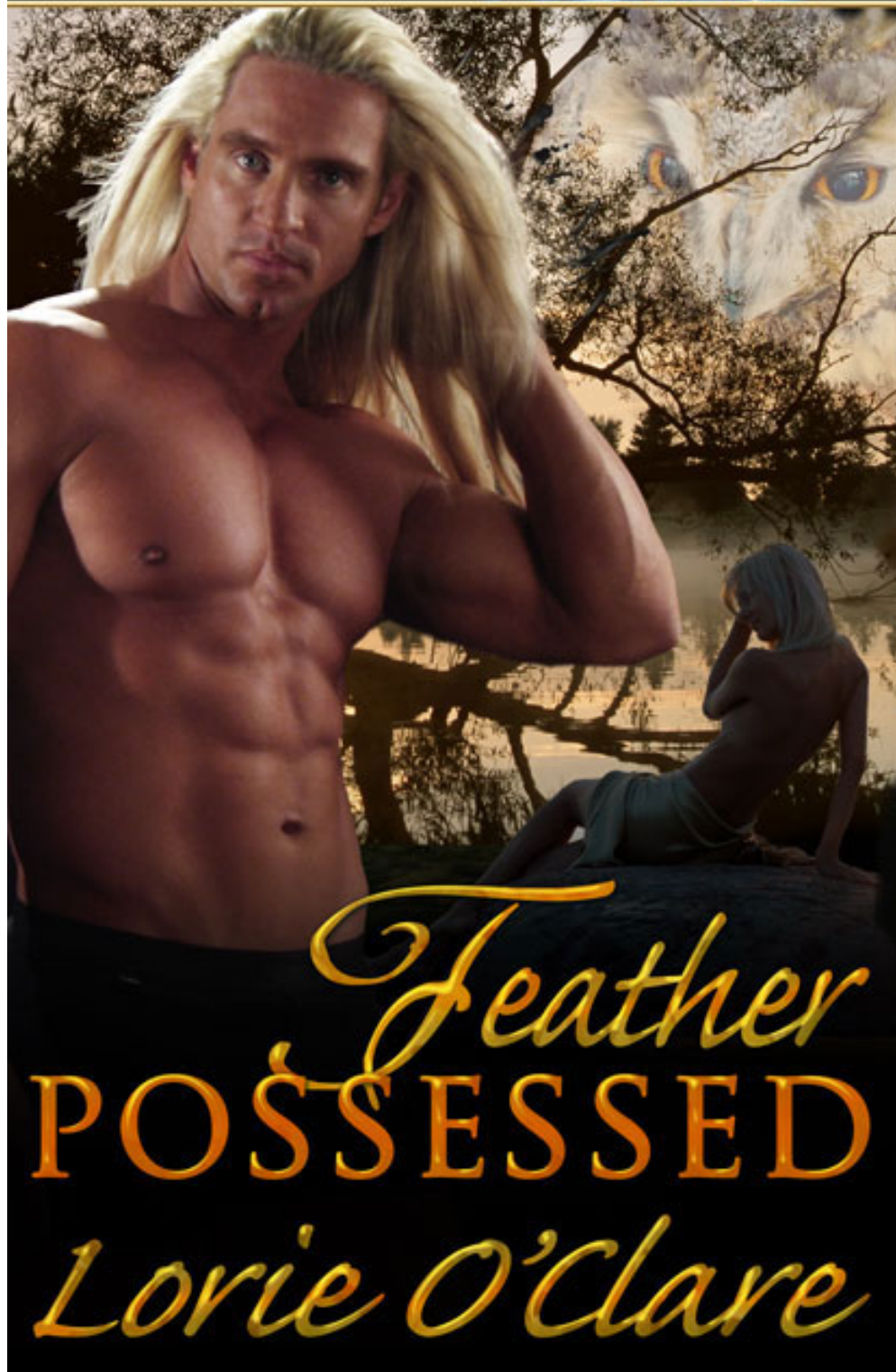


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Feather Possessed

Lorie O'Clare

Raptors Revealed, Book Two

Heath Halk runs his parliament of owls honorably. Every nest in Banff is his concern and he takes his job very seriously. He's never given thought to finding a mate until Shelly Preston walks in, blindsiding him.

Shelly holds her head high in spite of how the parliament views her parents. Shelly's nest is trash. Everyone knows it. Most think she's trash too. But Shelly won't fly without honor despite the passion lying deep within her. She won't shake her tail feathers for just any male. Anyone who knows her and flies by her side understands this about her.

When Heath flies after Shelly, she doesn't understand what the most desirable male in Banff would want with her. Heath could have any female, yet he continues coming after her. As their lust smolders into stronger emotions, Shelly and Heath need to learn if flying together for the rest of their lives is possible. If they mate it will mean bringing the best nest and the worst nest in Banff together, forever.

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Feather Possessed

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FEATHER POSSESSED

Lorie O'Clare

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Chapter One

Heath Halk stood outside his apartment complex building, ignoring everyone around him, and watched his younger sister leave with her new mate. They were heading across the country to her mate's nest with promises to return in a month or so. An uncomfortable knot twisted in his gut. He didn't want to think about never seeing Lana again.

"She'll be fine," Rock, his younger brother, said.

"Yup." Heath glanced past Rock at Beel. Both of his brothers needed his strength. Letting Lana go, even if the owl she chose as her mate appeared to be a good male, was incredibly hard to do. She was a grown female though, and accepting she was now part of another nest would be easier if they remained busy and kept their nest strong. "Let's get busy."

He led the way into the apartment complex. The four-story building had belonged to his parents and now was the parliament where his brothers, aunts and uncles, as well as a few other nests who'd come along over the years, called home. Lana and her mate had stayed in her apartment for the first year of their mating. Although she'd offered more than once to paint and prepare the apartment for the next nest, Heath knew once all of her things were packed, she would be anxious to settle her feathers in her new nest.

"Are you sure we made the right decision?" Rock followed him down the second-floor hallway until they reached Lana's door to her apartment.

Or the apartment that used to be her nest. Heath unlocked the door and pushed it open, the empty living room, once filled with his only sister's possessions and her happy, confident scent.

"It wasn't our decision to make." He knew his younger brothers thought him a hard-ass. All of them were grown males, but after their parents passed on, he'd become head of their parliament, owner of this complex, and the backbone to all of the nests he called family. If he broke down, all the owls would fall apart. "You could smell Lana's happiness. Dover is a good male. She chose wisely in her mate."

"I'm not sure." Rock was always the first to argue any point.

"She'll be fine," Beel said, cutting Rock off before he could start a tirade of complaints against Lana's mate. "Is the paint still upstairs? Rock, I know the ladders and drop cloths are in the storage room downstairs."

"Suddenly you're the boss?" Rock snapped.

"Fine. I'll get the ladders and drop cloths and you go get the paint." Beel shook his head at Heath, his older brother, and left the apartment, leaving the door opened behind him.

"We can't paint yet anyway. We need to putty first." Rock looked after his younger brother, who disappeared down the hallway but focused on Heath when they were alone. "It won't look right otherwise."

"Go get the paint." Heath headed into the kitchen, in no mood to argue with his brother. "Dover bought putty and already patched the few small areas where it was needed. Lana didn't hurt her walls."

Heath walked through the empty apartment once he was alone. Lana would be missed. He had to believe in her happiness. And it wasn't a lie how easily it could be smelled on her. Heath hadn't thought much of Dover when he first met the owl. His beliefs and habits were different, predominantly how he flew with so many different species. But Lana loved him. And she'd been reared in a good nest, taught to fly with the best and hold on to the honor that was woven strong and proud throughout her family.

He glanced inside the room that was once her bedroom, for a moment seeing her lying on her bed, her legs crossed and her innocent face staring up at him. How many times had he come in here to advise, console or argue with his only sister?

Leaving the room before he stunk it up with his own emotions, he opened the door to the smaller bedroom across the hall and glanced at the bathroom. The apartment really was in very good condition. It wouldn't take more than a day before it was ready for a new tenant.

He snapped his attention to the end of the hallway when quiet footsteps and a scent he knew but didn't recognize grabbed his attention. Heath straightened and stared at the young female watching him. Her scent ripened the moment they locked gazes. Interesting.

"I didn't mean to startle you." Shelly Preston, one of Lana's friends, stood at the end of the hall in the living room. She shifted from one foot to the other, her soft gray eyes surrounded by way too much makeup. "I take it Lana has already left."

"Yup." He approached her and then paused in the middle of the living room when Shelly stepped to the side to allow him to pass. "Why weren't you here to see her off?"

Shelly was thin, even pretty now that he focused on her. Her nest was trash though. Lana had always liked her and insisted Shelly fly by her side. He wasn't sure what his youngest sister saw in the female staring at him as if she were undressing him with her eyes. Like mother, like daughter, he thought to himself. Although Shelly would probably be one hell of a hot, wild fuck. Rumor had it that her mother was.

"I had to open the shop this morning." She had a soft, pleasant-sounding voice and if it weren't for all that makeup, her soft gray eyes might possibly appear more honest.

"Lana missed seeing you this morning before they left."

She nodded, not showing remorse. Her calm, relaxed expression didn't reveal any feelings. "My father was supposed to open the shop but wasn't home yet."

It wasn't a secret in Banff that Porter Preston spent more time with his girlfriend than he did his wife. Shelly didn't appear in search of sympathy. Her scent actually remained pleasant as she spoke calmly and easily with Heath.

"I did speak with Lana on the phone this morning. She sounded so happy and excited to fly into her adventure and new life." She dropped her gaze for the first time, her long, thick black lashes fluttering over her eyes. "She offered to let me fly with them. Lana said her mate wouldn't mind. I don't think I was wrong to tell her no. I need to find my own path to fly, don't you think?"

"Yup." He wasn't sure what else to say to this female who'd always been at Lana's side but had never really spoken to him before.

Rock entered the apartment, grunting as he hauled a small stepladder under one arm and several drop cloths rolled up under the other. Beel was behind him with several cans of paint stacked in his arms. The two of them took in Shelly with an appraising stare then each cocked an eyebrow, a question in their eyes as they looked at him.

"What color are you going to paint?" Shelly asked, turning her attention to the walls.

"White. All apartments return to white when a nest moves out." Heath wasn't sure why he offered that information. He watched Shelly turn and take in the room. The jeans she wore fit her like a glove. They were tight, although she moved easily enough in them to make them appear comfortable and they showed off her long, thin legs and nicely shaped ass.

She put her hands on her hips, wrapping her slender fingers around her waist. It was narrow and he imagined putting his own hands there. It wouldn't surprise him if he could make his fingers meet. When she faced him again, her attention still on the room, he took in how her sweater hugged her figure. Shelly wasn't wearing a bra yet her breasts were full and round. It surprised him he hadn't noticed before how incredibly hot she was.

"Do you want to stay and help?" Rock quit grunting as he held the stepladder and instead made a show of carrying it across the room.

"Sure," Beel added, sidling up alongside Shelly. He shifted the cans of paint so he held them in both hands. "We can see who's got the best strokes," he added, lowering his voice, and his gaze as he made a blatant show of taking in her breasts.

Heath wanted to clobber both his brothers for suddenly behaving like idiots. They were puffed out worse than fucking peacocks. And the way they both started flirting with her, strutting around her, he swore they might attack each other just to show off in front of Shelly.

"We don't need her help," Heath growled, moving between the two of them and taking Shelly by her arm and escorting her out of the apartment. "You two get busy," he demanded, and marched Shelly down the hallway.

Shelly didn't say a word when he escorted her down the stairwell. He took that route instead of the elevator so he could keep moving. Something set him off in there and he wasn't sure what. But standing alone with Shelly and waiting on the elevator would mean he would have to assess his behavior, and at the moment he didn't want to do that.

"I'm sorry," she offered when they stepped outside and Heath released her arm. Her nipples puckered through her sweater as she stood facing him in the cold breeze.

Heath watched her tuck a long strand of hair behind her ear. She puckered her lips as if she'd blow a kiss at the ground. Her lips were full and moist, and imagining what she might be able to do with them damn near got him hard.

"Why are you apologizing?" he snapped.

Shelly looked up at him quickly, her gray eyes widening when she stared at him, not blinking. "I'm sorry I went upstairs to Lana's nest. You didn't need to drag me out of there. I would have left if you'd told me to," she said, her tone remaining soft but the dullness in her eyes showed him how defensive she was.

Heath shook his head, blowing out a breath. "You're not the one who should be apologizing and if I was rough with you just now, forgive me. My brothers were out of line and shouldn't have treated you like that."

"You dragged me out of there because you didn't like how your brothers were treating me?" she asked, her voice dropping to a whisper.

Heath studied her face, watching as her gaze shifted, dropping down his body and then returning to stare him in the eye. Shelly didn't give any indication if her question indicated her surprise or disgust.

"Did you enjoy how they were treating you?" he asked.

Shelly straightened, closing her mouth as her gaze once again dulled.

"Maybe you enjoy the attention males give you and dress as you do so they'll flaunt their feathers in front of you."

"What's wrong with the way I'm dressed?" she demanded. She didn't answer his question though.

Heath moved closer, catching her scent on the breeze that blew her hair over her shoulder. The thin, silky strands parted around her breast. When she crossed her arms over her chest, they pressed together under her sweater and her nipples hardened even more. It was a view good enough to make his mouth water.

"They treated you like that because they think they can," he said, fighting to remain calm when he wanted to demand she tell him she didn't like the way they'd behaved.

"Go to hell, Heath Halk," Shelly snapped, spinning around fast enough her hair fanned around her shoulders. She strutted away from him, her ass shaking perfectly as she took off down the sidewalk.

If he had half a brain he would let her go. Shelly Preston wasn't his problem. How she dressed or which male did or didn't give her attention shouldn't matter to him. As Heath grabbed her arm and spun her around to face him, a hard wave of determination hit him he wasn't ready for. He wanted to know Shelly's mind. He wanted to make her his problem. That realization stung as hard as if she'd just slapped him in the face.

"Why does that upset you?" he asked, his voice amazingly calm, considering a fire suddenly raged through his veins.

"Once, I really believed you were one of the best males in Banff," she said, and focused on her arm where he held her firmly. She glanced up at him, her gaze hooded with her thick black lashes. "But you're no better than every other male who thinks with his cock instead of his brain."

"How dare you!"

"How dare I?" Shelly tried yanking her arm free of his grasp. "You just suggested I enjoy every male flapping his wings around me as if I were nothing more than a slut."

Heath let go and crossed his arms over his chest, noting her gaze drop to his torso when he breathed in, searching for a calming breath so he wouldn't haul her inside the complex and straight to his nest. God! He already had images of what he would do to her. She stood there, accusing him of thinking her a slut, and that was exactly where his mind was going. Which made her accusations right. Except there was something else, something drawing from deep inside him he couldn't identify and didn't quite understand. Until he did, he wanted to continue talking to her. Because whatever it was, he didn't think treating her like a slut was exactly where his thoughts were headed.

"I asked if you enjoyed the way my brothers treated you."

"No. I didn't. Any more than I enjoyed you hauling me out of Lana's apartment because you were humiliated to have me there." Shelly stepped backward and then once again turned away from him, this time walking away a lot slower than before. "But now I know how your feathers lay, Heath Halk."

Heath watched Shelly Preston walk away from him. "Interesting," he mused.

There weren't many times when he'd given Shelly a lot of thought in the past. Lana had always defended her, making it clear to anyone who flapped his or her wings too loud that Shelly was her friend. Although his nest never approved of Lana flying with Shelly, Heath never saw a reason to break it up. Shelly never damaged Lana's reputation.

The Preston nest was a bad one. Porter Preston and his mate owned and ran the hardware store downtown. It wasn't a secret when an owl went into Preston's they ran into a decent chance of feathers flying. Porter and Matilda were always squawking and

pecking at each other. They weren't faithful to each other either. The two of them possessed no honor when it came to being mated.

But as Heath searched his memory he couldn't recall one time when he'd seen Shelly with different males. Hell, Heath couldn't recall ever seeing her with a male at all.

He headed down the second-floor hallway and whatever conversation Beel and Rock were having ended as he pushed the door open and entered the apartment.

"Get yourself some?" Beel teased.

"No," he grumbled, immediately fighting a wave of aggressive energy that ached to come forward.

"You must be slipping." Rock shook his head, standing on one of the tarps while placing the stepladder on top of it. "Shelly doesn't turn down any male."

"You know this for a fact?" Heath didn't look at either one of them when he walked over to the paint tray and brushes.

"Everyone knows this," Beel offered.

"Do they now? So the two of you have both enjoyed the female?"

The silence in the room lingered long enough for Heath to finally pick up the brushes and then face his brothers. He caught the two of them shooting each other matching scowls.

"What's wrong?" Beel asked first.

"I don't think she's the slut you two make her out to be."

"Why?" Rock asked, leaning against the ladder. "Because she turned you down?"

Beel snickered but sobered quickly when Heath glared at him.

"She didn't turn down anything. Nothing was offered," he informed them, barely managing to contain the urge to leap at both of them. His urge to attack didn't make sense. It was almost as if he defended his female, which was most definitely not the case. "You won't refer to her with that slanderous title again."

"Where are you going?" Rock demanded.

Heath looked over his shoulder when he reached the door, ignoring the amused expressions on both their faces.

"We need new brushes," he informed them, and headed out the door.

"He's headed over to Preston's Hardware." Beel sounded puzzled.

"Why would Heath fly after a female like Shelly?" Rock mused.

Heath ignored their comments and hurried down the hallway. He didn't have answers but intended to find out what it was about Shelly Preston that intrigued him.

Chapter Two

Shelly slipped in through the back door of the shop and headed along the wall to the stairs leading to her upstairs apartment. She ignored her sire, who stood in the middle of the store, boasting about a new saw they'd just got in. He went on about how it was a necessity for any nest. Preston Porter was in his own element when it came to tools. And when he hooted to anyone who would listen about the necessity of them, it was a guarantee he wouldn't be fighting with her mother. Shelly glanced to the counter where her mother leaned, speaking quietly to two young males not much older than Shelly.

She didn't get it. Her nest was known throughout Banff as being a joke, the horrendous stench of infidelity so bad it had ruined any chance of her ever having a decent nest. That was, if and when she wanted to make a nest of her own. But wasn't that every female's dream?

Lana had been nice in offering Shelly a way out of this parliament. But Lana saw what Shelly knew to be true. She could be a damn virgin and no one would believe it. She was a Preston and therefore must be tarnished, her tail feathers permanently posed for any male who might strut her direction.

Letting the facts depress her wouldn't improve her situation. Shelly had always held her head high, flown a straight and narrow path, and never done anything to bring her dishonor. Not that any owl had noticed. They were too busy gawking at her parents while they continued to make fools of themselves.

And of all the males in Banff! Heath Halk was beyond gorgeous. His calm manner, the way he poised himself. The male reeked of honor and integrity and everything that was perfect. It was all she could do not to make a damn fool out of herself when he'd touched her. Lord, his grip was solid. Her flesh still tingled where he'd touched her.

"Shelly!" her mother called out.

She'd almost made it to the stairs. Her apartment and safe nest were a flight away and she was so close. A few moments alone, just to regain composure. It disgusted her how easily Heath had ruffled her feathers. No male did that to her!

It crossed her mind to head up and ignore being called. She wouldn't do that though. The town might not respect her nest, but Shelly would never dishonor her parent. Even when the urge hit her to do just that.

"Yes?" she asked, working hard to sound cheerful. There was no way she could explain to either of her parents why Heath Halk upset her.

Her sire quit speaking, looking her way with his piercing gray eyes. "Wait a minute," he said, patting his customer on the back and moving around him as he headed toward Shelly. "There you are, my precious little fledgling."

"Come over here." Matilda Preston used her soft, alluring tone, which she only used when she wanted something. "I want you to meet the Randall nest."

The two young males talking to her mother turned their hungry stares on Shelly. At the same time the front door opened, the bell over it ringing to announce a new customer. Heath Halk strolled in, his dominating gray eyes capturing her gaze immediately. Something twisted in her gut at the same time her heart did a mean groove, beating hard and fast against her ribs. She swallowed and her mouth was too dry. There couldn't possibly be a better-looking male anywhere. Maybe it made sense why she would react to him the way she was. It didn't mean she liked it.

Shelly didn't know if running into him and shoving him out of the store or flying up her stairs and hiding would be the better move. She wasn't convinced either act would save her from the inevitable embarrassment or humiliation she could already smell creeping into the air.

Matilda Preston pushed the two Randall males out of her way and grinned at Heath as if someone had just delivered the freshest and most coveted meat in town. Which in a sense was exactly what Heath did by entering their store.

"Why, Heath Halk," her mother crooned, her singsong voice almost as disgusting as the way she pranced toward him, damn near grabbing her large breasts and adjusting them in her full-support bra so that even more cleavage hung out over her too-tight dress. "I do believe you're even more handsome than you were the last time I saw you." She laughed as if her wit and charm were priceless.

"Back behind the counter, woman," her sire bellowed, putting his arm out in front of his mate to block her path before she could pounce on Heath. He successfully intercepted Matilda, reaching Heath first and patting him on the back as he escorted him farther into the store. "What can I do for you, Heath?"

"I'm here for your daughter." Heath's cool, calm tone was thick with confidence as he successfully moved out of her sire's burly grasp.

Everyone in the store stared at Heath and then gawked at her, as if that were the last thing any of them expected to hear out of his mouth. If Heath noticed their reaction, he didn't appear to care. Instead, he moved to her, took her hand and guided her to the front door.

"With your permission, we'll speak outside," he said to her sire, although he continued moving and opened the door for Shelly.

"Of course. Of course," Porter bellowed, and then said something else under his breath.

Shelly didn't hear what her sire said as the thick shop door closed behind her, which was probably just as well. She embraced the chill in the air, praying it would soothe the fever burning out of control inside her as Heath continued holding her arm.

"I didn't like how our conversation ended," Heath informed her the moment they stood facing each other on the sidewalk outside her parents' shop.

Shelly blinked, staring into his perfectly chiseled face. "Interesting," she murmured. "Is it that important to you that every owl in Banff see you as the perfect male?"

"No. But it matters to me that you see me as honorable."

"Why is that?"

"Because you misunderstood my intentions."

"Your intentions?" Shelly shook her head and then shoved strands of hair from her face when a wicked wind blew off the mountains. She ignored the shiver that rushed through her. She was anything but cold. "Your intentions were very clear when you dragged me out of your sister's nest. And I doubt I misunderstood when you asked me how I liked your brothers coming on to me."

Heath moved too fast for her to react. His large body pinned her against the brick wall next to her parents' shop entrance. Strong hands tangled in her hair. His eyes turned a violent shade of dark gray before his face blurred in her vision and his mouth captured hers. Shelly might be thought of as easy, but it wasn't a reputation she'd earned. As many males who believed she was something she wasn't, it never ceased to surprise her how none of them bothered to sniff out her integrity and honor. Heath was no exception.

But as her fists came down on his shoulders, his mouth moved with skills she'd never experienced before, conquering her mouth and creating a heat inside her that made her forget to bring her knee up and remind him of his manners. Instead she found herself moving her tongue around his as a sigh escaped her. Heat inside her swelled, creating a need deep in her womb she hadn't experienced in too long.

Males came on to her all the time. Single and not single. Rumor had it many of them had already been with her mother. It wasn't the type of life she wanted—one without honor. For twenty-five years, or at least since she'd changed from a fledgling into an available, single female, she'd worked to master getting males to leave her alone. Shelly wouldn't have anything to do with anyone who believed she flew without scruples.

Heath wasn't behaving any better than any of the other males who'd hit on her. And it sucked. How many times had she dreamed of being in his arms like this? How many times had she lay alone in her nest, after flying with her girlfriends, and imagined what it would be like to receive his attention? Lana had teased her about it and Shelly had denied it again and again.

Now here he was, pressing her against the building, every inch of his hard, muscular body torturing her flesh. Prickles pranced down her spine and over her flesh. A more carnal side of her, demanding and feverish, wanted to take all he would give her, fly with it and make him want all of her. She wanted to disregard her craving to be honored, to have his respect and simply give in to what her body wanted, no—needed.

Her pussy swelled and began throbbing. Shelly's hands were no longer balled in fists but pressed against his shoulders, feeling all that muscle twitch against her

fingertips. She ached to explore. The perfect male of their parliament was touching her everywhere. His hard, warm body was too much of a distraction to keep her thoughts straight. Heath twirled his tongue around her and they moaned at the same time.

"Now that I have your attention," he whispered into her mouth, his fingers pulling her hair just hard enough to pinch her scalp.

Shelly gulped in air, filling her lungs with his scent, which didn't help as she tried clearing her head. She stared at his face, growing breathless when she focused on eyes that were almost as dark as night. Emotions ran strong in Heath. She saw that. Hell, she felt it. But what emotions? And why?

"I'd say you've accomplished that," she acknowledged, her voice hoarse as if she'd spent hours squawking.

His mouth twitched, possibly indicating a smile. "Good." He adjusted his fingers, dragging her hair over her shoulders when he moved his hands until he pressed his palms at the top of her arms. "I didn't drag you out of Lana's apartment because I didn't want you there. I dragged you out because I didn't want Beel and Rock ruffling their feathers around you."

"Why not?"

He had full lips, the bottom one slightly larger than the top. They were lips of a lover. But when he pressed them into a thin line, it stole her breath. Heath didn't like her questioning him. Interesting. A male with scruples, although willing to take what he wanted. And if he wanted her, for how long? She wasn't some damn video that could be rented out and exchanged for something else when he grew tired of what he had.

"Maybe because I wanted more time alone with you," he hissed under his breath.

Her mouth was suddenly too dry to comment. More than anything she wished he meant what she wanted him to mean. Shelly would love to have Heath Halk by her side. He was the most honorable male in Banff, even if he was being seen publicly right now with her. That wouldn't tarnish his reputation and it wouldn't change hers. She felt his cock throb in his jeans and knew the truth without asking. Heath might come from a nest that held a high position in their parliament, but that didn't make him any less male. He wanted first dibs.

The truth hit her worse than a ton of bricks flying directly toward her through the air. Regardless of her fantasies. In spite of how many times she'd dreamed of flying with this male, it couldn't be like this. Heath probably hadn't given her a thought until she entered her friend's old nest. He saw something he liked and was a male used to taking what he wanted. For the moment it was her. As much as she wanted to give him what he wanted, it would destroy her more than if she lifted her tail feathers for a mated male coming on to her in a drunken state of lust. Not only would she lose what little honor she possessed, she would lose pride in herself. She might even lose her heart. Shelly couldn't risk any of that.

"I'm not interested," she managed to say, her heart constricting so painfully it was all she could do to push him away from her and edge along the wall to the door.

"You're lying." Heath grabbed her arm, spinning her around to face him. "Interesting. I wonder, why is that?"

Shelly slapped hair from her face, fighting to feed the anger inside her. If she got pissed it would dull the pain of letting go what she'd always yearned for. But she didn't want Heath Halk like this. Repeating that to herself didn't help. But she tried doing it anyway when she pressed her hand against his rock-hard chest and pushed him to arm's length.

"No. I'm not. And don't tell me you smell a lie either," she said, keeping her tone soft and calm. Regardless of what he thought of her, Heath would witness only honor when he was with her. Even if that would be for just a few more minutes. "That would make you a liar and you wouldn't want to stink up the sweet smell of your integrity."

"So that is how you kiss any male who approaches you?"

Shelly raised her hand, ready to strike before thinking. Heath moved faster, once again proving he was alert to her actions even if she was working on instinct. He grabbed her wrist and held her hand in midair between them, preventing her from slapping his face.

"Is this the only reason you came here?" she snapped, the pain threatening to take over. She wouldn't let Heath see her break down in front of him. The sooner she got away from him, the better.

"Actually, no. I need brushes."

"Interesting." That was what she thought. Heath saw her and decided to make the move he couldn't make in Lana's apartment because his brothers showed up. "I'll leave you to your shopping then." She yanked her hand free, feeling the sting on her flesh.

Humiliation bit fiercely at her pride when she marched into the store and caught her parents and the Randall males watching her curiously. Shelly felt heat burn her cheeks as she walked to the staircase and then marched up them to her nest. She didn't let out a breath until she closed the door behind her and then collapsed against it, no longer able to hold in her emotions.

Tears streamed down her face. It wasn't as if she didn't already know how unfair life could be. But damn it! Did it have to be thrown in her face like this? With Heath Halk? Why couldn't he have ignored her just as he had all the years she'd flown with his sister? That way at least she could have continued fantasizing about him without knowing what his kisses were like.

Someone climbed the stairs and she moved away from her door. She recognized her mother's footsteps, but talking to her would only make matters worse. Shelly hurried into her bedroom and around her bed to her bathroom to wash her face as her mother tried opening the door and then knocked.

"Let me in, Shelly," she called out, her tone sounding amused if not way too cheerful. Matilda Preston was a master at hiding her emotions but did so behind a

shield of false happiness. Shelly didn't get it. Her mother was so good, often times she sincerely smelled happy.

Shelly let the water run another minute, watching it drain over her fingers as she remained bent over her bathroom sink. Her mother would want to know what happened. It wouldn't be too hard to give her a believable story, and one that would conclude with her not seeing Heath again. The truth was pretty cut-and-dry. She seriously doubted he would pursue her after she told him she wasn't interested. No male worked that hard for a piece of tail.

Especially Heath Halk. He could have any female he wanted.

Shelly's heart constricted worse than it had been a few minutes before. Just thinking about another female garnering the attention Heath just gave her, enjoying his mouth pressed against hers the way he had kissed Shelly, almost made her sick to her stomach. Her emotions were on a whirlwind, flying out of control. Which wasn't acceptable at all.

It wasn't as if he were trying to initiate flying after her. She needed to remind herself of that. Males from nests like Heath's, when they were ready to create a nest of their own, shifted their attention from the easy, wild females to the females who came from reputable nests. And that wasn't Shelly.

She straightened, grabbing her hand towel as water dripped down her chin to her neck. A pain formed deep inside her, an emptiness that grew and left her wishing she could fly away and never return.

"The facts are the facts," she lectured her reflection. "Plain and simple. You aren't the type of female a Halk would want as a mate."

And she wasn't interested in mating with anyone anyway. Especially not someone from Banff. Anyone here would know her nest and have preconceived notions about her. Shelly wouldn't live with the reputation her sire and mother had created for the three of them for the rest of her life.

"Shelly!" her mother squawked, and pounded on the door.

Shelly jumped and then sighed. Her mother would make a scene and enjoy every minute of it. Matilda Preston wrote the book on being a drama queen.

She kicked her shoes off as she returned to her small living room and then pulled open the door to her nest as her mother's fist was poised to knock again. Matilda smiled, wrinkles appearing around her eyes and mouth as she did.

"Don't you ever lock me out of your nest," she snarled under her breath, still smiling as she waltzed past her daughter. "Especially when I come bearing such wonderful news."

"Is that so," Shelly murmured, imagining announcing to all of Banff that Matilda witnessed her daughter kissing Heath Halk outside their store would qualify as wonderful news to her mother.

"Yes, that is so," she hissed, spinning around and narrowing her gaze on her daughter with her cold, venomous gray eyes. "You really need to quit acting as if you fly better than the rest of us. Because you don't. You are part of this nest. Maybe you don't think it's much of a nest," her mother continued, fisting her hands against her waist as she dropped her voice to a deadly calm monotone. "Your sire and I aren't perfect and we've made mistakes over the years. But there isn't any way we've made a mistake with you. Now you've got an opportunity you won't turn down. And to be honest with you, it doesn't surprise me a bit he came flying over here for you."

Matilda started crooning around her daughter, appearing oblivious to the extreme release of emotions Shelly had just experienced. There wasn't any way her emotions weren't still cluttering up the air. But her mother stroked her hair and massaged her shoulders as she walked around her.

"You think I don't see how you dodge every male who flies toward you." Her mother dropped her tone to a soothing whisper. "You think every male out there is just like your sire. He made some mistakes, flew in the wrong direction. But I knew how to prune his feathers. And you'll learn too. Your sire might have flown after other females for a while but it's not that hard to convince a male his nest is where he belongs."

Shelly straightened. In spite of her sire's promiscuous ways, speaking slander on her nest didn't set well with her. It bugged the crap out of her when her mother announced from the treetops how terrible her sire was and then would do the same thing she accused him of doing. More than once Shelly thought the only way she'd truly be happy was to fly as far from this town as she could. Somewhere where no one would know anything about her nest. Telling her mother she shouldn't dishonor herself or her nest by saying what she did, fell upon deaf ears. It just made her mother fly into a tirade. So Shelly said nothing.

"But you have an invitation from the most reputable nest in Banff, and you will not turn it down."

Shelly fought not to let her jaw drop. If her mother seriously thought Shelly should lift her tail feathers for Heath simply because he kissed her outside the store, then she was worse off than Shelly thought. It took all she had to prevent her emotions from turning hostile and stare at her mother without reacting to her words.

"Now then," her mother continued, clapping her hands together. "We must find you the perfect dress to wear. Nothing shabby but nothing too inviting either." She wagged her finger at Shelly as she walked out of the living room and into the adjoining room that was Shelly's bedroom. "My daughter will be classy and elegant when she goes to dinner with Heath Halk," she sang out from the other room.

This time Shelly's jaw did drop. She didn't move. There was no way she could. As well, she'd heard her mother wrong. Prince Charming didn't really exist. And no one believed her to be Cinderella. Everyone thought she was as bad as the rest of her nest, no matter that there wasn't any proof to back that up.

"Do you have any money?" her mother asked when she reappeared in her doorway. "You need something nicer for your dinner date and there is still time to go shopping if you have money."

"What are you talking about, Mom?"

"After you flew up here, acting like a fledgling, Heath Halk requested permission from your sire to take you to dinner this evening." Matilda beamed, her gray eyes possibly glowing with life for the first time in years. "And you aren't going to mess this up. I don't have to tell you how many times your sire accused me of trapping him into a nest by hatching you. Now I know he thinks the world of you, so don't think otherwise. But do you know how proud your sire would be if you got in with the Halk nest?"

Shelly saw her mother's face light up. It dawned on her that in spite of how often she slandered her mate, Matilda loved Porter Preston very much. If she didn't, she would have flown away from this nest years ago instead of staying and enduring the dishonor she announced so loudly hung heavily upon all of them. It bugged the crap out of Shelly when her mother spoke as if her sire's flying to other females was a thing of the past. Possibly her mother prayed for the day to arrive when he would finally settle into his nest and become a good mate. It was a sad scenario, but seeing her mother's eyes glow with hope was enough for Shelly to want to keep it there.

"What time is the dinner?" she asked, feeling suddenly distanced from herself. There was no way she could eat with Heath Halk, but telling her mother that would remove the look from her face and Shelly couldn't remember when her mother had actually glowed the way she did now.

"Seven p.m. He is picking you up here," she announced, and a sudden calm fell over her mother. Knowing Shelly would go to dinner with Heath was all it took to turn her mother into a blissful creature.

"I'll go buy a dress." Shelly nodded to the door, needing this conversation to end so she could emerge back into sanity. She needed to remind herself that living for her mother to be happy would exhaust her. Shelly needed to live for her to be happy. And already she was suspicious about this dinner date.

"Perfect!" Matilda almost ran to the door leading to the stairs. "I know I can get your sire to give us money to buy a dress for you to dine with a Halk," she squealed, her tone already returning to its screeching level she usually used.

"Mom. Wait!" Shelly had to leap at her mother to grab her before she darted down the stairs.

Her mother was at the top of the stairs, holding the railing, when she looked over her shoulder at Shelly, her expression almost wild and her scent overwhelming with emotions she wasn't even trying to restrain.

