area fighting for land and hunting rights. Many litters had moved to this choice part of the world after being persecuted in the states. That time had passed for their kind, but that left new problems for the leopards. Relocation meant settling where other species were already comfortable. The parliament of owls in Banff appeared pretty settled and were probably accustomed to flying as they pleased in their town. Lana told him as much when she questioned him not knowing the honor in her last name. There were quite a few werewolves in the mountains as well, and the two species didn't appear to be cohabitating in harmony. Normally issues with other species wouldn't bother him. But there was something odd in Denmark—or in this case, Banff. The hostility smelled a bit too spicy and he saw it coming to a head all too soon.

A bitter cold wind ruffled his feathers, revitalizing him. He needed a clear head. Ever since arriving here and dropping Darla off at the Masters den, he'd been preoccupied by Lana. Even now, perched on a branch on the side of a mountain, she consumed his thoughts. It was his intention to put her out of his head. Her nest didn't see the same ideals he saw. Refusing to meet him and judging him for things they couldn't smell out, or refused to smell out, weren't qualities he would honor. Although he hadn't detected anything dishonorable in Lana, she was part of this nest.

Regardless of his efforts to convince himself he would be better off simply surveying Banff, sniffing out the source causing so much unrest between species and then determining the best way to fix matters, Lana continued to distract him. He saw her in his mind when he'd first laid eyes on her, so cocky in the comfort of her friends and clucking her tongue at him. Then later, when the leopards started trouble, Lana continued trying to impress him with her confidence. And when they'd been at the park and her sweet scent wrapped around him, uncertain yet intelligent. She knew when to be cautious and at the same time dared taking him on.

Not to mention Lana made love to him as if it were the most important thing in the world. Her tight, perfect body had wrapped around his cock and nearly drowned him with her heat and compassion. He'd learned a lot about her last night, the main thing being Lana didn't fuck just any male. She didn't go after a male simply to satisfy a

craving. Dover wouldn't flatter himself into thinking he was more appealing than any other male she'd ever laid eyes on. And she'd had ample opportunity to back out on him. There was an attraction, so fresh-smelling and raw and untamed. Acknowledging it now made every inch of him hard.

Dover ruffled his feathers, allowing the frigid afternoon air to cool him before he overheated and caused this side of the mountain to reek with the smell of his lust. He turned his head at the sight of another owl, gliding over the side of the mountain facing him, and narrowed his gaze, bringing them into focus. It was a female hawk owl. He didn't notice the cold breeze or how it ruffled his feathers as he watched the female, her wings spread as she soared against the pale blue sky.

When she landed, finding a sturdy branch on a partially dead tree protruding from the side of the mountain, she faced him but then looked down and began pruning herself. Dover didn't move, perched a mountain away from her, and took advantage of his incredibly keen eyesight to watch her without her noticing. He willed the wind to change directions, to bring her scent to him. The only thing he was positive of at the moment was she was a hawk owl.

Time became irrelevant. It didn't matter if minutes or hours passed. Dover barely breathed, didn't blink but watched. The female took her time, carefully cleaning each feather on her body, using her beak to stroke and stretch until she had to be the cleanest female in all of Canada.

When she finished, she straightened, staring ahead of her. Once again Dover swore she gave him her undivided attention. His insides tightened when she took to flight, instinct taking over and demanding he watch her, protect her. It was stronger than any feeling he'd experienced before. She stretched her wings, soaring through the air, the sight so breathtaking an avalanche could occur around him and he wouldn't take his attention from her.

She flew closer, showing off the different shades of gray in her feathers that contrasted beautifully against the pale sky. And then his prayer was answered. The wind shifted, pushing her scent toward him.

Lana.

There wasn't any doubt. He'd never seen her in her feathers and everyone's scent varied slightly in their flesh and feathers. But as she drew closer, tilting her body against the currents in the air, she met his gaze. Her golden eyes were at least as captivating as the rest of her. She flew closer and then dive-bombed him. Her attack was playful but serious enough he felt the tips of her talons scrape his feathers before she flew away from him.

Why you little... Dover screeched as he spread his wings, breathing in her rich, intoxicating scent. He responded to her without thought. In his feathers life was so simple. There wasn't cause for hesitation. He didn't need to focus on what her reaction to his actions might be. Lana carried his scent. He'd already been inside her. His instincts screamed loud enough he was sure Lana heard it clearly. She was his female.

It was why he reacted so strongly, the urge to protect her overwhelming when he saw her on the other mountain. And it was why now, when she made a pass to spar with him, his body already knew how this would end. And she knew as well.

He took to flight, taking his time pacing her. The air lifted him, his feathers silent along the wind as he followed her through the mountain range just north of Banff. Lana's sleek body flew ahead of him, her wings stretched, showing off her limber, perfectly curved body. Her tail feathers added to the incredible view before him. Dover would follow her to the end of the earth without even hesitating.

In spite of being completely taken by the sexy female leading the chase, Dover didn't miss their surroundings. As closely as he paid attention to her, he also kept a keen eye on the land beneath them and rugged mountainside on either side of them. They appeared to be alone but he wasn't naïve enough to think that couldn't change faster than the direction of the wind. Let Lana play, enjoy torturing him and enticing him. He would make sure she was safe while doing it.

That was his job, what instinct demanded. His female. His life. She would fly freely, enjoy herself and experience all that was good. Dover would kill to make sure of it.

Lana dove beneath him, heading for a thick grove of junipers. Dover raced on the current, gaining on her when they both flew into the dense tree line. His eyesight adjusted quickly and barely a moment passed before he found her ahead of him as she landed on a thick branch. But even without his vision Dover never lost hold on her scent. It was rich and compelling and controlled him as strongly as if she were shrieking his name at the top of her lungs.

Lana chose a dark, secluded area where the shadows were as dark and pronounced as she was. If it weren't for his acute sense of smell, Dover wouldn't be comfortable in the thick foliage. Lana possessed the same strengths he did. Hawk owls were known for their incredible vision and sense of smell while in their feathers. Even as humans their skills surpassed others, which was why they were known for being ones to reckon with in any sticky situation.

Dover flew in next to Lana and she hissed at him when he intentionally almost landed on top of her. She raised her wings, jumping out of his way while her golden eyes flashed at him in their dim surroundings.

You started this, my little owl... he informed her, making a clucking sound in his throat to let her know she could flirt all she wanted, he had more serious actions in mind.

She plucked at him, trying to attack with her beak and going low toward his belly. Dover raised one foot, blocking her, and then jumped, landing on top of her. Lana succeeded from being captured the first time. Dover leapt at her a second time, her soft cry when he landed on top of her sending a rush of heat through his body.

Her soft feathers tortured him as much as her lithe, slender body did. They stroked against his, gliding against his body as he situated himself on top of her. There wasn't need for foreplay in their feathers. Instinct prevailed and the need for emotional

closeness not as prevalent as if they were in their flesh. It was a physical mating, one they both understood. And other than her initial attack, Lana didn't fight him. Not that she would. Her scent said everything she couldn't voice in her current form. Lana wanted him as desperately as he needed her.

Dover straddled her, burying his beak in the back of her neck while positioning the two of them so they were centered on the branch. It was thick, solid wood and he was able to dig his claws deep into it in order to secure the two of them so they wouldn't fall. As he stabilized their situation, Lana moved underneath him, obviously a lot less concerned with their safety and more intent on torturing the hell out of him. She brushed her tail feathers between his legs, stroking incredibly sensitive parts of his body. A fever rushed over him, boiling him alive, and for a moment causing all of his senses to go on hyperdrive. He heard the slightest rustle of leaves on the ground and rodents burrowing deeper into the ground to avoid the quick death from raptors. None of his surroundings grabbed his attention the way Lana did. All he saw were the outlines uniquely diagrammed in each of her feathers as he kept his head lowered and breathed in her intoxicating scent.

Lana continued moving underneath him. A low cooing sound started deep inside her, vibrating through her body as if she were purring the way a cat would. She turned her head, allowing him to preen the feathers on the side of her face. The soft, rhythmic lulling sound she made was damn near hypnotic.

Lana wasn't a seductress. He didn't sense any practiced, well-rehearsed skills in her. Her actions were natural and Dover bet she reacted instinctively, possibly unaware of how erotic and sensually enticing her behavior was to him.

As he pressed around her tail feathers, feeling the heat from her entrance as if it were a magnetic force, beckoning him in, he again felt the overwhelming sensation grab him as it did before.

His female.

His sweet little owl.

Logic made all of this very simple. There wasn't any reason to analyze the emotions consuming him. It all made sense. He would fly after her, provide for her, go to all efforts to give her the nicest nest any female ever rested in. And she would submit to him and allow him to do all of this. As a human he might question why they would pursue this relationship when her nest and his didn't agree on so many things. He might hesitate in pushing knowing her further due to their nests being so far away from each other geographically. But in their feathers all of those issues were trivial. They were meant for each other, their scents were bonded, and any problems in their lives were simply tasks to iron out, nothing more.

As he pressed into her, unable to take it slow or determine how ready she was for him, the reality of their actions hit him as hard as his newfound emotions did. Taking her in her feathers pushed them further into their brand-new relationship than either of them might be ready for. Instinct might dominate in his current form, but he wasn't just

a bird, and his human side wasn't so completely dormant that worries and hesitations didn't surface. He pushed his human fears out of the way, raising his wings and wrapping them around his pretty little owl.

Dover sunk deep inside her, thrusting until he filled her and her overwhelming heat wrapped around him just as if she were a thick blanket, designed specifically to protect him from the cold. Emotions didn't make as much sense in his feathers. Simple facts and the basic laws of the land were all that mattered. And as he fucked her, feeling her tight pussy clamp down around his cock, the simple law that fucking Lana in her feathers made her his female became an overwhelming reality.

Lana might be sheltered by an overwhelming nest, but he didn't smell ignorance on her. It was a fact she knew as well as he did. When she arched into him, turning her head farther so her gold eyes burned into his soul, it was very clear she was aware of the age-old laws and traditions. As he claimed her, she also took him, not only taking him deep inside her but taking his spirit, who he was.

Dover pulled out just far enough to feel the frigid mountain air attack him, which made diving deep into her heat all the more pleasurable. He pressed his body against hers, feeling the pressure build until he knew there was little holding out. Their faces touched, her soft, silky feathers stroking him. When he nipped at her face, the low melodic cry she let out did him in.

Dover had taken other females in the past and enjoyed them. Granted they'd been few and far between. But he'd shared mutual pleasure with a consenting female and had walked away with little regret. Leaving Lana sounded more unpleasant than plucking out his own feathers. Somehow, in spite of her nest, they would take what they were creating right now and allow it to grow. He smelled her desire to do so as strongly as he smelled his. And it was more than lust. That knowledge, the acceptance of how it would be, took him over the edge.

Dover met her cry with a louder, more piercing call of his own, and spilled all he had deep inside her. Once again he marked her with his scent, this time in their feathers, branding her in a way that would leave her brothers little doubt of what he and Lana were doing. They would have to accept him. Dover and Lana now shared the same scent as a mated couple would. Although instinct ruled his mind, even after the thick fog of lust began clearing, Dover accepted Lana and began plotting how he would approach her brothers and make it clear to them how it would be.

The simplicity of their situation faded the moment emotions entered the scene. Dover wasn't surprised. He flew with Lana to where she'd left her clothes. When she landed and moved the rock with her clawed foot that covered and protected them, he had grabbed her jeans in his mouth and taken to flight. Enduring her squawking protests didn't bother him. But when she followed him through the mountains, carrying the rest of her clothes in her beak, her underwear and sweater wrapped around her shoes, she'd thrown a fit he was sure could be heard several mountains away when he had landed at Kane Masters den.

Lana continued her tirade after Dover entered the small cabin and dressed. He hid his smile when he returned outside and spotted her in a nearby tree, the bundle in her mouth the size of her yet still managing to squawk every name in the book at him.

"They're gone for the day and have left me with their cabin. Come inside and change. I'll give you a ride to your nest." He left her to continue chewing him out and went back inside to start a fire, leaving her jeans on the kitchen table by the door.

He barely had time to arrange logs in the fireplace when the back door opened and he heard her enter barefoot. "You know damn good and well what I think about entering a leopard's den," she called out.

"Actually, I don't." Although she was showing him her opinion on the matter as they spoke. "Why don't you tell me?"

"Go to hell, Dover Down," she hissed, and he heard her shoes drop to the ground with a thud. "I don't even know these leopards."

"If that is your only reason for hesitating, I can arrange introductions." He stood and grabbed the box of matches off the mantel, tempted to enter the kitchen just so he could glimpse her naked.

Apparently she dressed with record speed. Lana appeared in the doorway, her hair a tousled mess. Not that he would tell her that. She was the sexiest owl he'd ever laid eyes on.

Dover struck the match and dropped it on twisted newspaper lodged between two logs. It ignited quickly and then burned the newspaper down before slowly simmering as the remaining flame took on the twigs he'd also stuffed between logs.

"That would be difficult to do since they aren't here," she informed him, crossing her arms over her chest and showing off the fact she didn't wear a bra under her knitted sweater.

If he focused on Lana instead of the fire he wouldn't be able to concentrate. As it was, her intoxicating scent made it very difficult to think of anything other than fucking her again.

"I can appreciate your hesitation in entering a den when you don't know who lives there." Dover did risk looking at her and caught her studying him. "That is the only reason you didn't want to enter though, right?"

She narrowed her round gray eyes at him, her scent changing when she frowned. "You think I'm a bigot, but you're wrong. You don't know me at all."

"Then tell me your thoughts."

"You jumped my brother's ass for passing judgment without sniffing out a situation. Are you no better than he is?"

Dover left the fire to spark and ignite. Moving in on Lana slowly, her scent wrapped around him, pulling him closer. He swore he could stand still and the powerful aroma of the two of them combined would draw her to him. If she acknowledged the same scent, she knew they needed to work through any differences.

Dover had never made a female smell as strongly of him as Lana did right now. He loved his smell on her. The powerful need to protect her, ensure her happiness, hit him so hard it damn near made him lightheaded.

He reached for her tousled hair, stroking the silky strands behind her shoulder as he stared into her large gray eyes. "I honestly don't know if I'm better or worse than anyone in your nest and probably wouldn't make that conclusion even after meeting them." He studied the determination lining her face but also saw and smelled her confusion. "You were there when your brother called me, weren't you?"

She nodded. "You aren't going to be able to do anything to get him to like you," she offered quietly, although it didn't sound as if she were apologizing.

"He cherishes you. I can see why." He leaned into her, kissing her gently because she needed it that way. Every inch of him hardened and the urge to ravish her consumed him with enough force it took every bit of strength he possessed to keep from doing so.

"I was very pissed when you talked to my brother," she whispered, moving her mouth over his as she dragged her fingers up his arms to his shoulders. Admitting she experienced such raw emotions showed she accepted Dover.

"He pissed me off," he admitted, the words slipping out of him as if sharing his hidden emotions were the most natural thing to do with Lana.

If she weren't kissing him he'd point out how their bonding now moved past being physical and now became the uniting of their minds. Owls didn't share their emotions. It wasn't logical or a wise thing to do. Most people used emotions and feelings against each other, and any owl with half a brain knew better than to offer their weaknesses for another to use against them.

Dover didn't stop her when she deepened the kiss. He didn't have the strength to do so. It would be smart to analyze and understand what it was about this female that laid such a hard claim on him and rendered his defenses useless against her. He'd never acted this way with any other female. He would sort it out in his head soon.

"Interesting," he said, his voice gruff when the kiss ended.

Lana had been on her tiptoes and relaxed, sliding down his front an inch or so but keeping her hands on his shoulders. Her nipples puckered through her sweater and tortured him. It didn't matter that her sweater and his t-shirt prevented their flesh from touching. The longer they stood here like this they would fill the small cabin with an impermeable smell he doubted Kane and Jin Masters would appreciate.

Dover backed away from her, taking her hands in his since he appeared unable to not touch her at least somewhere. "The only way to determine what's caused leopards, werewolves and owls to go for the throat is to learn what instigated the apparent feud I'm smelling in town," he offered, choosing his words slowly as he guided Lana to the couch. It was easier to move the conversation to others around them than focus on what was happening between them. He would never allow anyone to call him a coward. But

he needed time to understand and accept the closeness he smelled between them before talking about it with Lana.

"And you think my nest has something to do with this?" She stopped at the couch but crossed her arms over her chest instead of sitting next to him. Those emotions she just shared with him were once again tucked neatly away and she stood tall and proud, her honor all he could smell.

Dover reclined, stretching his legs out and resting his boots on the coffee table. He focused on the fire, which now blazed in the hearth, letting off a fair amount of heat. "I won't pass judgment on any owl without sniffing them out first," he told her adamantly.

"But you did just that when you accused my brother of doing the same on the phone." Her voice was tight. Her loyalty to her nest was unwavering. It was a very commendable trait.

Dover wished she would sit next to him but wouldn't ask her to do so. Possibly she also needed the time to understand why she'd just shared emotions with him. He would keep the conversation on topic. "It wasn't accusation as much as an observation," he tried explaining.

"Do you think my nest is involved in causing tension between species?" she asked.

"Are they?"

Lana opened her mouth and her spicy anger clogged the air around them as her cheeks flushed, showing off the silver in her blonde hair. "I thought I smelled good in you, something different and worth knowing," she shrieked. But then lowering her voice to a deadly whisper, she added, "You accuse my nest of things you have no idea about. You're worse than what you say my brother is. And you're a hypocrite too."

She marched to the door but Dover flew off the couch, grabbing her before she could leave. Pushing her against the wall, he gripped her jaw, lifting her face to his.

"All I did was ask you a question, little owl, and you fly into a rage. What is that about?" Maybe her emotions weren't as trained as he thought, although something told him that wasn't the case.

Lana tried shoving against him but her anger quickly waned. She studied his face, her silky, long hair draping over her narrow shoulder as she continued pressing against his chest. "You suggested my nest is responsible for species fighting."

"I asked. I didn't suggest." He rubbed his thumb along her jawbone and then stroked her flushed cheek. "My sweet owl has one hell of a temper when it comes to defending her nest."

Lana slapped at his hand, making a face while her anger dissipated and was replaced with an emotion that smelled faintly of embarrassment. "How dare you hold me in your wings and then insult me. You would defend your nest if it were attacked and, Dover Down, I'm not your owl."

Dover gripped her jaw, forcing her to tilt her head back even farther. "You're going to have one hell of a hard time proving that to anyone who can smell," he growled.

"Owls fuck all the time without having a nest. No one is going to tell me I can't behave the same way."

"You would show your emotions to any male?" He seriously doubted that. "The emotions I smell on you, curiosity, happiness when we're together, those aren't because you're interested in more than just fucking me?"

Lana's lips shook when she stared up at him. "I'm not interested in a male who wants to destroy my nest."

She slapped at him until he backed off and allowed her to leave. The door slammed closed in his face and he touched the doorknob, breathing in her scent and smelling the sadness she left behind.

Chapter Seven

Lana's heart skipped a beat when she heard the grumble of a motorcycle. Leaping off her couch, she hurdled her coffee table as she raced to the window. Although on the second floor, it wasn't hard to see the street below. Dover stole her breath when he parked his bike, turned it off and then stood, easily lifting his long leg over it. There was something so damn compelling about him, his height, the calm, relaxed way he moved. She wasn't fooled for a moment by his casual air, and in spite of the glass in front of her face and the distance between herself and him, Lana swore she smelled his determination and aggression as he approached her building and finally disappeared from her line of sight when he entered the complex.

"Crap," she hissed under her breath, turning and hurrying out of her apartment.

Before she reached the stairs it hit her she might do better to return to her apartment and put on some makeup, maybe make sure her hair was in place. Barely taking time to glance down at the skintight leggings she wore and loose-fitting t-shirt that fell to her thighs, she combed her hair out with her fingers and descended the cement stairs silently. It would do little good trying to be discreet while racing down the stairs when Dover more than likely alerted all of her brothers when he pulled up on that noisy bike of his, its rumbling speaking volumes and stating Dover was so confident in his feathers he didn't mind announcing his presence wherever he went.

Lana pushed open the heavy door on the first floor that entered into the foyer, guessing Dover probably scanned the mailboxes, searching for her name so he'd know which floor she lived on. The door barely closed behind her when she met Dover's hard stare. He stood in the elevator, facing her, and the doors were closing.

"Wait," she ordered, knowing there wasn't anyone else around and hurried to catch the doors.

Dover held his hand out, stopping them, and continued studying her. "What floor do you live on?" he asked.

Lana faced him and the elevator doors closed behind her. "The second."

He pushed the button for her floor and she noticed the fourth-floor button was lit up too. "Where are you going?"

"To speak with your brother."

"I'm going with you." She ignored the doors when they opened on her floor.

Dover grabbed her shoulders. His touch was gentle but determined when he guided her, backward, out of the elevator. "I will speak with him alone."

"Like hell," she snapped, pushing to reenter the elevator. "I have every right to go with you."

Dover stepped out of the elevator with her, allowing the doors to close behind him. His hands slid down her arms, scorching her flesh. The way his intense gray eyes devoured her made it extremely difficult to remember she was pissed at him, and had been since she stormed out on him the day before.

"You honor me with your concern over my affairs," he began, his deep baritone guarded. Not one emotion showed through his impermeable shield of honor as he stared at her with intense gray eyes that were impossible to read. All the emotions she so easily saw in him yesterday were gone.

She picked up on that immediately and bristled. It was one thing to be mad at him, but thinking he might be pissed at her didn't set well at all. She'd shared her emotions with him yesterday, something she'd never done with another owl in her entire life. Lana had opened up to Dover without thinking about it more so than she ever did her own mother. It wasn't something an owl did with another owl unless they were mated and very secure together in their nest.

"Why are you here?" she asked, reining in her own emotions and keeping her tone cool as she relaxed under his grip. It was one thing to be upset with him, but accepting he might as well be mad at her left a bitter taste in her mouth she didn't like at all.

He let go of her arms and petted the side of her head then cupped her chin and held her face as he brushed his lips over hers. Lana fought the immediate reaction her body had to his. Her efforts were futile as her insides swelled with need. She should be pissed as hell that he would assume he could be so affectionate with her after she stormed out on him yesterday. One look into those dominating gray eyes showed his satisfaction in knowing the truth. Lana was having a hard time remaining angry with him and that pissed her off even more.

She shrugged him off her and took a step backward. "Tell me why you're here," she whispered, unable to clear her voice when it cracked as she spoke.

He moved in on her again, once again brushing his knuckles down her enflamed cheeks. "I told you why I was here already," he said in a soft, soothing tone. "There is trouble in Banff and I'm here to learn the truth of it. I've come to talk to Heath Halk about it. He lives on the fourth floor, right?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice. It was all she could do from stinking up the hallway as an array of emotions washed over her. His touching her, stroking and kissing her, said one thing. But the calmness of his voice, his matter-of-fact attitude as he appeared all business once again threatened her reserve. It was a slap in the face, a reminder that Dover was a male on a mission, not a male seeking romance.

Sex was one thing. Affection and bonding to the point he would wish to speak with her brother about her was very much another thing. Somehow she needed to get a grip on her feelings when she was around him. Displaying, for anyone to smell, every thought and emotion that went through her head would bring her dishonor faster than Dover showing up with her scent and not asking to spend time with her.

"That is why I'm here." He quit touching her, dropping his hands to his sides and turning to the elevator. As if an afterthought, he looked over his shoulder. "Which apartment is yours?"

She shouldn't tell him. She should tell him to go to hell. Her arm rose as if it thought for itself and she pointed to the door to her apartment. "There," she said, suddenly numb.

Dover nodded once and pushed the button to the elevator. "After my business is over I will come to you," he told her as the elevator doors slid open quietly. "Stay here and wait for me."

She couldn't move until the elevator doors closed behind him.

"Who is your new male?" Aunt Olathe had an annoying ability to appear behind Lana without her knowing it.

"Aunt Oley," Lana said, sighing as she faced her aunt. "How long have you been standing there?"

Obviously if she'd been behind Lana when Dover was in front of her, he would have pointed her out. Regardless of her brain trying to tell her Dover was a rogue, her heart knew he held honor. And her body knew the rest. Lana refused to blush when Aunt Oley raised an eyebrow and gave her a scrutinizing stare.

"You haven't known him long." It was a statement, not a question. Aunt Oley's expression didn't change when she let her gaze travel down and then back up to Lana's face. "He sure does have your feathers ruffled. Come inside and tell your aunt all about this handsome stranger."

Aunt Oley's soft-spoken nature wasn't to be taken lightly. It would serve Dover right if she weren't in her apartment, perched willingly and waiting for him when he came to her later. Although, as she followed her aunt to her apartment down the hall, her legs were heavy, her footsteps reluctant. She hated herself for wanting to do as Dover instructed.

An hour later, as her stomach continued to twist in knots and her palms remained damp with apprehension, Lana's cell phone rang. She'd forgotten she'd stuck it in the pocket of her oversized t-shirt and pulled it out as it vibrated against her breast. She set down the weak coffee Aunt Oley had offered and refused to acknowledge her aunt's attentive gaze when she checked to see who called.

Her heart constricted painfully when it was her brother Heath and not Dover. Apparently their meeting was over and instead of a distracting, sexy male demanding to know where she was, her brother would call and berate her.

Lana almost sent the call to voice mail, really not wanting to hear what he had to say. It wouldn't do any good. He would just keep calling.

"Hello," she said, proud of how calm and unaffected her voice sounded.

"Where are you?" he demanded, his harsh, deep voice bordering on hostile.

Lana didn't have to guess how his meeting with Dover probably went. She tried telling herself she didn't care. "Sitting here with Aunt Oley, drinking coffee," she offered nonchalantly. "Where are you?"

"Don't try sounding innocent if your actions aren't so," he hissed.

"Heath." She wouldn't be belittled. For the hundredth time she assured herself she hadn't done anything wrong. If her brothers insisted on acting like Neanderthals that was their problem, not hers. "You aren't making sense. Don't dishonor me with the smell of your anger. I'll talk to you when you've calmed down."

Although her heart pounded in her chest, she was very proud of herself when she hung up on him.

Aunt Oley leaned back in the upright chair she sat in, facing Lana. "Maybe you should consider if your brothers are this upset about your new male there might be a reason."

Lana gripped her coffee cup, fighting to maintain control. She loved Aunt Oley but knew the old owl enjoyed poking until she could get a rise out of someone. Lana wouldn't be her target today.

