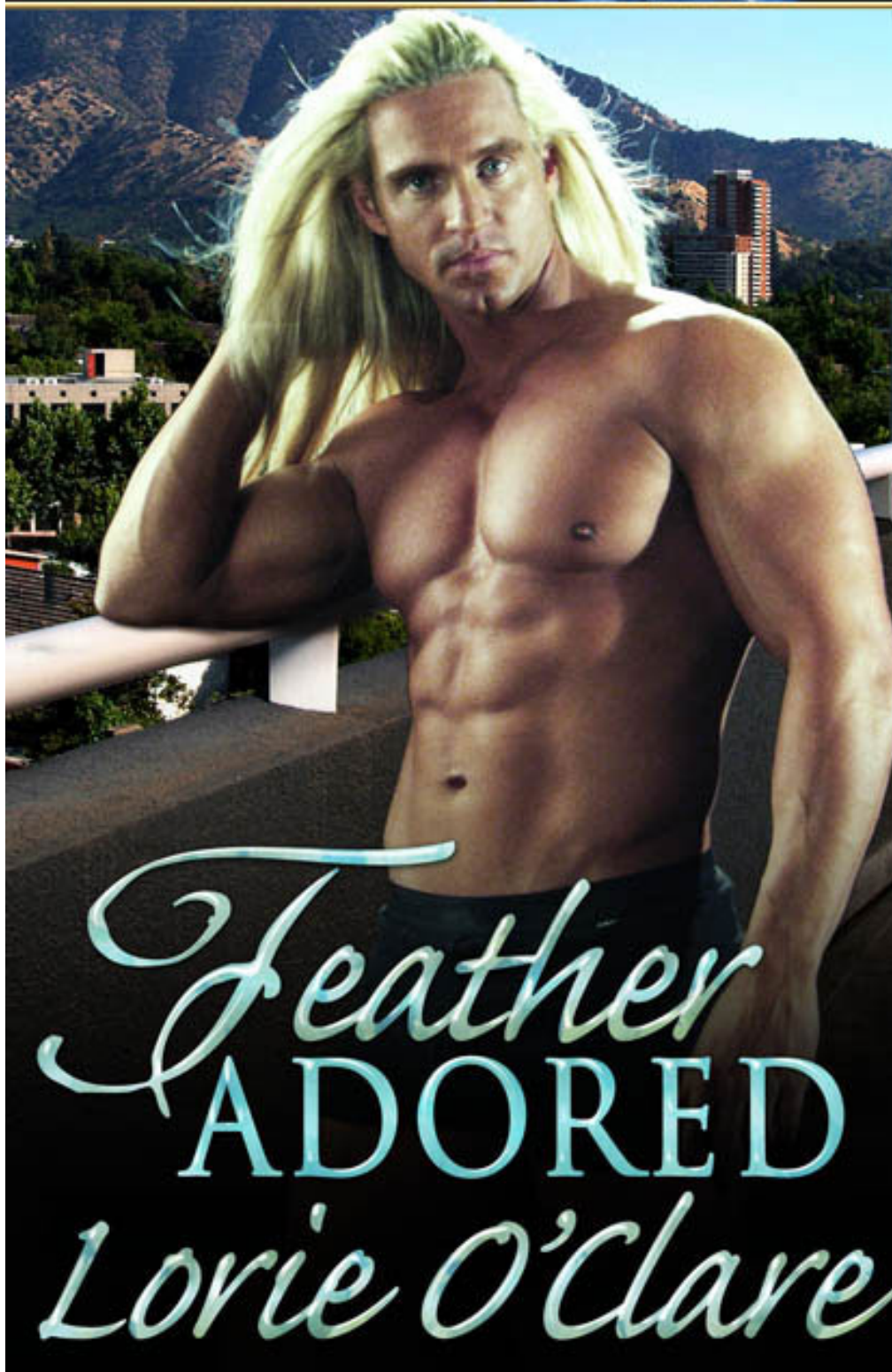


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Feather
ADORED
Lorie O'Clare

Feather Adored

Lorie O'Clare

Raptors Revealed, Book Three

Andrea Chouette is beautiful, sultry and aggressive. She also has a deep, dark secret. It's one she is willing to take to her grave.

Beel Halk works with his brothers to keep Banff peaceful and a lucrative place for all to live. If there's a problem, a Halk brother is on it. They protect their own. Strong predatory instincts flow in Beel's blood. No one harms what is his. The new little owl in town is on his radar despite her independence, and he's more than willing to tame her wild side—as a matter of fact, he's looking forward to it.

Andrea tries resisting Beel's possessive nature despite being inescapably drawn to his raw power and seductive ways. Revealing her secret, opening up and trusting someone else to protect her and her sister when the past explodes in her face, is something new for Andrea. But she must learn to give Beel what he wants, not only to satisfy the burning need inside her, but to save her life.

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Feather Adored

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FEATHER ADORED

Lorie O'Clare

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Chapter One

Beel Halk sat perched on his branch, ruffling his feathers when melting snow continued raining down on him. Rock was in the tree facing him, not moving, as if he were in another world, indifferent to the droplets of water slowly soaking him. Spring was upon them, and with it, everything turned to soup. The fragrances were also ripe, fresh and clean. Beel smelled the intoxicating scent of the females flying closer to them. His brother Rock should smell them too, although if Beel didn't know better he'd swear Rock wasn't paying attention to the Prudeaux nest. If Rock didn't notice hot, unmated females flying straight toward them, something was seriously wrong.

Ever since their oldest brother Heath mated and smelled head over tail feathers in love all the time, it had been Rock and Beel chasing the hot and willing pieces of tail in their parliament. But if Rock wasn't in the mood today, Beel didn't have a problem enjoying both females on his own.

Andrea and Anna Prudeaux were new to Banff. Already Beel heard the squawking about both females. Beel wasn't one to put a lot of stock in the parliament grapevine. But more than one male claimed the two females had raised their tail feathers already. Beel had no problem waiting his turn. He did hope it was coming soon. The wind shifted and he breathed in their sweet, enticing scents.

He wasn't the type of male who fucked and squawked about it later. Puffing out his feathers and strutting his stuff wasn't Beel's style. However, new females were worth sniffing out. If he got lucky, great. If not, there were other willing females who would flutter their feathers around him. Beel also reminded himself it was his duty to check out any new owls flying into their parliament. The Halk nest was one of the prominent nests in the parliament and it was logical to inspect each nest arriving in their territory.

When word traveled into the States that Banff was a prosperous community, surrounded by ideal hunting ground and run predominantly by owls, every species hurried to claim a bit of paradise. Especially when times were so hard everywhere. Quite a few leopard litters were trying to make Banff their home, which wasn't something anyone in the parliament wanted. But as leopards continually prowled around the neighborhood, ironically, so did quite a few new nests. Leopards weren't the only ones anxious for thriving land and good business opportunities. Beel didn't mind Banff growing if it meant new young, hot, single females were flying everywhere.

A drop of icy-cold water tapped him on the top of his head at the same time the two females soared in front of him. On reflex, he poofed himself out, shaking off the chill from more melting snow. He quit focusing on warming temperatures. Two female Northern Hawk Owls quickly grew and took shape against the pale gray sky.

Rock turned his head, giving the first indication since they'd perched in the trees that he was still alive. Beel's brother had turned into a brooding annoyance lately. He didn't have time to dwell on emotions Rock seemed unable to stifle. If he didn't shape up soon he'd start reeking of disgusting emotions. Although if Rock wanted to humiliate himself and act like a werewolf or leopard—or worse yet, human—flaunting his feelings for everyone to smell, that was his choice. Beel had better things to do with his time, and two of them were flying his way at that moment.

The two females flew into the trees alongside the mountain. Beel watched them gain altitude and soar in a large, lazy circle before descending again. These two would start fights. Beel's insides tightened, his sexual reaction to new, unmated females, a raw, gut-clenching sensation. His dick hardened at the thought of seducing the two young, temptuous Hawk Owls. They were gorgeous.

They spread their wings, showing off rich coloring of black and dark grays, which faded into sensually warm brown feathers. Both females stretched above him, as if showing off their slender bodies. Smooth, appealing curves made his tongue curl in his mouth. He made a clucking sound in the back of his throat, more than willing to bow to their erotic movements.

Beel had no problem letting either or both females know he watched. Not that he thought for a moment they didn't already know. He didn't buy into all the idle squawking, but sometimes gossip was based on truth. These two were definitely showing off. They knew they were new blood in the Canadian Rockies and every male would be tripping over his own feathers to get to them.

There were females out there who got off starting fights among males, especially the younger males. They would shake their tail feathers, cluck their tongues and cause feathers to go flying. More times than not, those females teased and tortured and that was it.

Beel didn't have time, or the desire, to mess with females who wouldn't put out. He would sniff these two out, learn which way they flew, and take it from there. Watching both of them soar against the pale, cloudless sky stole his breath. Owls had much better vision than any other species and, in their feathers, there was little they missed. The females reached a good altitude but Beel didn't miss the expressions on their faces. As peaceful and relaxed as the slightly smaller female appeared, her sister—and they were definitely hatched from the same nest by the coloring on their feathers—looked alert, aggressive. At this distance, he couldn't be positive, but Beel narrowed his gaze on the slightly larger female's face and swore he saw something else. He caught it in the tilt of her head, the dilation of her eyes, and the way she held her wings a bit closer to her body than her sister when they began their descent. Was it fear?

Interesting.

When the females landed, choosing a tree not far from Rock's, Beel left his branch and moved in alongside his brother. He was ready for Rock to peck at him, shove him away from his prime location and demand first dibs on the females. Beel puffed out his

feathers, prepared to remind his younger brother who outranked whom. Rock jumped to the branch above him, allowing Beel room on the sturdy center of the large tree.

That was fine with Beel. He turned his back on Rock and strutted the length of the branch, now within a tree's width from both females. Their scents were ripe, intoxicating, and drew him to them as if it were their intention. He jumped around the trunk, getting pelted with several large drops of freezing water, but this time didn't care. Easing onto the branch that extended closest to the tree where both females watched him warily, Beel strutted closer to the edge.

He captured both their gazes and again saw the intense differences in their personalities. Each female was so incredibly captivating. They watched him, their round, gold eyes unblinking as they stood next to each other, neither one of them moving. Beel smelled their curiosity, which was the emotion he focused on as he dared move closer. There were other emotions, carefully guarded and wrapped around each other so tightly it was difficult to tell which female felt what. Curiosity was the strongest. He knew he smelled interest. There was hesitation, which Beel paid attention to; not once had he mounted a female against her will. He also detected something darker, something he didn't too often smell on a female. It was definitely fear.

A common practice in Banff was to fly into the Canadian Rockies, located outside the town, especially over the weekend. Unmated owls flew with each other, played and fucked. These two might be new to the area but they weren't fledglings. The smell of sex was in the air. He wouldn't buy into them flying out here, intentionally landing in a tree next to two unmated males, and not have some premeditated intention.

Owls were known for their honor, their strong loyalty and intelligence. Displaying emotions as if they were loose feathers showed lack of honor and pride in their nest. They were taught as fledglings how not to cry, laugh or show any other extreme emotion, which would make fools of them. A decent owl thought rationally, weighed out a situation, then flew into it aggressively and with certainty. Anything less would make them as average as every other species on earth. Owls were definitely superior.

These two stood regally, their expressions impassive. Both soared above him long enough to sniff out the trees and all owls in them. They landed next to his tree. Which might mean there was interest. He picked up on their intelligence and saw by how they stood tall, their heads held high, how they flew with honor. Andrea and Anna Prudeaux knew exactly what went on out here among unmated owls. Maybe they landed where they did because they wanted to fuck.

Damn! The thought almost made him lose his grip on the branch. He wrapped his talons firmly around the bark, tilted his head at both females then clucked his tongue.

Nothing. The two females continued staring at him, their scent remaining the same, their feathers not even ruffling against the mild breeze drifting around the mountains. No change wasn't always a bad thing. Possibly his stunning good looks had both of them so captivated they were rendered speechless.

Beel leapt onto the branch the two females shared. He ruffled his feathers, puffing himself out as he inched closer to the smaller of the two. She turned her head, meeting his gaze head-on. She tilted her head slightly and inhaled when the wind shifted and blew in her face. Let her and her sister get a good whiff of him. Beel had nothing to hide and knew his scent would only show he was one of the more honorable males out here. Which didn't mean he would turn down a good time on a tree branch.

He shifted his attention to the slightly larger female, huddled next to her sister, who also pierced him with bright, gold eyes. They were so identical, he couldn't imagine them looking much different from each other in their flesh. And as beautiful as they were perched on the branch, there was no way they could be sexier in their human form.

A cry pierced the air and the two females shot their attention above them, as did Beel. Mickey Redd and Jordan Donovan flew toward the females, their beaks parted and claws spread open underneath them. It was as if the two morons viewed the females as their next meal and planned to sweep them off the branch and take off with them.

Beel bristled, ready to defend his territory. He landed on their branch first. That gave him right of first refusal. The males flew closer, Mickey screeching loudly. If the idiot thought he would intimidate Beel, he would soon learn otherwise.

The larger of the two females bristled. Beel shifted his attention and caught the smaller of the two still watching him. She had beautiful eyes, and the way her feathers overlapped each other against her lithe, slender body would have made him drool if he could at the moment. He found it interesting where before he'd detected fear in the larger female's eyes, now the fear glowed in the smaller female's gaze while the larger female appeared ready to yank every feather out of the males without giving it a thought.

Mickey flew closer, too close. Jordan was right next to him. Beel didn't smell alcohol on them but they might as well both have been drunk with their foolish antics. If they thought flying damn near upside down, their beaks pointed at the ground, would impress any female with half a brain, then both of them were bigger idiots than Beel originally thought.

Mickey dove in close enough to force both females to jump out of his way. He started to curve around the branches in order to come out on the other side of the tree and rudely interrupt Beel's chance to make a first impression. The larger of the females spread her wings, screeching at him, then, with a move fast enough Beel didn't catch it, she attacked.

Feathers and blood flew everywhere and screams erupted, echoing off the mountains. Beel jumped, instinct telling him to defend the females. Mickey had lost it. Whatever his intention, the flight pattern was ridiculous. A fledgling wouldn't try such a stupid stunt.

Whether Mickey would have pulled it off or not, no one would know. The female grabbed him, leaping into the air with an impressive wingspan, and tore at him, her screams continuing until it appeared she might seriously injure him.

Mickey managed his escape, although he flew lopsided, with Jordan in tow, hovering just above him. Beel didn't pay attention to them for long. He turned to stare at the females, at the larger one with her feathers puffed and her wings still extended. There was a wild, outraged look in her eyes. Her sister turned her large, gold eyes on Beel, but her sister snapped at her, pecking her until the smaller one looked away.

Beel clucked his tongue, although making the sound softer, assuring them he wouldn't attack. He'd get cozy with their permission. But he'd be damned if one of them turned out to be paranoid, or not into men, and take a peck out of him. Before the smaller of the two could look at him again, the larger leapt around her, making the branch shake when she grabbed it again, this time just a few feet from Beel.

There was something wild in her eyes. He'd sensed the fear on her before she landed although he still didn't smell any emotions coming from her. It was what he saw in her eyes and it brought him pause. Beel straightened, holding his ground and remaining quiet. She was a tall Northern Hawk Owl, the same breed of owl as him, but he stood almost a head taller. Mickey and Jordan were idiots but it didn't seem their actions should have spooked her as much as it did. Granted, she and her sister weren't from around here and didn't know the two males were a waste of feathers, but she would know with her next breath that Beel was an honorable, respectable male.

Apparently the female didn't breathe. Her scream wasn't warning enough either. As she opened her beak, releasing the deadly warning, she lunged at Beel, pecking him in the face. Her connection was solid, and before Beel could leap out of her way, she'd connected and took a chunk out of his face.

What the hell!

Pain pulsed in Beel's face as he broke free from the frantic female. When she would have dove at him for another attack, Beel puffed out his chest, spread his wings to their full length, and a low, deadly warning hissed from his throat.

Her scent and expression on her face changed at the same time. The female stumbled backward, crashing into her sister. Beel had never hurt a female in his life, let alone bullied one. But the look on her face turned his stomach. A hard, primal instinct surfaced that he seldom experienced. He didn't get it. The side of his face throbbed in serious agony, yet the urge to protect and prune this female's feathers until she relaxed surged through him with enough energy he couldn't stop it.

Calm down, little female, Beel gurgled, keeping his tone low and soothing as he held on to her frantic gaze. No matter what any other male might have done to you in the past, I swear it won't happen to you again. Not with me, little bird.

Chapter Two

"Why don't you fly with me tonight?" Anna pulled her hair off her shoulders and held it in a tousled mess at the top of her head. "Think I should wear my hair up?"

"I can't believe you're going out alone." Andrea sat perched on the hope chest at the end of her bed and stared at her sister through the floor-length mirror attached to the bedroom door.

"I wouldn't be going out alone if you went with me." Anna made a face then disappeared farther into the bathroom. "It's an owl-run establishment. We'll have fun. We can have a few drinks, dance together. Come on, Andrea. I swear the only time you've left our nest since moving here is in your feathers."

"A lot of good that did," she mumbled.

Anna popped into the doorway, wagging her mascara at Andrea. "You said he was cute."

"Which only proves looks are deceiving." Andrea straightened but kept her voice relaxed. Letting Anna know her thoughts on the male who joined them on the branch outside of Banff last weekend had been a mistake. At least she hadn't squawked about him since, although it had been hell keeping him out of her thoughts. The way he reacted when she bit his face, aggressive then soothing. She shouldn't be dwelling on him.

Anna sighed loudly, her emotions actually starting to smell. When they were alone it was easier to relax, although sometimes both of them opened up a bit too much. If they were still fledglings the slightest sign of any feeling or emotion would have resulted in their feathers being more than ruffled. Those were days best not to think about.

"You're right." Anna returned to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror on the medicine cabinet as she applied her makeup. "You usually are. You should stay here. If you did go out you'd chase away any male who dared sniff within a wing's length of either of us. You'd ruin my fun."

"And you're going to ruin your reputation before we're in Banff for more than a week." Andrea pulled her knees to her chest and hugged herself, staring at her toes. Sometimes she'd swear her sister thought there was a deadline on when she needed to find a mate.

"Those with honor will smell my integrity. They're the only ones I want to fly with anyway." Anna appeared again, this time walking through Andrea's room to the hallway and across it to her bedroom. "I'm not lifting my tail for any male—yet," she called out. "But those who squawk that I do will show the true color of their feathers."

Andrea stood and flipped off the light switch Anna had left on. Anna didn't throw a fit about Andrea getting the bedroom with its own bathroom since Anna's bedroom was bigger with a large window.

She left her room, padding barefoot on the cool, hardwood floor, and paused in her sister's doorway. "Do you really think any male with honor will fly near a female if they've heard she's a slut?"

Anna didn't spin around, instead, taking her time, she stared at Andrea. "I'm not a slut," she said under her breath.

"I know that."

"Why did you say that?"

"I don't want you acting like one."

Anna stared at her a moment longer, her emotions in check, which they usually were when she got mad. "I'm trying to fit in here, and you'd be smart to do the same. The parliament here is huge, large enough to protect us."

"The only ones who will protect us, is us," Andrea reminded her, lowering her voice as well. It wasn't the first nest they'd had in an apartment complex and she knew how easily the walls could have ears. "Don't ever forget that, Anna."

"I want to forget every minute of our lives before flying here. I like Banff." Anna's eyes flashed as streaks of gold suddenly dominated her gray orbs. "I want to wake up and have all of those memories gone, forever. This is the perfect parliament for us. You've said so yourself."

"Our past will never leave us alone until he is dead."

It was the wrong thing to say. Andrea stepped to the side when Anna marched out of her bedroom, leaving Andrea in the hallway when she stalked into their dark living room. Andrea flipped off Anna's bedroom light and followed her sister.

"The memories will fade when he dies," she promised.

Anna sat on the edge of the couch and slid her feet into her boots. "They will fade when you start living again."

Andrea almost told Anna she was living. For the first time in their lives Andrea was more alive than she'd ever been. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a male and dwelt on him afterward. Andrea had put his aggressive nature to memory, the protective side of him and the gentle side. He couldn't be as perfect as she imagined.

"I won't stay out late." Anna walked into Andrea's arms.

The two embraced, hugging each other without saying anything else. There wasn't anything to say. Andrea stroked her sister's hair, silently approving that she'd left it down. When Anna pulled away, her eyes were once again a soft gray. She smelled clean and fresh, and for a moment Andrea swore she also smelled happy.

Anna would never know how much Andrea envied her. It had been happiness she'd smelled on her, which was such a good sign. It had been too long since Anna

smelled happy. Their nest would know honor. They would live in peace and eventually there would be mates. For Anna, that would be wonderful. Andrea cringed at the thought, hugging herself and staring out the small window in their new kitchen.

She wanted a male, a tall, strong, honorable male who was sexy as hell and would look at her as if she were the only female on earth. Andrea loved the idea of flying alongside her mate, knowing every thought in his head while he knew her mind as well. Everyone would squawk about them smelling the same, and they would know each other's hearts so well there would be no secrets.

This was her private fantasy. No one knew, not even Anna. Her sister believed Andrea was dead inside, her heart cold and her feelings and emotions so suppressed they'd dried up and disappeared. Anna would die if she learned how alive Andrea really was on the inside. But they both needed coping mechanisms. Not many owls had lived through what they'd endured. Not many would have survived. Andrea and Anna made it by the tips of their feathers. Andrea's coping mechanism was her fantasy world, a place she escaped to when alone, and where she kept her perfect male.

Andrea didn't give him a face. His physical appearance wasn't as important as how he acted and how he treated her. But she knew he was sexy. His good looks would make her melt, and make every other female within miles envy her catch. He would only sniff after her though. He wouldn't even notice how other females privately drooled over him. And it would be private because if Andrea ever caught them sniffing at her male in the wrong way, she'd attack with beak and claw.

"What to do with yourself now?" Andrea didn't like her fantasies turning violent. There had been enough of that for a lifetime.

After wiping down the counters and taking a minute to glance at their clean, orderly kitchen, Andrea strolled into the living room. She paused in the middle of it, enjoying the silence. For a large, old apartment complex, the place was quiet. The wall clock ticked with each second. It was after ten p.m. on a Friday night, the end of their first week in Banff. The Halk nest owned this complex and, according to Shelly Halk, the female who showed and rented the apartment to them, only owls lived in the complex. At this hour, most of them would be getting ready for a late night flight or they'd be putting fledglings to sleep.

Andrea couldn't tell if there were fledglings in her future or not. Her fantasy never went past spending time with her perfect male. "Although as much time as you spend with him, you'd end up with more fledglings than you knew what to do with," she said, laughing.

It was a foreign sound, not only because there hadn't been reason to laugh most of her life, but also because owls didn't let their emotions show. Laughing was definitely a release of emotions. Which meant she was getting a bit too relaxed with her fantasy.

As much as she enjoyed the thought of being alone in their new nest, bonding with the serene, clean and homey environment they'd already created after settling in here, now Andrea couldn't figure out what to do with herself. Human TV shows weren't that

entertaining. Flying with Anna hadn't sounded fun. Anna didn't want Andrea attacking the males when they tried getting themselves a piece of tail. Andrea knew her sister could defend herself. And Andrea was a lot better than she used to be. It was still incredibly difficult to stifle the instincts when they rushed forward like a gusher if she feared someone might get too close.

"Enough!" Andrea wouldn't stand here in silence and allow old memories that needed to disappear ruin her evening.

On an impulse, she grabbed her keys and left the apartment, giving the place a quick glance to make sure all lights were out, then triple checking the lock once she was out in the hallway. When they'd moved in, she and Anna were given a tour of the apartment building. The stairs led to the roof, and at night many owls used the roof as departure ground for a night's flight.

She wasn't sure she wanted to fly, especially alone. But it sounded like a great place to enjoy the crisp night air, breathe in the smells, and watch the town below in privacy.

Andrea remembered the layout of the roof from her tour of the complex. Their application to live in the complex had been approved almost immediately. Which hadn't surprised Andrea. There wasn't any history behind the Prudeaux nest name. It had been their mother's maiden name. Andrea and Anna probably wouldn't be alive today if they'd kept their sire's name. Even with the name change, they'd been careful to maintain a very low profile. As a result any owl who ran a check on them came up with a blank page. No history was better than bad history.

She reached the top of the stairs and the door leading to the roof. Even if there were other owls up there, brick walls with lockers built into them allowed for privacy. She stared up at the metal door leading to the roof as a chill crept toward her. It hadn't crossed her mind to grab her coat. She wasn't planning on changing into her feathers though, which meant she might very well freeze.

She could return to her nest or stick it out. Andrea reached for the door handle although still wavering with her decision. As many times as she'd drilled it into her head how she wouldn't allow herself to be scarred for life, she cringed when something as trivial as opening a door and walking onto a roof scared the crap out of her. Anna would never know how much she envied her sister's ability to fly alone into the night, knowing damn good and well how many owls would be around her.

"You can do this," she whispered to herself, and grabbed the cold doorknob then pushed the door open with enough force it banged against the wall outside.

Talk about making an introduction. Andrea jumped at the clanging sound and reached for the doorknob as it slipped out of her hand, remembering one of the rules of going to the roof was closing the door and keeping the heat from escaping. There were tiny pebbles on the roof and her shoes crunched over them when she once again gripped the cold handle and this time closed the door silently behind her.

A group of young owls hovered at the other end of the roof, all of them looking her direction and sniffing the air before returning to their huddle. They spoke in soft

monotones, but the energy riddling off them reached Andrea easily enough. She instinctively walked the other way, sniffing the icy breeze for any other owls who might not be so obvious.

There were the lockers. All of them were closed. There weren't locks on any of them and Andrea remembered being told that in all the years the Halks owned this apartment complex, there had never been a problem with thievery. Andrea hadn't batted an eye at that bit of information. Owls didn't take what didn't belong to them. It was dishonorable. A guilty conscience smelled almost as bad as death. She would know. Owls prided themselves in honesty and straightforwardness. It was yet another reason why they were one of the best species on earth.