"I'm going to go shopping by myself," Shelly said, whispering to impress a sense of calm upon her mother. The last thing she needed was further humiliation if her mother went down those stairs, reeking of too many feelings. "You're going to descend these stairs slowly and not say a word to anyone about this." She paused, searching her

mother's face and then adding for good measure. "Let Dad approach you and ask if I'm going. Make him come to you, Mom."

Her mother's dull gray eyes once again flickered with excitement. Twice in one conversation Shelly saw more life in her mother's face than she'd seen in years.

Shelly didn't go downstairs with her mother. Her parents had their issues and were far from perfect, but they were all Shelly had. Every nest in Banff might see them as dishonorable and the trash of their parliament. If anything, the Prestons' disgrace possibly kept their store in business. Porter Preston was one hell of a good carpenter and ran an honest business with his hardware store. But every nest in town knew if they came here to buy what they needed, they would leave with all of the latest gossip as well as possibly a good show.

None of that was a secret. Shelly had grown up knowing her parents were the topic at more than one dinner table nightly in more than one nest. She'd endured the humiliation as a fledgling, grew tough and immune to the insults and had learned to fly straight in spite of all of it. As she grew into an adult female Shelly learned the only way she'd find a mate was to accept one who didn't care if she came from no honor. There wasn't a lot of selection in the trash heap.

Shelly walked into her small bedroom and then into the even smaller bathroom. As she stared at her reflection, she tried to understand Heath's motivation. He could have any female in Banff. And although she'd fantasized about him more than she would ever admit to anyone, Shelly had never made a fool out of herself flying in circles, praying he would notice her as so many other females did.

That didn't mean she hadn't wanted his attention. Shelly sighed, turning on the water and then washing her face again. She towed dry and then applied her makeup. No matter how she racked her brain, trying to find the logic in Heath's actions, nothing came to mind.

All the while she was grossly distracted by that incredible kiss. No male had ever kissed her like that. Just thinking how he'd grabbed her hair, taken her as if he truly wanted her, and damn near made her come right there on the sidewalk made her tremble with need.

Her pussy swelled all over again. She stood alone in her bathroom but swore Heath's hands were on her. The way he touched her. She felt it now. His strong, commanding touch moved her in ways no male ever had before. Shelly wanted him touching her everywhere. She wanted his mouth on her nipples, sucking, bringing that swelling he'd created inside her to a raging boil until she exploded.

"Shit," she muttered, giving up on her eyeliner and staring at the results of her work in the mirror. She fought to clear the fog of lust from her head. "There's only one way to understand why this male flies as he does."

And that meant enduring dinner with him. But if his motives weren't honorable there would be one less Halk in this town.

Chapter Three

"She is not a slut!"

"I never said she was." Heath leaned against his kitchen counter, nursing a beer. Maybe calling his younger sister Lana about Shelly wasn't a good idea. He didn't need to see her face to know her emotions were running strong. "So you arrived safely at your mate's nest?"

"We just got here an hour or so ago. Tell me why you're taking Shelly to dinner." Lana's calm tone didn't fool Heath.

His sister was one of the most honorable females he'd ever known. She always kept her emotions in check and flew a straight line. Although he hadn't approved of her choice of mate at first, seeing how happy Lana was made it easier to accept Dover Down. Apparently she wasn't in the mood to discuss her new mate with him.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," he admitted, rubbing his thumb along the circular lip around the top of the bottle. He remembered how soft and warm Shelly's lips were. They were moist and she tasted too good. "She showed up at your apartment this morning."

"So she did make it?" Lana had sounded happy from the moment she answered the phone when he called. But her tone lit up hearing her lifelong friend hadn't blown off wishing her safe travels and good hunting.

"Yes. She got stuck at the shop."

"That happens to her a lot."

Heath took a quick swallow of his beer and then set the bottle on the counter. "Why does she stay at that shop?" He didn't understand why Shelly was suddenly such an interest to him. But it seemed important he learn everything about her. The little female had made one hell of an impression on him this morning. Possibly he'd gone too long without getting laid.

"It's her nest, Heath," Lana explained, her tone resuming its soft, pleasant tone. "Shelly has more honor than most females I know. She endures a lot with her head high and not once has she let her feathers get ruffled over any of the slander too many nests toss her way. Why did you ask her to dinner if you aren't sure why you did it?"

Lana wasn't going to let him off the branch until he satisfied her curiosity. He wandered through his living room, down the hall and into his bedroom. He stared at his large king-sized bed that he always slept in alone while images of what Shelly might look like spread out naked on it made him lose his train of thought. Her breasts were full and round and he ached to know how large her nipples were, what they would

look like puckered into mouthwatering beacons. Her tummy would be flat, taut and smooth, and her legs slender and long.

"Heath," Lana said into his ear. "Do I need to call Shelly?"

"No. Don't call her," he said, snapping out of his fantasy. "I mean, of course you can call your friend whenever you like."

"Thanks for your permission," she said dryly.

Heath chuckled but squeezed the bridge of his nose, taking a moment while alone to let down his shield and release the tormented feelings that had tortured him all day since he'd left Shelly.

"What I meant is don't talk to her about me. And it really wouldn't be wise at this moment to ask her about me."

"I'm not so sure about that," she said slowly.

"Lana." His sister would seriously make him regret calling her. "I thought seeking you out about your friend would be the honorable thing to do." Maybe appealing to her integrity would help her see how imperative it was to not spook Shelly at this point. Already he guessed her feathers would quickly be ruffled if he let too many owls know he'd asked her nest permission to fly with her this evening. "I know Shelly means a lot to you."

"Yes, she does. We'd even discussed her flying out here to Kenora so she and I would still be close."

"You did?" Heath remembered Shelly saying something about that but wanted to hear from Lana what her reasoning was behind the invitation.

"Yes." Lana was silent for a moment before deciding to explain her thoughts to her brother. "Shelly deserves the best there is. She could have flown the route of her parents but instead has fought daily to resist that path. I won't say her nest doesn't have honor. But I will say her sire and mother don't enjoy the type of mating you and I believe in."

"You mean they aren't faithful to each other."

"Exactly."

"And Shelly refuses to be unfaithful."

"Heath, she refuses to fly with any male." Again there was a pause as if Lana worked to gather the right words to impress Heath. "I've seen males approach Shelly, believing they can make her a nest on the side. And I've also seen males fly after her because they think she will raise her tail feathers without question. It isn't fair to her. Shelly hasn't ever done anything to deserve that kind of treatment. If she were to fly to another town, the owls there would accept her as an honorable single female and treat her as such. Yet she stays in Banff, working at the hardware store with her nest, hardly making a dime doing it, and living above it in a tiny space barely large enough to make into a decent nest."

"She doesn't fly with any male?" He knew he should comment on everything his sister just said or she would believe him too self-focused. And he knew Lana already believed he puffed his feathers out a bit more than he should.

Heath ran the parliament in Banff and had since his sire passed on. It wasn't a responsibility he'd asked for but it wasn't one he would toss to the side. As a result, the females who flew with him were often willing to do so without considering much of a commitment. He just didn't have time. Which was why, when he let the thought surface again, he couldn't explain to himself why he pressed Shelly's sire into allowing him to pick Shelly up and take her to dinner. Although granted, Porter Preston damn near offered to give his daughter to Heath permanently when he asked permission to fly with her for one night. He understood what it meant to put his life on a side burner and fly for the better cause of his nest and those around him. It sounded as if Shelly did the same thing.

"You didn't hear a word I just said," Lana informed him, her tone still calm although the crispness in her voice let him hear her irritation. "I'm surprised Shelly agreed to go to dinner with you."

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you suggesting Shelly isn't interested in flying with me?" He knew from that kiss there was definite interest.

Lana laughed. "I doubt telling you she wasn't would cause your feathers to go limp," she said, teasing him. "And it isn't my place to speak Shelly's feelings for her. So did you just ask her and she said yes?"

"Actually no." He decided not to share with Lana how he kissed Shelly outside her store this morning. "I asked her sire if I could take her to dinner and he gave his permission."

"Oh," Lana said, dragging the word out slowly. "Well you might get your feathers deflated still."

"Why do you say that?"

"Don't be surprised if she doesn't show up."

Heath glanced at the clock after hanging the phone up with his sister. Soon he would learn more of how she had settled in to her mate's nest. Dover Down had flown into town and swept Lana off her feet so fast Heath hadn't seen it coming. Not that he was sure he would have been able to stop it if he had. Lana fell hard and fast for the male who was now her mate. In the year Lana had lived here in Banff with her new mate, he'd seen how good of a choice she'd made. And he'd seen them off this morning with his blessing. Although Lana said she would be back, Heath knew better. And he would miss his youngest and only sister terribly. The happiness in her tone showed him Dover treated her well. For now, he would have to accept that.

Just because Lana was happy with a mate didn't make Heath believe he should fly after a female for himself. That wasn't why he focused on her parting words to him. Lana didn't think Shelly would honor the dinner date. Even when Heath insisted to do so would bring shame to Shelly, Lana informed him she wouldn't see it that way. Shelly

wouldn't fly by Heath's side if she believed his intentions weren't honorable. After all, he was one of the most prominent males in Banff. The way his sister said it didn't exactly make him feel it was a credible title. More to the point, Heath was very high profile. A female like Shelly wouldn't want all of that attention, especially if it meant the town would whisper even more slander about her.

The thought pissed Heath off. It was quarter after the hour. There were forty-five minutes until he would pick Shelly up from her nest. But if she believed him doing so would create talk that would dishonor her further than she already had endured, what would she do to prevent that?

Heath attached his phone to his belt and headed out of his apartment. Ignoring the elevator, he hurried down the four flights of stairs and then out the front door, grateful no one spotted him and demanded his time. If his hunch was right, he had no time. The temperatures had dropped some since he'd first arrived at his nest, but Heath ignored the cold in the air and unlocked his black SUV then slid behind the wheel, praying he wasn't already too late.

Banff wasn't a large town and it didn't take more than a few minutes to arrive downtown, and it would have taken less time had he taken a direct route. If he parked in front of Preston's Hardware over half an hour early, he would make a scene. But if he parked too far away, he wouldn't be able to see with his human eyes who came and left the store. Finally deciding to park around back, Heath let the SUV run in park with the heater on as he stared at the upstairs windows of the building where Shelly's nest was.

For about the tenth time today he wondered what compelled him to ask Shelly to dinner. Thinking about the matter logically, the first reason was simple. Shelly was hot as hell. The female was damn near sexier than any other female he'd ever laid eyes on. It also made sense why he hadn't noticed her before. She'd been his younger sister's friend. Heath never gave Lana or her friends a lot of thought other than ensuring their safety.

There was another reason he wouldn't allow himself to ignore. It went deeper than how enticing Shelly was. When she'd stormed away from him, her feathers in a bunch, earlier that day outside his complex, she made herself a challenge. Heath wouldn't deny it was part of his nature to hunt. Any female who set herself up as prey would attract a male. Her scent had become more enticing, his need to have her greater. It would be illogical to argue his sudden decision to buy new brushes was for any reason other than to see Shelly again.

But when he kissed her, Shelly had submitted to him. In spite of her show of anger, she'd opened to him, relaxed in his arms and given him what he wanted. Not to mention, she'd wanted it too. That should have satisfied his craving to hunt.

Yet it hadn't. He sat here in the alley, having arrived at her nest long before he was supposed to be here just to make sure she wouldn't fly the coop. Maybe he still wanted to dominate her. Possibly if he fucked her it would get Shelly out of his system.

And that would make him no better than any of the other males she apparently flew hard and fast to avoid.

Heath straightened when the back door opened from behind Preston's Hardware.

"Why you little," he grumbled, grabbing the gearshift and clutching it, forcing himself to keep his SUV in park a bit longer while watching Shelly dart out of the building and run down the alley.

She ran the opposite direction from him. If she'd chanced heading in his direction she would have seen him and stopped dead in her tracks. At the same time, he would have been busted, watching for her to fly away from him, which was exactly what she was doing.

For a brief moment he argued with his own sense of logic. If she were fleeing from the building, taking flight instead of joining him for dinner, she really must not want to spend time with him. Maybe he should let her go. Lana didn't seem to think he should fly after her. Her nest was a mess. Inevitably spending any type of time with the female at all would create drama in his life he would just as soon not smell.

"The hell with all of that," he hissed under his breath, shifting his SUV into drive. Lana also praised how honorable Shelly actually was even though everyone saw her otherwise. He wouldn't buckle under peer pressure from a bunch of nests who would be better off keeping their beaks in their own affairs.

His truck leapt into drive and then Heath hit the brakes, causing it to lurch on him. Matilda Preston flew out of the building, her arms waving around her as if she could take to flight in her human form. She was yelling and Heath turned off the heater as he rolled down his window, cutting all noise so he could easier hear what she said.

"You selfish little fledgling!" Matilda Preston hit a pitch anyone would be able to hear, regardless of any other noises surrounding them. "You don't care about anyone but yourself. How can you do this? Think of your nest!" she wailed, racing down the alley after her daughter.

If she turned around she would spot Heath. That wouldn't be good. Putting his SUV in reverse, Heath looked over his shoulder as he backed out of the alley. He wasn't too far from the street and slowed, checking for cars, then glanced ahead of him toward the other end of the alley. Matilda was yelling something else, this time words he couldn't hear but easily guessed at their meaning. Shelly bailed on her dinner date, much to the disappointment of her nest—and her date.

However, the hunt was on again!

Heath took in the side street going in both directions before making a hasty decision and headed right. He banked on the notion she would fly to the north, which would be right. If he guessed correctly and she just wished to disappear for a while, she would head to the edge of town, change into her feathers and fly to the mountains. He'd done that more than once over the years when emotions crowded in on him too much.

Taking the next corner, he pulled into the first available parking spot and turned off his SUV. Shelly was on foot and it would be easier to track her the same way. Unless

someone picked her up. It surprised him he hadn't thought of the possibility she might have a male in her life already. Lana told him Shelly wouldn't fly with any males, but Shelly might not tell Lana everything.

Heath hopped out of his truck, locked it and hurried down the street, barely taking time to nod his head to the few people he passed who acknowledged him with a polite greeting. He told himself if Shelly ran into the wings of another male, he would let her go. She hadn't kissed him the way a female would who was distracted by thoughts of another male though.

When Heath reached the corner, he approached cautiously, unwilling to be cornered by Matilda Preston. He took a deep breath, sorting out the smells he took into his lungs. Matilda wasn't at the end of the alley and Shelly wasn't anywhere in sight. Opting to head to the next block to the north, he continued sniffing the air, willing her scent to come to him.

A few more blocks and frustration biting at him, Heath paused. He saw her, leaning against a bus stop pole, less than several meters away, watching him warily.

"Going somewhere?" he asked, his heart pounding in his chest when an adrenaline rush seized him.

"Possibly," she offered, her voice breathy.

"I'll give you a ride," he offered, reaching her and then stopping when he faced her, their bodies close enough the air seemed to sizzle around them. Shelly might have tried flying from him but it hadn't extinguished the lustful desire so incredibly apparent between them.

"Interesting," she mused.

"What? That I would give you a ride?"

"Yes. Especially when I just tried standing you up on our dinner date."

"I'm sure you have your reasons."

"I do," she offered without hesitating.

"Maybe you'll share them with me."

"Maybe." She looked away first, lowering her thick, long lashes over her sultry gray eyes.

"Will you walk with me to my truck?"

Shelly shook her head and a stream of silky, silver blonde hair fanned over her shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere near my nest."

He didn't blame her there. "Will you wait for me here if I go get my truck?"

She lifted her gaze to his, her black eyeliner making her soft gray eyes appear larger than they probably were. Maybe he could fuck her until there wasn't any makeup left on her face. He really would love to see her without so much on but knew they were nowhere near the stage in their relationship where he could make such a request.

"I'll wait for you," she whispered, her voice cracking as she searched his face.

Heath nodded once. "You honor me, sweet little bird."

And then because he couldn't wait any longer, he leaned in and brushed his lips over hers.

When Shelly acted as if she might back away from him, Heath reached for her hair. He needed more of her—now. She brought her hand up, apparently anticipating his move, and her slender fingers wrapped around his thick wrist. Shelly held his hand between them, her small hand clasped against his wrist. And they kept their hands there, suspended in midair, as he pressed his tongue between her lips.

The moment he impaled her he grabbed her ass with his free hand. Shelly cried out into his mouth, feeding his need that already burned out of control inside him. She opened for him and tasted so damn good, Heath could feast on her all night and definitely not get his fill of her.

"You're going to make it impossible for me to walk to my truck," he growled into her mouth.

"You kissed me, not the other way around," she retorted.

Heath nipped at her lower lip and Shelly jumped, her sharp gasp causing sparks to ignite in his brain. If he weren't inside her soon he would explode from his craving for her.

"And I'm going to kiss you again," he promised, raising his head far enough to focus on her flushed expression.

Shelly stared up at him, her large round eyes not blinking when she didn't comment. Her silence wasn't a no, he was sure of it.

"Are you okay standing here alone? I'm not parked far from here."

Shelly blinked, her surprise that apparent. It dawned on him she wasn't used to anyone being concerned about her well-being. Heath didn't have a problem letting her know how it felt to be watched over.

"Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back."

"I already told you I would wait," she said, stiffening noticeably. "Are you doubting my word?"

Owls didn't lie. There just wasn't any reason for it. The truth was easily sniffed out and no one would want to dishonor themselves by speaking a lie that consistently created a foul stench too easily detected.

"I don't doubt anything about you, my sweet little bird," he let her know, lowering his head and capturing her mouth once again.

He kept the kiss brief, knowing if he didn't he would never make it to his SUV. When he straightened, Shelly's thick lashes fluttered over her eyes. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips full, moist and slightly parted. It was a vision of beauty that stole his breath. "I'll be right back," he said, and turned, hurrying back down the street.

It wouldn't be hard to show Shelly that he honored her. Giving her the respect he doubted she received from anyone else would build her trust in him. Once he had her

trust, she would honor him and open up even further. Heath doubted it would take long before she would fully submit to him. He would open a part of her possibly never touched before. And when he did, Shelly would be his.

He damn near stumbled over his own boots, catching the curious gazes of several older owls walking across the street. Avoiding their gazes, Heath hurried to the next street and then to his SUV.

Where the hell had his thoughts come from?

This morning he was captivated by a sexy female. Within an hour of first seeing her, he'd kissed her. In no time after that he'd approached her nest, requesting to spend time with her. Now he logically laid out how to make her his female.

"What are you thinking?" he demanded, reaching his truck and then fumbling with his keys until he unlocked it.

It hit him at that moment he'd be smart to fly. Every bit of this was insane. Shelly Preston came from a bad nest. Her ability to trust and honor another owl was probably close to nonexistent. That wasn't the type of female he'd thought he would finally settle with and make his mate.

"And now you're contemplating a mate?" he hissed, closing his truck door and then just sitting there, staring out the windshield.

He'd lost his mind. There was no doubt about it. As he started his truck and then shifted into gear, his insides tightened with sexual anticipation he couldn't deny. Shelly had turned his ability to think straight upside down in less than a day. Worse yet, in spite of his effort to sort out the reason logically, all that mattered to him was getting back to her.

"I've got to fuck her." It was a damn good thing he didn't need to explain himself to anyone because he doubted he could do it.

Although he would have to justify his actions to one owl. Something told him Shelly wouldn't put out without the security of knowing it wouldn't be a one-time deal.

Chapter Four

Shelly shivered as the shiny black SUV pulled to a stop on the street in front of her. She glanced up and down the sidewalk, aware of more than one owl watching Heath Halk park his truck then hurry around to the passenger side to open her door for her.

If she pulled just one feather she would wake up and all of this would be a dream.

Heath watched her with his intense gray eyes, eyes that were dominating, aggressive and powerful. The black turtleneck he wore showed off his broad chest and fit, athletic body. Dark blue, crisp-looking blue jeans hugged roped muscle and black boots made his legs look even longer. His long fingers that so recently were tangled in her hair gripped the car door as he stood, his brooding stare making her damn near melt in spite of the cold temperatures, and waited as she climbed into the passenger side.

When he closed her into his truck and she leaned back against the leather, Shelly realized they were heated seats. Not only did the entire inside of his SUV smell like Heath, the warm, smooth leather against her backside added to the perfection surrounding her. She was so out-classed, so incredibly out of her element. She ran her damp hands down the new dress she'd spent too much money on earlier today for a date she was positive she wouldn't see through. An odd clarity hit her, making her straighten. As much out of her world as she was, Shelly could fly alongside Heath in his existence. She doubted seriously he would be able to do the same in her world.

"Are you hungry?" Heath asked, sliding in next to her and making the inside of his truck seem smaller when he closed his car door.

"Not really," she admitted. "But I appreciate you bringing your truck around for me."

"I'm not taking you back to your nest." Heath had one hand on the steering wheel but turned, pinning her with gray eyes that reminded her of a torrential storm waiting to break loose.

The last thing she wanted to do was return to her nest. Shelly doubted he'd drop her off anywhere else. Granted she really didn't have anywhere else to go.

Except away. Far, far away.

She pressed her legs together and folded her hands in her lap, maintaining her calm disposition. "Where are you taking me?" she asked, proud of how her voice sounded smooth and her scent impassive.

"I was going to take you to eat, but if you aren't hungry, we won't do that." Heath was also impossible to read when he put his truck into gear and pulled away from the curb.

The heat wasn't blasting on her, drying out her skin and hair like her sire's truck would do. Nonetheless, the temperature inside his black SUV was incredibly comfortable. The ride was smooth and quiet and the dash showed off all the features of a newer-model vehicle.

After driving for a few minutes in silence, Shelly glanced outside the window, pulling herself from thoughts of Heath and what life would be like in his perfect world. His truck didn't smell of humans, and if she chose where she focused her attention, she didn't notice anything human outside the truck.

It was a world she'd grown up in and for the most part didn't give it a lot of thought. Her parents owned a hardware store, which was part of her nest. Humans entered it as much as owls, and occasionally even leopards or werewolves frequented the aisles. There were times when walking away from the pungent odors of humans, cleansing her soul and regrouping with who she was, proved uplifting enough she could then return and continue in her world as she knew it.

"Where are we going?" she finally asked. Breaking the silence meant leaving her thoughts behind and focusing on Heath, which immediately caused her heart to beat faster as nervous anticipation gripped her.

Heath glanced over at her with those powerful, intense gray eyes. "I thought we'd take a walk."

He didn't elaborate but her stomach twisted nonetheless. She should have agreed to have dinner with him. Now they would be alone, and keeping her emotions in check when he was making every inch of her tingle with desire would be more than a challenge than she possibly had the strength to endure.

If only she was better at dating. It really sucked she'd spent so much of her life dodging any male who flew too close to her. Now she had no experience to call forward and rely upon when dealing with Heath. If she had, Shelly was sure she would have agreed to dinner in spite of not being hungry. Proper females wouldn't set themselves up to be alone with a male they barely knew. She was making a perfect mess of everything and more than likely convincing Heath she was the kind of owl who she wasn't.

If he were any other owl, any other male, she'd cut her losses and fly away from this fiasco. And if she were smart, she would do that anyway. Heath Halk was the owl of her dreams. It made sense she wouldn't let go of her dream that easily. Shelly told herself this and tried to wrap logic around her actions as they drove in silence.

They pulled into a public parking lot along the edge of the mountains. It was a spot Shelly knew very well. Several paths led into the mountains, some of them easier than others. As well, many nests parked here and then changed, enjoying flying into the crisp, clean air as they soared over the Canadian Rockies.

Heath didn't climb out on his side when he parked his SUV. Instead, leaning one arm over his steering wheel, roped muscle flexed against his shirt when he faced her.

"I have a confession," he offered, his baritone husky although there were no signs of emotions anywhere on him.

Shelly would match that calm level of composure, proving to him she was as honorable an owl as he was. "What is that?"

"When you ran out of your nest into the alley and your mother chased after you, screaming at you, I was parked at the other end of the alley."

"What?" she whispered, feeling all color drain from her as she stared at him, suddenly shaking from the effort it took not to jump out of his truck and run. It was a strain even to swallow. He witnessed that atrocious display of emotion and humiliation? "What are you saying?"

"It seems it would be rather dishonorable of me to continue knowing you endured that and not letting you know I witnessed it."

In other words, he probably wouldn't have taken her to dinner anyway. Well, it was probably best he learned sooner than later how accurate some of the slanderous squawking about her nest truly was. Unable to stay put any longer, she pushed into the door handle and jumped out of his SUV. She didn't slam his door closed, and the silence in which it shut reminded her even further how perfect a world he came from. There weren't even squeaky hinges in his life.

"Shelly. Wait!" Heath hurried after her, catching up with her and grabbing her arm when she reached the nearest path heading into the mountains. "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"Did you think sharing that bit of information with me would make me happy?" she snapped, feeling her emotions threaten to boil over and explode any moment.

"No. I can't imagine any part of that information making you happy."

"Yet you witnessed it and now throw it in my face. Is that why you so willingly backed out of having dinner with me?"

"No." He wouldn't let go of her arm.

Shelly tugged harder until his fingers scraped her flesh, causing a burn when he finally relinquished his grasp on her. "You claim you're such an honest male. Tell me you would be seen with me in public. Does anyone in your nest even know you're with me right now?"

"The fact they don't is no indication of how I think of you."

"And how do you think of me?"

"I think you endured a humiliating experience. When something like that happens to me, sometimes the mountains help clear my head." He gestured as he spoke, waving his hands at the rugged rocks that climbed into the sky in front of them. "Flying into them is good medicine for any predicament."

The dress Shelly bought for her date that she contemplated on returning the next day to get her money back was a thick material but nonetheless ended above her knees. She'd put on wool tights and flat boots and thought her outfit looked rather classy. It

wasn't enough to keep the elements away from her human flesh though. Nor was the sweater she'd donned before running out of her nest. Stripping out of her clothes and allowing the change to take over sounded better than any idea she'd heard all day. Except for one thing.

"Suggesting we change into our feathers and fly is a strong indication of the kind of female you believe me to be."

Something flashed in his eyes, making them appear dangerous, darker. Shelly wouldn't back away from him though and held her ground, holding on to his gaze at the same time and waited for his response.

"Female," he growled under his breath, his mouth barely moving. "I am simply offering you a way to release the unpleasant situation you endured. Forgive me for caring."

"You can drop the gallant attitude," she sneered, recognizing now that what she saw in his eyes was a challenge. It didn't surprise her Heath Halk wouldn't appreciate having his integrity put on the witness stand.

"Only if you drop this scrupulous attitude. I've gone out with females from the best nests in Canada who are more relaxed than you are."

"They don't have anything to lose."

"And what do you have to lose?"

She stared at him, fighting the urge to reach out and strike him. Instead, turning and heading down the path she'd chosen, she fought the sudden urge to laugh. Heath was right. Her reputation and honor were tarnished the moment she was hatched. If anything, it should give her an advantage. And Heath had just pointed that out. She could do anything she wanted and it wouldn't ruin her or force her to lose anything. No one would think better or worse of her for it. What made the situation even more humorous was that until this moment Shelly had never looked at things as she did now.

"I'll walk with you for a little bit," she conceded, deciding if this were her dream, and it was coming true, learning something out of it was perfectly logical.

Heath didn't say anything until they reached the first ledge in the path. It was an area where the path widened and a human stone fence had been built alongside a cliff, allowing whoever stopped to stand and take in the beauty surrounding them. She paused, feeling her heart beat faster after the brief incline in the path.

"Fly with me," Heath whispered, his face closer to the side of her head than she realized.

Shelly probably shouldn't have met his gaze. Those dark gray eyes of his made her skin prickle. The change surged to life inside her, honoring his request before her mind could. The physical response to his suggestion also motivated an incredible desire to lean into him and kiss him.

"You will call the shots, little owl," he added, his voice gruffer than it had been a moment before.

She didn't miss his meaning. When in their feathers a more primal side of them ruled. There was no denying the sexual urges that sparked and made the air sizzle around them. If they changed, instinct would overrule rationale. Heath would chase her down and fuck her before she could reach a decent altitude to soar. But he stood here now, still in his flesh, and told her she would be in charge. He just told her that in their feathers he would refrain, refuse to let his carnal side prevail and not fuck her unless she wanted it.

Which was god damn unfair of him to put that pressure on her.

"Oh really?" she asked, her own voice huskier than she wished it was.

"Yes. You have my word."

Damn him.

She licked her lips. His gaze dropped to the act. Her heart started pounding hard enough she bet he could hear it throbbing against her ribs. All she could do was nod once.

"We'll change here but then fly our clothes up to the next cliff so they'll be safe while we're gone," he informed her, immediately assessing the situation and making decisions.

Shelly guessed Heath probably lived every minute of his life that way.

"That's fine," she told him.

When he appeared to turn from her, allowing her privacy to strip and let the change convert her from human to owl, Shelly lowered her gaze, glancing around her to determine the best place to take off her clothes. But then Heath grabbed her chin, turning her head and pressing his lips to hers before she could catch her breath.

It didn't surprise her Heath had the type of nature where he was used to calling the shots, hooting commands and expecting all around him to listen and fly accordingly. And she'd conceded to all his wishes so far this evening, although admittedly without problem or hesitation. It was easy to fall into stride, do as he wished. Heath possessed a natural charisma about him. Not only was he sexy as hell, incredibly easy to like, his commanding nature had her submitting before she realized she was doing it.

All of which scared the crap out of her. Even as his mouth moved over hers and his fingers eased over her jawbone and then down to her neck, she tilted her head, allowing him to deepen the kiss. Shelly could tell herself she controlled the moment, enabling him to enter her mouth and taste what she offered. But she wasn't stupid. And until meeting this male, she'd never allowed any male the upper wing. Not once.

Her mind swarmed with her thoughts as well as images of how they could take this kiss further. Heath tasted of lust, of incredible desire to do more than simply feast on her mouth. His muscular body was hard as steel. When he stepped closer, easing one leg between hers, his cock throbbed against her hip. Not that she didn't already know he wanted her as badly as she wanted him. But that made it all the more complicated. Giving in and offering him what he clearly wanted would only prove to him she was the slut the entire parliament of nests in Banff already claimed she was.

Which was unfair as hell. Another female from another nest, possessing honor and integrity, could fuck him right here and now and fly away, holding on to that honor she arrived with. No one would condemn her for doing it with Heath Halk. In fact, she would probably be the envy of the town.

Shelly wouldn't fly like that. She told herself even if she were from a prominent nest, she wouldn't stoop to physical lust just to add a notch to her bedpost and gain bragging rights that she'd fucked the most desirable male around. Shelly wanted more. Not only did she want honor and respect from all who saw her, she wanted to be honorable, be respectable.

But damn it, she wanted Heath Halk too. There were plenty of single females in Banff he could have flown after. He chose her. That made him a damn smart owl, she told herself, feeling a surge of pride as their tongues did a sensual dance and added to the simmering lust already spawned to life between them.

For some reason, imagining him taking another female didn't sit well with her. Shelly didn't want to think of him seducing someone else. She'd grown up here just as the Halks had, and as many females as she'd seen throw themselves at him, she'd never seen Heath fly with any of them. Which meant he was picky or discreet. Both qualities should impress her.

Heath's hand moved down her neck and then he stroked her collar bone, causing the simmering heat in her to climax to a boil. Not even the chill in the air could extinguish it. Her breasts swelled and her nipples hardened, pressing against her bra. She ached for him to touch her, cup her breasts and tug at her nipples. Just imagining him doing such intimate things to her rid her of sobering thoughts and caused the swelling to dip lower inside her until she felt moisture pool between her legs.

When he ended the kiss and quit touching her, taking a step backward, Shelly swore the ground underneath her shifted. She lowered her gaze, running her damp palms down her dress as she struggled for composure. If he meant to put her into such a frenzy that the moment they changed she would attack him, it was a cruel trick. And she almost had half a mind to tell him as much.

"Change, little owl," he growled, his voice rough with the smell of his need for her as strong as her desire to have him. "I'm not leaving you alone up here, but I will honor you by turning my back."

He turned as he spoke and then immediately pulled off his turtleneck. Shelly got an eyeful of bulging muscle flex in his back as he lifted his arms over his head and then lowered them, dropping his sweater and then undoing his belt. She damn near tripped over her own feet, struggling to put her back to him and prevent herself from enjoying the rest of the show.

With their backs turned, they stripped out of their clothes. Shelly made quick work of taking off her boots and then pulling her tights off. She stuffed them in one of her boots and then pulled off her dress and underwear. Although she shivered terribly from the cold, it didn't take any effort at all to allow the change to take life inside her.

Prickles attacked her spine, creating the sensation of electricity sparkling just underneath her flesh. She stiffened, giving way to the gift she'd been born with that made her so much more than human. Maybe she'd been born of a nest many viewed as lacking, but nonetheless she was still an owl. More specifically a Northern Hawk Owl as was Heath. Although she knew this about his nest, she'd never seen Heath in his feathers close up.

As her skin toughened and her physical size and shape altered, the sweet burn that she craved possibly more than a junkie craved his next fix spread through her body. Although embracing the change was predominantly a physical occurrence, her mind altered as well. Some claimed taking their feathered form allowed a cleansing of sorts to fill them. Shelly most definitely agreed with that. It was more than possessing the ability to fly and escape life for a while. There was never truly an escape when someone took their thoughts and problems with them. But as an owl, with her brain shifting into that of a creature instead of a human, all of her thoughts and problems took on a different perspective.

Shelly's hands disappeared and feathers covered her naked flesh. Her feet no longer had toes but instead long claws dug into the rocky ground. The cold wind didn't make her shiver but instead brought to her all the smells around her she couldn't detect in her flesh. Her mind no longer dwelled on how much honor she didn't possess in the eyes of others. Problems that meant so much to her as a human didn't hold the same weight as an owl. Her thoughts shifted along with the rest of her and only one thing took precedence in her head. She flapped her wings, used her beak to roll her clothes around her boots, and then gave all her attention to Heath.

His scent captured her almost as strongly as his size and incredible beauty in his feathers. He was a magnificent bird, a raptor capable of defending himself and all around him he considered his own. Heath stared at her with incredibly gorgeous, bright round eyes, not blinking at all as he approached.

Shelly froze, unable to even hiss at him as his silky feathers brushed against hers. He spread his wings, growing larger until all she saw and smelled was his virile body. For a moment she believed he wouldn't honor his human promise. Possibly his need to fuck her was too strong for him to fight. She smelled his need for her and instantly swelled, her body preparing for him.

Heath stepped into her, causing her to jump backward, her own instinct powerful enough to override her craving to fuck him. If she didn't move he would be on top of her. Instead of grabbing her with his beak and keeping her underneath him, Heath grabbed her pile of clothing, rolling them into a tighter ball. He then jumped away from her and picked up his clothes. He squawked with his mouth full and although his cry was garbled, she understood. Shelly grabbed her clothes and took flight with him.

After dropping their clothes on a cliff where no human could find them, Heath flew into the air, his magnificent wingspread breathtaking. Shelly embraced the breeze, feeling it spread her feathers as she lifted off the ground. She tucked in her feet, curling

her toes and letting the wind carry her. Heath was ahead of her, flying higher than she before dropping and angling to the side as he dipped toward the mountain.

He flew silently, angling his body when he again let the wind lift him. His feathers appeared golden as he tilted, his wingspan long and his tail feathers adding to his length.

Heath was magnificent to stare at and when he looked her direction, she was grateful the wind carried her. Every inch of her swelled and ached. Need ransacked her with so much intensity it was all she could do not to call out to him and beg him to appease the growing pain she knew wouldn't subside until he took care of it.