"Your coffee is as good as it always is." Confidence washed over her when she sounded the way her mother used to sound, relaxed and in control. Lana placed her mug on the coaster and stood. "I'm sure Heath will sniff me out and his feathers will be flying everywhere. I don't want to mess up your happy nest."

She spoke as she headed to the door, turning and giving her aunt a quick, firm hug then hurrying out the door as Aunt Oley sputtered out something about her not having to leave so quickly. If there was a twinge of regret that her older relatives might need more of her attention, she would deal with it later. Right now she'd told her aunt the truth. All hell was about to break loose. She planned on it. And she wouldn't dishonor Aunt Oley by having it happen in her nest. Heath wasn't the only one who could calmly be outraged.

Lana heard the stomping in the stairwell when she reached her apartment door. Glancing at the door to the stairs, Heath yanked it open and stormed in her direction. In spite of being in his skin, she swore feathers would fly off him any moment and he might even start pecking at her. He looked fit to be tied.

"Where is he?" Heath growled. He was even angrier than she thought he would be.

And playing ignorant wouldn't be in her best interest, not to mention she didn't feel like playing. "I don't know," she said, standing tall and facing him, her hand on her door. She wouldn't run from Heath either. "Why are you so angry?"

He stared at her, his large, round gray eyes burning with more emotions than she'd ever seen in him before. "Why am I so angry?" he said, his deadly whisper enough to send chills rushing over her flesh. "Are you serious, Lana?"

"Very," she said, meaning it. "I saw Dover enter the building and spoke with him for a moment. I wanted to go with him to speak to you but he wished to meet with you

alone. What did the two of you talk about?" she asked, keeping her calm, maintaining her cool.

Heath searched her face, undoubtedly trying to make sure she really didn't know what they spoke about. She hated being in the dark, not knowing. Lana waited out the silence though. She didn't blink once and kept all her attention focused on relaxing her facial muscles, slowing her breathing and dwelling on maintaining a peaceful calm to the very core of her soul. If this were the first time she'd forced herself into such a stringent exercise, she would have failed miserably. But having seen her parents and aunts pull off the feat many times, Lana did a pretty good job of keeping the air around her smelling pleasant.

Heath's temper cooled and he let out a slow, cleansing breath. "This is a matter for the nest. Call your brothers."

Lana nodded. Whatever they discussed, she caught a whiff of apprehension before Heath turned from her. She waited until he hit the stairwell before entering her apartment and noted he went downstairs instead of up. More than likely he would fly around the complex, making sure Dover was gone before talking to them.

Lana entered her apartment but then paused when she heard Heath returning in the stairwell. Sticking her head out her door, her heart swelled to her throat and forgot to beat. Dover pushed open the door from the stairwell, let it close behind him, and approached her. His tall, silent gait would cause any female to react as she did.

Frustrated that his incredible sex appeal so easily manipulated her senses, Lana cleared her throat, once again suppressing her reaction to him. It was a hell of a lot harder to do with Dover than it had been with Heath a moment ago.

"Still pissed at me?" he whispered, his rough baritone scraping her nerves when he reached for her.

She didn't balk or move her attention from his face when he stroked her cheek. "What did you say to upset my brother?" she asked.

"Does his being angry with me sway your opinion of me even further, my little owl?" His fingertips were doing one hell of a number to her nerve endings.

Lana slapped at him, stepping backward into her apartment. His touching her made it so damn hard to keep her emotions under wrap where they belonged. "How can I possibly be angry with anyone when I don't have a clue what was said?"

She didn't get why her demand obviously pleased him. But the way his mouth twitched slightly at the corner when he followed her into her apartment, managed to close the door with his boot and then pin her against her wall, left little doubt he was not angry with her.

She watched her fingers spread over his rock-hard chest, felt his body pressed against hers, and filled her lungs with a hint of coconut and Irish Spring soap. The combination shouldn't be lethal enough to eliminate her resistance against him. But when she raised her gaze, saw the flakes of gold streak through his gray eyes, there was no stopping her body's reaction to him.

"I haven't decided yet," he whispered, nipping at her lip while gripping her shoulders and keeping her back pressed flat against the wall. "But I think that might be your best quality."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, so distracted by what he was doing to her it was damn near impossible to keep her emotions under wrap. Whatever quality he spoke of, it sure as hell wasn't remaining honorable. She couldn't even remain calm around him.

"You absolutely refuse to judge someone without knowing the entire picture." His breath tortured her neck when he lowered his face and nibbled her collarbone. Even though his hair was pulled back in a ponytail, the long, smooth strands stroked her cheek.

"Dover," she whispered, and at the same time fought to gather her senses. The fact his solid, muscular chest pressed against her breasts, which were now swollen and ached, did little to help. His words swam around in her fogged brain, his praise proving enough to destroy her resistance to him. "You need to leave," she gasped, turning her face to his.

His mouth captured hers and she moved her hands to his shoulders then around his neck, deepening the kiss she should be turning away. Not only was her resistance gone, but any anger she held toward him yesterday. It sucked. It really did. Dover was dominating, determined, and if anything were going to exist between them at all, she needed to figure out a way to maintain control around him.

When he gripped her jaw, tilting her head and then impaling her mouth, a craving so strong it was as if she were shocked with electricity zapped her down the middle. It swelled between her legs, soaking her, and her pussy throbbed furiously in response. Maybe she couldn't deny him. Possibly the physical connection between them was too strong to ignore or keep under lock and key where all her emotions belonged.

Lana would never submit to Dover or any male, not her brothers, not anyone. The moment she did, the instant she felt as if she were no better than some pigeon, coming and going at someone else's beck and call, it would be all over. Lana wouldn't live like that.

His mouth opened wider, his fingers stroking her neck, encouraging her to take more of him. Lana greeted his deepening of the kiss with eagerness and her tongue moved with his, as if there were some sacred dance involved with kissing that she'd always known and forgotten until this moment. It was too much enduring the craving that grew inside her. At this rate he would make her come with a fucking kiss.

Focusing on the fact Heath would probably return soon, expecting her and her brothers to be here, helped ground her. Although even with that knowledge, tearing her mouth from his was harder to do than she thought. Not because he held her chin, keeping her where he wanted her, but because she didn't want to end it.

Life sucked when she couldn't have what she wanted. Lana forced her head to the side, taking on a bit of aggression of her own, and dragged in a deep breath. She inhaled the mixed aroma of their lust. It was intoxicating.

And the first thing anyone would smell when they walked through her door.

Crap!

Lana pushed against Dover's chest. An overwhelming sense of satisfaction washed over her when she searched his face as she shoved and saw how dazed he appeared. His need and cravings got the best of him too. Another time and with another male capturing so much emotion on his face would be a hardcore turn-off. And it disappeared as she studied him, his cool, collected expression once again in place.

She wouldn't grin, wouldn't embarrass either one of them. Knowing she controlled him more than originally she might have believed was good enough.

"Meet me in the park where we were the other night in an hour," she instructed, continuing to push him toward her door. "Now get the hell out of here."

His expression darkened. "Are you ashamed of me, my little owl?"

"Don't dishonor me, Dover." There wasn't time to argue over whose owl she was. "Do as I say. I will hear what my brother has to say and then come to you to hear you."

Dover turned, opening her door and stepped into the hallway. "I will be there in an hour," he told her, his emotions more masked than she'd seen them before. All trace of lust, of his craving for her were gone.

And for an owl his size, his soft footsteps down her hallway had him out of her line of vision in a second. She glanced out her door in time to see the door to the stairway close behind him. As quickly as his emotions disappeared, so did he. Lana stepped into her apartment, closed her door and sighed heavily, smelling only her own scent.

Dover was a master of his own emotions, a quality quite commendable in an owl. Lana suspected it was something Heath probably picked up on Dover quickly. He wouldn't like Dover because of it, but it would only mean his dislike stemmed from resentment. Dover was a challenge to any other male. Although hell, he was quite the challenge for her too. She pulled out her phone, standing just inside her door, and called Rock and Beel. She had minutes to attempt mastering her own emotions, although she wasn't half as good at it as Dover was.

* * * * *

"Good, everyone is here." Heath stood in the middle of his living room when Lana followed her brothers into his nest.

She was more than happy when he informed her he wanted all of them meeting at his place. He'd called her before Rock and Beel got to her apartment, which gave her time to tell her brothers to head upstairs instead of going to her nest. Maybe she wasn't as good at covering her emotions and remaining calm and in control all of the time, but

she was damn good at auto callback on her cell and herding her brothers into Heath's nest.

Lana closed the door behind her, taking in the nest where she'd been reared. Although it was the largest apartment in the building, it looked smaller than it did when she was a fledgling. Heath's things were scattered around the bright living room, although her parents' furniture, or some of it, was still where it had always been.

She looked at Heath and noticed him watching her as he downed a good portion of a bottle of beer. Holding his gaze, she stood tall, slowing her breathing as she'd learned at a young age, and relaxing her features. Heath looked away first. It amazed her how easily she mastered control around everyone but Dover.

"I'm sure Lana told you Dover Down entered our parliament today." Heath spoke to Beel and Rock and then followed both of them into the kitchen.

"She didn't say why you wanted us," Rock said.

They were all in the kitchen and Lana would be damned if they were going to hold this discussion without her. Even the kitchen seemed smaller than it did growing up when she and her brothers would all circle around her parents, listening as the two of them discussed current events as each of them tried to steal bites of whatever was being prepared for supper. Often times it resulted in hands being slapped, but there were never hostile moments or any time in Lana's memory where she could remember when foul emotions stunk up the kitchen.

And they didn't now either. Beel was the only one to acknowledge her as Heath continued talking. He pulled beers out of the refrigerator, handing one to Rock and then offering her one as well. Lana accepted and screwed off the top then perched on a barstool next to the island in the middle of the kitchen.

"He strutted to my door with his feathers all pruned as if I should be honored he took time out of his day to meet me," Heath announced. "I knew who he was before he introduced himself."

"Why was that?" Beel asked. Although only a few minutes younger than Heath, there was something different in his expression that gave him a more youthful appearance than Heath. His hair was short but not as short as Heath's, and where his older brother didn't part his, Beel's naturally crooked part gave him more of an unkempt appearance.

Heath downed his beer and walked around Rock to the refrigerator. "Because I recognized his scent."

It took a moment for his inference to sink in. Lana had been focusing on the label of her beer, listening and staying quiet. She looked up to catch all three of them staring at her, as if already this entire affair were somehow her fault. Refusing to let them get her riled, she returned their stares, waiting calmly for the conversation to continue.

Heath screwed off the beer cap and tossed it into the trash along with his empty beer bottle. "Apparently Dover Down spends every minute of his time with leopards. In

fact, he's flown alongside them for quite a few years. Has he shared that bit about him with you yet, Lana?"

"No. He hasn't," she offered easily, since it was the truth. "Go on," she encouraged, eager to know anything about Dover that Heath might have found during their meeting.

Heath headed into the living room. "It's true. He told me as much himself and apparently enjoys their company. The young unmated female he brought with him to Banff is a very close friend to him. He has flown alongside her during her private runs for several years now, and with the blessing of her den. They asked him to bring her out here."

Beel and Rock didn't sit when Heath reclined on the couch. Lana relaxed at the opposite end, the moisture of her beer soaking her palm. She focused on the droplets on her fingertips, keeping her curiosity and the knot that threatened to twist painfully in her gut at bay only by telling herself not to react until she'd heard every word Heath had to say. She would then go to Dover and demand he share his entire conversation with Heath with her, which would give her the whole picture. Dwelling on how she would do this, making a pragmatic list of how events would play out between now and then, allowed her to keep her emotions where they belonged.

"You smelled that female leopard on him?" Rock growled, his thick chest stretching the t-shirt he wore. He fisted his hands at his side, his gray eyes darkening as he switched his attention to Lana. "He will not dishonor you, and if he needs that lesson pounded into him I have no problem doing it. That male has flown to you and while he's here he will not be with another female."

Lana would have loved to second that notion but instead smiled at her older brother. "You're sweet, Rock," she said, her tone soft and soothing, which appeared to calm Rock somewhat. "Let's not worry about that right now but instead hear what their discussion was about. I can't believe the two of you sat up here, perched in your nest, and spoke about me the entire time."

"Nope. We sure didn't." Heath lifted his feet and placed them on the coffee table, crossing one large foot over the other. It was an act their mother would have pecked at him severely for doing, and Lana had to stare at her beer bottle to keep herself from saying as much. If Heath noticed the act bothered her he didn't comment, fortunately, but instead continued. "After giving me a brief but interesting summary of his life in Kenora where he owns a nest, and I'm sure plans to return, Dover then informed me the leopard hunter Kane Masters requested Dover come out and fly around to figure out what is going on here. Dover shared with me the fights he's already seen between leopards and lunewulfs. He expressed concern that these species are creating fights among us."

"Interesting," Beel said. "Lunewulfs will fight with anyone. That *is* their way of getting along.

Heath actually smiled at Beel's joke, but Rock didn't.

"They don't act any different, no matter what town they're in."

"According to Dover, this level of hostility between species is unique." Heath's large gray eyes weren't readable as he focused on Lana. "He used the example of his friendship with Darla, the female he came into town with. It was the only time I saw emotion in his eyes. He is very fond of this unmated leopard female."

Her stomach twisted and slow, soothing breaths didn't calm her. "What does he plan to do while he's here?" she heard herself ask.

"He plans to narrow in on the problem and fix it."

"And who gives him the right to do anything in our town?" Rock demanded.

"The leopard hunter Kane Masters," Heath said.

"Masters doesn't have the balls to deal with it himself?" Rock asked, shaking his head. "This will ruin everything if we don't force this owl out of town. We have to make him fly or everything we've done so far will be ruined."

"And what does it say of Masters if he howls for an owl to do his dirty work?" Beel asked.

Heath pointed at him. "Exactly. Dover Down is no more than a puppet, flying back and forth like a fucking carrier pigeon, instead of gliding with the honor of an owl."

"He's giving owls one hell of a bad image, flying for leopards," Rock snapped, putting his beer down on coffee table hard enough to make a banging sound.

Lana stared at the beer in the bottle when it threatened to foam over the top. Her brothers continued screeching and badmouthing Dover as she listened. Her insides were numb, but it didn't prevent her heart from burning a hole inside her. Most of the time the three of them were sensible about a situation, levelheaded and fair when it came to the parliament of owls around them. Even when other species sniffed their way into the owls' world, Heath, Rock and Beel didn't ostracize them simply because they ran on four legs. Yet their accusations toward Dover were harsh and smelled nasty enough to turn her stomach.

"I can't help but wonder if you three would be condemning Dover if I hadn't slept with him," she murmured, for a moment believing she thought the comment instead of voicing it until the room went deafly quiet.

"What did you say?" Rock demanded, spinning around, and being the closest one to her, taking a step in her direction as he fisted his hands at his hips.

Another owl might straighten, respecting and honoring Rock not only as a Halk but also as a large male who appeared deadly when he was pissed. Lana raised her attention to him slowly.

"Apparently you heard me the first time," she said, remaining relaxed. It wasn't hard keeping her emotions under wrap since she'd already closed down inside from the number of insults they'd already slammed around her room. "Possibly Kane Masters asked Dover to fly around Banff because he feels this is an owl issue."

"We all heard you." Heath leaned forward on the couch, looking more concerned than angry. "I can't believe you just said that."

"I can't believe you would even think such a thing." Beel shook his head, his disappointment smelling legitimate.

Lana stared at the three of them. They'd had their differences over the years, but this was her nest, the males she loved and honored more than anyone else in Banff. At the moment though, she searched each of their faces, breathing in their scents, and wondered when they'd changed.

"I do think that," she said finally, looking away from them and then carrying her bottle of beer to the kitchen. She'd lost her taste for it. Her stomach churned and suddenly the walls around her appeared to be closing in around her. "I think it and it scares me," she added, returning to confront them. "What is wrong with owls working with leopards? Why is it a crime for us to interact with other species?"

"Where did you get that?" Heath asked. "We've interacted with other species all our lives."

"And lately you've decided the best way to handle all of them is to control and manipulate them. Don't try to deny it. You're taking over this town and making the rules as you go along." Lana grabbed her purse from where she'd left it on the side table by the couch and headed for the door. "I'm done with this meeting. I don't want any part of your monarchy."

"Lana, you're not going anywhere," Rock informed her.

She pulled open the door and barely managed enough strength not to slam it behind her. "I'm not going to be any part of you ruining the reputation of owls by continuing to try to manipulate the actions of others either," she told them, and closed the door, preventing her from clearly hearing their responses.

Chapter Eight

Dover pulled into the park where he'd first taken Lana twenty minutes before he needed to be there. His cell buzzed against his hip and he pulled the leather case free from his belt.

"Dover here," he said, acknowledging the number before answering.

"Hey, man, we've got a situation." Kane's deep voice didn't indicate his emotions.

Dover hated phones for that reason. He couldn't smell out a male's mood through a piece of plastic technology. "What's up?"

"There's some land north of Banff, just at the edge of the mountain that belongs to a litter of leopards," Kane began.

Dover leaned against his handlebars, turning his attention to the magnificent mountain range north of him.

"They've expressed concern about the owls lingering in their trees."

"What are the owls doing?" Dover asked.

"Just that. Lingering."

Dover didn't say anything. It wasn't a hostile act but he could guess any leopard's reaction to owls nesting in trees that belonged to a particular litter.

"Have the leopards confronted the owls?"

"That's just it. No owl is coming forth and acknowledging they're the ones lingering. This particular litter, the Lockhams, have laid in wait until the owls took to flight. But the owls lose the leopards before changing. We can't identify them."

Dover wouldn't appreciate being watched any more than another male would. "Interesting," he commented.

"I don't suppose you could help identify the owls."

"I might be able to learn why they are doing it." Dover didn't need to add he wouldn't identify any owl to another species without just cause. And Kane wouldn't press him to do so.

"Good enough."

"Good hunting," Dover said.

"Good hunting," Kane repeated as Dover pulled the phone from his ear and ended the call.

He continued staring at the mountains, digesting what he'd just been told. If he smelled the situation out right, the owls in this community were playing a control game with the other species in the area. Dover doubted it was simply to amuse themselves. There was a deeper plot in motion here. He didn't like the smell of it. But if he were to

guess at the outcome, he would bet the owls had every intention of controlling all of Banff, even if it meant making enemies out of the surrounding dens and litters in the area.

His cell rang again and he glanced at the small screen. It was Lana.

"Hello," he said, softening his tone in spite of the fact she wouldn't smell him over the phone.

"I'm not going to be able to make it."

"All right," he said, something tightening inside him even though there was no inflection in her voice that acknowledged a problem.

"Bye," she said, and ended the call.

An overwhelming urge to squeeze his phone until it cracked hit him hard enough he barely managed to prevent himself from doing it. Dover growled as he shoved the cell onto his belt, refusing to speculate on Lana's reasons for breaking off their meeting. That proved harder to do than breaking his phone. It wasn't his nature to allow emotions to outweigh facts. Even with such few facts to back up her cancellation.

"Damn it," he hissed under his breath, roaring his bike to life and heading out of the parking lot alongside the park.

He was north of town before it hit him he hadn't taken in his surroundings while getting there. His thoughts were lost on Lana. Which wasn't healthy or wise. Allowing the female to preoccupy his thoughts would get him hurt or worse. Dover forced himself to focus on the two-lane highway, taking to memory the land on either side and the occasional house set back off the road. He slowed to the minimum speed limit, breathing in the air and marking each curve and noticeable landmark as being either leopard or werewolf. There were more werewolves in the area than Kane had led him to believe.

The highway curved, leading him into the mountains. Dover took his time, the road used more for local traffic than by tourists. Slowing his speed allowed him to take in the scents surrounding him, separate them and remain acutely aware of his surroundings. He focused on the road, downshifting as the curves grew more extreme. But at the same time took his time surveying the land on either side of him. Even in his human form he saw his surroundings much better than a human would. Although he didn't take time to focus on every blade of grass, which would have been a waste of time anyway, Dover narrowed his focus on the tall, narrow trees that grew from the side of the mountain.

After riding several miles, Dover didn't spot a single owl. He digested this information as he slowed and turned around, heading back toward Banff. Kane wouldn't lie to him. He accepted that as fact. At the same time, owls didn't lie. It wasn't in their nature. In the heat of passionate rage, Dover had never known a leopard, werewolf or human to accuse his kind of such a rank character defect. There were often variations of the truth, as perceived from the one sharing the facts. Good owls spent their entire lives focusing on separating emotions from facts, ridding any possibility of anything they said being interpreted as anything other than simple truth.

Dover had a nest of owls breathing down his tail feathers, thinking he flew for leopards and had turned traitor on his own kind. He didn't smell a lie on Heath Halk, but he did detect the male's dislike for Dover. It was obvious his opinion of Dover was jaded because of Lana. That became proven fact when Dover tried using his relationship with Darla as an example of how different species coexisted in other communities. Heath ignored the facts and jumped on a different truth, that being Dover had a relationship with an unmated female. He didn't even acknowledge his own words – that owls and leopards lived harmoniously in other communities.

Therefore, knowing the Halk nest didn't want to hear Dover's truth indicated the beliefs they offered him would be jaded. It wouldn't smell like a lie if Halk believed it as truth. The parliament they lived in honored Lana's nest. She indicated as much when she introduced herself to him, surprised when he didn't react to her nest's name as she thought he would. So many nests wouldn't allow the reputation the Halks held out of fear or loathing. Her nest was honored, which offered another truth. Many who flew in these parts believed her nest worthy of their respect. Which would suggest Dover's truth might be jaded and not Heath Halk.

At the same time, Kane Masters was a powerful leopard, especially now, holding the rank of hunter, a position among leopards only five held. Hunters protected all leopards, fighting for their rights, safety and honor, more times than not among themselves than with other species. Dover had been present when Kane fought for the right to become a hunter. He was the most recent addition to the coveted title. From what Dover witnessed, Kane ran with honor. If he didn't, Dover sure as hell wouldn't have agreed to travel across the country with Darla and then turn her over to the paws of the leopard.

Kane howled for him. He'd requested Dover fly out here and investigate what he viewed to be a problem. Dover would agree. There was a problem. At the moment though, he needed to possess the strength to sniff out a lie amidst so many truths.

"Interesting," he mused, contemplating the circle of logic he'd followed while driving back into Banff.

Dover's bike rumbled in protest when he slowed to the speed limit in downtown Banff. It seemed no matter the time of day or day of the week there were a fair amount of people browsing the stores or simply walking along the sidewalk. The cold, crisp air stung his cheeks but kept him alert. He breathed in the pungent odor of so many humans and searched both sides of the streets for other species.

When he reached the block where he'd parked the other day with Darla, he pulled into an empty stall and parked. Maybe checking out some of the local establishments would get him another view of Banff. There were other owls in the area he could speak with, learn their opinions on local politics. He took in the large awning Lana stood under when she'd clucked her tongue at him.

Just thinking about her, picturing her in his mind, and how damn cute she'd looked when she'd flirted with a male she didn't know got him hard as a rock. Entering the dimly lit establishment cooled his senses. Although he was immediately aware of the

smell of owls, Dover couldn't stop the sensation that washed over him. Lana had cancelled out on seeing him today and he wanted to know why. Regardless of his determination to learn more about Banff, there was no avoiding the urge growing inside to also learn what Lana was about.

"Whatever you have on tap," he told the bartender, an older owl who gave him the once-over before nodding and grabbing a plastic cup.

Dover leaned against the bar, adjusting his eyes to the dark surroundings. This was an owl establishment. From what he could tell, owls sat at several of the booths lining the walls and several played pool in the back of the large room. The place was quiet, the atmosphere calm and serious. It was a typical owl scene with little emotion to smell and no hostility in the air.

"Just passing through?" the bartender asked, sliding the draw across the smooth wooden counter to Dover.

Dover pulled out a few bills, handed them to the bartender as he made eye contact with another male leaning against the bar. There were several barstools between them, but the male didn't hide the fact he was waiting to hear the answer to the bartender's question.

"Just arrived the other day," Dover offered, matching the calm, quiet tone of the bartender. Although keeping his attention on the male, who was probably a good ten years older than Dover, he was acutely aware of the male down the bar from him, watching him closely. "And I don't know yet how long I'll be here. Might be awhile," he added, keeping his options open with his answer.

"Do you have a nest here in Banff?" the male next to him asked, sliding his empty glass to the bartender and then straightened as he faced Dover. "My name is Beel. And you are?"

The male didn't offer his nest's name, so Dover didn't either. "You honor me," he said seriously. "I am Dover. And no, I have no nest."

"Not anywhere?" Beel asked, nodding when the bartender refilled his glass.

Dover sipped the cold beer from his plastic cup, aware that apparently newcomers to this town weren't honored with glasses as the locals were. The beer tasted good so he had no complaints. "Not that I know of."

"Then you're a drifter."

Dover sipped at his beer, aware that the bartender and the male facing him were waiting for his response. They wanted to know everything he would share about himself, which was typical of an owl. This was a much more acceptable greeting into a town than the one he'd initially received. If the conversation evolved past himself, he would inquire as to why he got the greeting into Banff that he did. But that would only happen if these two offered the traditional and acceptable stages of this type of conversation. He would tell them about himself then they would share information about their town. Owls were very formal and protocol didn't change no matter where an owl flew. It kept things logical and organized.

"I have a nest in Kenora of Lake of the Woods west of here," he explained. "I've owned that nest for several years now and settled there after helping leopards destroy Leo Pard."

A male and female, about his age, sat at a nearby table and stood as he finished his brief summary of himself. Bringing an empty pitcher to the bar, they stood behind Beel. He turned, acknowledging them with a look that told Dover they were acquaintances. When the bartender took their pitcher and refilled it, everyone watched him until Beel returned his attention to Dover.

"Why did you help the leopards with their plight?" he asked.

The question was acceptable. In spite of the tension this town held on to when it came to different species, this direction in the conversation didn't smell hostile. The faint aroma of curiosity continued lingering, which was enough to prompt Dover to answer the questions honestly and without hesitating.

"I'm acquaintances with all of the leopard hunters. When Pard began his quest to locate and imprison leopards with visions, I disagreed with his actions. Suppressing and controlling their species wouldn't benefit owls, so I helped."

Beel nodded. "You're right. I admit, although I didn't fly with their fight, I followed the situation and listened closely to all of its developments."

The bartender handed the full pitcher to the couple behind Beel and took their money, ringing it into the cash register. "We had quite a few leopards come through Banff during that time," he offered.