If she stepped carefully, the pebbles under her shoes barely moved, allowing her to tread quietly. The continual breeze kept shifting directions, which made it impossible to hide her scent. Other than the far corner, the roof was quiet and unoccupied. Andrea began to relax.

It was a perfect night. The black sky overhead was filled with bright stars. The cold breeze smelled of the mountains with hints of the town filtering through it. Andrea exhaled, reaching the end of the row of lockers. She stood against the brick wall, keeping her back to it and enjoying the crisp, clear evening. With each breath she relaxed further until she viewed the night as a means to soothe away all her fears and haunted memories.

They were starting a new life in Banff. A year ago Anna never would have left Andrea's side, especially to go out to a club. That was progress. Standing on the roof of a building by herself was progress too.

Andrea wouldn't look at it that way. Not anymore. They wouldn't live by claw and beak any longer. She could relax. Damn it. She would relax. Maybe next time she'd go out with Anna too. They were safe. He wouldn't fly into a parliament this size and come after them.

Two owls landed on the ledge at the edge of the roof. In spite of her preaching to herself how their new life started now, Andrea jumped and almost squealed at the sound of the owls' noisy landing. Her heart thumped too loudly in her chest. She pressed her back against the cold, hard brick wall and watched two males change into their human form.

Then her heart stopped beating. Two males grew into their human form, their feathers receding and flesh appearing. Lots of flesh. Andrea couldn't catch her breath and she couldn't look away. They were tall, even for owls, their bodies glistening with sweat after flying. Muscles took shape and bulged under taut, smooth flesh.

When she finally caught her breath and drank in the cold night air, something familiar grabbed her attention. She knew that scent. But from where?

If the group of young owls were still on the roof, they ignored these two males. And as soon as they changed and could speak, both immediately began talking. Their strong

male scents continued filling her lungs. Strong, powerful and confident, and very much at ease as they walked across the roof to the lockers.

"There's something about her. I don't know what it is but you can tell by her scent." The male ran his hand over his silver blond hair, messing it up worse than it was a moment before.

"You're just trying to justify being attacked by a female," the other one said, his tone light.

They disappeared around the brick wall and there was the sound of lockers opening and closing. Andrea should move. If she walked to the door and left the roof right now it wouldn't appear as if she watched them or paid attention to every little detail about them.

Not that there was much that was little about either one of them.

"Think that if you want," the male said from the other side of the wall. "I know females. This one flirted as if she didn't know how to do it."

"What's wrong with that? Maybe she's more honorable and, once again, all the squawking gossips in this town were getting their feathers ruffled for nothing."

"There are a lot of honorable females in this parliament. That doesn't mean they don't know how to fly around a male."

"She knew what she was doing. There wasn't anything wrong with her. All I smelled was a female who simply wasn't interested in you."

"I want to meet her sister."

Andrea froze. Now if she hurried to the door they would know she'd been listening. Although the males weren't whispering and she had as much right to be on this roof as they did. They were talking about Anna and her. It always helped knowing what other owls truly thought, especially if they were in the same parliament.

"Why? So she can scratch the other side of your face too?" There was definite humor in the male's soft words.

The males appeared at the other end of the wall, this time dressed. Her view of naked male perfection was gone, and it was just as well. Not that the view she had now cooled her insides. One of them was definitely taller than the other, although the shorter was quite muscular. Most male Northern Hawk Owls stood at least a few inches taller than Andrea, yet the shorter one was just an inch at the most taller than her.

"She won't attack twice." The taller of the two sounded very confident in himself.

Andrea stared at the male as he turned slowly in her direction. There was a dark scratch underneath his right cheekbone.

"Yeah, well good luck with that." The shorter male patted the taller one on the shoulder then headed to the door leading to the stairs.

It shut behind him and Andrea stood in the darkness, no longer aware of the beautiful night she'd relished moments before. All her attention was on the male who slowly moved closer to her.

“Are you going to come out of the shadows now?”

Chapter Three

"Andrea Prudeaux." Beel heard how hard she breathed and stopped trying to see her face in the dark shadows where she hid. He dropped his attention to her breasts, which were a lot easier to see. "I don't think we've been formally introduced."

With every breath, her sweater constricted around full, round breasts. Her nipples puckered in the cold night air. She wasn't wearing a coat. Had she planned to go flying by herself?

Earlier that night he'd finally had the chance to meet Anna Prudeaux when he and Rock stopped in at Earl's. With the continual concern of more leopards moving into the area, Beel and his nest were taking turns keeping a close eye on all town activities. Their parliament was strong and powerful, which was grabbing the attention of leopards and werewolves from different parts of the country. Times were hard, and as word spread life might be good in Banff, many were traveling into the mountains to see if they could make a go of it living here.

They had stopped in at Earl's to hear the latest gossip and have a beer. Earl was a good owl and if there was anything to know in the town, he knew it. He never had a problem allowing all species in his bar, which made the place ideal to hear what was going on outside their parliament. Beel had just ordered his beer when he heard one of the new single females was fluttering her wings in town.

Anna Prudeaux had an entourage around her. Beel had perched at the bar, within earshot of the males who were all trying to impress the female. The first thing Beel noticed about her was she didn't appear stuck-up from all the attention she received. Either she'd never known life any other way and was used to flying with males all around her. Or all of this attention was very new to her and it had yet to make her jaded.

The bar filled up fast, making it harder to see the young female. Rock moved among the crowd, his solemn manner lately keeping him quiet and brooding. Beel continued watching Anna. He wasn't into playing parlor tricks. If the other males wanted to puff their feathers and fight to impress her, they could wear themselves out doing it. Beel was content to learn what there was to know about the female by watching her.

Anna was friendly but not as flirtatious as he'd imagined a female would be if she were lifting her tail feathers for any male who landed on her branch. It didn't take long to decide the squawking wasn't true. At one point he caught her attention. She stared at him with bright gray eyes, which looked almost innocent. He got the oddest sensation she was experiencing some incredible event for the first time and was in awe with it more than trying to manipulate it.

Which was the exact opposite of Andrea Prudeaux, who hugged the shadows and appeared to know precisely what she was doing. Andrea was as captivating as her sister, yet from what he'd seen of her so far, he couldn't picture her being in a bar while every single male within miles stumbled over themselves for a moment of her attention. More than likely they would run from her with their tail feathers between their legs as she attacked each one of them.

"I'm Beel Halk," he said, taking a step closer.

"I'm not interested in a formal introduction."

Her large gray eyes swarmed with more emotion than Beel had ever seen on an owl, male or female. He inhaled but didn't pick up her scent, other than the usual female smells of scented soap, shampoo and conditioner. He saw raw emotion burning in her eyes but couldn't smell it.

Interesting.

"Why is that?"

"Because I don't wish to be acquainted." Andrea stepped out of the shadows. She held her head high and moved slowly, gracefully, as if she could float in her flesh.

Beel didn't know why he wasn't ready for her to leave. More than likely because females didn't usually give him the brush-off. He didn't want to think that was the reason though. Maybe he wanted to understand this female better since she was now part of their parliament and living in his nest's apartment complex.

"I think it would be a good idea if we were." When he grabbed her arm, something crackled in the air. If he didn't know better, Beel would swear all those emotions swarming inside her just zapped the hell out of him.

Andrea lowered her gaze, studying his hand clasping her forearm, before raising her attention and staring him in the eye. "It would not be a good idea." Her soft voice, which was calm and relaxed, was still weighted with all the emotion he spotted in her gaze.

"Now why is that?" He tightened his grip on her arm when she tried pulling away.

Andrea lifted her other hand. Beel moved as fast as she did, but he had the advantage of size and strength. He barely noticed the change in her eyes before she tried striking out. He grabbed her other arm seconds before she tried smacking the opposite side of his face she'd attacked the night before.

"It sure isn't because I'm worried about putting another mark on your face." The hostile look on her face faded and she relaxed in his grasp. "Let go of me, please."

"See what you've done? Don't you know you can't challenge a male?" He held on to both her arms and rubbed his thumb over her smooth, warm, soft skin at the end of the sleeve of her sweater.

Andrea's color faded. Suddenly she fought like a trapped bird. She twisted and lunged into him then balked and struggled with all her strength until he released her. Putting more speed into it than she needed, Andrea raced to the door, yanked it open

and caused it to make a loud banging sound when it hit the wall behind it. Before he reached the stairs, she'd already raced down the first flight.

"Andrea!" he bellowed, in hot pursuit.

She maintained a flight ahead of him but Beel tore down the stairs, determined to catch the hot little female. He didn't think about what he'd do once he had her again, but there was no way she'd take flight and disappear on him.

There was enough clamoring in the stairwell anyone just outside the doors to each floor would think someone was plummeting to their death. Beel really didn't care what anyone else thought. But he would learn Andrea's mind. Her fear was over-exaggerated and her hostility too aggressive. He didn't have a clue why. She was too strong and willful to have been an abused bird.

Beel followed her scent, leaping around each break in the stairs then bounding down the next flight. There was something so incredibly female about how she smelled, yet all she showed was outrage. It amazed him how easy it was to see her anger yet how hard it was to smell.

A door opened and banged shut. She'd left the stairs. He didn't know which floor she lived on but he wasn't far behind her. At the next break in the stairs, he reached the third floor. He yanked the door open and tore down the hall when he spotted Andrea.

"Andrea! Wait," he said, restraining from yelling. The last thing he wanted was a scene. Not to mention, something told him Andrea would run from him even faster if she thought other owls were watching.

She struggled with her keys, noticeably shaking. Beel pulled himself up short.

"You're afraid of me," he said calmly.

Her key was poised to insert into her lock and she froze. Then turning on him with the key pointed at his chest, he suddenly got a whiff of the spicy anger she was no longer able to control.

"I'm not afraid of anyone," she informed him, her tone so cool and menacing it chilled the hallway.

"Good. Then let's start over." He didn't believe her, but knowing owls seldom lied—and she didn't smell like a lie—he accepted she believed that. Straightening, he focused on her face, doing his best not to stare at her tousled hair or how her sweater was now slightly twisted. "I'm Beel Halk. How are you doing, Andrea? I would like to spend some time with you."

Andrea didn't move. She didn't pull her gaze from his and she didn't finger her keys. He gave her the time she needed, staring into milky gray eyes that were large and round with thick lashes bordering them. The spicy anger faded and once again her emotions were very well masked.

"Interesting," she breathed.

"Tell me something about you. Where was your nest before here?"

"All of that information is on my application your nest already approved."

"I'm not interested in references or what condition your nest was in when you left it to fly here."

Andrea tilted her head and puckered her lips. Her pale blonde hair had more streaks of silver in it than Anna's did, a sign of maturity. Andrea was the eldest of her nest. That was where Beel quit comparing the two females though. Andrea was by far prettier, her body much more of a distraction. Even with the harsh stares she gave him and her incredible ability to suppress her emotions, she obviously felt very deeply.

"What are you interested in?"

Beel didn't hesitate. "You."

Something flashed in Andrea's gaze. Beel saw it deep in her eyes when they glowed for a moment. In a brief bit of time he saw through the blanket that covered all those emotions. There was something raw, unleashed and desperately trying to find the freedom Andrea kept very well cloaked from the world to see or smell. As it managed to surface, although only for the briefest of moments, it created color in her cheeks.

Andrea flushed, her expression suddenly glowing when Beel told her he was interested. He'd just made her feel good. That or the interest was mutual. Maybe both.

In the next moment, the cloak was secured in place, her gray eyes darkened and she paled. "No," she said sharply, slicing her hand through the air as if she could create a divide he couldn't pass in order to reach her.

This time Andrea's hand didn't shake and she slid her key into the lock, turned it and opened her apartment door. Beel did a quick mental survey of everyone who lived on the third floor. There were two mated owls, the ones closer to him older with all of their fledglings long since out of the nest. The other mated owls were at the other end of the hall. They didn't have fledglings yet. Possibly both nests were home at this hour. Beel wasn't sure. Then there was Marcia Reed, who lived across the hall. He knew she wasn't at her nest because he'd seen her down at Earl's. Beel's nest was at the end of the hall.

It would dishonor him and Andrea if anyone else heard their conversation. Beel didn't want to create a scene that would cause the parliament to start buzzing about the new single females who'd moved in. There weren't too many owls nearby although the building was full of them. Beel wasn't sure yet what ignited Andrea's temper, or if there was a long list that would set her off.

Regardless of her callous nature, Andrea held her head high. She wouldn't do anything to disrepute herself after just having moved into a new parliament. If it made him a rogue to take advantage of that visible trait in her, then so be it. Beel didn't want to fight with Andrea. It was the last thing he wanted.

"I don't want to end this conversation yet."

Her hair fanned over her shoulder and fell to the middle of her slender back. It looked thick, silky, and was combed so it shone against the light. He imagined it would tumble over his fingers, smooth and soft as he played with it. It would be a while before

he reached that stage with her though. When Andrea glanced over her shoulder as she stepped into her nest, it was clear she meant to close the door in his face.

"Good hunting, Beel Halk," she said, not meeting his gaze this time and walking into her nest.

Beel placed his hand on her door when she went to close it. "There are times when moving into a new parliament brings challenges."

Andrea stopped in her tracks, her body stiffening. "Are you suggesting there's going to be trouble?" she whispered. Once again her gray eyes were riotous with emotions impossible to smell on her.

"I'm suggesting that if there is, you might need help."

For the first time since meeting Andrea, Beel saw her expression seriously relax. It wasn't friendly and warm but instead burned with animosity. "I'm very capable of taking care of my own nest," she hissed.

"I know." He'd be smart to wish her good hunting and leave. She didn't want him around.

She was putting up a damn good show in making him believe she was not interested. Something made him hold his ground though. Maybe it was the charge of energy surging through him when he first touched her. It could have been how he'd watched her pant in the shadows. There was also the mystery around so much passion burning in her eyes he couldn't smell.

"Every owl needs help once in a while." He kept his voice low and gentle. If she detected anything other than sincerity on him she would lash out without a second thought. "Even you, my little owl."

"I am not *your* owl."

Beel smiled and was sure his grin wasn't half as cold as the one she'd blessed him with. "We'll see," he said, letting go but taking advantage of her stunned expression and running his fingertips across her cheek before dropping his hand. "My nest is at the end of the hall, number 310. This is my parliament and I can fix any problem."

Andrea had as much honor as she did anger. No owl spit at another when they showed sincere hospitality, which was what he offered at the moment. Andrea was a smart female. She knew he offered more, but he'd caught her off guard. It was clear she was a pro at warding off any male, although why she did was another mystery surrounding her. Beel found it very interesting Andrea wasn't as quick and smooth when she was presented with sincere kindness.

"Now I'll wish you good hunting," he said, running his thumb along her jaw before stepping back.

Beel headed down the hall to his nest, not looking back. Andrea watched him. She hadn't shut her door and the back of his neck prickled, awareness making his skin itch. Not only was she watching—Andrea was assessing him. He'd give it a day before making his move.

Chapter Four

Andrea sat at her kitchen table, nursing hot tea and listening to a sharp wind blow outside. Anna would be asleep for a while, having stayed out late into the night and coming home smelling of the outside and happiness. Her sister was so excited about making friends and flying with them she didn't notice how distracted Andrea was.

She had woken up on the couch when her sister entered the nest. Her sleep had been filled with dreams of a tall, powerful owl who ignited a passion inside her she still couldn't extinguish. It gave him an advantage Andrea couldn't allow him to have. Even as she sat at their table, images of Beel controlled her thoughts.

Why wouldn't he just go away when she made it clear she wasn't interested?

And why couldn't she be more like Anna and give in to her craving for a male?

"You know the answer to that one." Andrea shoved her chair back, immediately frustrated. There were days when she wanted to scream, craved releasing the emotions she worried she wouldn't be able to restrain much longer.

But she had to restrain them. There would never be an appropriate time to break down and cry, or fly until she couldn't stay in the air any longer, or attack and mutilate something until all the rage was gone. Any of those actions might be discovered and she couldn't risk the attention.

Not after...

"Don't even think about it." She rinsed her mug in the sink and placed it in the strainer. They were settled in their new nest and she needed to establish her position in the parliament. "You need a job."

As she opened her laptop and let it boot up, Andrea wasn't able to stop the image of Beel from appearing in her mind. He was tall, well built, although she remembered his brother being more muscular. There were three Halk men in their nest. Information about them was available in the local website for Banff. It hadn't mentioned they were owls of course. The site was run by humans. It was how she and Anna learned of the parliament before flying here from Yellowknife in the Northwest Territory.

"And now that you're here put the past behind you." She had to do just that. Not just for her, but for Anna. Her sister had a right to have a happy life and put the terrors of their past behind her. "Never let those emotions out for her," she ordered herself, and drank in a deep cleansing breath.

It was a breath filled with a masculine scent that sent shivers up her spine. For a moment, the memories she ordered to disappear flooded her senses, making her panic. If *he* had found them their lives would be over. No way would she let that happen.

They'd come this far, made it from one parliament to the next. No one had asked questions in over a year. But if he were here...

Andrea exhaled, straightened and stared at the front door. She wasn't scared. She wasn't nervous. She wasn't even upset. There wouldn't be one little emotion picked up in the air from her. There wasn't guilt. None of this was her fault.

"You did the right thing," she whispered, reminding herself after all this time that flying had been the right thing to do.

Once again Andrea shoved unwanted memories from her head. This time she sniffed the air carefully. There was a faint aroma of a male. But they were in a complex with many nests living together. It would be inevitable she'd pick up on another owl's scent if someone walked down the hall.

Returning to her laptop, she typed in the website for Banff then found the link for the local newspaper. There were ads for jobs listed and she started scanning them.

"Bookkeeper," she mused. "I could do that." The ad asked for experience but would train the right person. It was a hardware store and she jotted down the address. Then using MapQuest, she charted the distance from her nest. "Not far at all. Walking distance." Which was a good thing since it would be a while before they owned a car.

As much as she didn't want to, Andrea opened a new page and typed in the address for the Yellowknife newspaper. This was why her memories wouldn't fade. Part of keeping her nest safe meant staying a good flying distance from trouble. She had to know if trouble came too close. It meant searching occasionally and making sure he wasn't picking up on their trail. Although a year had passed since their last encounter, the only way more time would pass was if Andrea kept an alert eye open.

The Yellowknife newspaper's website appeared in front of her. Andrea started scanning articles. It was easy to spot the signs. Tracking someone also helped teach her how not to be tracked. She found the small blurbs that listed who had been arrested. None of the arrests sounded like anything he'd do. There weren't any articles on violence or charges reported against anyone concerning fighting or breaking and entering. Maybe she and Anna had flown out of there spooked by a ghost.

He wasn't a ghost though. His feathers were as real as hers. Andrea leaned back against the couch and stared at the laptop on their coffee table. The moment she started believing she was now as strong as he was, something would happen. Humility and caution were best.

Andrea again caught the scent of a male. This time it smelled even stronger. And familiar.

Beel Halk lived on this floor of the complex too. She would have to endure his scent every time he walked up and down the hallway. Tilting her head, she listened, struggling with her human eardrums as she tried to have the hearing she would have in her feathers. There was no comparison. She didn't hear anyone outside their nest.

Andrea headed down the hall to her bedroom, deciding to change clothes and find the hardware store. The sooner she found a job the faster they could rebuild their

savings. God forbid they had to fly again, but if he found them, they would disappear in the night as they always had.

A solid knock on her front door damn near made her heart explode. Again the unbearable rush of panic attacked with so much fury Andrea couldn't move.

"Do not give him that power," she said, grinding her teeth as she fought to suppress her fear. It wasn't him. He wouldn't knock on her door as if he were an owl with honor. But if the day came, Andrea wouldn't let him smell her fear, not even for a second. Turning, she held her head high and kept her pace relaxed as she went to the door.

It wasn't him. She knew before opening the door. Beel's overwhelming male scent wrapped around her system, heating it until she swore a fever ignited deep in her womb and spread, swelling inside her until she could barely breathe. As humiliating as it would be to have another owl smell her fear, she also wouldn't let anyone smell her desire. No matter where they set up their nest, squawking was always the same. Get close to anyone and owls would gossip as bad as any other species.

Her palm was damp as she reached for the door, but her emotions were in check. All she smelled was Beel's powerful, dominating and confident aroma. It grew tenfold when she opened the door.

"May I help you?" she asked, keeping her tone smooth and calm, quiet as she relaxed her facial expression and stared into his eyes.

His eyes looked too knowing for an owl his age. Andrea held her ground, focusing on her slow breathing and showing no emotions or feelings whatsoever.

"I'm sure you could," he said, barely moving his mouth while intense gray eyes searched her face. Beel smelled as if he'd just showered and his pale blond hair was damp, making the silver streaks she'd seen last night harder to see today. "May I enter your nest?"

She would be dishonoring him to tell him no, especially since his nest owned the building. Andrea didn't mind showing him how his question aggravated her. Beel raised one eyebrow and tilted his head slightly, waiting for her response.

"My sister still sleeps," she said, grateful to come up with a valid and proper excuse that got her out of being alone with him. Anna wouldn't be waking up any time soon. "Forgive me," she added, nodding her head once in a gallant gesture. "But it wouldn't be proper."

Beel filled her doorway, his height and broad shoulders making it impossible to see beyond him into the hallway. "Interesting," he said, his expression impossible to read.

Andrea knew how to smell aggression on a male as easily as she smelled desire. They were a nauseating aroma when combined. She hadn't met a male yet who didn't start releasing a terrifying odor sooner or later. Many of them carried the scent on them as if it were so much a part of their nature they were proud of it. As she focused on Beel, there wasn't an ounce of aggression on him.

"Interesting," he mused, repeating himself.

"You don't respect our traditions?" If she pissed him off he would leave. The longer he stood in her doorway the greater the chance another owl would see him there. It would be one thing for him to greet new owls to the parliament, but he could have last night. His reason for being here today wasn't clear yet.

"I do," he informed her. "I didn't take your nest for being that rigid and old-fashioned."

"How do you take our nest?"

"As two females modern enough to go out without an escort and to live unmated without their sire or mother."

Andrea almost hissed. She tried fueling the anger she started feeling, although for some reason, standing this close to Beel, with him watching her with an almost compassionate look on his face, made it really difficult to ignite her anger into being outraged.

Beel took a step toward her, entering her nest without her consent. She should demand he leave, remind him he wasn't invited. She and Anna weren't old-fashioned. Hell, they were probably one of the most progressive nests among all owls. That was their business though and one she wouldn't let become public knowledge.

"What is it, Andrea?" he whispered. Then he stroked her face as he had last night. His fingers were warm, calloused, and his hand was very large. Beel was a male strong enough to kill her yet spoke with a soft tone that belied that image.

"I don't want you to be here." It was all she could think to say. Her mind was suddenly flooded with images of what he might be able to do with those hands.

"I think you do." Beel moved closer.

"There is no way you have a clue what I'm thinking." She stuck her chin out defiantly.

"You're right. But I can see you're thinking a lot."

"What do you see?"

He was close enough and tall enough it was impossible to see around him. Beel didn't take his penetrating gaze off her face. Somehow the door closed behind him, as if he'd pushed it closed with his foot. Andrea couldn't be sure. She barely managed to swallow when he stretched his fingers under her jaw and tilted her head so their mouths were a breath away from each other.

"I see a female who possibly feels deeper than any female I've ever met, yet for some reason has mastered stifling those emotions so not a trace of those feelings smell at all. I wonder why that is," he said, and ran his index finger along the artery in her neck as blood pumped through her faster than it should.

"I think you attack when you don't want to," he continued, stroking her flesh with his fingertips. "Anyone gets too close and you strike out. What happens if I get too close, Andrea?" he asked, moving in on her until her nipples pressed against his hard chest. "You don't want to attack me twice."

It didn't sound like a threat. Beel was inside her head, voicing what he knew to be her true nature. Andrea fought panic. He didn't really know her mind. The male was perceptive, intelligent. That was all. Rational thinking and logic always helped keep emotions in check. They didn't seem to be helping her much when it came to fighting his touch though.

This couldn't happen. Nothing could change. The moment she let her guard down in the past *he* had appeared. He would intrude on the nest she and Anna had fought so desperately to rebuild and he would destroy both of them. Beel had no idea what trouble he could bring them. If she was anything, Andrea was an owl who learned from her mistakes.

"No, you shouldn't," she began, telling herself to push him away. She placed her hands on his chest but forgot to push when his mouth captured hers.

Beel eased into her mouth as easily as he'd climbed into her head. His tongue stroked hers, exploring as he deepened the kiss. He pulled her closer, wrapping his strong arms around her. One of his hands tangled in her hair and tugged. The sting in her scalp zapped all rational thought out of her head. Andrea's head fell back and he feasted, kissing her as if she'd never been kissed before. He cupped her ass, drawing her up against his hard, swollen cock. She was lost, falling and soaring at the same time, drifting into a place she didn't know, yet felt no fear.

It shouldn't surprise her a male who smelled as confident and dominating as Beel would be an incredible lover. He devoured her mouth as if he did it every day. He wasn't overbearing or too timid. Beel was the perfect male. He released a craving inside her she'd successfully suppressed for far too long. Looking at his seduction in a new light helped her understand her reaction to him. It was simply because she'd suppressed everything, including her simple, normal physical needs. This wasn't anything to fear. Kissing him didn't mean she was letting down her guard. She would enjoy this moment and send him flying on his way.

After all, he was a Halk and they were the prominent nest in this parliament. This was how normal unmated owls behaved. No one would pay more attention to her because she kissed a male inside her nest. All she had to do was prevent it from going further than this.

Even as the thought formulated in her brain, her body already resented it. Need had blossomed inside her and wouldn't easily be ignored.

Andrea wouldn't risk leaving a trail of any kind, no matter how discreet. Now she paid the consequences in the arms of a male who quite possibly was the most incredible male she'd ever laid eyes on. The way he took control, ignoring her words when he knew she didn't mean them, and pulled from her emotions he claimed to already sense, was too overwhelming.