As he continued watching her, the two of them floating on a current that drove them across the mountain range beneath them, it was as if some invisible force captured them, keeping them as they were fixed in time and place where nothing else in the world mattered but the two of them. It was an odd sensation and one Shelly was positive she'd never experienced before. No matter how many times she'd took to flight in her lifetime, releasing all the stress and agony of her life, nothing compared to the freedom she experienced gliding alongside Heath.

They curved around the next mountaintop, the extreme cold temperatures doing little to appease the heat inside her. Although it calmed her, the frigid air seeping through her feathers, her desire to fuck Heath grew stronger until she looked away from him, searching the jagged rocks below for a sanctuary where she could fulfill her fantasies.

Chapter Five

Heath followed Shelly when she landed on one ledge and then jumped to the next cliff. She searched for the perfect perch and he didn't have a problem allowing her time to find it. When she finally found a secluded ledge, partially covered by a protruding rock so hardly any snow covered it, he had to agree it was almost a sacred location. And it would be soon. It was all he could do not to mount her the moment he landed alongside her. In fact, his talons reached for her, his instinct almost too strong for him to fight it.

Shelly made a low gurgling sound in her throat, threatening and questioning him at the same time. Her smell was intoxicating, stronger than any drug, and calling out to him with a force possessing strength he doubted he could battle. He'd told her she would call the shots for more than one reason. First he honored her, and he still did, if not more so now in their feathers than he had in his flesh. But another reason, a reason he wouldn't let her know. Heath told Shelly she would call the shots to protect her from him. It was a promise he couldn't take back. And it had created a shield around her, saving her from him. Otherwise he didn't doubt he'd already have sunk deep into her heat by now.

Just imagining having her wrapped around his cock made him teeter. The wind damn near knocked him over. He was so swollen, throbbing painfully and weak with hunger for her. And Shelly knew it. She smelled it seeping from him as easily as he did. As she stood next to him, her golden eyes glowing while the wind lifted her soft, down feathers, the turmoil he saw warring inside her was almost enough to do him in.

Just let me know it's what you want, my sweet little owl, he cooed, watching her pupils widen as he spoke the best he could in his feathers.

The soft sound that came from deep in her throat rushed over him. Her body poofed out and she edged closer to him. Everything he was made of told him that was more than an invitation. It was a fucking demand for him to mount her. The amount of logical rationale inside his head was decreasing, being pushed to the side by an animalistic craving to possess her.

He wanted her carrying his scent. There wouldn't be any doubt when they returned who had fucked her. Heath would see to it. No one would ever look at Shelly again without knowing she possessed more honor and integrity than any other female in Banff. It should already be obvious to anyone who watched her walk down the streets or enter any establishment in town. The way she carried herself, the regal air in which she floated into a room spoke volumes in itself. He was certifiably insane not to have noticed it about her sooner.

Heath realized it was what captured him when he first laid eyes on her when she entered Lana's apartment earlier that day. Her calm manner, those beautiful, soft haunted gray eyes of hers and her sensual body, so perfect in every way, had called out to him the moment he'd laid eyes on her. No female had ever intrigued him the way Shelly had. And it was so clear to him now why that was so. No other female possessed the degree of integrity Shelly did. It didn't matter what nest she came from. She'd risen out of the ashes of disgrace and had become a creature worthy of adoration and praise. Heath trembled from the knowledge of it, suddenly humbled and honored to be in her presence.

There wasn't any questioning the incredible desire to make her his female. He'd flown with others before, watched them stare at him as Shelly did now, and not once had he been overtaken with the knowledge that was clearer than glass to him now. When she looked away, no longer adoring him with those sensual golden orbs, he breathed in her scent, willing her to grace him with her attention again.

Shelly shifted, rubbing her backside against his chest as she did. Her long tail feathers dipped between his claws and he moved over her before he could register his actions. She fit next to him like a glove. Her body curved under his perfectly. The heat and moisture pooling between her legs might as well have possessed a magnetic force too strong for him to ignore or fight.

Heath swelled, growing and hardening as he mounted her soft, warm body. The toe-curling humming sound coming from her throat was melodic, intoxicating, and possessed a musical quality that was hypnotic. He matched the sound with a lower baritone of his own, their curdling hums making a song of sensuality and lust that wrapped around him and pulled him deeper inside her.

As Shelly adjusted herself underneath him, taking one more step and pressing her warm, smaller body alongside his, Heath glided into her scalding heat with very little effort on his own part to do so. Her soft sounds turned into intense cries, echoing off the rocks as he penetrated her tight, soaked pussy.

There wasn't foreplay in their feathers. He couldn't kiss her with his beak. There wasn't any way to stroke her perfect curves with his claws. But none of that mattered as it would if they were in their flesh. All that mattered right now was burying himself as deeply as he could, taking all she offered and filling her.

Heath adjusted his legs, gripping the side of her soft body and holding her in place underneath him. She wrapped around him with suffocating heat. Shelly was smooth, tight, and so damn wet he drowned inside her. And when she constricted, pulling him deeper toward her womb, she contracted, shivering and crushing him with a quick, hard orgasm that trembled through her entire body.

Heath swelled with more intensity than he'd ever known before. Shelly cried out, screeching into the frigid night air. The heat emanating off her was enough to melt snow, cause an avalanche, and leave him lost forever in a world of sensual warmth so incredibly powerful he would never find his way back. More so, he didn't want to

return. Shelly had just offered him a world so smooth and perfectly tight, wrapping around him and constricting so he couldn't move.

He held her in place, listening until her cries turned again into sated hums. There wasn't any doubt in his mind she'd just offered him a part of her very few other males had ever experienced. Not only was Shelly not a slut, she had fucked very few males in her life. What she gave him right now was a gift so precious it would have moved him to tears, if his eye ducts were capable at the moment.

Shelly didn't fool around in her feathers or her flesh. She didn't fuck just any male who came along. He doubted she shook her tail feathers for any of the males who had commented about her over the years. Heath penetrated her, thrusting deep inside her again and again, knowing without doubt if any male made a lewd comment about her again, he would kill them.

The aroma surrounding them in the private ledge, covered and secluded from the world, grew stronger as the momentum built between them. Heat scalded him, but as he breathed in their combined, intoxicating scent, the sweet thickness of it damn near made him come. It was hard enough enduring how tight she was. Shelly was satiny-smooth and coated with her come that lubricated every thrust. But as he filled her, receded and impaled her, the mixture of their scents melted together, creating a new aroma so thick and heady it was as if he breathed in a new drug specifically made for him.

Heath swelled until the pain became too much. *Come for me one more time before I can't hold out any longer*, he warned her, and then grabbed her by the back of her neck. Pinning her underneath him, he dragged her feathers through his mouth, tasting her. She twisted her head, piercing his heart with her golden orbs. Shelly would take more than what he could offer her physically. She wasn't just another female demanding relief in her feathers so she could return to her perfect world without him. Shelly was taking his heart and his soul.

For a moment he panicked, losing himself in the incredible beauty she offered him as she stared up at him. Nothing compared to the way she looked at him. But it became so clear the meaning behind her gaze, even as she panted and fought the orgasm he could feel trembling inside her. Shelly wouldn't allow him to fuck her and fly away. The fact he didn't want to terrified him more than knowing she didn't want him to.

Heath was intelligent, calm in his authority and knowledge that he would think any matter through with intense clarity before acting upon it. For the first time in his life though, the simplicity of the situation made it unnecessary to dwell on how to handle the matter. There was only one option, only one way to fly. And that was with Shelly at his side.

He thrust again, filling and stretching her as he cried out with a fierceness that should have scared him even more but instead calmed him. Heath fucked her with everything he had until the trembling in her smaller body underneath his grew strong enough to shake snow loose from rocks surrounding them. The powder glistened in the air, adding to the magic of the moment.

When Shelly shrieked, losing herself in her orgasm and constricting around him, Heath couldn't hold back any longer. He exploded, filling her with his come. At the same time he grabbed her by the back of the neck, holding her in place with his beak. His body convulsed and she constricted around him, making those melodic sounds deep in her throat.

Even as he drained all he had in her, he didn't want to leave her warmth. Taking his time, he slowly began caressing the feathers on her back, stroking each one in his beak. When she relaxed underneath him, he knew he brought her pleasure yet again. It created a sensation inside him he couldn't quite identify. But knowing he made her feel good, having brought her to a hardcore climax yet soothed her until she was one-hundred-percent sated, made him happier than he'd been in ages.

What was it about Shelly? Although he'd known her, or at least known who she was most of his life, until this morning he hadn't given her a lot of thought. Now that she wasn't by Lana's side, he wanted her by his side. There was logic in there somewhere and he needed to seek it out and understand it. The sooner he could figure out what it was about this female that drew him to her the better off the both of them would be.

One thing Heath knew clearly was that there hadn't been another female who'd impressed him the way Shelly did. Plenty had sought him out, thrown themselves at him. And if they hadn't, their nests had. Heath never wanted for a female. Although he'd ignored most requests. But with Shelly, he didn't want to ignore her.

Possibly knowing she planned on running from their date intrigued him more than he realized. Shelly wasn't like all the other females who were all over him. He'd watched her run. It was the hunter in him, he decided. Shelly wanted him. He'd known that the moment he smelled her and watched her in Lana's apartment. But she had decided to run away from him instead of to him. He'd taken care of that. Now he needed to determine if she would continue running.

As he continued stroking her feathers, taking great care to clean each one and lay it perfectly in place with the others, Shelly's moist heat, simmering around him, started climbing in temperature. Pampering Shelly turned her on. Knowing that got him hard all over again. She arched underneath him, her sated state making her movements slow, almost lazy.

When she shifted underneath him, turning to stare into his eyes, her pussy constricted around his cock, suffocating and boiling him alive at the same time. Heath hissed, feeling all blood drain from his body as the urge to fuck her hit him almost harder than it had the first time. He met her gaze, feeling the magnitude of emotions she didn't hide from him pull him into the core of her being.

Their sizes were perfect for each other. Heath easily stood over her, still buried inside her, and began a slow movement while holding on to her gaze. The cold, rocky ledge underneath them added to the strong sensibility he felt surging through him as he took Shelly again. Never had he felt so incredibly right in his actions. Fucking her slowly, feeling her suck him in deeper with each thrust, added to the knowledge he

grew to understand and it was logical. There would be details to figure out. But they were of minor importance. What rang through with incredible clarity was that Shelly was meant to be his female.

He continued staring into her golden orbs, seeing the purity and integrity in her soul as she opened up to him. Heath continued riding her, feeling the pressure grow and not fighting it, and watched as Shelly started panting underneath him. Her own desires peaked with his, her pussy clenching around him, draining him. If he had tried fighting it, straining to maintain control of their lovemaking, he doubted he would have won. Their bodies peaked together, their orgasms hitting at the same moment, and as they plummeted, the two of them crying out from the strength of coming hitting hard enough they collapsed onto the hard rock together, Heath knew nothing like this had ever happened with another female before.

This time, completely drained, he slipped out of her easily. Shelly rested on the cool, hard ledge, her breathing still coming hard. Once again Heath began cleaning her, using meticulous detail to stroke each of her feathers. He would always take care of and cherish his female.

Chapter Six

Shelly couldn't recall when she'd last flown across the mountain range and barely remembered doing it. The wind carried her, which was a damn good thing. She wasn't sure there was enough strength in any of her muscles to lift a single feather. Her insides were jelly. And every inch of her tingled. As frustrated as she was, she was also more satisfied and fulfilled than she'd been in her entire life.

For twenty-five years, or at least all of her adult life, Shelly spent every waking minute defending her honor. She always sniffed out a situation very carefully when any male started flying around her. Not one second passed where she hadn't been acutely aware of so many eyes on her if a male bought her a drink. She smelled curiosity and speculation if she agreed to a dance. Shelly knew the parliament of nests in Banff was ready to condemn her, call her a cheater like her sire or a slut like her mother. Or, God forbid, a mated male paused to say anything to her. Some mated males avoided allowing her to wait on them in the store for fear of what would be whispered.

And it had been whispered. Ever since she'd sexually matured. Shelly knew she wasn't paranoid. Every nest around assumed she was no better than her parents. She'd lived with that, worked her way through it and had formed a bond between her friends who knew without doubt Shelly was an honorable female. Her friends understood she had scruples. They smelled Shelly's honesty and her desire to be the best she could be. She was trusted, respected and loved in her small group.

So why the hell had she just done what she did?

Shelly wouldn't accept that years of fantasizing over Heath explained why she'd so willingly moved underneath him. He'd told her nothing would happen unless she wanted it. But damn, had she wanted it. And she got it too. Heath was better than she'd ever imagined he would be. He'd offered to take her to dinner and she'd declined. Instead of having him pick her up at her nest, enter their establishment and formally accept her from her sire and mother the way a proper female would begin a date, he'd picked her up at a bus stop. Instead of a night on the town, they'd gone into the mountains. When they could have talked and spent the evening knowing each other better, begin a dating relationship honorably, they'd fucked each other — twice.

All the years she'd spent trying to prove to herself above and beyond the rest of the community that she was better than her parents and in a matter of one evening she'd proven that she was worse. She'd agreed to a date she'd then run from, and when he'd picked her up, she'd fucked him.

She'd fucked him twice. And she wanted him again.

Where the hell was the logic in all of that?

How could she want a male she'd successfully just destroyed all of her honor with?

There wasn't any doubt in her mind she was emotionally unstable, a complete nutcase. Not only did she throw all of her honor to the wind for a male she barely knew, the thought of doing it again almost made her miss the ledge where her clothes were bundled next to his.

Heath landed next to her, his calm, confident poise causing her to feel even more rattled. Shelly needed to get a grip on her emotions, stuff them away and accept what had happened. There was no undoing it. Nor was there any denying she didn't want to regret it. What mattered now was she face Heath with honor. Although for the life of her she didn't have a clue how to do that when she'd just so incredibly dishonored herself.

Heath grabbed her clothes and flew down to the opening in the path where they'd changed clothes. One of her boots fell and she swooped down to catch it and then landed in the clearing next to Heath. He left her with her clothes and flew to get his. Shelly's heart pounded so hard in her chest the change came on painfully. She grew, her feathers receding and the cold attacking her ruthlessly. She shook so hard it was damn near impossible to slide her tights on and then finish dressing.

She prayed she appeared composed and not too incredibly tousled when Heath's boots crunched over the path behind her. His scent was riper than it had been and she picked up on her own aroma mixed with his. She could also smell him in her pores.

"Are you ready to go to dinner now?" he asked, grinning at her. His round gray eyes looked happy, relaxed, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Maybe he was used to his dates putting out for him without hesitating. That thought belittled her even more. But when she searched for that soothing breath, pulling air deep into her lungs, she noticed how similar their scents smelled. They'd branded each other with their unique aromas, combining them so that they now both smelled the same.

Her mark was on him. What would it take to keep it there?

"I don't know about you, but I'm starved," he added, and then reached to comb her hair with his fingers.

She cleared her throat and managed what she hoped was a relaxed expression. "Where would you like to go eat?"

Shelly was so grateful for her new dress, even if it did cost her more than she'd spent on clothes in ages. It would be so nice if she could touch up her face though. She was certain she didn't have a bit of makeup left anywhere when they walked into one of the nicer steak houses in Banff half an hour later.

The maitre d greeted Heath warmly, bowing his head and then acknowledging Shelly with an equally formal welcome. One she was sure she wouldn't receive if she weren't by Heath Halk's side.

"Will you be dining with us this evening, Mr. Halk, or are you here simply for drinks?" he asked, his tall willowy body appearing even taller in his black suit, trimly cut with long tails that gave him the ultimate formal air.

It didn't seem to bother Heath a bit that he wore jeans. Shelly wasn't sure her dress matched the attire of the restaurant. She should have packed makeup in her purse. In spite of her growing discomfort, she forced herself to remain relaxed, return the warm welcome the maitre d offered, and present herself as comfortable in her environment.

"We're dining tonight," Heath informed the older male. "In fact, if you have one of the private tables in the back available, I would really appreciate it."

The maitre d seemed to offer a knowing nod. Whether he believed the two of them wished intimate privacy or that Heath might not want to be seen by anyone he knew, Shelly couldn't tell. She refused to consider the latter.

If this were a once-in-a-lifetime experience, she would enjoy every minute of it. The maitre d didn't ask them to wait. He didn't write down a name and leave them sitting and forgotten. Instead, with a gallant gesture, he led the way through the restaurant—through the middle of the restaurant—where they passed everyone dining until he paused at an elegantly set table and pulled out one of the chairs.

"If the lady would allow me," he said, holding her chair for her to sit.

"Thank you," she told him, trying to meet his gaze but noting the male kept his eyes averted and focused on his task, sliding her chair to the table as she sat.

Heath discussed wines with the maitre d and then appetizers. A young waitress joined them, taking the order as the tall, formal male continued offering suggestions and discussing different food items with Heath. Shelly was more than glad no one asked her opinion on anything. She barely understood what was ordered. Instead, daring to glance around them, she saw they were indeed seated in an intimate setting.

There were many tables in the restaurant, and quite a few of them were occupied with owls as well as humans. But in this back section the tables were farther apart, the chairs were upright with tall backs and the lighting was dimmer.

"What do you think?" Heath asked, reaching for her hand when they were finally alone.

"It's very nice," she told him honestly, aware of his calloused fingers brushing over the back of hers. Her insides swelled immediately, wanting him in her human form in spite of having just having him twice in her feathers.

"It's the best Banff has to offer."

"Are you trying to impress me?" She couldn't imagine why he would feel a need to.

"Possibly." He stared into her eyes with dark, brooding gray orbs. "Yes," he said.

Shelly stared at him, wishing she understood him. "Interesting."

"Why wouldn't I want to impress you?"

"Why do you feel a need to?" She asked the first thing that came to mind.

When he didn't answer at first, her mind started racing for possible conclusions. Either he didn't feel a need to and simply asked the question out of politeness, or he wanted to gloat. Shelly didn't see him as the type to show-off his lucrative nest. His self-esteem didn't smell in trouble to her.

"Possibly I want to show you what I can offer you," he finally said.

She hadn't anticipated that answer. "You're showing off a lifestyle you feel I'm unacquainted with and yearn to be part of," she surmised, searching his face. There were many layers to Heath Halk, she decided. Possibly being in the position he was in among their parliament had created an assumption of rank in him. And he believed himself top-ranked and her at the bottom. "My question to you would be then why you have the urge to offer me anything?"

Their waitress showed up at that moment, carrying their wine and a silver platter with two wineglasses on it. Shelly watched her pour a small amount for Heath to taste. The waitress watched him attentively, although she didn't smell intrigued or interested. She didn't smell at all. Probably a prerequisite to working in such a place. She never took her attention from Heath when he approved of the wine until she poured two glasses. Shelly stared into her pale gray eyes when she accepted her wine without commenting.

Heath watched the waitress leave before returning his attention to Shelly. "I don't know that I would call it an urge. But you are entitled to an explanation. I feel I am as well. We've known each other for many years without so much as having a pleasant conversation."

"You're right," she said, lifting her wine and sipping. It went down like warm silk and tasted better than she expected.

"When you entered Lana's apartment this morning I believe I noticed you for the first time, possibly because you were no longer my sister's friend."

"I'm still her friend."

He nodded, his hard facial features and firm set of his jawline reminding her of how he'd bit the back of her neck when he'd fucked her. She imagined him taking her like that in their human form and took another sip of her wine, the dark, blood-colored liquid adding to the heat, which already burned steadily inside her.

"It's the only explanation I have to offer at the moment," he said, taking a long drink and finishing half his wine. "I came up with the excuse of needing more brushes to see you again. I haven't pursued a female the way I have you."

He wasn't lying. But she still wondered at the accuracy of his words. Possibly he hadn't expressed the reason behind why he flew after her, or maybe he hadn't come to terms with the reason himself. Shelly was a type of female, whether she earned the title or not, who Heath didn't usually fly after. Maybe this was an adventure for him.

In which case she needed to pay close attention to her emotions and be sure not to allow them to surface and risk getting hurt.

By the time they'd finished sharing appetizers, she wasn't sure she'd be able to pull it off. Heath's charms wrapped around her, making her feel comfortable and relaxed. The way he continued reaching for her hand, letting go as he gestured with their conversation and then slipping his fingers around hers, showed her how relaxed he was with her.

"Do you like working at the hardware store?" Heath asked when the waitress removed the empty appetizer plates. He leaned forward on his elbow, continuing to caress the back of her hand.

He dropped his attention to the action and Shelly did the same, her insides twisting with nervous anticipation when once again she imagined fucking him in her flesh. Doing her best to focus on the conversation did little to prevent her skin from sizzling, a heat ransacking her system she was sure he would have to be able to feel by touching her.

"It supports our nest," she offered, knowing she didn't answer his question.

"So it's a decent job?"

"It's the only place I've ever worked so I don't have anything to compare it to." When she lifted her attention to his face, Shelly caught him watching her. Those compelling gray eyes of his captivated her. He really appeared interested in hearing her answers. "I guess as with any job, there are good days and bad. Honestly though, I don't want to work there the rest of my life."

"What do you want to do?"

Telling him she wasn't sure would make her sound shallow. But sharing her dreams would mean opening up to him and risk allowing her emotions free reign. Shelly studied the hard contour of his face, the rugged width of his shoulders and how he leaned into her, appearing completely relaxed as he waited to hear what she would share with him.

"I want to leave Banff." It was the truth, and the first answer that came to mind that didn't require opening up to him too much.

But when his eyes darkened and something almost sinister appeared in his expression, Shelly fought the urge to pull her hand out from under his.

"But tell me about you," she said, deciding a diversion would calm the sudden odd sensation rippling in the air between them. "What exactly do you do?" she asked, smiling and then laughing with the admission that she wasn't sure exactly how he earned his income.

"I take care of everyone and make sure they are happy here in Banff," he informed her, stressing the last few words.

He made it seem as if her stating she would leave this town implied he didn't do his job right. Something told her Heath wasn't that superficial. She could smell the depth in him regardless of how well he kept his emotions in check.

Grateful for the waitress showing up, she watched as she put plates in front of them and then enough side dishes to feed a group of owls and not just the two of them. Shelly decided to take over her task after the waitress left.

"I sure hope you're hungry," she stated, picking up a bowl of mixed vegetables and scooping some on to his plate next to his steak. After doing the same to her plate, she then reached for the platter with rolls. "Butter?" she asked.

"Thank you. But enjoy your food. I'm accustomed to waiting on myself."

"Good thing," she said, smearing butter on a roll and watching as he reached for his own roll. "I never was good at filling the servitude position."

"I doubt I would like you if you were," he muttered, placing the unbuttered roll on his plate and then picking up his knife and fork. "I have a feeling if you are yourself and I am myself we'll get along really well."

She wondered if he thought she was putting on airs for him. Since she wasn't, she hummed her agreement as she bit into her roll.

Shelly swallowed and watched Heath enjoy his steak. There was something about a man eating meat. He took his time running the sharp steak knife through the meat, causing the juices to spill around it on the plate. It was rare, like hers, and the pink inside made her mouth water. She imagined the carnivore inside him surfacing, and him ripping the meat apart and savoring each bite.

When he lifted his gaze to hers, realizing she watched him, Shelly opened her mouth to speak, unwilling to have him catch her simply staring at him.

"Taking care of everyone here in town can't possibly pay the bills," she said, letting the first thing she thought of spill out of her mouth. She then frantically worked to make her statement appear logical and not prying. "I remember Lana saying something about you running the apartment complex you live in."

"My nest and I run it," he offered after chewing and swallowing his steak.

Shelly took a bite of hers, savoring the incredible flavors that ran down her throat as she chewed the perfectly prepared meat. She watched him, hoping he would continue since her mouth was full.

"It belonged to my sire and mother and when they passed on, we inherited it and keep it maintained. It's a strong parliament but definitely not something that will make any of us rich." Heath ate more of his steak and the silence between them was comfortable as they both enjoyed their food. "Do you expect to inherit the hardware store at some point?"

God. She hoped not. "I haven't given much thought to either of my parents passing on. But I guess if something terrible and unpredicted were to happen the store would go to me. There isn't anyone else in our nest."

"We didn't anticipate inheriting the complex either." Heath sliced the remainder of his steak and then stabbed a piece of it, holding it in the prongs of his fork as he stared at her with those stormy gray eyes. "And like you, I worked for my parents. In our

world the unexpected happens too often. You'll be better off to be prepared for what you don't expect to happen."

Chapter Seven

Heath rolled over in his bed and reached for his phone when it rang. His thoughts immediately went to Shelly and an urgency brought him out of a sound sleep quickly.

"What is it?" he growled, rubbing his eyes and squinting at the digital clock on his night stand.

It wasn't Shelly. Paul Mason, a single male who lived on the other side of town in his own nest, spoke loudly into the phone. "Heath, we have a situation. I was flying to my nest, disappointed I was heading there alone when I saw the Young litter breaking into the back of one of the nests over this way. I flew down to confront them and they attacked."

Obviously Paul wasn't hurt too badly. He was articulate and loud and speaking so fast Heath could barely keep up.

"Where are you now?" Heath asked, pushing himself to a sitting position on the side of the bed.

"I went to my nest and changed then sprinted back over to this neighborhood. Heath, you can see the damage those motherfucking leopards did to this nest. And this is the Straffer nest. Frances Straffer is here alone and she won't allow me to enter to make sure her nest is safe. She's pretty shook up. Maybe if you flew over here."

Frances had lost her mate Timmy Straffer when many of them went head-to-head with leopards fighting over the right to keep their stores from being bought out by a large investor who leaned toward helping the litters of leopards in the area.

"Keep an eye on her nest. Don't bother her. I'll be right there."

Heath didn't doubt for a moment Frances wouldn't allow Paul Mason into her nest. The male was a known player, and although a good-looking, successful owl, his continual determination to fly after every female in their parliament had soured Heath's impression of the male. At one point he would have considered him a good candidate for a mate for Lana. His sister had other plans though and wouldn't give Paul so much as a second look.

Within minutes Heath was dressed and heading down the hallway toward the elevator. He waited until he was outside before pulling his cell phone out again. This time he hit speed dial where he'd save Shelly's number. His insides warmed at the sound of her groggy, husky-sounding sensual whisper when she answered her phone.

"Hi there, my sweet sleeping owl," he growled into the phone as he pulled out his keys and hit the unlock button, which caused his SUV to blink its lights at him. It was parked on the street at the end of the block and he pulled open the driver's side door

then slipped inside. The leather seats were damn cold. "Get dressed and meet me out front of your store."

"What? Why?" She didn't sound any more awake than she had when she first answered.

"We have a situation and I'm going to need your help." He'd decided on the spur-of-the-moment that approaching Frances would best be done by a female. And who better than Shelly, who was already known in the community and not a female anyone would be leery around. "I'll be there in a minute. Be ready."

Shelly stood outside the hardware store, alone on the quiet, dark street when Heath pulled alongside the curb. Her comfortable-looking faded jeans hugged her slender legs and hips. And the baggy sweatshirt she wore didn't quite succeed in hiding her large, round breasts. But Heath decided it was her tousled long, silky hair bordering her flushed face that truly made her the most beautiful creature he'd ever laid eyes on.

"What's wrong?" she demanded, her tone harsh and her expression pinched with more worry than she would probably display if she were more awake. "Is something wrong with my nest?"

It surprised him she would jump to that conclusion, but he bit back his reaction to her question, waiting until she'd shut her door before commenting.

"I got a phone call," he began. "You asked what I do and now you'll see. The only way for nests to survive in this cut-throat world is to stick together. Frances Straffer just got attacked by three leopards. She won't allow anyone inside to talk to her so I'm going to send you in to calm her down."

"What?" Her eyes were large and cloudy-looking as she brushed a strand of silver blonde hair from the side of her face. "You woke me up to take care of Frances Straffer?"

"Is that a problem for you?" he asked.

She stared at him a moment longer before slowly shaking her head. Shelly had climbed into his truck and pulled her knees up onto the seat as she'd faced him. Now she straightened her legs, shifting and facing the windshield. Her small perky nose and full, moist red lips created one hell of a profile. Somehow he needed to get her back to his nest when this was all over. Regardless of his rule never to bring females into his private sanctuary, he needed Shelly in her flesh just as desperately as he'd needed her when they were in their feathers. The thought of fucking her gave him incentive to resolve this matter as quickly and painlessly as possible.

"It's not a problem. I'm not sure why you think she would talk to me," she said after a moment of silence.

Heath headed into the quiet neighborhood, which was a mixture of humans and nests. He slowed more than he needed to as he understood now Shelly's hesitation. Most owls kept to themselves. It was only the few, the strong, who flew out in the middle of the night to ensure the protection of the rest of them. He saw that strength in Shelly and now simply needed to point it out to her.

"Frances lost her mate when the leopards and owls fought over ownership of some of the store buildings downtown," he began.

"I remember that," she whispered.

Preston's Hardware was in one of the buildings the investor tried to buy out. If the leopard investor had succeeded, many of the shop owners, who already weren't in written leases but verbal agreements, would have been evicted or would have faced such hike increases in the rent they paid they wouldn't have been able to afford the overhead. Many nests would have lost their only means of income. Not to mention the security a lot of owls knew here in Banff would have been yanked out from underneath them. It had taken brutal force and then quick thinking on their feet to manipulate the leopards out of Banff. And Heath was male enough to admit that his sister's mate Dover Down had a big impact on convincing the town commissioners, some of whom were human, to influence the current owners of those buildings not to sell.

"Tonight a litter attacked her nest."

"Why?" Shelly again turned to face him.

Heath shook his head. "We'll find out. But imagine knowing you're alone because of leopards and then having them attack your nest. She needs comforted—a female's touch."

"Is she hurt?"

"I don't think so."

"Who is with her now?"

"Paul Mason."

"I wouldn't allow him into my nest either," she muttered.

"Damn good thing," Heath said.

He'd made that last comment without thinking and knew when Shelly cocked one eyebrow and continued studying him he'd accomplished showing her how she could help with this situation. She might wonder at the meaning behind his slip of the beak, but she could go on wondering. It was too early in their relationship to inform her of the level of possessiveness he was already feeling for her.

Shelly didn't say anything but looked out her window when he pulled up in front of the Straffers' nest. Heath jumped out, spotting Paul Mason and a couple of his flying buddies standing at the corner a couple of nests down. They'd honored Heath's request and left Frances alone but kept an eye on her place. For that he was grateful.

Paul took long strides down the sidewalk and then waited when Heath opened his passenger door for Shelly. He took her hand, aware of her watching Paul and the other males warily as she moved to Heath's side. It wouldn't be long before she no longer looked at other males as if they might attack. Soon Shelly would see how protected she was with Heath and would relax. But only time and treating her properly would make that happen. He had every intention of treating her properly and as he gripped her small hand in his, he couldn't wait to start.

"What's she doing here?" Paul asked, giving Shelly the once-over as the two of them walked to the sidewalk in front of Frances' nest.

"She's here to talk to Frances," Heath said, continuing to walk up the sidewalk to Frances' front door. He saw her move the curtain next to her door as they approached but was aware of the males following behind them. Keeping himself between Shelly and Paul and the others, he paused, facing them. "Stay at the street. I'll be back in a second to hear your story."

The males nodded their consent, not that he anticipated argument. None of them would question his actions. Not that there was a damn thing illogical about what he was doing. Frances would be spooked and talking to a female would be easier for her to do than discussing what happened with a male.

He knew he'd made the right decision when they reached the door and Frances opened it, peering out from the darkness of her living room with wide, frightened eyes.

"You honor me by coming to my nest," Frances offered, opening the door and standing back to allow them to enter. She clutched a long, thick pale green bathrobe at her chest and her thick, silver blonde hair fanned around her shoulders as she watched the two of them walk into her living room and closed the door, locking it behind them.

"You honor us by allowing us in to your nest," Shelly responded before Heath could say anything. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Frances looked anything but fine. "I admit I'm a bit pissed and also frightened."

"Do you want to tell us what happened?" There was a softness to Shelly's voice that would make any female open up to her – or probably male for that matter.

"I don't know why they attacked my nest," Frances murmured, and then began shaking. She hugged herself, hurrying out of the living room.

After a moment Shelly followed without looking at him first. Heath brought up the rear, knowing Shelly didn't need him. He wanted to hear whatever Frances would say though. If they had another problem rising with the leopards, he needed to know about it. Although he felt for Frances, he did hope this was an isolated incident. Leopards weren't like werewolves. He wouldn't be able to report to the leader of their kind. Once he learned the truth of the evening, he would have to seek out the individual litter who caused the damage and seek revenge for Frances' honor. If that didn't work, he could always approach Kane, who was the leopard hunter in this part of the country. Hunters only intervened when litters couldn't resolve their own problems.

Heath learned the different kinds of politics existing between different species at an early age. It was something he didn't mind doing, especially in the case of Frances Straffer. She was a young female who lost her mate before they'd been able to create a nest of their own and have fledglings chirping throughout the home. Frances might find another mate in time, but Heath knew she still mourned the loss of her Timmy.

"I could make coffee if you like." Frances stood in the dark in the middle of the clean and orderly kitchen with her back to both of them.

"Hot tea sounds better. If you have any," Shelly suggested, moving through the dark room as if she'd been in the nest before. "Should we turn on the lights?"

"I guess it is okay to do so now."

Shelly flipped on the light switch and then walked to a teapot, which was already on the stove. Heath remained in the doorway, watching the two females go through the motions of making tea without further conversation. The simple task seemed to bring order to Frances' thoughts and she gestured to the small table along the wall by the back door.

"Forgive me please. You two must be seated," she insisted.

She joined them as the water began hissing. Shelly was adorable when she rested her chin in her hands, her elbows on the table, and her tousled hair streaming down her arms and framing her relaxed expression. She didn't look at him but all her attention was on Frances, as if the female's state of mind meant everything to her. Heath knew he'd made the right call in bringing Shelly to assist with this situation.

"Tell us what happened," Shelly prompted.

Frances nodded. "Earlier this evening several owls stopped by, asking me out. Their intentions are good. And soon I will start flying with everyone. I promise," she said, glancing at Heath as if apologizing for continuing to mourn and remain in her nest.

"There's nothing wrong with staying in," he informed her.

Again Frances nodded then glanced at the teapot when the sizzling sound grew louder. "I've been sorting through Timmy's clothes and plan to offer them to nests who have males about the same size as Timmy was. It was a lame excuse to use for not going out. And tonight was worse than usual. I couldn't help feeling as if they really wanted me out of my nest and not just for my own good."

"Who were the owls?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned back in the kitchen chair and studied Frances.

She fidgeted with the tie of her bathrobe and didn't look up for a moment.

"Paul Mason," she began, shifting her attention in the direction of the front door. "Mickey Redd was with him. I think there were a few others who didn't come to the door."

"And they were persistent in you coming out?" Heath asked.

The teapot started whistling and Frances jumped.

"Keep talking," Shelly told her. "I'll get the tea. Sugar anyone?"

"Please and thank you." Frances watched Shelly move around in her kitchen. A moment of silence passed as she followed Shelly with her eyes, appearing unsure if she appreciated another female making herself at home in Frances' nest.

"Did you get the impression something bad would happen if you stayed in tonight?" Heath tried for a more direct line of questioning.

Frances snapped her attention to Heath. Her lips puckered into a small circle and she narrowed her dark gray eyes on him, studying him while digesting the question. Heath knew the look. He'd handled more than one crisis in his parliament and quite often asking what he suspected to be true helped whoever was involved in a moment of drama to see more clearly.

"Something bad," Frances repeated. "Honestly, at the time I worried something bad might happen if I flew with that group."