"That's when several dens took land around our nest," the female owl behind Beel offered. She watched her mate walk over to their table and pick up their glasses then return to fill them with beer. Apparently they intended to join the conversation. "We're Frances and Timmy Straffer," she offered, and Beel stepped backward, allowing a better view of the couple as they extended introductions. "Welcome to Banff."

Dover nodded to the female and then acknowledged Timmy Straffer. "You honor me. I'm Dover Down," he told them, including his nest name since they'd done the same.

"We aren't used to an owl who flies so closely with leopards." Beel sobered the conversation. "Do you find the litters you know to be controlling of where and how you fly?"

"Leopards keep a close eye on those they care about, but no," he said truthfully. "I fly where I want to fly and no one around my nest has ever suggested I do otherwise." Then daring to direct the conversation in spite of being the newcomer to their town, he continued. "I've noticed the tension in this town between leopards and owls."

The couple focused on Beel, as did the bartender. He was a leader in their community and Dover watched him closely, studying his features. Something occurred to him at that moment, which would explain why Beel didn't offer his nest's name. Dover wondered if Beel might be a Halk.

"What brought it to your attention?" Beel asked.

The conversation would remain on him. Dover admitted he would have done the same to a newcomer. He gave the question some thought, knowing there was only one answer.

"I was asked to come here because of the existing tension. Although the day I arrived it was displayed nicely for me."

"Do you think you would have noticed it if you hadn't arrived with an unmated leopard female?"

Any owl in the community might have learned of his arriving with Darla. In retrospect, Kane possibly would have suggested to Tore that Dover would receive the reception he did with Darla on his bike.

"Interesting," Dover mused, nodding to Beel as he digested the possibilities of how his reception might have differed without Darla. "Since I didn't drive into Banff alone, it is hard to speculate. I took the female to a litter where she is now and will remain while I'm here. When I came downtown the first night I was here, a handful of leopards confronted me about being with the female. They didn't approve any more than the owls here did."

"And it would be different where you come from?" Beel asked.

Dover stared the male in the eye, deciding he would learn now which nest Beel came from. "Since that same night I found the female owl who expressed interest in me upon arrival, and the leopards weren't pleased with our presence together any more than they were with my presence with the leopard female, I would have to say no. Had I not taken the female owl with me, the leopards would have attacked her."

Beel tightened his grip on his beer and the bartender straightened. It was the only reaction given to Dover's statement but enough to show Dover what he needed to know. Beel cared about Lana.

"Is that why you took the female owl with you?" Beel asked.

The couple behind Beel listened with mild curiosity. The two of them saw a chance to catch up on local gossip in their parliament. But it didn't appear they had all the facts as they showed no emotion either way toward the conversation. Dover doubted either of them knew that he didn't know whom he was speaking with until this moment.

There weren't any doubts in his mind now that he spoke with a Halk. If he dwelled on it, Dover would say Beel was probably the same age as Heath, possibly hatched in the same nest. Where Heath had a hard edge to him, Beel was more relaxed. But now that he dwelt on it, there was definitely a strong nest resemblance.

When he met the male's gaze, any shred of doubt faded. Beel knew that Dover was aware of his nest and his relation to Lana.

"No," he told Beel, holding his attention and now honoring him as the relation to a female he was interested in. "There aren't any single female owls around my nest. Lana grabbed my attention the moment I pulled into town."

"Lana?" the female behind Beel whispered, her large gray eyes flashing as she looked from Beel to Dover. Her mate touched her arm and she lowered her gaze.

The conversation had tilted from one of learning of a new owl to knowing the intentions of a single male toward a single female. Such a conversation was held only between the nest of the female and the single male.

"You come to Banff with a single female in search of a mate?" Beel demanded, although there was no hostility. He continued to honor Dover by asking his questions and waiting calmly for the answers. Beel had yet to pass judgment on Dover.

For that, Dover honored him with as much honesty as he could master. Which meant giving the question serious thought. The owls watched as he pondered, staring at his cup of beer and the thin film of foam covering the golden liquid.

"Darla comes from an honorable litter," he began, offering the truth and knowing the male would take it as he would. There wouldn't be any manipulating this situation. If Beel didn't see it how it was, there wouldn't be anything Dover could do about it. "Her littermate's mate is a hunter, and the one Kane Masters approached when he sniffed out a situation growing here."

"What..." the male behind Beel began.

Beel held his hand up, silencing the male with a gesture. "Continue," he told Dover.

"It was suggested I bring Darla with me to prevent an unwanted mating where she lives." Dover hesitated, but an image of Lana appeared in his mind. There was something between them, an instant connection that went beyond damn good sex. Deep honesty was called for in this situation, which, if it weren't for Lana, he might not share. "Darla is a wonderful female but the facts remain as they are. I wouldn't mate outside my species and for that reason there has never been anything between me and that female other than friendship. Darla wouldn't hold a grudge if I were to find a female who made me happy."

"You didn't share your interest, or immediate attraction as you put it, with Darla when you saw Lana?" Beel asked.

"Darla hasn't been around a parliament before. She didn't hear, nor would she have recognized what it meant, when Lana clucked her tongue at me."

Beel stiffened, but there still wasn't hostility. The bartender and couple focused on Beel. Lana had sought him out and he wouldn't suggest otherwise. It wasn't his nature to fly with a female who hadn't expressed interest in him.

"What are your intentions now?" Beel asked.

"A legitimate question asked from her nest," Dover said.

Beel studied him a moment and then nodded once. "I honor your keen sense of observation and you are right."

"What is your relation?" Dover asked.

"Lana is the youngest of my nest."

Dover nodded, knowing he'd been right in guessing Beel was a Halk. The others relaxed, although curiosity kept them attentive as they waited for Dover to announce whether he would officially fly after Lana. If he stated as much, the community would then assume he would pursue Lana with the intentions of creating a nest. Owls were incredibly formal and stringent when it came to the laws surrounding how a single female of mating age was to be treated.

Dover would have preferred to discuss this with Lana before announcing his intentions. Once he answered Beel's question, it would be official. Although for centuries, nests arranged dating conditions between males and females without the consent of both parties, it wasn't a formality practiced as much today. If Dover announced he would continue seeing Lana, Beel would see that as a perusal to the end. If Dover stated he didn't mean to do anything without talking to Lana, it would be seen as a casual fling. More than likely Beel would authorize flying Dover out of Banff. It would be in his right.

Studying Beel's face, the owl knew he'd cornered Dover. It was impossible to say how he'd react in the same situation. Dover didn't come from a large nest. He didn't have a sister, but trying for a moment to imagine how Beel might fly since he had an unmated sister, Dover decided he would do exactly what Beel was doing. Cut to the chase, narrow in on the kill and demand to know exactly how Dover would fly. If that meant forcing Dover into a decision at this very moment, so be it. Dover conceded it was a logical method of attack and one he would do exactly the same way.

Taking in a slow, deep breath, he faced the situation, knowing he'd never cowered from the unknown before. Nonetheless, his stomach twisted into an uncomfortable knot while an unfamiliar sensation washed over him.

"My intentions are to remain here, learn why such unrest has grown between species."

"What are your intentions with Lana?" Beel asked the moment Dover finished speaking. He wouldn't allow Dover out of his corner.

"My intentions are to fly after her," he said, and the sensation that spread over his body at lightning speed threatened to choke him. He'd just given away his single male status.

Chapter Nine

The room spun for a moment when Lana stood. "Good grief," she said, reaching for the side of the couch. "What did you put in those drinks?"

Shelly laughed, grabbing Lana's empty glass and her own. "Gena is off work and heading down to the bar. She wants us to meet her there."

"Text her and let her know we'll fly that way now." Lana spread her arms as if she had her wings and almost tripped over the coffee table.

Shelly giggled, placing the glasses in her sink and turning in her small studio apartment where she lived over her parents' store. "You couldn't fly a straight line right now if you tried."

Lana spun around, pointing a finger at her friend. "Which is all your fault," she snapped, but then grinned at Shelly's show of appearing wounded. "Just because I show up at your doorstep tormented and displaying too many emotions for my own good, you feel you have the right to get me trashed."

"It sure didn't have anything to do with you telling me you wanted to get trashed." Shelly held her serious expression a moment longer before laughing along with Lana. "The bar is just a couple blocks. It will do us good walking some of this alcohol off. But at least now you have an excuse for smelling of emotions."

"If anyone could smell them over the alcohol." Lana would worry about how much she had to drink later, right now she needed to focus on moving without staggering. "Remind me next time you mix a mean drink."

Shelly grabbed her purse and handed Lana's to her. "You honor me, dear friend," she said, meaning it.

Lana didn't care if others thought Shelly was a bit too rough. It wasn't Shelly's fault she didn't exactly have the best nest in the world. Her father was known to have a couple of girlfriends around Banff. Shelly's mom would put out for anyone who looked twice at her. It was amazing Shelly wasn't a tramp, but she wasn't. If anything, telling Shelly about her night with Dover had her friend blushing.

Shelly glanced at her phone as she opened the door, which led down the flight of stairs to the street below. "Gena is already at the bar," she announced, letting Lana head out ahead of her and then closing and locking the door to her upstairs apartment.

"Do you think Gena will think I'm doing the right thing too?" Lana heard her words slur as she waited at the bottom of the stairs.

Shelly held on to the banister and took her time descending, waiting until she was down the narrow flight of stairs before meeting Lana's gaze. "You always do the right

thing," she said slowly, but then waved her hand in the air between them. "I've never known an owl to fly a straighter line than you."

"I don't know about right now," Lana said.

Shelly snorted, a very unladylike sound, and pushed the door at the bottom of the stairs open, leading the way outside. The afternoon sun was bright in spite of the crisp, cold air that felt good on Lana's face.

"Damn, girl, you're a Halk," Shelly insisted, falling in stride alongside Lana as they started down the street. "It makes perfect sense you would be very picky about any male you flew with." Shelly giggled, nudging Lana in her side with her elbow. "I'd never thought I'd say I was happy to be a Preston. But at least I don't have to worry about what male I'm with. If he looks good and treats me right, that is all that matters."

"That's all that should matter," Lana said, suddenly feeling a lot more sober than she had when she was upstairs in Shelly's small apartment. "I mean if a male and female like each other, that is enough, right?"

"Apparently not if you're a Halk." Shelly's smile faded as she studied Lana's face. "Crap. Don't get all down about it. You know how many males in this town would peck each other's eyes out for a chance to fly alongside you?"

What sucked is she did know. Too many males had approached her brothers, kissing tail feathers just for a chance to spend time with her.

"I think that is what made Dover special. He liked me and didn't even know a thing about Halks."

"Wait a minute. When you came over it was to tell me you weren't going to see him anymore. You said he was here to start trouble and you needed to be loyal to your nest."

"Now I'm thinking I need to be loyal to me. Hell, Shelly," Lana said, rubbing her temple to keep a pending headache from growing. "I couldn't even face him. Heath said what they talked about and told me Dover said he was here to learn why we're fighting so much with the leopards and werewolves. Once he has his answers, he's returning to his nest. He's not staying here."

"So therefore you can't give him the time of day from here on out." Shelly nodded but then made a face. "Sounds rather prissy to me."

"I'm not prissy," Lana snapped, offended.

"You're right. You aren't. But that is how it sounds."

"How it sounds is that I'm proud to be a Halk. I just need to know the truth of it all."

Gena Mason hurried out of the bar, her expression pinched with worry until she saw Lana and Shelly. Lana watched her expression transform, turning relaxed and calm. Whatever bugged her when she left the bar was gone by the time she reached Lana and Shelly.

"I hoped to run in to the two of you." Gena's long silky hair flowed over her shoulders as she wrapped her arms through Lana's and Shelly's and tried to turn them in the opposite direction. "I'm starving. Let's go find food."

"I thought we were going to the bar," Lana said, stopping instead of walking back the way they'd came.

Which was apparently what Gena wanted them to do. She nudged Lana away from the bar, making her wonder what had happened inside to make Gena want to go somewhere else.

"I don't want to go to the bar." Gena didn't smell of anything indicating she'd been scared or pissed off. "I'm starving. Let's get a burger."

"I'm not that hungry," Shelly began.

"Who is in the bar?" Lana asked.

Gena quit trying to nudge them away from the bar and crossed her arms over her chest, sighing heavily. She searched Lana's face for a moment before answering.

"Your brother Beel is in there."

Lana frowned. "I thought you liked Beel."

Gena's blush wouldn't have been noticeable if Lana hadn't already been watching her closely. It faded within moments but then Gena looked at the ground. "I just thought getting a burger was a good idea."

Lana looked toward the bar and that was when she spotted the motorcycle. In spite of all her arguments that her nest came first, that it mattered to her how her community was treated and how others viewed it, she stepped around her friends without a word. The alcohol still swam in her system, but it didn't make her forget what she'd announced to Shelly when she'd arrived at her apartment.

Reciting the pros and cons of her situation in her mind as she headed toward the bar didn't slow her pace. Dover came to Banff to stir up trouble. When he finished flying around, judging nests, he would leave. And regardless of him telling her the female leopard was nothing more than the youngest of a litter he was friends with, he'd entered town with her, she'd answered his cell phone, and Heath said he spoke affectionately of her. Owls didn't display emotions unless they experienced them too strongly to maintain. And her brother wouldn't dishonor her by lying about such a thing.

She stopped in her tracks when Heath parked at the end of the block and jumped out of his SUV. His long, determined strides as he walked down the center of the sidewalk, appearing unaware of the humans moving to the side as he approached, told her more than the serious expression on his face. Lana picked up on his scent before he spoke, an aroma for years she equated with comfort and security.

"Where have you been?" he demanded, stopping in front of her.

The two of them stood outside the entrance of the bar, but the thick, metal door blocked out all sound and scents from inside, something Lana always assumed had been intentional when the door had been installed.

"With my friends," she offered.

"You're drunk."

"I've been drinking." She was feeling less and less drunk with every moment that passed.

Shelly and Gena appeared at her side, although Lana didn't look at either of them. Instead, she glanced at the door to the bar. Heath took her arm, his grasp strong yet not rough. He let go of her when she gave him her attention and moved between her and the entrance.

"Go home, Lana," he instructed.

"We'll take her home," Gena offered easily. She would say anything though if she thought it would gain her favor in Heath's eyes. As much as Lana loved her friend, Gena's obsession with Lana's brothers grew old.

"What's going on in there?" she asked, ignoring his order as well as her friends.

"That's what I'm about to find out."

"I was just in there," Gena piped up again, edging her way closer to Heath.

He showed her only mild interest before focusing on Lana.

"Beel is in there along with that new owl in town, Dover."

Lana hadn't talked to Gena about Dover, but Shelly cleared her throat, touching Gena's arm. She was a bit too obvious when she slightly shook her head, trying to silence Gena. Heath's noticeable disapproval silenced Gena faster than Shelly's efforts to do so.

Lana understood now the look she'd seen on Gena's face meant something other than some male not responding as she would have liked. "What's happening in there?" Lana asked quietly, facing her friend.

"Beel and that new male were talking," Gena began.

"About me?"

Gena frowned, her lips parted as if she thought carefully how to answer the question.

Before she could answer, Heath stepped between them, taking Lana a bit more forcibly than he had before. "I want you to go home," he said so quietly it grabbed Lana's attention. "Go home and I'll come to you soon. Trust me on this one, Lana. Something has happened. Allow me to take care of it. If you go in there..."

"What?" There was something she didn't know. Whatever had transpired in the bar upset Gena enough it showed on her face when she walked out the door. Gena didn't know the details between Lana and Dover yet, but Lana sensed whatever it was, it involved her and Dover. She was about to find out. "I'm very capable of making the

right choice with my life," she offered, holding her head high as she stepped around all of them and reached for the door to the bar.

Heath reached over her head, pulling the door open the rest of the way when Lana went to open it.

"Just remember, I tried protecting you from this," he told her, his voice drifting into her ear as he spoke next to her.

At the same time the dimness of the bar surrounded her so that his words sunk into her brain while she worked to adjust her vision to the change in lighting. Lana stopped, staring at her brother as Shelly and Gena almost ran into her. Heath gave her a hard, determined look but then turned, striding across the bar and leaving her standing at the entrance, an odd sense of doom sinking deep into her gut.

"What did he say?" Shelly whispered. She seldom spoke around Lana's brothers. Even though none of her brothers ever dishonored Shelly's presence around Lana, she suspected Shelly questioned what they thought of her. Lana wouldn't tolerate anyone in her nest ever saying anything bad around Shelly, and she suspected her brothers knew that. Oddly enough, that realization brought her even more pause. They never commented on Shelly's unscrupulous nest because they cared about Lana.

She watched her brother pause next to Beel, who stood at the other end of the bar. Beel turned, looking her way. Lana's eyes were adjusted enough to witness his expression tighten at whatever Heath said to him. Something was seriously wrong.

"He said he tried protecting me from this," Lana said, not taking her attention from her brothers. They were having a rather heated discussion in public, something neither of them would normally do. But why?

"Let's get out of here." Gena touched Lana's arm. "Please, Lana. They are deciding which way you'll fly."

Lana's heart swelled into her throat so quickly there was no stopping it. Suddenly the darkness seemed to close in around her, creating a panic sensation she couldn't control. Shelly's cool hand on her forearm wasn't enough to calm the emotions she couldn't keep under wrap.

"What? What did you say?" she asked, her voice cracking. Humiliation washed in with the panic that damn near had her shaking.

"Lana, please. Let's go." Gena had her hand on Lana's back, trying to escort her out the door.

Lana didn't understand. Her brothers would never tell her how to fly. That was barbaric. Nests just didn't control the actions of their females that much. Sure, there were way too many male relatives who seemed to thrive on making their female relatives live through hell until they flew away from them and found the male who would make them happy. But to take control, make all decisions to the extent they would announce publicly who would fly by her side. That was arranged mating, and they just wouldn't do that to her.

As all these confused thoughts attacked her, another realization hit her with the clarity of crystal glass. Lana froze, backing away from her friends and ignoring their protests. She turned slowly, scanning the bar until she found Dover. He stood at the bar, nursing a plastic cup of beer, his attention pinned on her brothers. As if he knew the moment she spotted him, he turned his head, pinning her with his possessive stare. At the same time Lana felt her brothers focus their gazes on her too.

Her skin burned. Her body itched as the sensation to run, to fly as fast and as far away from this scene as she possibly could hit her harder than an uncontrollable blast of wind. Beel started to her and it was as if everyone in the bar stopped what they were doing, turning to watch the scene that was about to play out. The only problem was that Lana didn't know her lines. And she couldn't help thinking she was the only one who didn't. There was no way everyone would watch some barbaric display, amused at her expense.

Lana held her head high, refusing to run, and at the same time unwilling to be taken off-guard with her emotions flaring. She ignored her friends when they called after her and walked across the bar, passing Beel when he tried to speak to her and instead headed to the bathroom. She had to regain control before speaking to anyone.

Lana knew looking in the mirror after drinking was a really stupid thing to do. On top of that, seeing all her emotions splotched across her face would be even more humiliation she didn't want right now. Pushing open a stall, she slid the lock closed on it, put the seat down on the toilet and plopped down on it. Resting her head in her hands, she focused on her breathing, fighting to rein in her emotions.

"You should have told her when we were outside." Shelly's voice grew louder when the bathroom door pushed open.

Damn it. She should have locked the outside door.

"I didn't have time," Gena complained. "Lana, where are you?"

"In here," she said, wishing more than anything she could just be left alone. "Tell me what?" she asked, fearing the truth but needing to hear it.

"Tell her," Shelly hissed.

"Well, from what I heard," Gena began, placing her hands on the door to Lana's stall and struggling to focus on her between the crack where the door didn't meet the door frame. "Beel started talking to Dover Down. And why didn't you tell me you were already hanging out with him?" she demanded.

Lana ran her fingers through her hair, straightening and letting out a long breath. "I haven't seen you since I was with him." It was the truth and a shallow admission since she'd last seen Gena the other day.

Gena smiled, her eyes warm with happiness. "You always did go after what you wanted," she said softly. "Open the door, Lana. I feel really weird talking to you like this."

Shelly laughed and Gena laughed along with her. Lana stood, knowing she needed to face the music sooner than later if she was going to save a shred of her pride.

Unlocking the door, she pushed it open, her friends making room for her in the small bathroom where they'd spent so much time over the years primping and talking about the males out in the bar. It was odd this was where she would hear about how her entire life was about to change.

"Dover really is gorgeous," Gena offered.

"He's absolutely sexy as hell," Shelly said, standing next to Lana.

Lana made the mistake of looking in the mirror with both her friends on either side of her, staring at her reflection along with her.

"Tell me what you've heard," Lana insisted, combing her hair with her fingers and deciding the small amount of makeup she'd put on this morning hadn't streaked as bad as she worried it would.

"Beel arranged for the new owl in town to fly after you," Gena whispered, sounding in awe.

Lana nodded once, shoving her emotions way back in the corner of her brain. She was numb, which was the only way she could be at the moment. The knowledge wouldn't sink in.

"I've never known any nest to arrange for a male before." Shelly put her hand over her mouth, but the words were out. They hung heavy in the air between the three of them.

Lana wouldn't be humiliated among her closest friends. "We'll see about this," she decided, pushing between them and heading for the door.

The bar smelled as it always did when she left the short hallway where the bathrooms were and entered the large room filled with tables, booths and pool tables. A handful of owls, the usual amount at this time of day, minded their own business as she headed to the bar. No one looked at her or treated her any different than they ever did. If she took the time, she could probably name every owl in here, all from nests she'd grown up with. It was a comfortable, relaxing social hangout where she'd spent most of her time since coming of age.

Maybe her flare of emotions came from her own humiliation and not because everyone in the bar judged her nest for some archaic decision. Possibly everyone here didn't already know what was going on.

Gena knew about it. Lana would ask her how she learned the news when she had a chance. Her friends were behind her, creating a quiet support group when she reached the bar. Beel and Heath had left. Imagine that. Do what they felt was right and then walk away, leaving whoever was affected by their decisions to cope with it. Dover still sat at the bar, his beer in front of him. He continued staring at it when she walked up to him.

"What have you done?" she whispered, all too aware of the bartender moving toward her.

Dover met her gaze. His eyes were haunted, but other than that, she didn't detect happiness or anger. He was as he'd appeared to her since meeting her, completely unreadable.

"What any owl with honor would have done." He didn't look away as he spoke.

Lana's heart skipped a beat. There was something about the way he stared into her eyes, tormented heat seeping deep into her soul, that created a heat inside her she couldn't extinguish.

"And what was that?" she whispered, hating how her voice cracked.

Gold streaks flashed across his gray eyes, reminding her of how they looked when they'd made love in the park. Her insides reached a boiling point and she worried he'd smell her desire the longer he continued holding her gaze.

"It appears that in a parliament like this, where so many nests remain together, it doesn't take long for news to fly from owl to owl." He didn't sound upset, but his expression hardened.

Lana would have missed it if she weren't standing so close and staring at his face. "The news didn't fly in straight lines. I didn't know a thing until I walked in the door. And even then, no one has told me what's happened."

Dover reached for his beer and nodded to the bartender to bring her one. Lana pulled her attention from Dover. "Earl, ice water is fine."

"You've been drinking," Dover said. The gold flecks were gone from his eyes.

"I thought I was drunk."

"You cancelled on me to go get drunk?"

"I spent time with my girlfriends."

Dover looked past her, acknowledging Gena and Shelly for the first time. Lana glanced over her shoulder at each of them, meeting their curious, anxious stares. Neither one of them would leave her alone with Dover, even in a public place, unless she asked them to leave. She gestured to each one of them, making introductions.

"Dover Down, this is Gena Mason and Shelly Preston," she offered.

Dover nodded to each of them. "I'm honored to meet your friends," he said solemnly, but then turned his attention to Earl when he brought Dover a refill and Lana her water. He gulped down half his beer and then licked foam from his lips, returning his brooding stare to her. "What did your brother say to you?"

"Heath tried to make me go home. When I refused and came in here, knowing something had happened but not knowing what, he told me he tried to protect me."

Dover nodded.

"You haven't told me what you and Beel said to each other. You did speak with Beel, right?"

"Although he never honored me with a formal introduction, yes, I spoke with him."

"What did you say to each other?"

"He demanded I voice my intentions with you."

"He made you say that you would fly with me?"

The panic she'd experienced when she'd first entered the bar threatened to return. Dover felt cornered into his decision.

"Your brother continued insisting I state my intentions, not only while I was here in town, but as well with you. I've never dishonored a female, and I don't plan on doing it now." He reached for his beer and downed the rest of it then placed the empty cup on the bar. When he stood, his broad shoulders blocked the light coming from the neon signs behind him. "Let's go."

"I'm not leaving my friends. I came here with them."

"I just said I wouldn't dishonor you," Dover said, his voice so deep and almost menacing-sounding. "I'm not leaving here without you."

"Go on. It's okay," Shelly and Gena mumbled almost at the same time.

They gave her hugs, but Lana wasn't sure she could accept the affection and especially the happiness she smelled on both of them. They saw a gorgeous stranger. Lana wouldn't deny Dover was better-looking than any male in Banff or anywhere around there. But he'd been coerced into announcing he would fly after her. He'd said as much just now. She managed to walk out of the bar alongside him, once again experiencing the sensation of too many eyes watching her.

"There's something I want you to know." Dover stopped before they reached his bike, taking her arm and facing her.

"Stop," Lana said, choking out the one word as she struggled to keep her emotions in check. "You don't have to say anything, Dover. I sensed it on you inside."

"And what did you sense?"

"You were trapped into this. I understand." She licked her lips but her mouth was too dry to moisten anything. "I know you're in Banff just to learn why there are problems and you'll want to leave once you've learned what you need to know. I won't stop you."

Dover gripped her chin, forcing her to look at him. The gold streaking through his gray eyes captivated her. But when he lowered his mouth to hers, kissing her, she couldn't remember if there was more she wanted to say to him or not. His kiss was hot, demanding and dominating. He entered her, devouring her mouth as his fingers snaked around her neck and then tangled in her hair.

When he tugged on her hair, the pinch at her scalp sent shivers rushing over her flesh. It was a damn good thing he held on to her because her world teetered, her legs suddenly wobbly. Lana's fingers touched his chest and roped muscle twitched. As easily as he overpowered her, he wasn't unaffected by what he was doing to her. Knowing she had the power to ruffle his feathers gave her the strength to take control of the kiss.

Yet her mind was in turmoil. She hated this. Lana always thought of herself as a mature young female. She wasn't flighty. She didn't fluff her feathers for any male when he started smelling horny. She kept a level head in all matters of her life. What the hell was it about Dover that turned her sensible sense of smell into some kind of insane hodgepodge?