Beel dipped inside her again, teasing her mouth with his tongue while his hand stroked her rear end. His fingers inched closer to the source of her heat, but then shifted, pressing against her tailbone as jolts of electricity charged up her spine.

Everything inside her melted. It was as if he knew her body intimately already. He knew how to touch her, how to kiss her, how to position her against him so their bodies fit together perfectly.

When he left her mouth, Beel grabbed more of her hair, pulling so her head fell back against his arm. He feasted on her neck, scraping his teeth over sensitive flesh, then pressing his lips against her tormented flesh.

Andrea's pussy swelled. A throbbing between her legs matched the hard pounding of her heart. She felt how soaked she was, and when she gasped for air, tasted her lustful craving in the air around them. It was mixed with his dark aroma, a rich, intoxicating aroma filled with promises of how he would relieve the unbearable pressure that was quickly spreading, consuming her.

"I had a feeling," Beel whispered, his voice rough as he continued nipping at her neck.

Andrea's head swam in a pool of lust. "What?"

"You've walled up your emotions so tight. All it took was a little stimulating to open you up to me."

Andrea stiffened. Beel sensed it immediately and tightened his arms around her. He raised his head but gripped her chin when she would have lowered hers.

"Don't you dare go back into your mental nest, my little owl." His voice was rumbling, raspy from need.

"I'm not your owl," she stressed, her voice barely audible. He had pulled her out from behind the wall she'd used for so many years to protect herself and her nest.

"How many males do you kiss like that?" he asked.

"None."

"Good. That makes you more my owl than anyone else's."

Chapter Five

Beel opened the door to the hardware store and knocked snow off his boots. The moist snow falling helped draw out all the dormant smells from winter. Normally it didn't matter. Today it would save questions. He left Andrea's nest before she tried telling him their kiss meant nothing to her. Although, if she had said that, he'd do whatever it took to prove to her how much it did mean to her.

The way she'd melted against him, opening up and taking all he offered, had him thinking she was one little starving female. He didn't know her past but there were definitely some dark moments in it. It would take some time to pull out of her why there were so many emotions clouding her pretty eyes. Beel wasn't worried. Especially after that kiss. Andrea would open up to him and he would enjoy the hell out of the process.

"What's up with you?" Heath Halk, the eldest in their nest, glanced up from behind the counter. When he took Shelly Preston as his mate, her nest gave her the hardware store. Shelly was so proud of her store Beel could almost smell it on her.

Beel glanced around, not seeing Heath's mate. "Not much. Your mate shackle you to the store already?"

Heath scowled at Beel. "You're in too good of a mood. What female have you disgraced this time?"

"You don't know?"

Heath was known as the leader of their parliament even though he didn't hold any official title. Ever since their parents died, Heath had made the parliament his business. Beel didn't mind teasing his brother when there might be a bit of news in the air his brother hadn't sniffed out yet.

"Do I want to know?" Heath grumbled.

Beel didn't mind smiling. "You worry too much," he said, leaning against the counter and glancing at the papers strewn in front of his brother. "What are you doing?"

"Shelly is having a hard time managing all the books. I'm trying to help, but I admit running a business like this isn't my expertise."

Beel shook his head. "Not mine either."

There wasn't anyone else in the store at that minute. Beel glanced out the large storefront windows and watched the snow fall even harder. Most owls would be staying in tonight.

"I've got a question for you."

Heath searched Beel's face. The two brothers were hatched within minutes of each other, which was common among owls. Any human might guess them twins but neither had ever been accused of such. Beel never thought his older brother looked much like him at all.

"What's up?" Heath asked, looking away first and stacking the papers he'd spread out over the counter.

"There are two females who've just moved in on the third floor," Beel said, lowering his voice to almost a whisper. No one would catch him asking questions about Andrea's nest.

"Yeah? And?"

"Where did they live before moving their nest here?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I want to know."

Heath studied him for a second and nodded. Beel wouldn't have to explain himself to his brother. If there was reason to share his time spent with Andrea later, he would do it willingly. But not until after they'd flown together at least a time or two. Until there was a relationship to announce, it wasn't anyone's business whose nest he spent time with.

"Yellowknife, I think."

Beel nodded. That was a good-sized town up in the Northwest Territory.

"Why do you want to know?" Heath asked again.

"You mind if I take a look at their rental application?"

"I guess not. Is there a problem?"

"There's no problem," Beel assured him.

"Good. You know where the files are kept."

Beel nodded then looked around the store. Preston's Hardware was often a primary source to learn the latest gossip. Owned and run by owls, Heath's mate grew up working in the store. Her sire and mother wanted their daughter to be an honorable mate for Heath and so gave the store to her when the two of them announced their mating.

The door to the back office opened and Heath came around the counter. His mate Shelly held the door open and Andrea followed her into the store. She wore a knit dress with a high collar and thick, black stockings hugged her slender legs. Flat black boots added to the ensemble. She looked hot as hell.

Beel shifted his attention to his brother when he joined Shelly, wrapping his arm around her, and focused on Andrea.

"I take it you two had a nice visit," Heath said quietly, although it was just them in the store.

"We did. We really did." Shelly's content, relaxed nature was easy to smell.

Unlike Andrea, whose emotions and reactions to anything around her were bound tighter than ever.

"Good. Perfect," Heath said, hugging his mate.

"I offered her the job."

"What's going on?" Beel couldn't remain silent any longer. He moved in on Andrea, taking in her appearance and fighting to keep his interest at bay.

Andrea didn't manage to keep her appearance as masked. She looked at Beel and froze, her scent bordering on shocked. Heath narrowed his gaze on his brother.

Andrea's scent changed almost too fast. She ignored Beel and turned a gracious hand to Shelly. "Thank you, again."

"We'll see you tomorrow," Shelly said.

"Yes. I'll be here." Andrea nodded to Heath and walked out of the store, not giving Beel another look.

"Wait a minute." Beel ignored his brother's wary look and hurried after Andrea.

"Beel!" Heath yelled behind him.

Beel didn't respond but caught up with Andrea as a cold wind filled with heavy, moist snowflakes wrapped around him.

"Why were you in there?" Andrea hissed, not looking at him but keeping her head down as she started down the street toward the apartments.

"My nest owns that store."

"Oh." She kept walking.

"Beel!" Heath shouted behind him and ran to catch up.

Beel wouldn't ignore his older brother, especially when it was clear Heath planned on protecting Andrea if he thought Beel was harassing her. And he wasn't. But she wouldn't walk away from him when he acknowledged his nest. Beel grabbed Andrea's arm, stopping her on the sidewalk, and turned to face Heath when he caught up with him. Shelly stood just outside the store, her arms wrapped around her as she watched her mate.

Andrea stopped and didn't fight Beel but stared at the ground, appearing more the trapped animal than someone delayed with their schedule.

"I want to walk with you," Beel said under his breath, hating how trapped her scent smelled.

In the next moment her scent faded. Nothing. Beel kept staring at her, fighting the urge to grab her chin and force her to look and acknowledge him.

"Is everything okay here?" Heath stopped when he reached both of them, barely acknowledging two older owls who greeted him and Beel as they walked by.

"It's okay, Heath." Beel stared at his brother but kept his grip on Andrea.

"I'll hear that from Andrea," Heath said under his breath, although his expression and tone sounded calm and nonthreatening.

Andrea did look up then, her expression relaxed and her large gray eyes impossible to read. All the emotions Beel had seen swimming around inside her before were gone.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Do you want Beel escorting you to your nest?" Heath asked.

Andrea took a moment. Her gaze shifted from Heath to Beel and something flashed in her gaze. It wasn't regret and not quite fear but it wasn't happy either.

"That's fine." Andrea answered as if she were being asked if she liked the snow or not. There was no enthusiasm in her tone.

Beel wasn't the only one who noticed.

"Escort her to her nest and return to the store."

Beel had no problem telling his brother he'd come see him when he was ready.

"I mean it," Heath said in a softer tone so no one around them would suspect there was any kind of altercation going on.

Beel stiffened. Heath hadn't ordered him around since they were fledglings. By right, as the oldest in their nest, he held the most rank. Beel was only five minutes younger. He didn't answer to anyone.

In front of Andrea though, when already he felt it would take a lot of patience and understanding to get through that damnable brick wall she had secured around every feeling and emotion she had, Beel wouldn't dishonor his own nest.

"Fine," he said, barely moving his mouth. Once he returned to the store, he would have a thing or two to say to his brother. Then, letting go of Andrea's arm and placing his hand in the middle of her back, he turned both of them from his brother. "Let's get you out of the snow," he said.

Andrea walked alongside him, not saying a word as their boots crunched in the snow building on the sidewalk. Humans were already out with all of their equipment, determined to keep their town clean in spite of the snow tumbling to the earth. Beel waited until they had a bit of privacy inside the complex before questioning her.

"Is there a reason why you didn't want my nest knowing you have already met me?" he asked when he opened the door to the stairwell.

"I'm a private female," she said, and gripped the banister with her gloved hand as she started up the stairs.

"I have no intention of dishonoring you."

"Thank you."

Beel fought mounting aggravation. He wanted to take Andrea in his arms, shake her until she confessed her feelings. She either wanted him around or she didn't. He hadn't been able to get their kiss out of his head since he'd left her. And it wasn't a kiss from a female who didn't want anything to do with him.

"I think we need to talk."

They reached the third floor and he opened the door to their hallway for her. Andrea stepped out of the stairwell and stopped, clasping her hands in front of her as she faced him.

"No, Beel," she said with regret in her tone. "We don't need to talk. Please, the best thing to do is leave each other alone."

"Like hell," he hissed, and reached for her.

Andrea flinched. She ducked away from him, acting so different than the female who'd lunged at him and cut his face the other night. Fortunately an owl's accelerated metabolism helped them heal quickly. Today it was just a scratch. But her moment of panic, or whatever emotion she experienced when he tried taking her in his arms faded. The aggressive, defiant female he'd first met surfaced. Beel had never met a female so mixed up with her feelings.

Owls prided themselves on not showing emotion. They flew with honor, and displaying petty emotions for all to see was beneath them. Andrea didn't dishonor herself with a tirade of emotions, but Beel swore they swarmed around her more than they did most females. He guessed it was because something distracted her thoughts, haunting her, and the sooner he understood it, the better off both of them would be.

"You don't want to leave me alone any more than I want to leave you alone," he said under his breath. This time, he took her arm, preventing her from walking away from him, and pulled her to his nest, unlocking the door and taking her inside.

He'd guessed she wouldn't make a scene. It mattered more to Andrea when no one noticed her than it did him. Again, probably because she didn't want to be noticed. He guessed her reason was tied into the explanation for why there were so many hostile emotions swimming around in her pretty eyes.

"Let go of me," she squawked the moment his nest door closed behind the two of them. Andrea attacked, hauling off with her free hand and aiming for his face.

Beel grabbed her wrist, pinning both of her arms at her side as he pushed her against the wall and pressed his body into hers. Immediately his cock hardened painfully. All of her efforts to push him away didn't convince his body any more than it did his mind that she didn't want him.

When Andrea lifted her face to his, the expression she offered showed she knew as much. "Why are you doing this?" she asked, her voice cracking.

He let go of one wrist and raised his hand to her face, stroking her cheek with his knuckles. "It's you," he said simply. "Something about you, Andrea."

"You like females who attack you repeatedly?"

Beel swore the corner of her mouth twitched, as if she fought a grin and tried to remain serious and hold up her image of not being interested.

"If that female is you, I do," he said, lowering his mouth to hers.

"We can't do this," she whispered, but opened to him when he kissed her.

The soft moan she let out when he pressed his tongue between her lips damn near made him come. Her dress was made out of soft wool and her breasts and round hips underneath it created a package that drove him wild as he felt every inch of her against him. The sensible, mature side of him demanded he be gentle, take his time and draw this gorgeous creature out of her shell, show her how to fly once again, or maybe for the first time. A more carnal side of him, however, craved every inch of her. He wanted to know her curves, learn what it took to hear her moan again. He wanted to taste her, make her come for him and relish in the look on her face when she did.

"Tell me why we can't do this," he whispered when he left her mouth and began kissing her neck.

"It's not you," she gasped, arching her neck and exposing it farther for him to explore.

"There's nothing wrong with you." He let go of her other wrist and gripped her hips, holding her body in place.

Every time she shifted, it added to the torture he seriously fought to endure. As spooked as Andrea had looked for the briefest of seconds in the hallway, he didn't want to ruffle her feathers. He wanted to fuck her but needed her to accept what he sensed she already knew. There was a connection that zapped to life the moment they first saw each other. Even in his feathers he'd been compelled to come to her in spite of her aggressive, heated nature. Someday he'd let her know this wasn't his style. Females were willing and compliant or he didn't let his feathers get ruffled around them.

Heath might have seen Andrea panic but he sniffed the air out wrong. Beel would take that up with his brother later. Beel would never dishonor their nest. Heath knew this already but Beel didn't have a problem reminding him. Andrea saw him in the hardware store, probably a place she hadn't expected to run into him, and her emotions surged beyond her control. She didn't panic around every male. Beel had seen her speaking amiably with Heath.

He moved her high collar with his chin and nipped at her soft flesh underneath. Her breath caught as every inch of her tightened. She wasn't pushing him away. Far from it. Her lust climaxed, thickening in the air and filling his lungs with a scent sweeter than anything he'd ever breathed in.

"Do you know how incredible you are?"

Andrea made a choking sound in her throat. Her scent softened considerably. "Yes. I do."

Beel raised his head, searching her face. She didn't sound boastful. If anything, although he couldn't tell by her scent, she sounded resigned to the fact. "You're beautiful, little owl." And a mystery.

Her lips were moist, swollen and puckered. There was color in her cheeks and her gray eyes were glazed with the lust he smelled on her as well as him. Their combined scents were an intoxicating mix.

"You fly and walk with grace and honor."

Her mouth did curve this time, shaping into a sensual smile as her eyes glowed. "Do you sing the praises of every female you fly after?"

He didn't hesitate. "No. Any female I've taken in the past has been for mutual, satisfying sex."

"And you don't want sex from me?" Her nipples were hardened beacons rubbing against his chest.

Beel slid his hands along the curve of her hips, feeling her sharp intake of breath when he rested his hands under her breasts.

"I want more than sex from you." He lowered his mouth to hers again, taking his time kissing her.

The raging need to bury himself deep inside her burned him alive. When he cupped her breasts, fire swept through his veins. His brain fogged over from the lustful cravings that were growing harder to restrain. He wasn't sure holding back would benefit either of them. Andrea was telling him no for some reason other than her desire to be with him. If she wouldn't share her hesitations but continue to suppress them as if they didn't exist, he would pull them out of her. She would be willing and eager when he finally fucked her.

Beel squeezed her breasts while tilting his head and deepening their kiss. Andrea opened to him, giving him all he demanded. When her hands brushed up his arms, the fire inside him ignited, fueling his need for her even more. He teased her nipples through her dress but needed more. Moving his hands down her body, he grabbed the end of her dress and hiked it up, searching for flesh. The thick stockings she wore were tight against her waist and her dress fit snugly. He wanted her out of those clothes.

Andrea cried out when he lifted her into his arms, as if he'd just snapped her out of some trance. Immediately he sensed the change in her scent. Beel cradled her against his chest, moving through his nest to his bedroom. His body was a walking time bomb, ready to explode at one wrong move. Need spiked through him with a vengeance so intense he felt the sparks race up his spine. The change threatened to come forward as the carnal side of him took over his rational thought. All that mattered was making her comfortable, removing all the clothing she wore and adoring her body until she relaxed underneath him, primed and ripe for the taking.

And he would take her. He would adore her flesh and later her feathers. Just the thought of marking her, creating new, unique scents both of them would carry with pride, filled him with a greater need. It was a sensation new to him, one he hadn't thought he'd ever experience. Claiming one female hadn't ever been high on his list. Beel was content taking care of their parliament, ensuring all owls lived the honorable lives they deserved and knowing none of them existed tormented or humiliated.

Beel moved down the hallway, aware of how tight his balls were, how swollen his cock was as it stretched painfully inside his jeans. With every step, and Andrea in his arms, he felt the weight of his need grow until he fought the urge to rip her clothes from her body the moment she slid down him to the bed.

"I need you undressed," he said, explaining his actions when she sat at the edge of his bed and he grabbed one boot then the other, sliding them off her feet.

He climbed over her, pushing her dress to her hips as he did and grabbed her stockings at her waist.

"Beel," she breathed, her hands on his shoulders. The heat from her touch scalded his flesh through his clothes, fueling his need for her further.

"You have nothing to fear with me," he murmured. "You're going to fly by my side."

Chapter Six

Andrea stared into Beel's dark gray eyes. Traces of gold laced his intense gaze. He pierced her soul, seeing what no other owl had seen since her nightmares began. Even through the torture, the abuse, her soul, her innermost feelings and emotions were hidden from those who strived to pull them out of her. Andrea wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her pain.

But Beel, a male she'd just met, saw inside to her rawest, most impure and dishonorable thoughts, and swore to take care of her. She didn't understand how he saw what no other owl noticed. Even her sister believed Andrea was fine, ready to take on their new lives and build a nest everyone would honor and respect.

She stared at his handsome face, the silver streaks in his hair adding to his regal and captivating appearance. He was a Halk, and in this parliament, they were the most honorable nest. Business owners and nest owners whom everyone in the community respected. If there was a problem, they would be there, flying to the rescue.

Andrea closed her eyes, pain attacking her too fast to control. Beel's hands were on her. He murmured sweet words of adoration, but the pain ransacked her system. Flying with Beel would draw attention. *He* was still out there, looking for both of them. If Andrea could wipe the past out of her brain and free her and Anna from the nightmares they both remembered, they would be safe. It was impossible to forget something that continually tortured her every night. As long as she and Anna lived, he would fly after them, hunting them until he found and killed them. He believed that would make him free.

Only his death would free him. And Andrea was growing tired of flying all the time, building a new nest only to have to flee from it. She wasn't a fledgling anymore and it was time to fight back.

But to drag Beel into her nightmare, give him what he believed he wanted, would dishonor him. It wasn't right. It was worse than unfair. It was how it had to be though. Until her past was truly her past and no longer able to sneak into the night and destroy all she had, Andrea couldn't allow anyone into her life.

"Beel, no."

His hands stilled but remained at her waist, branding her where he touched her. "Andrea." His voice was gruff, his eyes laced with gold.

"I can't." She scooted backward on the bed.

Beel moved in on her again. "Then tell me why."

She struggled with her dress that was now twisted around her waist. "I can't." She wouldn't dishonor him. Beel would hate her if she did. The pain from that would be worse than what she endured now.

"Tell me why I can't smell your emotions but can see them burning you alive inside," he whispered. "Explain why you're so hungry for me but turn down what I offer."

She shook her head, her hair streaming into her face. Andrea slapped it out of the way as she climbed off his bed. "It isn't you." She couldn't explain further.

"Like hell it's not!" Beel flew off the bed, grabbing her and spinning her around so she slapped his hard, solid chest. "If you trusted me you would explain what I'm seeing, what I'm feeling, what you're scared to share with me."

"Don't do this." She struggled but he held on tighter.

"I will do this." Beel grabbed her arms, lifting her in the air so their faces were inches from each other.

Anger spiked in the air, tickling her nose and making her eyes water as he devoured her with a look so determined, so stubborn and commanding she stilled.

"You want me. Tell me you don't and I'll release you."

There wasn't any way she would lie. Her humiliation ran deep enough, but he asked her to dishonor herself on top of it. "Stop it!" she demanded.

"No. You're going to explain yourself to me now!"

There were hard lines in Beel's face. He was an owl to reckon with, and Andrea didn't doubt for a moment he would take on any situation if it appeared or smelled dishonorable to him and set it right. Which was exactly what he was doing with her.

"I'm not trying to hurt you," she exclaimed, her frustration brewing into anger as he kept her hanging in front of him.

She didn't want to upset him. Maybe they hadn't known each other long but Andrea loved the idea of building something between them. She hadn't dared dream of what her perfect nest would be, knowing if she did try, it would come to something like this. She hadn't tried. Beel wouldn't fly away from her. Knowing the effort he put forward to know her, fly with her, broke her heart.

"Let me go, Beel."

"I don't think so." He turned to the bed, ready to place her back where she was a moment ago.

Andrea didn't have the strength to ask him to stop twice.

"No!" She had to make him stop. If they had sex, bonded themselves to each other, it would pull Beel into her nightmare with her. As much as it destroyed her, Andrea found the strength to fly.

The moment Beel put her on the bed, Andrea sprang off it, pushing with her legs and flying through the air. She tumbled to the ground, rolling to her side in her twisted dress.

"Andrea!" Beel was on top of her in seconds.

She scrambled forward, crawling on her hands and knees as her emotions peaked, making her eyes burn. Not once had she cried over the destruction of her nest. She'd refused to shed a single tear when she last looked at her mother. Nothing would cause her to give in to the humiliation and allow her emotions to surface when her nest went up in flames and smoke.

"Calm down." His hands were on her, his voice soothing and quiet. "Talk to me, my little owl."

For years she'd maintained her honor, flying with determination and managing to stay ahead of the devastation that continued pursuing her year after year. Yet, in a matter of days, Beel had moved into her space, saw into her mind and was able to pull on emotions no one else could touch.

He would not make her cry!

"There's nothing to say," she said, clenching her teeth together as sparks raced up her spine. Damn him for making her feel.

"Bullshit! Or you wouldn't be fighting me now."

He lifted her off the ground, pulling her backward until he held her against his strong, virile body. Andrea didn't have a choice. If she stayed now, the dishonor that would burn through her veins would give Beel a glimpse of the ugliness inside. Beel had pushed her into a corner but she wouldn't stay there.

Her spine zapped painfully as the change threatened to tighten her skin. Tears streaked her face, blinding her. Andrea remembered that final night. The horror that had been her life came to a head when the hatred exploded around her. Squawking and accusations! Violence and dishonor! Scene after grotesque, ugly scene played in her mind as she struck out, fighting with all the strength she had.

Beel yelled something. Andrea wasn't sure what he said. She raced from his nest, blinded from years of pain taking its toll on her. If anyone else was in the hallway, she didn't notice. When she was in her own nest, breathing hard and unable to focus or stop the nightmares replaying themselves in her brain, over and over, collapsing on her own bed offered little security. Her world was caving in around her and she no longer possessed the strength to stop it.

* * * * *

Andrea closed her blinds in her bedroom after getting out of a hot bath. An unsettling calm, the kind before a vicious storm, consumed her as she twisted the wands and stared out the glass panes at the velvety black night outside.

"Are you hungry?" Anna called from the other end of their nest. "I have good news!"

Her sister sounded happy and the smells coming from the kitchen should be making her tummy rumble. She hadn't eaten all day. There was news to share with

Anna too. It seemed a lifetime ago but Andrea had a new job and would start in the morning. If only she could feel the enthusiasm for it that she heard in her sister's voice.

"I'll be there in a minute," Andrea said, and dropped her robe to put on sweats.

Every inch of her body tingled. Wherever she touched herself as she pulled on a baggy sweatshirt and slipped into comfortable sweats reminded her of Beel's hands on her. He'd destroyed her earlier today, pulled emotions out of her that never should have seen the light of day. Andrea wouldn't think of how his nest must have smelled after she left.

"I know we have to be conservative with our money, but I had to pull some out when I learned my good news." Anna carried two plates to their small kitchen table.

Andrea paused in the kitchen doorway, staring at her sister as she beamed and smelled strong with happiness.

"I got a job today over at Earl's. He really is a nice owl," she added, and placed a plate on each side of the table. "I know you wanted to share your good news with me but I heard about it while I was at the bar. You have a new job too."

Andrea wanted to ask who told Anna but didn't risk speaking.

"So when do you start working? I start Friday night. All new employees have to take the late shifts. You have to build rank at Earl's before you can have nights off to fly with everyone." Anna slid into her chair and picked up her fork. "These aren't the best steaks there are but I picked them up from a butcher Earl recommended. Did you know leopards live in Banff too?" Anna looked up at Andrea when she walked around the table. "What's wrong?"

Anna's happiness almost smelled stronger than the steaks. Her face glowed and her light gray eyes were bright as she followed Andrea with her gaze until Andrea sat down facing her. It had been a long time since she'd seen Anna filled with so much happiness. Her world was moving as it should, as it did for most normal owls. And other than Andrea's ordeal with Beel earlier that day, they had little to complain about. It wouldn't be the first time Andrea had walked through a parliament with shame. This time though, she would bear her burden silently. Anna deserved freedom from their past. If Andrea couldn't provide it for herself, the least she could do was give it to her sister.

"Nothing is wrong. I slept really soundly."

"I know. I came home and you were out like a light." Anna's grin returned. "Eat. We feast tonight, sister!" she said enthusiastically. "Our nest is settled and life is good."

"Yes, life is good." Andrea reached for her fork. It was nothing new to stifle her feelings. All well-bred owls were taught to do that as young fledglings. Somehow, this time it seemed an overwhelming task. She almost choked on her steak as she tried to keep the pain from surfacing.

Except this time, it wasn't her past that haunted her, but a tall, determined and stubborn male whose scent seemed wrapped around her, a silent reminder of what she could have had if her life were different.

Chapter Seven

Beel followed Rock into Heath's nest. The smell of fresh meat greeted them and Rock hummed his approval.

"It's about time someone brought a good cook into this nest," Rock called out.

Female laughter followed and Heath appeared from the hallway. "Wipe your feet." He pointed to the mat on the floor. "She won't let you eat if you mess up her nest."

"Memories of our nest," Beel muttered.

Rock shot him a side glance, grinning and understanding. Their mother would tan their feathers if they traipsed mud through her nest. Beel rubbed his boots on the floor mat after Rock joined Heath in the living room. He'd been trying to look forward to this invitation ever since Heath told them his mate was cooking a meal for all of them that Friday night. It wasn't as if he had anything better to do. Every available female would be flying tonight and a good portion of them shaking their tail feathers for any male who caught their attention. Beel didn't feel like flying after females.