Shelly snickered or made some kind of snorting sound with her back to the both of them. When she turned around, steaming mugs in hand, the two females gave each other knowing looks. Heath didn't need an explanation. Paul and Mickey were male sluts. Everyone knew it. He understood Frances' meaning.

"Let me know if it isn't sweet enough," Shelly murmured. "And I love your kitchen, it is so nice and roomy."

"Thank you," Frances said, cupping her mug with her fingers and letting the steam from the tea float into her face. "The only thing I found curious is that when the leopards attacked my nest, Paul and Mickey were the owls here on the scene. It crossed my mind they were already nearby. They had to have been or they wouldn't have known the leopards were here."

Heath nodded. "I'm going to go outside. I asked the males to wait for me so I could speak to him. When it's daylight we'll be over to make any repairs to your nest."

After making sure the back door behind them was locked, Heath walked through the quiet, dark nest, taking the liberty of glancing into two small rooms before heading out the front door. Both were bedrooms. One was obviously Frances' room, the bed not made, showing she'd been sleeping when the disturbance occurred. The other room was cluttered with boxes and spare furniture. Frances' offer to give some clothing and possibly other items to nests who might need them was a gracious one and something he would follow up on later. These were hard times for nests everywhere and the generosity of one nest quite often helped another nest make it through a crunch.

Less than an hour later, Shelly appeared on the slab outside Frances' front door, informing him quietly that she'd tucked Frances in for the night and thought the female would be able to sleep for the remainder of the evening. Sunrise was only a few hours away and he saw the exhaustion in Shelly's eyes but also the glow in her face. It did her good to get out of her nest and help someone else. And she was a natural at doing it.

"We can come by in the morning and help repair the side of her house and the window," Paul offered when Heath and Shelly joined him and the others on the sidewalk in front of Heath's SUV.

"That's fine. But I'll call you when I'm ready to fly this way," Heath said, meeting the male's attentive stare. "Don't give Frances the impression you're flying after her, my friend, or she will fly away from you so quickly you won't see her tail feathers in the dust she leaves behind."

The males around him shifted their weight, all suddenly looking down to hide the smirks on their faces. The smell of amusement was enough to sour Paul's scent.

"I would help any female alone in her nest if she needed it," Paul snapped, straightening as his facial features noticeably relaxed.

Heath doubted the male heard how his statement sounded. Nor did Paul appear to notice his slip in not adding he would help any single female. It wasn't a secret Paul flew after any female, whether mated or not, as long as they were willing. Right now that wasn't the problem at hand, and Heath had no desire to create another issue.

"I'll give you a call," he repeated, taking Shelly by the arm and guiding her around the males to his SUV.

"Heath," Mickey Redd said, following him around to the driver's side after Heath helped Shelly into the cab and closed her door behind her. "There's something bothering me here."

Heath opened his door and reached in to start the motor so Shelly wouldn't freeze sitting there. Then closing the door, he stared at the large owl. His neutral expression didn't bother Heath as much as the way he shifted his weight and glanced over his shoulder at the other males who were already strolling to the corner. He'd already learned when talking to the group that they'd left their cars downtown and would walk the blocks to them. Since he didn't have room for all of them in his truck, he hadn't offered a ride. If Mickey wanted a ride, he wouldn't turn the male down, although he questioned the male's motive in not wishing to walk.

"What's that?" he asked, following Mickey's gaze when he studied Frances' nest.

"The Young litter was downtown earlier this evening when we stopped in at Earl's. The smell in the air wasn't right and I know I wasn't the only one to notice it."

Ever since Earl Brenning, the large old male owl who bartended at one of the more established bars in Banff, bought the place and proudly named it after himself, he'd screeched loudly how he wouldn't discriminate against any species entering his bar. Fights were common in the bar. Earl had a sense about him when it came to sniffing out the instigator of trouble and would throw an owl out onto the street as easily as he would leopard or werewolf, as well as the occasional human.

"What did you smell?" Heath asked.

"Trouble."

Heath shook his head. "You'll have to do better than that."

"You're right. The Young litter always smell as if they're trying to stir up a fight, even when they're laughing and appearing in good moods."

"Agreed," Heath said slowly, deciding there was a point to this and Mickey was simply taking his time getting to it.

"Which was how they appeared tonight, especially with Paul." Mickey quit talking and turned around.

Heath looked past him as well when Paul returned from around the corner, taking long strides to approach the two of them quickly and silently. His serious expression was hardened by dark shadows.

"You are blaming this attack on me," he said, staring at Mickey.

"Do you feel the blame is yours?" Heath asked, shifting his weight so he stood between the two males.

Although Mickey moved so Heath couldn't prevent a confrontation, Paul focused on Heath. "Not only is the blame not mine, but my association with anyone, regardless of their species, is my own business."

Chapter Eight

Shelly didn't know what to think. She lay in her bed, knowing she needed to get up, and continued replaying the events from the night before in her mind. It didn't make sense when Heath called her after dropping her off at her nest and then took her to speak with Frances Straffer. She'd been proud of how well she'd concealed her fear. Frances didn't even appear to notice how apprehensive Shelly had been.

It had felt really good consoling Frances. Shelly felt her worries over being shunned by the nest fade when Frances opened up to her, sharing her own fears of the single males in town flying after her. When Frances told her how she was scared to allow any of them to approach her because of what the nests around her might start saying, Shelly had understood completely. Shelly also saw how much Frances still loved her mate, even after he'd been dead for almost a year. Shelly couldn't imagine loving anyone so much and then losing him. Just the thought of it made it even more terrifying to risk falling in love.

She stretched under her sheet with her two down comforters piled on top. A shower was in order and at least attempting to remove some of Heath's scent from her body. Not that she didn't enjoy lying there and smelling him every time she inhaled or shifted under the blankets.

It had been the most unique and wonderful evening she'd ever had in her life. If anyone had told her Heath Halk would fly after her, demand she fly by his side even when she ran from him, and then seek her out again mere hours after bringing her to her nest, she would have called them insane. When they'd left Frances Straffer's nest, the way he'd protectively escorted her to his truck, keeping himself between her and the other males present, she'd felt so special. It had crossed her mind more than once that he might take her to his nest or somewhere where they would fuck again.

And damn her already-ruined reputation to hell and back, she would have gone with him. There wasn't any doubt in her mind.

"You're such a lost cause," she mumbled, dragging her legs together under the thick pile of blankets and then pulling the covers up to her chin. "You don't have a clue what his intentions are and you would fuck him until you'd never be able to scrub his scent off of you."

And then what? Heath Halk wasn't just another male. And it wasn't because of the many times she'd fantasized about him over the years. Shelly knew she wasn't the only female who shifted her tail feathers when Heath came around. Although, as she thought about it now, focused on particular circumstances in her past when she'd seen him out and watched other females flaunt themselves, crooning as if they were in heat, it created a very unpleasant knot in her gut.

"And what are you going to do when he takes another single female out on the town?" she demanded of herself, and then pulled her knees to her chest and hugged herself, fighting the anger that threatened to create a stench in her room as she tried to figure out how she would cope with that. "I'd claw her damn eyes out," she hissed, allowing jealousy to raise its ugly head for just a moment before blowing out a loud breath and fighting to shove her emotions back where they belonged.

Then shoving the blankets off her and sitting up fast enough her head spun, she kicked her bare legs off the side of the bed and stared at her floor. She didn't want to lose Heath, but she needed to accept that she didn't have him. That was almost too much for her to handle. Her brain hurt within minutes of trying to work her mind around the strong possibility he wouldn't fly toward her again.

"Coffee," she decided. "And a shower."

If Heath had simply taken her into the mountains and fucked her she'd be able to accept all of this a lot better. Not that she would have liked it.

"Yeah right," she grumbled, remembering how incredible sex with him had been.

She'd broken every rule she'd so firmly flown by all of her adult life. And with no guarantees. She traipsed into her bathroom and scrubbed her hair with her fingers as she stared into the mirror.

"Heath Halk, you are going to be honorable," she told her reflection. "I'm going to see to it."

It was how it would have to be. The only way she'd be able to live with herself, continue to hold her head high and fly straight was to make Heath her male. She turned from her mirror, contemplating the best way to make this happen. As she stripped and then turned on her shower, feeling the steam fill the air and sink into her pores, Heath's scent seemed to grow stronger. Shelly swore he was in the bathroom with her, standing right behind her. He would touch her at any moment, caress her with his confident hands. She almost tripped stepping into the shower as thoughts of him joining her clogged her already-fogged brain.

Picturing the different ways they might fuck in the shower didn't help her create a plan to make him her male. Shelly didn't have the type of mind some of her friends had. Maybe she should discuss this with Gena, her friend since they were fledglings. Or Lana. The three of them—her, Gena and Lana had been as tight as a nest for so many years. Yet now she suddenly felt she was all alone, standing in a mist of fog, trying to figure out the impossible.

"Would Lana help me snag her brother?" What type of trap did one set for an owl who was clever enough to tackle all problems the nests in Banff could come up with?

And why did it have to be so hard? So many females pruned their feathers while plotting to get the male they wanted. Shelly heard them hoot and puff their feathers as if they had a fool-proof plan. But Heath flew after her. He cornered her, strutting around her like a peacock. And God, was he good at it.

He would be just as good in his flesh. She had no doubts. Shelly arched into the water, closing her eyes as droplets splashed over her skin. His strong, confident hands would know where to touch her. She wouldn't have to tell him what turned her on. Heath's skilled fingers, his mouth, every inch of his body, would put her in a state of arousal too strong to deny.

Heath would grab her waist, placing her body where he wanted her. She would face him, stare into those gray brooding eyes, a gaze so full of confidence and power she would lose herself in him. And he would touch her. He would take his time too. Shelly lifted her hands over her head, stretching in the water, and closed her eyes. His mouth on her flesh then sucking in one nipple, torturing it thoroughly, before moving to the other. He would pay meticulous detail to every inch of her, tasting, exploring, devouring.

She almost stumbled and slapped her hand against the shower water before reaching for the soap. Imagining the different ways they could fuck each other wouldn't help her snag the owl.

By the time the water turned cold, Shelly wasn't sure if she'd cleaned every inch of herself or if she'd scrubbed herself several times. And she wasn't any closer to figuring out how to make sure Heath stayed with her.

Although she told herself if all he'd done was fuck her all of this would be easier to understand, there wasn't a lot of logic in that line of thinking either. When he'd flown after her twice in an evening, the second time for her to assist him when he went to help a nest, being by his side seemed so much more real. It was as if they were mated, working together to help their parliament.

"And thinking like that is not only not logical, it will stir up feelings you know aren't healthy to experience." Shelly shook as she spoke to herself, fighting to wrap a towel around her hair.

It seemed colder than usual in her small nest and she suddenly worried the furnace might have gone out again. If so, her sire and mother would fight over it all morning. That was enough incentive to dress faster, put herself in order and hurry to make coffee. As she padded into her kitchen, the floor was so cold she ran back to her bedroom and dug out thick, heavy socks. Then retracing her steps, she started coffee and stared at the small window at the end of the corner of her apartment that was her kitchen. The panes were frosted over and the pale gray glare that offered a bit of natural light drew her closer.

"Snow," she whispered, suddenly aching to change and fly over the mountains, putting all of the turmoil in her brain to the side and enjoying nature in her purest, raw form. There was nothing better than fresh snowfall. "And you're the first to remind anyone that flying away doesn't resolve any problem." Not to mention, it was also illogical to want something and not work to see it happen. What was the point of allowing the craving if she would then fly off before determining how to satisfy the ache?

Shelly took her steaming cup of coffee from the corner of her small studio apartment where her kitchen was to the other side of the room and plopped down on her couch. There was no getting Heath out of her head. Every conversation they had, every minute they were together the night before, pranced through her frazzled brain. She sat, curled on her couch, not even bothering for the remote but instead stared ahead as she sipped her hot coffee.

Something hit her as she watched the flashbacks in her brain. Heath told her he saw her mother run after her down the alley. Why hadn't that smelled odd before?

"Crap," she complained, holding her coffee cup away from her and staring at the dark brew dripping down her hand at the same time someone knocked firmly on her door. "You are way too jumpy."

She put down her cup and rubbed her wet and slightly burnt hand against her jeans as she pushed herself off the couch. Heath's scent still lingered on her flesh but his overwhelming aroma wrapped around her as she reached for the door knob.

"Why aren't you answering your phone?" he demanded the moment she opened her door.

Shelly stepped backward and Heath stormed into her apartment still wearing the same clothes he had on when he dropped her off. He smelled of the outdoors, of the mountains and the cold from outside still clung to him when he turned and pierced her with intense gray eyes.

"You are not going to blow me off," he growled, moving in on her.

Shelly stepped backward, closing her door and leaning against it. The hard wood behind her wasn't enough to keep her grounded, and her brain was already in a haze before he entered. "My phone must be in my bedroom," she stammered, hating how uncertain she sounded.

Heath possibly didn't hear her response. Her words were barely out of her mouth when he grabbed her, lifting her so they saw eye to eye. Shelly wasn't short by any means, but Heath still stood at least a few inches taller. He pressed his body against hers and his cock hardened between them, stretching and throbbing.

Her heart pounded in her chest, but catching her breath seemed impossible. Heath had a way of making it impossible to hold on to any rationale in her brain. And she needed to do just that. She'd been trying to figure out how to make him her male before he came over and now the thoughts stomping around in her tormented brain told her it wasn't necessary. After all, he'd just flown up her stairs and into her nest, throwing a fit because she hadn't heard her phone ring. Any male who would do that was obviously interested.

When his mouth seared hers, placing his behavior into an acceptable category proved impossible. More so, the desire to figure him out while keeping her own emotions in place no longer seemed important. Dragging her fingernails up his muscular arms, feeling his blood pulse through the vein in his neck, suddenly became

all she could focus on. That and the incredible skills he possessed as he tormented her mouth with his tongue and lips.

Heath was a damn good kisser. The best! A few moments ago she was too cold and now every inch of her simmered. She was getting hotter by the second. Heath thrust his hips against hers, moving his hands from under her arms down her sides until he was dangerously close to caressing her breasts. Shelly swore the temperature in the room sky-rocketed to dangerous levels.

And when he released her, backing up and allowing her to slide down her front door, she licked her lips, tasting and smelling him.

Heath rubbed his knuckle over her moist lips. "I want to taste that every morning," he whispered, his gray eyes smoldering as he stared down at her.

"That would require being together every morning." In spite of the logic in her statement, Shelly couldn't believe she spoke so daringly.

He didn't argue with her. The way he turned from her, walking through her small nest as if it were his own, sent an odd sensation rushing over her. She stepped away from her door, feeling the chill in the air once again and hugging herself as she watched his broad backside. Heath walked into her bedroom and she followed, all too aware of how hard her nipples were and how perfectly sculptured his backside was. At the same time, his strong sense of control, his dominating and possessive nature appealed to her way too much. Heath was moving into her world and taking over with demands and stipulations. Just because she'd fantasized about this male and the entire town of Banff considered him the perfect catch shouldn't be reason to let him fly into her world and take possession. Shelly wanted this male but she needed to take him on her terms.

"What are you doing?" she asked, taking in her unmade bed and the towel that was draped over the side of her laundry basket. Her room was hardly in any condition to have company. Not that she'd known he was coming over.

"Where is your phone?" he asked, searching her room as if he had every intention of finding it himself.

Shelly walked to the side of her bed and picked her cell phone up off her nightstand. It was facedown, which was probably why she hadn't heard it ring. There were two missed calls from Heath and a missed call from her mother. Odd her mother would call and not come upstairs to her nest.

"Why is it so cold in here?" he asked, walking past her back into her living room and then staring toward her kitchen area along the far wall. "How is your nest heated?"

"The furnace is in the basement. And I thought it was cold too. I hoped the furnace hadn't gone out again and that it was just incredibly cold outside."

"It is cold outside." He walked up to her small thermostat on her wall and tapped it with his finger. "But not so bad that it should be this cold in here."

"I missed a call from my mother." She walked over to her coffee table where she'd left her coffee. "I need to call her back. Help yourself to coffee."

He nodded and did just that as she returned to her spot on the couch, watching him while placing the call to her mother.

"There you are, dear," her mother said in greeting when she answered the phone. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything," she added, laughing a bit too loud.

"No, Mother. You didn't." She watched Heath open her two cabinets, choosing the wrong one the first time and then finding her cups when he opened the second one. "Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm over at a friend's nest and probably will be for a few days since your sire is such a cheap wad and won't hire a professional to fix the furnace. He insists he can fix it himself. I swear that male couldn't fly a straight line sober," she whined, but then chuckled.

Shelly relaxed farther into the couch, her mother's insults toward her sire helping to sober her thoughts. "I guess that explains the chill in the air," she offered, years of experience having taught her defending her sire or agreeing with her mother accomplished nothing. Her parents loved complaining about each other and probably would for the rest of their lives. "I'd wondered if it was just because it's snowing."

"There is another storm heading this way so no flying, my dear." Her mother suddenly took on the air of authority. "Unless of course you are still with Heath Halk. I heard you ended up with him last night anyway," she said, her tone implying she knew all along it would be that way. "And already there is some hooting that the two of you assisted a nest together during the night. Is he a good fuck?"

"Mother," Shelly snapped, keeping her tone low. Discussing sex with her mother was worse than being plucked and something Shelly avoided at all costs. Not only did her mother have a lewd and disgusting take on what males were good for, she was a worse gossip than those she complained about. "Let me know if you need anything," she added in a softer tone when Heath sipped at his coffee while leaning against the counter and studying her.

"I need to know when you're going to arrange it so our nest is related to the Halk nest," her mother said.

Shelly took in a slow deep breath, forcing herself to remain calm so she wouldn't lose control of her emotions. Heath continuing to watch her with his unreadable, brooding expression caused her flesh to tingle and she lowered her gaze so she focused on the slight bulge in his jeans. Then, realizing where her attention rested, she stared at the black brew in her cup.

"I've endured humiliation and insults most of my life being mated to your sire and it's time to have my due. I deserve to have my only fledgling mated to the best there is. Let those nosy owls try to berate me then. They will all treat me like a queen. And I've earned that staying with your sire and that stupid store of his."

"I'll give you a call later, Mother."

"He's there right now, isn't he?" her mother crooned, her bitterness suddenly melting as her voice turned into an annoying singsong pitch. "You better make him happy. I'll never forgive you if you let him fly away."

"I love you too." Shelly ended the call and then adjusted herself on the couch so she could slip her phone into her back pocket.

"Is there something wrong with your furnace?" Heath asked, his expression not changing.

"Apparently. My sire is going to fix it." There was no point in sharing any other details of the conversation with Heath.

Fortunately, he didn't ask. Instead, nodding once, he sipped more of his coffee and then walked across her small living room with the confidence of a predator who'd conquered all around him. She watched roped muscle flex in his legs when he reached her door and then gripped the knob.

"Gather some of your things. It's too cold for you to stay here. I'll check with your sire on the furnace." He didn't elaborate or leave her time to comment but instead headed down the stairs, leaving her door open behind him.

Shelly had no intention of gathering anything when it wasn't stated where she would be flying. And although the thought of staying at his nest created a twisted thrill of excitement in her tummy, doing so wasn't an option. She accepted that her honor was still intact with him after fucking him last night. But she wouldn't push the matter by going to his nest.

It wasn't because of what the rest of the nests thought of her. Shelly didn't doubt many might even think better of her by seeing Heath fly with her. It was her honor, her pride. She'd made it all these years knowing in her heart she flew the right way, viewed all situations logically and didn't do anything to disrespect her small nest, which in her eyes consisted of only herself. If something became of her and Heath it would be because she made him her mate by flying properly, not through manipulation and taking advantage of a broken furnace.

Gulping down the rest of her coffee, Shelly hurried after Heath. She slowed at the bottom of the stairs, entering her sire's store calmly. Both males glanced her direction when she approached and it didn't surprise her to see the glow in her sire's eyes. He looked as he always did when he smelled profit and a situation leaning in his favor. The look caused her stomach to churn.

"The truth of the matter is the furnace is simply wearing out. I'm good at fixing things, one of the best owls in Banff if you ask me," Porter Preston bragged, puffing out his chest as he stood behind his counter, facing Heath. "I don't have to tell you times are hard. Even with all of my skills I can only keep her working for so long."

"That makes sense." Heath leaned against the counter, one of his legs crossed over the other as he stared out the large windows facing the street. It was a mass of white blur outside, visibility from the heavy snowfall indeed making it a dangerous storm. The best of navigators could end up flying in circles in a storm like this.

"If I had the money I'd put a new furnace downstairs in a second. A male provides for his nest and I certainly don't want my sweet Shelly freezing her feathers off. All I need is the money and I'll have a new furnace installed right away." Porter stared at the side of Heath's head as if he might pounce at any second and take any cash Heath might have on him.

"Interesting," Heath mused, taking his time straightening and then sipping at the coffee he'd brought down with him. "If I knew anyone whose furnace went out right now I'd definitely suggest they fly to you."

"And that is appreciated," her sire said, straightening as well.

"But if you don't think you can fix it, then we do have a situation. I didn't notice a fireplace in Shelly's nest but if you have one in yours I'll arrange to have wood brought right over."

"Wood won't buy a new furnace," Porter snapped, crossing his thick arms over his chest.

"You're right but it will keep your nest warm."

"I need a new furnace."

When her sire stepped around his counter, Shelly got the urge to fly. It took more determination than she wanted to administer to hold her ground when her sire walked up to her and then put his arm around her. She couldn't remember when he'd last held her this close as he did now.

"Let's make sure we understand each other." Porter's tone actually added to the chill already in the air. "You're not going to dishonor my nest by flying in here and wrapping your scent around my only fledgling."

Shelly's heart swelled into her throat so that she almost choked. Her sire would humiliate her to get Heath to offer to pay for a furnace. It was more dishonorable than his accusation against Heath. Especially since he stood here today, carrying her scent as strongly as she carried his. But the point was that he was here, a piece of logic her sire intentionally ignored.

"Now if you think you're going to get under her feathers again, you're going to start helping out around here. And we'll start by you providing this building with a new furnace."

"If I were dishonoring your nest, I wouldn't be here," Heath pointed out, his stance remaining as relaxed as his expression. "I will contact the owner of the building on your behalf but not because of Shelly."

Porter dropped his arm that he had around Shelly's back as if he had forgotten he'd been holding her. "Interesting," he grumbled. "She's not worth a furnace to you."

Heath took advantage of her sire having released her and walked to her, placing his hand on her back and easing her away from her sire. "I don't buy affection, Porter," Heath stated. "That is not only illogical but also an uneven trade."

Porter Preston wasn't a young owl anymore and he was thicker than some males his age. But he could move with a silent speed their species was known for and did so now, diving after Shelly and ripping her away from Heath's grasp. He almost tossed her toward the stairs as the air around them filled with the spicy stench of his fury.

"You aren't laying a single feather on my daughter again until you see to that furnace being replaced," he snarled, continuing to shove Shelly at the stairs. "And I expect it to be fixed before the day is out, unless you don't care if she freezes." He glared at her, his dilated gray eyes a wash of outrage. "Get up to your nest and stay there," he hissed.

Shelly wanted to scream at him to take his claws off her. She was a grown female, old enough to make her own decisions on who she flew with. But her sire was larger than she was, angry enough she didn't dare push him, and had already embarrassed her more than she thought possible. Her nest would destroy any chance she had with Heath in their determination to unite their nest with the Halks.

Turning, she raced up the stairs before her own emotions started filling the air with an even worse odor. If Heath said anything she didn't hear it. And she doubted he did. No male with any amount of sanity would have anything to do with a nest as incredibly fucked up as hers.

Chapter Nine

An hour later Heath sat in his SUV, staring at the white cloud of snow outside his windshield. In the minute or so since he'd turned off his wipers, it had quickly gone to zero visibility. He sat outside the hardware store, unsure if Porter Preston saw him from inside or not. Heath could barely see the building he was parked next to.

Beel and Rock would throw a bloody fit the moment they found out he'd pulled out enough money for Preston to buy a new furnace. He could argue he was helping a nest. All of them had handed over cash to help those in need. Heath knew he wasn't doing this to help a nest. The Porter nest was a mess and there was little anyone could do to help them. But Shelly wasn't like her sire or her mother. Shelly wasn't like anyone he'd ever met in his life.

He still tried searching for the logical reason as to why she'd come to mean so much to him in a matter of a day. Even as he sat there pondering it, there was one truth that ran strong. Heath wanted Shelly. He would make her his female. He would figure out the whys. That would come with time. But the energy coursing inside him was too strong to be a good case of lust.

Pushing his door open against the harsh wind, he continued contemplating reasons why Shelly was getting under his feathers. Pulling his coat around his chest and waist, he ducked into the snow and wind and hurried around the front of his truck toward the hardware store. There wasn't anyone downtown today. Humans even had enough sense to stay out of this storm. From what he'd heard on the radio heading back over here, it would get worse before it got better.

The bell above the door rang and Heath entered then pushed to close the door although a whirlwind of snow blew around him. Porter Preston appeared from a back room and then paused. He was a tall, stout male with short silver blond hair, although it was more silver than blonde. His large, watery gray eyes stared at Heath, unblinking, when he stopped outside the back room but then slowly walked toward his counter.

Heath didn't take as much time. He pulled out his wallet from his back pocket, opened it and slapped the necessary bills on the counter. "Go buy your furnace."

Porter stared at the stack of cash, frozen in obvious shock, before moving around the counter quickly and snagging it into his thick hands. "Interesting," he muttered. "Are you sure you're paying for a furnace?"

"You make it hard to pity a nest for it being cold as hell when it appears you've created the hell that exists here," Heath whispered, damn near done with trying to be hospitable with the indifferent and cold-hearted bastard who now stared at him, almost amused. "Go buy your furnace. Keep your nest warm. Although at the rate you're going, you'll be a nest of one."

"I seriously doubt that," Porter called after Heath when he headed to the stairs that led to Shelly's nest. "There's something to the saying out with the old and in with the new."

Heath managed to climb the stairs before the pretentious stench from Porter's boasting filled the air. Whether or not Porter would replace his nest with new females if the ones he had left him wasn't Heath's problem. And he knew in his heart he didn't offer the money to buy time with Shelly but to ensure she remained warm if she were to stay here.

It didn't surprise him Porter didn't follow him up the stairs or exert any effort preventing him from climbing them. The bastard was too busy counting the money Heath just gave him, which was enough to buy a decent furnace. He didn't doubt for a moment Porter would search for the cheapest furnace out there and pocket as much of the cash as he could.

It also didn't surprise Heath as he reached the top of the stairs and knocked on the solid wooden door in front of him that he possessed an overwhelming desire to take Shelly out of this nest. They had just met and it was only proper and logical to allow time to pass before instigating any form of commitment or even announcing to her nest his intention to fly after Shelly. Although he doubted her sire or mother would care if he made the announcement. Both parents were so wrapped up in their own lives it was a wonder Shelly turned out to be as perfect as she was.

After knocking two more times, Heath tried the door handle and turned it easily in his hand. "Shelly," he called out, although kept his tone soft so it wouldn't travel downstairs. "Shelly?" he called again, walking through her small living room into her bedroom and then staring at her open bathroom door.

Heath took in the contents of her small, cluttered bedroom. It wasn't messy. But her large bed and dresser took up most of the room and there were large prints on her wall, everything from landscapes to copies of classic paintings. Shelly appeared to like the classics, and he guessed they covered rather rough walls underneath. Taking his time leaving her room, he then stared at the contents of her living room. Shelly's scent was everywhere because it was her nest. It didn't help him know how long it had been since she'd been here.

As he glanced at the far wall where her refrigerator, sink and small cabinet and counterspace were, he stared at the square window over her sink. Heath cleared the space between him and the window and slid his wrist through the opening. The window had been pried open, adding to the chill in the tiny apartment. But opened far enough for an owl to slide through. Staring at the crisp curl of paint lining the sill, he decided this window hadn't been opened in a long time. But it had been pried open, and he was pretty damn sure it hadn't been open when he'd stood here earlier, helping himself to coffee.

Heath shifted his attention to the coffeemaker, breathed in the scent of coffee grounds, and then touched the pot. The glass was still warm but the machine unplugged. Shelly had been here recently, very recently. And now the darn fool had

fled her coop, and in weather that the best of flyers would have a hard time navigating in.

Heath pushed the window open farther and got a face full of snow for his efforts. He glared at the storm outside. Where the hell was his sweet little owl? After doing a quick search of her apartment and not finding her cell phone, he tried calling it. After a few rings it went to voice mail. Something told him if she were in her flesh she would have answered.

There were two older, widowed males leaning against the counter talking to Porter when Heath stormed back down into the shop, but he didn't care.

"Your daughter is gone," he informed Porter.

"That little twit flew out in this storm?" Porter demanded, shaking his head as he glanced at his two buddies.

Heath didn't see the amusement that he smelled coming from Shelly's sire. He walked up to the counter, pushing his way between the two older males standing there. Both of them stepped back, giving him room, but Heath focused on Porter, ready to make his point very clear.

"This isn't the type of weather any owl should fly in and you know that," he said, keeping his tone cool and calm. "If your daughter is lost in this snow, or worse, you will pay. Trust me, you will pay dearly."

Heath stormed out of the store, pulling his phone and keys out at the same time. Rock and Beel might give him shit about flying after Shelly but neither of them balked at the suggestion that they search for her. He'd barely made it out of downtown when he'd already spoken to both of them and agreed they would meet at the apartment complex.

"There's a foul stench among the leopards right now," Rock informed him in greeting when they entered the complex around the same time a few minutes later. "I was just down at Earl's and when I left, a group of them were standing on the corner. I overheard some of their conversation."

"What's going on?" Beel asked, coming out of the elevator and meeting his brothers in the lobby.

"The leopards are up to something," Rock offered.

"We need to find Shelly," Heath interrupted. He was aware of something going down with the leopards and needed to give that situation his attention soon. He wouldn't think straight until he knew Shelly was safe.

"She's not in the complex, at least not that I noticed," Beel told him, facing him when the elevator doors closed behind him.

Heath reached around him, slapping the button to open the doors again. "I'm heading up to my nest and then flying out to search for her."

"You're going to fly in this mess?" Rock shook his head. "She's probably hanging with some of her friends. Her nest should know who she usually flies with."

The elevator doors opened and Heath stepped in. "Her nest won't be any help in finding her." The harshness in his tone grabbed both his brothers' attention. He smelled their concern but also their curiosity. Fortunately, Heath didn't need to explain his actions to either one of them. "You're right though. We don't need anyone flying in this storm who doesn't need to be," he added, pressing his hand against the elevator door to keep it open as he faced Beel and Rock, who didn't enter the elevator with him. "Take the SUV and head down to the bar. Make sure no one else is out in this mess and keep your ears to the ground. Call me if you hear or learn anything."

"About?" Rock cocked one eyebrow.

They were interested in knowing his sudden urgent desire to find one female. He didn't feel like explaining himself to them right now. Maybe once he understood the frantic emotions rising inside him he would take the time to enlighten his nest.

"Make sure no one else is out flying in this mess," he said, deciding what his orders would be to both of them on the spot. "And learn what you can about the leopards. Something is up there and we'd be smart to sniff it out sooner than later."

"And you're going to fly in this storm and search for Shelly Preston?" Rock asked.

"Yup." Heath let go of the elevator door and let it close.

"Interesting," Rock said as the doors closed.

Heath endured his sister's interrogation when he called to confirm who Shelly might fly to if she were upset by her nest. Gena Mason was the only female Lana knew where Shelly might go.

"You'll call me the moment you find her." There was worry in Lana's soft-spoken voice.

Heath hated putting it there. "I'll find her and she'll be fine. You have my word."

"Just call me the moment you find her. Better yet, have Shelly call me." Lana cared deeply about her friend.

Heath told her he would and hung up the phone. After a quick phone call to Gena, and keeping the conversation neutral and businesslike, he confirmed Gena hadn't seen Shelly all day. He wouldn't have any more owls probing him for answers as to his sudden interest in Shelly Preston.

There wasn't any reason he could rationalize in his head as to why he needed to explain his actions to anyone. It made sense if there was an owl flying in a storm like this that he fly after them. Forming a large posse to fly in all this snow would be illogical. He'd notified his nest he was flying out. If he didn't report back in soon they would come looking for him. Heath wouldn't get lost in this snow. And he would find Shelly.

As he stood in his living room and stripped out of his clothes, the change began burning through his system. His skin prickled when he walked into his bathroom and pushed open the window. Any other time he might fly from the roof of the apartment

complex but not this time, not in this weather. As blood rushed through his veins and his senses grew more acute when the change consumed him, there wasn't any doubt he was doing this the right way. He would find Shelly, and when he did, returning to her nest or the roof of his complex would draw attention he doubted either of them was ready for yet. Something had ignited and burned strongly between the two of them but until he could voice his thoughts, share them with Shelly, and know she felt the same way, what was between them would remain private.

Heath's vision and hearing intensified as the physical change took over. Letting go and taking on his feathered form, he breathed in the storm outside as he listened to the snowflakes land against the brick sill. The flakes hitting the window panes created a different sound than those hitting the side of the complex. He fought to ignore the continual pattering noise from so many flakes landing outside.

It wasn't the first snowstorm Heath had flown in, although experience didn't make the weather any more pleasurable. He dug his claws into the windowsill and took his time breathing in every scent that bombarded him. Even as his feathers were blown backward against his body, Heath searched the air for one particular scent. Shelly was out there somewhere between her nest and his. It was the logical recourse. She left her nest in anger, was unable to fly through the storm and so waited it out, clinging to a tree branch. Now to find his little female.

Picking up Shelly's scent proved impossible with the direction of the wind. But it was in his favor that the hard, brutal storm blew in toward her nest and not away from it. Although it took every bit of muscle he had, Heath glided into the storm, allowing the current to carry him to some extent. At least he didn't have to fight the wind while flying. The hard part was focusing through all the damnable snow.

In his feathers, fighting the eternal human battle of emotions versus logic wasn't a problem. There wasn't hesitation or questions plaguing him as to why he did what he did now. Going after Shelly made perfect sense. She was meant to be his mate. Their compatibility, physically and emotionally, had clicked on instantly. While in his flesh he fought the obvious truth. But now in his feathers it didn't bother him accepting how it would be.

The snow was blinding and the wind treacherous, but relying on the smells around him, Heath worked his way to Shelly's nest. When he landed on her windowsill and stared into her empty nest, it didn't surprise him that it appeared undisturbed. Even in his feathers it pissed him off that Shelly's sire and mother were so self-focused they didn't care that their only fledgling flew in this storm. It was logical to feel anger when those who should care didn't. She might be their flesh and blood, but now his scent was wrapped around her. That made her his. It made her his problem. And it made her his to protect. Nothing else mattered as much as ensuring her safety.

Adjusting himself on the ledge, he flew to the nearest tree then to the next. The moment her scent hit him, it was as if the wind had strengthened tenfold. The cold snow soaking his feathers no longer affected him. He didn't feel the stabbing, fierce

wind. Her scent was sweet, enticing and captivated him, drawing him to her like a magnet.

Heath searched the tree, fighting the elements as he struggled to fly from one branch to another. When he saw her, hovering above him, the wind damn near blew him off the tree. Fighting the wind as it blew every feather on him away from his body, he struggled to reach her. Shelly hugged the base of the tree, her wing wrapped around her with her head ducked under it. Heath slid into her, causing her to screech, but he spread his wings, creating a wall with his body. As he nudged into her, pressing his body against hers, Heath swore Shelly collapsed against him. He was overwhelmed when the smell of her relief and gratification wrapped around him.