Lana managed to turn her head, gasping for air while his fingers stroked her scalp.

"Lana," Dover growled, his face next to hers, his eyes aflame with raw, unleashed lust.

"What?" she whispered, her voice too rough for her own liking.

"I've never been trapped into anything in my life."

Lana yanked free of him, staggering backward before she regained her footing. "And you aren't trapped now," she told him, proud of herself for not yelling. Her emotions were simmering to the top of her sense of control. Turning from him before he would see the tears burning her eyes, she hurried down the street, determined not to run or look back.

Chapter Ten

"Damn it." Dover watched Lana's tight, perfect ass sway as she stormed away from him.

He didn't climb onto his bike until she'd disappeared around the corner. As much as flying after Lana appealed to him, he would give her time to cool her feathers before discussing this situation with her. Dover wasn't one to dwell on the age-old traditions that owls used to fly by religiously. Nonetheless, a simple fact now existed. He'd made a verbal pact to fly after her and he'd never spoken a word he couldn't stand by.

He wouldn't deny the twisting in his gut when he watched the satisfied expression cross Beel's face as Dover stated he'd fly after Lana. A few beers later it still hadn't sunk in as deeply as he thought it should that he'd just given up his single status. Never again would he fly after another female. He would only fly for Lana. No one would ever have been able to make him believe he'd agree to such terms. Especially with a female he'd only known a few days.

There weren't many times in his life he'd regretted not having a nest to turn to. His parents were gone and had been for years. He was the only owl in his nest and that was just fine. Dover didn't question why he'd flown solo for most his life. He was good at seeing a situation clearly, although now that it was his situation, he found himself hesitating.

If this were another owl's problem, they would come to him, present their issues, and he would analyze and advise. It was what he did, how he'd always been. Dover knew he got along so well with leopards because they were so hot-headed and sometimes needed a calm, logical outlook at things. All the hunters sought him out to investigate problems. He was good at what he did and not once had he entered a situation he hadn't been able to resolve.

It was absolutely insane, not to mention illogical, to pretend he was someone else coming to him for advice. Dover exhaled, realizing he'd been sitting on his bike, staring at nothing. He glanced up and down the street, Lana was gone. He hadn't followed her, although finding her wouldn't be a problem. At the opposite end of the street three male owls reached the side street. One of them looked over his shoulder, making eye contact with Dover. The male looked away quickly as if he were checking to see if Dover were watching them.

He started his bike, reminding himself why he'd come to Banff. Dover gave his word to fly around the town and learn what the different species were about. Since arriving, he'd given his word again, to fly after Lana. The two promises weren't in conflict with each other, but one might need more attention at the moment. If there

were problems stirring, he didn't have a problem ruffling a few feathers to learn what it was about.

Dover wouldn't deny that following the males to see if they were up to no good was the easy way out. Flying after Lana meant confronting emotions he wasn't ready to let surface. Her feelings were simmering so close to out of control and he wasn't good at dealing with mental breakdowns. Admitting his weaknesses left a foul taste in his mouth. Learning others' problems and exposing those who weren't flying right was a hell of a lot easier than chasing one hot little owl who got under his feathers faster than any female had ever done before.

Dover pulled out of the parking stall and headed the direction the males had gone. By the time he reached the corner and turned, they were no longer in sight. He drove past several intersections without spotting them anywhere. Nor did he see Lana. The three owls either entered an establishment or changed into their feathers and took flight. After driving a few more blocks and realizing he was searching for Lana more so than the three males, he headed back to his motel. He could spend all day driving up and down the streets of Banff and learn a lot less than if he changed into his feathers and took flight.

In spite of being curious about the males and knowing it would be a good idea to fly over Banff as well as into the mountains to see what he could find, Lana wouldn't stay out of his thoughts. It wouldn't hurt to call her, find out where she went. Dover entered his motel room, letting the door close behind him, and pulled off his shirt then dropped his cell phone on top of it on his bed. Then stripping out of his boots and jeans, he dropped the pants on top of his phone.

It wasn't a copout not calling Lana. Just because he wasn't talking to her right now didn't mean he was dishonoring his agreement with her brother. The small window in the bathroom was the perfect entrance and exit in his feathers. Changing, though, proved more intense than usual, proof his feelings weren't tucked away as neatly as they should be.

A sinking feeling hit his stomach harder than usual, making him nauseous as he shrunk in size. His skin prickled, his pores stretching as his feathers sprouted. Dover focused on his breathing, all too aware that fighting the sensations rippling through him would make the change more painful. When his fingers no longer moved on their own but instead became the extension of his wings, Dover raised his arms, feeling the air flow through his feathers.

He breathed in the smell of the mold in the caulking alongside the tub. Tiny dust mites floated in the air, distracting him only for a moment as his senses intensified with the change. He heard the sound of water running through pipes in the motel walls and someone talking on a phone several rooms down. Dover leapt to the edge of the sink and then to the window ledge. Nothing sounded or smelled out of ordinary, but then there weren't many staying in the motel right now. He hadn't expected anything to be out of sorts here.

After making sure no humans were in view, Dover took flight, leaving the bathroom window and soaring over the motel. He stretched his wings, embracing the cold wind as it speared through his quills and the plumage surrounding them. Gliding silently, Dover let the air carry him, taking a moment to simply enjoy the freedom of flight. In this state it was easier to let go of any baggage he created while in his human form. Once he cleared his head, all problems fell into logical patterns and their solutions became more obvious. Right now was no exception. He smelled a conspiracy and would learn where it came from. As soon as he had that figured out, he would take time to learn more about Lana. If she was meant to be his mate he would claim her and the rest would fall into place.

He reached the mountains and found himself flying over the Lockham litter. Another hawk owl was perched in the trees about half a mile from Dover. He landed, using a thick clump of trees at the edge of what appeared to be the Lockhams' property line as a shield. Keeping a low profile while he learned what the other owl was about would be to his advantage.

A great horned owl appeared against the grayish white sky, gliding with its massive wingspan until it reached the trees near where the hawk owl perched. Dover watched the horned owl land in a nearby tree. Taking his time, he searched every branch near the two owls and found what he suspected, several other owls. A fucking parliament perched on leopard land, just as Kane Masters said. Now all Dover needed to learn was who they were, and what the hell they were doing there.

* * * * *

The pounding in her head wouldn't stop. Lana rolled to her side, blinking her surroundings into focus as the steady thudding continued. Someone was at her door and, from the sound of it, they would take it down if she didn't answer. Anything to make them quit pounding.

"I'm coming," she muttered, traipsing barefoot through her dark apartment.

Lana unlocked the padlock at the same time as Beel pushed her door open.

"Are you okay?" he demanded, entering her apartment and searching the darkness before turning and giving her an appraising once-over.

"I was until you started pounding." She rubbed her forehead and then dragged her fingers through her hair. It was really tangled. "What time is it?"

"After midnight. How long have you been asleep?" He continued studying her as if he were trying to figure something out.

"I don't know. Ever since I got home." Then it all came back to her. The fog from her deep sleep lifted and Lana remembered pushing away from Dover after he damn near kissed her senseless. She'd taken off down the street and he hadn't followed her. "Tell me what you and Dover said to each other."

"He didn't tell you?" Beel followed her into her small kitchen and leaned against her refrigerator as she started coffee.

"I'd like to hear it from you." Her brain cleared more as she poured water into her coffeemaker and then dumped grounds into the basket to brew. "And I'd really like to know what was in your head when you so gracefully gave away my freedom."

"I gave you what you wanted." Beel's expression was serious when she searched his face. His silver blond hair was tousled around his face and his brooding expression was as serious as it always was. "As for our conversation, I wanted to know his mind and which direction he planned to fly. He was very clear on each matter addressed."

"What does that mean?"

"It means he didn't hesitate in stating he would fly after you."

"And suddenly that doesn't bother you?"

"Many males have ruffled their feathers for you and not once have you shown any interest. You're twenty-three, Lana, and deserve a good nest. Don't tell me you aren't happy when you're with him. I can smell what he does for you."

"That has nothing to do with anything." She had a hard time believing Beel went out of his way to line her up with a male simply to make her happy. He'd peck the eyes out of any male who flew too close to her. "You trapped him and I want to know why."

"Did he tell you I trapped him?"

She searched her memory for Dover's exact words. But then Dover would never confess to another male taking him down. In the few days she'd known him she knew that much about him.

"He said he wouldn't dishonor me."

"We'll see to it that he doesn't."

"What's that mean?" Lana pulled down a clean coffee cup and poured coffee.

Beel held his hand up, declining a cup when she offered it. "Where is he now?"

Lana pointed toward her room. "I was asleep, remember?" She glared at him. "Alone. I have no idea where Dover is." And she wouldn't let it show that she cared.

"I admit, I thought he flew with more honor. Heath argued otherwise but I was sure I made the best move by insisting he declare his intention." Beel ran his fingers through his hair as he headed back into her living room. "When an owl declares he'll fly after a female that is what he should do. Not fly in the other direction."

"Do you know where he is?" Lana didn't understand. None of her brothers ever wanted a male hanging around with her. Now Beel seemed upset that Dover wasn't.

"Nope." He headed to her door. "But we're going to announce our disappointment that he isn't with you after stating he would be."

"Beel," Lana called out, but he closed the door behind her. "You aren't making any sense," she complained, but she was talking to herself.

She sipped her coffee while musing over her brother's odd behavior. Then pausing in the middle of the room, Lana tilted her head, listening to the sounds outside her apartment.

"What's going on?" she asked the dark room, heading back to her door and pulling it open then stepping into the hall.

"I'm going," Uncle Otis insisted.

"If you are, I'm flying too." Uncle Reece hurried past her, ignoring her and catching up with Uncle Otis.

Beel appeared from the stairwell, his determined gait stopping both her uncles. "I need both of you to stay here and keep an eye on the nests."

"Don't feed me that crap. We're not too old to fight," Uncle Otis snapped.

"We're just going to observe." Beel looked past her uncles to Lana. "Stay here."

"What's going on?" Lana moved in between her uncles, breathing in a bit of anger coming off her brother. "Beel, what is it?" she asked quietly.

"I'm not sure yet." He started back to the stairs.

Lana followed him, not liking the tension she picked up off him. "Beel, tell me. Is Dover involved?"

He spun around, and for a moment the unleashed outrage lined his expression. Lana had never seen him so pissed.

"If that fucking owl had any honor at all he would have flown after you and left well enough alone. Now stay here. That is an order!" He grabbed the door to the stairwell hard enough it banged against the wall before he stormed up the flight of stairs.

He was heading to the roof. And there was no way Lana would sit in her nest and wait to hear whatever report her brothers decided to share with her once they returned. Racing past her uncles, who were still arguing in the hallway over who fought the better fight in their youth, Lana hurried into her apartment and found her phone.

"Damn it," she hissed when Dover's phone went to voice mail. "Where are you?" she whispered.

Dropping her phone on her coffee table, she again left her apartment and headed to her roof. She was stopped at the door leading out to the flat surface where they changed and took to flight by her brother.

Heath looked as mad as Beel did. "You aren't going anywhere," he informed her, taking her by the arm when she tried walking into the night air.

"I want to know what's going on. You're going to tell me right now or I'm just going to wait until you leave and then fly out alone."

"Like hell you are." His grip tightened on her arm when he dragged her back into the stairwell. "There's been an attack."

"A what?" She almost stumbled on the stairs and slapped her hand against Heath's chest when he held her up to keep her balance. "What do you mean? Who?"

"North of Banff. The leopards attacked the owls. And from what I can smell at the moment, your Dover is a god-damn traitor for turning tail on his own kind and alerting the leopards to attack."

"What?" she hissed, shaking her head. "Dover would never do that."

"Sounds like you didn't sniff him out well enough, Lana." Heath's expression was hard, his anger clouding his gray eyes as he glared down at her. "Beel thought he could get Dover to fly to you and leave matters alone, but apparently his honor isn't any stronger than his loyalty to his own kind."

"Beel pushed him into agreeing to fly after me just so he would leave you and your parliament alone?" she asked, her heart constricting painfully in her chest. Suddenly she couldn't breathe.

"We're taking care of our own," Heath stated, his words so harsh it seemed to get colder in the small stairwell. "There are enough nests in Banff now that the only way to maintain order and peace is to keep all the litters and dens at bay. Leopards and werewolves will run us off if we don't ensure they understand who is in charge here."

"So you intentionally created tension between the species." Lana yanked her arm free of her brother's grip. "I don't know you anymore, Heath. Owls don't start fights."

"You're right. We don't." He straightened, staring down at her with her father's eyes. At least, once she would have called them that. Right now they were hard, cold, and so determined they scared her. "But we will protect our territory and with so many leopards rearing litters in the area, measures needed to be taken."

"What measures?"

Heath shook his head. "What matters right now is there has been an attack. I need to make sure none of our own are hurt. And I need you to stay here to help assist if there are injured."

He pointed his finger at her, heading through the door to the roof. "Remember this is your nest, Lana. We're the owls who truly care about you."

Her heart was swollen in her throat, making it impossible to answer. Beel coerced Dover into agreeing to fly after her. It was a promise she didn't doubt Dover would take very seriously. But the promise was only demanded to keep Dover out of their way. But out of their way from what?

Lana hurried back down the stairs, needing time to think. She needed answers too. Dover wouldn't fly after her if he smelled something wrong. His honor was that strong. Apparently her brothers were so clouded in their determination to create a strong parliament they didn't see what she so obviously saw and smelled. If there was trouble, Dover would fly to the source of it just as quickly as her brothers would. Which was what all of them had done, leaving her here alone.

She entered the second floor, heading to her apartment, and paused when one of her cousins kissed his mate goodbye and then headed to the stairs. All mated owls would separate tonight and then return, proud to fight for their kind. Lana made eye contact with her cousin as she stood in the doorway, offering Lana a small smile before disappearing back into her apartment. Her mate would come home with adrenaline and testosterone pumping through his veins. One look on her cousin's face said she already knew that and probably would go bathe and pretty herself up in anticipation of his return.

Lana wondered if she could ever be that kind of mate. Already her skin itched with the intense urge to change and fly after the trouble. She had to know what was going on. She had to see and smell for herself the source of the trouble. But more than anything, she needed to know for herself that Dover flew straight.

"He does," she whispered under her breath, unable to believe otherwise.

It didn't make sense though. There were serious pieces of logic missing to this puzzle. Heath and Beel were some of the most honorable males she'd ever known. All of her brothers were. They were good males. Anyone would agree to that. Yet they believed Dover was part of an attack. They believed he'd turned tail feathers and was a traitor.

And they'd committed him to fly after her.

"I hate messes." Lana realized she'd been pacing her living room floor in the dark, trying her damndest to figure out the situation without knowing everything.

There was only one way to learn the truth. She grabbed her phone, pushing the button to call Dover again. It didn't surprise her that it went to voice mail but she had to try. That left only one other option. She'd never sworn to stay here at the parliament.

Lana paced some more, hating the minutes that dragged by. She listened as well as she could with her human ears, waiting until the hallway appeared silent and the commotion had settled down. Her uncles would be pacing their living rooms, driving their mates nuts until the others returned. All the mated females would focus on putting their fledglings in their nests for the night and then hurry to prepare themselves for the return of their mates. They would all be busy and none of them would think of her. Which was perfectly fine.

She would leave her phone here but head to the roof dressed. Years ago there were lockers built on the roof, specifically designed to place their clothes and other belongings in and keep them out of the weather when they took flight. Lana slipped out of her shoes and glanced down at the jeans and shirt she wore. She would change on the roof and then fly to the motel where she'd heard Dover was staying. If his motorcycle was there it would mean he was there or in his feathers. Something told her if he were there he would answer his phone. She also knew if he smelled trouble he would be in the middle of it, just like her brothers.

Her stomach twisted in knots and her heart pounded too hard for her human body to handle as she reached for her door. When she opened it, she breathed in the

incredibly strong scent of Dover. Her heart stopped beating in her chest when she stared into his dark gray eyes.

"What? What are you doing here?" she asked, filling her lungs with his rich, compelling scent.

"When a male swears to fly after a female that also means protecting her. I came here to make sure you were all right." He stepped into her apartment, forcing her to step backward. "Where were you going?" he asked, glancing down and probably taking in her bare feet.

"Dover, there is something you need to know."

"And what might that be?" He pushed his way into her apartment, letting the door close behind him.

"You've been tricked," she began.

"Is that so?" Dover lifted her, putting his warm, strong hands under her arms and pressing her against the wall, pinning her with his body and kissing her.

He smelled of the outdoors, of the cold night air, and of all the testosterone and adrenaline she'd envied in her cousins' mates. When she smelled his lust, and all of that hard, packed muscle pressed against her body, Lana wasn't sure she had what it took to tell him how her brother deceived him.

Dover's mouth moved over hers and he nipped at her lip with his teeth. She opened to him and he filled her, moving his tongue in a seductive dance around hers. He moved his hands to her shoulders and Lana realized she'd wrapped her legs around his hips. As she held on, he feasted on her, filling her senses with all of that raw, untamed male lust.

His kisses were hot, demanding, and carried a promise of satisfaction as he created a burning heat inside her she ached for him to extinguish. His touch seared her skin when his hands moved down her arms and then up to her neck, tangling in her hair. With a quick yank he pulled the ponytail holder out of her hair, causing her strands to brush over her shoulders and tickle her flesh.

It was too much. He nipped her lip and she cried out, the need to have him inside her, for him to fill her and fuck her until the dam holding her desire crashed and released the unbearable pressure building in her womb. There were things that needed said, a craving to understand his mind. But one thing was very clear. As she sucked in her next breath, she tasted the ravenous need that had to torture Dover as much as it did her.

"Dover," she whispered, her voice rough and raspy. "If you don't stop now..."

"I'm not going to stop." He let her slide down the wall but then grabbed her jeans at her waist as her feet fell to the floor. "You want this as badly as I do."

"Yes," she managed before he unbuttoned her jeans and then unzipped them.

It was all she could do not to tear his clothes from his body when he undressed her. She couldn't say where all their things went. They were tossed around the living room

in a frenzy that matched the searing lust burning inside both of them. The moment Dover had her naked he turned her, almost tossing her on her couch. And he was behind her just as quickly.

Lana straightened her arms, pressing her hands into her couch cushions as she knelt and tried bringing her other leg up to crawl and give Dover room. He gripped her hips though, holding her in place, so one of her feet remained on the ground.

"Just like that, my perfect little owl." His voice was husky, deep and with a drawl sensual enough to make her heart beat faster. "I swear I've never seen a better view in my life," he added.

Lana felt incredibly exposed with her ass in the air and Dover gripping her hips, holding her in place as his thumbs trailed down the swell of her rear. At the same time her pussy swelled, need throbbing through her at a dangerous speed. There were fallacies to her actions, making all of this rather illogical. Dover didn't seem to mind seeing the act through. She noticed how thick and hard his cock was before she was bent over the couch. Whatever coursed through both their veins, she would analyze it later. Right now, more than anything, she needed him inside her.

"The hell with the view, owl. Fuck me," she demanded, tossing her hair over her shoulder and then straining to see him.

His silver blond hair was pulled taut behind his head, but a few strands were loose. Possibly her doing. She itched to change positions just so she could pull his hair free as he did hers. In the darkness, his bare chest was accented by shadows where muscles bulged and rippled. The dusting of hair across it added to his intense sex appeal. But more than his physical looks, the way he met her gaze, staring deep into her eyes as the two of them held their position for a moment, showed her insight into the powerful, dominating male who'd entered her world and changed everything with such quick, fluid actions.

"Just because I'm doing what you demand right now, don't think for a minute you can squawk and I'll submit," he growled, barely moving his mouth.

"God forbid we bruise that delicate male ego." She fought to keep from smiling when all she wanted was for him to shut up and enter her.

"Delicate, my ass," he sneered.

Dover moved quickly, positioning himself perfectly so he glided deep inside her, stretching and filling her pussy with one solid thrust.

"Yes," she cried out, dropping her head. Her hair fell around her face, shrouding her and hiding the world. "Oh crap!" she hissed, biting her lip when he filled her.

For the slightest moment he stilled and she felt him throbbing against her soaked pussy walls. Dover wasn't a small male. Nothing about him was delicate. If put to the test, she would bet even his ego could handle a harsh blow and he wouldn't buckle from it.

"You are so hot, so tight," he whispered over her, his fingers pressing into her flesh when he started moving.

It didn't take him long to build momentum. Lana pressed her hands into the couch, closing her eyes and enjoying the hell out of all the sensations that ripped through her. The friction burned between them, the heat tearing her apart inside and causing the pressure behind her dam of lust to build until she swore it would kill her.

Dover was relentless, not stopping or slowing as he impaled her repeatedly, giving her everything she needed and wanted and offering more. The pressure exploded inside her, making her come so hard the room spun around her. The damn couch could have floated off the floor for all she knew and she'd be oblivious to it. Lana breathed in the thick scent of their lovemaking and grew drunk off it.

Wanting more, needing everything he could possibly offer her, she collapsed on the couch, twisting underneath him. Dover slipped out of her, growling his protest and reaching for her as she grabbed him.

"What are you doing, little owl?" he asked when she spread her legs.

"I want to watch you." She wrapped her legs around his waist, drawing him to her once again. When she reached between them and gripped his shaft, her come soaked her hand and made him feel glossy and smooth. "I want to know you," she added before she could think through what meaning he might give to her words.

Even in the dark room she saw gold streaks flash through his gray eyes. Dover lowered his face to hers and brushed his lips over hers, keeping his eyes open. "Put me inside you," he instructed, instead of commenting on what she just said.

Silently she thanked him. Lana wanted the physical, the release he so easily offered her, and the satisfaction that would come after he fucked her thoroughly. There was so much to understand between the two of them. Things that needed to be thought through. It would be best to do that with a clear head and not while she was high off the thick aroma of their sensual lovemaking.

Lana's hand was soaked when she pressed the thick, swollen tip of his cock against her entrance. She managed to get her hand out of the way just in time when Dover thrust, driving deep inside her as if being out of her had caused him serious harm. The intensity of his expression, the way his lips pressed together in a thin line and his dark features appeared almost ominous got her so fucking hot the pressure built inside her so damn fast it stole her breath.

He locked his arms, keeping them straight on either side of her, and held his torso above hers while riding her hard and fast.

"God yes. I love it. Don't stop. Whatever you do, don't stop." Lana dropped her gaze to his muscular chest, running her hands up his arms and then over his shoulders.

"How much can you take, my little owl?" he asked, tilting his head while his foreboding gaze sent chills over her burning flesh.

"All of it. Don't stop." Her insides quickened, a flutter in her heart telling her he would push her further than she'd gone before. The unknown didn't scare her, but apprehension built along with the pressure of her next orgasm.

"I want all of you." He leaned forward, kissing her gently, which was in contrast to the hard thrusts that took her over the edge as he spoke.

"Dover," she cried, hating how it sounded as if she begged.

He fucked her better than she'd ever had it before, not that she had worlds of experience prior to meeting him. Lana knew good sex though. And this pushed the borders of better than excellent.

"It's my turn," he hissed, clenching his teeth when she'd barely caught her breath from her third, or was it fourth, orgasm. She'd lost count. And she didn't care when he started swelling inside her, slowing his pace for the first time since they began. "I'm going to fill you with my come, sweet little owl."

"Okay," she whispered, her voice hoarse as if she'd been squawking for hours. God help her, she hadn't cried out that much, had she?

Dover filled her one more time and then a slow, rumbling growl started from deep inside him. His hot semen soaked her insides, feeling better than she ever imagined it would. He coated her, soothing the burning in spite of how hot it felt. And as he slowly relaxed, still very hard and thick inside her, he moved an arm under her neck and then pulled her up against him.

Lana was surprised how limp she suddenly felt. He damn near folded her in half as he embraced her in his arms with her legs still wrapped around his waist. It was a wonderfully comfortable position though. If she could float in her flesh she would have. His heart beat solidly against her breasts and his warm breath tickled her neck.

"Next time, my little owl, I'm going to fuck all of you."

Lana laughed, feeling so sated the world could have disappeared around them and she wouldn't have noticed. "How much more of me do you think there is?"

The sound he made was a mixture between a hum and a growl. He moved his free hand down her spine, causing her to shiver. When he cupped her ass, his cock twitched inside her.

"I want to fuck your ass," he told her.

Chapter Eleven

"What?" Lana's eyes were wide circles, so soft and gray. The cloud that suddenly passed over them showed her apprehension when he told her what he wanted.

Dover kissed her nose, lifting her farther into his arms. He eased himself out of her, hating to do so but knowing they didn't have hours to enjoy each other. Soon though, he would arrange for more time with her, time he would know didn't risk interruption.

"When you're ready, I'll show you how wonderful anal sex can be."

"This is something you like?" She looked skeptical. But she also looked completely sated and no longer worried and frantic to race out of her apartment and enter into the madness outside.

"Yes." There wasn't any reason to hedge around the answer. Nothing felt better than the intense heat of a hot, tight ass after drowning in a soaked pussy. And something told him taking Lana in such an intimate, personal way would be an action that would bond them together much more than any verbal commitment could ever do. "And you'll love it too."

"Why do you say that?" She'd stiffened in his arms.

Dover adjusted her so she sat sideways on his lap, her soft ass torture against his still slightly hard cock. He could too easily enter and fuck her again. There were matters between them to discuss as well as a battle waging outside that he'd successfully distracted her from, for now.

"Because you love fucking. There are nerve endings around your ass that are incredibly sensitive. I promise when I take you like that you will come harder than you've ever come in your life."

Her gaze shot to his when his cock twitched against her ass. Her flesh was so soft and so warm and she felt damn good in his arms. But her gaze was wary. He wouldn't push her into anything until he knew she was ready.

"We'll see," she said, lowering her gaze as the smell of her emotions faded. She was damn good at concealing them, better than most at her age.

"Where were you going when I got here?" he asked, intentionally changing the subject when she slid off him and found her clothes.

Lana gave him a furtive look, not answering right away but instead bending down and picking up her jeans. She was slim, her tummy flat and her legs long and muscular. Her long hair fanned over her shoulder, blocking his view of her ripe, full breasts. But she faced him when she dressed, showing off how hard her nipples were.

"My brothers took flight shortly before you showed up. They were pretty pissed," she said, searching his face as she spoke.