"You're both just in time." Shelly stuck her head from around the corner, her face flushed from standing over the hot oven and her happiness smelling as strong as the food she was preparing. "Go ahead and sit. Heath, get them beers."

"Tonight I wait on you two," Heath grumbled.

Rock took one of the four chairs at the table. "Here, here," he cheered, sounding unusually amiable considering his brooding nature lately.

Beel figured one of them had to be brooding and tonight it was his turn. Since Andrea was now officially an employee at Preston's Hardware, he wouldn't bring her up. It was all he could do to stay away from her though.

Heath returned to the table, offering his brothers beers, then helped his mate serve meat and vegetables.

"This looks great." Beel smiled at Shelly, unwilling to let anyone suspect his personal turmoil.

"Maybe it will be incentive for you two to find mates and quit torturing every female in the parliament." Shelly winked at Beel.

He offered a smile but knew it was strained. Glancing at Heath, he was relieved to see his brother digging into his meat, unconcerned about the comment. Andrea hadn't given either of them cause to suspect anything.

They ate and enjoyed small talk, each of them offering what gossip had been squawked around town. The food was incredible, and after a couple beers, Beel found himself relaxing and enjoying his nest's company.

"I have to say that new female is making life a lot easier at the shop," Shelly said when she stood and began clearing dishes after they'd finished eating.

Beel looked up, aware of Heath giving him an appraising stare.

"She's quite the unique owl," she added, disappearing into the kitchen.

Beel grabbed his plate and followed Shelly into the kitchen, indifferent to the focused looks both his brothers were giving him now.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked, setting his plate on the counter.

Shelly grabbed a dishtowel and wiped her hands. "There's nothing wrong with her. She's an incredible bookkeeper, although I found it odd that she couldn't produce references." Shelly looked up at him and beamed. "I went on a hunch though and I'm glad I did. Andrea is a friendly, sweet owl. There's just something..."

She hesitated as if searching for the right word.

"Haunting?" Beel suggested.

"Interesting," Shelly mused as Heath appeared in the doorway. "I wouldn't have used that word but you're right. Something is bothering her."

"I wonder who that might be," Heath said dryly, not even trying to hide the smell of his disapproval.

"Something was bothering her when she flew to our parliament," Beel said easily. "If I annoyed her further, I've been given no indication an apology is warranted. But whatever it is, when I tried to pull it out of her, it bent her feathers all out of shape."

"So, you have annoyed her." Heath nodded as if he'd suspected this all along.

"It wasn't my intention." Just as it wasn't his intention to share any details with his nest.

"I might agree with Beel," Shelly said, turning and touching Heath's arm. "I'm not saying he didn't do something out of line, but there is something about Andrea. I can't quite sniff it out of her. In fact, you can't pick up any scent off her. Her emotions are hidden better than any owl I've ever met."

"Interesting," Heath mused, rubbing his chin. "But you trust her doing the books at the store?"

"She's completely honorable," Beel snapped.

"Yes. I trust her," Shelly said at the same time.

Heath shifted his attention from his mate to Beel. "Why do you find her haunting? That is the word you used, right?"

Beel lifted a shoulder lazily. He wasn't comfortable discussing Andrea. "Speculating on the nature of an owl smells an awful lot like gossip."

Heath shook his head. "I need to know if there is a situation here. If trouble could be brought on the parliament."

"I've met Anna, her sister," Rock said as he stood behind Heath. "She's open and honest and will be an asset to Earl's."

"Earl's?" Heath questioned.

"I happened to be there when he hired the female. She was so excited she hugged everyone before flying out of there."

"How fortunate for you," Heath mumbled.

Rock winked at Shelly when she smiled at him.

"Andrea isn't trouble for our parliament." Beel grabbed Heath's attention. "And I won't have you sniffing around her and spooking her when she's trying to do a good job at the shop."

"Staking claim on this female?" Heath demanded.

Beel stared at his older brother. This conversation needed to end, but he wouldn't lie to his nest. "She isn't interested in me," he explained.

A cell phone rang in the other room and Rock turned in the doorway with Heath following him into the living room.

"The two of you have spent time together," Shelly said, returning to the sink and clearing dishes. She didn't make it a question.

Beel didn't feel a need to respond. He brought the plates scattered around the kitchen to her at the sink, willing to hear anything she might have to say about Andrea.

"Andrea is very good at keeping books," Shelly continued, turning on the water and holding her hand under it as she adjusted the temperature. "In just the few days she's been working for me, I feel more informed as to how the store's doing than I have in all the years I've been there."

"If memory serves, you've worked at that store since you were a fledgling. That is high praise. Maybe you should tell Andrea that."

Shelly glanced at him, nodded, and returned to her task. "I might do that. I had thought of putting her out on the floor, giving her a break from sitting in that small back room and letting her wait on customers. When I suggested it though, the smell of panic filled the room before she could stifle it. She actually blushed when she informed me she didn't feel she would be an asset to me there."

"Interesting."

"I think she's hiding from someone." Shelly took a pot from Beel and poured soap and water into it. "I think someone has hurt her terribly and she's flown from them and is scared they might find her. It might explain why she refused your attention."

Beel wouldn't ask why she thought Andrea had refused his attention. More than likely Shelly and Heath had discussed the matter. They'd seen him fly after Andrea earlier that week when she left the store, the same day Andrea flew out of his nest, going into a severe panic attack after melting in his arms and filling his nest with the smell of her lust.

"What does that explain?" he asked.

"Beel, you're a Halk. You have a high profile in this parliament. For a female to fly by your side, every owl in Banff, if not farther, would hear about it. The squawking would make quite a fuss for a while."

Beel remembered when Heath first started flying after Shelly. Her family wasn't viewed as honorable. Most owls, including the older aunts and uncles related to their nest, insisted Heath leave her alone. Because he was a Halk, he needed to find an appropriate mate. Heath had ignored all of them and his nest with Shelly smelled of happiness and love every time Beel came over.

"Interesting," he mused, wondering if there would be any way to convince his sexy little owl to give him another chance.

"We've got trouble." Heath hurried into the kitchen, putting his hands on Shelly's shoulders and kissing her cheek. "We need to head down to Earl's. He just called, something's going on."

"What?" Shelly grabbed her towel and started drying her hands as she followed all of them into the living room.

"All Earl said was an owl who isn't from around these parts is stirring up trouble. We won't be gone long."

"Supper was incredible," Beel told Shelly as he headed to the door with his brothers.

"Come eat and fly anytime." Shelly made a face at them but smiled. She'd mated with a Halk. She understood that meant they would take care of any problem that might jeopardize their parliament.

"Let me grab my heavier sweater." Beel hurried to the stairs after they left Heath's nest. If they ended up changing into their feathers to pursue a rogue owl, a different change of clothes would be more appropriate than what he wore now. "That way I won't need a coat."

"Good idea." Rock reached the door to the stairs at the same time Beel did. "I'm going to do the same."

"I'll meet both of you outside," Heath said behind them.

The three of them raced down the stairs. Beel left his brothers and turned to the door leading to the third floor. He flew through it, his blood already pumping at the thought of an altercation taking place among the owls that Earl couldn't handle. Earl was a Great Horned Owl, the largest of their kind. Very few messed with him.

Beel came up short, stopping fast enough so he didn't stumble into Andrea, who had her hand raised to knock at his nest. All thoughts of the bar drained out of his head. He hadn't seen her since she'd raced out of his nest, leaving her boots as a torturous memory that she'd been there. Her long blonde hair fell neatly to the middle of her back, and her black leggings and flat, short boots showed off her long, slender legs. She wore a bright pink blouse and a wide black belt around her waist, giving a mouth-watering view of how slender and well-rounded her figure was.

Andrea lifted her gaze to his slowly, sucking in her lower lip and taking her time, as if she now understood staring into his eyes revealed her soul to him.

"Andrea," he breathed, reaching for her but pausing before he touched her.

She watched his hand but didn't retreat. "Beel," she began. "I...I need your help," she said, and the smell of panic he'd noticed on her for brief seconds flooded the hallway.

Beel unlocked his apartment, placing his hand on her back and keeping her close as they entered. He'd missed the hell out of her and they'd just met. But something was wrong. She'd flown to him and he wouldn't let her down. He told himself he would treat any female the same if she came to him for help, and he would. But his heart wouldn't swell in his chest the way it did now as he ran his hand down her smooth, long hair.

"What is it?" he asked, closing and locking his nest door. "I need to grab a sweater. Follow me." Beel started down his hallway and stopped, turning to see Andrea planted in the middle of his living room, watching him warily. "I won't touch you," he snapped, but hid the pain she was so easily able to inflict on him.

"I'm very sorry about the other day," she offered, but didn't move from where she stood. "I wish I hadn't behaved that way."

The timing here sucked. More than anything Beel wanted to sniff out the truth behind her statement. Did she wish she had stayed and made love to him? Or did she wish she wouldn't have revealed so many emotions to him and had instead managed to get away from him while keeping her cool?

Beel hesitated for only a moment. He turned to his bedroom. The parliament had to come before his own needs and desires. Grabbing a heavy, hooded sweatshirt, Beel hurried back down the hallway. Andrea remained in the middle of the living room, so incredibly beautiful but appearing at the moment like a damaged bird.

"I'm sorry about the other day too." He stroked the side of her face. "If you wish to talk about this, I would very much like that. But right now I have to go. We have a situation."

The air crackled around him, worse than static electricity, as he stroked her smooth skin. Andrea raised her hooded gaze to his and the intensity of emotions swarming in her gaze stole his breath.

"Is the situation at Earl's?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

He'd never seen her appear so defeated. The feisty female who'd attacked him, who fought beak and claw to get away from him, stood before him now as if she'd been beaten into humble submission. Beel's blood boiled. He would kill whoever did this to her. And if it was him—damn!

"Wait a minute," he said, stiffening. "Your sister started working there tonight, didn't she?" Sudden understanding hit him when she nodded slowly. Andrea was here on behalf of her nest, not for him. She needed his help because he was a Halk, because her sister was in trouble. "What's wrong?"

"There is..." She faltered, almost staggered, then gathered some inner strength. Andrea straightened, the worry etching her face fading as she stuffed the emotions she didn't want him to see behind some dark shroud. When she met his gaze, her gray eyes were flat, blank, as if some part inside her died so she could say what needed to be said. When she spoke again, there was no life in her voice. "There is someone after my nest. I thought we'd flown far enough for him to lose our scent. I was mistaken. My sister's life is in danger."

She shared this information with Beel as if it were some trivial item at work. It hurt her so deeply to tell him the truth behind her pain that she sacrificed all feeling, all emotion simply to utter the words. For a moment all he could do was stare at her, his insides torn apart as he fought the urge to grab her and pull those emotions back out of her.

Andrea didn't want him in her life. He nodded, deciding he could also stuff emotions as proudly as any owl. There was a difference between walking with honor and not displaying every thought on the tip of the beak, and killing everything inside so it became impossible to feel. It terrified him that a female as beautiful and enticing as Andrea might have done the latter.

"Your sister will be fine," he promised her. Then, pulling off the shirt he'd worn to have dinner with his nest, he yanked his sweatshirt over his head as his phone rang. Grabbing the hood and adjusting it behind his neck, Beel pulled his phone out of his jeans pocket. "Yes," he said, noting Heath's number. "I'll be down in a second."

"I'm going with you," Andrea said after the call ended, her expression still flat.

"No. You're not. And no fit of yours is changing how it will be." He pointed his finger at her, ignoring the constriction around his heart when she simply stared, not moving or reacting to his harsh tone. "I'll take care of this matter, and your sister. It's what I do."

Andrea nodded. "You're a Halk. You take care of your parliament."

"That's right." He headed toward the door.

Andrea didn't move.

When he glanced behind him, she remained standing where she'd been since entering his nest, her body and face as relaxed as if she didn't have a care in the world. "If I can't go with you, may I stay here?"

His heart swelled and excitement flooded his system. Andrea would be in his nest when he returned. As quickly as the glint of hope warmed his insides, he put a clamp on it. Andrea wasn't here to be with him. Whatever had her flying, stifling all feelings and making her a female incapable of touching another, was closing in on her. It had her terrified. She was here for his protection only.

"Who is at Earl's?"

For a moment he thought she wouldn't answer. Every inch of him tightened as he fought the urge to fly at her, grab her as he had the other day and shake her until she believed in what heart she still was able to feel with that he would never hurt her.

Andrea's eyes widened. Apparently he wasn't as good at masking his emotions as she was. He almost offered her assuring words. He wanted to pull her into his arms, hug and kiss her and swear to her everything would be okay. Beel held his ground. He watched her lower her gaze and stare at his floor as if there might be more than one answer and she contemplated the best one to give him.

"My sire," she whispered.

Chapter Eight

Earl's was in the middle of the block downtown, its purple awning helping it to stand out from the other shops on either side. At the moment, hard-packed snow, lined with zigzagged tire tracks, covered the street in front of the bar. There were a fair amount of cars parked around the establishment, most of them lining the front of the building. As night fell, so did temperatures, and everyone wanted as close to the door as possible so they could hurry in out of the cold.

Earl didn't discriminate. Werewolves, leopards and even humans frequented his place. Although it was common knowledge to all that it was an owl establishment and his kind controlled and monitored all activity inside.

Beel sat in the backseat of Heath's black SUV and climbed out on Rock's side after they parked. His skin prickled as he crunched over the snow and headed to the bar's entrance.

Heath grabbed the door, pulling it open and leading the way inside. An unsettling quiet attacked them. It was a Friday night. Music should be blaring. Pool balls should be cracking against each other on the handful of pool tables at the back of the bar. There should be a dull roar of people laughing, talking or arguing as the evening progressed. The place was full yet quiet.

Beel searched the long bar, spotting Earl immediately. He headed toward the incredibly tall, large bald man who barely had a scar on him yet was said he'd been in more fights than any owl in Banff.

"He wants to take her with him." Earl didn't say hello or offer any other type of greeting. Instead, he cut to the chase, as always. Very little ruffled the male's tail feathers, but tonight worry lines were etched deep in his forehead. "She's an unmated female," he continued, justifying his actions to the three of them as he moved to the end of the bar. "I won't let her leave, especially when she smells terrified of him, without your consent."

"Why is the place so quiet?" Beel asked, meeting Earl at the end of the bar.

"Turn the fucking music on," Earl bellowed, his deep baritone reverberating against the long walls and high ceiling. Immediately an old rock and roll song started playing and conversation picked up. "Come with me," Earl said, not raising his voice over the music.

Beel picked up on a handful of conversations as he walked in between his brothers and followed the large owl into a back room behind the bar. There was speculation, the different groups of owls and a handful of leopards rehashing what they'd witnessed before the Halk nest showed up. Beel heard several key words that rang repeatedly in his brain.

Insane. Violent. And the repeated statement—Never seen an owl like him.

Earl opened a door and bright light flooded the dimly lit bar. Anna sat at a table alone and jumped to her feet, covering her mouth to muffle a shriek as she stared with wide, terrified gray eyes. She searched all of them and rested her attention on Beel.

"Is my sister okay?" she asked, her voice shaken.

Anna was a younger, more innocent version of Andrea. It was common in nests for fledglings to often appear as twins. Anna and Andrea were as different as day from night though. Where Andrea was doing her best to die inside so no one would see her feelings, Anna trembled from the fear and anger that filled the room with their pungent odors.

"Your sister is fine." Beel hadn't shared with his brothers about Andrea being at his nest when he got there. His feelings were still too raw when it came to Andrea.

"Is she?" Anna searched his face. "Have you seen her? Do you know for sure?"

"It's okay," he said, moving to the table and standing opposite of it from the young female. "She's safe where no one will find her." That is if the impossible female didn't get her feathers ruffled and take off on him.

"Okay," she said slowly.

"What do you want me to do with the male?" Earl asked.

Anna's mouth opened and her skin went white as a sheet. "He's still here?" she whispered.

"He won't leave without you," Earl said.

"I don't want to go with him." Anna reached across the table and touched the back of Beel's hand. Her fingers were icy cold and trembled. "Please," she begged. "I know my sister cares about you," she continued, her words coming out faster. "She trusts you, so I do. He will kill us. That's why we're here."

"Why would your sire want to kill you?" Beel asked.

"Her sire?" Heath and Earl said at the same time.

Anna collapsed in her chair, dropping her head into her hands and began sobbing. "I'm dishonoring all of you and you're only here to help and protect your parliament," she wailed.

"Maybe I should send in a female." Earl shuffled behind them, obviously disturbed by Anna's emotional outbreak.

It wasn't something most owls knew how to deal with, but Beel needed to understand better so he could decide what to do. Heath's silence and his remaining behind Beel as Beel spoke with Anna proved he wouldn't supersede Beel's decisions in this matter.

"Don't send anyone else in and humiliate the female," Beel said, remaining calm as the smell of too many emotions cluttered the small room. "Bring her some water. I'll talk to her." Beel looked over his shoulder as Earl started to leave. "And make sure that male doesn't go anywhere." He wouldn't honor the monster who'd damaged Andrea as

badly as he had by giving him a title. The waste of feathers didn't deserve to be called their sire.

"I have him in the storage room," Earl said as he stood in the doorway, blocking the view to the bar. The noise level had returned somewhat to normal, although there was a noticeable smell of apprehension drifting into the room.

"I want to know what happened," Heath demanded.

"The female just started tonight," Earl informed him, keeping his voice low in spite of the noise behind him. "I was training her when the male walked into the bar."

Beel watched Anna suck in a breath, trying to regain her composure. Rock watched Anna as well. His expression remained blank but Beel didn't think his brother was too impressed with the pretty, young, single female. She looked ready to fall apart.

"I didn't pay any attention to him until I smelled her panic. The male marched right up to her and tried grabbing her from across the bar." Earl's tone turned menacing. "I don't allow any fighting in my bar, but especially not between males and females," he growled, sounding repulsed. "The female shrieked and jumped behind me. Now I don't get in the middle of any nest's issues," he insisted, straightening and looking as if he might split the doorway any minute as his large arms pressed against both sides. "But when that male started telling this female how he'd had it with the two of them disappearing on him and when he was through with them they would never fly again, I told him I didn't have that kind of squawking in my bar. That male turned an evil eye on me." Earl had a look about him that would terrify any species. He never smelled aggressive and his expression always remained relaxed, but even in his calm, deep baritone, the shrewd look he gave all of them in the room showed he meant business. "I run a respectable bar and am honored in this parliament. It will stay that way," he hissed, making it sound like a threat. "But I don't tolerate anyone dishonoring me. That's when I locked that male up and called you." Earl shook his head, relaxing somewhat as he focused on Heath. "I'm here to tell you, there's something wrong with that male."

"I'll go talk to him," Heath decided. "Rock, you're with me."

"I'll stay here with Anna," Beel said. His brothers looked at him but Heath nodded then turned to leave. "But I want to talk to that male too."

"Are you sure my sister is safe?" Anna asked the moment they were alone.

"She's at my nest," he told her. "You can call her if you want."

Anna looked noticeably relieved but shook her head. "We share a phone. I didn't think I'd need it while I was at work."

Beel pulled out his cell phone. "Call her so you know she is safe."

Anna still trembled when she accepted his phone and pushed the numbers to call Andrea. Her blonde hair tumbled over her shoulder when she looked down as she pressed his phone to her ear. There was none of the cocky arrogance in this female. Anna was purely the docile, submissive female owl, and with her looks, would be the

perfect mate for some lucky male. Beel wondered at his sanity. A week ago he would have sworn a female just like Anna would be perfect for him.

The phone rang several times and, alone in the small room, Beel heard Andrea when she answered.

"Andrea, it's me, Anna. I'm on Beel's phone."

"God. Are you okay?"

"No. I'm scared to death."

"Don't be. We're going to be fine."

"Are you sure? Do we have to fly again?"

"I don't want you worrying about anything. Stay with Beel. He will protect you until you're with me. Promise me, okay?"

"I will. I'm scared he's going to find you. He wants you worse than he does me."

There was silence on the other end of the phone and for a moment Beel worried the line had gone dead. Heath wouldn't let the male go, but if for some reason he did, there wasn't any way he'd find Andrea, that was, if she'd keep her cute ass safe and at his nest.

"I know, Anna. He won't get me and he's not going to hurt you."

He found himself continuing to compare Anna to Andrea as he listened to the two talk, and understanding around Andrea's behavior became clear. As much as he wanted to shake sense into Andrea since he'd met her, he found this female, who struggled to maintain control, used her sister for her strength. If they were continually flying away from an abusive sire, there was no way Anna would have made it without Andrea.

"Andrea, what are we going to do?" Anna wailed as if she were still a fledgling.

The silence didn't last on the other end as long this time. "Is Beel there with you?"

"Yes."

"Put him on."

Anna obediently handed the phone to Beel.

"Are you still at my nest?" he demanded when he put the phone to his ear.

"You honor my nest with your help. I wanted to say thank you."

Beel rested his forehead in his hand and closed his eyes, knowing it took strength on Andrea's part to humble herself and show gratitude. "You're welcome. Stay at my nest."

"Your protection right now is greatly appreciated."

He saw right through her. She wasn't confirming she would stay anywhere.

"Andrea," he hissed, and immediately smelled tension from Anna. Glancing up, he fought to remain calm. He should have tied his hot-headed little owl to the bed.

"I've never promised anything I couldn't do," she began, speaking slowly. "Just as I've never committed an act that might lead to false pretenses."

Again he heard what she was saying between her words. "We'll discuss this later. Right now, you will stay at my nest or, believe me, I'll hunt you down. And I will find you." Beel didn't make promises he wouldn't keep either.

Andrea apparently realized this. "Fine," she hissed, although she sounded as if she had already made other plans and his promise interfered with them.

"What were you going to do?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter. Have you seen him yet?"

Beel noticed Andrea didn't refer to him as her sire. "Not yet. My nest is with him right now. I'm with Anna."

"She will feed on your strength."

Anna straightened as if to prove her sister's words.

Beel looked at her. "Anna is strong in her own right."

The small smile she graced him with touched his heart. Anna was pure in all senses and a strong, protective instinct lunged through him. "You have my word no one will harm her."

"I know. You're an honorable owl."

"So are you, Andrea."

She made a snorting sound. "You aren't seeing things clearly, Beel."

"Yes. I am seeing them very clearly now." He didn't care if Anna overheard this. She was part of Andrea's nest and he would make his intentions clear for both of them. "The dishonor you've weighted yourself down with is imaginary. You haven't done anything wrong."

"You don't know that."

"Your sire is alive."

There was silence again. Beel kept the phone against his ear, hearing her soft breathing and imagining her warring with the demons she refused to let go of inside her. "I want you to make me a promise, Beel."

"What is it?"

"Hold that male and don't let him fly. When you can, send for me. I'm going to kill him."

Beel leaned back in his chair, running his fingers through his hair and ignoring the attentive stare Anna gave him. She remained silent, as did Andrea on the other end. The two of them had lived through some hell and they deserved closure. There was still a lot Beel didn't know though.

"Andrea," he said, his voice a soothing whisper. "What did he do to you?"

The door opened and the sounds from the bar filled the small room. Heath and Rock entered the room, closing the door. Heath moved around Beel, pausing at the end

of the table and resting his hands on it. His expression and emotions were more guarded than usual.

"Beel, we have a situation," he said, shooting Anna a wary look.

Beel heard a click through the phone. "Andrea," he demanded, but silence followed. He all but slammed his phone on the table. "Damn it," he hissed.

"Interesting." Heath stared at him.

Beel barely managed to control his mounting frustration when he met his brother's focused stare. "What?"

"I'll speak with you outside." Heath straightened and nodded to Rock. "Stay with this female. We'll be back shortly."

The cold night air didn't do a lot to soothe the growing apprehension inside Beel as he followed his brother outside. Heath stopped at the front of his SUV and stuffed his hands in his pockets, taking a moment to look up and down the sidewalk and sniff the air before determining they were alone and focusing on Beel.

"What do you know about these two females?" Heath asked.

"Not a lot." Beel didn't have a problem telling his brother all he knew about Andrea. He saw trouble in Heath's eyes and wanted to understand it. The more they communicated the better he could protect Andrea's nest. "I met Andrea a few days ago. I've been pursuing her and she's been resisting."

Another time Heath might have given Beel shit for that comment. Heath's somber expression simply verified how serious this situation was.

"She hasn't shared with you anything about herself personally?"

"There is trouble in her past." Beel hesitated. He wouldn't dishonor Andrea by squawking to anyone about their time together. "Your mate spoke accurately. Something is haunting her. I listened as Anna spoke to Andrea on the phone. They are both convinced he's here to kill them and they need our protection."

Heath exhaled and lowered his gaze, staring at the ground. A car pulled into a stall a few cars down. Both watched it park. Several young owls barely gave them a glance as they headed to Earl's.

"Jerome Chouette has apologized for disgracing Earl's," Heath began, focusing on his boot as he scuffed it against the snow and gravel.

"Chouette?" Beel asked.

"Exactly." There was concern in Heath's eyes. "I wonder why the two females use a different name than their nest's."

"Interesting." Beel didn't have a clue but he intended to find out.

"I'll take your response as meaning you didn't know they'd changed their name."

"Do we know they changed it?"

Heath stared at Beel. "You're going to find out."

When Beel didn't respond, not seeing a need to comment on the obvious, Heath continued.

"He admits his emotions burned out of control when he saw his fledgling behind the bar. He hadn't expected to see her but simply flew into town for a night's rest and went to Earl's to relax."

Beel listened, already suspecting he wouldn't like what Heath had to say.

"When he saw Anna, all of the pain of his past surfaced and he lost control. Apparently, when the two females were very young, Andrea killed their mother."

"What?" Beel hissed, ready to deny it but holding his tongue. He didn't have all the facts and Andrea hadn't shared anything with him other than repeating that being with him would be a mistake. Was she trying to save his honor?