The wind continued blowing. Snowflakes soaked his feathers. Heath didn't feel the cold. The storm no longer bothered him. Shelly pressed against him, relying on him, needing him. It could have stormed forever and it wouldn't have mattered. His little female finally quit shivering, her soft downy feathers stroking his chest as she relaxed against him. She warmed his soul, and as he continued protecting her, he feared she took a bit of his heart.

There wasn't exactly a break in the storm when they chanced flying from the tree. Heath flew close, keeping Shelly with him when the winds tried blowing them off course until they reached his nest. Gliding through the partially opened bathroom window, he almost slid on his snow-covered floor. The puddle of water grew at their feet as if someone had showered without using the curtain when the two of them took their human form.

Shelly was frozen. He swore he felt her pain as his own blood boiled with the change. Even though his senses dulled considerably when he relinquished his form and resumed that of a man, Shelly remained an image of beauty when she straightened before him. They were inches from each other, her body racked with uncontrollable shivers and her flesh and hair dripping wet. Her teeth shattered and her nipples were harder than stone. He watched her fingers flutter over her creamy skin as if she were still trying to flap her wings. Grabbing the large bath towel hanging next to them, he used his hands almost before they held their human shape and wrapped her in it.

"We'll take a hot shower." His voice was garbled but she understood and nodded, her silky silver blonde hair clinging to her beautiful body. "I need to call and let them know you're safe first though or we won't be left alone."

Her large gray eyes were haunted when he returned to the bathroom with his phone and she flashed a worried look at him. Heath understood. "I'm calling my nest," he explained, and knew she didn't need him to elaborate on why he wouldn't reassure her nest that she was okay.

"Why did you come get me?" she asked, her teeth chattering as she tightened her towel around her.

His call was already going through but he met her curious yet slightly wary look.

"You find her?" Rock asked when he answered at his end.

"She's with me now." Heath continued studying Shelly when her gaze dropped. She fingered the corner of the thick towel. Her hair was so wet it was as if she just stepped out of the shower instead of being ready to get in it. "I'm going to get her warmed up and will fly out to find you soon."

"Sounds like you're enjoying keeping her warm all of a sudden," Rock said, his baritone neutral although a hint of amusement seemed to be mixed with confusion. "I wouldn't have guessed her to be the type you'd fly after."

Something hardened in Heath and he tightened his grip on his phone. "Sniff out the situation with the leopards. If there is something we need to pay heed to, I want to know before trouble starts creating a stench."

Apparently his tone reflected the surge of anger that simmered to a quick boil before he was able to put a lid on it. Not only did Shelly glance up at him, her long lashes fluttering over her questioning gray eyes, but Rock grunted.

"Interesting. Didn't mean to get your feathers in a ruffle," he grumbled. "We'll hang out here at Earl's for a bit although it's pretty quiet right now with the storm."

"There's nothing better than a good storm to clean the air out and make it easier to tell the direction of certain aromas." Heath told his brother goodbye and closed his phone then placed it on the bathroom counter.

"Why did you come get me?" she asked again.

Heath barely had to move to clear the distance between them. The smell of the winter storm still clinging to her moist flesh was as enticing as the mixture of his scent and hers. But what appealed to him more was how her lust sweetened the air when he rested his hands on her bare arms.

"You knew I would," he whispered, watching her face and knowing the truth in his statement when she met his gaze.

"I'd like to hear why though." Her voice was as soft as her feathers.

It stroked his senses, beckoning to him. She wanted more than the facts. Although he wouldn't deny the possessive desire burning him alive when it came to Shelly, putting into human words what he felt went against everything he'd been taught. Owls didn't dwell on emotions. They confused situations. Focusing on them too long created too many aromas that made it hard to read the logic in a situation. It was something every owl knew, including Shelly.

Sharing with her the raw emotions he'd as yet to give names to would mean exposing himself. They'd already fucked. Heath learned the moment they did that Shelly didn't put out to every owl who shook his tail feathers at her. Now she asked for more.

"The storm is dangerous and I needed to know you weren't hurt," he told her honestly.

Shelly licked her lips and nodded once. Her hair clung to her neck and streamed down her back. Narrow strands reached for the swell of her breasts. He rubbed his thumbs over the curve of her shoulders until she lifted her gaze to his face.

"You honor me by coming to get me," she told him.

"I don't ever plan on dishonoring you, sweet little owl," he told her, and lowered his mouth to hers.

She tasted so good. Her lips were warm in spite of the chill still on her flesh. As he deepened the kiss, he moved his hands, pulling the towel from her and then pressing her naked body against his. Although he'd been semi-hard ever since resuming his human form, the fire in his veins flowed quickly to his cock.

He lifted her into his arms, needing to be inside her now. The fever igniting inside him burned him alive. But when his cock nestled between her thighs, found the warm, moist flesh of her pussy so ready for him, he almost staggered from the intense wave of desire that washed over him. No female had ever created such a hard need to possess as Shelly did. Not once had he been hit by the reality that holding on to his emotions might be more than he could master when around another owl. Shelly pulled something out of him, something dark and carnal that he didn't want to suppress.

When Shelly moaned, tilting her head slightly to deepen the kiss as she wrapped her legs around his hips, Heath wondered if the same rush of emotions was attacking her. He smelled their lust. There wasn't any denying they wanted each other. But the pure sweetness of her smelled so clean when he breathed her into his lungs he searched for other emotions. It surprised him that he smelled the rich craving to possess her coming from him more so than from her.

Shelly had her emotions under lock and key. That was where his usually were too. For some reason with Shelly, especially when she'd just asked him to state his reasons for flying in the storm after her, he wanted to know those emotions. It wasn't fair of him since he'd been vague in answering her question. In order to know Shelly he would have to open up to her. He wasn't sure if he could do that.

But he was sure of what he could do. What he would do was fuck her. As he found the source of her heat, adjusted her body and then glided in to her velvety folds, he understood with blinding clarity that stating he would honor her and then repeatedly fucking her would require he do just that. Heath would need to release the emotions he'd focused his entire life on suppressing in order to know and understand Shelly.

"Heath!" Shelly cried out, arching her back as her head fell back. She dug her fingernails into his shoulders as she clamped her legs against his hips. "God. Yes! Oh yes," she sighed, her long damp hair falling behind her shoulders.

He gripped her ass, kneading her soft flesh and spreading her open, breathing in her intoxicating scent as it mixed with his. Shelly rode his cock as he held on to her, the lean muscles in her legs constricting as she raised herself off him and then slid down the length of his shaft.

"That's it, my precious owl," he grunted. "Take all of me. Fuck me."

"I want it hard. Fast," she breathed, almost panting when she managed to gaze at him, her sensual large eyes fogged over with her thick dark lashes draping over them. "Now, Heath. Now."

He clutched her ass, raising her off his cock and holding her in place with her legs pressed against the side of him. Then he impaled her. Her breath flowed out of her lungs, her mouth forming a perfect circle as she stared into his eyes. It was the prettiest sight he'd ever seen and so impaled her again. This time, when she let out a cry, her soaked muscles clinging to his cock constricted around him until he swore she would drain every inch of resistance out of him.

"Come for me, Shelly," he told her, building the momentum and determined to hold out long enough to watch her pretty face flush as she came at least one more time. "I want you to give it to me again."

She didn't speak this time but when her lips curved, her amusement mixing with her desire, the results were intoxicating. Heath would lose himself in her gaze, in the incredibly addictive smell of her lust and happiness, and the way she continued pumping him with so many muscles that clamped and clung to his dick.

He fucked her, breathing hard as he held her body in place and drove his cock inside her, craving more with each thrust. She soaked him, her come drenching his dick and his balls. He glided inside her with more ease each time, her silky-smooth flesh constricting around him, drawing him deeper and enveloping him with heat that damn near scorched him alive.

"You're so hot," he breathed, his words growing ragged.

"It's good." Shelly panted and dragged her fingers down his arms, her large breasts bouncing and her nipples puckered.

He watched them move, the sight mouthwatering. Just watching those full, round, perfectly shaped breasts keep rhythm with him fucking her made his cock swell even more. As he grew inside her, the soaked flesh wrapped around him stretched and conformed, taking all of him as if she were made just for him.

Shelly's hair fanned around her shoulders, still wet and smelling of the outdoors. Her cheeks flushed and her lips held that perfectly round puckered shape. When she breathed, panting in rhythm with his thrusting and her bouncing breasts keeping in time, she lowered her head, staring into his eyes as her hair fell around her face.

"I'll come when you come," he informed her.

Shelly arched one eyebrow, pressing her lips together, but didn't say anything. Her body responded to him though. And he didn't want to miss a thing it said. Forcing himself to slow the thrusts, he moved deep inside her and then retreated. She coaxed him back into her heat, enticing him with minor quakes from soft, soaked flesh that wrapped around him, making him feel as if he'd found the perfect nest.

"Then you better," she gasped.

"I plan on it," he growled, pushing her against his wall, impaling her one last time, and releasing everything he had as she cried out, coming as hard as she did.

Whatever it took, Heath would keep Shelly by his side. He was definitely the luckiest owl in all of Canada. Every male in Banff flew after his hot little owl, or they had until recently. He would make sure his scent remained embedded in her and would have a damn good time doing it. There would be no more listening to all the males as they flapped their wings and hooted about how they would fuck Shelly. As she groaned, the soft alluring sound stroking his senses, he swore he'd kill the next male who even suggested he might touch her.

Soon he'd figure out the logic and organize his emotions. But first he wanted his hot little owl again.

Chapter Ten

In her twenty-five years Shelly could count on one hand the amount of males she'd fucked. Each one had been carefully selected, sniffed out and dubbed satisfactory because no one would ever know she'd fucked them. Her nest wouldn't know. Her closest girlfriends would never know. No one in her world would ever fly into her personal space and know she'd found sexual relief. No one would ever sniff out the truth. She was always very careful never to allow any male scent to linger anywhere near her. They would wear protection, not that owls worried about all the things humans stressed over when they used condoms. But Shelly always kept a male's come from touching her.

Which meant now she must be certifiably insane.

Heath slid out of her, his strong, calloused fingers gliding over her moist flesh as he backed away from her. Without a word he turned his back to her and bent over to turn on his shower. Shelly stared at roped muscle stretched under his smooth, taut skin. There wasn't a damn thing to condemn about Heath Halk. She seriously doubted at the moment he dwelled on what the world might be thinking of him.

It wasn't right she should dwell on such things either. Maybe she'd been hatched and reared in a nest destined to tarnish her feathers and cause her nothing but grief. That was her nest's problem, not hers.

Shelly let her gaze drop to Heath's hard ass as he bent over, adjusting the shower water and then straightening the curtain. Every inch of him was so perfectly fine-tuned. He was top of his line, honored by everyone in Banff. Shelly doubted Heath ever gave thought to the integrity that flowed so strongly through his veins ever being tarnished. He came from a nest so unflawed, so perfectly woven and fabricated into the solid existence he held on to today that no one would question his actions. They probably wouldn't even condemn or think less of him for carrying her scent.

"Come here, my little owl. You need cleaned." His low baritone held an air of pure carnal male satisfaction.

Shelly let him take her hand and stepped into the bathtub. Heath was right behind her, his hands brushing over her body and then pressing her backside against his front as water pelted her flesh.

When he guided her under the water, she closed her eyes and let him comb her hair with his fingers. He massaged her scalp, his fingers tangling in her hair. She tilted her head back, closing her eyes, and allowed him to carry her to a place where every inch of her tingled with pleasure and there were no worries about suppressing how incredibly good it felt.

"I'm going to clean every inch of you," he whispered into her ear, and then nibbled on her earlobe. "And then I'm going to put my scent on you all over again."

"Okay," she moaned as he poured shampoo into her hair and once again massaged her scalp, causing soapy bubbles to stream down her.

Owls don't lie, not that she doubted his word for a moment. After shampooing and conditioning her hair, he lathered a washcloth and meticulously cleaned her until she was sure she'd hold on to the sensation of his hands touching her everywhere for quite a long time.

Heath turned her into the water, rinsing the soap down her body. As he moved her again, she caught him watching with something akin to intense appreciation. Apparently satisfied she no longer had any soap clinging to her body, he wrapped his arms around her, yanking her against his naked, wet and perfectly hard body.

"We're going to embed my scent into you until no one has any doubts who you belong to."

Her heart swelled into her throat with enough speed she couldn't utter a sound. Whatever foolish expression was on her face obviously pleased him. His scent altered as the steam from the shower wrapped around them, the clean, fresh aroma of pure happiness warming her insides.

This was too much, too damn good to be true. As she managed to push her heart back into her chest, she forced herself not to be carried away by his words. Just because a male wanted everyone to know whom he was fucking didn't mean he wanted her as a mate. It was as obvious as the feathers on her wings that Heath Halk was an incredibly possessive, dominating male. He wanted something and he took it. For the moment, it was her. Shelly didn't want to live for the moment though.

She lowered her gaze, focusing on how so many tiny, tight curls clung to his perfectly chiseled chest. "Then everyone will likewise know you carry my scent," she said, her voice huskier than she wanted it to be.

"I will wear your scent with pride." He leaned into her, nipping at her lip and then capturing her mouth as he turned it into a steamy kiss.

The way he made love to her almost stole her resolution to keep her heart uninvolved with anything having to do with Heath Halk. When she thought, since they were in a shower, he would turn her around and bend her over, keeping their sexual play less personal, he instead kept her facing him. She should have initiated a more impersonal position, made the effort on her own part to keep things casual.

There was no stopping him when he knelt in front of her. Water streamed down his face, over his broad shoulders and down his back and chest. He watched her, his lashes laced with droplets clinging to them. They helped hood his gray eyes. She didn't miss his brooding stare turn attentive as he kept his gaze on hers while his hands glided down her sides to her hips.

"Let me taste you," he said, almost whispering. His husky baritone made his words sound more like a decision than a request.

Like she would tell him no. Shelly gripped his shoulders, feeling muscles flex against her fingertips. She didn't have time to move and barely enough time to brace herself when Heath pressed his lips over her clit. Heat seared the most sensitive part of her body as every inch of her seemed to turn into one incredibly oversensitive nerve ending.

Heath moved his hands and stretched his long, confident fingers over her ass as he cupped her rear. He held her in place, supporting her, and began a slow, torturous feeding.

Shelly dropped her head, blinked water off her lashes, and watched Heath as he sucked, kissed and drank from her pussy. He had skills she'd never dreamed a man capable of. She was on fire and then leveled off, enough sanity returning to enjoy his manipulations.

But watching him on his knees before her, in such a humble position, this giant of an owl focused on getting her off. He did this for her, and it humbled her too.

"Heath," she whispered, finding her voice.

He blinked, opening his eyes and looking up at her as if she'd taken him from a very special place. God, he looked mesmerized, as if the pleasure he gave her got him off too. What kind of special male found such intense pleasure in such a selfless act?

"You taste so good," he grumbled, and ran his tongue over her opening before dipping inside.

Shelly's eyes damn near rolled back into her head. "Oh God, it feels even better." Was she actually purring?

It didn't take being with hundreds of males to know they were about getting themselves off. Even those who were fun to be around. The few she'd selected, dared intimacy with over the years, were about taking care of their own needs. They would give her pleasure, take care of the burning need inside her, but at the same time satisfy themselves.

Heath looked as if bringing her to the point where she would explode got him off too. As his mouth moved over her oversensitive flesh, dragging her orgasm out of her, he continued watching her, the look on his face showing Shelly that her coming meant a lot to him.

"That's it, my sweet little owl," he encouraged, apparently sensing the moment when she couldn't hold back any longer.

Shelly dug her fingers into his shoulders, panting hard as she started to come. Heath didn't stop. He didn't leave her dangling but continued moving his tongue over her sensitive flesh, dipping inside her and moving to her clit until the dam broke.

She cried out, wave after wave of desire and passion ripping through her as she exploded. When her legs gave out, the intensity of her orgasm becoming too much, Heath was right there, grabbing her and taking her in his arms.

"You're so perfect." Heath lifted her into his arms, pressing her back against the smooth, soaked shower wall, and moved in between her legs.

Shelly forgot all about impersonal or keeping her heart at bay.

"Wrap your legs around me, my little owl." Droplets of water clung to Heath's lashes, making his gray eyes look brighter. His expression was more relaxed, that hard, focused look he'd worn as long as she'd known him nowhere close to the way he appeared now. It was as if the male who resolved all problems and ensured every nest maintained honor in their parliament had transposed into the male holding her pinned against the wall right now. "I've got you, Shelly, that's it," he encouraged, almost smiling as his gaze dropped to her breasts.

His fingers pressed into her ass once again, stretching and opening her so tiny trails of water tickled and tortured incredibly sensitive parts of her body repeatedly as the shower continually pelted her flesh.

Shelly gripped his arms although he held her right where he wanted her. His cock was hard, stretching toward her and amazingly swollen considering he'd just given her so much pleasure without focusing on his own needs. It probed at her entrance, creating a swelling that spread throughout her, adding to the scalding heat, which already had her itching to twitch and encourage his entrance.

"Tell me you want this."

Her gaze shot to his face. She wasn't sure if he meant that she wanted him to fuck her again or that she wanted more. For them to fly together. Their scents embedded. A mating.

"I want this," she whispered.

And he gave it to her. Sheathing her with his cock, he stretched and filled her, not hesitating or even appearing to try to be gentle. It was one of many things she liked about Heath, she decided. He could be sensitive and at the same time almost brutal. He was compassionate, concerned about her feelings, and equally demanding.

God. Her heart was slipping away from her. And the way he continually impaled her, with the shower water washing over them, keeping her come from soaking the two of them, allowed her to feel every ridge and bulge in his cock as he stroked her inner walls. She focused on that, on the physical. And damn was it easy to give all her attention to.

"You feel so good," he groaned.

He was so beautiful. His smoldering gray eyes burrowed into hers and he leaned forward, brushing his lips over hers just for a second, reminding her of his compassionate side, before straightening again and thrusting deep inside her.

Shelly cried out then sighed. "Very good," she moaned, easing her legs up his sides.

He took advantage of her moving and dove in her again, filling her, roped muscle constricting and stretching under his smooth, taut flesh. She leaned her head against the

shower wall, taking all he offered as she closed her eyes and lost herself on the many sensations tripping over each other as he fucked her.

Heath increased the pace, thrusting inside her with enough force she swore he impaled her clear up to her bellybutton. Her back slid against the wall behind her, her hair tangled and snagged, the tug to her scalp adding to the physical experience. She dragged her fingernails over the curve of his biceps, enjoying its shape yet barely acknowledging it. Everything he was doing to her tripped her mind, drowning her in a pool of intense satisfaction as first one and then another orgasm tore through her. He could fuck her like this forever. She was on a plain of pure and perfect ecstasy.

"Look at me, Shelly."

His words trailed toward her, gliding through the fog in the shower into the fog in her brain. She blinked, feeling droplets of water slip off her lashes and blind her when she opened her eyes.

He steadied the rhythm, his cock easing in and out of her as if he were created for the sole purpose of satisfying only her. It was the perfect speed, just the right pace to build the pressure and create a desire in her to come that was stronger than she'd ever known.

"Heath," she gasped when she was finally able to blink water from her eyes and stare into his.

"That's it, my pretty owl. Give me everything." The smell of her was on his breath. Oddly enough she found that even more erotic.

Shelly wasn't sure what everything was though. Not that she bothered trying to analyze that at the moment. When his fingers adjusted over her ass, stretching her farther as his cock glided deep inside her, speaking proved impossible. Shelly was losing herself in him, in his powerful, commanding gaze, in the way he seemed to control the building need to come inside her, in the way he managed to know exactly what to do to her. The oddest sensation gripped her when she finally toppled over the edge. As her orgasm hit, flooding her insides and taking her with it, she felt as if they were one. Heath knew her as well as she knew herself. And as she continued to stare into his stormy gray eyes, she saw his satisfaction, his commanding nature.

Heath roared when she came, erupting and releasing his own orgasm at the same time. His head fell forward and he rested his forehead on her shoulder. Shelly brought her arms around him, rubbing his back as pure satisfaction carried her into a very sated place. It would destroy her if this were just a fling. If Heath didn't mean to fly with her she would be lost. And already she feared it might be too late to save her heart.

Shelly's hair was still damp when she entered Earl's less than an hour later. The frigid air left it feeling stiff, as if ice crystals had formed in it. Oddly enough though, her palms were warm and damp. When she ran her fingers through her hair, combing out the brittle-feeling strands, the contrast of cold to warm hit her.

"Over here." Heath rested his hand on her back, adding yet another sensation to her hypersensitive body. Heat singed through her coat and her shirt underneath, scalding her senses.

She nodded, aware of how all-business Heath was as he walked, tall and proud, through the large bar, his focus straight ahead of him. Shelly hadn't come in here since Lana started flying with her new mate and walking alongside Heath also threw her off-guard. It was as if she were walking alongside herself, aware of her motions and capable of maintaining a relaxed, controlled persona for all to see, but her insides were a torrential storm and she feared if she didn't keep a close eye on herself the storm would rage out of control and she'd lose her composure.

"Two beers," Heath told Earl without asking her what she wanted to drink.

Since a cold beer sounded really good, Shelly didn't complain. His hand remained on her back, although he moved it closer to her neck when he leaned against the counter.

"Who do you know here?" he asked, whispering so only she heard him.

Shelly blinked, not ready for the question. As well, it forced her to look around, take in her surroundings, which was something she normally did when she entered any public place. Since she didn't want him to know how distracted she was, she hoped she appeared to be surveying the place slowly, making it appear she was taking inventory of surroundings she already knew.

"Pretty much everyone," she told him, deciding she wouldn't go into detail about each owl here. There were a few leopards too, she noticed, playing pool in the corner. And several humans, probably tourists, laughed in a booth across the bar. "Why?" she asked, shifting to face him. It was easier focusing on him instead of the curious stares some of the owls were giving them.

Earl slid two chilled glasses of beer in front of them but then moved down to wait on a few males leaning against the bar several barstools down from them. Heath took his beer and sipped, licking the foam from his lips as he stared over her head at the room.

"Do you notice anyone talking to anyone else whom they usually don't talk to?"

Shelly embraced the cold beer, drinking and then licking the foam from her lips. Heath shifted his attention, watching her, his placid gray eyes darkening as he focused on her. Immediately her insides quickened. He'd fucked her already today and she would take him again if he offered. Shelly forced herself to focus on his question, try to make sense of his reasoning. It helped her keep her thoughts off how and where they could fuck each other next.

"Interesting question," she mused, taking another drink before putting her beer on the counter and shifting her weight, moving just enough so his hand slid off her back. As much as she immediately missed his touch, it helped her gain control of her thoughts.

"There is a reason for asking," he told her, his deep baritone serious. "Look around the room and tell me what you see."

Shelly did as he suggested, returning the curious stares of several owls who immediately looked away when she acknowledged them. If there was a reason for asking the question, then Heath must have noticed someone talking to someone that struck him as odd. She spotted his nest, Rock and Beel Halk, talking to several females. One of the females was Marcia Reed, a female Shelly always had admired. The female wore clothes that showed off her perfect figure and too much makeup. She shook her tail feathers for any male she wanted and no one ever hooted a word about her. It was something Shelly had never figured out. Why did all the nests dub her the slut and not Marcia Reed? Shelly was sure the female fucked every available male out there.

Since she wasn't sure how often Rock and Beel spoke with those females, she didn't think Heath meant them. As protective as Heath was, he didn't strike her as the kind of male who would control which females his nest decided to fly with. If that were the case he sure as hell wouldn't be seen with her in one of the most visible spots in Banff. She shifted her attention to the surrounding tables and then the booths lining the walls.

The far corner of the bar housed several pool tables and she narrowed her gaze on them, staring at the Young litter, a rambunctious lot who would spar and snarl at anyone they thought they might be able to start a fight with. It was the nature of the leopard though. They would rather attack than hold a conversation. For the most part that litter left her alone, although Shelly had never been fool enough to allow herself in a situation where they could give her grief.

The male leopards were engaged in a game of pool and didn't notice her studying them. That allowed her to stare past them at a female she hadn't noticed before, propped on a stool in the dark corner behind the pool table. Shelly wasn't sure she'd seen the female before and although she was too far away to pick up her scent it was apparent she was a female leopard.

"I don't think I know the female in the corner," she said, returning her attention to Heath before speaking.

He looked over her head for only a moment before dropping his attention to Shelly. "She moved to Banff when Dover came here," he offered. "Her litter is still on the other side of the country where Dover and Lana are now."

Shelly remembered the day Dover Down rode his Harley into town with a female leopard wrapped around him, riding with him. It had caused quite the stir. Single male owls didn't fly with female leopards or with any species other than their own. Or at least they hadn't until Dover flew into their world. Although he was completely dedicated to Lana and made an incredible mate for her, his ideas were different from any Shelly had contemplated before. She wasn't opposed to spending time with other species, but quite honestly it was easier flying with her own kind. They understood each other better and made casual conversation easier.

Owls were the only species who didn't embrace their emotions or display them on their feathers for all to see. She never understood why leopards, werewolves or even humans always made such a show of being happy, sad, angry or even horny. It seemed rather embarrassing to her, not that she would share that thought with anyone. No owl would do that. Not to mention, a leopard couldn't fly, which made spending quality time when shifting hard to do.

Shelly took her beer and drank, relaxing some as she stood next to Heath and again surveyed everyone in the bar. Someone she hadn't noticed at first glance moved out of the shadows, saying something to the female leopard that made her laugh.

"Gena's older brother is talking to the female leopard." Shelly didn't face Heath this time when she shared the information. "Interesting," she said.

"Yes, it is." Heath put his hand on her shoulder and leaned forward so when he spoke again his mouth was next to her ear. "Why do you think he would be spending so much time with the leopards?"

"I don't know." When she turned to look at Heath, their faces were mere inches from each other. "I could ask Gena if she knows."

The group of females surrounding Heath's nest dispersed and Beel and Rock headed toward Shelly and Heath. Shelly quit watching the leopards, focusing now on Heath's nest as they strolled closer, their long legs and relaxed, confident gait giving both of them the appearance of dominating and commanding personas. In a way, they were incredibly similar to Heath.

Beel was the same age as Heath, hatched at the same time. Shelly had known that about his nest for some time now. His hair was longer though, and the crooked part in his silver blond hair added to his roguish look. Rock was the same age as Shelly, five years younger than Heath and Beel. He was more muscular than the rest of his nest and she knew more outspoken. Shelly knew his real name was Laurence and used to be called Laurie as a fledgling. The name Rock came around due to his bullheaded nature. With a quick assessment, Shelly concluded although good-looking, neither Rock nor Beel held the charisma Heath possessed. He was by far the pick of their nest.

"They've been back there for over an hour," Beel said under his breath when he neared the two of them. Leaning against the bar next to Heath, he said something else to him that tickled Shelly's ears but she didn't pick up. "Earl, more beer when you have a minute," he called out.

The bartender nodded and continued with what he was doing, which appeared to be flirting with the females who had just left Rock's and Beel's sides. Shelly faced the bar, cradling her beer in her hands with Heath on one side of her and Rock on the other. She stood with Heath's nest, carrying his scent as he carried hers.

Logically this was how it should be. They'd fucked each other in their feathers and their flesh. Heath should walk by her side and fly by her side, honored to be there. It's what he appeared to be doing. Shelly brought her beer to her mouth, downing the rest of it as she gave herself a firm, mental shake. Traditionally, Heath would approach her

sire for his consent and blessing in flying after Shelly. Her sire only cared about money. If he could sell Shelly to Heath, he would do it without ruffling a single feather.

Shelly would hold her head high, maintain her honor and give the two of them her blessing without consent from her nest. She'd made it twenty-five years flying on her own and she would make it through this until she had Heath permanently.

"You fly with Gena Mason." Rock didn't make it a question and at the same time snapped her out of her thoughts so she stared at him.

"She is my friend." Shelly kept her expression relaxed when she felt Heath's hand move possessively around her shoulder.

"We'll talk to Gena." Heath entered the conversation, looking over Shelly's shoulder at Rock when she glanced at him. "What's this I hear about the Hampton nest?"

"We just heard ourselves from the females." Rock didn't elaborate when Earl moved toward them, wiping the top of the counter and taking empty glasses and refilling them.

"I was just told Elisa Hampton was attacked last night." Earl Brenning was a great horned owl and even in his human form was a bit larger than most. He wasn't bald but the receding silver blond hair that bordered the side of his head seemed to thin more with each year. He gave Shelly his attention for only a moment when he placed her full beer in front of her and then focused on Heath. His non-blinking, sober expression was the closest he would ever look to being pissed. It was the serious aura about him at the moment though that captured all their attention. "She and her nest live alone on the edge of town and don't have protection."

"I just heard about it myself," Heath said.

Elisa Hampton was one of five Hampton females who lived in a rugged log cabin outside of Banff. None of those females stood under six foot. Shelly doubted mentioning to the males surrounding her that the Hampton nest could kick ass better than most men would appease their incensed urge to protect. She never would understand why males needed so desperately to believe that females were weak and craved a male's protection.

"What did you hear?" Heath asked Earl.

Earl leaned forward on his side of the counter. The Halk nest crowded in around her, standing tall and alert and silent as they listened to the replay of events from the night before. Shelly managed to shoot a side glance down the bar, past Rock, when Marcia Reed left the other females and walked toward the door. She shot Shelly a furtive glance and cocked one eyebrow. Shelly couldn't determine from the female's expression if she was amused or impressed by Shelly standing among the Halks and so noticeably by Heath's side. If her look reflected jealousy she hid it well. But Marcia could just get over it. Shelly would fight to keep Heath and she hoped her look told Marcia as much.

"Elisa and her sister Elaine were in town buying some supplies this morning. According to the females who told me," Earl continued in his deep, slow baritone, "the Hampton nest didn't recognize the leopards but smelled the vengeance and anger on them when they attacked their nest."

"I called Elisa after we heard about it," Beel stated, sliding his empty glass toward Earl. "We're going to head out there and see what repairs are needed. She told me her nest can handle it but I wouldn't mind taking a look anyway."

"Frances Straffer had her nest attacked by leopards last night too," Heath said, staring at his beer as he spoke. "Two nests that are only females being attacked in the same night by leopards doesn't smell like coincidence."

Shelly lived alone in her nest although it was over the store and possibly a bit harder to attack than others. She studied Heath's determined profile until he looked at her.

"Why would leopards want to scare female owls?" she asked.

Chapter Eleven

It had been over a week. Shelly had spent every minute of it with Heath and knew everyone in Banff was whispering about a mating. She didn't want to ruin a good thing and knew Heath wouldn't be pushed into doing anything he wasn't ready to do. Flying with him, fucking him daily and sleeping at his nest was enough for her. Heath honored her and if a mating was in their future, she wouldn't push for it until more time passed.

She hurried out of her bedroom when someone knocked on the door. Although surprised Heath would be here so soon, she immediately assumed it was him until she neared the door and picked up her friend's scent.

"Gena," she said in greeting, smiling at her friend's inquisitive look.

"I haven't talked to you in over a week." Her tone was a mixture of accusation and hurt, which wasn't surprising.

Shelly immediately apologized. She hated upsetting her friend since fledglings. "I know and I kept meaning to call you. We really need to go flying. I have so much to catch you up on."

"You don't if all the hooting around town is true," Gena said, entering Shelly's nest without invitation and then walking around her slowly, clucking her tongue as she tapped her index finger to her chin. She gave Shelly a scrutinizing onceover. "Is it all true? Smells like it is."

"I'm sure you've heard more of the gossip on me than I have," she said, hoping for once it wasn't all bad. After a lifetime of enduring hateful whispers, it didn't bother her too much to be gossiped about when it wasn't vindictive.

Gena reached for Shelly's hands and squeezed them as she met her gaze with her warm, soft gray eyes. The slow smile that appeared cautiously on her face was contagious when she pulled Shelly to the couch. "Tell me everything," she whispered, even though they were alone. "You really are with Heath Halk. I smell him everywhere. Don't leave out one little detail."

"I don't even know where to begin." Shelly relaxed into her couch for only a minute before jumping up and hurrying to get them coffee. "The day Lana left I missed seeing her fly off with her mate because I got stuck at the store. When I went up to her empty apartment, I ran into Heath and his nest and it all flew out of control from there."

"But you're flying together. You've been seen everywhere with him. And I know you, Shelly Preston. You never fly with a male casually."

"And I'm not now." She was more sure of that statement with every day that passed. Returning to the couch with two brimming cups of coffee, she offered one to her

friend and then sat next to her, facing her, once again. "We spend all of our time together."

"Where is he now?"

Shelly blew on her coffee instead of sipping. Gena's energy and enthusiasm seeped into Shelly, making her heart pound hard enough that downing coffee probably wouldn't be a really good move.

"He dropped me off here a little while ago. I'm supposed to be gathering a change of clothes."

"You're staying at his nest?" Gena stared at her wide-eyed over her coffee as she sipped.

"Everything I own is here." She gestured with one hand and sipped her coffee. "I live here. But yes, I've slept there all night."

Gena reached for Shelly's hand again, and again gave it an affectionate squeeze. "And you're happy. I can smell how happy you are. But there is something else? Is he not everything you want?"

"Heath Halk is everything any female would want," Shelly answered truthfully. "There isn't a thing I can think of to fault him."

Gena studied Lana's face without saying anything. It was apparent she picked up on Shelly's uncertainty. And it sucked that it smelled that strongly. Although maybe it didn't to most but Gena would know Shelly's scent since until recently, she'd spent all of her free time flying with her girlfriends.

Gena leaned into the back of the couch, nursing her coffee, and waited. It wasn't the first time Shelly searched her mind, aching to apply logic to her feelings toward Heath. Although it had been only a week, suddenly it seemed as if she'd known Heath longer. She realized more than once she'd ached for someone to mull all of this over with, someone who could help her rationalize her emotions. Gena sat patiently, waiting to be that owl. All Shelly needed to do was open up to her, which she'd done before. For some reason, as she tried putting her thoughts into words, nothing that came to mind made any sense.

"Heath is very protective of me," she began. "He's also very possessive. If another male even looks at me his feathers get all bent out of shape."

Gena nodded, drinking more of her coffee. "That explains why you've ignored me all week."

"I've thought about you." Shelly remembered then she'd meant to call Gena to talk to her about her brother and why he was spending so much time with leopards who were breaking into nests where single females lived. "Like I said though, this week has flown by so fast. I haven't even worked at the store that much."

"I don't blame you for spending every minute flying with Heath. I know you've fantasized about him enough."

Shelly fought embarrassment, refusing to allow it to create a stench. But she had shared her private dreams with her dear friend. A time or two she'd even confessed her fantasies to Lana, and she was part of Heath's nest.

"The fantasies don't hold a flame."

"That's good."

"I mean, I never imagined what it would be like talking to him or simply flying alongside him, enjoying the mountains." Granted they'd only done that once, but it had been so wonderful.

"Is the sex better too?" Gena whispered, lowering her gaze to focus on her coffee the moment she asked the question.

A sigh escaped her lips before she could stop it. Gena shot her attention back to Shelly, her eyes widening. "I wonder if his nest is as good as he is," she whispered, and then giggled.

"Now that I can't tell you." Shelly forced herself to relax, knowing it was healthy to talk all of this out with her best friend and a female she knew wouldn't screech everything Shelly told her to every other nest in town. "I'm worried I might be falling in love with him."

"Why would that worry you?" Suddenly Gena scowled. "Any other female I might accept hearing that from after they met a male. But not you. You surprise me, Shelly. Do you think I don't know how much it matters to you that a male not think you're a piece of tail?"