She wanted him to offer what information he knew. In spite of his need to create a bond of trust between them, there were still quite a few unanswered questions. After learning Lana's brother was one of the owls scoping out the leopard land north of town, he'd headed back to confront Heath. Maybe the male didn't approve of Beel demanding Dover commit to flying after Lana, but nonetheless, the commitment had been made. That meant Dover would honor not only her but her entire nest. After he spoke to Heath, he planned on sniffing out Kane Masters. But Heath cut those plans short.

Dover barely made it into town when he spotted Heath and Beel outside the apartment building, talking to some other owls. They were so involved in their discussion they didn't notice him, although in their human form he was hard to spot perched in a tree at the end of the block. Dover heard what they said though. And it had distracted him all the way to his motel room where he'd changed before coming to Lana.

"Did they tell you why they were pissed?"

"Actually, yes." She sat at the edge of the couch and handed his jeans to him. "Dover, are you taking information from the owls to the leopards?"

Lana might as well have taken a knife and stabbed it deep into his gut. He felt the pain of her words rip through him as if she plucked him, feather by feather, torturing him by showing how little she honored him. They were so far away from mutual trust he wasn't sure at that moment if they'd ever accomplish it.

Dover took his clothes and stood, dressing quietly while fighting for words that wouldn't cut her as deeply as she just cut him. In spite of how terribly she'd just dishonored him, he wouldn't treat her the same. He just wasn't raised to fly that way.

Lana sighed, remaining on the corner of her couch. She pressed her long, thin legs together and pressed her hands in fists against them. "I wish I could arrange for you and my brothers to be in a room at the same time. When I'm with you I smell your honor, how strong and aggressive you are, and have a hard time believing you would ever do anything to disrespect how you fly."

"You're going to have to learn how to trust what you smell." He pulled his shirt over his head and tucked it into his jeans then sat to put on his boots. "Until then, I doubt we can fly together."

"Dover," she whispered, the smell of her sadness suddenly so strong it choked him.

He met her gaze head-on, staring deep into those sensual gray eyes and then watching when she slowly licked her lips. Her actions weren't to seduce. It was one of many attributes he really enjoyed about this sweet little owl who studied him right now. Lana didn't manipulate a situation. And she so easily could with that sexy body of hers. Her sincerity smelled as strong as her confusion and sadness when she continued watching him.

"If I didn't trust what I smelled, I wouldn't fuck you," she said, her voice as soft as her feathers.

"Then why would you ask me such a question?"

"Why would you hesitate in answering?"

"The only information I've shared with any leopard since arriving here is my attraction to you."

Lana blinked. It added to her sensuality when long, thick lashes fluttered over her large eyes.

"Who did you share that information with?"

"Darla." He'd told her the day after he met Lana, since Darla smelled her on Dover and questioned him. "She was happy for me," he added, which wasn't a lie since Darla told him as much. Her aroma had turned a bit sour, her jealousy apparent, but Darla would have every single male leopard in the country to choose from. Dover didn't doubt for a moment one of them would make her very happy.

"You told the female you came into town with about me?" she asked.

"Is that a problem?"

"No." Lana turned from him, her sadness fading, and once again the rich smell of lingering sex dominating all scents in her living room. She walked to the kitchen doorway and paused, leaning against it when she turned and faced him. Lana hadn't tucked in her sweater but the knitted material still stretched over her large breasts, offering one hell of a view as she appeared to be deciding something as she studied him. "Why did you come over here?" she asked.

Lana saw the need for communication between them. Dover straightened, crossing his arms against his chest while holding his position. Her question asking what he'd shared with the leopards still stabbed deep, but he admitted it was a blow to his pride. As much as he wanted Lana to see how honorable he was, and that his flaws were minimal, he'd credit her with intelligence. He wouldn't judge an owl completely on his or her scent, although how they smelled definitely said a lot about them. It was only fair he allow Lana the same when it came to learning exactly how he flew.

"It was the right thing to do. After seeing what I did, and then hearing enough to show me the accuracy of the picture, I needed to know you stayed out of the situation."

"What?" She shook her head, pushing away from the doorframe and walking toward him. "What situation? Don't talk around the subject, Dover," she demanded, stopping in the middle of the room and fisting her hands against her hips. "I wake up to everyone having their feathers bent out of shape. First Beel comes to check on me and then my uncles are upset in the hallway because they want to fight too. I made it to the roof but Heath was so pissed he almost yelled."

"Why was he mad?"

"There was an attack," she began, but then looked away from him, taking a minute to stare around her quiet, dark apartment. "I wouldn't be surprised if you know more of the details than I do," she continued, still not meeting his gaze. When she looked down at her fingers, studying them as she twisted them together, her scent changed. Suddenly it was muskier, more intense and alluring, as if whatever thoughts plagued her mind, they tortured her senses with thoughts regarding him.

Dover straightened, keeping his arms crossed over his chest and watched her. Long strands of silky, silver blonde strands drifted over the smooth curve of her shoulder. She pressed her lips together, appearing almost to pout while continuing to ponder whatever it was that moved her as it did. A prickly sensation stabbed at his flesh while an urge to calm Lana, soothe whatever troubled her thoughts, hit him harder than her comment about talking to the leopards did. This time it wasn't a stab to his pride, but to his basic need to dominate and protect what his most-basic instinct insisted was his. Dover held his ground, waiting out the silence until she spoke.

"There's something you have a right to know." Lana raised her attention to him and straightened, pushing her hair over her shoulder and then dropping her arms to her side. "Beel had an ulterior motive when he pushed you into agreeing to fly after me."

Dover wouldn't exactly say he was pushed into saying he would fly after her, but he waited for her to finish before commenting.

Lana wrinkled her brow for a moment before her facial features returned to being relaxed. When she scowled at him, it appeared she wanted him to say something, although there wasn't anything to say until he knew what was on her mind.

"My brothers believed you would focus more on me and not on matters at hand if you were cornered into an agreement that would weigh heavily on your honor." Lana didn't blink and didn't look away when she spoke to him, offering the information as calmly as if she were giving directions on how he should fly.

"Interesting," he mused, immediately curious as to what stage of events they wished him to leave alone. "And did their plan work?"

"Apparently not," she said, and then let out a deep sigh before leaving the room.

Dover meant to remain firm, not touching or pursuing Lana until she'd spoken her mind and shown him her thoughts. He followed her into her kitchen before giving thought to the fact that he'd moved. Light glowed from the refrigerator. Lana's jeans hugged her slender waist and showed off the curve of her hips and ass when she bent and reached for a beer.

"I don't drink that often," she offered. "I've had these in my refrigerator for a while. Would you like one?"

He didn't drink too much either. It wasn't something that crossed his mind to do. "Sure," he agreed, sensing she craved something to soothe the rampant thoughts she was sorting through and would be more comfortable if he indulged with her.

"Have you sniffed out all the damage my nest has done?" she asked, handing him the cold, unopened bottle of beer.

Moisture dripped from the bottle down his fingers when he twisted off the cap. Then handing the opened bottle to Lana, he took her unopened beer and opened it.

"There was no damage until tonight," he told her, needing to know what Lana had learned. It occurred to him what plagued Lana wasn't her feelings for him but her need to digest the fact her nest had involvement in the tension growing between species. "It

would be easier if you shared what you've learned. If there is something you don't understand, possibly I can offer some insight."

"You better have a lot of insight then," she said. "Because nothing I've learned makes a damn bit of sense."

Lana rested her hand on the top of her refrigerator door. Dover stepped closer, pushing it closed and enveloping the two of them in her dark kitchen. The faint smells of coffee and fried meat, a mixture of bacon and chicken, were barely detectable against her powerful aroma that wrapped around him when he moved in on her.

"Leopards retaliated and attacked a group of owls who'd been loitering on a litter's property. The situation escalated quickly, which would be expected with all the tension that has built between species." He ran his fingers into her hair, stroking it away from her face as he tilted her head and cupped it with his hand. "The attack occurred when I'd flown into town to sniff out Heath. I planned to share with him what I'd learned and hear what he had to say."

"What had you learned?"

"That one of the owls sitting in the trees on the Lockhams' property was Rock Halk." He watched her tongue dart over her lips, moistening them. "Once I learned why they were watching the leopards, I would act accordingly on the information."

"I can't tell you why," she whispered.

She tried pulling away from him. Lana wasn't lying but there was information she knew about her nest she wasn't sharing. Dover didn't hold this against her. Lana's loyalty to her litter was as strong as her craving for honor. Yet another quality in her that made her inner beauty glow and matched her physical sexual appeal.

"I know," he said, leaning forward and brushing his mouth over hers.

It took quite a bit of strength to not devour her. There wasn't a lot of time left though. He'd already been here long enough for the battle to play out and sides to establish. When he'd come to Lana, he reminded himself this wasn't his fight. Siding with the owls and attacking the leopards wouldn't be honorable. He didn't have grief with either species here. But he had made a commitment to fly with Lana, which justified him flying to her and protecting her during the attacks.

When he pulled away from her, tasting her on his lips, Lana's lashes fluttered over her pretty eyes. Gold lined the gray in her irises, highlighting her eyes and making them appear larger. God, she was hot as fucking hell.

"There's something you have a right to know," he told her, watching her focus on him and the gold fade in her eyes.

"What's that?" she asked.

Something buzzed in the other room and Lana shot her attention that way.

"Your phone?" he asked, leading the way into her living room.

"Yes." Lana picked up a cell phone that was on her coffee table and stared at the glowing screen. "It's my brother."

"Which one?"

She swallowed some of her beer as the phone continued buzzing in her hand. He wouldn't have her ignoring the call because he was here. That would bring her brothers flying in faster than they'd flown out to fight. He was ready to tell her as much when she put the bottle on her coffee table and answered the phone.

"Hello," she said, staring at the ground.

It wasn't hard to hear the male voice at the other end of the line.

"Tell me you're at your nest," the voice boomed through the small phone Lana held to her ear.

"I'm here," she offered, her soft, sensual tone relaxed and very convincing that she didn't have any worries. Once again Lana displayed her abilities to conceal her emotions. It was a quality highly valued among owls and further proof not only that Lana possessed attributes above and beyond being sexy as hell, which would make any owl eager to chase her tail feathers, but that she came from a nest of honor.

"Interesting," her brother said. "I admit I believed you would fly out of there the second I left."

"I almost did," she offered.

Apparently her brother, and Dover guessed she spoke with Heath, was distracted enough with his current events not to question what or who stopped her.

He continued with his reason for calling, letting Lana off the hook so she didn't have to tell him she had company. Lana picked up her beer and walked around her coffee table to the couch, listening as her brother spoke. When she sat, Dover joined her, sitting next to her, which made it easy to continue following the conversation.

"The attack was bad, Lana," her brother said, his voice deepening with the seriousness of his words. "We lost an owl tonight."

"Who?" she demanded.

"Timmy Straffer," he said.

"Oh God. No. Does Frances know?"

"I haven't called her yet. I believe her brother was out there and I'm sure he flew to her immediately after the leopards retreated."

"The leopards retreated? Timmy died an honorable death."

Dover remembered the young couple at the bar when Beel demanded to know which way Dover would fly. Telling Lana he would have agreed to fly after her even if Beel hadn't had ulterior motives would help her find the logic in his actions. And he'd meant to tell her right before her phone rang. But that information seemed less relevant now than learning the details behind the attack. He would contact Kane Masters once he knew Lana was safe and how her nest was doing.

"It will be announced that he did," her brother said. "I've just received confirmation two leopards died as well. And I know there were several Cariboo lunewulfs at the

attack as well. I saw and smelled them myself and will seek out their pack leader once everyone's feathers are in place."

"Heath, why was there an attack?" Lana asked, adjusting the phone between her shoulder and ear and taking her beer in both hands, running her fingernail along the edge of the moist label wrapped around the glass.

"Politics are never black and white. I wish I could give you a simple answer."

"And I wish you'd quit talking to me as if I were a fledgling." Lana remained calm, her tone as serene as it would probably be had the conversation been about something pleasant.

Dover studied her profile, itching to run his hand down the back of her head, stroke her silky hair. It was the same color as her feathers, an incredible shade of blonde and silver that added to her regal, classy air.

"I gave you the explanation earlier, Lana. Your words now show me how you wish to see the clarity in a situation that simply isn't that way."

"You are trying to chase out the leopards who have settled in and around Banff in the past years." Her tone turned dry and her sensual aroma took on a stronger, almost spicy scent.

Dover didn't blame her a bit for being pissed at the ugly truth of the matter. Heath and her other brothers intentionally created tension in Banff in order to tame leopards and werewolves so they would adhere to the parliament of owls who wished to control this land.

"And I understand now why you've kept this information from me. I don't approve of your actions, Heath. I don't mind telling you as much."

"If it were that simple, I wouldn't approve of my actions either."

This was the main reason Dover hated phone conversations. He'd waited for this moment to learn the true intentions that brewed in Heath's mind. Hearing the explanation over the phone, without Heath being present, made it impossible to know the full truth. Words were too shallow alone without their scent available to back up and validate them.

"Honor me, Heath," Lana said, and then sipped at her beer. "Explain to me why you would allow this to happen. And if you can't honor your own sister, then honor the life of Timmy Straffer."

"I didn't allow this to happen, Lana. The leopards attacked. And you know werewolves. Give them the scent of blood and they jump in with tooth and claws and ask questions later."

"But they were provoked." Her voice remained calm, but she sat at the edge of the couch, her head leaning against her shoulder as she held her phone there.

Dover pushed her hair over her shoulder to see her face and she jumped as if she were so engrossed in the conversation she'd forgotten Dover sat next to her.

"It was necessary." Heath's tone sounded tight. The male didn't like being pushed. "I'll explain everything to you, Lana. You have every right to honor your nest and I won't take that from you."

Lana stared at Dover as Heath spoke through her phone. Her expression showed what he believed in his heart. Heath would say what it took to maintain his sister's honor.

"I'll know the truth," Lana said softly, staring into Dover's eyes as she spoke.

Something crashed through the phone and Lana gripped it in her hand, dropping her attention to somewhere toward the floor while she strained to hear along with him.

"Heath? Are you there?" she asked.

"I've got a situation. I've got to go. I'll see you soon." Something or someone howled in the background and the line went dead.

"Crap," Lana said, jumping to her feet. "That didn't sound good."

"I think I know where he is." Dover guided her around the coffee table.

"I'm going with you."

Dover had turned to the door but paused when he realized Lana had planned on flying after her brothers and he'd stopped her by showing up. There wouldn't be any keeping her here if he left. One look at her determined expression told him as much.

"If you fly with me, you stay with me. Do we have an agreement?"

When she just stared at him for a moment, he realized how she took his meaning as being more than just their flying together tonight. He hadn't seriously thought through how long their relationship would last. And it was illogical for them to commit after only knowing each other a few days.

"I mean tonight," he added.

He swore something clouded over her eyes but there wasn't time to discuss it. "I agree," she offered without hesitating.

Dover opened her door but she came up around him. "We'll go to the roof. This way," she told him, pushing around him but then letting him leave her apartment and closing the door behind them. "Hurry," she added, gesturing for him to follow and then running to the end of the hallway and going through the door to the stairs.

The roof was a flat, rocky surface with a ledge around it that came up around four feet. Lana's parliament of owls had made some improvements to the secluded area, turning it into an ideal take-off and landing pad. He followed her to a row of lockers built into a wall. Some were closed and others open.

She held on to an open door. "Put your clothes in here."

That meant he would return here with her. Lana stripped without ceremony and he followed suit, already feeling the prickles along his flesh as the change surged to life inside him. He focused on Lana's long hair that tapered along the small of her back when she straightened after stepping out of her jeans. She had a perfect ass, one made to hold on to and keep a firm grip while making hot, passionate love to her. He was

harder than stone staring at it, and imagining burying his cock inside her tight, little asshole damn near made him lose his balance.

Lana took his clothes, making quick work out of folding them and placing them in the locker along with hers. There were no locks on any of the lockers and he imagined among the nests living in this apartment complex, theft wasn't a problem. From what he'd heard, the Halks owned the building and most of their relatives lived in it. It was the largest parliament of owls he'd seen in all his life. One would easily believe this large population of owls would go to an extreme to secure their area and make sure no threats got in their way of thriving.

A small smile appeared on Lana's face when she watched him pull his ponytail holder from his hair.

"I imagined what you might look like with your hair down," she said, reaching and combing her fingers through his tangled locks as it fell past his shoulders.

"You keep doing that and we aren't going anywhere." He was honored she would imagine anything about him, and the thought of her possibly lying in her bed at night, falling asleep while fantasizing about him, was too much at the moment.

There were serious matters at hand. Although Lana's ripe scent prevented any other smells from coming in on the breeze, if he tried hard enough, he would smell the pungent odor of death. Tonight would be a bad night and here he was, fighting the urge to take Lana again.

"Where are we going?" She didn't stop stroking his hair as her gaze dropped to his chest.

"North. Stay with me." He let the change take over, his blood boiling painfully in his veins when his animal form took over, consuming him while his craving for Lana intensified as well.

Lana was so gorgeous standing before him naked. When her face changed, the contour of her bones taking new form, something inside his heart changed along with her. Smooth, shiny feathers coated her body as she became the gorgeous hawk owl he'd seen the other day. It wasn't the first time in his life he'd watched a female change from human to owl. Although there weren't plenty of times he'd enjoyed the experience, none of them compared to what went through his insides as the change wrapped around him.

He would kill to protect her. Being in his feathers made every emotion he experienced as a human so much clearer. There wasn't any hesitation. Nothing beckoned at him to take matters slowly or to wait when the obvious was in his face. It didn't matter that he'd known Lana only a few days. She was his mate, his female, his to adore and cherish and protect with his life.

Lana soared into the air alongside him, silently gliding with the breeze. Her scent was so strong, so pungent, Dover wouldn't put aggressive speed into arriving at where he was sure Heath was. Nothing mattered as much as protecting Lana.

When they flew north over Banff and reached the edge of the mountains where the Lockham leopard land was, Lana tried taking the lead. Her anxiousness to find her brother, protect her den, was apparent with her sudden speed. Dover smelled the tainted scent of death as well as the outrage and fury that hung heavily in the air when they descended to the ground. Lana picked up on it too, her tail feathers quivering as she raced through the darkness toward the battlefield that just the other day had been magnificent and prosperous hunting ground.

Dover kept pace with her easily enough though. When the smell of other owls grew strong, he veered into her, herding her to the nearest tree. He gave Lana credit. She didn't fight him. Her feathers brushed against his as they perched next to each other on a thick limb and watched the scene play out below.

Several Cariboo lunewulf, the large white werewolves, forming a deadly line, squared off against a handful of leopards. Dover didn't have to look very hard to spot the owls in the trees surrounding them. One male hawk owl pinned him with a threatening glare. Dover felt Lana straighten next to him and guessed she returned the harsh stare to her brother. The male returned his attention to the scene below, obviously realizing Lana was safe where she was. Any reprimand he cared to dish out later would be dealt with accordingly.

Another leopard, with his mate at his side, appeared through the trees, strolling into the clearing with a calm confidence that showed off his rank. He snarled at the leopards who were ready to leap at the lunewulfs. Dover recognized Kane Masters and his mate Jin. Kane didn't hesitate at snapping at the leopards until they backed up, acknowledging his rank as hunter and leader of the leopards in this area. When he'd created space between leopards and lunewulfs, he turned to the lunewulfs, snarling at them as well.

One lunewulf leapt toward him and several of the owls in a nearby tree raised their wings, ready to soar down and join the fight if there were to be one. Heath let out a low, sneering, hissing sound, a warning for them to stay put. Dover hadn't witnessed the fight that took place earlier while he was at Lana's, but it didn't take much to figure out how terrible it was. Two males lay motionless, naked and in their flesh, proof they had fought and were killed while in their animal form and had converted back to human as they all did when they died. He didn't know who they were or what species. The repugnant smells in the air were too thick to distinguish their source.

Lana screamed when the Cariboo lunewulf lunged at the leopard. The male leopard went up on his hind legs, his long, deadly teeth flashing against the moonlight. The sudden aggression in the air intensified. Dover flapped his wings, willing to block Lana's view of the fight if he could. This wasn't a scene he wished her or any peaceful-living owl to have to witness. As he breathed in the metallic smell of blood, the female leopard let out a breathtaking howl, its sound deadly and outraged. Jin Masters would fight to the death to protect her mate, as would any female if her male were threatened.

When the two leopards lunged into the group of Cariboo lunewulfs, the sound of their teeth clashing as loud as thunder, several lunewulfs went rolling backward. Their

large bodies shook the ground, causing the branch they perched on to shake under their claws. Lana screamed again when the owl who had glared at them soared down, diving at two other owls who apparently could no longer sit and watch without stealing a bit of the action.

No! Dover screamed when Lana leapt from her perch next to him, her shrill screech announcing she would attack and kill anyone who went after her brother. Dover took off after her, spreading his wings wide and putting full-force speed into his chase. Regardless of her loyalty to her nest, he wouldn't allow her to get involved in this fight.

Dover slammed against Lana, causing her to flap her wings to maintain her balance as he knocked her to the side. Apparently he wasn't alone in his opinion that Lana stay out of the fight. Another owl dive-bombed the two of them. Dover turned, ready to attack as his instincts took over. He would protect Lana from her own foolishness as well from any other owl who tried getting near her.

The male who swept down on the two of them successfully avoided Dover's beak and flew around and underneath, forcing Lana to divert her path to a nearby branch. The moment she was perched, the male landed next to her and she pecked at him. Then focusing on Dover with her glowing gold eyes, she screeched with enough intensity to warn him she would dive again if he didn't resolve the problem.

And the problem was apparent. Lana leapt back and forth on her branch, flapping her feathers while she hissed, her beak open and her eyes wide with frightful determination. She looked as if she were the one being attacked and the poor male next to her was doing a piss-poor job of calming her down.

Dover didn't land next to her. He'd agreed to fly after her and that meant he would honor and cherish her as well. It also meant her nest would mean as much to him as it did to her. He wasn't coerced into agreeing to fly with Lana. In spite of her fears that her brother tricked him, Dover was more intrigued with Lana every minute he spent with her. The sex was hotter than any he'd ever experienced, but it was more than that. Lana flew in a straight line. She didn't dishonor anyone and refused to believe her nest was anything other than perfect. But when she smelled a flaw, she stood up to her nest and demanded to know the truth instead of choosing to believe everything was fine. Lana didn't mind ruffling her feathers and she didn't mind ruffling anyone else's if it meant keeping the air clean of lies and deceit. The more time he spent with Lana, the more perfect she became in his eyes.

Dover wasn't sure he would say the same for the rest of her nest. Heath and her two other brothers were up to something. He would learn the truth, and when he did, he would share it with Lana. It was her right to know. When that time came, he prayed whatever they were doing wouldn't completely dishonor and shame her nest. Dover would take Lana. But he'd be damned if he would have anything to do with a nest that reeked of shame.

While waiting to hear the truth, Dover needed to calm Lana down. Instead of landing next to her and wrapping his wings around her to soothe her panic, he left her on the branch.

This wasn't Dover's first fight. He'd taken on leopards as well as werewolves before. Hell, he'd had a round or two with coyotes too. Each species had its strength as well as its weaknesses. Knowing a species' weakness was imperative if going into battle against them.

Dover flew with more speed than he'd used to chase down Lana. Heath was dive-bombing the Cariboo lunewulf who attacked Kane Masters. Interesting that Heath fought to help protect the leopards. There was definitely a lot here still to learn.

Chapter Twelve

Lana didn't know whether to puke from relief or attack with beak and claws and tear into the feathers of her fool brother and Dover for scaring the crap out of her. She perched on the branch, not daring to move a muscle or take her attention from the deadliest fight she'd ever witnessed in her life. There was no way of knowing how long it lasted, but she was positive she held her breath through the entire thing.

Feathers floated through the air and her stomach churned from the grotesque smells hanging too heavily around her. Beel nudged into her, his low, soothing sounds meant to reassure her. Lana was positive he jumped for joy and exhaled loudly when the Cariboo lunewulf finally retreated into the woods and the leopards retreated in the direction they'd originally come.

Suddenly owls were flying everywhere, calling out to each other and bragging and boasting as if each one of them were the one to strike the victorious blow. Lana searched the crowd. There was a hell of a lot more owls around her than she'd originally noticed. When she didn't see Dover, and Beel had left her side to fly after Heath, Lana turned toward her nest. Exhaustion hit her hard, making the flight home harder than she anticipated.

She shivered so hard when she stood naked in her flesh on her roof that she could barely manage to open the locker where her clothes were. Several owls hooted behind her and Lana slipped around the brick partition, built by her father when she was a fledgling, to allow young unmated females privacy when changing.

"Lana! What in the hell were you doing out there?" Rock bellowed, his voice bouncing off the roof as he approached.

She didn't answer but instead fought to reach for her locker without stepping around the brick wall. A bitter wind blew through her hair, causing her teeth to rattle in her head. Rock's heavy footsteps announced his presence before she saw his hand. He tossed her clothes in her direction. There were other males with him, one of her cousins and a friend. They hooted and hollered, their adrenaline pumping through their veins as they recited the events of the evening. Lana didn't see a hell of a lot to be so damn excited about.

"Get dressed," Rock ordered unnecessarily. His grumpy tone didn't match the surge of unleashed energy she detected around him. Energy almost sparked in the air as he shot her a quick look before turning to his friends.

More owls landed on the roof and everyone talked over everyone else as they changed and shared the excitement of the evening. If Dover was among them she didn't smell or hear him. After struggling with her clothes and regretting not bringing her shoes to the roof, she stepped gingerly along the rocky, cold roof. Odd that she didn't

notice how uncomfortable it was under her feet when she'd come up here with Dover. She reached for the locker, ready to close the door Rock left open, when she noticed it was empty.

Where were Dover's clothes?

Glancing around the group of males, she noticed Beel and Heath had landed as well. There was no sign of Dover. Heath was snapping the buttons on his jeans when he walked over to join her.

"Why were you there?" Heath demanded.

"Where did your boyfriend go?" Rock was on his heels.

"No. Not this time." Lana held her hand up, still shaking from the cold but quickly feeling anger and determination replacing the chills that rushed over her body. "I'm the one with the questions. What the hell happened out there?"

"What happened is we secured this territory." Paul Mason, Gena's oldest brother, flashed her a winning smile and then pulled his sweater over his muscular chest. Her brothers had suggested more than once that he would be a good mate for her. Paul was a player though, and didn't have a problem with the reputation. All of his good looks turned sour when he bragged about flying after several females at the same time. A male with no honor was as unappealing as it got. "The leopards will honor and respect us now. And the Cariboo lunewulfs will go back to the mountains where they belong." He high-fived one of his buddies before turning to join a group of his friends.