Heath looked troubled when he met Beel's gaze. "I sense that you're developing feelings for this female and agree an incredible amount of discretion is warranted in this case."

Beel walked away from his brother. If Andrea were responsible for murder, she would be killed. Their way was simple. They didn't have jails or juries and didn't carry out sentencing when an owl turned bad. For the most part, it didn't happen. Honor and integrity were engraved into their nature from birth. He'd never met an owl who would commit such a horrendous crime. As tortured as Andrea was, and even with all the warring emotions he saw in her eyes even when he didn't smell them, he had a hard time seeing her capable of killing another owl, especially her own mother. Andrea wasn't evil.

"I'm going to go talk to her," Beel decided.

Heath grabbed Beel's arm when he started across the parking lot. "Wait. I'm going with you."

"No. I will do this alone."

"Beel." Heath's expression showed his concern. "I know you don't want to believe this is true. I have heard the male's story and agree Andrea has a right to tell hers. But you can't hear her confession alone. To protect her, and to protect you, I will stand with you as a witness. This is a serious accusation."

"You don't have to tell me that." Beel ripped his arm from his brother's grasp. "Come if you wish. I'm going to her now."

Chapter Nine

Andrea heard the key turn in the lock and fought the bile rising in her throat. Her sire was in Banff. There was no way the asshole would fly out of this town alive. She had to remain cool. Beel wasn't an idiot. He was far from it. He was so perfect it tore her apart knowing she couldn't have him. There was no way she'd dishonor his nest by being with him.

The key in the lock turned and she jumped off his living room couch, instinctively looking around the quiet nest. It might not be him. She shot a wary look at the kitchen. There was a small window in there. If it wasn't him, she needed an escape route.

As she stepped toward the kitchen, Beel's strong, all-male scent wrapped around her like a warm, comfortable blanket. She grabbed the doorway, immediately smelling another male with him, and waited, braced to fly if she had to.

"Andrea," Beel said, entering his nest and crossing the living room in a few long paces. He was in her space in the next instant, dragging his fingers through her hair. "Thank you for remaining here," he said under his breath, his dark gray eyes looking more troubled than usual. "You honor me, my little owl," he whispered.

She nodded but stared past him as Heath, Beel's nest mate, closed the front door and locked it behind him. He too looked troubled although she didn't smell anything on either of them other than the faint smell of beer and cigarette smoke, which would make sense if they'd been at that bar.

"Where is my sister?" she asked, pulling her pensive stare from Heath and focusing on Beel. His usual warm gaze was gone.

"She's at Earl's for now," Beel said then slipped his arm around her and guided her to his couch. "We're going to sit and talk for a minute."

"About what?" She was hesitant to move with Beel but his grip on her was firmer than it looked. He brought her to the couch and sat with her facing her. Heath remained at the door, silent, watching her with piercing gray eyes so much like Beel's but harder, sterner and colder than she'd remembered them being. Her heart began thumping in her chest and she searched Beel's relaxed expression. "What happened?"

Beel's expression was unreadable as she searched his face. He swallowed, and for a moment, she thought she saw pain in his eyes. It might have been her imagination. He wasn't acting the way he usually did around her and if it was because his brother stood guarding the door to the nest, she worried his attention toward her hadn't meant to him what she thought it had. It was for the best though. She straightened, waiting for him to speak. If he wasn't willing to show the affection toward her that he displayed when they were alone, all that meant was she'd made the right decision in not fucking him.

"My nest spoke with Jerome Chouette at Earl's," he began.

Just hearing his name uttered out loud gave Andrea the chills. It was imperative she not break down in front of these two. They were the backbone of the entire parliament in Banff. If she lost it in front of Beel's nest, he would never see her again. Although a moment ago she was praising herself for resisting him. Andrea shoved all thoughts out of her head, staring at Beel and waiting for him to continue.

"Heath is here because he heard Jerome's words. We're both going to hear your story now."

"My story?"

Beel nodded. "It's time, Andrea," he whispered. "Tell me what happened."

She searched his face. He'd asked her before about her past. No one would ever know that story. It was something she'd take to her grave. She and Anna had flown in the night so many times, running from that monster. Meeting Beel though, recently her thoughts were changing. It had crossed her mind to stand and fight. Her nest deserved a life. That monster had robbed them of it at too young an age, but they should be able to live like any other owl. And with Beel in her life.

She shoved the fantasies out of her head and stared at his somber expression. "Anna and I won't fly this time," she whispered, hoping he understood that protecting her, showing her his honor, did mean something to her.

Beel didn't respond. His expression remained grave. "It's very important that you tell us what happened. We need to hear your story."

"My story?" She studied him a moment then shot her attention to Heath, who remained at the door, watching her with his expression more guarded than Beel's. "Wait a minute," she said as a painful knot formed in her gut. "What did Anna say to you?"

"Anna hasn't said anything. She spoke to you on the phone and that calmed her. Your sister is safe, Andrea. Please tell me what happened."

There it was again. Pain. He looked at her with an imploring, strained gaze that once again searched deep into her soul. She could feel him penetrating her, and she felt his pain. Why would he feel pain?

"What do you know?"

Heath stepped forward. Beel held out his arm, his expression fierce, protective when he shot his brother a warning look. "I'll handle this." The darkness in his tone was terrifying.

Andrea jumped up from the couch. "What is going on here?" she demanded.

Beel flew off the couch, grabbing her as Heath moved closer too. The two males stared at each other, and the fierceness in their gazes scared her further. Beel turned his back on his brother, his grip on her arms strong enough she couldn't move.

"Andrea, tell us the truth and I'll protect you," he whispered, and brushed his lips over hers.

"Would you do this over a female you've just met?" Heath demanded, his voice growing louder as he spoke. "Stand aside, Beel. I'm ordering you."

Beel turned to face his brother but pushed Andrea behind him. "This is my nest and I have as much rights in this parliament as you do," he hissed, sounding more aggressive than she'd ever heard him sound. "You're going to remain quiet and hear her side of this story or you're going to leave."

"What?" Andrea pushed her way around Beel, slapping at him when he tried keeping her from his brother. "Stop it," she snapped, glaring at Beel. "What do you mean, 'my side of the story'?"

Heath didn't say anything but instead watched her interaction with Beel. "Interesting," he muttered.

Beel picked her up and returned her to the couch, shoving her down and sitting next to her. When she tried scooting away, he held her firmly, his piercing eyes lined with gold. She wasn't sure if she'd pushed him too far by growing aggressive in front of Heath or if Heath's words affected him.

"I want to know right now what happened when you were a fledgling," Beel demanded.

She stared at him. He already knew. Emotions swarmed through her that she'd barely managed to conceal. How could Beel possibly know? There was no way that asshole, that waste of feathers, would ever confess to the truth. Had they somehow managed to learn the truth from him? Maybe he was more insane now than he'd been when they were fledglings.

But if Beel knew the truth, any fleeting fantasies she had of being with him would be shattered. His expression was hard. His actions rough. Beel promised protection and consoled her to calm her, but it was his way of showing her he wouldn't dishonor her. A male like Beel wouldn't be with a female like Andrea if the truth were out. Nests seldom mated beneath themselves.

"A very terrible thing," she began, and her voice cracked. She would dishonor herself in front of both of these males. All her life, or it seemed as if it had been all her life, she'd fought to hide the truth, even from herself and Anna. Now she had to tell both these males, which would mean having to leave yet another nest. There would be no way she could hold her head high with honor once they knew the truth.

"Take your time." Beel's tone softened and he took her hand.

She focused on him, on this moment. This was why she kept all males at bay. If they learned the truth they wouldn't want her. Now she was closer to being with a male than she'd ever been. For just this moment she would cherish the feeling of Beel looking at her compassionately, of him holding her hand and staring at her as if she meant something to him.

"I was hatched in a nest in Echo Bay, north of Yellowknife where I told you we lived prior to flying here." Andrea cleared her throat. "It wasn't until my sister and I learned how to fly that we coincidentally learned my mother didn't mate with my sire

by choice. She would tell us stories of her past to help us relax while we learned to work our wings."

It all came back to her. For years she'd fought to hide the memories, make them go away. With a single sentence all of it popped into her head as if they were thoughts she dwelt on daily. The intensity of them made her waver. The room spun for a moment and she tightened her grip on Beel's hand.

Beel held her firmly and gently rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand. She licked her lips, refusing to stare into his eyes as she struggled with her next sentence. Remembering it was one thing, voicing the nightmare to anyone else was completely another.

"She wouldn't ever tell us the details. My sister and I swore we smelled her sadness. It was during one of their fights that we found out one of the ugly ones when our mother dared stand up to our sire." The yelling came back to her. The terrible fights below while she and her sister huddled together upstairs. "I used to tell my sister stories of great owls that I would make up so we couldn't hear the fighting as much." She almost laughed, but it was a choking sound and a warning that her emotions would surface if she weren't careful. "He bought our mother and the nest we were hatched in from her sire. He would yell at her that he paid too much."

She couldn't do this. Andrea stared at Beel, wanting him to know she wasn't strong enough. He thought she was strong, honorable. But she wasn't strong. She hadn't been hatched into honor or raised in it. Andrea had learned to fly with honor, but it was impossible if anyone got close enough to prevent the stench from her upbringing not to come through. Beel's nest and hers would never even be in the same forest. He'd never known life without honor.

They weren't going to let her leave until she shared her story with them. The words wouldn't come out. She'd spent her entire life learning not to talk about it or think about it. Too much training couldn't be reversed. If she tried, her dishonor would flood the room, her emotions would erupt. The pain was bad enough already.

When she stood, Beel didn't stop her. Maybe he sensed she needed space. Andrea wouldn't look at him to find out. Instead, walking away from both of them, she paused in the doorway leading to the kitchen, staring at the small window she thought might be an escape route earlier. There wouldn't be any flying this time. It had all closed in around her and now was the time to face her past, stand up and conquer it. If she could just do that.

"The worse part about all of it was Mother never fighting back. You've met him. There's nothing to him. He's an asshole." She gathered strength, knowing what she would say next would destroy all chance of her ever finding happiness. Andrea turned around, glancing at each of them. "It was a night after one of their fights," she began, and sucked in a breath. She smelled compassion and concern. Holding on to those scents, she lowered her gaze, unwilling to stare at either of them as she voiced the worse of it. "It was bad. Mother was in her bedroom with the door closed and he came after both of us. He took each of us by the hand and brought us downstairs. Then,

walking to the fireplace, he took the newspaper from the table and caught it on fire. He lit the curtains on fire in the living room then a book our mother had been reading." She closed her eyes, hearing her and her sister crying for their mother. "He tossed that book at our mother's bedroom door then pulled my sister and me outside."

Everything started spinning. Andrea staggered and grabbed the doorway, swearing she smelled the smoke. Her sister had screamed for their mother to come out of the bedroom. "The house lit up the night. I stared at it, my eyes burning, waiting for our mother to run toward us. She never did. He killed her that night. At some point I realized that, understood we wouldn't see her again. I don't remember how I did it, but somehow I grabbed my sister and ran. I told her to change and we flew. It was the only way we could get away from him. I knew that. He never flew straight. I don't know why but there was something wrong with him."

Andrea choked, this time not smelling the flames but instead the strong scent of a male. She hadn't heard him approach, but when she opened her eyes, Beel stood right in front of her, blocking her view of the rest of the room. His gray eyes burned with the flames she'd seen in her head. As he pierced her soul with his all-knowing gaze, she couldn't look away.

"We stayed out of parliaments until we were old enough for no one to question our being there without our nest. The only way to make sure he didn't find us was to change our nest name. Prudeaux was our mother's nest. It was the best way for Anna and me to honor her. Our mother might be dead at the wings of that monster, but his nest is now also dead. It will die with him. Our mother's nest will live on through our fledglings." Andrea fought a blush at the mention of someday mating and having her own nest. She couldn't look away from Beel though.

"We've been flying from him ever since," she whispered, her emotions wavering. Somehow there was strength in his steady stare that she pulled from, gathering her own. "He's not going to hurt Anna or me anymore. If you don't kill him—" she began, ready to warn Beel again that she would.

Beel put his fingers over her lips and made a soothing, hushing sound. Then putting his arm around her, he pulled her against him.

"Do you smell a lie?" Beel asked Heath, turning them and focusing on his brother.

"What?" Andrea stiffened.

"No. I don't." Heath's expression was chiseled in stone. "I didn't smell a lie on the male either."

"What are you talking about?" She tried pushing away from Beel but he tightened his grip. All that hard muscle touching her everywhere was too much. She was raw inside, her emotions teetering on destruction. "Why would you smell a lie?" she demanded, fisting her hands against his chest.

"Jerome informs us you killed your mother," Heath told her.

"What?" She barely got the word out. Nor could she stop the spicy outrage when it rushed through her. "That bastard destroyed our nest, robbed us from ever flying with honor," she spit out, suddenly shaking.

"Question Anna," Beel said.

"No!" Andrea fought him, pounding his chest and kicking, everything she'd laid out before them crashing around her as her emotions surged to life. They stunk, carrying a nasty stench to them, which almost made her gag. "Don't you dare do that to her!" she cried out, feeling zaps shoot up her spine. "I won't allow you to do that to her!"

"Enough!" Heath roared, his voice echoing off the walls in the nest.

Beel's strong arms around her held her up when otherwise she might have crashed. She was lightheaded from her emotional outburst but burying her head in his chest would add to her shame. It was impossible to move with him crushing her against him.

"I'm okay," she managed, her voice still shaky but she would face her disgrace on her own. When she straightened, Beel's grip on her eased. He let her go so she could face Heath. "Forgive me. I've disgraced myself before both of you. I understand now you wished to hear me defend myself. You offered honor to a nest that has none. Thank you for that."

"Don't ask Anna to tell the story. We've heard it from Andrea. That is enough," Beel said, his strong, calm tone soft but filled with authority. "I think simply asking her straightforward questions would be sufficient."

Heath nodded. "Agreed." Then turning to the door, he unlocked it before facing Beel. "It would be best to return her to her nest for now."

He stepped into the hallway without waiting for a response. When the door closed, the weighted silence closed in around her.

"I don't want you to worry," Beel said. Once again he'd moved without her knowing and stood inches behind her, his soft baritone brushing through her hair. "No one is going to kill you. We believe you didn't kill your mother."

That's what all of this had been about. She'd been charged with murder by another owl. Their laws were simple. Kill one of their own and die. That bastard was ready to let others do what he hadn't been able to accomplish on his own. He wanted his nest dead. As long as she and Anna could fly, he risked his ugly secret surfacing.

Andrea barely felt a thing when she stumbled to his door. There wouldn't be any comfort in her nest but at least she'd be alone. Not that she was sure waiting in her nest would be any better than remaining here. Her past still swam around in her brain. That terrible night. The flames dancing cruelly before her, taking away her nest, the remaining years of being a fledgling. They twisted around each other and reached for the sky, mocking her and sealing her into a life of shame and no honor.

When she unlocked and entered her nest, she wasn't the one who closed the door behind her or secured the lock. "Anna has her own key?" Beel asked.

She nodded, staring at him in the darkness. Beel didn't say anything but put his arm around her shoulders, keeping her close as he walked to the hallway leading to the bedrooms. "Which one is yours?" he asked.

Andrea pointed then used her hand to push open her bedroom door. She needed to tell him to leave but didn't want him to go. His strong, protective hands felt too good on her body. He cupped her cheeks, holding her face and kissing her. The taste of his concern, his compassion and protectiveness was sweeter than anything she'd ever tasted in her life.

That nagging voice in the back of her head repeated how it would be wise to send him away. Assure him she would be fine. There wasn't any strength left in her to attack until he stopped. She'd done that to him once already and lived with the pain, the emptiness after when she'd deprived herself of having him inside her.

Beel undressed her, taking his time and stroking her flesh as he slowly exposed all of her to him. "My sweet little owl," he muttered, his voice thick and heavy with need.

He ignited the fire inside her as he had every other time he'd touched her since meeting her. When he cradled the back of her neck, she let her head fall back, surrendering and arching before him. Beel growled, the sound coming from deep in his throat as he let her smell his craving for her.

"Every inch of you," he praised, touching her breasts, pressing his hand flat against her stomach then sliding it down between her legs until he cupped her pussy. "We can just sleep if you want."

She blinked, realizing her eyes had been closed. His gaze smoldered. Raw passion and lust swarmed in those heavy, large gray eyes as he searched her face. Somehow she knew he would have his answer even if she didn't utter a word. Never would she have believed any male would know her so completely. It should terrify her. Instincts should kick in and demand he leave her mind alone, respect her space.

But damn, he felt incredibly good swarming around in her brain with her. The corner of his mouth twitched, and in the next moment, he swept her into his arms, carrying her and laying her gently on the bed. He didn't toss her as he did the last time when they'd been in his nest. There was a rough, aggressive side to Beel and there was a compassionate, dominating side. Both turned her on and got her so damn hot it should terrify her.

Yet she melted on her bed, stretching her legs and easing herself to the edge to allow room for him to join her. Beel undressed before her, revealing all that roped, well-defined muscle. She took her time, studying every inch of him as his clothes came off.

He tousled his blond hair when he pulled off his sweatshirt and dropped it to the ground. Thin lines of silver, signs of his maturity that added to the honor he carried with pride, weaved through his hair. She ached to stroke his hair, feel its softness under her fingertips.

There was a thin, straight scar under his arm that disappeared when he lowered his arms and reached for his jeans. Andrea shot a glance to his face, noticing the puckered

skin from where she'd attacked him had faded. It wouldn't scar. Owls were healthy and strong and their metabolism allowed them to heal much faster than a human. She was glad there wouldn't be a mark reminding her of the first time she'd laid eyes on him. Andrea didn't want to remember how she attacked him, but instead how he refused to back down or fly away. He'd stood up to her, acknowledged her strength and showed her his own.

Beel slipped his fingers inside his jeans and unbuttoned them then unzipped them. A fine line of hair stretched from his chest down his stomach. As he kicked off his boots then pushed his boxers and jeans down in one fluid movement, she stared at the tight, dark patch of hair. When his cock snapped free, suddenly alert and facing her, as if it already knew exactly where it belonged, her mouth went dry.

But when Beel straightened, completely naked, and eased onto the bed next to her, suddenly she drooled from the sight of him. He was amazing, absolutely perfect in every way imaginable. Andrea wasn't sure there was much left to her after revealing her dishonor to his nest. Yet the way he looked at her, immediately touching her as he stretched out alongside her, along with his intoxicating ripe aroma, were enough to show her he didn't care.

She wasn't ready to believe or accept her past now being just that. Part of her thought she should have insisted on going with them to Anna, protecting her sister as she always had. It was a moment of selfishness, a moment of wanting what Beel offered, and the lack of strength to fight any longer what she needed for herself.

"I want you," she admitted, and knew she stated the obvious when she looked into his face.

His cock danced between them as he rolled to his side, easing one arm under her neck then cupping her breast. "Damn good thing," he grumbled, and teased her nipple.

It was just as it had been the first time he touched her. Charged bolts of energy zapped from his fingertips, hardening her nipple painfully as her breast swelled and the burst of electricity shot straight through her body to her pussy. Andrea arched into him, letting her head roll back on his arm and breathed in his scent.

"I've wanted you since I first saw you in your feathers," he told her, lowering his mouth to her breast and sucking her hard nipple.

She arched into him, grabbing his head and digging her fingers into his hair, holding him against her as she enjoyed the torture he administered. Her pussy swelled, instantly soaked. The throbbing started there but spread instantly, tearing through her so everywhere his fingers moved—touching, exploring, probing and learning her body—created new sensations she absolutely loved.

He would push her over the edge before she could attempt to gain some kind of control. She was so swollen, so ripe and ready for him. His fingers cupped her pussy, stroked her shaved flesh, and found her tender clit.

"Shit!" she hissed, her hands flying from his head to his shoulders and digging in. "Damn! Beel!" Her world toppled, every inch of her charged from a swollen pressure surging beyond her control.

Beel grunted, moving his mouth to her other nipple and scraping it with his teeth before sucking hard, pulling her into his mouth as his fingers continued circling and torturing the small part of her that was the source of her pain. It was also her pleasure. Beel teased her clit while adoring her breast until she couldn't handle it any longer.

"I'm going to..." The words were lost.

He didn't need her to tell him though. The pressure inside her erupted, filling the room with her lustful aroma as she came hard. Wave after wave of pressure exploded inside her. Andrea cried out, tossing her head from side to side and feeling the rippling muscle in his arm under her neck as it flexed.

Before her orgasm ebbed, he slid his fingers into her velvety heat and found another spot that sent her crashing harder than she knew herself capable. Hell, he hadn't even entered her yet and she was drenched with her come, ripe and throbbing from quick, hard multiple orgasms.

If it was her body's reaction to enduring so many emotions, or simply Beel's capable hands and unmatched skills, Andrea didn't know. Nor did she care. Not at the moment. He thrust his fingers deep inside her, twisting them so his knuckles rubbed against her sensitive inner walls and she floated. This was better than anything she'd ever felt in her life.

His cock rubbed against her, swollen, long and hard, promising her more pleasure. Andrea gulped in the thick, fragranced air. It was cool in her lungs and helped her regain strength. As hard as she'd just come, and as much as she'd needed that relief, all he'd done was chip away at the surface. Pressure regained momentum almost immediately the moment she caught her breath and continually dragged more of their combined scents inside her.

It was a single bed and Beel was a tall man. Andrea didn't mind the confined space. She rather preferred it at the moment. Although she was rather surprised every inch of her hadn't turned to rubber, she used the strength she possessed and rolled into him, pushing his hard chest.

"On your back, male," she ordered, her voice raspy and thickly laced with lust.

Her gaze locked on his as she climbed onto him, and his amused, dominating stare created a heat that burst into flames immediately. Every inch of her burned with desire. Her skin sizzled. Wherever he touched her proved acutely sensitive, as if his fingers controlled her. Her body reacted to his touch and she wanted that same power over him.

Moving to her knees then straddling his thighs, she almost teetered when his cock nestled against her soaked pussy. It would take nothing to ease him inside her, take what he offered and what he needed as desperately as she did.

"My aggressive female returns," Beel mumbled, although he didn't appear or smell upset when he adjusted himself on her bed, stretching out on his back so he lay in the center with room for her legs on either side of him.

"I never left," she pointed out, and her hair tumbled forward when she pressed her hands flat on his chest and lowered her mouth to his. "I will always be in charge."

He kissed her, latching his hand against the back of her head and keeping her there, impaling her mouth and growling so that his guttural rumble tore through her body.

"We'll see about that," he whispered into her mouth then nipped her lower lip. He tortured her with his teeth and a sharp prickle created sparks in her spine. He immediately followed the sensation with incredible pressure as he dragged his tongue where he'd just nipped at her. "I'm not an owl to be tamed."

Beel grabbed her hips, lifting her just enough to give himself leverage, then slipped inside her, thrusting her down on his cock. Andrea arched into him on instinct, pushing herself up as her hands remained flat on his chest. His solid, strong heartbeat pounded against her palms, letting her feel his commanding strength as he filled her.

His cock drove deep inside her, stretching and caressing, growing and taking all she had. She could barely breathe, let alone remain straight on top of him. Nothing had ever felt better. Her insides clenched around him, taking all of him as she soaked them with her come.

But she wouldn't surrender. Even as he maintained a firm hold on her and began a strong, hot rhythm, fucking her as he slid against incredibly soaked, tender flesh, Andrea wouldn't give in to his proud domination.

Maybe she wasn't hatched in honor. That didn't mean she flew without pride.

"I'm not a—" She gasped when he thrust harder than he had a moment before.

Andrea fell forward, her arms buckling as she collapsed against his chest. Beel's arms wrapped around her, pinning her there, and took her with more energy, moving faster and hitting her at a new angle.

"An owl to be tamed either," she continued between gasps.

Beel grunted, nipped her lip playfully as his expression hardened. Andrea looked into his eyes and couldn't look away. He held her captive, making love to her with a fierceness that pushed them over the edge together.

Her orgasm hit her so hard, the change rose inside her. Beel howled, feeling her tighten around him. Andrea's pussy muscles clamped, twitched, and pressure exploded inside her. At the same time Beel swelled, his cock twitched as his face hardened along with the rest of him.

When he released inside her, gold flecks appeared in his gray eyes. He continued staring at her, but this time she swore she saw deep into his soul. All of his determination, his aggressive nature and commanding disposition, his intensely powerful honor and domination were obvious. But she saw something else and smelled it as well when she lost herself in him.

It was possessive, strong and glowing even as the gold flecks faded and the fog cleared. The corner of his mouth curved. "My little owl," he whispered, and moved one hand to pet the back of her hair. "You're a marked female now."

Chapter Ten

Beel didn't want to slide out of Andrea's bed. It was warm, and her soft, perfect body nestled up against him. When her breathing slowed and the tension in her faded, Beel guessed she might be sleeping better than she had in years. He wanted to hold her, enjoy knowing he'd pulled her nightmare from her. And he would end it too.

Jerome Chouette wouldn't fly out of Banff alive.

Beel eased his arm out from under Andrea. She groaned and inched closer to him. His little female might play all tough and independent when she kept her wall up around her, but in her sleep, with her natural smells filling the room, she clung to him, not wanting Beel to leave. His heart swelled as he gazed down at her relaxed expression.

Her lower lip stuck out slightly, giving her a pouty look, and her hair was tangled and tousled. It draped over her bare shoulder and he brushed it out of the way then kissed her warm skin. Andrea moaned but didn't wake up.

Her nest was quiet and neat. Beel hadn't taken time to look the place over when he first arrived but he did now. After glancing at the bathroom then taking a quick look at the second bedroom where Anna slept, he moved into the living room. The couch and coffee table were along the same wall as they were in his nest. But there weren't lamps or throw carpets on the floor. No pictures hung on the wall—no pictures of either of them or their nest.