"I know. I know. And that does matter to me. But I broke every rule I made for myself and honored for years when I met Heath. The first night we were together he wanted to take me to dinner. I refused and flew into the mountains and he followed me. And I fucked him." Shelly sighed. There wasn't any turning back now. Gena leaned forward, anxious to hear all the details. And it would be healthy to voice them. Possibly it would even enlighten her as to how to proceed with Heath from this point. "I stayed with him all evening and then fucked him in our flesh. I would never have done that with another male."

"Probably because this one is meant for you."

"Heath Halk is meant for me?"

"Now that is enough. No. In fact, don't even go there," Gena said, her tone almost harsh. "You know damn good and well you aren't deserving of any of the rumors or labels you've earned from your nest."

"You're right."

"You deserve the best there is. And now you have him." Gena gulped down her coffee and set her cup on the coffee table. "How long will you fly with him before announcing a mating?"

"We haven't even discussed mating."

"It has been only a week." Gena nodded as if it were all perfectly logical. "A few months or so would be proper I would think."

"I don't know of any rules laid out on that one."

"I don't think there are."

Owls could be disgustingly backward when it came to some things. Although for the most part, none of their traditions had truly ever bothered Shelly. Holding on to propriety when it came to flying with a male made things simpler, kept them in order and proper.

"And it's quite clear that you are still living here in your own nest." Gena pointedly looked around the small quarters. "So there isn't any dishonor either."

"Heath is a very honorable male."

"And so are you."

"You're right. I admit I've worried about it."

"I believe you." She stood, taking her coffee cup to the sink and rinsed it out. Gena was very thin, small for a female. And the long sweater she wore today with her black leggings and boots had a thick black belt secured at her waist, accentuating her narrow waist. Her thin hair tapered against her long, slender neck and her creamy gray eyes added to her pretty features. Gena had a delicacy about her that wouldn't allow anyone to question her integrity. "I did stop by for a reason, other than to check on you, of course. I won't deny I'd heard the rumors flying around town and you know I would make sure for myself their accuracy."

"How accurate are they?"

"Pretty accurate." She glided a strand of hair behind her ear. "But other than all of that I wanted to know if you'd like to go look at a nest with me."

"A nest? Why are you looking at a nest?"

"Paul is considering selling our nest. He might be leaving Banff and since he's the oldest, if he sells it I would have to find a new nest. He's helped me search around and there is an address I can go look at this morning."

"Why would he sell your nest?" Again Shelly thought of the conversations she'd had with Heath, of the questions he had suggested she ask Gena about her brother. All of them amounted to learning why he would be associating with leopards who smelled so dishonorable. Paul might be a player, an eager and willing partner to any female who would lift her tail feathers for him. Being a rogue wasn't as dishonorable as associating with those who would attack nests.

"For the money." Gena shrugged as if it didn't matter to her, which was slightly hard to believe. She lived in the nest where she'd been hatched and that wasn't something an owl usually parted with easily. "He would split it with me and my share would be enough for me to go to college."

"You haven't mentioned any of this to me before."

"Paul just brought it up to me a few days ago. It all seems to be happening rather fast." Again Gena offered a small smile. "It appears this is the week for new events to be transpiring quickly."

"I guess so." Shelly didn't ask if it was what Gena wanted. She didn't smell upset about any of it. And she'd tell Shelly if she were. "Let me call Heath. I'll go check out this nest with you."

An hour later Shelly and Gena entered a small coffee shop on a street of shops predominantly run by humans. The first snowflakes floated through the air as they walked into the warm shop and its smells of chocolate and coffee.

"There's got to be a better nest than that," Shelly said, being blunt. "I absolutely refuse to allow you to live like that."

"I didn't like it either." Gena smelled disappointed. "I had told Paul after looking at two nests yesterday with him that I didn't like either of those and he told me this one would be nicer. He was wrong."

A chubby older human female who wore enough perfume to rob the air around her of the sweet smells in the shop took their order. They stood at the counter in silence, waiting for her to prepare their coffee and place good-sized brownies on paper plates for each of them. Then, carrying their chocolate and coffee to a nearby table, they sat facing each other, each of them breaking off a crumbly corner of their brownie and humming their approval before continuing their conversation.

"Your nest is very nice, Gena, and you shouldn't accept moving into anything that isn't as nice."

"I agree." Gena licked her fingers and then blew on her coffee. "I don't know how much time I have to look though. Paul sounds as if he's closing a deal pretty soon on our nest."

"I can't believe he's selling it."

Gena picked at her brownie, pulling the moist chocolate apart but not eating any of it. "I didn't realize he wasn't that happy in Banff either," she finally said, her whisper of a voice the only indication she offered that she wasn't happy with the situation.

"Gena," Shelly said softly, waiting for her friend to lift her gaze to hers before continuing. "Is there any chance he's being pressured into selling?"

Gena narrowed her brows. "Pressured? By whom? What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure if I mean anything." She'd asked the question and had to offer what explanation she could now. Gena continued staring at her until she continued. "The last few times I've been out, Paul has been seen with some leopards."

"Don't tell me you're one of those owls who believes we shouldn't mingle with other species." Gena immediately defended her nest.

Shelly waved her hand in the air between them. "You know me better than that."

"I thought I did," Gena said slowly.

"You do. That isn't what I meant." Shelly searched for the words. In the past week, standing at Heath's side, he handled communicating with nests so well. She needed that same diplomatic edge. "Earlier this week Frances Straffer and the Hampton nest were attacked. Physical damage was done to their homes and they were scared."

"I can't imagine the Hampton nest scaring that easily," Gena said, popping a piece of her moist brownie in her mouth as she watched Shelly and listened.

"Me either and I never talked to their nest but I did Frances and it really shook her up." Shelly ate part of her brownie and glanced past Gena at the falling snow outside. She needed to say this, put it on the table, so to speak, and hear Gena's reaction. "The Young litter was accused of attacking Frances' nest and Paul was there that night. He was also with the Young Litter the other day at Earl's. The Hamptons didn't recognize the leopards who attacked them."

"You think Paul would attack nests?" Gena's eyes grew wide as she stared at Shelly. A slight hint of spiciness hung in the air before it faded as Gena regained control of her emotions.

Shelly waved her hand through the air, helping to get rid of the unpleasant smell. "No. I don't. Not at all. But you see why I asked about the leopards he's been seen with. They aren't the most scrupulous of litters."

"Interesting," Gena said tightly. She sat stiffly in her chair, still working to rein in her emotions.

Shelly allowed her that time, sipping at her coffee, which really tasted good. She needed to say something to appease her friend. Gena came from a reputable nest, unlike Shelly, and her feathers were bent out of shape.

"You know I've never thought poorly of Paul. No one does," she offered, putting her cup down and then reaching for Gena's hand. Gena didn't pull away when Shelly covered her hand with her own. "That's why I asked you if you knew why he was spending time with them," she added quietly.

Gena shook her head, her anger having waned. Once again her soft gray eyes met Shelly's, although this time they appeared slightly tortured. "He's been different lately," she whispered. "I never would have dreamed he'd think of selling our nest. And I really don't want to live in a dump."

"Can't you tell him you don't want to sell your nest?" Shelly asked. After all, it was the nest Gena was hatched in. Paul was the oldest but he wasn't heartless.

Gena shook her head as Shelly's cell phone started ringing in her purse. When she pulled it out, her heart did a little number in her chest as she recognized the number.

"Where are you?" Heath asked instead of saying hello.

Shelly told him the name of the shop as warmth traveled through her that not even the coffee could provide. "Gena and I are spoiling ourselves with good coffee and hot brownies."

"I'll be there in a few minutes." Heath was all business as he always seemed to be on the phone. He hung up without saying goodbye.

Not that Shelly was surprised. She'd always known Heath took matters of every nest seriously in Banff, but until spending time with him, she hadn't realized how involved he was in making sure every nest was treated honorably. And that all of Banff relied on him to do just that.

"Interesting." Gena leaned back in her chair, nursing her coffee as her eyes glowed. She stared at Shelly over the rim of the cup, appearing rather amused. "Looks like we won't be walking back to our nests."

Heath pulled up in front of the shop a few minutes later as he said he would. His dark, ominous SUV sat outside, clear of any snow on it in spite of the billowing storm growing outside. He texted her, telling the two of them to take their time and come out when they were ready.

"Oh my God," Gena whispered, her appreciation apparent in her tone. "You've got the catch of a lifetime there, my dear."

Shelly couldn't agree more. "I keep panicking that I'll wake up and it will be a dream."

"It's no dream and I can see why he flew after you."

"Why is that?"

Gena looked at her as if she'd just grown a second beak. "Because you're a beautiful bird, silly. You've got a warm heart and it's so easy to smell how pure and friendly you are."

Shelly damn near blushed. "Thank you," she said humbly, hating feeling speechless and thinking she should sing Gena's praises although that wasn't the logical move. Gena simply answered Shelly's question and to respond by praising Gena would make her appear less appreciative. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yup."

They paid their bill and then pushed their way into the cold, bitter wind outside. Heath was around the truck before either of them reached it, pulling open the front passenger door. Shelly climbed in, scooting to the middle of the front seat so Gena could climb in next to her. When Heath slid behind the driver's wheel, he wrapped his hand around Shelly's thigh. His possessive nature had an odd way of making her horny as hell. She was overly aware of his thumb stroking her, just above her knee as well as Gena watching the ever-so-slight movement.

"Are we taking Gena back to her nest?" Heath asked as he pulled away from the curb.

"My nest for now," Gena mumbled.

It was sign enough for Shelly to share their afternoon with Heath. She hadn't thought to ask Gena if she minded her telling Heath what they talked about and had simply told him they would run errands.

"Paul has decided to sell their nest. We've spent the afternoon looking at nests in town for Gena to move," Shelly offered, enlightening him.

"Interesting." Heath stared straight ahead, his perfectly chiseled profile unreadable. His muscular arm brushed against her side, his thigh against her thigh and his hand protectively wrapped around her leg, yet she couldn't pick up a single emotion off him. "And did you find a nest you like?"

"No," Gena said without hesitating.

"There's nothing but dumps out there. Gena comes from a nice nest and isn't going to settle for anything that isn't clean and safe."

"She'll move into Lana's old nest." He spoke with so much conviction that for a moment the cab of his SUV was so silent it was as if the engine had even decided to be quiet.

Gena broke the silence first. "Is that an option?" she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

Shelly looked at her friend to see her leaning forward, staring past her at Heath. The hope in her warm, gray eyes showed how much she liked the idea.

"Consider it a done deal," Heath told her, glancing her direction for only a moment before shifting his attention to her. "Do we need to help her pack?" he asked Shelly as if suddenly Gena didn't sit with them in the truck.

When it hit Shelly that Heath honored her, speaking directly to her instead of the other single female with them, a warmth spread over her that almost made her break out in a tingly sweat. Her spine tingled, sensations rushing over her, a mixture of pleasure and flattery that made it damn hard to answer him. He seemed capable of driving and holding on to her stare for the longest moment. And all she could do was stare into those penetrating gray eyes, drown in them, lose herself.

She actually blinked, something she didn't do too often, and looked away first. Heath was beyond perfect and that he would honor her, honor her friend, taking away all worries and concerns with the easiest of decisions for him, should scare the crap out of her.

"How much is the rent?" Gena asked.

"We'll figure that out later so that it works into your budget. Why have you decided to sell your nest? Weren't you hatched there?"

Shelly decided he had a right to ask such questions in spite of how personal they were. It wasn't every day a nest up and left where they were hatched, not unless it was absolutely necessary. There were owls who traveled, flew from town to town and never stayed put that long, but most lived that way as a result of losing the nest they were hatched from due to means they couldn't control. If an owl wasn't forced from their nest, they didn't easily give up the roots and heritage they could pass on to their own fledglings.

"Yes. Both Paul and I were both hatched there, as was my mother," Gena offered. "Paul has decided the money from selling the nest will help put me through college. It is something I've always wanted." She ended the last sentence on a sigh, which lacked the conviction she tried putting into it. This wasn't what Gena wanted at all.

Shelly wouldn't point that out at the moment, not when Gena did her best to hold on to the honor of her nest while explaining her brother's actions to Heath. Heath wasn't stupid though. He would see through the truth in the matter.

"Do you have a buyer already?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. I only found out about this earlier this week. But Paul seems anxious for me to find a new nest so I think he does have someone interested."

"Interesting," he said again, and didn't elaborate.

"Something tells me her brother won't be pleased that Gena will be moving into the parliament," Heath said after they dropped Gena off at her nest.

"I don't understand why he is selling their nest. It's almost cruel. Gena isn't happy about it at all."

"Do you blame her?"

"No. Not at all. She has history there and so much honor and happiness."

Heath put his arm around her, pulling her against his hard body as he drove into the worsening storm. He navigated the SUV nicely with one hand on the wheel and cuddled her against him.

"We need to learn who is buying their nest. Something tells me there is a connection between that and the nests that have been attacked this week."

Chapter Twelve

Paul Mason had a very nice nest in a good part of Banff. He got a really nice selling price and closed the deal in less than a week. What pissed Heath off to no end was the litter who took possession of the house. An American litter searching for a new home after being unsettled during the Leo Pard dilemma the leopards endured several years ago.

He crawled out of bed, leaving Shelly cuddled under the blankets and moaning softly when he left her. His phone rang a second time and he realized it was what awakened him. Grabbing it from the night stand, he stared at the soft, silver blonde hair tousled over the side of Shelly's face and streaming over her exposed, bare shoulder. The covers were tucked around her, showing off the soft curve of her hip and her slender waist. Her expression was relaxed and her long, thick lashes fanned above her cheeks as she breathed softly and continued sleeping. Heath was instantly hard as stone just staring at her and cursed his phone under his breath when it rang a third time.

"What?" he grumbled, noting how early it was as he answered his phone.

"We have company." Rock didn't sound any more awake than Heath was.

"I've already got company and I'm good with that," he complained, and swore he saw Shelly's relaxed lips curve slightly.

"I'm sure you are but you're about to have another female join you."

"Another female?"

Shelly's lashes fluttered and one eye opened, staring at him. She was awake and mention of another female made her forget to pretend to Heath she was still sleeping. He kept his voice at a gruff whisper anyway.

"What are you talking about, Rock?" he demanded, the sudden urge for coffee hitting him.

"I was just heading to my nest and entered the foyer. We have a young female leopard here who wants to talk to you."

"She wants to talk to me? Who is she?" Heath headed for the coffee as Shelly sat up in bed. It didn't surprise him to hear her bare footsteps following him in to his kitchen.

"Her name is Darla Sheridan and she wants to talk to you," Rock repeated.

"Darla Sheridan? That's the female who came to town with Dover Down." Heath reached for the coffeepot but then stared at Shelly, who stood in the kitchen doorway. She'd grabbed his bathrobe and he got a flash of her full, large breasts before she pulled it around her. The wary look on her face as she listened to his conversation was enough to let him know telling her how hot she looked right now with her tousled hair and

sleep-filled eyes would probably fall on deaf ears. "She's staying with the Hunter, Kane Masters, and his litter up in the mountains. Interesting. Send her on up."

He decided it would be in his best interest to ignore the sudden smell of anger that purged from Shelly when he poured water into the pot and then dumped it into his coffeemaker. In the next minute, the machine gurgled to life, promising hot coffee soon, hopefully soon enough.

Instead of waiting for his hot little owl to approach him, he walked into her, wrapping his arms underneath the bathrobe and around her bare back.

"You're not meeting with a single female without putting clothes on," she hissed when he tried kissing her.

Telling her how hot her possessive nature got him would have to wait. Instead, he kept his arm around her bare back, dropping his hand to cup the curve of her warm ass and guided them back to his bedroom.

"We'll both get dressed," he informed her. "And you'll answer the door when they knock."

Allowing Shelly to greet a newcomer to his nest meant more to her than she would tell him. Heath saw that immediately when her gray eyes sparkled. She simply nodded though and shed his thick bathrobe in the bedroom then dressed without saying anything. There was a lot on her mind. He'd learned that about his hot little owl in the two weeks they'd been together. Whatever thoughts traipsed through her pretty head would also have to wait until after they learned why they had company at such an early hour.

He just had time to snap his jeans when someone knocked on the door to his nest. Shelly combed her hair with her fingers as she traipsed out of his bedroom, wearing her jeans and a sweatshirt with no bra as she headed down the hallway. She didn't hesitate in fulfilling the task he'd asked her to do and walked with pride to his door then opened it when he appeared at the end of the hallway.

"You honor me by allowing me into your nest this early in the day," a soft female voice said when Shelly entered the door.

Shelly opened the door farther, stepping to the side to allow Darla to enter. "It is Heath Halk who honors you. This is his nest and you may enter," Shelly said seriously, standing a few inches taller than the female leopard who walked silently into the middle of his living room. Rock entered as well, meeting his glance for only a moment before focusing on the backside of the young leopard.

"Would you like to sit?" Shelly continued playing hostess. "Coffee?"

"Thank you." Darla smelled nervous and only glanced at the couch but didn't move. She shot a furtive glance to the door and then looked down quickly as Rock blocked her path from leaving.

Although Shelly started toward the kitchen she must have also sniffed out Darla's sudden wariness if not slight edge of panic. She faced the female and gestured to the couch. He was proud as hell of his little owl, not that he'd let the emotion show, for not

being repulsed or even distracted by the female leopard's easy display of all of her emotions.

"Close the door, Rock." Heath also decided to put the female leopard at ease. "Sit here with our guest while I help with coffee."

He enjoyed putting his hand on the slender curve of Shelly's back as they left the living room and stood next to each other in front of the coffeemaker. After pulling down four cups and focusing on Rock's deep baritone as he spoke with Darla in the other room, he glanced down at Shelly's profile as she poured coffee.

Heath brushed strands of hair away from her face and she stopped pouring, looking into his face with her soft gray, round eyes. "What?" she whispered.

"You're beautiful." It wasn't what he meant to say. They had a situation and he needed to prep her.

Shelly's eyes glowed, the sleep in them disappearing as she brushed her fingers down the length of his cheek. "I didn't think owls lied," she said, her husky, soft voice making his dick hard. What he wouldn't do to have this company arrive in a couple hours. He wanted time alone with Shelly, now.

"They don't," he told her seriously. "I love how you look when you first wake up."

"I wish I had time to make myself more presentable."

"They are going to have to accept that we just woke up." He picked up two of the coffee cups but then faced her when she turned toward the living room with the other two cups in hand. "I want your opinion on what is said after they leave but while we're in there I'll do the talking."

She nodded once and followed him into the living room. Heath handed one of the cups of coffee to Rock, meeting his gaze and studying his brother's expression. It was guarded, he noted that. But there was something else, something Heath couldn't label. And he knew he must still not be quite awake because if he didn't know better he'd swear he smelled interest on Rock. His brother looked away first, returning his attention to the female leopard sitting on the couch.

Shelly offered Darla coffee and then sat at the other end of the couch, shifting herself and pulling one leg up so she faced the young leopard. Heath stood, facing both of them, sipping his coffee for a moment and allowing the silence to pass while all of them took in the caffeine.

Darla cleared her voice and shot a curious look at him and then Rock. "Thank you again for being willing to see me. I'm sure you're curious as to why I'm here."

"I admit to the curiosity," he told her easily.

"First of all, you must understand that where I came from I spent quite a lot of my time with owls. I know here there is a line each species seems to have established. I'm not here to judge, just to note that the difference might make it seem odd to you that I would approach you whereas in my mind it isn't such a strange action for a leopard to approach an owl's nest."

"Noted," Heath said, noting as well that Darla didn't squirm while talking and if anything did in fact appear fairly relaxed. The moment of panic he thought he saw on her face when she first arrived seemed to have vanished. Either Rock calmed her down or she sniffed out the honor in his nest and knew there was nothing to fear here.

"There is something I want you to be aware of. I can't say if Kane and Jin Masters would approve of my being here."

"So they don't know you're here?"

Darla shook her head. "I was out on a run and gave this quite a lot of thought." She opened her mouth to say something else but then shot Rock a quick glance and pressed her lips together. Then, placing her coffee on the coffee table, she moved to the edge of the couch and pressed her hands on her knees. Darla was a pretty female, he decided, graceful and captivating with flecks of gold in her eyes that made them appear very nonhuman in her human form. "There are leopards determined to settle here. When Dover was here, he prevented them from buying out some of the buildings downtown, which was a very honorable move on his part since if they had, quite a few of your nests would have lost their businesses and means to support themselves."

"I remember all of that." It was barely a year ago and Dover's actions had shown his true honor and convinced Heath he would make a good mate for Lana, Heath's sister. Since all of this was fairly common knowledge, he doubted the female was here to hash out old news.

Darla nodded once then pushed her long blonde hair behind her shoulder and stared into Heath's eyes, blinking several times as her scent ripened. She was nervous but doing a good job of suppressing it.

"Dover is gone now but the leopards who wish to settle here, take advantage of a strong economy in a time where most towns are suffering, are once again plotting to make their move. If they're successful many of your nests will be forced out of town."

"How is that?" He thought of Paul Mason who recently sold his nest to a litter for a fair price. It wasn't normal for a nest to sell, especially an established nest. Gena was in the process of moving into her apartment in his complex and although she would pay a decent amount of rent, a price he knew she could afford, she wasn't happy with the move and being forced to resettle.

"According to the howlings, if the nests aren't willingly selling their homes, they are being encouraged to move, so to speak."

"Encouraged?" Rock asked. "How are they being encouraged? Do you mean leopards are attacking nests possibly? Nests where females live who might not have the means to defend themselves?"

Darla swallowed and then licked her lips. "Something like that," she said, her voice cracking.

"How many litters are planning on moving here?" Heath took a slow breath to keep his temper from rising. Darla honored them by bringing this information to them, by risking the possible wrath of the litter she stayed with. By coming here, she placed

herself in his wings and Heath would give her whatever protection necessary, which would cause more problems. A lot of nests didn't like leopards or werewolves mixing with their own. Heath had spent years flying over a narrow line, playing diplomat between species. Something told him his efforts were about to become moot. Things were going to get ugly.

"There are five litters living in the mountains right now with their sights on Banff." Darla picked up her coffee and the cup noticeably shook when she brought it to her lips.

Shelly gave him an imploring look and Heath knew she ached to console the female. She did owls a great service but keeping his anger at bay took all of his energy. Providing the female with comfort when she just told him nests in town would continue to be attacked and bullied in an effort to make them fly away was a bit more than he could master at the moment. Nor did he care to try.

"But there are more," he growled, unable to keep all of his emotions in check.

Darla came from a species who wore their emotions with as much honor as his kind kept them under lock and key. She gulped down more of the coffee and then clutched the cup with both hands, her long hair streaming over one shoulder and draping around her large breasts. Even her distracting good looks didn't allow him to give her any compassion at the moment. And if the female was as intelligent as she smelled, she would know there was little chance of receiving any sympathy from any of them.

"I believe there are." Darla looked at Shelly, giving her an appraising once-over. "It's things I've heard growled in the litter where I'm staying. And don't get me wrong. My loyalty to Kane and Jin Masters is unbreakable. But I know they don't approve of this either. Although they believe they're taking matters in to their own paws and handling it, I know the damage is already playing out."

"How do you know this?" Shelly asked.

He'd asked her to remain quiet but Darla was speaking directly to Shelly. Heath watched the females study each other, noting how incredibly beautiful both of them were. Although Darla's features were more refined and her golden-green eyes an incredible distraction, she wasn't using her looks to sway their way of thinking. Some females took advantage of their looks, not always by fucking their way into getting what they wanted but nonetheless using the distraction they presented to sway a situation in the direction they wanted. Darla showed she wouldn't do this by speaking to Shelly. Again, an honorable trait. Heath wondered if she'd taken advantage of Rock, persuading him to allow her into their parliament in order to have this meeting. He glanced at his brother but Rock focused on the females, his jaw set hard and his emotions very well-suppressed.

"Because a litter just moved into one of your nests and another is planning on moving next week. If those who are actively supporting this succeed, Banff will be run by leopards here before long. Their only worry is this apartment complex."

"There is no way this parliament will go under or be taken over," Heath informed her. He had a clear note from the bank, although even without that, he wasn't scared of leopards, no matter how many litters they brought on.

Darla stood, finished her coffee and then placed the cup on the coffee table. "Thank you for allowing me into your nest," she said to him, tilting her head slightly as she spoke. "That is the information I wished to share with you. Now I really must get back to my litter before they start worrying about me."

"Fly over her as she runs to make sure she returns safely," Heath informed Rock.

Possibly it was his imagination but it seemed Rock agreed very readily to the suggestion.

"Good hunting," Darla said when Rock held the door open for her and she moved to leave.

"Good hunting," Heath said at the same time that Shelly did.

Shelly got up and poured more coffee then disappeared down his hallway into the bathroom. A few minutes later he heard the shower but continued pacing instead of joining her. Probably having some good wet sex would have cleared his mind a little, but instead he found himself pacing, mulling over their short visit with the female leopard.

He could justify her coming to see him. Darla spent time with owls. In fact, she was a good enough friend with Dover Down that her litter encouraged her to travel to this part of the country with him. Darla wouldn't have any ill aggression toward his species. From what he'd learned, Kane Masters, who was a Hunter among his kind, a higher-ranking leopard and one who settled all fights and issues that arose among them, also viewed Dover Down as a good friend. Again, there wouldn't be any hatred between the two species, at least not as far as that particular litter was concerned.

Possibly this wasn't about friendship though. The more Heath gave thought to the matter the further he started believing this was about survival. He tried putting himself in the leopards' position, stripped of their dens and struggling to find new places to live and hunt. Many litters lost everything during the attack of Leo Pard. It was a dark time for leopards and one he didn't envy them enduring. A mad male, one of their own kind, decided he was omnipotent and could decide who would breed with whom and where they should live. He wanted to make a powerful race and instead almost destroyed his kind. Now litters searched for new homes.

If owls were displaced and fighting for new nests, any other species would attack furiously to protect their hunting ground and their homes. Well, Heath would do the same thing. There would be no more owls run out of their nests.

Chapter Thirteen

Shelly listened as Heath and his nest spoke to the owls. She stood with her nest along the back wall, which made the meeting even more uncomfortable. It wouldn't be proper to stand anywhere else. She was an unmated female.

"If anyone approaches you to sell your nest I want you to contact me right away," Heath said to the crowd.

"Like I would sell my nest," someone yelled from the front of the room.

Others chimed in and the hooting carried on for several minutes before Heath regained control of the room.

"Would depend on the offer," her sire muttered under his breath as he stood next to her, leaning against the wall with his thick arms crossed over his chest.

Shelly glanced at his profile, the way his expression was twisted into a sour look. Either her mother hadn't heard him, which Shelly doubted, or she had no comment. She couldn't help but wonder if anyone had offered to buy out the hardware store. As much as she despised the place over the years, the thought of it being run by leopards turned her stomach. She would fight beak and claw for that store, she realized. And the thought brought her pause.

"Some of you are going to be tempted by offers you feel are too good to be resisted." Heath yelled and everyone grew quiet. "You're going to think twice about giving up the nest where you've hatched your fledglings."

He raised his hand, staring hard at the large group of owls crammed into the back warehouse downtown behind the grocery store, which was owned by several nests. Heath's commanding presence had an impact on more than just Shelly. It took a bit of effort to pull her attention from him, but when she did, she caught the expressions on other owls' faces. It wasn't anything new, knowing Heath possessed the ability to control a parliament, to lead and explain calmly how things should be.

Maybe it was his captivating good looks that held some. As she looked from one female to another, imagining what might be going through their minds caused a rise in her that left a bitter taste in her mouth. She wouldn't allow herself to smell jealous though. That would require an explanation and letting her parents know she was letting her imagination stray during such a serious meeting wouldn't look good. Not to mention they would make a scene she didn't want or need.

But it was more than his sex appeal that held other owls' interests. She saw that clearly. Heath was honored by everyone in this room. He spoke with a level of compassion that made an owl want to hear him out. The way he flew, his feathers pristine, made him an owl not to reckon with.

God. If she weren't careful she would either reek of jealousy or pride, neither of which would be good.

"I know many of you think I'm wrong, but trust me, it's already happening." That statement started the buzz of comments again. Heath didn't try to quiet them but continued, speaking loud enough his voice echoed off the walls around him. "Leopards have been persecuted, run out of their dens, their litters scattered, and they're desperate. We all remember how they tried to buy out our downtown last year."

Again the comments flew, everyone having something to say about that time period. Many around her were shop owners. Owls owned and ran most of the shops in Banff, and had for quite a few years now.

"They're trying to take us out again!" Heath yelled.

The uproar now made it impossible for Heath to speak over. Owls around her started talking to each other, shifting and moving so that it was harder for her to see Heath. When she caught a glimpse of him, it was as if he stared right at her. His dark, penetrating gray eyes burrowed deep into her soul, pinning her where she stood and stole her breath. Her heart started pattering harder and a quickening in her gut created a humming inside her that drowned out the noise of the room. It was just her and Heath, the many owls flapping their wings and hooting up a storm between them fading into the background as she stared at him.

He looked away first, saying something to Beel, who stood next to him. As she studied his profile, captivated by his strong, dominating presence, he looked back at her. Again she was convinced he stared directly at her. When she caught his mouth curling slightly on one side, it took all she had not to smile at him. But then she realized he got the owls in the room riled for a reason. He was driving his point home, making them see that no matter how much money they were offered for their nests, selling would hurt their parliament, could quite possibly wipe them out. It was a matter of survival, and owls would not clip their wings for leopards or any other species.

"I want your word," Heath said, not yelling but silencing the parliament with his calm tone and the serious edge to it. "If you're approached to sell your nest, you will contact me. Do I have everyone's word?"

Shelly glanced around her at different nests who spoke out, giving their word they would contact Heath if anyone approached them. It hit her as odd her sire and mother didn't say a word. She glanced at her sire, who continued staring ahead of him, his hard jawline worked into a determined glare. He didn't look at her and remained quiet. When she looked at her mother, Matilda focused on her painted fingernails, appearing almost bored.

Now wasn't the time to ask, but soon she would understand the meaning behind her parents' silence.

* * * * *

Owls flooded the parking lot after the meeting, many of them standing around and catching up on each other's lives. Just as many discussed the meeting and whether anyone had been approached about selling their nests. For the most part it appeared no one had. Shelly noticed a few other owls who remained silent, or who left without talking to anyone. Again her curiosity was piqued.

All Heath could do was ask for everyone's word. If an owl gave his word, it was good. But those who remained silent, as her nest did, worried her. If they didn't answer Heath, they weren't being dishonorable by responding to a buyer without contacting Heath first. Although as far as Shelly was concerned, if her nest had an offer on the table for the store and didn't tell anyone that was just as dishonorable as if they'd said they would tell him and then not do it.

She glanced around at the slowly dispersing crowd. Her mother was already walking down the street with several other females her age. Matilda didn't bother wishing her good hunting or letting her know she was leaving. Not that Shelly had anticipated either. There weren't a lot of maternal instincts in Matilda. She hatched Shelly, made sure she had a nest and food and called her job done. Complaining about Porter Preston entertained her a lot more than making sure Shelly was okay.

Her sire's car pulled out of the parking lot. Shelly noticed he didn't turn in the direction of their nest. Which meant he was heading out to his girlfriend's house. Her sire never did figure out how to be discreet about his extramarital affairs, which disgusted Shelly as much as the fact that he had them.

Cringing and praying everyone else was too wrapped up by the meeting to notice her sire, she shifted her attention to the back entrance of the store. Heath hadn't told her to wait for him. But then they didn't speak before the meeting. Light spilled out onto the dark asphalt parking lot, which otherwise was lit by one streetlight near the exit. The blanket of blackness overhead and the extreme chill in the air would have made for a cozy environment if her insides weren't all twisted. It would take very little at the moment to get incredibly confused as to whether she should wait for Heath or start walking home. The last thing she wanted was to appear awkward standing alone in the parking lot if he wasn't coming out for her. Then she remembered the females watching him as he spoke and headed to the entrance of the store before giving herself time to consider her actions.

Beel appeared in the doorway before she reached it, his tall frame and tousled silver blond hair and hard yet definitely appealing features reminding her of a more stubborn version of Heath. The two males were so much alike yet so incredibly different. Although their shade of eyes was almost identical, when he met her gaze, there was something different in them, something almost cold and aloof. His relaxed expression and easy stance proved the aggression she thought she first saw in him was simply how he looked.

"Heath is still inside talking to several nests. I'll wait with you," he decided, pausing a few feet outside the door and blocking her entrance.

"That isn't necessary." If he'd move, she'd go inside and join him. There was a sudden urgency swelling in her to make sure none of the single females were using the meeting as an excuse to get close to Heath. When Beel didn't move, she drew on a bravery she didn't usually exert. "I'll go join him."

He stared at her a moment and she thought he would try to stop her. "Very well. Good hunting," he mumbled, and continued with his lazy stroll across the dark parking lot.

Shelly heard keys jingle and wondered if he'd take the SUV. The thought of walking with Heath in the cold, dark night didn't bother her. If anything she imagined Heath would be rather wound up after the meeting and talking about their reactions from the different nests, listening to him as he plotted and informed her what he would do next about all of this created an excitement in her. Not to mention, if he were all wound up, hard, rough sex later would be the perfect way for him to burn off all of that adrenaline.

Her flat boots thudded quietly on the cement floor inside the building as she walked along the narrow hallway and returned to the large warehouse where a few owls still lingered. Soft voices, sounding as if they carried a serious conversation, reached her before she spotted Heath. He stood with a handful of owls surrounding him. None of them mattered to her other than the female posed next to him with her hand stroking his back.

She didn't give her actions any thought. If she had, Shelly couldn't say if she would have responded differently. Already she'd convinced herself she would fight to hold on to what had started between them.

Shelly marched up to the small group, aware of two older males, who were facing her, eyes growing larger in either surprise or disbelief as they focused on her. They weren't her concern. She grabbed the arm of the female whose back was to her and who continued caressing Heath's back.

Whipping the female around, she stared into her shocked expression. "Do you not smell my scent on him?" Shelly whispered, and was incredibly impressed at how calm she sounded. All of her emotions were in check.

"I didn't think it..." the female stammered.

Again Shelly's calm and controlled manner surprised her but also filled her with confidence to finish out the scenario. She would fight for what was hers.

"I forgive you for not thinking." Shelly released the female, who was one of the younger owls from a group of nests who lived on the outer edge of Banff. Shelly didn't know her name but knew she flew with a wealthier crowd who was in college. More than likely at least one of the older males was part of her nest. "Please don't forget yourself in the future," she added.

The female held on to her grace as she nodded and then turned to the group, excusing herself before hurrying out of the warehouse. Immediately one of the older males muttered something about good hunting under his breath and hurried after her.

"We'll be in touch," the other older male told Heath, and then nodded to the other females with him, all of them old enough to be Shelly's mother. The females pinned her with hard stares but said nothing as they left the group without a word.

"Did you think I would do something with that female?" Heath asked once they were alone.

"The thought better not have crossed your mind." Now her anger surged to life.

"It didn't and I can't believe you would think that it might."

Unable to hold her emotions at bay any longer, she squared off, staring at Heath. "It wasn't what I thought you would do but that another female would dare touch you. You don't exactly smell single anymore, Heath Halk."

"Those were very wealthy nests who..."

Shelly interrupted him, her temper slicing through her with waves strong enough to make her shake. "And so you would allow that female to fondle and caress you because they have money? What else would you have allowed her to do? Is my honor worth nothing because I come from a poor nest? Because if it is..."

"Enough!" Heath sliced his hand through the air between them. "That is not what I meant."

"Then say what you mean."