"Did you think we weren't being honored or respected before?" Lana couldn't believe lives were lost over the need to control Banff.

"Quite a few litters moved in to our territory over the past five years or so," Heath said, his voice quiet and calm as he stood inches from her. "When they started trying to buy out some of the businesses in Banff and secure their place in town, we stood our ground. Leopards are an aggressive breed though, Lana. They view owls as passive and didn't have a problem pushing harder to claim the town."

His large body blocked the cold wind, although it still tried wrapping around her and she shivered. When he stroked her hair, it reminded her of how Dover touched her. Lana closed her eyes, not feeling anything similar to how Dover made her feel when her brother touched her. She ached to know where Dover went, and why he didn't fly back here with her.

"A good owl died tonight. His mate is a widow." A lump formed in her throat when she imagined how Frances felt right now. She would be devastated, destroyed over the loss of her mate. "I can't imagine she feels his life was worth giving up so owls could continue to run Banff."

Heath stared at her with more compassion than she'd seen in his face in a long time. She believed he mourned the loss of Timmy Straffer, but wondered if he truly regretted his death when he seemed so happy over the battle they'd just fought.

"I was there when he took his human shape," he offered.

Rock and Beel created a huddle around her, helping to create a wall of warmth. None of them spoke for a moment, all of them understanding the pain that would slice through any of them if they were with a friend when they died in their feathers and resumed their human form.

"We aren't like leopards or werewolves," her brother announced, straightening as his voice deepened, his seriousness smelling strong in their small circle. "But there are times when the only way to communicate with a species is in their own language."

"You attacked because they are blood-hungry creatures?" Lana asked, shaking her head. "I don't understand. There is no logic to this."

"Lana, the Lockham litter settled with a lot of money." Heath pierced her with his hard, solemn gaze, reminding her a lot of their father as she stared into his eyes. "Over the past months they have been pushing a lot of shop owners downtown, shops owned and run by the same nests for many years. When the owners wouldn't sell, the Lockhams threatened to open their own stores, put our nests out of business. A few months ago they bought all the land off humans on the west side of town and were preparing to bring in franchises with the specific intent of closing down our doors. Many, many nests would have lost their only means of income. Add to that the fact they were buying land off the werewolves, taking over the mountains around us to bring in more litters, and they took our hunting ground. Within a year we would have been chased out of town."

Lana wondered why she hadn't heard of any of this before now. She knew the section of town Heath referred to and had seen the sold signs as well as signs announcing that new shops would be coming soon. None of it had bothered her. She'd been wrapped up in flying with her friends and focusing on where the next party was. All the while her brothers were sniffing out the well-being and safety of their parliament.

"You could have told me about all of this sooner," she said, staring past him at the door leading to the stairs. She glanced up at the black sky, again wishing she knew how Dover got here before everyone else and then disappeared without waiting for her to get here too. "I'm not a fledgling anymore," she added, although over the past year while they worried about their town, she worried about what to wear while heading out on the town.

Heath's tone was gentle, soothing when he continued. "You had a right to fly and stretch your wings, Lana. Although I admit, all of us were a bit put out when suddenly you focused on a male with more on your mind than torturing the poor soul and then leaving a few beak marks before prancing away from him."

Another time she might have smiled at witnessing her brother's soft side. Now wasn't the time though. The battle might be over but there was still a fight left. She smelled it in the air. And she would be involved from here on out.

"I don't know where Dover went. His clothes were here with mine, but when I got here, they were gone. I need to find him."

"Like hell," Rock sneered.

"Go find him," Beel said at the same time.

"She's not going anywhere tonight," Rock argued, turning on Beel.

"Enough." Heath held up his hand, silencing both of them.

"I don't understand why he didn't return here with me," she added, ignoring the arguing between her brothers.

"Why did he allow you to fly out with him?" Heath asked.

Lana noticed for the first time as she glanced past her brothers that everyone else had headed downstairs. The four of them were alone on the roof. She returned her attention to her brothers, glancing at each of them while they waited for her answer.

"More than likely because he knew I would fly after him if he insisted I stay here. When he first got here, I was heading out my door. If he hadn't shown up, I probably would have witnessed the deaths too."

"Interesting." Heath rubbed his chin, staring over her head for a moment. "My guess is he flew to Kane Master's litter."

"And don't even think you're flying across town right now into the mountains," Rock informed her, growing in size as his expression hardened.

"No, she isn't." Beel reached for Lana. "She's flying with an escort."

"God, thank you," Lana said, sighing in relief. She hated arguing with any of them, and tonight would make it hell fighting with them. But damn it to hell if any of them were going to lock her in her nest when she didn't know where Dover went. "Let's go."

"I'll fly with you too," Heath decided.

Rock grunted and then yanked off his shirt. "We'll all go."

* * * * *

Lana glided on a breeze, her wings stretched as she flew with her brothers around her into the mountains. As distracted as her thoughts were, trying to understand why Dover simply disappeared after the fight, she forced herself to remember when the last time was she flew with her entire nest around her.

She followed Heath when he soared to the ground, Rock and Beel sticking close to either side of her. Lana landed on a low-hanging branch, taking her time staring at the dark cabin through the trees. The smell of leopards was thick in the air. She searched the land, focusing on everything around her and breathing in the scents she picked up on. Her body tensed when she grabbed a hold of Dover's scent.

Rock pranced around her, damn near knocking her off the branch. Beel squawked from above, but Heath moved to the ground, dropping the clothes he carried in his beak, and let the change ripple through him. Lana was more than anxious to do the same.

Pushing past her brothers, she jumped to the ground as the change ransacked her system. Her clothes fell out of her mouth, landing on the rocky ground, and she jumped out of the way so as not to land on them. Fire burned in her veins as she pushed the metamorphosis. Her vision dulled and she no longer heard every sound around her. And when the cold hit she thought for a moment she would fall over from the severity of tremors that attacked. It was all she could do to reach down and pick up her clothes then pull her shirt over her head.

"You'll wait here," Heath decided after tucking his shirt into his jeans.

"No." Lana zipped up her jeans and then made quick work of combing her hair with her fingers. "You can wait here. I'm going to find out what he's doing."

She ran over the rocky ground, ignoring the stinging burn under her bare feet as she hurried to the front door of the cabin.

"Lana!" Heath called after her.

The cabin door opened and light and warmth flooded the undeveloped front yard of the leopards' litter. Lana paused and stared at the female leopard who sniffed the air and then curled her lip at Lana.

"I've come for Dover," Lana announced, holding her ground and hoping the female wouldn't attack simply because she was on her land. She straightened, praying honoring the female would help calm her hostility. "Good hunting," she added, lowering her voice.

"Good hunting," the female said, but didn't move out of the doorway when Lana dared step closer. A branch crackled behind Lana and the female narrowed her gaze on Heath, who stood behind her. "Do you need backup to seek out your male?"

"They are my nest and my escorts," Lana offered, keeping her voice low and soft, and watching the female in case the smell of her hostility grew. "Is Dover here?"

"He is. Who are you?"

Something told Lana the female already knew who she was. Lana was pretty sure she'd seen her before and guessed she was Kane Master's mate.

"I am Lana Halk. My brothers Heath, Rock and Beel escort me."

"Do you always fly with so many escorts?"

Lana almost told her she'd never flown with escorts before but didn't want the female making any judgments before Lana had a chance to understand her better.

"No," she said, without elaborating.

"Jin, let Kane Masters know the Halk nest is here," Heath growled from behind Lana, his tone darker and deadlier than Lana had ever heard it before.

Jin growled but backed into the door, closing it behind her and leaving Lana and her brothers standing out in the cold. So much for honoring visitors. She shifted in front of the door, hugging herself and feeling how cold and uncomfortable she was in bare feet for the first time since changing back into her flesh.

The door opened again and a large male leopard appeared. Lana took a step backward, having sworn she smelled Dover and expecting him to open the door. Heath placed his hands on her shoulders, his strong, comforting warmth seeping through her shirt and preventing her from backing up farther.

"You honor us," the male said seriously, stepping backward and gesturing for them to enter.

Lana wasn't quite sure why the leopard hunter, a male who was a leader among his kind, would feel honored that owls were at his doorstep less than an hour after a deadly attack took place. She would find out though and stepped out of her brother's grasp and into the warmth of the small cabin.

"Lana," Dover said, his voice gruff as he pinned her with his deep, dark gray eyes.

He stood in the middle of the living room, his hair still down, and looked as disheveled as she felt. Where he looked sexy and rugged and her fingers itched to touch him, Lana had a feeling she looked more the wreck, frazzled and cautious.

"So you're Lana." A pretty, young female appeared in the doorway, smelling of lavender with her long, damp hair falling over her narrow shoulders and her clothing hugging a figure that would turn the head of any male.

Lana met her inquiring gaze and then remembered her as the female Dover rode in to town with. This was Darla.

"Yes, I am," she said, keeping her tone quiet and using all her strength to hide her reaction to the female. Which, for reasons she didn't want to acknowledge, the urge to lunge and attack hit her with full force. It didn't matter if this female was a leopard. She was a bit too close to Dover for Lana's liking.

"What brings you to our litter?" Kane asked, his deep growl menacing.

Heath didn't appear daunted. "My sister Lana required an escort when the owl who gave his word to fly with her didn't escort her back to her nest."

Lana wanted to kick Heath for insulting Dover in front of the leopards.

"My apologies if you worried for the safety of your sister," Dover offered before Kane could comment.

Kane's mate moved closer to him and Darla stepped out of the doorway, inching closer to Dover. Lana's brothers remained at the doorway. With it closed, the warmth of the cabin quickly took the discomfort of the cold night although the tension in the air didn't put her at ease.

"I felt it imperative to confirm the attack accomplished what you wanted," Dover added, pinning Heath with a look that told Lana he knew everything Heath had shared with her on the roof.

"And what is that?" Heath asked, his voice quieter yet demanding everyone's attention.

Lana watched the males around her as Dover straightened. If Heath implied with his question that there weren't any ulterior motives on his part behind this attack, he

was a liar. Not knowing what the others already knew put her at a disadvantage. But the tension grew in the room, putting her on edge. She held her ground, standing next to Dover. She didn't need him to escort her back to her nest and Heath was being annoying to suggest otherwise. She'd flown on her own for many years now and never had her feathers ruffled by any male. None of them bothered her out of respect and honor to her nest. Heath knew that.

"I've just confirmed with Kane," Dover continued, his tone giving no indication the tension in the room bothered him at all.

Lana held her head high, staring at her brother as he watched Dover. If he didn't see the honor that ran so strong through Dover it almost drowned out the tension, then her brother was a fool.

"Dover showed up here thirty minutes ago or so," Kane interjected, causing everyone to focus on him. "He wanted to make sure the Lockhams would back down and agree to cancel all contracts and arrangements they've made so far with humans to open several franchises in Banff."

"And have they?" Heath asked.

"The Lockhams wish only to create jobs for the many litters who now live in the area," Kane growled, his expression turning harsh when he turned his attention from Dover to Heath.

"The Lockhams bought land here and immediately approached shop owners in downtown Banff, shops that had been run by nests for generations. When the nests refused to give up the only security their nests had, the Lockhams threatened franchises if the nests wouldn't sell. If providing security for your litters means destroying our nests, we have a serious problem." Heath put his fists on his hips, and although his expression and scent remained calm, Lana saw he was getting angry.

Dover took Lana's arm and pulled her behind him, stepping between Heath and Kane. He held up his hand, taking control of the room and preventing Kane from spitting out whatever he was about to say. It was obvious the leopard respected Dover when he closed his mouth and scowled instead of growling.

"You howled for me and I came," Dover said quietly, his long silver blond hair falling over his broad shoulders as he stood taller than the leopard and Heath and her brothers. "You told me there was a conflict smelling up the air and asked me to fly around and let you know what I learned. I've done what you've asked. And I came here tonight to tell you what I found. Tell the leopards to back down or there will be war."

The room grew so quiet Lana could hear the breeze whipping around the cabin outside and tree branches brush over the roof. The fire popped and cracked in the fireplace while males and females studied each other and waited for the response.

"I'll meet with the leopards and let you know their response."

Dover nodded at Kane's response.

"We wish you good hunting then," Heath offered. "We'll wait for your answer."

"You'll have it soon." Kane moved to the door, opening it for her nest. "And good hunting to you too."

"Lana," Dover said, once again taking her by the arm. "I'll escort you home."

Instead of looking at her, he focused past her at her brothers who already were heading out the door. Lana didn't need their permission to accept that offer.

"Thank you," she said before her brothers could comment, moving next to him and then around him so he was between her and her nest.

"She'll be home soon," Dover told Heath.

It was obvious Heath still didn't like the idea of her flying with Dover. Rock seemed to swell in the doorway. Beel nodded though, being the last one to head out the door. He pushed his brothers out the door.

"We'll watch for you," Beel said over his shoulder.

Kane closed the door behind them and let out a growl, running his hand through his hair. His mate was immediately by his side, whispering something that tickled Lana's ears although she didn't pick up what was said.

"We'll head out here in a minute," Dover said, moving Lana's hair behind her shoulder.

"Will you be back tonight?" Darla asked.

Lana tried meeting Dover's gaze when he spoke to her, but he shifted his attention to Darla. When she did the same, there wasn't a challenge in Darla's tone. The female tilted her head, focusing on Dover and ignoring Lana as she moved closer to him.

"Probably not tonight," he said without hesitating. He didn't avoid Darla's touch when she placed her hand on his chest though.

"Are we heading back to Kenora soon?" Darla's tone was too sweet.

Lana was sure the female tried pissing her off. She forced herself not to step forward but instead waited for Dover's answer. The emotions ransacking her weren't ones she'd experienced before but that didn't mean she didn't know how to react to them. If Darla touched Dover one more time, Lana would scratch her eyes out.

"Are you unhappy here?" Dover asked, instead of answering the question.

"I figured you were about done here," Darla snapped, tossing her pretty, long blonde hair over her shoulder, her eyes speckled with gold flecks over green, adding to her compelling good looks.

She shot Lana a furtive look, blinking several times. In spite of how blatantly she displayed possessive and almost jealous emotions, they didn't make her ugly, which made Lana like her even less. Holding her position, not daring to blink or allow one facial muscle move, she watched Darla when the female shifted her attention to Dover.

"And you're taking me back with you, right?" she added, licking her lips in what looked suspiciously like an invitation.

Every muscle in Lana's body tensed.

"I'm not done here." Dover didn't elaborate.

"I can't guarantee the Lockhams' response," Kane said, appearing oblivious to any tension Darla created in the room.

Dover shifted his weight, running his hand down Lana's back and guiding her to the door. She made an effort not to glance over her shoulder at Darla, although it was tempting to give the female a look, anything to make sure she realized she should acknowledge...

Lana sucked in a breath, missing Dover's response to Kane. Acknowledge what?

Was she laying claim on Dover as her male? If so, the next step would be mating. It was one thing knowing he'd voiced his commitment to fly after her. But he'd been tricked into it. She'd never known an owl to fly with as much honor as Dover did. And she didn't doubt for a minute he would follow through with any obligation out of honor.

But she didn't want a relationship with a male because he felt duty-bound. That would make things no better than if one of the many males in Banff were able to claim her. None of them wanted her out of love but out of the prestige it would bring their nest to bind them to the Halks. Dover might not have known anything about her nest, but that didn't change the situation.

"Did you hear me?" Dover asked when they stepped outside into the cold night air.

The frigid night didn't prevent heat from swelling inside her when he stroked her hair, his touch so gentle in spite of the commanding presence that emanated around him when he turned so he faced her.

"What?" she stammered, hating that he caught her lost in thought.

Dover shook his head, dismissing whatever it was he'd just said. "You're freezing." He'd changed the subject. Wrapping his arms around her, he lifted her into his arms, holding her against all that packed, roped muscle and walking easily away from the cabin. "Strip out of your clothes, little owl. I'll meet you back on your roof."

"Where are you going?"

"Nowhere." He brushed his lips over her cheek. "I'm going to hold you while you change so you don't freeze your cute ass off. I'll be right behind you, enjoying the view."

There was no way the darkness hid her embarrassment. Damn him for actually grinning at her.

"You better not dawdle then," she said, shifting in his arms and unzipping her jeans. "I'd hate for you to miss that view you crave seeing."

"Trust me. I'll be right behind you."

She'd never undressed in a male's arms before and the experience had to affect him as much as it did her. In spite of having fucked him just a couple of hours ago, heat swelled inside her when she slid out of her jeans and then rolled them into a ball. His

hand moved over the curve of her ass, reminding her of his words when they'd finished fucking earlier. What would it be like having him in her ass?

Lana didn't bother with her shirt but instead allowed the change to take over.

"Don't think you can get away from me," he whispered in her ear as her body started to change.

There was no way she could answer, even though a few snide remarks came to mind. Her mouth had changed form, her lips changing into a beak. Her tongue transformed, making it impossible to say the words. She welcomed the feathers that sprung out over her body though, welcoming the warmth they offered. When her sweater hung loosely around her, Dover pulled it off her, holding on to it as he ripped his shirt from his torso.

"I'm right behind you," he called out when she took to flight.

She put some speed into it, soaring high at first and then flying toward Banff. Where before the cold made her miserable, now she embraced it, loving how it stroked through her feathers. She felt so alive, so in control of her life. And she had one hell of an awesome male chasing after her.

Lana glanced down at one point, knowing she flew over the Lockhams' land and feeling compelled to search the trees for any owls. She then scoured the ground, identifying every dark shadow until she was certain no one lingered where the bloody battle had taken place.

The wind current changed almost too fast for her to dive and avoid Dover when he damn near slammed into her backside. He let out a screech, challenging her. Lana's tail feathers shivered and she dipped lower, suddenly wanting him so badly it was all she could do to keep her wings straight.

He came at her again, his right wing stroking her backside as he called out again. The sound of his cries, his mating call, created a reaction inside her, causing a swelling she'd never experienced while flying. Fucking him in their feathers sounded so damn good she dipped lower again, seeing the town come up beneath her and immediately searching for a tree that would offer enough solitude they wouldn't be noticed.

Dover flew around her then underneath her, forcing her to take on elevation. This time his screech was more demanding. Apparently finding a good branch wasn't what he had in mind. She wanted him now though, not later. And it was his fault for tormenting her while they flew.

She screeched at him, letting him know he wasn't the only one who could make decisions, and dropped in elevation in spite of his efforts to make her fly higher. There was a thick grove of trees lining the town, a private, secluded area where she knew many of her friends had fucked in the past. Lana didn't care if the location had a reputation. Her tail feathers quivered so badly it was all she could do to fly in a straight line.

This time his shriek was a warning. He could be as fucking bossy as he wanted, Lana wasn't daunted. But then she saw the other males. Dover flew into her again,

apparently deciding the trees she had in mind would make for a good landing. He wasn't steering her into them to fuck though. They had company and it wasn't a social call, at least not the type of social call Lana would have anything to do with.

She smelled her lust in the cold air as she spotted the two great horned owls dive-bomb toward her and Dover. Lana hissed a warning but it wasn't heeded. Dover left her side, flying through the air with so much speed the two horned owls were forced to separate so he wouldn't fly into them.

You don't have to be a fucking hero! Lana cried out to Dover to come back to her.

The horned owls turned their attention to her, their eyes glowing in the night as they both flew straight at her. Once again Dover applied enough speed to his flight and physically knocked one of the males to the side. The other shot up into the air, leaving his buddy to regain his equilibrium on his own.

Lana landed on a thick, long branch that stuck out from a tree, the first tree in a long line of them that bordered the edge of town. She tried jumping to the side when Dover damn near slid into her. His large wings wrapped around her and for a moment she swore he would mount her in front of the two males. No way would she be the object of some perverted peep show for a couple of assholes.

Dover ignored her squawking protests. He outweighed her and she swore he put his entire weight on top of her, making it impossible for her to move. She tried screeching, even cussing him out, but he smothered her, wrapping his wings around her until her entire world became the warmth of his body, the steady, determined beat of his heart, and the overwhelming smell that was unique to Dover.

Lana couldn't see a damn thing. When Dover let out a menacing screech, even though she fought to get out from under Dover, all she could do was feel his warning cries vibrate through him. Her heart raced so damn fast she swore she would hyperventilate. It took a minute for reality to sink into her frenzied brain. Lana didn't understand why Dover was on top of her. He wasn't adjusting himself to fuck her. But his dangerous cries finally sunk in.

Dover was protecting her from the horned owl males. They couldn't get to her with him on top of her. At the same time, his threatening screeches announced beyond any doubt that she was his female, and they would die trying to get to her. Even as this reality came to her, its meaning didn't sink in until he finally jumped off her. Lana straightened, shaking out her feathers and gulping in fresh air that didn't smell of Dover.

That's when she realized he'd left her. Lana searched the sky, only needing a second before she spotted him chasing the two male owls away from her. She gave herself another hard shake, her body cramped from him having all his weight on top of her. Before she could take to flight, Dover turned around and dive-bombed straight toward her. She jumped out of the way although it was an unnecessary move. Dover slid to a landing on the thick branch, leaving indentions in the wood with his long talons.

He was beyond pissed. His eyes glowed with a fury that was so unsaddled it shook the air around them. His feathers were puffed and he stalked toward her, continually hissing and squawking with a demonic look on his face.

Oh yeah, like any of this is my fault. Her cries appeared to fall on deaf ears.

She tried dodging him when he pecked at her with his beak. He wouldn't stand on top of her again and continue to yell at her. Maybe Dover had a temper that once unleashed was too intense for him to straddle back in. That wasn't her problem. And it sure as hell wasn't her fault that a couple of horny males spotted them playing in the air. If he was going to keep up with the attitude he could fly home alone.

Lana couldn't take flight though. Dover didn't climb on top of her, but one powerful wing stopped her from embarking from the branch. His strong beak swiped over one of her feathers and then another. And as quickly as his outrage spiced up the air, it faded as he continued pruning her.

I'm fine. You're worse than a mother hen. Even her insults fell on deaf ears when Dover continued running his beak through her feathers, holding her still with one extended wing. He moved into her space, his hooting becoming more soothing while he continued his efforts. One by one he stroked her feathers and it felt good. Real good.

Lana found herself relaxing as her temper and fear dissipated and once again a swelling soared to life inside her. The branch didn't have its appeal for fucking that it did when they were flirting in the air. But damn, she couldn't wait to get home.

Chapter Thirteen

They'd lost their clothes. Dover wouldn't allow Lana to endure the humiliation of her shirt and jeans being found on the ground after she'd flown home. In spite of her protests and insistence she fly with him to search for them, Dover had the last word and her promise that she would stay at her nest while he searched for them.

In his human form, finding clothes that fell from the sky and could have drifted in any direction would have been close to impossible. But in his feathers, identifying every object on the ground in a mile radius was a relatively simple task. His incredible vision and hearing was an asset that added to the many traits that made owls a predator to be wary of. So when he didn't find their clothes, Dover smelled foul play.

He flew over Lana's apartment complex several hours after making her promise to return to her nest. The building was quiet and dark, and he bypassed the roof, soaring around the building until he spotted the small open window. Lana had left her bathroom window open for him.

Even as he landed on the sill, breathing in her rich, strong aroma, the need to take her grew stronger than his desire to change. Dover leapt to her sink and then to the floor, forcing his body to convert from bird to man.

As bones stretched and muscles took new form, the darkness around him became more noticeable and his ability to detect every different smell in her apartment faded. Every sound around him faded, creating a silence that should be peaceful. A fire burned in his veins though, and at the same time concern over their missing clothes distracted him.

Dover didn't doubt the clothes would turn up and bring both of them grief if he allowed it. Flying with honor had its advantages though and he looked forward to confronting the male or female who would try creating havoc in his or Lana's life.

As he straightened, forcing his human ears to try to hear any sounds in Lana's apartment as well as outside in the hall, Dover stepped onto the thick, dark rose, oblong carpet in front of her sink. There were slight, damp indentions, suggesting she took a shower when she got home and then stood, her feet still damp, on this carpet while facing her sink. Did she clean herself for him? Taking time and preparing her body while thinking of fucking him when he got here?

Dover was hard as stone before stepping out of the bathroom, and being completely naked made it impossible to hide the fact. Glancing up and down the dark hallway, he picked up on her scent, which indeed was clean with the hint of lavender mixing with her natural aroma—an aroma that was now a mixture of her scent and his. His insides tightened, every muscle in his human body straining for control as he moved silently to her bedroom.

Lana lay on her stomach, her hand curled in a ball next to her face. Long, silky strands drifted over her cheek and streamed down her bare back. A thick comforter stretched over her large bed. Lana slept along the edge, facing him, her expression relaxed and the swell of one breast visible next to the bend in her arm. The comforter covered the lower half of her body although at some point in her sleep she'd raised her leg and her knee stuck out under the blanket. She looked relaxed, peaceful, and more of a seductress than any owl he'd ever known. Even as her breathing changed and he suspected his scent woke her from her sleep, her long dark lashes, fanning over the top of her cheeks didn't move.

Dover focused on the soft swell of her breast and then the slender curve in her lower back just above where the blanket covered her ass. He moved into her bedroom, careful not to make a sound as he approached her bed. Lana appeared to still be sleeping in spite of her deep breathing having changed to softer, quieter breaths.

"Would you allow anyone to sneak up on you, my little owl?" he whispered, barely making a sound as he stopped at the edge of her bed.

"No," she whispered, her lashes fluttering over her eyes.

Dover smiled in the darkness. Lana heard him come in and chose to remain in the position she was in. It was provocative, enticing, and most definitely the best sight he'd seen all day.

"You're naked."

"So are you," he told her, taking the blanket that covered her ass and lowering it.

Her soft behind curved into her long, slender legs. It was a view he could barely handle. His cock swelled as his balls tightened and taking his next step took more concentration than he cared to admit.

"You didn't find our clothes?" she asked.

Dover crawled onto the bed, straddling her legs so she couldn't roll over. "No," he told her. "I would have if they'd been there."

"You think someone took them?"

"Clothes don't usually just disappear."

"Interesting." She sighed when he cupped her ass.

The sound tortured his senses. "I have a feeling they will show up."

"But not in a good way." Lana obviously guessed what he'd already surmised. Someone took them and would try using them against either Dover or Lana.

"It's not something you're going to worry about this evening." He gripped her ass with both hands, kneading the soft flesh and then opening her for him.