Beel entered the kitchen, moving quietly as he glanced in cabinets and the refrigerator. They were all but bare. The two females flew here with nothing to claim as their own. Granted, both immediately found jobs. It was obvious their intentions were to create a good nest for the two of them and fly with his parliament. Beel closed the refrigerator, immediately feeling the urge to hunt then lay his kill before Andrea. Even in his human form a carnal urge to protect and provide ran strong through his veins.

He wouldn't leave this nest tonight. Heath and Rock hadn't contacted him but he knew at some point they'd escort Anna to her nest. It didn't bother him knowing they'd find him here. He didn't care that they'd smell Andrea all over him. Hell, he wore her scent with pride. But he wouldn't be found in Andrea's bed, sleeping. Not yet. Beel would allow his nest, and hers, to grow accustomed to them being together before taking her bed.

After doing one more walk-through of the nest, making sure all windows were securely locked and not surprised to already find them that way, he stretched out on the couch, locking his hands behind his head, and made himself comfortable as he waited and listened. Jerome Chouette wouldn't escape Beel's nest, but if something strange happened and the male tried flying to this nest, he wouldn't live through his effort.

He was positive he never slept. There were dreams though, fleeting, as if they were flashes before his closed eyes, drifting in and out of his brain.

Beel chased a male, although he didn't know what he looked like. Anger and determination hardened every inch of him, pushing him faster. The male wouldn't get away. Then another flash. Andrea standing before him, the sun reflecting in her beautiful, long, blonde hair. She was radiant, the sexiest female he'd ever sniffed after. Her scent was the same as his and he loved how it smelled on her, and on him. But every time he tried to touch her, she seemed to be just out of his reach. It frustrated him. He wanted her, needed her. She stood there, staring at him with her haunted gray eyes. And she needed him. He had to take care of her but only if he could reach her.

Something clicked and Beel jumped, springing to a sitting position and staring around him wildly. His spine zapped as the change urged to come forth. Protect Andrea!

He was disoriented, but only for a moment as the dreams faded. Beel twisted on the couch, sniffing the air and listening. Andrea still slept in her bed. He listened to her soft breathing as he inhaled the rich aroma still lingering in her nest from their lovemaking.

There was no way he fell asleep. He couldn't protect her if he slept. A glance at the wall clock showed it was an hour later than when he'd lain down. He'd heard something that grabbed his attention and listened for it to repeat itself.

There was a clicking sound. It was the same noise that roused him. Beel stood slowly, focusing in on the sound. Several owls were on the other side of the door to the nest. Moving closer as he pressed to identify their scents, whoever they were slid a key into the lock and turned it until the door unlocked.

Anna appeared in the doorway with Heath and Rock behind her. All of them immediately focused on Beel. Anna jumped, covering her mouth so she wouldn't embarrass herself, and at the same time stepped backward until she backed into Heath. He grabbed her shoulder.

"It's Beel," he whispered.

Anna nodded, entering her nest and placing her keys on the coffee table. "Where is Andrea?" she asked, her head lowered and her hair shrouding her face.

"Asleep," Beel told her.

It didn't take more than a second for the three of them to sniff the air and once again focus on Beel. Anna's eyes opened wide, her mouth opening, but she snapped it closed and hurried into the kitchen, turning on the light and sending long shadows across the living room.

Rock followed Heath into the nest and closed the door behind him.

"Is the nest secure?" Heath made a show of sniffing Beel.

Beel ignored the implication. "Yup. I checked it myself."

Heath nodded. "Let the female go to sleep."

"That's fine."

Again Heath nodded. "Let's go. I'll fill you in on everything once we're out of here." He kept his voice low although if Anna tried she probably could hear them.

"I'm staying here."

Anna appeared in the doorway holding a glass of water in both her hands. She appeared ready to sip but stared at all of them over the rim.

"Have you been invited to stay?" Heath asked.

Beel shrugged. "She fell asleep." He wasn't going to elaborate, nor was he leaving.

Heath sensed Beel's convictions. "Step outside with me."

Beel gave Anna his attention. "Go to bed. Your sister is fine and asleep. I'm going to stay on the couch. You'll both be safe. You have my word."

"Thank you," Anna mumbled, hesitating for a moment, as if she worried leaving the males standing in her living room was somehow unacceptable.

"It's okay," Beel stressed, softening his tone. "Go get some sleep."

"Okay," she said slowly, and headed down the hallway.

"Outside," Heath grunted.

Beel followed his brothers to the hallway but remained with his back to the nest door, keeping it from closing all the way and making sure the door wasn't locked.

"Do you think it was wise fucking her with everything going on?" Heath hissed the moment the three of them stood in the hall, hovering in a tight circle.

Beel stiffened, turning a harsh stare on his brother. "It was very wise," he said, his teeth clenched.

"Your feelings for this female will cloud your judgment."

"There isn't anything to cloud. She isn't guilty of anything."

"Maybe." Heath looked away from Beel first, tapping his finger against his lips as he glanced at Rock then the ground.

"Anna doesn't remember a lot of the details around the death of her mother," Rock offered.

Beel accepted that. It fit into the picture if Andrea protected her sister, apparently since they were small fledglings, from their grotesque upbringing. "What did she tell you?" he asked, curious.

"We followed your suggestion," Rock offered, glancing past Beel as he spoke.

Beel did the same. It was very late but not too late for owls to be returning from a night flight. The hallway was empty, for the moment.

"Instead of having Anna explain what happened between Andrea and her sire, I asked her questions," Rock continued.

"What did you ask her?"

"I asked what happened to her mother."

Heath had been staring at the ground, appearing lost in thought. Both Heath and Rock smelled of Earl's. There was also a tight, not-so-descript scent lingering on both of them. Beel guessed it was from the unpleasant experience they just endured. Having to set things right in a nest gone wrong wasn't a pleasant experience for any owl. Fortunately, his kind flew with enough honor situations such as this one seldom happened. Beel was positive his nest had never had to deal with such an ugly ordeal.

"And?" Beel pressed.

"The female stared at us wide-eyed as if we'd both just grown horns." Heath was suddenly upset. He whispered, but the way he hissed out his words along with a slight spicy aroma showed how he might have reacted to Anna's silence. "She refused to speak to us without her sister present."

"Which is her right." Beel nodded, although agreed it would have made all of this much easier to end if Anna would share the truth with them. "And she never changed her mind?"

"Nope," Rock said, glancing the other way down the hall.

"My staying here will ensure the two females don't have the chance to speak of this before Anna is questioned further."

"I would have agreed with you until coming to this nest and smelling the fresh smell from the two of you fucking," Heath hissed.

"Are you suggesting I would encourage either of them to lie?" It was hard to stay calm. "My relationship with Andrea has nothing to do with that insane owl flying into Banff."

Heath studied Beel. "Interesting."

"It's a hell of a lot worse than 'interesting'. That male has terrorized these two females long enough. And it ends now. You take care of this, or I will."

"We still have the problem of Jerome Chouette not smelling like a lie when he accused Andrea of killing his mate," Rock said, studying both of them but straightening when Beel flashed him a hostile look. "I would kill for a female I cared about too," he offered, raising his hands in surrender. "Try to look at this situation as if you didn't know the females."

"I do know the females." Beel fought his mounting anger as he pushed through his brothers. He paced a few feet before facing them and combing his hair with his fingers. "Not Anna as well as Andrea, but Anna's scent and behavior matches the stories Andrea has shared."

"We sleep on this tonight," Heath decided, slapping his leg and walking toward Beel. "Sleep with this nest if you will. But if we have no new information tomorrow, I'll form a small parliament to decide. I won't fly alone as the law in this situation." Heath gave Beel a parting look, one that was a mixture of conviction and concern, before starting down the hall to the stairwell.

Rock stopped in front of Beel and patted his shoulder.

"Where is the male?" Beel asked before his brother could say anything.

"We have no grounds to confine him." Beel shook his head, glancing in the direction Heath had gone. "He decided to stay at the Hampton Bed and Breakfast. Elaine and Elisa were advised to keep an eye on the male and let us know immediately if he flew anywhere."

"How does he have money to stay at Hampton?" Beel clenched his fist, feeling fire surge through his veins. That male would wreck havoc on Andrea and her nest unless he took matters into his own wings.

The Hampton Bed and Breakfast opened less than two years ago by a Great Horned Owl nest who was all females. Already it had a reputation among humans as being the place to stay while skiing. The Hampton nest didn't mind catering to humans since they paid an extraordinary amount to stay at the large Victorian house the females had converted into a nice, cozy room of nests for any who would pay the price to stay there. Beel hadn't flown by the house yet, but the squawking he'd heard said the Hampton nest were incredible cooks and could prepare a kill better than any female in the area.

Rock shrugged. "It wasn't my place to ask." He squeezed Beel's shoulder. "Don't dishonor our nest." The smell of his compassion made his words less harsh. "Tomorrow will come soon enough. If the male lies, we'll catch him in it easily enough."

"He does lie," Beel hissed, shrugging away from his brother. "Go to your nest. I'll see you tomorrow."

Beel entered Andrea's nest and stared at the two females who were hugging each other in the middle of the living room, standing in the dark, staring wide-eyed at him. He'd left the door ajar, which possibly enabled both of them to hear most of what he and his brothers said out in the hall. Even in human form owls had incredible hearing.

He closed the door, locked it, then moved closer to both of them. "How much did you hear?"

Andrea's eyes were as large as her sister's and more haunted than ever. "Beel," she said, her voice breathy. "You're not going to dishonor your nest for my nest."

For either of them to have heard what he and Rock just said to each other, when they stood down the hall and spoke in whispers, one or both females had to have been standing at the door, eavesdropping. He didn't blame either of them for being curious as to what was being said about their nest.

At the same time, although Andrea spoke harshly, she confirmed what he was pretty sure he'd smelled earlier on her. His little female cared about him. Beel stepped forward, and even in the dimly lit living room saw Anna's knuckles turn white as she gripped her sister's hand.

"I will do whatever is needed to protect you," he said, and rubbed the back of his hand down Andrea's cheek. It was warm, her skin flushed.

"We've made it this far flying alone," she said, lifting her gaze to his.

"Has he flown this close to you before?"

There was a slight shake of her head. "No," Andrea mumbled. "I'm willing to bet he's flying in circles with happiness right now at his stroke of luck. We didn't leave a trail. I wouldn't have settled in your parliament if I thought I'd bring the stench of dishonor with me. Whenever we heard squawking of an owl who didn't fly straight, we moved our nest, hid until he disappeared again."

"You've been through enough." Beel's outrage toward an owl he'd never laid eyes on ran deeper than any emotion he'd ever experienced in his life.

Andrea stepped forward, touching Beel's chest. He gripped her hand, watching Anna hug herself when her sister let go of her.

"I won't allow you or your nest to be spoiled with the stench of dishonor," she whispered.

"Are you so incapable of having someone care about you?" Beel demanded, either incapable or unwilling to extinguish the anger burning inside him. This situation merited outrage and he had no problem feeling it at the moment.

Andrea started shaking her head but stiffened, sliding her hand from underneath his and taking a step backward. Immediately Anna wrapped her arm around Andrea's waist, pulling her against her.

"If I were incapable of feeling I wouldn't have run all these years to protect my nest," she hissed, a flash of gold appearing in her eyes. "I wouldn't have fought you with claw and beak, trying to keep you away from me. I would have fucked you right away and not cared how tarnished being with me might make you."

She spun around, grabbing her sister and yanking her to the hallway. Just as quickly, she turned on him again, her blonde hair flying over her shoulder as she moved in on him.

"Don't ever imply you know how I feel or what I'm capable of feeling, owl," she growled, not stopping until she poked his chest with her finger, jabbing him several times. "You don't have a god damn clue what we've been through. Go sleep in your perfect nest!"

Beel grabbed Andrea's wrist, pulling her off balance so she fell against him. "I'm not going anywhere!" he stated, grabbing the back of her neck with his free hand and twisting her hair in his fingers. "And don't ever say something to me again that you don't mean."

She remained stiff for only a moment, her gaze locked on his, before deflating. Immediately Beel loosened his grip on her and began stroking her hair.

"This is the end of your continual flying, my little owl," he whispered.

Chapter Eleven

The intensity of emotions and feelings rolling off Beel was terrifying. It also sent a thrill up Andrea's spine as she stared at his hard features. Maybe there was more truth in his words when he suggested she might not know what it was like to be cared for.

Of course she understood compassion. She didn't fear other owls simply because one evil bastard lived and breathed out there somewhere. Andrea understood how a terrible fledgling life could ruin an owl, but that wasn't her. Just because she and Anna didn't remain in the same nest for very long didn't mean they didn't know compassion. She loved her sister very much.

As she relaxed in his arms, letting him stroke her hair, sensibility seeped into her ransacked thoughts. Logical thinking would get her through this. Allowing emotions to consume her would end only in chaos. Although she hadn't taught them by example, Andrea's mother repeatedly whispered to both her fledglings that honor and a clear head would get them further in life. Andrea focused on her breathing, shoving the precious memories of her mother back into their safe spot. She needed to be focused.

She sucked in another slow, deep-cleansing breath and filled her lungs with Beel's scent. It matched her own and smelled damn good on him. At the same time, she became acutely aware of his hard body pressed against hers, the solid beat of his heart, those incredibly strong arms holding her tight. She wanted to let go, to give being with him a chance. If she were to do so now though, it might very well destroy him.

And that was her proof. Proof Beel wouldn't hear. Because she cared about him she couldn't let him become too involved in this ugly mess that was her life. He'd already made it clear he didn't see her logic. Andrea exhaled slowly, knowing there was only one thing to do.

"You honor both of us," she whispered, and slowly moved out of his arms. "I'll get you some blankets."

The look on his face showed he'd rather sleep in her bed with her, but Andrea wouldn't do that to Anna, not after the night she'd had. When her sister crawled onto Andrea's bed, waking her from a deep, dreamless sleep, the turmoil and pain wrapped around her made Andrea think for a moment they'd regressed in time to when they were fledglings. It wasn't the case though, and as she'd listened to what happened to Anna at the bar, she was grateful her sister was okay, and immediately wondered where Beel was.

"If that is what you want," Beel said slowly, that damnable gaze of his burning into her soul once again and seeing the truth.

Falling asleep next to Beel's warm, strong body sounded better than anything she could think of at the moment. "We'll get the blankets. Please," she said, gesturing with a wave of her hand, "make yourself comfortable."

Anna was nervous, edgy as she inched down the hallway and into Andrea's bedroom where several blankets were stacked next to her dresser.

"What should we do?" she whispered.

Andrea held up her hand, indicating Anna not speak. Beel would be focused on hearing every word they said.

"We go to bed." She searched her sister's face and immediately ached to wipe the fear and panic away that lined Anna's pretty features.

"But you heard them," Anna stressed, whispering and moving farther into Andrea's bedroom toward the blankets. "They're going to question me again tomorrow."

Andrea picked up a couple of blankets and hugged them against herself as she stared at her sister. "I know what I've told you in the past."

Her bedroom door pushed open and Anna spun around, almost stumbling backward into Andrea and the bulky blankets in her hands when Beel filled the doorway with his dominating presence.

"Let me help you." He gave both of them a shrewd look before moving around Anna and lifting the blankets from Andrea's hands. "The two of you should go to sleep."

He didn't want Anna talking to Andrea. That hit her harder than if Beel had smacked her. Andrea bit her lower lip, using the pain to keep fresh, raw emotions from surfacing. With Beel so close and her sister in the room too, she was grateful for the darkness and the large blankets in Beel's hands. It was hard for him to look over them until he adjusted them and shoved them under his arm. Andrea used that moment to stifle the pain so it wouldn't reek.

"Is there anything else you need?" she asked, and her voice cracked.

Anna edged to the door but smiled at Beel. "Thank you again for your protection. Sleep well," she murmured, gave her sister a fleeting glance, and hurried to her bedroom.

"Come with me." Beel didn't make it a question and didn't give her time to respond. He walked out of her bedroom, leaving her standing in the dark.

Her heart constricted in her chest, the discomfort of it distracting. Flying in the night repeatedly, enduring the disrespect branded in her feathers, was a pain she'd learned to endure over the years. But this, fresh, acute and sharp, pierced so deep inside her it made it difficult to breathe. Andrea hesitated, thinking it would serve him right if she refused.

Beel sat on her couch in the living room, the floorboards squeaking under his weight. He would stretch out, drape her blankets over his perfect body, and she'd be in

her room alone. Andrea followed him down the hallway before she could argue with herself any longer.

She paused at the end of the hall, her mouth going dry at the sight of roped muscle rippling through Beel's bare back. He'd pulled his sweatshirt over his head and draped it over the end of the couch. As he turned to the couch where he'd dumped the blankets, he took his time looking at Andrea. He moved with the stealthy confidence of the honor-bound predator he was. Dominating, sure of his actions and what he would do next, Beel moved without hesitation as if the world and all who were in it would adhere to his words of wisdom, or else.

That much raw confidence shouldn't turn her on as much as it did. Beel was cocky, gorgeous without a fault, arrogant and possessive. Not the kind of male she needed in her life. He was an amazing lover, leaving her tingling with satisfaction and at the same time wondering when they would make love again. Her scent was embedded in his flesh and his in hers. If they parted, their scents would fade off each other, but the longer they remained together, the stronger it would become. And it was that scent, along with his addictive sex appeal, that drew her to him, making it damn hard to remain where she stood and not slide around the couch until she was at his side.

"I know the story Jerome Chouette told my nest is a lie." Beel lifted one blanket and shook it out then spread it over her couch. He lifted the second blanket and unfolded it. "You fly with honor, Andrea, and have since I first laid eyes on you."

Since she also knew the bastard lied and did her best every day to fly with honor in spite of her tarnished nest, she didn't say anything. Andrea understood though, he was appeasing her. Beel sensed her pain in the bedroom when he sent Anna to bed and interrupted their conversation before Andrea could assure Anna over what to say when she spoke with Beel's nest. He believed Andrea but didn't think her capable of handling the situation without his assistance. It still hurt.

"Anna is a beautiful young owl. She is pure of heart and untarnished," he continued, reclining on the couch and stretching out his legs. One by one, he kicked off his boots so they fell to the floor with a dull thump. His voice was soft and compelling and his body beautiful as he pulled the blanket over him, covering his jeans and leaving his torso exposed. "You've raised her as a mother would her only fledgling."

"She was far from grown when our mother died," Andrea said, stepping to the end of the couch and whispering, not wanting her sister to hear them talking about her.

"She relies very heavily on you."

"We rely on each other."

Beel nodded and lowered his gaze, although she suspected this conversation wasn't over. It would be hard as hell going to bed with the image of him sprawled out on her couch burned in her head. She'd never seen a more perfect male. Every inch of him appealed to her, even when he annoyed the crap out of her with his dominating nature.

"The two of you don't discuss your past."

"There's nothing to discuss. To relive it simply causes pain to surface that neither of us wish to endure."

"I understand." Again he nodded, his voice a soft drawl with a magnetic quality to it. "That's why she wouldn't answer my nest's questions earlier tonight."

It was clear now where he headed with his conversation. His logic fell into place and she understood why he flew the course he did as he spoke. If he simply stated Andrea shouldn't advise Anna in what to say it would ruffle her feathers. It should terrify her how well he already knew her. Again though, Andrea saw the logic. Beel stared into her soul, knowing her heart before she did. That scared her but, in an odd and very illogical way, excited her too. Not once in her life had Andrea known another bird who moved so close alongside her. She'd been too young to develop that type of relationship with her mother. Anna leaned on Andrea. They were friends but would never have the type of relationship she saw could form with Beel. It compelled her, intrigued her, and she ached for it worse than she did to fly.

"I suppose at this point," she began, choosing her words carefully as she moved around the coffee table so it was easier to see his face in the long shadows cast from the kitchen light. "It wouldn't be appropriate to suggest Anna will be more cooperative tomorrow."

His gaze remained hooded and she hated knowing if he did stare up at her, she wouldn't be able to read him as easily as he did her. It gave him an edge she didn't like. Regardless of what he now knew about her, Andrea would be damned before she would accept, or tolerate, Beel believing he was better than her.

"You heard the conversation I had with my nest in the hall." He didn't make it a question.

"Yes," she admitted.

Beel did look up at her then, lifting his gaze and tilting his head so he stared at her with large, stormy gray eyes that were so much more turbulent than his relaxed drawl. He lifted his arm, reaching for her. "Come here, my little owl," he commanded, his voice suddenly gruff.

Chills rushed over her flesh and her insides warmed when she immediately pictured herself stretched out on top of his virile, half-naked body.

"That wouldn't be a good idea," she whispered, hugging herself as if that would keep her in place.

"I will send you to bed shortly, I promise," he said, his hand still extended to her.

"I'm quite capable of sending myself to bed," she snapped. Beel would quit with this commanding attitude real soon or she'd claw it out of him.

For the first time since she'd followed him into the living room to talk to him, his brooding expression faded and he almost looked amused. "I'll remember my sexy owl doesn't take orders well."

"It would be wiser to remember not to give me orders," she informed him, narrowing her gaze on him and deciding that sending her point home would be in his best interest. "That is, if you wish to hold on to your honor and not lose it at the mercy of a helpless female."

"Darling, there is nothing helpless about you." He stared at her, his dark eyes focused, waiting out a moment of silence and simply staring at her. "Andrea, please," he muttered, turning his palm up as he reached for her. "Come here."

She stepped close enough for him to reach her. Beel grabbed her waist, nudging her closer. It wasn't sensible to toy with him, although instinctively she would have done so. Andrea quit hugging herself and touched his forearm. His skin was so charged with raw, unleashed energy she almost yanked her hand back. Except it was like a strong magnet, pulling her closer, reining her into his grasp as if he truly did possess the ability to control her.

Beel grabbed her arm, pulling her to him with enough force she would have tripped around the coffee table if he hadn't kept a firm hold on her. When she was at the edge of the couch, he used both hands, almost lifting her and placing her over him. Andrea was suddenly stretched out on top of him, just as she'd pictured herself being a minute before. Worse yet, she imagined Beel had pictured the same thing happening, except he decided to make it happen. Being around him made her lose her sense of control. Yet somehow Beel pulled it off so she almost believed it was her own doing that got her here. Turning this male into a somewhat submissive, catering to her needs and not manipulating her to see to his, quite possibly would be an impossible task.

"When I was in the hallway with my nest," he continued as if their battle of wits hadn't just happened, "I gave my word you wouldn't coerce Anna in any way as to how to answer the questions that will be presented to her tomorrow."

Beel ran his hand down the curve of her back and rested it on her ass, stretching his fingers and cupping her firm flesh. Sparks of desire ignited and popped inside her, creating a pressure that instantly began throbbing between her legs. She stretched one arm over his shoulder and relaxed her head in her hand, staring at him with their faces inches from each other. His breath tortured her flesh as she watched his long lashes flutter over his gray eyes.

Andrea rested her other hand over his chest and felt his heart beat with a solid, repetitive thump against her palm. She shifted her attention to her hand, needing her thoughts clear as she spoke.

"You won't dishonor yourself in front of your nest. I've already given you my word on that," she murmured, studying her fingers as they touched thick, solid muscles. His bare skin was warm and soft and the tight curls spread across his chest tickled her flesh when she moved her fingers. "None of you suspected Anna would immediately come to my room, wake me, and share everything that happened to her in detail. As soon as I knew you and your nest were here, we came to the living room. When I heard the three of you discuss how imperative it was Anna back up my story, I assured her it would be all right to tell your nest what she remembers."

"Interesting." Beel didn't elaborate but lowered his gaze. For a moment it seemed he'd closed his eyes, although his consistent breathing let her know he wasn't ready to fall asleep.

Andrea shifted her leg and Beel's cock danced to life through his jeans. The hard, long shaft pressed against her, and she caught her breath, sucking it in as her body immediately reacted to the subtle invitation. There was no way she'd fuck Beel on the couch, not with her sister asleep in the nest. It would be wrong and grossly dishonorable. Nonetheless, imagining how he might take her right here, with her riding that thick, incredible cock, or possibly bending over with her hands on the coffee table so he could impale her that way, immediately sent her blood pressure rising. Andrea wasn't the only one who created the thick, sweet smell of lust that suddenly filled the room.

"Does she remember?" Beel asked, shifting his attention to her face and sounding nonchalant enough to suggest making love to her right now hadn't crossed his mind. His hand began a gentle, circular motion over her rear end, which belied his inquisitive tone.

Andrea licked her lips, capturing his attention. Just that small movement and she controlled him. It wasn't much but enough at the moment to give her confidence in possibly taming his incredibly dominating nature.

"I don't know," she said.

"Her story needs to match yours."

"I know this." She moved her fingers over his collarbone, finding his pulse there. His muscles twitched where she touched him, again showing her what power she did possess over him already. "If I review what happened on that terrible night with her, it would influence what she said. I won't do that."

"You can't."

She didn't think before acting but touched his soft lips with her fingers. "I'll protect your honor as well as you crave protecting me," she said, and the pain restricting her heart earlier dissipated instantly when he looked at her. His eyes laced with gold as emotions strong enough to smell and see on his face damn near caused a lump to choke her as she fought to swallow the overwhelming desire to say something more.

Beel sucked one of her fingers into his mouth, holding her gaze captive and stealing her breath at the same time.

When he moved his hand, cradling the back of her head and urging her closer for a kiss, she reminded herself she was capable of sending herself to bed. And she would, in a few more minutes.

* * * * *

Andrea lay in bed, gripping the top of her blankets, and stared at her ceiling. It took less than ten minutes for her to rationalize the logic of her decision. Then she lay there

listening, waiting for the slow, steady breathing that indicated sleep. Every inch of her tingled. She rubbed her legs together and pressure grew. Beel had made love to her earlier that night and already it was driving her nuts wanting more.

She needed to focus on her plan, lay out a concrete method of attack. But analyzing what should or should not happen with Beel took precedence in her brain. He was most definitely the most perfect male she'd ever met. And he wanted her. Andrea admitted to herself Beel hadn't laid out specifics on the type of relationship he wanted. But she'd never given a lot of thought to flying with any male for any length of time.