He stared at her, his expression unreadable. When he didn't answer her, Shelly turned, walking out of the now-empty warehouse, every inch of her shaking so bad she was surprised her legs carried her out into the cold night.

Worse yet, Heath didn't follow her. He didn't call after her or fly into a rage to finish the argument. Shelly stormed across the parking lot, having half a mind to strip out of her clothes and fly into the bitter night air. Her eyes burned with emotions she couldn't put back where they belonged. Everything was just as she feared it would be. Because she came from nowhere, from a nest without honor, Heath wouldn't puff his feathers out with pride on her behalf. He wouldn't even acknowledge her or defend her honor in front of the wealthy nest.

There was a decent crowd at Earl's although the nest with the rich female tramp wasn't there. Not that a nest like that would go to Earl's. Shelly let out a soothing breath. It wasn't like her to judge a nest based on their financial status or beliefs. She needed to cut this pity party out. Maybe it was for the best that she learned her worst nightmare about Heath was true. He liked Shelly. She wasn't so blind to miss that. And he loved fucking her. God, she loved fucking him too. But when it came down to it, when Heath Halk was put on the spot, he would have preferred she remain to the side, enduring the pain of another female fondling him, than come forward and hoot that he belonged to her.

Shelly wouldn't fly alongside a male like that. She just wouldn't.

The painful lump in her chest and her wobbly legs were an incredible distraction as she walked to the bar.

"Drinking alone tonight?" Earl asked, wiping down the bar counter in front of her with a clean white cloth heavily doused with cleaning chemicals.

She told herself the chemicals on the cloth made her eyes water and not the emotions she was still struggling to put tightly back where they belonged. "Sure am," she said, afraid her voice sounded too loud, too cheerful.

Earl didn't react as if he noticed. His calm, thick round face faded into his balding head as he nodded once. "What will it be, sweet owl?" he asked, his soft, gentle baritone barely audible over the loud music and many conversations going on around her.

"How about a tequila sunrise?" she suggested. Drinking her problems away wasn't her style, but one good drink wouldn't hurt anything. Numbing her annoying feelings would be a good idea too.

Shelly dug into her purse for the money for the drink when Paul Mason slid up to the bar next to her, nudging her arm with his. "It's on me," he announced, sliding his empty beer across the bar to Earl.

Earl nodded once, giving no indication that he cared who paid for her drink. And he more than likely didn't care. As long as it was paid for. Shelly decided to hold on to that same attitude.

"A beautiful owl shouldn't be drinking alone." Paul moved her hair behind her ear, his warm fingers brushing her cheek.

"I'm not drinking alone." She managed to relax her expression and braced one foot against the base of the bar while leaning against it. Paul and she went way back and although she knew he was a player, he'd never annoyed her too much. "Where is Gena?" she asked.

"Last I heard she is working on her nest, making it a cozy home." He almost sounded proud as if Gena having a new nest was her idea and something he commended her for doing.

Shelly would love to go spend time with her girlfriend, although heading over to Gena's nest would mean entering Heath's parliament. She would smell him everywhere and possibly even run into him. It wasn't something she thought she could do right now and felt robbed of something she should have a right to do – visit her friend.

"Gena is very good at making a cozy nest." Shelly paused and worked up a small smile when Earl placed a small napkin in front of her and put her cocktail on it. She ignored Paul when he slid a large bill across the counter to Earl to pay for the drinks. "Where will your new nest be?"

Paul gave her an assessing look when he tipped back his bottle of beer and swallowed several times. He was a large owl, muscular with too much human cologne splashed on his body. His hair was gelled back, which brought out the silver highlights in his blond hair. She never gave it much thought before but his physical appearance bordered on disgusting. He was a good-looking owl but ruined it by so much primping.

An image of him sitting on some branch, taking his time pruning every feather on his body, almost made her choke on her drink.

"You should come see it," he offered, lowering his voice. "I've created a love nest up in the mountains. I know you would love it."

Shelly couldn't imagine how Paul would know what she would love or not. Which meant, although she couldn't smell it through all his cologne, that he was flirting with her.

"Are you talking about the meeting tonight?" Mickey Redd came up behind Shelly but then moved to stand on the other side of her at the bar.

"Nope. No reason to listen to Halk screech at the parliament," Paul said, straightening as if his stating he didn't acknowledge anything Heath had to share made him more important.

"Better not hoot about Heath around Shelly. You know she'll fly straight to him." Mickey nudged Shelly, his gray eyes flashing with amusement. It appeared he'd already had a few drinks.

"No. Not Shelly. Just because she's fucked him doesn't mean he tells her where to fly. She's with me tonight."

Did everyone seriously think she and Heath were just fucking each other?

"I'm not with you tonight," Shelly informed him.

"I just bought your drink," Paul pointed out.

Shelly reached into her purse and opened her wallet then pulling out several bills, she slapped them on the bar counter. "You can't buy me, Paul," she informed him.

"Now, my little owl. That isn't what I meant. Don't get your feathers all ruffled. We can do that later out at my nest," he added, lowering her voice and nudging her when he finished speaking.

Shelly barely had time to register that someone had grabbed her arm when she flew backward. She would have lost her balance if Heath didn't stabilize her, keeping a firm grip on her arm as he glared at Paul and Mickey. The rich, spicy aroma from his anger damn near made her eyes water.

"Does she smell like a single owl to you?" Heath hissed, his gray eyes black with fury.

Shelly stared at him, shocked, her mouth going dryer than sand paper in a matter of seconds as she watched him grow before her eyes. Heath was a natural born leader, an owl who knew how to fly so others would follow. He'd helped maintain a successful, prosperous parliament and not once had she seen him raise his voice to anyone. Even when violence surrounded them and he watched as owls were wronged by other species, he'd always kept his cool and flown a straight line into danger, handling it with a steady wing and powerful control.

"You know damn good and well she is with me," he continued, moving in on Paul and pushing her behind him. "Should I start thinking your actions of indifference to the

parliament you enjoy living in might be directed toward me and not simply because you don't care about a damn owl other than yourself?"

"Now wait, Heath." Paul held up his hand, shielding himself against Heath with it, which almost appeared comical.

Paul might be a large male owl but Heath's wrath and his intelligence were enough to seriously handicap Paul. Mickey straightened, his serious, relaxed expression attentive as he focused on Heath. Even Earl moved down the bar, facing Heath and Shelly, waiting to see how the scene would play out. Shelly glanced around them, incredibly aware of how many owls had stopped what they were doing and given them their undivided attention.

They were making a scene. Heath was making a scene.

"I can't stop you from selling out to leopards," Heath said, lowering his voice to a deadly whisper. "But I can stop you from ever touching my female again."

"Interesting," Paul muttered, glancing past Heath to look at Shelly for only a moment before returning his attention to Heath. "There's no need. She's not worth the fight."

Heath actually growled. Shelly's ears started ringing as the buzz started around her, everyone whispering and speculating that Heath Halk might be close to a mating. Either he didn't notice the scene he'd just made or he didn't care. He turned, still holding on to her arm, and headed out the door. The last thing Shelly wanted was to make the scene worse than it already was. At the same time, she'd be damned if anyone, even Heath, would drag her out of the bar as if she were his property.

"I can walk on my own." She wasn't at all sure she could.

Heath shot her a fiery stare, for a moment looking as if he would pounce. But he let go of her and reached the door a moment later. Pulling it open, he held it and allowed Shelly to walk outside ahead of him. Anger attacked her as quickly as the frosty night air did. It wasn't the only emotion giving her grief. Part of her wanted to jump into his arms for coming for her. Another part wanted to reel on him and let him know exactly how she would fly. It was a two-way street and the way she saw it right now, her side was a bit too congested.

"Would you mind explaining yourself?" She sounded calm. That was a plus. Hugging herself as much to keep her emotions contained as to head off the biting chill in the air, she turned to face Heath.

"Was I not clear?" His anger still filled the air around them. Even when he exhaled loudly and walked away from her a few paces before returning to face her, the intense spiciness clinging to him didn't dissipate. "I think I was very clear," he stated, and pressed his lips into a thin, hard line.

"Actually you aren't being clear at all. Not to me." Almost whispering, Shelly breathed in slowly, determined not to add her emotions to the stench hanging heavily around them already. In spite of Heath's strong feelings that he was making no effort at all to rein in, Shelly also picked up on the thick aroma sticking to both of them, the

definite scent of the two of them mixed together, creating a new smell that was now each of their natural smell. Other than Heath's anger, they smelled the same. "You flew at me as if I were out of line for making a scene in the warehouse and then feel your actions just now were justified?" she demanded. "I don't think so, Heath. If it's one way, it's both ways. If there will be no other males for me, then there will be no other females for you."

"There are no other females for me," he snapped, his gray eyes sparking, flashing like a thunderhead with lightning shooting through it. "There is only you."

His words were music to her ears. It was all she could do not to melt into his arms. But if she were to allow him to fly like this, it would only get worse. Heath would attack with claws and beak every time a male came anywhere near her but then would throw a fit if she suggested a female shouldn't hang all over him. Maybe his heart was where it belonged. Maybe his feelings for her were sincere. But he didn't see anything wrong with a female flapping her wings around him or shaking her tail feather as she flirted with him.

Then it hit her. She stared at him, her jaw dropping as her anger suddenly spiked to the point where she couldn't control it. "How dare you," she hissed, unable to keep the calm in her tone any longer. "You know in your heart that you won't respond to a female flirting with you, so you see no harm in her doing it. But if a male flirts with me, I'm too weak to refrain from his advances. You think I won't tell him no."

"I didn't say that," he told her, his anger waning as the hardness in his expression softened.

"Yes, you did." She stormed past him, her legs once again so wobbly she almost tripped over them. "I might not have the honorable nest that you have, Heath Halk, but I'm an honorable female and I won't be insulted the way you did tonight."

Heath grabbed her. And it was a damn good thing he did. She blamed the harsh winter air for creating the sting in her eyes and making them water. But losing her balance could have seriously been hard to explain if he hadn't yanked her up against him. And he saved her honor, although she sure wasn't going to tell him that when he prevented her from tripping over her own feet by wrapping his arms around her and pinning her to him.

"I love you, Shelly."

Chapter Fourteen

Heath couldn't remember when his emotions last raged through him as they did now. Not even when he was a fledgling. But this wasn't the result of a tantrum. Emotions weren't surging through him because of hormones. Worse yet, in spite of uttering words he'd never said before to anyone, other than possibly his mother when he was barely hatched, he didn't regret them at all.

Grabbing the hair at Shelly's nape, he yanked enough for her head to fall back and then pounced on her lips. He demanded, entered and conquered. If he impaled her mouth because he didn't want to hear her deny the words he'd just spoken, or worse yet, not be able to respond to them at all, he wouldn't dwell on that right now.

Instead he ravished her, filling himself with the taste of her. Her hair tangled around his fingers, its soft, silky texture just one more thing he loved about her. Running his other hand down the curve of her back, he pushed her against him.

The moment Shelly relaxed into his arms, lifting her hands and then clasping them behind his neck, it was as if she spoke the words back to him. Then she moaned. Heath swore he could feel his tail feathers span, every inch of him swelling with pride he couldn't control any more than he was able to prevent his anger causing a much more appealing aroma to fill the air around them.

"Shelly," he muttered into her mouth, moving his lips over hers.

She blinked, her soft, alluring eyes hazed over as she stared up at him without answering.

"I love you." He really liked saying that to her. Even more, watching her eyes glow when he did filled his insides with a pressure that was stronger than anything he'd felt for her before now.

Shelly licked her lips, taking a deep, slow breath. "I love you too, Heath." Her voice cracked as she spoke.

Maybe the words were hard for her to say but she spoke them and Heath believed she wouldn't have done so if she didn't really mean them. The pressure continued growing until he knew if he didn't fuck her soon he would explode.

"But, Heath," she continued, cupping his chin with her small, cold hand. "You must trust me or how I feel for you won't matter." When a harsh wind slapped several strands of hair across her face, Shelly let go of his chin and hugged herself. "You got upset with me in the warehouse but then lost it just now in there."

He curbed his emotions, managing finally to get a grip and wrapped his arms around her, using his body as a shield against the elements for her. "We both just fought for each other."

Shelly buried her face against his chest but he felt her smile. "Got our feathers all ruffled, didn't we?"

"You sure did." He managed a straight face when she pulled away and gave him a sharp look. "My little owl, before you stomped across the warehouse I was in the process of telling everyone about you."

"Then why was she stroking your back?"

"That female strokes every single male's back."

She swallowed slowly and he got the impression she choked on words that almost stumbled out of her mouth. Heath said them for her. "And I don't fly alone anymore."

"Before you came into Earl's I was in the process of telling Paul that buying me a drink didn't give him permission to ruffle my feathers or fly me out to show off his new nest."

"But you didn't tell him you were with me?"

The wind slapped around them again and Shelly shivered. Several owls came out of Earl's and Heath was grateful for the weather carrying away his harsh emotions that had lingered around the two of them a moment before. Putting his arm around Shelly, he started down the sidewalk. When he'd marched over here from the warehouse behind the grocery store, his anger fueled him against the wind. Now it blew so fiercely Shelly shivered against him. He felt the cold too, but more than that, the hesitation from his little owl.

"Are you hesitating about flying with me?" he asked, breaking the dark silence between them as he kept the pace up and hurried them toward his nest.

"When you first entered my nest, the thought of having you by my side seemed a dream I couldn't reach no matter how hard I flew."

He looked down at her determined expression. She didn't look up at him though, but instead stared at the ground ahead of them as they walked.

"Do you really think I believe my nest is all that better than yours?"

"Don't cloud the issue, Heath," she said, speaking quickly. "You snapped at me when I puffed out my feathers and laid my honor on the line for you."

"As long as we've been flying together, it's all seemed too good to be true," she continued after a moment of silence. "Getting cozy in a nest is easy to do, and I know that. It's another thing completely to show that same intimacy in front of an entire parliament."

"Are you suggesting I wouldn't fly with you where others could see and smell my feelings for you? Have you already forgotten the time we've spent together in public?"

She shook her head and blonde strands laced with silver flew around her face. "I haven't forgotten a single moment we've spent together, Heath," she whispered, continuing to hug herself instead of moving her hands to get her hair out of her face. "In a surreal situation it doesn't take much to create a cloud of doubt."

"Telling you not to make a scene when a female is giving me attention created doubt in you?"

"Yes, it did." She glanced up at him and moved her hand to tuck hair behind her ear.

"Interesting."

She didn't offer more of an explanation although he believed there to be more of one. He hurried her along in silence. They both would have embraced this weather if they were in their feathers. As appealing a thought as it was, they'd both just shared very raw and new emotions. Owls didn't give a lot of merit to emotions, but that didn't mean they didn't have them. When they came forward, it was usually because the emotions were too strong to contain. And if a situation pulled those suppressed emotions forward, then it was something that meant a lot to an owl. Heath and Shelly would talk this out until they understood each other.

They reached the apartment complex and he let go of Shelly then pulled open the door. She hurried inside fast enough to verify what he already knew, his little owl was freezing and warming up was imperative before they focused on a delicate yet very necessary conversation.

Thankfully there wasn't anyone in the foyer and he pushed the button to the elevator. "We're going to understand each other," he informed her, taking her hand and guiding her into the elevator.

"I think I understand." Her eyes were such a soft, glowing gray when she pressed her hands to his chest and stared at him. "I'm just not sure if I can accept it."

He didn't smell her sadness but the way her eyes glistened, appearing for a moment like deep, swollen murky pools, showed him how much it hurt her to say this to him. And he felt the pain. It stabbed through his heart fiercely enough so when the doors opened he stood there, studying her.

When Shelly walked out of the elevator and headed toward his nest, he followed. There wasn't anything worse than facing a conversation when it appeared the knowledge of what would follow would destroy him. And if Shelly was trying to gather courage to tell him she wouldn't fly with him, it would do just that.

Heath pulled his keys from his pocket, fingering the cold metal and adjusting his nest key in his hand. Shelly stood next to him, her arm brushing against his as he pushed the key into the lock and then opened the door. He placed his hand in the middle of her back, guiding her into the darkness as his eyes quickly adjusted.

That's when he saw the destruction.

"Oh my God," Shelly whispered.

"Stay here." Heath left her in the doorway with hallway light flooding into his living room as he walked to the light switch on the wall and flipped it on.

"It doesn't sound like anyone is still here," Shelly whispered, again hugging herself, although he doubted this time it was from the cold.

Heath took in the turned-over side lamp, the drawers pulled out of end tables and left on the floor upside down. The few framed pictures on his wall had been torn down, cushions on the couch tugged to the floor and slit open so the stuffing spilled from them.

Pulling his phone from his belt, he tossed it to Shelly, who caught it as she continued staring wide-eyed at him. "Beel is speed dial two and Rock is speed dial three. Call both of them and tell them to get here immediately."

She nodded. "Who is number one on your speed dial?"

"You." He didn't register her expression but instead headed down his hallway, not surprised to see his bedroom just as destroyed, and the smaller bedrooms on either side of the hallway that he used for storage also upheaved, their contents spread around in complete disarray. "What were they looking for?" he mumbled, staring at the mess.

"Heath!" Shelly yelled from the other room.

He leapt over the knocked-over dresser that he'd been investigating and hurried down the hall. Shelly hadn't stayed at the doorway where he'd told her to remain. She stood in the kitchen, her pretty gray eyes wide with alarm. Heath pulled her into his arms, her soft, warm body feeling too good pressed next to his.

"I'll take care of this," he whispered, burying his face in her silky hair.

"I know you will." Shelly straightened, the concern in her eyes heart-warming. She pressed her palm against the side of his face. "I think whoever was here left you a message."

"Oh yeah?"

She didn't try to get out of his arms when she shifted and then gestured at his kitchen table. He didn't remember leaving his ketchup out but it sat in the middle of the table. Next to it was a big pile of the red, pasty stuff. And someone had left the imprint of a cat's paw in the middle of the mess.

"Interesting." Heath let go of her, walking over to his table and then gripping the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

It wasn't an actual cat print, but someone had gone to some effort to imitate a cat paw in the ketchup.

"Heath?" Beel called from the front door.

Shelly hurried out of the kitchen but Heath was right behind her, taking her arm and pulling her against him. Not that she needed protection from his nest, but having her there was more of a comfort than possibly she realized. Or maybe she did. Shelly relaxed into him, wrapping her arm around his backside.

"What the fuck?" his brother growled. "I didn't understand at first why Shelly would call me from your phone."

"I had her call you and Rock while I checked out the rest of the nest. We just got here," Heath told him.

"This is terrible." Beel worked his way through the living room and then picked up a picture lying facedown on the floor. It was one of their nest when the three of them were still fledglings with their sire and mother. "Any idea who did this?" he growled, searching the wall for a moment until he found the nail and then hung the photograph.

"Shelly found a cat paw," Heath said, wishing he knew what it was they were searching for. The way everything was turned over and pulled out indicated a search and not just an effort to make a mess of his nest.

"Leopards?" Beel hissed between his teeth, his eyes darkening the way they did when he was pissed. "They'll pay for this."

"We don't attack until we have our answers," Heath told him calmly. "What I want to know first is what they wanted."

"Paul Mason wasn't at the meeting so he's a suspect." Shelly didn't look at Heath when she spoke but walked out of his arms and paced the length of the room the best she could while tapping her lip. "We should determine who else wasn't at the meeting."

"Were you here up until you went to the meeting?" Beel asked.

"Pretty much." Heath didn't like thinking how much time Shelly spent with Paul Mason. He forced himself to focus on the fact she just named him their first suspect, which meant she saw him as possessing no honor. Shelly was pissed when her friend Gena had been left without a nest, offering more proof that she didn't care for Paul Mason. "We can't let our personal feelings for any owl cloud our judgment," he said, reminding himself of the fact as much as the others.

"He's a despicable owl who flies with no honor," Shelly pointed out, her calm voice indicating she spoke facts and not emotions. "Who else wasn't at the meeting?" she asked, staring into his eyes as she spoke.

"Most all the nests were there," Beel offered, glancing from one of them to the other. "Other than the older nests who often don't attend the meetings and simply wait to hear the news once another nest brings it to them."

"Did Rock say when he'd be here?" Heath asked. "And you're right," he added, nodding at Beel. "It seemed to me everyone was there except for Paul Mason."

"I left voicemail for Rock. He didn't answer," Shelly told him.

An hour or so later quite a few owls worked in Heath's nest, helping to clean up the mess. At first one or two appeared in the doorway, noting that it had been left open, and then entered to offer assistance. Two of his aunts, Aunt Opal and Aunt Oley, were fluttering over his couch, determined to sew the cushions and put it back to new. To tell them he could just buy a new couch would dishonor their efforts so he left them to argue over who possessed the better seamstress skills.

When Rock showed up, he smelled of the outdoors, indicating he'd been flying, which explained why he hadn't answered Shelly's call. Rock didn't offer any

explanation but jumped in to help straighten Heath's nest the moment he arrived. Heath, Beel and Rock had worked to put furniture back where it belonged and finished with the last of the bedrooms when something hit him.

Rock and Beel decided to see if Heath had any beer left in his refrigerator and Heath followed them into the kitchen. Gena Mason and Marcia Reed fluttered around the counters, helping Shelly scrub cabinets. His kitchen was cleaner than it probably ever had been. Shelly glanced up at him, blowing a strand of hair out of her face as she stuffed her hands into a bucket of water and cleaning fluids.

"Come with me," he told her, ignoring the others as his brothers immediately started flirting with the two unmated female owls.

"We're almost done here," she offered, drying her hands on a towel as she moved around Gena.

"Your friends honor me by helping to clean. I'm sure you've put this room back to order better than it was before our intruder arrived."

"When we do a job, we do it right." Any anger or frustration that once aggravated Shelly was now completely gone.

She smelled of cleaning supplies and her face glowed from her work when he guided her out of the kitchen, leaving the other females to fend for themselves against his brothers who saw the opportunity to prance around Gena and Marcia and impress them with the list of work they'd done since they arrived.

"We'll be right back," he told his aunts as he continued leading Shelly through his nest to the front door.

"Everything is under control here," Aunt Oley told him and he closed the door right after hearing his aunts begin discussing whether a mating would be announced soon by Heath or not.

Long lashes hooded Shelly's gaze as she stared ahead of her and didn't comment on anything his aunts said. They would discuss and work through any issues with their relationship. Right now though, he needed to remain focused on their current situation. The moment it hit him what they might be up against, he needed to talk it out with Shelly, hear her thoughts. And they needed privacy for that.

"Where are we going?" she asked when he led her to the stairwell.

"I want a moment alone." Pushing open the door, he held it for her when she entered. There wasn't anyone in the hallway and he made a mental note to question everyone later to see who might have seen anyone come or go from the building. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

Shelly entered but as the door clambered shut behind her, creating an echo in the dark cement stairwell, she paused, looking up at him. "Heath, you're right, we do need to talk. But right now isn't a good time. My mind is a whirlwind with what happened to your nest."

"Good." He already knew she cared, and her concern as she searched his face showed him even more into her thoughts. Not only did his nest being disrupted upset her, but their relationship mattered enough to her she wouldn't enter into discussion about it without having a clear head. "Not that your mind is tormented," he added when she narrowed her brow. "But that you care."

"I don't think I've ever offered indication that I don't care. And I certainly wouldn't have said," she added, but then paused, cleared her throat and looked down, "well, what we said to each other earlier, if I hadn't meant it."

"I wouldn't tell you I loved you if I didn't mean it either." He cupped the back of her head and then ran his hand down the length of her hair until he pressed against her lower back. "Come with me."

Shelly didn't argue but walked next to him willingly. The soft curve of her rear end, the way she moved, tall and proud with a silent, easy progress threatened to drain all blood to his cock even as they ascended the stairs. Her silky strands tickled his fingers. Shelly was warm, gentle with almost a passive, unsure persona. Yet she was strong, proud and held on to more honor than most owls had a right to possess. From such an ugly, gaudy nest rose an elegant creature. Most of her makeup had worn off from her efforts cleaning his nest. The smell of cleaning supplies clung heavily to her flesh and her shirt was slightly crooked over her shoulders. Heath knew beyond any doubt she was the sexiest female he'd ever laid eyes on.

It humbled him. Brought him pause and moved him in a way no owl had ever touched him before. Shelly would be his female if she'd have him. And damn her, he smelled her hesitation. He came from one of the most affluent nests in Banff. Females tripped over each other for his attention. Yet Shelly, an owl many viewed as low-life, wasn't sure if she would have him. He wasn't boastful. There wasn't a feather on him when it came to thinking he could tell her she'd be moving up in the world to fly by his side. Because Heath knew that wasn't the case. Shelly might not have a nest to brag about but that hadn't affected her. He would be the lucky one to have her. It would be his nest that would be graced with her presence if she'd fly with him.

Shelly was right. Their heads needed to be clear to discuss this. Dwelling on it as they climbed the stairs to the roof of his apartment complex created more emotions than he wanted or needed to have inside him right now.

Heath pushed the door open at the top of the stairs and embraced the icy-cold wind that slapped him in the face. He needed the cleansing breath he drew deep into his lungs as they stepped outside into the night.

"I should have grabbed a jacket for you." Heath let the door close behind them but then pulled Shelly into the corner where two brick walls provided a small amount of protection against the extreme cold.

"I'm okay," she said quietly, but nestled against him, hugging herself and pressing her body into his. "We're not alone," she whispered.

Heath spotted his Uncle Otis perched on the opposite corner of the roof. "Uncle Otis is practically deaf," he told her, studying the owl whose feathers lifted in the wind. "He doesn't fly much anymore but likes to sit out here." Heath made a mental note to ask his uncle if he saw anyone enter the building during the evening. Uncle Otis might not be able to hear like he used to but his vision was damn good.

"Why did you want to come up here?" she asked, her voice shaking from the cold.

Heath wrapped his arms around her, their bodies keeping each other warm. In fact her body was doing a damn good number on his. Her nipples turned hard and poked into his chest and when she shifted slightly, the nice curve of her hips rubbed against him, making his cock lengthen and swell in his jeans.

"I figured out why the intruder destroyed my nest."

Shelly tilted her head. Her soft, round gray eyes pulled him to her, creating a quickening in his gut when he felt his soul drowning in hers. She didn't blink but her thick, long lashes fluttered for just a moment. "Is something missing?"

"There was a small lock box in the back of the bottom shelf in my desk," he began. "The key to open it is on my key chain and it's a pretty sturdy little box."

She pursed her lips, studying him as he spoke. "And it's gone? What was in it?"

"Yes. It's gone. And there isn't anything in it other than some newspaper articles my mother saved over the years. Once the deed to the apartment complex was kept there along with the car title and insurance papers. I moved all those documents to a safe deposit box at the bank when I took possession of the parliament after my sire and mother passed on."

Shelly was quick. "They were looking for the deed to the apartment complex."

"My guess is they wanted confirmation as to who owned it."

"Isn't that public information?"

"If you're smart enough to figure out how to go about finding that out, it is."

Shelly nodded once. "But an arrogant owl, one who thinks only of himself and isn't quick enough to track things down online would use brawn instead of brain to learn what he wants to know."

"Know an owl who fits that description?"

"I think I'll ask Gena how good her brother is with a computer."

Chapter Fifteen

Shelly really had to work to keep her thoughts on topic. Heath held her protectively against him, the warmth from his body as dangerous as an addictive drug. It would take nothing to lose herself in him, willingly continue to profess the love she'd already admitted to, and remain by his side. The process wouldn't be hard, and it was so damn tempting. So what if taking him now meant he would fly off the handle any time a male sniffed around her? That was rather flattering. It would get old and she knew it, but telling herself right now it was a sign of Heath's devotion was incredibly easy to buy into.

Then there was his obstinance if she let her feathers get bent out of shape because some female hung on him. She could justify that behavior in him too. Heath was flattered other females found him attractive. He knew in his heart he was loyal to her so therefore didn't see a problem with females flirting with him.

Again, Shelly knew without any doubt she wouldn't be able to handle that behavior in him or any male who flew by her side for very long. It had to be a two-way street. They had to both fly the same way. If it wasn't right for one of them, it wasn't right for the other. Plain and simple.

Maybe it appeared the easier flight to take him as he was right now. And it took some effort, especially with him wrapped around her so possessively right now, to convince herself flying with a male who didn't treat the same issue fairly was no way to fly.

Shelly relaxed in his arms. He brushed his lips over the top of her head and she breathed in his all-male scent. They'd agreed not to discuss their relationship right now. Therefore she shouldn't think about it.

It took a bit of effort but she forced her mind to wrap around their conversation. A cold wind managed its way up the back of her shirt and she shivered uncontrollably. Heath pulled her in tighter. Her insides tightened and swelled, her pussy suddenly throbbing eagerly, knowing what Heath could do for her to make her forget all about the cold.

"Are we both in agreement that Paul Mason is our prime suspect?" Obviously Heath was able to have her pressed firmly against him and focus on his nest.

"There might very well be other strong candidates. We haven't researched the possibilities." Her mind was working, and logically. She needed to keep it that way. Straightening, she pushed away from him. "And if we don't go inside right now, I'm going to change into my feathers," she scolded.

Heath guided her to the door. The temperature jumped substantially the moment they were back in the stairwell.

"Why don't you offer to walk with the females back to their nests?" Heath suggested when they'd reached his floor again.

"I can try. They might not want to leave."

"I'll hide in my room until they do." The lightness in his tone proved his joke in spite of his serious expression.

Her heart fluttered happily in her chest and she fought the grin that threatened to spread across her face. "Sounds like a plan," she said seriously.

It wasn't hard for Heath to do just that. His brothers were still in one of the smaller bedrooms in the nest and Heath joined them when they returned. A rather old, very tall and thin female was in the kitchen with Gena and Marcia Reed. Shelly took a deep breath, reminding herself it would appear odd if she hesitated in entering Heath's kitchen when it was these three females who were the guests.

"You three honor Heath by doing so much work to return this nest to its proper condition," she said, pausing in the doorway and clasping her hands in front of her.

"That's what families do for their nests," the older woman said shrewdly.

Shelly had guessed the old female was related to Heath. When she'd been in the complex from time to time over the years with Lana, she'd seen the female. Lana had never bothered to make their acquaintances though. Proper introductions were in order if they were to continue their conversation.

"I'm Shelly Preston," she told the older owl, stepping into the kitchen and facing her. "It would be an honor to know you."

"I'm very aware of the nest you're from," the older female snapped, straightening in her chair and pressing her hands together into her narrow lap. "I am Olathe Baker, Heath's aunt. And I guess introductions are necessary at this point." Olathe Baker stood and ran her long, thin fingers down the loose-fitting smock that covered her bony frame. She stood as tall as Shelly and the way her long, silver hair was pulled tightly into a bun at the back of her head gave her face a gaunt, harsh look. "It might be an honor to know you if the circumstances were different."

Shelly wasn't sure what Olathe meant by her words and stood silently, something twisting in her gut when she got the sensation the female would make herself perfectly clear.

"Heath can thank me for fixing his couch. That is the proper thing for him to do. I don't acknowledge your voice in his nest and hope he comes to his senses soon before he dishonors his nest."

Heath's aunt didn't think Shelly was good enough for her nephew. Her words cut through Shelly with their harsh honesty and her mouth was suddenly too dry to respond. Not doing so would dishonor the woman further than she already felt she was being. Shelly didn't dare glance at Gena or Marcia as she stared into the female's icy glare and fought to figure out what to say.

"I guess all I can do is hope with time you'll come to see I'm an honest, hard-working female," Shelly stammered.

"Neither quality changes the reputation your nest stubbornly holds on to," Olathe told her, holding her head high with a righteous tilt.

Shelly jumped when firm hands gripped her arms from behind.

"Aunt Oley," Heath growled, wrapping his arms around Shelly's waist and clasping his hands together against her belly as he pulled her back against his virile, hard body. "I'll thank you to accept the invitation Shelly extends to know her better. I know you're wise enough to see the good in an owl."

"Feathers of a kind flock together," Aunt Oley informed her nephew and then walked around the two of them. "Escort me to my nest, Heath."

Heath gave Shelly an affectionate hug. The day's growth on his chin tickled her neck when he nibbled there and let out a low growl. Gena and Marcia were watching with intent fascination but Shelly turned away from them, moving in Heath's arms until she faced him. Owls have very acute hearing. Shelly didn't dare comment on anything his aunt had just said with the old female in the very next room. She wasn't sure she saw compassion in Heath's eyes or sympathy. But straightening and holding her head high, all she could do at the moment was show him she was made of tougher stuff than to allow a false opinion of her to get her down. Regardless of how the old bat's venomous words sliced deep into her pride, she'd be damned if she'd show signs of how they affected her.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," he whispered, brushing his lips over hers. "Take the females to their nests."

He tasted so damn good. Maybe she was as strong as she wanted all of them to see. Or possibly Heath's sex appeal was a drug she was all too easily becoming heavily addicted to.

"I will," she said, whispering as he did.

Shelly took her time gathering her things together and then making sure the lights were off in the nest after Rock and Beel left. She gave Heath plenty of time to have a head start in escorting his aunt to her nest before they entered the hallway. Regardless of what strong points she did or didn't possess, Shelly wasn't in any hurry to run into Heath's aunt again.

"I would have told the old owl where she could fly," Marcia grumbled under her breath when Shelly joined her and Gena in Heath's living room.

"She's my neighbor," Gena offered, and then puckered her mouth as if she'd just smelled something foul. "And I remember she wasn't all that nice to Lana either, so I guess you're in good company."

"That makes me feel so much better." Shelly allowed her guard down just a bit when the three of them walked into the quiet and empty hallway. "She obviously doesn't think much of me."

"The old owl is just jealous because she's not getting it anymore." Marcia nudged Shelly in the arm. "And you're getting it from the best there is in town."

Shelly studied Marcia's round, steel gray eyes, unsure if the female expressed jealousy or praise. Marcia immediately lowered her head, submitting, and glanced at her through thick, long lashes.

"Don't get me wrong," she offered quietly. "You and I are just the same. If you can pull off landing an owl like Heath, it gives me hope I could fly above my nest status as well."

Shelly punched the elevator button and then focused on Marcia. "I take your comment as an insult, not to me but to Heath."

"You shouldn't." Marcia cut her off with a wave of her hand. "Heath doesn't judge an owl by the nest they were hatched in. All owls should be so pure of heart."

"I don't judge an owl by the nest they were hatched from either but I do take in stride an owl who feels their nest status might be improved because another owl as low as they are suddenly appears to be doing well."

"I don't have a problem with my status." The elevator door opened and Marcia entered but then faced Shelly, standing in the middle so Shelly and Gena couldn't enter. "In fact, I like myself very much. Maybe, when there is time, you might find you like me too." Marcia reached for the button inside the elevator and nodded at Gena and Shelly. "Until then, my fellow females, good hunting."

"Lana complained that Marcia flew after Dover too," Gena said after the elevator doors closed. "I'm pretty sure she backed down and didn't ruffle her feathers for him once she knew he was with Lana."

"Pretty sure, huh." Shelly wasn't sure what to make of Marcia, a promiscuous-looking single female who lived in a complex where she was damn near the only nest not related to all of the others. And the parliament run by the Halks. That was pretty strong protection for a female who had no known relations to any nests in the area. "I guess we have bigger problems right now."

"Do you have any idea who might have done that to Heath's nest?" Gena asked when they walked down the hallway to the stairwell.

Gena kept in stride with Shelly as they descended the stairs, their shoes tapping out a rhythm that echoed in the cement stairwell. Another time the two of them might have made a dance out of the rhythm they made or at least tried tripping each other up on the stairs. Shelly shot Gena a furtive glance and caught her staring straight ahead while she rubbed her lower lip with her teeth. She appeared lost in thought and probably didn't hear the repetitive sound their shoes made.