Lana groaned, having the good sense not to argue with him. She arched her rear end off the bed and spread her legs as far as she could with him pinning her. The ripe, rich aroma of her lust reached his nostrils and he breathed it in, filling his lungs with her scent. She was a drug for him, his perfect drug. And he craved his next fix more than he craved taking his next breath.

Dover ran his thumb over her asshole and watched the skin pucker. Then dipping his finger lower, he felt how wet her pussy was. "Damn, little owl," he grumbled, every inch of him tightening and so hard, focusing on anything but burying his cock inside her drenched heat was almost an impossible task.

Lana brought her arms against her side, pushing herself onto her elbows as she buried her head in her pillows. Long strands tapered around her shoulders and drifted down the center of her back as she moaned.

Dover pushed his finger into her pussy, coating himself with thick, rich cream. Her muscles tightened around him, pulling him in deeper. Lana twisted on the bed, turning her head and crying out as he slid in a second finger.

"Relax, my little owl. Enjoy yourself," he told her, his voice thick with his lust as he grumbled and watched her head collapse on the pillows.

"I'd enjoy myself better if I could move," she said, her voice muffled when she spoke into the pillow.

She wasn't trying too hard to twist around and he wasn't pinning her with enough strength to prevent her from doing so if she really wanted. Dover let her complain and glided two fingers inside her soaked heat. Lana hissed, the sound sharp and quick. He sucked in a deep breath, tasting her intoxicating aroma in his mouth. Then pulling his fingers out, his cock danced between his legs as he stared at the white cream coating his skin. When he rubbed the moisture over her tight ass, blood drained from his brain.

"Dover," Lana cried out, almost leaping off the bed.

"It's all right," he told her, placing his hand on the small of her back and then stroking her ass with his finger. Then moving along her smooth, shaved skin, he thrust his fingers deep inside her pussy.

"Crap!" Lana tossed her hair over her shoulder when she tried looking over her shoulder, twisting her body enough he glided deeper into her heat.

"You don't like this?"

"That's not it," she hissed, clenching her teeth together as her large gray eyes flashed in the darkness. Gold streaks made them almost glow.

She was incredibly sensitive as turned-on as he was, and so damn wet she almost soaked his hand. When he pulled out and again soaked her ass with her come, this time he pressed against her puckered flesh, just enough to coat her ass with her come.

"Oh my God!" Again Lana leapt off the bed, using enough force this time he would have fallen back if he hadn't braced himself.

"Relax, Lana," he instructed, keeping his tone calm although the gruffness in his voice as he suffered from the intense desire to fuck her was impossible to hide. "Relax and enjoy it."

"But," she murmured.

"If I hurt you, I'll stop. I promise." He stroked her back, keeping his finger over her ass until she relaxed.

Dover repeated the steps, rubbing the entrance to her tight ass and then burying his fingers in her pussy. Lana sighed, noticeably relaxing and arching her ass into the air. He loved how her rear curved, how soft and smooth it was. Moving his hand from her back to explore the curve, he fondled her flesh where her ass ended, just above her thigh. It quite possibly was his favorite part of her body. Her skin was warm, almost moist as she panted but remained relaxed. Every inch of her appealed to him but that one small spot, where her skin was so silky, fascinated him. If he continued stroking her there though, she would grow antsy. Dover knew her need soared out of control inside her as much as it did in him.

He thrust his fingers several times into her pussy, creating fresh moisture that caked his skin as he fucked her with his hand. His knuckles pressed against her shaved flesh and heat wrapped around him. He wouldn't be able to hold out much longer but he wanted her to experience the pleasure he would be able to give her when he fucked her ass. In order to do this, she needed to be prepared, stroked and lubricated until she was able to take his cock.

This time when he brought his finger to her ass and pressed against her puckered flesh, Lana's breath caught but she didn't leap off the bed.

"Oh God," she whimpered.

"Does that feel good, my little owl?"

She didn't answer at first, her breath coming hard when he pushed a bit deeper. "I think so," she finally murmured.

Dover's heart swelled painfully in his chest. His cock throbbed and pulsed as more blood drained to that part of his body. Tingles rushed down his spine and his skin prickled, the change surfacing with the intensity of his desire. He wanted her to love this type of sex. But more than that, he couldn't wait to show her the pleasure she would experience that was so much more fulfilling, so incredibly intimate and so provocative. He'd guessed Lana would be the type of female who would be willing to explore her sexuality with him and take it to new levels. But to hear her say she thought it felt good tore at his senses with a cruel veracity that damn near undid him.

"Roll over," he told her, deciding he would show her the pleasure she would know before taking it himself.

Lana flipped over on the bed as soon as he moved off her. Her long hair fanned over her breasts. It didn't hide the perfect swells and curves and her hard, puckered nipples. Her flat tummy was taut and her breathing came fast as she stared up at him. Lana knew she was about to experience something new and it excited her. The way her scent ripened when she spread her legs on either side of him was almost as sweet as the sight of her glistening pussy.

Dover adjusted himself, scooting down on the bed and enduring the intense tightness in his balls and the weight of his cock as it hung swollen and tight between his legs. Then dragging his hands underneath her legs, stroking her thighs, he watched her

shiver as goose bumps traveled over her flesh. Her nipples hardened even further, making his mouth water.

Lana sucked in a deep breath, watching him with her lips parted.

"I'm going to make you come," he told her, positioning himself with his mouth in front of her pussy and dragging in a deep breath before tasting her.

"Oh God, yes!" Lana cried out, digging her nails into his shoulders and trying to pull him closer when he lashed at her soaked flesh with his tongue.

Dover feasted, drowning in her sensuality while her rich cream soaked his face and filled his mouth. He loved the taste of her, how thick her come was, and how wet she got when he impaled her with his tongue.

He lifted her off the bed, spreading his fingers under her ass and stretching her so she opened farther for him. Then dragging his tongue from her pussy to her ass, he soaked the two holes, lubricating her and teasing and torturing her tight puckered hole.

"Crap, oh crap," Lana hissed, struggling to grab a hold of him, her body convulsing as she fought her orgasm.

"Come for me, little owl," he instructed, continuing his labors and loving the hell out of her reaction to what he was doing to her.

When she moaned, her body quivering while her muscles constricted against his tongue, he knew he had her close. He wanted her exploding, soaking him, and so over the edge that when he entered her she would soak him all over again. Just thinking about it was almost too much. His cock weighed a thousand pounds and his balls were so tight the agony was unbearable. But he held out, doing everything he could to bring her to the point where he wanted her.

And when she let out a final cry, grabbing his hair and tugging while her body stiffened, Lana hit the point of no return. She came so hard fresh cream pooled around her pussy, dripping toward her ass. The view was absolutely incredible. He moved his fingers to her ass, pressing against the tight entrance and allowing her come to soak her there. His blood boiled with the urge to fuck that tight little hole.

"Dover," Lana said on a breath, breathing so hard her breasts wiggled when he raised his gaze to her face.

"You're so beautiful." He licked his lips, tasting her there as he watched her breathe hard and her skin glisten with perspiration.

"And you're very good." She smiled, closing her eyes, and the smell of her happiness mixed with her lust. The combination was erotic as hell.

"You ain't seen nothing yet, my little owl." Dover climbed over her, nipping at one nipple and then the other.

Lana dragged her nails over his shoulders and then into his hair, massaging his scalp and tousling his hair. She hummed her approval when he adored her breasts, wrapping her legs around his thighs and lifting her pussy to his cock. He could feel her

heat, detect her soaked pussy so close to the tip of his cock. She was the best kind of torture there was. An aphrodisiac he couldn't wait to get addicted to.

When he positioned himself at her entrance, it was as if Lana dragged him deep inside. Her muscles constricted around him, soaking him and tugging him into her heat. Dover was lost in her pleasure. There was no controlling his cravings any longer. Thrusting with all he had, he impaled her, driving to the source of her explosive heat.

"My precious little owl," he growled, bringing his face to hers and finding her mouth when his world had become a blur.

Lana wrapped her arms around his neck, pinning his body to hers, and took all he could give her. With each thrust she cried out, letting him know how sensitive her womb was. There was little surprise learning Lana didn't have a lot of exposure to hard, deep sex. But that she enjoyed it as much as she did, taking what he gave her and embracing it as she pulled him in deeper, brought him a pleasure so intense it stole his breath.

He took her, harder and harder, feeling her soak his balls, her come trickling over his flesh as she came for him. Even then, he couldn't let up. He buried himself in her heat, feeling so many tiny muscles constrict around his shaft. Her cries of pleasure drove him on, and the way she held on to him, as if she would slip away if she didn't, added to the intensity of the moment.

As wonderful as her hot little pussy felt, he wanted to complete the experience. No, he needed to complete it. Dover had to show Lana how incredibly perfect they were together. The most intimate of acts, a type of lovemaking he craved but wouldn't perform with just any female, would create a union between them he realized he wanted more with each moment they spent together.

"Lana, I want to fuck your ass," he whispered against her cheek as he slowed the momentum and then focused on her face.

Her hands were tangled in his hair and her legs stretched around her torso. "You'll stop if it hurts." It wasn't a question.

Dover took it as more of a reassurance. He kissed her, tenderly, entering her mouth and dipping into the moist heat there while his cock danced with eager anticipation. Lana moaned as he spasmed inside her. It took more strength than usual to slowly pull out of her and then adjust himself lower against the tight puckered hole that was so soaked with her come.

"I will never hurt you," he promised her.

The haze over Lana's gray eyes faded and she stared at him, studying his face as her expression sobered and then slowly relaxed. When her tongue darted over her lips, moistening them, she nodded once, a slight movement, but all that was needed. He wouldn't do anything with her so intimately without knowing she was completely into it too.

Her eyes were bright as she continued gazing up at him when he pressed his cock against the entrance of her soaked, tight ass. Electricity surged through him, sizzling

him alive and causing every inch of him to tighten to steel. He wouldn't rush through this, although for the life of him, it would be easier to fly through a hurricane than to keep his actions slow and controlled at this point. He embraced the challenge though, needing this to be as perfect for Lana as it would be for him.

"Don't look away," he instructed, his voice a raspy whisper. "I want your attention on me the entire time."

"Just fuck me, Dover. Don't talk. Do it now." There was an anxious edge in her tone, although her soft voice sounded as sultry as always.

It amazed him even as Lana entered into the unknown, willingly taking on something she'd never done before, and wasn't one hundred percent sure about, she showed no fear, no apprehension. Her bravery reflected in everything she did, even sex.

"My little owl, I'm going to fuck you," he growled, and pushed just enough to press past her puckered flesh.

Lana sucked in a quick breath, although she didn't look away from him.

"Exhale," he said, his voice tight as blood boiled in his veins.

Her muscles contracted around the tip of his cock with enough force to squeeze the life out of him. Lights exploded before his eyes, his entire world fading to black other than Lana's flushed face as she stared at him, her flesh glistening with sweat while her breaths came hard.

"Don't stop," she hissed, pressing her teeth together as she tried not to pant. "Do it...now."

He couldn't ignore her demands any longer. Dover pressed deeper into her incredibly tight ass. She wrapped around him with muscles so strong and determined not to be stretched far enough to allow him moving room. He couldn't breathe, could barely see as he burrowed into her ass.

Smooth, incredibly hot, moist flesh stroked his cock, driving him into motion. When he started moving, creating a rhythm and fighting to hold on so he didn't explode before he could even show her the pleasures of anal sex, Lana constricted around him even tighter, damn near draining every bit of strength out of him.

"God damn. Lana." His voice sounded far away to him. He could barely focus on her face. Lana drained every inch of his ability to take his time.

"Fuck me," she demanded. "Fuck me hard. Fast."

"Lana."

"Now, Dover. Fast," she gasped.

As he built momentum, the sleek flesh wrapping around his shaft molded for him. Lana took all he offered, her sizzling ass draining him before he could stop himself.

"Oh God," she howled. "God. Yes!"

Her approval, her acceptance and willingness to take him like this brought his brain to a boil. His balls were so tight they were going to explode. As he started to release inside her, and her cries of need filtered through his brain, he couldn't stop.

"My little owl," he muttered.

"Yes," she whimpered, taking all of him as he filled her with his release.

Chapter Fourteen

Lana rolled over and every muscle in her body complained. She groaned, reaching for the edge of her bed and her legs brushed against solid muscle. Glancing over her shoulder, she stared into Dover's relaxed, peaceful expression.

Crap. They'd spent the night together. Glancing at her alarm clock, it was late enough the nests around her would be awake. They would smell Dover. Her brothers would be told.

She stumbled out of bed, her cold floor taking some of the fog out of her brain. After searching her room a second for Dover's clothes, the events of the night before came back to her. Not necessarily in the order they happened.

Lana stared at Dover's large body sprawled across her bed. His head was in one corner, his feet in the other, dwarfing a bed any other time she would say was rather spacious. His long hair fanned over his broad, muscular shoulders and her comforter covered part of his torso and his long legs. There'd never been a male in her bed before, and mostly all night. Taking a deep breath, memories of their incredible lovemaking the night before hit her hard when she inhaled the thick, pungent aroma of the act still hanging heavy in the air.

As nice as it would be to crawl back under her covers and cuddle up against that large, warm body, it just wasn't a logical move. Sooner than she cared to admit, his scent would be picked up and her nest would be knocking on the door or breaking it down. Lana left Dover in her bed, deciding she would deal with the inevitable when it happened, and headed for the shower.

She wasn't in pain as she thought she might be although, as hot water sprayed over her body, Lana discovered some incredibly tender areas. It reminded her of Dover fucking her in the ass, of how he brought her body to mind-blowing orgasms again and again. Her flesh tingled as she ran the soap over herself and then stood under the shower to rinse.

By the time she dried off, the smell of coffee tickled her nose. Lana wrapped her hair in a towel and another around her body and padded to her bedroom. Her bed was made. Her room was very empty.

"I don't have any clothes for you," she called out, but there wasn't an answer.

Something tightened in her gut when she hurried down her hall, glanced at her empty living room and then stopped short in her kitchen. A fresh pot of coffee stood full in the coffeemaker, there was a clean cup next to it and another cup in her sink. Dover wasn't there.

Lana leaned against her counter, running her finger along the rim of the cup in the sink and then staring into the empty apartment. "Where did you go?" she muttered, speaking out loud as she wondered how he left her apartment. "Obviously through a window," she mused, continuing to talk to herself as she poured coffee and then headed back to her room to get dressed.

After donning a comfortable pair of jeans and a turtleneck that did a decent job of showing off her breasts and narrow waist, Lana brushed out her hair and applied a bit of makeup. Not much, nothing that would make anyone think she had an agenda, but just enough to look good. Her curiosity bit at her though and she gave up on primping to check all the windows, and then finally, on her second cup of coffee, stood in the middle of her living room and breathed in the lingering scent from Dover. At the same time she realized how quiet it was. Not only in her apartment, but there weren't any sounds coming from outside her nest either.

"Wait a minute," she grumbled, nursing her coffee and walking to her apartment door. Stepping outside, she made sure her door was unlocked and then let it shut behind her. She still smelled Dover.

Lana opened her door to grab her cell but then hesitated. Instead, hurrying down the hall to the stairs, she bolted up them to the top floor and to Heath's apartment.

"Heath?" she asked, banging on his door with her fist and then trying the doorknob. It was locked. "Heath?" she called out again, switching hands with her coffee cup and banging harder with her fist. No one answered.

No wonder no one barged in on them this morning. "So let me guess," she mumbled, hurrying to Beel's apartment and then to Rock's. None of her brothers were at their nests.

Was that why Dover left without bothering to say good hunting? She didn't see him being the kind of male who would get shy on her the morning after fucking her the way he had the night before. But if he smelled something in the air... As she stood in the third-floor hallway outside Beel's apartment, her good mood faded. It bugged her when Dover disappeared on her while she showered. Granted, she hadn't wanted him coming in and trying to shower with her. She'd wanted that bit of space before seeing him after last night. But a good hunting, or see you soon, anything, would have been better than flying out her window without a word.

Now, as she stood alone in the hallway gripping her almost-empty cup of coffee, she started feeling jilted. Something was up. Dover got wind of it, flew out to tend to matters and left her without a word.

"And I bet he thinks he can fly right back in my window when he's done and expect me to lay my kill at his feet," she hissed.

"What did you say?" Marcia Reed, one of the few owls not related to her and living in the parliament, stood in her opened doorway, balancing a laundry basket full of clothes that held a pungent, stale odor of sex and beer. She tilted her head and puckered her full, red lips as she stared at Lana.

"Nothing. Good hunting, Marcia." Lana started down the hall, the last thing she wanted was Marcia hooting to the other females how Lana stood in the hallway talking to herself.

"Wait a minute." Marcia let her apartment door close behind her and hurried to catch up with Lana, both her arms wrapped around her full laundry basket. "Did you hear all the commotion early this morning?"

"What time?" Lana held the door to the stairs for Marcia, resigned to the fact she'd be walking down the stairs with her. The laundry room for those without washers and dryers was on the first floor.

"Maybe an hour ago. I don't see how you missed it. Your brothers were in a frenzy organizing the males and telling them where to fly." Marcia paused in the stairwell before descending the final flight of stairs. She sniffed the air while giving Lana a scrutinizing once-over. "Was that new male in town with you? God, girl, he's hot as hell."

"What male is that?" Lana headed down the stairs in front of Marcia.

"The tall male, the one on the Harley. Holy crap, when I saw him leaving with the others this morning I damn near wet my panties." Marcia giggled at her own crudeness.

Lana bit her lower lip, forcing herself not to demand to know how Marcia knew the male leaving this morning drove a Harley. But then she damn near stumbled over her feet on the final steps. Dover left without clothes. If Marcia saw him with the others, and possibly with his bike, it meant Dover flew to get his bike, got dressed and then returned to the complex. He hauled ass to do all that while Lana showered, which meant there had to be one hell of a reason for him to move so quickly.

"I didn't hear any of this." She maintained her composure, keeping her emotions trapped where they belonged as she held the door for Marcia. "It must have all happened while I was showering." There was no way she'd satisfy that smell of curiosity on Marcia by asking about Dover. Her pride wouldn't allow it. "But I was a bit confused when all of my brothers were gone. Do you know where they went?"

Marcia stopped when she entered the first floor hallway and faced Lana, her eyes glowing with excitement. The satisfaction brimming in the air around them offered proof Marcia loved thinking she knew something Lana didn't.

"They were all seriously worked up about it all," she began, adjusting her basket on her hip as she spoke in a hushed whisper. "You seriously missed out. All those males shaking their tail feathers." Marcia hummed her approval and wagged her eyebrows.

Lana forced herself to stay put. More than anything she ached to fly out and find Dover, find her brothers, and learn where the hell they disappeared to and why she wasn't informed. Her concern before that Dover left without a word now turned to outrage. And if he thought when this was all over he would just fly back through her window...

"It sounds like it." She was damn proud of herself for keeping her tone neutral and her scent pleasant.

Marcia's smile faded. "Apparently it's about the fight last night."

"With the leopards?" Lana stopped herself, unsure of what Marcia already knew and not wanting to offer information that might not be parliament knowledge.

"Yeah, they flew out to stop several litters from buying some of the buildings downtown. If the leopards succeed quite a few nests will be out of work. Of course that won't affect your nest."

"Yeah it would," Lana muttered, deciding not to point out how her nest was obviously already affected by it or they would be here. Of course she was still here but that was only because apparently there were several males, well four to be exact, who needed a few of their feathers adjusted for thinking she wasn't competent enough to be included in helping protect their parliament. "Good hunting, Marcia."

"Good hunting," Marcia said, sounding confused.

Lana almost made it to her apartment before Marcia hurried to catch up with her. She no longer carried her laundry basket and grabbed Lana's arm, letting go when Lana turned to face her.

"You've got to tell me," she said, sounding winded while her gray eyes glowed with excitement. "The male on the Harley. I smell someone on you. Was it him? Is he any good? I thought I might let him fly after me."

It was too quick, too unexpected. Although, if she'd been thinking Lana should have anticipated Marcia would try shaking her tail feathers for Dover. Marcia went after any male she thought she might have a shot at. But Lana was taken off-guard and said the first thing that came to mind.

"You're not going to fly after him. And he will not fly after you. Is that understood?" she asked coolly.

Marcia's jaw dropped and she stepped backward. "Fine. I see. Good hunting."

Lana nodded, entering her apartment and managing not to slam her door shut. "God damn it," she hissed, dragging her fingers through her still-damp hair as she stalked to the middle of her living room. She put her coffee cup on her coffee table and then scowled at it. Marcia would be on her phone, telling anyone who would listen how Lana just spoke for Dover. Every nest in Banff would know before sundown.

Crap. And after he just flew out of her nest as if he had the right to fuck her the way he did and then leave. Lana put her hands on her head, groaning, and squeezed her eyes shut. Dwelling on gossip that hadn't flown the coop yet was a waste of time. The males were flying out to protect their parliament and she had every intention of joining them.

"So where did they go?" she asked herself, pacing her living room with her head in her hands. "They went to stop a couple of buildings downtown from being bought."

Lana stopped, snapping her fingers in the air, and smiled, breathing in the still-thick smell of Dover and then feeling the tender muscles in her body as she did. She hated how her insides warmed, images from the night before playing back in her mind

in spite of her efforts to make them stop. Dover flew out on her, and to assist with the parliament, without thinking she needed to know. That wasn't the type of male she wanted by her side for the rest of her life. Yet remembering what he did to her last night got her so hot she barely managed her next step without feeling moisture pool between her legs.

"Damn him." She balled her fists at her side, forcing herself to focus on what she'd just learned from Marcia and to use logic to figure out her next move.

Marcia asked about the male on the Harley. She told her everyone was in an uproar this morning. Marcia saw them all leave. She saw Dover leave with them. And they were flying out to prevent leopards from buying buildings.

"Which they would probably have to do in their flesh." And that explained why Marcia saw Dover leaving with the rest of them. He'd flown to get clothes and drove back on his Harley. "All while I was showering."

Lana picked her coffee cup off the coffee table and took it to the kitchen, setting it in the sink next to the cup Dover must have used. She turned off her coffeemaker. Then hurrying to grab her purse, she put her phone into it, grabbed her keys, slipped her shoes on her feet, and then left her apartment, locking her door behind her. It wasn't that long of a walk to downtown. If she hurried, she could catch up with the males and make it very clear they would not leave her out of matters involving their nest again. Not if any of them wanted to fly straight again.

* * * * *

Dover's bike was easy to spot when Lana reached downtown. What surprised her was Heath's black SUV was parked right next to it. She immediately spotted several other cars she recognized as well in nearby stalls. Pausing on the corner and catching her breath after almost sprinting downtown, Lana glanced at nearby buildings, guessing which one they might be in.

Her Uncle Reece and Aunt Opal drove by and Aunt Opal rolled her window down and waved at Lana. "Has the town meeting started yet?" she called out.

Lana grit her jaw, staring at her aunt for a moment and biting back anger that gnawed at her with mounting fury. "I'm not sure. I just got here," she said truthfully.

"Wait for us," Aunt Opal said, and then rolled her window up.

Lana didn't have a problem with that. Her aunt and uncle parked and then approached her, the older owls walking side by side and looking somewhat ruffled when they approached.

"It always takes your aunt forever to get ready," Uncle Reece teased when they were by her side.

"I'm not going to such an important meeting with my feathers in a fuss." Aunt Opal smiled at Lana. "Why are you here alone?"

"No one waited for me while I got ready," she bit out before catching herself.

"Males don't come to us with their feathers all in order and pretty," Aunt Opal offered. "You need to train them to behave properly. Give it time, little fledgling, your male will learn to honor you by waiting."

"Which building is this meeting in?" Uncle Reece started toward double doors in a brick building next to them.

"When I first met your Uncle Reece, he thought he could fly wherever he wanted and I would sit and keep his nest warm." Aunt Opal wrapped her arm around Lana's and followed her mate, who appeared to know exactly where he was going.

"I can't live like that," Lana admitted, nodding to her uncle, whose expression was solemn as he held the door for her and her aunt. "I won't have a male who will fly the coop the second I turn my back on him."

"That's right. You won't." Aunt Opal patted her arm and led them across a large foyer.

Glass walls made it easy to see which door they needed. A large group of owls she recognized, including her brothers, were in the room. When Uncle Reece reached around her and her aunt and pulled open the heavy wooden door, the noise level rose drastically.

"Oh my," Aunt Opal said, turning to her mate and letting go of Lana.

She followed her aunt and uncle until they reached a long table where several of her cousins immediately jumped up and insisted the two of them sit. Lana continued on, finding space along the wall where others stood.

The atmosphere in the room bordered on hostile. In spite of two of the walls being glass, there was still a claustrophobic sensation Lana found hard to kick even when she focused on the small group of males and females sitting at a long table at the front of the room. Others seemed to be presenting their argument to this small group.

After spotting Heath and Beel, the next thing Lana noticed was the leopards and humans. One of the women sitting behind the table was human. The way she sat, with her hands clasped and leaning her chin against them with her elbows perched on the table, she appeared anything but nervous to be stuck in this room with owls and leopards. If anything, she seemed barely tolerant while listening to the leopard who stood facing her and the others at the group of tables as he presented an argument.

An older male, probably in his forties, and a great hawk owl Lana recognized as one of the shop owners from downtown leaned into the human female from time to time, whispering something she only nodded at. Two other owls, a mated couple who owned and ran one of the more successful restaurants downtown, sat on the other side of the human. If this human female was the mediator for this rambunctious crowd, there would be trouble.

Lana did a quick glance through the crowd, avoiding eye contact with any leopard she saw. There was no sign of Dover.

"I don't see how having leases for your shops has any bearing on the owner of the building deciding to sell it to another owner."

Lana snapped her attention back to the human when she spoke.

"We've made the building owner a very generous offer," the leopard facing the table said, rocking up on his heels.

There was no way she could pick up individual scents in such a large group, but she was sure she smelled the pompous stench coming off the leopard. He had a lot of nerve standing there surrounded by owls and roaring as if he were the only one who mattered.

The human female shuffled through paperwork on the table in front of her. "And the owner isn't present, correct?"

"The owner of this building and several other buildings downtown is actually a corporation," Heath pointed out, stepping around several owls and making his way to the table next to where the leopard stood. "There are several nests who run businesses in those buildings, the one in question being one of them, and rely on that business to pay their bills, and have for several generations now. These are prominent businesses in Banff."

"I'm aware of the stores downtown and how long some of them have been there," the human said, interrupting Heath. "And with the shops having leases, why do the tenants care if the building is sold?"

"The new owners would terminate the leases," Heath said, silencing the room.