What she needed to understand in her mind was what flying with Beel right now might do to her life, to her nest's life. Beel suggested she thought for Anna, protected her too much. Anna wasn't complaining and she was a grown female. She flew without Andrea. Hell, she went out and found a job without Andrea's help or guidance. But it was fair and the honorable thing to do to consider Anna as she contemplated how best to handle Beel.

Andrea admitted being around Beel made her happy. At the same time, when he tried controlling her, it pissed her off more than anything. She focused on that for a moment, but it didn't take too much thought. Since a fledgling she'd thought for herself, chose the direction she'd fly with no one to guide or advise her. Her mother was gone way too early in her life and Andrea had stretched her wings, flying in her place to rear her and Anna into grown females. She didn't regret this. Mourning her mother's death had passed years ago and was replaced with repulsion and hatred toward the man who killed her.

Andrea was intelligent. She knew such hard emotions weren't honorable to hold on to, and keeping them inside simply made them smell worse with time. She and her sister had done what any sensible owl would have done in a similar situation. They moved on with their lives, putting the despicable memories out of their heads. Would Anna remember enough to clear their nest and show these owls how terrible of a male Jerome was?

Beel believed her. It was obvious in his words and actions. His scent—God, his scent—he smelled just like her now. Breathing in deeply filled her lungs with his ripe, incredibly appealing male scent. Her bedroom, their entire nest, smelled of his commanding presence. It also smelled of his integrity and faith in her. There wasn't a doubt in her mind he believed completely in her innocence.

Which spoke volumes. Beel flew with more honor than most owls. His nest was revered by the entire parliament in Banff. In just the few days here, Andrea smelled how well the entire Halk nest was respected. Flying by his side would boost the honor of her nest. But Andrea wouldn't fly with a male for that reason. She'd never taken advantage or used another owl in her entire life and wouldn't start now.

Andrea allowed her desires to surface, trying to analyze them. That was easy. She wanted him. But for how long? Beel told her he wanted her. He was sleeping on her couch when he could be comfortable in his own nest. And he did so to prove to his nest

her honor was solid and strong. It was so easy to imagine flying by his side and being happy while doing it.

She exhaled, shifting her attention to the window in her room. Lying here all night and contemplating the different angles of a relationship with Beel wouldn't give her answers. Only time, being with him, learning more about him, would determine if they were truly compatible. She listened to the sounds of her nest, focusing first on Beel's breathing, then slowing her mind further, inhaling and exhaling silently so she could hear her sister's breathing. Both sounded as if they were sound asleep.

It wasn't a lot to go on but all she could afford to rely on for now. If she walked through the house, inspecting further, one or both of them might wake up. Andrea wouldn't risk either of their honors in this matter. She needed to take care of things herself.

She sat and pulled the warm blankets off her. Easing off the bed, she grabbed sweatpants and a sweatshirt, rolled them tightly around boots, then slipped them in the cloth bag she kept at the window.

She had locked all the windows earlier and the lock clicked when she moved it. Andrea didn't breathe, looking over her shoulder at her bedroom door, which she'd left ajar so she could hear better what was going on in her nest. The click of the window unlocking sounded deafening to her, proof her senses were hypersensitive. It took a moment to calm her heart so it wouldn't pound so loudly in her ears. Everything in her nest sounded calm. No one had moved.

There were new windows throughout their nest. The Halks took good care of their apartment complex. Andrea stripped out of her nightshirt and underwear and tossed them on her bed. Then, pulling the drawstring on her clothes' bag, she put the string in her mouth, holding it with her teeth, and opened the window.

Jerome Chouette would die. Beel had been right. Her continual flying would end tonight.

Chapter Twelve

Beel waited before he heard the window close then threw back the blanket covering him. He'd expected Andrea to fly tonight. It still disappointed him. She didn't trust him to help her. He told himself years of surviving without relying on another owl made it a difficult task for her. That didn't stop the painful swelling in his chest.

There wasn't time to dwell on emotions. He was honor-bound to his nest, the parliament in Banff. Andrea was starting to mean something to him. He would be willing to fly with her, learn if something could develop between the two of them. And that was more than he'd ever considered doing with another female. Thinking about keeping her by his side didn't terrify him as thoughts of mating had in the past. Beel had never been interested in narrowing his life down to one female or giving up the hunt he enjoyed so much when finding a new, sexy conquest for the night. With Andrea though, he wasn't even thinking about other females.

Beel remained silent as he stepped gingerly through her nest, pausing for a moment outside Anna's closed door as he contemplated leaving her alone in her nest. Anna was a grown female, not a fledgling. If Jerome Chouette had half a brain he would guess Andrea might try to attack. Beel hadn't met the male though, so couldn't formulate an accurate assumption on what the male might do if he believed his daughters might come after him.

Jerome's actions didn't matter to Beel as much as Andrea's did. He wouldn't allow her to murder her sire. His parliament would handle the male for his crimes. Beel needed to stop her before she made the worst decision of her life. Already she was scarred from crimes in her past, dishonorable acts she had no control over. He wouldn't allow the memory of destroying Jerome Chouette to add another scar.

He entered her room and confirmed what he'd heard. Andrea's bed was empty, the covers pushed back and her night clothes tossed over crumpled blankets. The window she'd locked earlier that night was no longer secured. Beel stripped out of his jeans, wasting no time, and let the change rip through his body, opening the window just enough to allow him to fly through it.

Beel had the advantage of knowing exactly where the Hampton Bed and Breakfast was. Andrea might not know its exact location. They'd never discussed the place and he hadn't given the bed-and-breakfast a thought prior to tonight. He didn't doubt her persistence and bull-headed nature for a moment though. Andrea would find the house full of nests, and he'd bet she'd find it without wasting much time. So he couldn't either.

Fire burned in his veins and his bones popped, contorting and taking on a new form as his world grew incredibly more visible. Shades of gray and black suddenly

were colorful. The sounds of the night outside were as clear and easy to hear as was every breath Anna took while sleeping in her bed. He smelled the paint on the wall, the finish on the hardwood floor, and Andrea's scent, which was incredibly strong in her bedroom.

Feathers sprouted through his flesh, removing the chill on his body and making him feel incredibly lighter. He didn't have a clothing bag, but rolled his jeans, which was almost impossible to do with fingers he no longer had. Using his beak, he managed to bundle his jeans into a pile he could fly with then stretched his wings and flew out the partially opened window.

There was a slight mist in the air and the temperatures had dropped noticeably since he'd last been outside. It wasn't as cold as it had been over the past few weeks though, with spring right around the corner. Tonight would be ideal for hunting, and the noises from rabbits and squirrels scurrying out of the way when their worst nightmare flew overhead distracted him barely a moment. The only thing he'd be hunting tonight was a hot little female.

Andrea would try every nerve he had as long as they flew together. She would spite him, challenge him, push him to submit to her ways. There was really no logic in pursuing a female who would create so much work for him. Beel wouldn't focus on that right now. There was nothing dishonorable about Andrea, even her actions tonight. They were selfless, intended only to bring peace to her nest. She didn't want his parliament pulled in to her horrendous past, and he didn't blame her. Andrea's motivation and actions were justifiable, but not acceptable.

If he was a selfish bastard for wanting her alive, then so be it.

His feathers grew damp and clung to him as he sailed through the air, keeping alert for owls or other predators known to enjoy the night. Andrea would be focused on the hunt for Jerome and preoccupied. She was a single female although she carried his scent. There were enough males out there who wouldn't care if she flew with a male's smell embedded in her wings. Beel didn't have a problem changing their minds about that one deception. They would learn to care.

He flew toward the Hampton Bed and Breakfast and eventually picked up Andrea's scent. It called to him, compelling him forward, as if she were a magnet he couldn't resist. Beel didn't regret making love to Andrea for a moment, but now he was even more pleased with their lovemaking. Andrea couldn't hide from him. His little female belonged to him.

He searched the night sky as he gave his revelation more thought. Did he really want to consider mating with her? Andrea was stubborn. She flew with more honor than most females he'd met, probably because she feared daily having it stripped away from her. But actions like this, and her determination to have the final word with him, would drive him nuts.

Owls took mating very seriously. It was for life. His kind didn't believe in divorce. Would he be able to handle a female who challenged him every time he turned around? Even worse, who dared suggest he submit to her?

Beel barely thought the questions when the answers came to him. He would for Andrea. It wouldn't be him tolerating and drooping his tail feathers as she whipped him into a docile mate. But he was up to the challenge of helping her see his need to protect her was more than honor-bound; it was because he cared.

It had only been several days. Although Beel was a confirmed bachelor who enjoyed sailing through the sky and showing off for any female who caught his attention, since meeting Andrea, she'd been all he'd thought about. Now here he was, flying into the night, with his jeans in his beak, prepared to save her sexy little ass. And he doubted she'd be happy to see him.

If Beel could have grinned, he would have. Maybe he was losing it. But the thought of hauling her out of the bed-and-breakfast in order to keep her from getting killed damn near got him hard while flying. Focusing on his surroundings, he worked to remain focused. He swore Andrea's scent came at him from all directions.

As he drew closer to the bed-and-breakfast, Beel soared around the large, old home. He searched the trees surrounding the house methodically, stretching his wings and angling his body so the currents held him in place, allowing him to slow and move in a circular path. Beel started with the tree closest to the house and worked his way out, knowing if Andrea was moving in on the bed-and-breakfast, sniffing it out as she hopped from tree to tree, he would catch her faster than if he searched the mountains stretching halfway around the backside of the place. When he began scanning his fifth tree, he spotted something.

My little owl, is that you? He clucked his tongue, instinct and the desire to know exactly where she was at that moment kicking in with a vengeance. He almost dropped his damn pants.

Beel dropped in altitude, focusing on the dark figure on a rather large branch of a tree to the side of the large yard around the structure. That's when something else grabbed his attention. There was another figure in a tree not too far from the first one he'd noticed. He dragged in a deep breath, willing his senses to pinpoint her.

There wasn't any reason to make his presence a secret. Whether any of the figures were Andrea or not, Beel had as much cause to be here as any other owl in the parliament. As he angled his body and dropped farther in altitude, a movement on the ground, not too far from the base of the mountain, grabbed his attention and caused his heart to still long enough the pressure inside him made him teeter.

Someone was running on the ground, in their human form. Long, pale blonde hair spilled out behind her.

Andrea!

The dark figures perched in the trees sprang to life. Andrea was running into an ambush. At the same time he realized this, she obviously picked up on their scents

because she slid to a halt, her hair flying around her face as she looked around her wildly, appearing to sniff the air and search desperately with her human eyes in the darkness to learn their exact whereabouts.

Beel might be able to go anywhere in the area and his presence would be honored. The Halk nest had built up a solid reputation and was welcomed anywhere. His nest had lived in Banff for several generations now. Andrea didn't have the same advantage. He'd be damned if they would humiliate her by restraining her until determining why she ran to the bed-and-breakfast from the mountain.

There was no way he'd allow her to lie to cover her ass.

Dive-bombing the scene, Beel tried to screech a warning but too much denim in his mouth prevented the sound from being heard. The best he could do was land in a nearby tree and allow the change to take over.

The moment he gripped the first solid branch he came to, Andrea braced herself, her hands outstretched defensively as she searched the darkness in his direction. Beel saw the wild look in her eyes and how her mouth shaped into a perfect, small circle. She snapped her attention away from Beel when a large Great Horned Owl appeared out of the darkness in the other direction and screeched fiercely as it barely missed her head with deadly, sharp talons.

Andrea covered her head, dropping to the ground, then scurried in his direction practically on all fours. She was smart to use the trees to shelter her, at least long enough to let the owls know she wasn't human. Which apparently they determined when they picked up her scent. Another screech tore through the night, a warning call demanding Andrea make her presence known.

Something told Beel that wasn't part of her plan.

As the change burned in his veins, his vision faded. Defined shapes and distinct objects faded, turning into black and dark gray shadows that were difficult to recognize with human eyes. He'd flown hard and fast to make time getting out here and his body was covered in sweat as his legs grew until he stood barefoot on some damn cold snow.

"Fucking hell," he grumbled the moment his tongue could form words. It was colder than he ever remembered it being after a change. His hands barely cooperated as he slid into his jeans. Knowing he'd have to endure the cold half dressed was incentive enough to race across the large yard.

Andrea screamed when he bulldozed into her. "You're with me," he hissed in her ear, taking her down on incredibly hard, uneven frozen ground.

"God damn it!" Andrea wailed, taken by surprise as she curled into a ball underneath him.

He'd surprised the hell out of her, racing into her before the owls could come back around with another warning, which proved how distracted she was. She hadn't made it all these years, successfully keeping her nest safe, by not thinking clearly. Something told him tonight's mission scared the crap out of her. For the first time in her life,

Andrea flew toward her nemesis instead of away from him. She wouldn't be doing it alone though.

Beel stood and started hurrying to the house in one fluid movement, holding on to Andrea and almost dragging her alongside him. It was cold. His feet would suffer severe frostbite in his human form and the rest of him following if he didn't get inside fast.

"Beel!" Andrea squealed, clawing at his bare chest and making his skin burn. "What the hell?"

"I'm freezing," he snapped, panting as he kept them moving as fast as his human body would go.

The best way to ignore the growing pain from exposure to the harsh elements was to conjure up a damn good reason for the two of them being out here, and him half dressed. The Hampton nest were noble females from a Great Horned nest who had lived in the mountains longer than the Halks had been in Banff. They were respected and honored by every nest in the parliament. And their squawking held a lot of weight among the owls. Beel wouldn't lie to them, but a sound truth that would be the facts once they were out of his mouth would be acceptable, at least to him. Andrea would go along with his plan or else.

His lungs were so tight it was almost impossible to catch his breath when they neared the backside of the house. Floodlights beamed around them as an interior light came on, letting him know he had little time to fill Andrea in on his plan.

"We're here together," he panted, stopping when he'd stepped onto a shoveled wooden deck that was just as cold as the bare ground. "You wish to see Jerome and I'm your escort."

"No," she whispered, twisting in his arms and freeing her arms. She immediately pulled her hair away from her neck and began combing it with her fingers. "You can't be part of this, Beel. I won't allow it. These nests adore and respect you," she said, her voice growing frantic as she searched his face. "Why are you almost naked?"

"I wasn't given a lot of time to fly after you," he grumbled, putting his arm around her and walking toward the nest. "If we're going to fly together, we're together on all matters. There are no exceptions."

He took advantage of her digesting the meaning behind his words, and her silence, as he opened the back door, which gratefully was unlocked, and escorted her into a hallway that appeared to be a service entrance.

A tall female, standing at least six feet, appeared at the other end of the hall, her almost completely silver hair brushed to a silky shine as it tapered over her shoulders and disappeared down her back. The floor-length robe she wore flowed around her long, dark gown as she moved to study them, appearing concerned.

"Beel Halk?" she questioned, her soft-spoken voice indicating her high breeding and cultured manner. "Forgive the awkward welcome you probably received. Our guards weren't expecting your arrival."

"We're the ones who beg your forgiveness." Beel straightened, keeping Andrea snuggled to his side and aware of Elaine Hampton giving him a curious look. "I left the nest in rather a hurry," he continued as Elaine's dark gaze took in his bare torso. He didn't feel a need to offer more detail. Instead, running his hand down Andrea's back, he glanced at her hard expression as she took in the Great Horned Owl female. "May I present Andrea Prudeaux?"

Elaine was tall but perfectly proportioned for her height, which added to her elegant appearance. Andrea was equally as beautiful, but her defiant nature and dominating side glowing in her eyes made her look ready to take on the female of the nest.

"I'm not familiar with the Prudeaux nest. Are you traveling?" Elaine took her time shifting her attention to Andrea.

If Andrea shifted her weight to press closer to Beel and stake her claim on him, he couldn't be sure. He didn't miss her stiffen though and sensed he was in for a female showdown.

"My nest is in the parliament complex," Andrea offered, her voice smooth and calm, too calm. "But I have a feeling you are familiar with the Chouette nest."

Beel let his hand fall off Andrea's back and stepped in front of her, unwilling to allow these two to spar.

"Do you have Jerome Chouette staying here?"

Elaine's expression softened when she returned her attention to Beel. "Yes, we do. But that hardly makes me familiar with his nest," she added, her tone a bit too sweet.

Andrea tried moving in front of Beel but didn't quite succeed. "I want to see him."

Elaine didn't pull her attention from Beel. She stared at him a moment longer, her gaze lingering on his bare chest. Beel had never spent much time with the Hampton nest. Elaine's quiet demeanor at the moment didn't match what he knew about this nest of females. They were aggressive, if not rather rough with their males. Beel preferred his females a bit more compliant. He knew of a few owls who had flown with the females, and the wild squawking he'd heard over the years left him a bit wary.

She either took her time acknowledging Andrea's request or finally decided she'd grant it. Elaine pulled her attention from Beel, turning slowly, and disappeared at the end of the hallway. Beel had no intention of waiting for a formal invitation to enter the bed-and-breakfast. He took off after Elaine with Andrea at his side.

"What are you doing?" Andrea whispered.

"I want you alive," he said, barely moving his mouth as he sent her a look he hoped she read as "behave".

Andrea stared at him a moment when they walked around the corner at the end of the hall and into an open foyer. "Promise me you won't dishonor yourself," she whispered.

"Neither of us will dishonor ourselves tonight, my little owl," he grumbled under his breath, pulling his gaze from hers and taking in the large, high-ceilinged old home.

The quiet elegance to the place definitely spoke of old money. It had a human look around it, with human artifacts on display, tall vases, large oil paintings and tapestries draped over dark wood walls. No wonder humans flocked to this place. The Hampton nest saw an enterprising venture and took it. They weren't the first nest to profit off human weaknesses.

Elaine disappeared behind French doors with a sheer curtain hanging on both sides. She left them partially ajar although Beel didn't hear her after she disappeared. He continued staring at the contents of the room, and a wide, winding wooden staircase that twisted and disappeared on to the next floor.

"I want to see him alone." She was staring at him when he looked at her.

Beel smelled other owls in the house, although their scents were lingering. Andrea's aroma wrapped around him though, rich and sensual. He brushed a loose strand away from her face and she lowered her lashes, hooding her gaze.

"What are you going to say to him?"

"I don't know," she whispered. When she looked up at him, her eyes were on fire. "Give him a chance to live, maybe." She shrugged as if it didn't matter to her either way if he did or didn't.

Beel glanced over Andrea's shoulder when Elaine appeared through the French doors. Elisa Hampton appeared next to her sister, stepping forward when she made eye contact with Beel. She grinned, extending her hands.

"You honor us by visiting our humble nest, Beel Halk," she said, her tone as soft-spoken as her sister's.

Elisa was as tall as Beel, easily six feet, with pale blonde hair streaked with silver. It streamed past her shoulders and had more body than her sister's fine hair. Both females were captivating, their dark gray eyes large and round, and their figures slender with curves that would send many males clucking. It wouldn't surprise him if many males flew around this nest, anxious to try out one of the Hamptons, if not all of them.

"I'm sorry my visit isn't more formal." Again he sensed Andrea stiffened as she intentionally moved this time, stepping into him so the female was forced to see her at Beel's side.

Elisa smiled and perfect white teeth flashed in the dimly lit foyer. "Trust me, your appearance is very appealing."

Before Andrea could hiss at the female, Elisa shifted her attention, offering Andrea the same warm smile as she extended her hands. "And you're Andrea Prudeaux," she murmured, lifting Andrea's hands and holding them in her own. Elisa stood at least several inches taller than Andrea and looked down at her as she clucked several times. "You are beautiful, little owl," she said, her voice a sultry purr.

Elisa's affectionate greeting, honoring Andrea in her nest, disarmed her. Beel was acutely aware of Andrea's every movement, down to her hard nipples that puckered against the sweatshirt she wore. Her sweatpants were loose but didn't hide how slender her waist was. Andrea could be in a gunny sack though and her beauty wouldn't be hidden.

"I hear you're here to visit one of our guests," Elisa continued, letting go of Andrea's hands when she didn't say anything. Her tension had faded though, and if that were Elisa's intentions, she did a good job of relaxing his hot little owl. "If you climb the stairs, Jerome is in room four. The doors are marked. You may go see him."

Andrea didn't look at Beel before heading to the stairs. He watched her ascend them, her ass swaying as she climbed with a steady, determined gait. Her desire to see the male who sired her was obviously stronger than her concern over leaving him alone with two unmated females. Not that she had a damn thing to worry about. He didn't look away until Andrea disappeared toward the top of the stairs. There were soft footsteps that stopped after a moment then Beel heard a solid rap when Andrea knocked on Jerome's door.

"We were warned," Elaine began, stepping forward the moment Andrea knocked on the door upstairs.

Beel held up his hand, silencing the female. "Andrea won't dishonor your establishment," he informed her, glancing from one sister to the next.

"We never thought," Elisa began, clasping her hands in front of her and letting her gaze travel hungrily down Beel's chest. "What we mean is, your nest asked us to keep an eye on the Chouette male."

Beel nodded. "Yes. Andrea won't stop you from carrying out your task."

"Of course not," Elaine mumbled.

"So will we lose another eligible Halk male soon?" Elisa asked, changing the subject and continuing her appraisal of Beel's half-naked body.

Beel had no intention of flirting with either of them. A week ago he might have exchanged a few comments and possibly contemplated more with either or both females. It hit him hard when he realized it hadn't crossed his mind to flirt with either of them. He was very aware of their subtle body language. That didn't bother him. But to not reciprocate—damn. His hot little female had gotten under his feathers more so than he'd realized.

"All good males go sooner or later," he told her then shot his attention to the stairs when Andrea started down them.

"There's no answer," she announced, looking disappointed. "Are you sure he's in his room?"

"Positive." Elisa glanced at her sister before heading to the stairs.

Beel followed the females to the second floor. He stepped around Elaine, pulling Andrea to him even though she tensed as she watched the females. Elisa knocked on

the door and called out Jerome's name. When there was still no answer, she glanced at her sister. The two of them seemed to speak to each other without uttering a word. It lasted only a moment before Elaine pulled a ring of keys from her robe pocket and singled out a key.

When the door opened, Andrea hurried forward. He again brought up the rear when they entered the room. It was an elegant nest, complete with canapé bed and rich, mahogany furniture. Quite the setup for a male possibly guilty of killing his mate.

"He's not here," Andrea announced, although it was apparent as they all stared at the empty room and the thick curtains that were closed over one window and shifted against the cold night breeze.

Chapter Thirteen

“Anna!” Andrea felt a wave of panic hit her so hard she almost lost her balance.

The Great Horned Owl females were in her way when she almost broke into a run, needing out of the small nest and its grotesque human furniture. The bed-and-breakfast was an oddity in itself, with so much human history hanging in this individual nest and the larger nest downstairs. The females running the place gave her the creeps too. They stared at Beel as if he were their next meal and almost looked at her the same way.

She ignored what the Hampton females said behind her. Anna was at their nest alone. Damn it! She’d been a fool. If that motherfucker so much as damaged one feather on her sister, she would make sure he endured a very slow and torturous death.

“Andrea!” Beel yelled behind her.

She raced down the stairs. There wasn’t time to discuss their next recourse. She needed to get to her nest.

Andrea almost slid when she reached the foyer and its highly glossed floors. She cursed loudly, aware of Beel bounding down the stairs behind her. His fingers brushed down her back, creating a sizzling her body immediately reacted to in spite of her frantic flight to reach her sister.

“Andrea!” Beel yelled again, smelling and sounding frustrated when he hurried down the hall with her. “I’ll call my nest. She’ll be okay.”

There were two large males outside the back door when Andrea pushed it open. Beel’s hand came down possessively on her shoulder as he stepped outside with her. Both males, who were Great Horned Owls, had tried detaining her when she arrived. They shifted their attention to Beel when he touched Andrea.

“Good hunting,” Beel said to the males, his soft, deep baritone bridging any concern on their faces.

The males nodded and one of them let his gaze travel down her. With Beel keeping her next to him and holding on to her firmly, it was a blatant insult to his claim on her. Andrea didn’t have a lot of contact with Great Horned Owls, but knew they were the largest of all owls and were known for sometimes attacking and killing other owls.

Beel escorted her into the yard, pulling his phone from his jeans. She noticed he stepped gingerly on the cold snow and was as anxious as he probably was to change into their feathers.

The two females followed them outside. Andrea didn’t stare as one of them said something to the males about Jerome being missing. Immediately the males leapt off the porch, stripping and running toward the trees at the same time.

"We are searching the nest right now," Elisa said. "If he's in the area he will be found."

"Notify my nest if you find him," Beel told her. He already had his phone to his ear.

Andrea heard it ring but continued staring at the ground. Beel had a firm grip on her shoulder. She might be able to break free, strip and change and get back to her nest. Beel would try to detain her though. He was doing his best to help, but damn it, they were wasting time.

She was a fool. A god damn fucking fool! Andrea knew Beel would hear her leave, even if she didn't consciously think about it. She knew he'd fly after her. She should have consulted her sister, as they always had. Andrea had kept Anna under her wing, which kept her safe. The moment she allowed a male into the nest, her sister was in danger. And it was all because Andrea wasn't focused when Beel was around.

"Heath," Beel said, his voice sharp. "Jerome Chouette isn't in his nest at the bed-and-breakfast. The Hampton nest is searching for him."

Beel's brother interrupted and was easy to hear. Andrea's ears tickled when he spoke. "How long has he been missing?"

"I don't know."

If Beel didn't end this conversation soon Andrea would break away and let the change course through her. Already the sparks shooting up her spine in anticipation of her feathers were becoming too much of a distraction.

"We're out here now and flying back."

"You're at the Hampton Bed and Breakfast?" Heath asked, his voice louder than it was a moment ago. "Why are you out there?"