"I was about to ask you the same question." Shelly was already watching Gena when she shot her attention her direction.

Gena grabbed the railing although she picked up her pace. "Why would you ask me about this?"

It was a direct question. Gena knew Shelly wouldn't lie, not to her or anyone. Some owls were masters at bending the truth, especially those who already had a bad streak running through them. There was no such thing as a perfect species, although Shelly would swear on her own blood that she and those who were closest to her were some of the most honorable owls she'd ever known. That included Gena.

Shelly pulled open the metal door leading to the second floor. A moment of anxiousness tripped her when she expected to see Heath and possibly even his aunt down the hall. There was no one though. The familiar hallway, one she'd paraded up and down for a number of years since Lana moved into her own nest, now was the branch, so to speak, leading to Gena's nest. The familiarity offered comfort, washing the anxiousness out of her.

She held the door for Gena and then followed her into the hallway. "I'm curious if Paul might have said something to you."

When Gena picked up her pace, taking long, rushed strides until she reached her nest door, Shelly worried Gena might try telling her she knew nothing. And she was very much acting as if she knew something.

"Did Heath ask you to ask me?" There was a cold edge in Gena's expression that wasn't usually there.

"Yes."

"And you didn't say, 'Gena is my friend. It would be too hard to ask her something that might hurt her. You should ask her instead.' It didn't occur to you to say that to him?"

Shelly stared at her friend long enough that Gena spun around and stabbed the doorknob with her key. A soothing breath didn't calm Shelly's suddenly beating heart. She stood behind her friend, a female she'd known since they were fledglings, and felt her pain. Gena struggled with the lock for a moment and then shoved her door open, applying enough force it hit the wall inside with a thud.

Shelly wouldn't enter without an invitation but at the same time suddenly was extremely vulnerable standing in the hallway. Heath's aunt might yank her nest door open at any moment and peck away at Shelly worse than she had upstairs.

Gena faced her inside her nest, worry lining her face. "You know you can enter my nest whenever you wish," she told her in a scratchy whisper.

"You didn't answer my question," Shelly said, stepping in to the small foyer that opened up into the living room.

"You're right." Gena walked across her living room. It looked so different in it with her furniture instead of Lana's. But it had been arranged nicely and the strong, comfortable setting gave Gena's nest a homey feeling. "Do you want some hot tea?"

"Are you not going to answer the question?"

Gena disappeared around the wall that split the kitchen from the living room. "I don't have any good answers for you to give to Heath. I choose to stay out of it."

* * * * *

It was after midnight and Heath's nest was locked. Shelly slid down the wall opposite his door and pulled her knees to her chest, hugging herself as she glanced down the hallway. No one would be out prowling at this hour. She told herself Heath would be here shortly and that there was nothing to worry about. An annoying chill rushed up her spine nonetheless as she rested her chin on her arms and relaxed them on her knees.

Heath's aunt didn't even bother fluttering her wings when she insulted Shelly. She didn't approve of where Shelly came from and didn't think Shelly was good enough for her nephew. And then Marcia downstairs. Her implication that she and Shelly weren't good enough for the Halks made Shelly's blood boil.

She was good enough for Heath!

"God, listen to me," she grumbled, angling her head to the side and getting comfortable in her sitting position.

Just a few weeks ago she wouldn't have argued with either female. What happened during that time?

Worse yet, she shouldn't be sitting here dwelling on that when the reason she sat here in the hallway waiting on Heath was because she'd helped escort females to their nests after cleaning Heath's nest. His nest had been turned upside down and that rated figuring out more so than bigoted owls who believed females should find mates who held the same rank of honor as them.

Shelly had plenty of honor. She wasn't properly represented by her nest. Her sire and mother wouldn't have hurried out in the night to help restore a nest. They would have paced their own nest, eating up the gossip and speculating.

A firm hand on her shoulder made her jump. "God damn," she hissed, and then almost fell into Heath's legs. "I didn't even hear you enter the hallway."

"I thought you were sleeping for a minute." Heath gripped her arms and lifted her off the floor.

"No. I was just thinking."

"Uncle Otis saw Paul Mason enter the building earlier tonight." There was an excited glow in Heath's eyes when he placed Shelly on her feet and then stroked her hair. "Beel and Rock are flying after him now."

"Why didn't you fly with them?"

"I came up here to check on you."

Shelly shook her head, taking his large, calloused hand in hers when he tried brushing the side of her head again. "No. Heath, this is your fight. Go after him."

"And you're my female," he growled. "I have just as much responsibility to you."

She tried to say she was fine but the damn lump swelling in her throat made it impossible to speak.

Chapter Sixteen

Heath definitely made the right decision. Not only in opting not to fly with his nest after Paul Mason. But as well, choosing not to discuss the conversation he had with his aunt when he escorted her back to her nest. Shelly was a hundred miles away when he came out of the elevator. Heath had a pretty good idea where her thoughts were. So now he would take to task showing her how much she really did belong flying right by his side.

"The problems of the parliament will still exist when we're done." He unlocked his apartment door and reached for Shelly. "Remind me to get you a key."

Her eyes widened but then she tilted her head, studying his face. When she didn't move to enter, he coaxed her inside, closing his door with his boot. There wasn't any point or logic in wishing for more time. Matters would descend on them soon enough and he would have to deal with them. But Heath planned on enjoying what time he did have alone with his little owl.

"I hope you never allow another owl to make your decisions for you," he said.

Shelly spun around, her chin tilting as she narrowed her gaze on him. "I make my own decisions," she informed him.

"Good. I would hate someone like my aunt having an impact on your decision."

Her eyes clouded as her face relaxed. Any emotions she had concerning his aunt she wasn't prepared to share with him. Shelly honored the fact Aunt Oley was part of his nest and didn't want to offend him. Yet another trait in her adding to her perfection. The old female insulted Shelly in front of everyone and Shelly wouldn't squawk negatively about her in return.

"She isn't the only one who shares that opinion," Shelly said slowly, her tone cool.

Heath walked into her, ignoring her when she backed up a step and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Then all I can do is hope those opinions don't make you decide you won't have me." If he clasped his hands behind her back for fear she would try to fly from him, he wouldn't focus on that now. So much was happening and at the same time a panic he'd never known before forced him to give their relationship precedence. "Don't let anything any owl says influence your thoughts, my precious owl. I don't want to lose you because others judge us incompatible."

Shelly threw her head back and laughed out loud. Her long, slender neck, exposed and arched just for him, was too much to resist. Heath let her laugh, not understanding the emotion but content with her showing happiness over frustration or anger.

Heath bit her neck and then sucked at the soft, tender skin he'd just violated. She stiffened and lashed out, her fingers dragging up his arms to his shoulders when she hissed.

"Heath," she cried out, trying to straighten.

He liked her in the position she was in though and leaned into her, preventing her from moving and keeping the advantage in his corner. She tasted so damn good. Her soft skin was smooth. And when he found the rapid beating of her heart, throbbing through the artery in the side of her neck, he lashed at it with his tongue.

Stretching his hand across the middle of her back to keep her from falling, he moved his other hand between them, pushing it under her shirt and bra. When he found her nipple, already hard as a round pebble, Shelly sucked in a sharp breath and dug her nails deeper into his shirt. She pinched his flesh but he didn't care. The pain was short-lived and made his cock throb ruthlessly in his jeans.

"Tell me you'll be mine," he growled into her neck.

Again Shelly tried straightening. This time he allowed her up for air but only to lift her into his arms and move to the couch. Then dropping her, he came down on top of her before she could bounce to an upright position.

"Tell me you don't care what anyone else says," he grumbled, pushing her shirt up to expose her breasts.

"I don't care what anyone thinks but you." She was almost panting when she shoved her small hands under his shirt and then ran her fingers up his bare chest. "Take your shirt off, Heath." But then she focused on him. "Do we have time for this?"

"We're making time for this." The world would wait long enough for him to know beyond any doubt Shelly wasn't flying away from him. Until then the owls in Banff would fend for themselves against the leopards. "Admit we're better together than apart."

"We are good together." She arched into him when he pulled off her shirt and made quick work of removing her bra.

Heath managed to stand long enough to strip out of his clothes. He made little ceremony about it. The pressure growing inside him would render him insane if he couldn't sink deep into her hot, tight pussy soon. He wanted to do more than fuck her though, he wanted her to believe the two of them could work through any problem. After having an argument over females hanging on him and males giving her too much attention then crash landing into the situation with his nest, one crisis after another oddly allowed him very clear thinking. He saw that handling the ugly sides of life would be a hell of a lot better with Shelly.

He didn't care what nest she was hatched from. It didn't bother him if others talked about her sire and mother. Those two lived the life they'd chosen and he would do the same. But he would fly with honor. And in just over two weeks he knew without doubt Shelly flew with more honor than any other female he'd ever met.

The second he stepped out of his pants, Shelly moved to the edge of the couch, still wearing her jeans and her perky breasts full and round. Her hard nipples made for a mouthwatering view. She wrapped her fingers around his cock and glanced up at him. Heath could barely focus on her breasts as his world turned into shades of purples and reds. He damn near toppled to the side when she wrapped her lips around him. And when her tongue did a little dance around his shaft, the swelling inside him threatened to explode on the spot.

"Damn, little owl," he hissed, grabbing her hair. He wanted to yank her away from him and at the same time hold her in place and dive deeper into her heat. "You're so fucking perfect."

She hummed, her thick lashes fluttering over her eyes as she sucked his swollen cock. He fought to focus, wanting not only to feel everything Shelly did to him but see it too. Her full lips wrapped around his shaft, taking him in and then gliding over his flesh as her fingers gripped him. Her tongue lapped out, lashing the round, glistening tip of his cock. When she looked up at him, her eyes watery, and then smiled, he was almost positive he'd lose it.

"You're torturing the hell out of me," he told her.

"And you seem to like it." Her smile faded as she lowered her gaze and returned to her task.

He couldn't argue with her. Hell, he couldn't say a word. Shelly sucked his dick better than he imagined any female being able to do. Her mouth wasn't big enough to take all of him in, but she made up for that with her tongue, stroking and licking then using her lips to kiss and suck. It was magic, perfection, an art he didn't want to think about her possibly perfecting with another male.

"Like it, I love it," he managed, dragging his fingers through her soft hair.

She kissed the tip of it again, her lips glossy and swollen when she wiped her eyes and looked up at him. "Good," she said, her voice raspy. "You're supposed to love it."

"I love you," he told her, meaning it. The words came out easier this time and he watched her face, noting she didn't cringe or tighten her expression to prevent him from seeing her emotions.

"I love you too," she told him, not looking away.

Her face was serious, her stare earnest. She meant it and it showed. His heart swelled and started pounding so vigorously it allowed a bit of the blood that had drained to his cock to recirculate through his body.

"We're going to make this work." He grabbed her when she tried standing and unsnapped her jeans. Pulling the zipper down, he managed to push her jeans down her thighs while standing between the couch and his coffee table. "Come here," he suggested. "Let's not test how well my aunt sewed together my couch."

"Good thinking." Shelly stepped out of her shoes and jeans, taking only a minute to sit down and complete the task and then stood again, completely naked as she dropped her underwear on the pile of clothing on his couch.

Heath didn't want to look away from her for even a second. But if he didn't focus on where he walked, he would fall on his face. The room still spun slightly from the incredible blowjob she'd given him. His cock throbbed, matching the thumping of his heart against his rib cage. Shelly followed him into his kitchen. When he pulled out one of his kitchen chairs and sat on it, she didn't hesitate.

Shelly straddled him, cupping his face with her hands and staring into his eyes as she slowly glided down on him. She didn't speak as she took him deep inside her, although the way her gray eyes turned milky with her pleasure, if she had uttered a word he wasn't sure he would have heard it.

So many tiny muscles constricted and pulsed against his shaft, pulling him into the depths of her soaked heat. Shelly took every inch of him, impaling herself with his cock, and let out a soft breath when he filled her completely.

"Do you want it slow or fast?" she whispered, pressing her lips against his as she spoke.

"Take me however you want me." He wrapped his hands around her narrow waist, lifting her slightly when she started rising over him.

"However I want you?" she asked, and rose high enough he almost fell out of her completely. But then she dropped, sucking him deep inside her once again.

She gasped as if he'd just thrust deep inside her instead of her controlling the action. Shelly then began a gentle rhythm, rising and falling. She let her head fall back and her long hair fanned over her back, swaying slightly from side to side as she closed her eyes and rode him.

It was a sight he would remember always. Her breasts began bouncing as she picked up the pace. Although she ran the show, he kept his hands firmly placed on her waist, aiding her in her journey while his cock glided with the help of thick cream that soaked him clear down to his balls.

Shelly was so beautiful, so fucking perfect. She took and she gave, enjoying the hell out of herself but giving him pleasure that felt better with each passing moment. He could tell the moment she constricted around him, quit panting, and her cheeks flushed a beautiful rose shade that her orgasm was right there.

When she picked up the pace, fucking him with all she had, Heath thrust deep inside her when she came down on him.

"Holy crap!" she howled, dragging her nails down his shoulders as she exploded and soaked his legs.

There wasn't any doubt she came harder than possibly she ever had with him. Her pussy still twitched around him when she collapsed in his arms, breathing heavily.

Heath wasn't convinced he could stand, but he made himself do it anyway. "You aren't done yet, my beautiful owl," he told her, lifting her off him.

His cock immediately felt so cold from the thick cream covering him and the cool air in the room. He endured the pain though, turning her around and bending her over the table they'd just scrubbed to a shine.

"Oh yeah?" she asked, although didn't fight him or stop him when he pressed his hand in the middle of her back and then used his feet to spread her legs.

"Now there is a view." He grabbed his wet cock and slid it back inside her, watching it disappear as her scalding heat once again wrapped around him.

Shelly sucked him deep inside her, every inch of her pulsing around him, and then clamped down on him when he reached a spot deeper than their previous position had allowed.

"Take all of me, darling," he whispered, caressing her back.

Shelly pressed her cheek against the table and wiped her hair away from her face as she made a slight effort to look at him. She didn't exert too much effort and her eyes closed when he took control of the pace.

Heath watched her ass jiggle when he thrust hard into her smoldering pussy. Shelly gasped, clawing his kitchen table, and stretched over it, moving to her tiptoes as she spread her legs even farther. She stretched out before him, her hair draped over her shoulder and flowed down her back. When she moved her arm, he saw the swell of her breast pressed against his table. Every inch of her was perfect and if he didn't lose himself in her, fucking her, he would definitely lose himself on the image she offered stretched over his table.

"You're so beautiful." He caressed her ass, shifting his attention to his cock disappearing inside her. "So damn perfect."

"It feels good," she breathed, her lashes fluttering over her eyes.

"You deserve better than good." He unleashed his craving for her, impaling her again and again.

Shelly continually cried out, dragging her fingers along the table while her mouth formed a perfectly shaped circle. She constricted around him, dragging him deep and threatening to hold him there when he receded, only to drive deep into her again.

Heath didn't remember closing his eyes, but doing so allowed him to focus on how wonderful it felt fucking her. Later, when there was more time, he wanted to spend hours making love to her. But then if he had it his way, they would have the rest of their lives together making love. He credited the argument they had followed by the drama around his ransacked nest. The clarity and logic that settled in around his brain while putting his nest back in order amazed him. Not only did he see how much Shelly and him belonged together—mated—he saw how imperative it was to make her see things as he did.

And not over time. There wasn't time. Nests in Banff would pull her away from him, convincing her she didn't belong with someone who flew like he did. Which was bullshit. There wasn't another male for Shelly. And there sure as hell was no other female Heath would settle for.

He was riding Shelly so hard the table screeched across the kitchen floor. Let it leave marks on his tile. He owned the damn complex and no one would take it away from him. He would look at those marks daily with pride.

"Crap, Heath!" Shelly cried out between heavy pants. "More. Yes, more. Harder!"

He gave her all he had, creating a friction between them he swore would start smoking it was so damn hot. His body slapped against her ass, and the sound it made added to the erotic scene they played out. He could barely focus, but when he looked down, her jiggling ass, which was slightly red from him gripping and kneading her, was an incredible view.

"Hold on," he said, that being all the warning he gave her before he built up their lovemaking to full speed.

Shelly stretched her arms, gripping the side of the table, and grunted in between her heavy breathing. He didn't want it to end, never wanted to see anything other than the beautiful female stretched over his table. And he would do anything to always feel her hot, tight pussy contracting around him. When she came again, howling this time loud enough if any of his neighbors were home and not enjoying a night flight, there would be no doubts in their mind what the two of them were doing.

Not to mention the aroma filling his kitchen would work its way through the ventilation system. It was so strong they would cover the entire fourth floor with the smell of their lovemaking. Thinking of how he could mark his entire nest, all of the parliament with the scent of the two of them uniting, drove him even harder.

Shelly convulsed around him, her pussy growing tighter with her orgasm. The pressure inside him ebbed before he could control it. She milked him, taking all he had. Heath came, howling as his head fell back and released his come, feeling his cock throb as he continued filling her.

"Oh my God, Heath," she panted, her body relaxing although she didn't move from the sprawled position on his table. "That was beyond incredible. Am I flying?"

There was no logic to her words and she didn't seem to care. Heath bent over her, his cock twitching with contentment as her soaked muscles vibrated around him. Pressing his lips to her moist cheek, he drank in the taste of her while relaxing his body on top of hers. His table groaned from the additional weight and reluctantly he prevented himself from feeling her moist flesh against his.

"We're incredible, which is why I'm never letting you go."

Shelly slid off the table more than stood. Her movements were willowy and she didn't stop him from pulling her into his arms when she finally stood. Her hair was tangled and tousled, her cheeks flushed. Her lips were moist and full and her body covered with a sheen of perspiration.

God, she was fucking gorgeous.

"We need to clean up," she said, glancing down his body before meeting his gaze.

Although very sated, he sensed once again his adorable owl had stuffed every emotion and thought concerning him deep into some dark crevice of her brain. Under different circumstances, he would sing her praises for so honorably concealing her emotions. But they were alone. It was just the two of them after mind-shattering sex. Shelly closing herself off to him meant only one thing. She wasn't experiencing the same desperate need to be one with him.

It scared him but also made him more determined. He would approach her nest about mating with their daughter. And he would convince his stubborn little owl she was meant to be with him. But he would prefer laying claim to an official uniting between them once he understood her mind. The longer Shelly closed herself away, the harder it would be to see through his plans.

Heath rubbed his thumb along the side of her face. "There is time for a shower."

She nodded, almost limping back to the living room and then gathering her clothes. "I'll just rinse off. I won't take but a few minutes," she told him, holding her shirt and jeans and underwear in a ball pressed to her chest.

"Shelly," he began, ignoring his clothes and taking her arm before she reached the hall leading to his bathroom. "Wait."

"Aren't you worried your nest will return?"

"Is that why you suddenly closed down inside moments after we shared the best sex we've ever had in our lives?"

Shelly stared at him, her eyes large. She looked curious. His words affected her and he really wanted to know how.

"The best sex," she began, her words trailing off.

"God, Shelly." He turned her so she faced him and then took her clothes, placing the pile on his coffee table before clasping her hands in his. "I'm serious about this."

"The odds are against us," she whispered.

"What do you want?" he asked, saying the words slowly but then pausing, studying her face and giving her time to answer.

"You don't know how long I've wanted you," she said after several moments of silence had slipped by.

Although her words excited him, a knot twisted in his gut. There was more, and something told him he wouldn't like it. Heath pressed his mouth to hers, his kiss almost savage as he devoured her mouth. Whatever else she wanted to tell him, he didn't want to hear it. Shelly admitted she wanted him, she'd told him she loved him. If there were fears inside her, they were normal, and he would soothe her worries by showing her how good they were together.

"Go get that shower," he said, moving his mouth over hers. "Wash away those fears inside you while you're in there. We're strong enough to make this work."

Chapter Seventeen

This wasn't working. Shelly made Heath bring her to her nest so she could clear her head of him but all she thought about was him. She stood in the middle of her living room. It was so small compared to Heath's, compared to anyone's. But as she stared at the contents, the books on her shelves, the knick-knacks and small items stuffed among covers that she'd gathered over the years, all of this was what made up her nest.

And all of it made her who she was. An honorable owl risen up from ashes of deceit.

Her phone rang and she stared at it, watching as it lit up just inside her purse. Heath wouldn't be calling her already. His tortured soul ripped at her very being, which was exactly why she asked to be taken to her own nest. They needed time apart. Or at least everyone always said when things got so emotional, a smart owl took time to prune feathers, sort thoughts and find logic in the matter. So far, after being dropped off late last night, having a restless night sleep and waking up frustrated and alone, Shelly wasn't sure she was in the mood to talk to anyone.

Unable to tolerate the continual ringing, Shelly cleared the distance between her and her purse and yanked the phone out. The small screen told her Gena was calling. Her heart clenched. Her best friend, the only true friend who'd flown by her side through good and bad since they'd been hatched. Shelly should have handled matters concerning Gena's nest better than she had.

She accepted the call, walking around her small coffee table and sinking down onto her couch. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice cracking from sleep as she stretched out on her couch.

"Don't be." Gena sounded as weary as Shelly felt. "I didn't want to think about Paul, not after moving in here and then seeing Heath's nest destroyed like that. This place is supposed to be secure, safe, you know? And if my own nest is involved..." Her words trailed off.

"Then you're perfectly safe," Shelly finished for her.

Gena's laughter sounded dry. "I don't mind leopards," she continued. "You know I don't care about any species. If they're honorable that's all that matters."

"Agreed."

"But I wouldn't sell out my nest to them," Gena went on, as if Shelly hadn't said anything. "Do you know that the Halk nest went after Paul?"

"I heard something about it," Shelly admitted.

"They confronted him and asked if he was helping leopards secure litters in town."

"What did he say?"

"I haven't talked to him about it." Gena paused but the silence between them wasn't uncomfortable. "I mean, I talked to him for a few minutes after the Halk nest left, but he wasn't in the mood to discuss anything."

"So you don't know his answer as to if he's helping the leopards or not?"

"He said he sold our nest to them but he did it to help me with my future, a future he claims I wouldn't have had otherwise. Paul has pretty much reared me since I was a fledgling."

"I know." And Gena would honor her brother to the death. Shelly envied her that loyalty. She searched her heart to find out if she would do the same for her parents and found with odd clarity she would fight for them. Maybe they weren't perfect but they were her nest, all she had. Like Gena, they flew with what they had. "If he is helping them, I'm sure he feels his actions are honorable."

"I think he resents the torture and humiliation leopards endured until recently. He wouldn't want to see owls displaced the way so many litters were."

"None of us would." Shelly found herself ready to defend Heath's actions in flying after Paul. She didn't want the conversation going in that direction. Gena called her for support and Shelly would be there for her. "Are you looking at colleges?"

"Actually, yeah. Maybe a junior college to start or some online classes. I need to work too."

"Yeah," Shelly said, having never given a lot of thought to college since her sire and mother had made it clear through high school she would work in the shop and help support her nest.

"So where are you? Are you here in the building? Want to do coffee?"

"I'm at my nest."

"Oh. Is everything okay?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" It was a copout answer and Gena jumped on it as quickly as Shelly guessed she would.

"Nothing's happened between you and Heath, has it?"

"Everything's happened between us."

"So why are you at your nest? Is he there with you?"

"No." Shelly decided not to make Gena dig for answers. She needed to talk to someone about this anyway and the logical choice would be Gena, who knew and honored her already. "I wanted time to myself because everything is flying by me so quickly."

"Interesting."

"He told me he loved me and he wants me to say I'll fly with him always."

"That's wonderful."

"And he's so sexy, and intelligent, and everyone honors him and loves him."

"Do you?"

Shelly hesitated, realizing she'd squawked out all of her fears in a matter of seconds and now found herself gasping for more words. Gena's question threw her a curve.

"Yes. Yes, I love him."

"Perfect. When is the mating?"

Gena's conversation didn't help at all. Shelly needed to get Heath out of her head. Determined to lay her feathers flat and keep a clear mind, she showered, applied makeup and put on a long-sleeved dress that hugged her figure. Add black tights and her flat boots and she was rather proud of her appearance as she shifted in front of her mirror. Primping didn't clear her head enough though. All that came to mind was wondering what Heath would think of how she looked.

Shelly headed down the stairs, forcing herself to think about the shop. Hard work always helped cleanse the soul, and hopefully it would also clear the turmoil flying around in her head.

"Hello," she said cautiously when she entered the store through the door at the bottom of the stairwell and spotted her parents.

Her mother leaned against the counter, next to the register, in her usual position. But it was her sire, standing at the edge of the counter next to her mother, watching her, that puzzled Shelly. Both of them glanced her way and confirmed what she thought she'd seen when she first entered. Compassion. On their faces. For each other?

"How are you?" she asked, holding her own emotions in check. Already she had edged too close to a meltdown. Seeing her sire and mother appear almost...affectionate?...toward each other wasn't something her brain could handle right now.

"We're fine," Matilda answered slowly, focusing on Porter when he straightened.

"I'm glad to know that." Something had happened. Shelly didn't know what. But she swore there wasn't an ounce of tension in the air, and if she didn't know better she'd swear she smelled happiness, an aroma she'd never smelled on her parents.

"And like your mother I'm sure you'll be happy to hear I'm not going to sell the store," Porter Preston boomed, making the announcement as if it were information she'd been dying to hear.

"Sell the store?" she whispered, and couldn't prevent her jaw from dropping as she gawked at him. "You were going to sell the store?"

"Don't play coy with me, little owl." Her sire moved in front of the counter, blocking her view of her mother, and faced Shelly. "I saw you watching me at the meeting the other night. Now that you're flying so closely and smug with Heath Halk you're in on all the current events before they even happen. I bet you already knew I'd been offered a tempting price."

Shelly almost blinked. She snapped her mouth shut and swallowed, remembering when her sire wouldn't voice his word along with the other owls that he would be loyal

to the parliament and not sell out to leopards. She'd been right, although it had only been a hunch.

"Father, I didn't know until now. I admit I guessed, worried, was scared that leopards had approached you to buy our store. Was I right? Did leopards approach you?"

"They did." Porter shifted his attention to Matilda when she came around the corner.

Her mother wasn't wearing any makeup this morning and Shelly couldn't say when she'd last seen her mother so unadorned. Although she wasn't young anymore, Matilda was still a very pretty owl and at the moment she glowed in a way Shelly had never seen her look before.

"Your mother called me last night and asked to discuss this with me," her sire explained, his bellowing baritone calming down until he spoke in almost a soothing tone. "As she put it, there haven't been many things she's asked of me over the years."

Matilda waved her hand in the air, grabbing her mate's attention, and making a show as if what he just said was of little importance to her.

"This store is all we have, Shelly. I know we haven't given you the most honorable nest to grow up in, but if your sire and I are anything, we're both dedicated to you. Both of us have always wanted a solid nest for you."

Shelly stared at them. Had they stayed together, no longer loving each other, simply because of her? "Don't tell me you two have been miserable for years just for me." She couldn't handle bearing that truth.

"God no," Porter said quickly, shaking his head adamantly as he did. "If we'd hated each other we would have flown in different directions a long time ago. Many have judged us to be without honor and we've lived with that, but what your mother and I have always strived to do is provide a good nest for you." He gestured to the stairs and then the ceiling toward where her nest was. "And you have that. Not every female your age has a nest as nice as yours."

She stood solemnly, not sure what she was hearing. "Thank you for all you've given me. But what does any of that have to do with leopards trying to buy our store?"

"A litter contacted me almost a month ago. They're in the states right now but have heard how bountiful the hunting is up here and that other litters are settling in this area. They have money but lost a lot of their litter when that insane leopard murdered a bunch of his own kind. Like many other litters, they are trying to start over and they know retail. Their offer was very tempting."

"Your sire was ready to sell Preston's Hardware," her mother announced. She took a step toward Shelly, her hand extended as if she would touch her but then stopped and clasped her hands in front of her. "I asked your sire to reconsider. We both see how happy you are flying with Heath Halk. Neither of us dreamed you would catch such a wonderful male. But it appears you have. And when you do, we want you to have

something to take with you, something you can bring in to the mating. Neither of us had that when we mated."

"What are you saying?"

"Your mother and I haven't offered you much over the years." Porter moved in behind his mate and put his hands on her shoulders. It was odd how they seemed to fit there. He stood a lot taller than his mate and looked over her at Shelly as he continued. "Like your mother said, many view us as a dishonorable nest. The way we live works for us and we want you to have a way of life that works for you."

She stared at her sire, unsure what to say, so said nothing. Her silence didn't seem to bother either one of them.

"We've talked about it and we want you to have Preston's Hardware. Now your male will be able to ask the female he loves to mate with him without worries that his nest will squawk too loudly over his decision. He will be mating with a business owner and that is a very honorable mating."

"What?" She choked on the one word.

"Do you want to mate with him?" Porter asked her, and for the first time in as long as she could remember he sounded as if he cared to hear her answer.

Shelly swore all life almost deflated right out of her. She'd come downstairs to clear her head, throw herself into work and do whatever it took to clear her head of Heath.

"He's told me he loves me."

"All right then," Porter bellowed.

Matilda held up her hand, silencing him immediately.

"And?" she asked, searching Shelly's face.

She shook her head, fearing she would dishonor the two people who possibly cared for her more than she ever realized they did. She wouldn't cry. She wouldn't allow a display of emotions to destroy this moment.

"His nest doesn't want him to fly with me," Shelly admitted.

Matilda straightened, standing tall and proud as she narrowed her gaze on her daughter. "What do you want?"

"That's what Heath asked me." If she only knew the answer to that question. "He said we're strong enough to make this work. I know that I don't want Heath dishonored because of me."

"Do you think you fly without honor?" her sire asked.

"No," she told him, not shouting but speaking harsh enough she worried he would yell at her. "I know I fly with honor. I've fought to carry a respectable reputation my entire life."

"And you have one, my sweet fledgling." Now her mother did walk into her. Her hands were cool when she cupped Shelly's face and stared at her with an expression filled with fondness. "Your sire and I are so proud of you. We see how strong you are."

We've both noticed how you don't shake your tail feathers for just any male. You never have. And believe me, both of us know you have felt having the two of us as parents has been a burden and a shame for you."

"I admit the two of you have annoyed me more than once, and I haven't understood the relationship both of you have. But I swear to you, I am not ashamed to be your fledgling."

When her mother's eyes moistened, Shelly looked down, allowing her time to regain control of her emotions. It was hard as hell to maintain the lock on her own feelings. So when her mother tried lifting her face to hers, Shelly resisted. When her sire placed his large hand on her shoulder, she jumped. The two of them were right there, in her space, touching her and huddling around her as if she were just hatched and they needed to be at her side to keep her from falling. For a moment she feared she might do just that.

"Send that male to me," Porter instructed her. "If he flies with the honor this parliament swears he possesses, he will ask to fly with you. And he'll ask to have you as his mate. If you agree to mate with him, the store is yours."

It wasn't the store that sent her over to Heath's apartment complex. Granted it was the only job she'd ever had. Keeping her nest's hardware store, running it, created a mixture of excitement and trepidation in her that she hadn't expected. Being a business owner definitely shot her up the ranks of owls.

There wasn't any doubt when she entered the apartment complex why she was here. After having talked to her mother and sire, hearing and seeing that a love that worked for them did exist between the two of them, Shelly made up her mind. Her parents endured the squawks of many nests and stuck it out together. They could have flown away from each other, found mates who would have appeased the parliament, but they were in this for each other, not for the rest of the world.

And that was what mating was all about. Shelly had known that all along but her parents had spelled it out for her. In spite of how she'd worked so hard to make sure her feathers lay straight, she knew right now she would do so for the rest of her life for herself and for Heath, and not for any other owl.

"Good hunting." Shelly walked past Heath's aunt and several other older owls who stood just inside the foyer. All of them quit talking and stared at her when she entered. "The weather is turning for the worse out there. Please be careful if you go out."

She smiled to herself, enjoying their stunned expressions when they watched her walk past them to the elevator. Her flesh tingled and she swore her insides buzzed when she rode the elevator to the fourth floor. At the second floor, it stopped and two young females with fledglings bouncing all around them filled the elevator. They both nodded to her politely and then continued their quiet conversation, carrying on about the best way to teach their young ones to fly. On the third floor they got off, focusing on herding their fledglings out of the elevator and barely giving her a glance.

It was for the best. She was bubbling with raw, unleashed energy that she barely managed to contain when the elevator finally opened on the fourth floor. As she stepped out and turned toward Heath's nest, he stood there with his nest door open, just outside in the hallway, facing her.

"News travels faster than the elevator," he informed her, holding his position as she walked to him.

"You were warned I was coming up?" She saw the wary way he watched her and could only imagine what might have been said about her when she entered the complex. Not that she cared.

"I was," he said, holding his position and studying her face.

"They'll have to get accustomed to seeing me," she said.

Heath shifted his attention, searching her eyes then dropping his gaze lower, possibly to her mouth. If he caught her doing her best not to grin that was just too damn bad. Along with no longer caring what other owls thought of her, she wouldn't hide her emotions from the male she loved.

Shelly smiled, her grin growing when Heath cocked an eyebrow. "That is, if you'll have me."

"Shelly Preston, are you asking me to mate with you?"

She almost laughed out loud. "I guess I am."

"What happened after you left here?"

"I witnessed true love," she whispered, picturing her parents. "And I saw that love is stronger than any squawking from any owl or nest or parliament. Heath, all my life I've fought to be honored, to make sure everyone saw that I flew straight. I became so wrapped up in worrying that others saw how perfectly my feathers lay that I forgot to focus on what I wanted."

"And what do you want?"

Shelly walked into him and Heath pulled her the rest of the way, wrapping his arms around her and almost lifting her off the ground. His lips brushed over hers, but he didn't continue the kiss, instead held her close and waited for her answer.

"I want you, Heath Halk."

"Be my mate, Shelly," he whispered, tugging at her lower lip with his teeth.

Shelly shivered, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and collapsing against him. "You have to ask my sire. But yes, Heath. Yes!"

Heath lifted her into his arms and spun her around in a circle. Hooting and squawking started from the other end of the hallway and Shelly twisted in his arms, surprised by the noise. Heath didn't let her go but held her, her backside pressed against his front while his arms moved possessively around her.

"We heard the old owls carrying on and thought something like this might be happening." Beel strolled down the hallway.

Rock was right next to him, his eyes glowing mischievously. "We also heard you're mating with a female who is a business owner."

"What?" Heath didn't hide his surprise.

"I was going to tell you that part later." Shelly squirmed until he released her and then turned her back to his nest. "My sire and mother were determined that I be happy and worried my rank in the parliament might prevent that from happening. They agreed to give me the hardware store if I accepted the offer to mate with you."

"Your parents are giving you the store?" The look on Heath's face made it appear he might already have heard about her sire being approached by leopards.

"Yes. They are. Preston's Hardware will always be owned and run by a Preston. Although it wasn't the proposal that I become owner that sent me over here, Heath. It was witnessing true love that has endured in spite of how much the parliament has judged my parents for how they have chosen to live."

"Let's go," Heath said, taking her hand and heading to the elevator.

"Where are we going?"

"I need to ask your sire for the right to fly by your side," he informed her. "And hopefully he will honor me with the right to have you as my mate."

It was a damn good thing he held on to her hand. Otherwise, Shelly might have floated right off the ground, even though she was in her flesh. Happiness made her lighter than all of her feathers and she had a feeling it would be an emotion she would never be able to.

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 email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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