Lana again searched the meeting room, trying to see around those standing to see who sat in the chairs around the other tables that lined the room. She'd guess at least thirty people stood in the room, owls, leopards and humans. She spotted the nest of the male who sat next to the human at the front of the room, the fledglings she'd seen bussing tables or just loitering in the popular restaurant. It was a good-sized nest with a fair amount of young ones. They were all present, standing tall, their expressions relaxed and their eyes large as they watched the proceedings that would affect the rest of their lives.

Down the wall from where Lana stood, on the other side of the door, an older lady who owned a clothing store stood alone, her hands clasped in front of her. The loose-fitting paisley dress she wore didn't do justice to her pretty figure. For an older owl, Lana always thought the female would have every available male flying after her. Lana knew she was a widow and lived in an empty nest. Maybe she would be the only one affected if her store were taken from her. But it still would be wrong.

"What proof do you have of this?" the human female asked then tilted her head and frowned at the leopard standing silently in front of her. "Do you intend to terminate their leases?" she asked.

Again the room grew quiet, everyone watching the male leopard and waiting for his answer. When he smiled, Lana swore his teeth were sharper than they should be. He reined in his anger but possibly the adrenaline pumping through him as he prepared for his attack caused the change to simmer with anticipation.

"Once we establish ownership, every tenant will be offered a lease to sign," he began.

"A lease with rent so high no one will be able to remain where they are," Heath finished for him. "We've already heard him howl his accusations."

"And that would be very unfortunate," the human female said, raising her voice when everyone in the room started voicing their opinion. "I'm as aware of the stores in question as the rest of you are. And I've lived here with my family just as long as many of you have. Losing a business is very tough on a family or a nest or a litter and not something we wish on anyone. But if the corporation is willing to sell to this...man," she said, waving her hand at the male leopard, "then there isn't really a lot we can do about it. He isn't breaking the law. It would be nice though if you were to put something in writing assuring these businesses will be able to keep their doors open."

As she finished speaking the door opened with enough force at least several owls hurried to move out of the way. Dover stormed into the room, barely noticing how everyone parted, creating a path so he could easily approach the front of the room.

"It would be nice if the leopards put something in writing," Dover announced, his dark, deep baritone causing chills to rush over Lana's flesh.

She glanced around the room, curious how everyone else reacted to him. More than likely every single female, and maybe even a few mated ones, would respond to him the way Marcia did, willingly fantasizing how he would treat them in bed. The thought made Lana's blood boil.

"But having just been in contact with the owners of the building, as well as the real estate agent negotiating the terms, the leopards have not done that. In fact have no intentions of doing that. They will raise the rent and force the existing businesses to close their doors so that new businesses, those run by leopards, can take their place."

"I'd like you to prove that," the leopard snarled, curling his lip as he growled at Dover.

Dover wasn't daunted. "I don't have to prove it."

"Actually—" the human female began.

Dover raised his hand, silencing her. It wasn't an aggressive move but relaxed. His expression amiable as he stood tall, his hair still damp and pulled behind his head in a neat ponytail. He wore jeans as he always did and a clean dark blue shirt, one that accented the color of his hair and showed off the incredibly captivating gray eyes that now turned and took in everyone in the room. He rested his gaze on hers for only a moment before addressing the room. It was long enough to cause her insides to sizzle.

"I don't have to prove it because the owners aren't going to sell the building to the leopards."

"What?" someone gasped.

Lana hated how her body reacted to his compelling nature. Dover would save the lives of many owls today. Already she saw how he soothed feathers throughout the

room. She didn't like the thought that he'd be able to soothe her feathers too, make her easily forgive him for flying the coop on her without so much as a good hunting. And if she let him get away with it today, he'd continue doing it, not once giving thought to how it might affect her. Dover would be too focused on keeping peace among the parliament as a whole.

"Unlike this community, where I come from, leopards and owls get along, fly and run together." Dover gave his attention to the human female. "We move among humans with respect and without hostility."

She nodded once, a small smile on her face. Even the human wasn't immune to his charm. Dover looked away from the human as quickly as he'd focused on her, again addressing the room. His expression was relaxed, his stance casual, and his presence overwhelming. All traits Lana doubted Dover gave a thought to. He worked for the greater whole and didn't fly with an attitude simply because females tripped over themselves to get closer to him. More than likely Dover never gave thought to how many females he could so easily have.

"And unlike this community, in other towns around the country, leopards have resettled after moving here from the States knowing they needed to pay their dues. They know they are starting over and that their litters will have to work again to possess what they once had. Here, however, for some reason, leopards have sniffed out what they believe is an easy way to move to the top of the ladder without having to fight for it. That behavior messes with the natural food chain we all respect and honor." Dover turned on the still-snarling leopard. "You won't buy that building today. I think you'll find it's no longer for sale. There are some communities nearby who would strongly benefit from litters settling with enough money to help their struggling community. Banff doesn't need you here."

The hoots that followed were so loud they were deafening. Owls closed in around Dover, patting him on the back and shaking his hand. Lana barely saw the male leopard push his way through the group and leave the room. She had half a mind to follow him, not to chase after the leopard but to return to her nest. Dover would have his feathers poofed out too far for anything she had to say to affect him right now.

And he deserved his moment of glory. Lana had no desire to deny him that. At the same time she wouldn't ignore her own feelings, not this time. Too often she slid them under the carpet, into that neat spot in her brain where they were protected and unable to cause her any pain. She'd spent her entire life, since she was a fledgling, learning how to control them and maintain peace in her head. The more relaxed her mind, the clearer her thoughts and more attentive she was to the world around her.

Slowly she moved toward the door until she was able to slip outside into the foyer where already quite a few owls loitered, talking among themselves. The happiness in the air seemed to make the large entry area brighter.

"I'd love to say I had great insight when I had him agree to fly after you," Beel said, putting his hand on Lana's back as he moved to stand by her side.

"Too late," she said, smiling, and refusing to let her apprehension or worries show at the moment. They would be too easily picked up on in this jovial setting. "You've already told me you were a snake."

Beel wasn't swayed by her insult and in fact grinned along with her. "He's a good male, Lana. I'll argue that to the point of blood if needed."

"That won't be needed, I'm sure."

"And I'll publicly announce my false intentions and allow Dover to state if he wishes to fly after you without being coerced," he added softly, his smile fading. "If that would make you happy."

Her efforts to hide her fears weren't good enough, not around her perceptive brother. Lana would be damned if she'd humiliate herself in front of almost every nest she knew.

"Unfortunately, the happiness needed to make a good nest isn't something you can give me," she said, placing her hand flat on her brother's chest and staring into his concerned gaze. "That is only something a mate who would love me and respect me for life can offer."

Beel nodded, putting his larger hand over hers. "And you'll get that, Lana. I have no doubts."

Several of Beel's friends joined them, all talking at the same time with the consensus being, within moments, that they hit the bar and start drinking. Lana was able to ease away from them, ending the delicate conversation. If she didn't know better though, Beel just told her he knew she would also fight for what was right. Dover wasn't the only one who saw how things should be and flew with no limits to make sure it played out that way. Lana also knew there was only one acceptable way to fly for her. What she didn't know was if Dover would be able to fly alongside her if she flew in that direction.

Chapter Fifteen

Dark clouds hung low around the mountains and a mist soaked through Dover's shirt before he slipped his jacket on. He hadn't wanted to go to the bar, especially when he noticed Lana had left, but there was no getting out of it. After calling Lana twice and both times it going to voice mail, he grew anxious to get out of there. Everyone's scent had changed around him. He now received a warm welcome into the community and a few offers to fly after females in several different nests. The only female on his mind appeared to not want to talk to him. And her brothers were no help in speculating why that might be.

He pulled the towel out from under his seat and wiped off the leather before climbing onto his bike. Thunder rumbled and lightning clapped across the sky as he rumbled his Harley to life. Ignoring the females who clucked their tongues at him, Dover backed out of his stall and headed toward the apartment complex.

His insides hardened with anticipation as he neared Lana's. Dover refused to speculate on why Lana hadn't taken his calls when he tried reaching her after leaving the city hall meeting and then later after he'd been at the bar for a while. There were too many possible reasons why she hadn't answered. He would know the truth soon enough. More than that though, he would be with Lana. Just thinking about her made his dick painfully hard as it pressed against his jeans.

Dover parked in front of her apartment complex as the mist turned to sleet. The tiny pellets of bitter cold, chunky rain did little to cool the heat that swelled inside him as he entered her building and started for the stairs.

His boots made thudding sounds when he started down her hallway, which he was sure announced his presence to more than just Lana. Dover breathed in a gulp of air, longing to fill his lungs with her scent. A montage of odors hit him, none of them being from his little owl.

Dover knocked on her door, and when she didn't answer, tried her doorknob.

"She isn't there," an older owl informed him as she stepped out of the apartment next to Lana's.

"Forgive me if I disturbed you," he offered solemnly, straightening as he faced the older female. She was tall with silver hair that wrapped around her head in a loose bun. The plain yellow smock she wore hung on her bony figure and although her wrinkled face was gaunt, something in her expression reminded him of Lana. Dover guessed they were related. "Do you know where I can find her?"

"You aren't going to find her."

Dover stiffened, acutely aware of the female's shrewd stare and strangely feeling he would be condemned of some test if he responded in any way to her statement.

"You aren't going to find her because you aren't going to look for her." The older female left her doorway and approached him, sticking her long, bony fingers into a large pocket on her smock and pulling out a folded piece of paper.

His chest constricted, making it hard to suck in his next breath as he stared at the folded piece of paper. There was no doubt he wouldn't like what it was going to say. She handed it to him and he accepted it, his fingers damp as he unfolded it.

"There are certain things all females need in order to fly with honor," the old female said, watching his hands as he straightened the paper. "Mainly, we need to be honored. Lana has made the right choice. Now let's see if you do the same."

Nothing she said made any sense. And as he stared at the neatly printed message on the paper, it made even less sense. He fought the urge to crumple the paper up and throw it as he read it a second time.

Dover –

You are released from your agreement to fly after me. The request for you to do so and your response at the time were made under misleading circumstances. There is no way we can fly with honor when the terms of our relationship are devised under less-honorable conditions.

Lana Halk

"Where is she?" Dover demanded, crumpling the paper in his fist and feeling the corners of the paper poke against his palm when he made a fist.

The older female remained standing tall, facing him, her relaxed expression probably one she'd held on to for so many years she wouldn't be able to show an emotion if she tried.

"With all due respect," he began.

"There can be no respect when no formal introductions have been made."

Dover nodded once, conceding. "You are right," he said. "I am Dover Down and would be honored to know your nest."

"You already know it." She clasped her hands in front of her. "I am Olathe Baker but Lana calls me Aunt Oley and you may do the same."

She was allowing him to address her as her nest did, which meant she believed he would be part of this nest.

"Aunt Oley," he said, having a harder time controlling his emotions than usual. "Please tell Lana she knows where to find me when she's ready to talk to me."

Aunt Oley stared at him, not saying a word. Dover nodded and turned, his muscles constricting and his gut churning as he walked down the hallway to the stairs.

* * * * *

Lana did all she could not to crash against the wall when she heard Aunt Oley returning to her apartment. Her aunt entered, closed the door behind her and walked past Lana to her kitchen. Her apartment had the same layout as Lana's but the older furniture, a darker paint on the wall and the never-ending smell of nutmeg and coffee gave the nest a warm, dark atmosphere Lana's apartment didn't have. When Aunt Oley didn't return, Lana followed her into the kitchen.

"Maybe I should..."

"You're not going after him." Aunt Oley took a deep pot out of the cabinet and placed it in her sink and then started filling it with water. "That wouldn't be logical after the steps you've taken to ensure a happy nest."

"I don't feel very logical right now," Lana mumbled.

Aunt Oley didn't smile. Lana wasn't sure she ever had. But when the old owl turned and studied her face, Lana swore the old owl's expression relaxed more than usual.

"Then everything will work out as you want," Aunt Oley said in an uncharacteristically soft voice.

Lana couldn't take her aunt being so nice, so compassionate. It was why she came to Aunt Oley instead of Aunt Opal. Now she wasn't sure she'd made the right move. The second she told her aunt she needed help, needed to know what to do, Aunt Oley took matters into her own claws. Aunt Oley had a sharp beak, even for an old bird. She'd told Lana to write down what was in her heart, what she wanted Dover to know more than anything. She'd told Lana writing it down would save her emotions.

Lana tried doing it, typing out the note to Dover on her computer and then bringing it to her aunt. Aunt Oley hadn't even looked at it but folded it and put it in the large pocket on her smock. When they'd heard Dover coming down the hall, her aunt told her to stay put and went and spoke to Dover. Lana hadn't been able to keep herself from the door and had heard every word.

Aunt Oley tricked her, but confronting her about it wouldn't get Lana anywhere. The overwhelming urge to fly after Dover and tell him what her aunt did to her made it hard to stay put. She paced from one end of the small kitchen and then back to the doorway, chewing her fingernail when Aunt Oley went back to what she was doing at the sink.

"How exactly does an owl know what they want for the rest of their lives?" Lana demanded, tapping her finger over her moist lips while staring at Aunt Oley's backside.

"If you didn't know you wouldn't be so upset right now."

Her aunt wasn't making a bit of sense. "I'm curious for answers. I'm not upset."

Aunt Oley's deep clucking sound reminded Lana of her mother's sound when she'd had her say on a matter. What she wouldn't do to have her mother by her side right

now. Although, knowing her mom, she would only complicate matters more. And they were complicated enough already.

"I guess I'll head back to my apartment. Thank you for everything." Lana put her hands on her aunt's thin shoulders and hugged her from behind.

"You can't. I need help making lunch. Your brothers will all be here in an hour. Grab the steaks out of the refrigerator and lay them out for me."

Lana wouldn't pout and actually found helping with the mundane tasks helped keep her focused. When her brothers trailed in her aunt's door, her other aunt and uncle trailing behind them and a few of her cousins, helping to turn the small, cozy apartment into a boisterous environment, Lana found her mind wandering again. It didn't take long to learn where Dover had spent some of his time since he'd left the building.

"What's this all about?" Heath asked, shoving a crumpled piece of paper at her.

Lana took it, unwrinkling it and then staring at the fancy font she'd chosen to type her note. "He gave this to you?" Her voice cracked, too many emotions surfacing at once that she couldn't control.

"He accused us of making you write it." Beel pointed at the letter. "Why did you give this to him?"

"I want him to want me because he wants me, not because he was tricked into flying after me."

Beel let out a breath and ran his hand over his hair, shooting Heath a condemning glare before turning to Lana.

Heath spoke before Beel could say what he wanted.

"You had him and sent him flying, Lana." Heath's hard stare only pissed her off.

"You never wanted him flying after me anyway," she shot back, intentionally keeping her tone soft and pleasant. When she raised one eyebrow, Heath's gaze narrowed in on her. Lana wouldn't let him control her though. "And I didn't write that note because of what you wanted or didn't want."

"I have no doubts. Maybe it was you who weren't ready to start a nest."

His words hit her harder than she thought anything he could say to her would.

"That's something I would know, not you." She moved around him, greeting her cousins when they wished her good hunting.

The smell in the room changed, turning concerned and curious. Although they'd kept their voices low, it was a small apartment. Sometimes that sucked, coming from such a large group of nests, in that Lana couldn't keep her problems to herself. Granted she'd talked to her aunts about it. But they didn't need to squawk the gossip of her love life to the entire parliament. Her aunts, uncle and cousins studied her now with pity she couldn't stomach, all because they probably eavesdropped on her conversation just now with Heath and Beel.

"That owl doesn't deserve you anyway," Rock announced, his booming baritone silencing the room.

Lana wanted to fly out of the room and get as far away from all of them as she could. Hell, she wanted to find Dover, learn what was really on his mind.

"He shoved that note at Heath and had the nerve to glare at all of us and accuse us of manipulating your decisions," Rock continued. "He said he wanted a relationship with you and not your entire nest."

"He said he wanted a relationship with me?" Lana asked, staring Rock down, although suddenly he went dumb on her, obviously refusing to say another word. "Aunt Oley, Aunt Opal, good hunting. I need to go."

"Lana, you'll stay and eat with us." Aunt Oley used a tone Lana had never argued with in the past.

"I can't," she whispered, backing toward the door.

Heath tilted his head, turning his attention from her first. But then Lana heard it too. A rumbling sound, coming from outside, as if a motorcycle just pulled up in front of the building. Instead of heading out the door, Lana hurried past her brothers, heading for her aunt's kitchen where a small window faced the front of the building. Dover climbed off his bike, his long silver blond hair in a ponytail, streaming down his broad back. When he turned and headed toward her building, his determined, brooding expression made her heart skip a beat.

Lana hurried out of the kitchen. He hadn't flown away after reading that note. It didn't chase him away. There were things to talk about, words he must say, but he was back, and for now that was enough to make her heart soar.

"You can't fly after him," Aunt Opal said. "Remember what I told you earlier."

"That's right. You stay put. A male flies after a female, not the other way around."

"I need to talk to him alone. And he did fly after me. He's back." Lana hurried to the door before any of them could physically stop her. She closed the apartment door quietly behind her as she stepped out into the hallway. At the same time she heard determined stomps coming up the flight of stairs at the end of the hallway.

Dover came through the door, his expression more determined than she'd ever seen it. He stalked her, approaching with a steady, solid pace as his boots created a steady beat on the hallway floor. He was so tall, so muscular with his broad shoulders and muscles stretching the t-shirt he wore. Lana's body overheated, fire igniting in her womb and creating a pressure she couldn't control. It damn near made her weak in the knees.

"Where are your brothers?" he asked, slowing when he was several feet from her.

Lana pointed over her shoulders. "My aunt fixed lunch for our nest."

"Good." He approached but then moved around her, not touching her.

"What are you doing?" she asked, trying to come between him and the door when he raised his hand to knock.

Dover took her arm and physically placed her next to him and at the same time rapped on the door. Her Uncle Reece opened the door almost immediately, but then stepped backward while her brothers closed in as they stared hard at Dover.

"I wish to speak with you," Dover said, his baritone rumbling. He let go of Lana and let his hands fall to his side, standing tall enough he filled the doorway. Dover didn't enter though but stood firm where he was. "We need to talk about Lana."

Heath crossed his arms over his chest and Rock did the same. Beel tried moving around his brothers. "There's nothing to discuss as I see it," he growled. "You accused us of telling her what to do."

Lana shoved her fists against her hips, ready to remind Rock of how many times he'd tried controlling how she flew.

Heath held up his hand. And although Rock was almost in front of him, apparently he saw the movement because he snapped his mouth shut, almost snarling at Dover.

"Say what you came to say," Heath ordered.

"I've come to formally ask your permission to fly after Lana," Dover said, his tone quieter than it had been a moment before.

Lana froze. If she hadn't she was sure her jaw would have dropped to the floor. Staring at Dover's profile, she knew she gawked at his determined expression. Soft hair was pulled back from his face, allowing her to see his strong nose, the high curve of his cheekbones, and the flat line he'd pressed his lips into. Not once did he take his attention off Heath, but instead stood tall, proud, as if he were an ancient warrior, settling a score with a male who could be a strong ally.

"You will honor her?" Heath asked, his face more grave than usual.

"Yes." Dover didn't hesitate.

"She comes from a proud nest."

Dover nodded. "It shows in the way she flies."

Heath continued studying Dover, as if the one word was just too much for him to spit out. When Lana thought she would scream from the lingering silence, Heath looked at her.

"Is this what you want?"

His question surprised her but when she nodded, unwilling to speak and her voice crack from the emotions spilling over each other inside her, Heath exhaled slowly, almost looking sad.

"Very well, you have her nest's permission."

There were shrieks behind Heath in the apartment. Apparently Lana wasn't the only one waiting with bated breath for the request to be honored. Immediately Aunt Oley and Aunt Opal started chattering at the same time, announcing what work needed done for a nesting party.

"You honor me," Dover said solemnly. "Good hunting to your nest."

"Good hunting," Heath muttered.

Dover had turned from Heath already and once again reached for Lana. "Let's go," he said, holding her arm and guiding her down the hall.

"Where are we going?" she asked when they walked past her apartment and she let him guide her to the stairs.

Dover didn't answer her. In fact, he didn't say a word as he guided her down the stairs. Lana pulled away from him when they stepped outside. Gripping her hair at her nape to keep it from blowing in her face, she squinted against the freezing rain when Dover walked to his bike parked at the curb.

"Why did you leave this morning without saying anything to me?" she asked.

Dover had pulled his gloves out of his pockets but now held them, staring at them for a moment before lifting his captivating gray eyes to her.

"Is that why you wrote that note?"

Lana shook her head, ready to explain her aunt had her write it without telling her what she'd do with it. But she needed to stay focused and make him answer her question first.

"I won't have a mate who comes and goes as he pleases and expects me to keep his nest happy and warm for him."

"Would you want a mate who demanded to know where you went and who you were with every time you left your nest?"

"Of course not."

Lana didn't feel the cold sleet pounding her head and cheeks any longer when she stared into Dover's deep, intense eyes. He didn't say anything but instead cocked an eyebrow, letting her take her time digesting his words.

"So," Lana began, choosing her words carefully because this was important and would make a big difference on which way their relationship developed. "You're saying there's no difference between walking out of a nest without so much as a good hunting and having to account for where you're going, how long you'll be gone and when you'll be back."

"Lana. This morning your nest needed me. They called me. It was a desperate situation and owls don't draw blood to solve their problems, not unless we're attacked."

"We were being attacked. All the nests in Banff have worked so hard for what we have."

"I see that." Dover slapped his gloves against his hand as he walked closer. To many he would appear a very intimidating owl. His size and all the black leather he donned, not to mention his choice of transportation, would cause many who didn't take the time to know him believe he would attack first and ask questions later. Already it was clear he wasn't that kind of owl. He wasn't a rogue. Dover was everything honor and integrity was made of. "And I saw a chance to fight alongside your nest, prove

myself to them and therefore win their respect so they would welcome me with open wings and allow me to be with their sister.”

She was touched by his words. It must have been obvious. Dover closed the distance between them, his large frame blocking a bit of the icy wind that tried wrapping around her. Even the sleet though did little more than sizzle against her feverish flesh. In spite of needing to win this discussion, her need for Dover didn't subside. If anything, when he cupped her cheek with his bare hand, a swelling formed deep inside her womb, immediately causing cream to pool in her pussy. She shifted, rubbing the seam of her jeans against her clit and sucked in a breath, reacting from the intimate touch of fabric.

“Your point is taken,” he whispered, his voice suddenly rough.

“It bothered me when I got out of the shower and you were gone without a word.”

“My sweet little owl,” he murmured, brushing his lips against hers. “I won't leave your side again without you knowing it.”

“I will offer the same promise,” she muttered, aching for him to pull her into his arms.

Apparently Dover was a mind reader. He wrapped his arm around her and escorted her to his bike. Dover climbed on, helping her climb on behind him. Then he took off so quickly Lana didn't have time to worry about the biting cold or heavy mist in the air. She wrapped her arms around his thick chest, hugging his backside while clamping down against her outer thighs with her legs.

She pressed her cheek against his smooth leather jacket, breathing in the smell of it and the smell of Dover. His scent was as strong as his body, dominating, aggressive and compelling. It drew her in and made it hard to remember what needed said. Already her body screamed for him. She ached to have him inside her, relieving the pressure that swelled beyond being a distraction.

When she lifted her head and tried moving one of her hands to brush her hair from her face, Dover grabbed it, placing it against his stomach with her other hand and then covering both of them with his larger, warm, strong hand. Lana ducked her head, unable to see as her hair whipped around her face. His large body blocked the wind although sleet slapped against her cheek, stinging her already feverish skin.

Dover slowed and turned, and the pavement became bumpy as he crawled around potholes and finally parked.

“Let's get inside. It's almost too cold to be on a bike today.” Dover spoke as he almost lifted her off his bike and placed her down on a sidewalk running along the outside of one of the motels on the edge of Banff. He pulled a card out of his back pocket and slid it along the lock on the door to his room.

Lana's heart fluttered in her chest when she entered the room that smelled so completely of Dover. A couple of shirts she recognized him wearing the past few days were lying over one of the two chairs pushed under the table by the window.

"There are decisions to make, but for now I've paid a monthly rate to stay in this room. After that, maybe I'll take you to see my nest in Kenora if you like."

Lana wondered what Dover's nest would look like. If his room was any indication, it wasn't impeccably neat, but at the same time, he obviously wasn't a slob.

"I think I would like that," she said, taking in the large king-sized bed, neatly made with a colorful thick blanket stretched tightly across the bed and large pillows stacked over each other and leaning against the headboard.

A long mirror hung on the wall opposite the bed and a desk, with a laptop that hadn't been opened, rested on the desk. Lana wasn't sure she wanted to see herself in that mirror right now, not with her hair damp and tousled from their ride in the sleet.

The room was spacious with a microwave resting on top of a small refrigerator and a second table before the vanity leading into the bathroom. A coffee cup and coffeemaker were on that table along with a bunch of scattered pages. Everywhere she looked held Dover's touch, his scent and, oddly enough, even though it was a rented nest, it gave her the oddest sensation of coming home. All her life all she'd known was that apartment complex her parents owned, her parliament of safety. Somehow now, with Dover standing next to her, the urge to explore the world, to learn what was out there and fly as far as her wings could take her, sounded more appealing than it ever had.

"What do you want to do first?" Dover asked, wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing the side of her neck.

"I'm doing it," she told him, arching her back over his front and then stretching her arms over her head to hug him. "I'm with you, and that's what I wanted."

"Lana, you're making me fall in love with you."

She laughed, loving the sound of that one word coming out his mouth, in spite of how strained it sounded. More than likely Dover didn't use that word very much and that appealed to her even more.

"You're not making me fall in love with you."

"I'm not?" He sounded surprised.

"Nope. I think I can do that all by myself."

"Why you little owl," Dover growled, sweeping her off her feet too fast for her to defend herself.

She laughed when he tossed her on the bed, knowing life with Dover would be perfect.

About the Author

All my life, I've wondered at how people fall into the routines of life. The paths we travel seem to be well-trodden by society. We go to school, fall in love, find a line of work (and hope and pray it is one we like), have children and do our best to mold them into good people who will travel the same path. This is the path so commonly referred to as the "real world".

The characters in my books are destined to stray down a different path than the one society suggests. Each story leads the reader into a world altered slightly from the one they know. For me, this is what good fiction is about, an opportunity to escape from the daily grind and wander down someone else's path.

Lorie O'Clare lives in Kansas with her three sons.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can e-mail us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

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