"I'll explain later. Anna is alone in her nest. Check on her. We'll be there shortly." Beel must have sensed Andrea's growing aggravation. He hung up the phone without so much as a good hunting and shoved it into his jeans. "Let's go," he said under his breath, turning her toward the trees. Then, looking over his shoulder, he nodded to the females, who were probably waiting for Beel to strip before going inside. "Good hunting," he called out as he escorted Andrea farther from the odd nest.

Andrea didn't feel a need to show the same gratitude. She didn't know the females and her only concern right now was her nest. Any owl with honor would understand and agree. Instead, the moment they hit the first clump of trees, she yanked off her sweatshirt. She wiggled out of her sweatpants, taking her boots off last as the change began pumping in her veins.

Beel was already out of his jeans and twisting them into a secure ball around his cell phone as his hands changed form and he dropped them. Andrea embraced the cold, stretching her arms when feathers popped out of her flesh and her legs shortened as long talons stretched where her toes were a moment ago.

Her hearing and vision grew stronger, tenfold that of what she could see and hear as a human, as the cold air no longer bothered her. Instead, it brought all the scents of

everything and anyone around her. She tilted her head, looking over her shoulder as the females on the porch clucked their approval. Andrea hissed at them, not caring if they were a larger, stronger breed of owl than she was. She'd knock both the bitches down to size if they made a move on Beel.

To their credit, the females stopped clucking and turned to go into their nest. Andrea didn't look at Beel but took flight. Right now wasn't the time to analyze the intense wave of possessiveness that plumaged her insides. Her sister was very likely in incredible danger, and the only thing she would focus on was what she'd do to the asshole if he harmed Anna in any way.

The moisture in the air had turned to a light mist and Andrea was soaked when she followed Beel to the roof of the complex. She'd tried heading in her bedroom window, but Beel damn near knocked her off balance when he flew into her and squawked fiercely. If she wasn't so preoccupied by possible scenarios of what might be happening to Anna right now, she would have torn into him for bullying her like that. She made a mental note to do some squawking of her own once she knew Anna was safe.

Beel's phone started ringing the moment they landed on the roof. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen an owl change so fast into their human form. Beel was straightening as his legs grew before the sparks had fully ignited in her spine.

"It's rather hard to answer the phone when I'm flying." There was a harsh edge in Beel's voice when he pressed the phone between his bare shoulder and side of his head. Whoever it was, they'd apparently called more than once since they'd left the Hampton Bed and Breakfast.

Anna was still in her feathers, which made it even easier to hear the caller on the other end of the line. Heath had been trying to call Beel ever since he'd hung up on him.

"We're at the females' nest now. No one is answering the door."

Andrea tried telling Beel to let Heath know he should break down the door. She would be there in a moment, possibly less if she didn't have to change first. Maybe Anna was asleep and didn't hear the door. It wasn't likely, but possibly he hadn't come to their nest. She'd been frantic for nothing.

A gleam of hope lifted a bit of the weight off her heart. Not much, but enough for her to take a deep breath. Andrea tilted her head, fighting to listen to every sound in the building and narrowing it down to her nest.

"We're coming down. If Jerome isn't in his nest out at the Hamptons, my guess is he flew here to find his daughters." Beel looked at her. "Change," he said under his breath.

Andrea barely heard him. There were too many noises in the building. She couldn't pinpoint her sister. But running down the stairs might take more time than they had. In spite of the possibility her sister was safe, there wasn't any time to waste until she knew for sure. She could get to her nest faster if she flew.

"Andrea!" Beel howled when she took off, flying around the side of the building.

She ignored the spew of profanity that followed when she left Beel on the roof. Instead, flying to her bedroom window, she slid through the still-opened crack and landed on her bedroom floor.

The change attacked her as if it had been penned up inside her, anxiously waiting to take over her system. She bit her lip, the moment she had one, to keep from crying out as the explosive sparks in her spine attacked her nervous system. Fire burned in her veins. It was normally a sensation she embraced. Experiencing both halves that made her whole, even for the brief moments before she changed into one form or the other, usually fulfilled her.

Andrea was too distracted to enjoy the moment. Instead, her body contorted while she endured it until she stood naked in her bedroom. A pounding on the front door almost made her heart come up to her throat.

"Anna," she murmured, her hands shaking and cold attacking her with her window open and her bedroom freezing. She fought with her clothes, walking and trying to dress at the same time. "Why don't you hear that, Anna?"

She pulled her sweats up and managed to get her sweatshirt over her head. Then, opening her bedroom door, she raced to her sister's room, ignoring the noise coming from the hallway.

"Anna!" she screamed, staring at the empty bedroom as her brain struggled to accept what she saw, or didn't see. Her sister was gone. "No!" She continued screaming, stumbling into her sister's room and touching the crumpled blankets. "You've got to be here."

A crashing sounded in the other room, and Andrea jumped, flipping around, ready to attack anyone who entered her nest. Anna was gone. It couldn't be. He didn't want Anna. He wanted her. They'd always known that. Andrea took special care of her sister for having to endure the life they led because of what Andrea had witnessed. Anna had been too young, a victim in a nest gone bad.

Males bounded down the hall and Andrea leapt out the bedroom door, hissing at them. Heath led the procession, so was her target. She lunged at him, attacking with full force.

"Why didn't you break in here sooner?" she howled, feeling the change waver inside her but ignoring it as outrage consumed her. "My sister is gone!"

She didn't hear what any of them said but was peeled off Heath by Beel, who gripped her fiercely in his arms until she reluctantly relaxed.

"Check every room in the nest." Heath barked orders as he entered Anna's bedroom and checked windows. "Nothing appears tampered with."

"He possibly walked into the building and came to their floor. If all this happened after we flew to Hampton Bed and Breakfast, Anna wouldn't have known not to answer the door if he knocked." Beel kept his arms wrapped around Andrea, holding her securely against him. "But I don't smell a male in the nest, do any of you?"

Now that Andrea was thinking a bit better, she sniffed the air and agreed it didn't reek of anyone they didn't know. "Let go of me," she said so only Beel heard her. They still stood in the hallway while Rock and Heath searched the nest. "I need to find my sister."

"We're going to find her." Beel let go of her but turned her so she faced him. He stood in the narrow hallway, blocking her view of anything but him as he lowered his face so their mouths were a breath away when he spoke. "He wants to live or he wouldn't have lied about killing his mate. He accused you to prevent losing his life. He won't hurt Anna. No matter how insane the owl might be, he doesn't have a death wish."

He was right. Andrea fought for a clear head, needing to process everything and focus on the best method of recourse so she could fly right to wherever he'd taken Anna.

"We're going to question the nests here."

She nodded, although barely felt herself doing the act. "Let's start with the first-floor nests. It would make sense he would start there since they're the closest nests once you enter the building."

"Now you're thinking." Beel smiled but there wasn't any joy in his eyes. "That's my sweet little owl. We'll find Anna and she'll be fine."

He cared. Andrea saw it in his eyes. She probably wouldn't have noted it if it wasn't something so unusual for her to see or smell on another owl. She and Anna had flown all their lives knowing little about compassion or concern from anyone else except each other. Her heart stilled while a warmth filled her. There wasn't time to acknowledge it or understand what it meant.

"Let's go." Andrea accepted one fact. Anna wasn't in the nest. Therefore, she needed out of there to find her.

"Wait," Heath said, coming out of the kitchen and meeting them in Andrea's living room. "Where are you going?"

"We're going to question the nests on the first floor, see if any of them told a male recently where Andrea and Anna's nest was," Beel said.

Heath nodded and switched his attention to Rock when he appeared from the hallway.

"Nothing in this nest has been disturbed that I see," Rock offered, running his hand over his short blond hair. "And honestly, I didn't smell the scent of a strange male in the hallways on our way to their nest."

"He probably was never here," Heath said.

Andrea looked at him. "What's that mean? My sister isn't here."

Heath looked at her, his expression contemplative although it was too hard to pull his scent with her own emotions so turbulent at the moment.

"Does your sister have a cell phone?"

"We share a cell."

"Did she have it?"

"I didn't take it with me."

"Where is it?"

She liked the idea of questioning nests. That was acting on this situation. Searching for her cell seemed a waste of time. And they didn't have time. "Why do you want it?" she asked, at the same time making her mind work so she could remember where it was.

"Possibly your sire called Anna."

Her phone was in her bedroom. She hurried to get it, but only to prove he wouldn't have called Anna. He didn't know the number. Returning to the living room with it in her hand, she breathed in their tension for the first time. If this was what it felt like to be part of a parliament, she should be grateful. If her brain weren't in such a frenzy and her entire body stiff with tension, anxious to find her sister and destroy the male who'd given her life then ruined it, she might have been able to acknowledge the sensation of not flying alone.

"I need to find her," she said, not meaning to speak out loud. At the same time, she stared at her cell and the last number that called it.

Beel moved in next to her. "Were there any calls?"

"What?" Andrea asked, not recognizing the last number that had called her phone.

"Was there a call?" Heath sounded excited when he moved in on the other side of Andrea and strained his neck to see the small screen.

"I don't know this number," she murmured. "This area code," she began.

"What time did the call come through?" Beel asked, slipping his arm around her and nuzzling his head next to hers.

Her body was already being bombarded with emotions she barely managed to keep under wraps. With Beel touching her so intimately, shock waves zapped her system, adding to her inability to focus.

"Umm," she said, pushing the button to show the call time. "Wait a minute."

Andrea walked out from in between both males, needing space. Beel was too close. Heath hovered on the other side of her. She couldn't think. Especially when she focused on the call time.

"This call came through after I left for Hampton Bed and Breakfast," she said, and lifted her gaze from her cell to Beel.

Chapter Fourteen

Beel stared at the ceiling as he stretched. There were sore muscles everywhere. He was getting damn tired of sleeping on Andrea's couch, but there was no way he'd leave her alone. She hadn't suggested he join her in his bed, and with the turmoil swimming in her pretty gray eyes, he hadn't pushed.

Two days had passed. Two long, grueling days with him and his nest flying everywhere they could think, searching for Anna. She didn't simply disappear into thin air, but it was starting to feel that way. Andrea had insisted they not disrupt the lives of all the nests in the parliament trying to find Anna. Beel didn't have to ask his brothers what they thought of that. The Halk nest had always ensured the safety of every nest in their parliament and they weren't about to stop now. He, Heath and Rock had no intention of slowing down until they found Anna. They kept the squawking to a minimum but owls were perceptive creatures. Word got out and quite a few nests offered to help search for both of them.

After two days, none of them were thinking as clearly and wouldn't without sleep. So they had agreed to search in shifts. Heath and his mate were out searching while Rock and Beel rested. Getting Andrea to agree to fly to her nest and nap for a while had almost proven an impossible task. His little owl was wound tight and growing grouchier with every passing hour. When he threatened to throw her over his shoulder and march down the street with her to her nest, Andrea had agreed to come to bed. The scathing look she gave him let him know what she thought of his idea. The thought had its appeal though. Beel didn't bother mentioning she had submitted to him in the end when he'd brought her here and even tucked her into her bed.

Beel understood her frustration and pain. No one thought less of Andrea as she grew more distracted and distant. Her nest was missing and it was apparent Andrea blamed herself. In truth though, Beel knew it was his fault. He had slept on their couch to protect their nest, not just Andrea. When she'd flown into the night, Beel had chased her hot little tail. He'd left Anna unprotected.

He shifted on the couch, unable to get comfortable. His brain was as worn out as his body, but shutting down for a few hours of sleep didn't seem an option. If he wasn't meandering over Andrea, his thoughts drifted to her sister. Anna wasn't gone that long before they noticed her missing. Jerome Chouette couldn't possibly have flown too great a distance with her. Yet they'd looked everywhere and the two owls were nowhere to be found.

There was a pattering on the kitchen window and Beel immediately sat upright, sending the single blanket he'd draped over himself to the floor. Maybe he'd drifted off

and hadn't realized it. That or his nerves were really shot. Icy rain pattered against the window.

"Crap," Beel hissed, standing and pressing his hands into the small of his back as he stretched. Then padding barefoot into the kitchen, he stared at the black panes in the small window as droplets of water melted against the glass and streamed in crisscrossed patterns toward the sill. "This is going to make our hunt pure hell," he grumbled.

Heath and his mate were out in this shit. Rain, whether frozen or not, would wipe out any lingering smells. It would become damn near impossible to search for Anna.

Beel breathed in Andrea's scent before he heard her soft footsteps coming down the hallway. He turned, meeting her gaze as she paused in the kitchen doorway.

"It's raining," she said unnecessarily. Her long blonde hair was down and tousled, as if she'd flipped around in her bed until giving up on sleep. Several slender strands of silver were dominant tonight, giving her a regal, wise look in spite of the exhaustion weighing heavily in her somber gray eyes. "Anna could be out in this freezing weather right now."

"She could be," he said slowly, knowing there weren't any words of consolation he could offer that she wouldn't twist around until she'd interpreted them for the worse. Beel hated seeing the pain lining her pretty face though. "If Jerome likes his creature comforts, which it appeared he did by the looks of the nest he chose to sleep in after coming here, I would bet both are safe and dry."

"Not safe," she muttered, lowering her gaze.

Beel was across the room, pulling her into his arms before giving the action any thought. Instinct demanded he console her. His emotions backed the idea. "We're going to find her and she will be fine."

"One hour with that male and she wouldn't have been fine." Andrea didn't try lifting her face to his. Instead it was buried in his chest, making her words muffled. "You don't know, Beel. Thank god you don't know. No one knows. He doesn't fly right. He never has. The only reason Anna and I exist is because the monster bartered for a mate."

Beel had never known pain as strongly as he felt it now. It was thick around Andrea and he absorbed as much of it as possible, continuing to hold her tight against him. Allowing his imagination to conjure up the hell of her fledgling life wouldn't help matters any. The thought of any owl existing in such an abusive nest turned his blood to fire in his veins. It burned as he fought the anger threatening to turn the air around them into a stench Andrea didn't need right now.

"Then the male did one good thing," he whispered. "No, two. You and your sister are honorable owls, honest and you fly straight."

"Thank you." Her words were barely audible. "I wish I knew where they were. And I can't imagine what he might have said on the phone to make Anna fly to him."

"We'll learn all the details when we find Anna."

Andrea lifted her head and he gripped her chin, easing her face back and kissing her. Her lips trembled. Andrea was on the edge of collapsing. He wouldn't blame her if she did. Owls might not approve of emotional displays, arguing justifiably they hindered cognitive thought. Any owl brought up in an honorable nest learned at an early age to suppress anything that would prevent them from thinking rationally. But at the same time, no one would argue that in times of extreme stress, terror or any situation where emotions formed in the human side of their brain grew extreme, keeping them boxed up often made it hard to think clearly. These were the few times releasing them was appropriate, albeit, any respectable owl would do so privately. Beel prayed after knowing Andrea just over a week she was comfortable enough around him to allow her guard down long enough to keep her from exploding.

He moved his hands, rubbing them across her back as he parted her lips with his tongue. More than anything he would love to carry her to bed and strip her out of the extra-long nightshirt she wore. He wanted flesh, her fresh scent, and the taste of her sensual body as he devoured every inch of her. As he impaled her, dipped into her moist heat, Beel couldn't think of a better therapy than fucking his hot little owl.

"Beel." Andrea muttered his name against his mouth. She didn't push him away but instead dug her nails into his shoulders as she went up on tiptoe.

"My precious owl." He slid his hands over her round ass, grabbing the bottom of her shirt and pulling it up until he cupped her smooth, soft flesh.

"I'm dishonoring your nest by allowing your brother and his mate to be out in this weather. Please call and ask them to return to their nest," she said, her soft, sultry voice so full of concern.

It wasn't the first time in the past couple days Beel's insides hardened with an incredibly powerful pull of protectiveness. If he got his hands on the beast who caused Andrea this much pain, he'd snap the bastard's neck without so much as a thought. Andrea searched his face, her large gray eyes so easy to see deep inside, straight to the core of her being. If only he could interpret the warring emotions and scents he saw and smelled.

"Heath and Shelly are honored to look for your sister," he assured her. "We all know how protective you are of her. Believe me, it crossed all our minds you would fly out of here and get yourself killed before you would consider our help."

"That's not quite true," she said, lowering her head as she let her hands slip from his shoulders to his chest. "I knew you'd follow me out to the Hampton Bed and Breakfast. If I'd stayed put none of this would have happened."

"Andrea," he growled, taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger and forcing her to look at him. "I shouldn't have followed you. Little owl, you attacked me the first time we met. I know how well you fight. I'm the one dishonored in this mess."

"No." She shook her head and several long strands slipped over her shoulder.

"I'm the one who chased your scent. You've created a passion inside me so strong it controls my ability to think straight sometimes. And obviously at the worst of moments."

"No," she repeated.

"If I had called the Hampton nest, or my nest, and warned them you'd left your nest and remained with Anna, none of this would have happened."

"You can't think like that!" she snapped, hitting his chest with her fists before spinning around and marching into the dark living room. She spun back around with enough aggression she almost lost her balance. Either not noticing, or not caring, Andrea lunged at him, wagging her finger at him as her hostile emotions filled the air. "You won't carry the burden of dishonor in this mess. I won't allow it," she hissed, stabbing his chest with her finger. "I knew in my heart and in my head why he flew into Banff. Even when he was questioned and presented a believable-enough story to make your nest hesitate, there wasn't doubt in my mind. This is my life, Beel. This male has stalked us since the day he burned my nest to the ground. And he'll continue doing so until he or both of us are dead."

"Your knowledge doesn't change the fact I can't stay away from you," he said quietly, wrapping his fingers around her wrist and bringing her hand to his mouth. Her scent was intoxicating. He couldn't breathe in deep enough to satisfy himself. "I don't want to be without you, my little owl," he admitted. "I've never wanted a female as much as I want you."

Andrea stared at him, not moving. She didn't blink or even breathe. Beel gave her the time needed to digest the meaning of his words. The timing was wrong, but damn it, holding back the truth when it was so easy to smell seemed pointless.

When her phone rang, Andrea jumped. She looked down the hall toward her bedroom when Beel did. It rang again and she stiffened. Beel sensed her trepidation and let go of her when she headed to her bedroom.

He was right behind her, curious how many knew her cell number. Andrea reached for her phone but then yanked her hand back as if the phone might bite her.

"It's the same number," she whispered, and at the same time fear filled the room with its pungent odor.

"What?" He moved in next to her, picking her phone up from her nightstand and staring at the number. It was the same number that called her phone when they'd been at the bed and breakfast. He recognized the area code. "Answer it," he ordered.

She took the phone from him, her shoulders squaring off as she seemed to draw from some inner strength. Her back was to him when she answered the call.

"Hello," she said, sounding impressively calm.

"I think you've waited long enough to cooperate," a scratchy male voice said coolly.

Beel wanted to yank the phone from Andrea, make the prick aware of how he would die for the torture and treachery he'd put Andrea and Anna through.

"Where is Anna?" Andrea demanded, suddenly sounding colder than Jerome did.

Beel pulled his phone out of his pocket, not wanting to waste any time in letting Heath know they'd been contacted.

"With her sire, where any honorable unmated female would be."

"If you've hurt her in any way," Andrea threatened.

"Now, Andrea," her sire scolded. "I've never done anything but love both of you, in spite of what you did."

"What I did? The only thing I did was witness my sire kill my mother."

"Andrea, you will admit to the truth. It's the only way to put this behind you. Think about it, my dear. If I killed your mother, why would I chase the two of you from one parliament to the next? Don't you think I'd be concerned about how I smelled to other owls?"

"You fly with no guilt. So of course you wouldn't smell of it. You also fly without honor, which is why no one smelled a lie on you. But trust me, the truth is simple and can't be denied." Andrea paused a moment, not saying anything but instead looked at the floor. Her long hair spilled over her shoulders, shrouding her face. When Jerome didn't say anything but allowed the silence to linger, Andrea spoke again, this time her words so soft they were almost inaudible. "In spite of who you are, Anna and I do fly straight and hold our heads high. I also know I remember every detail of that horrendous night well. I wasn't the only witness, you know."

Beel had his phone to his ear, listening to it ring. When it went to voicemail, he guessed his brother and his brother's mate were in their feathers. "Heath," he said quietly, turning around to make it harder for Jerome to hear him through Shelly's phone. "Call me back immediately. Jerome Chouette has called Andrea."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jerome hissed loud enough through the phone to easily be heard.

Beel hung up and moved closer to Andrea. She still focused on the floor, which made it hard to see her face with her hair shrouding it.

"Haven't you wondered over the years why you haven't been welcomed in any parliament? You've flown from town to town but never settle down. Why is that do you think?"

Beel studied Andrea. There was something odd about her tone. It almost sounded vindictive, manipulative, and he thought of forcing her to look at him. Her smell changed too.

"I've flown from town to town trying to sniff out you two," Jerome snarled. "You both did a damn good job of making sure you didn't leave one feather of a clue."

"We want to live," Andrea said without hesitating.

"Why would you say there is another witness?"

"Don't you remember?" There was that odd tone again.

Beel opted to sit on the edge of his bed, which allowed him to see her face. Her eyes were opened and glassy as she looked at her bedspread but didn't appear to see it.

"I remember you running from our nest after you started it on fire," Jerome snapped.

"You remember me running from our nest because it was on fire," Andrea explained, her tone calm and too-sweet sounding. "I carried Anna. You saw us running because you already stood outside the nest, watching it burn."

"I would have watched it burn to the ground if you hadn't flown off on me."

Andrea shot Beel a glance. She didn't hold his gaze but instead searched his face before lowering her attention again to the bed.

"Why did you fly after us?" she asked.

"You two would go squawking to the closest nest about your nest burning down. I didn't need that."

"Any nest would have taken us in. Instead we slept in trees."

"There's nothing wrong with living in your feathers for a while. It's good for the soul," Jerome said.

Andrea licked her lips and didn't say anything for a moment. She appeared to be considering something and Beel ached to know her thoughts. Her scent bothered him. She was upset. That part was easy to detect. But there was something else. Something he didn't like. It was in her scent and on her face, which he now believed she was trying to hide from him.

"We didn't live in trees because it was good for us," Andrea said, her voice still calm, soothing, as if she were talking to a fledgling. "We lived in trees because you were hunting us. Did you hunt the other witness?"

Jerome didn't say anything for a moment. Andrea's mouth twitched, as if she fought a smile. Was she trying to trap him into admitting he started the fire?

"There wasn't anyone else there that night," he finally said, his tone turning harsh. "What is this, Andrea?"

"You aren't sure, are you?" She sucked in a breath and closed her eyes. "If you'd known there was someone else who witnessed you start that fire you would have flown after them as fast as you could. We were just fledglings. We wouldn't squawk about you with malice the way another grown owl would have."

"Why are you bringing this up now, after all these years?"

"We haven't talked before now," she said simply.

"Interesting," Jerome murmured. "And you tell the truth."

"I always tell the truth." She squeezed her eyes closed and her scent grew sharper.

Beel studied her, tilting his head to see her face better as he sucked in a slow, deep breath. He swore Andrea lowered her head farther, hiding behind long strands of her silky-soft hair.

"So who is this witness?" Jerome asked.

Andrea offered a dry laugh that didn't smell of happiness. "That would be the last thing I told you. But I am offering this information to protect you."

"You're protecting me?" He sounded stunned.

"In spite of your deep hatred for me and my sister, you are our sire. I will always protect my nest." This time she didn't dip her head lower but instead straightened a bit as the pungency of her aroma seemed to fade. "I'm telling you this so you'll drop this story about me starting the fire and quit humiliating yourself. If you continue to do so, I'll call the owl who saw the whole thing. I'm sure he'll fly out here and help maintain my honor."

"Him?" Jerome sneered. "Tell me right now who this owl is. I have a right to know who would see to my death."

"You don't get it." Andrea sighed and the room began once again to fill with a pungent odor. "He won't appear if you only squawk the truth."

"My dear, I have no intention of dying."

"Then release Anna and fly away," she whispered, her tone deadly and menacing.

"What if you're making all of this up?"

Andrea dropped her head into her hand. "You just said I spoke the truth," she reminded him, but she sounded defeated.

Beel wanted to touch her, to stroke her hair from her face and show her he would fly by her side. No matter what this male said to her, Beel would make sure Andrea and her sister were safe. It seemed to him he'd proven that already, but if she needed more convincing he didn't have a problem showing her.

"Believe what you want," she added. "Just give me back my sister."

"It would be just like you to sniff out some willing male who would hiss to anyone who would listen about what happened that night." Jerome's tone was hostile again, so angry it could almost be smelled through the phone. "Tell me, little bitch, did he actually witness the fire or did you shake your tail feather at him until he fucked you and agreed to say whatever you wished?"

Andrea's entire body flinched as if she'd just been slapped. Beel hardened as well, every inch of him tightening. He balled his hands into fists, outraged as Andrea's humiliation and anger filled the room with their stench. First chance he had he would fly to the male whose only decent action in his life was siring Andrea and Anna. Beel ached to break the owl's neck, end his life without a thought to it. Heath would organize a small group out of their parliament though. It was tradition, a logical solution to an illogical action. Beel didn't doubt for a moment the decision would be to kill Jerome. Beel just wished he could be the one to do the deed.

When Andrea looked at him, the fury mounting out of control inside him tapered off. But only because of the sadness in her eyes.

"Sorry," she mouthed.

He couldn't keep his hands off her. Beel cupped her cheeks and kissed her forehead, willing to do anything to help put an end to this. No owl, decent or otherwise, should ever have to endure such extreme emotions, be lied to, hunted and despised. It wasn't honorable. It was so incredibly unacceptable he wouldn't have believed an owl this evil existed, one who would encourage the death of his own fledgling to save his own tail, if he hadn't heard and smelled it for himself.

Andrea shook her head, pulling away from him. "No, that isn't what happened at all. He never touched me."

"Then it was one of those owls who came around when your bitch of a mom shook her tail feathers. Like I didn't know the dishonor she placed at my claws. I did our nest a favor getting rid of her," he snarled.

Andrea jerked as if she'd just been shocked. When she met Beel's gaze, the triumph in her expression almost drowned out the stench she'd filled the room with a moment before.

"Where is Anna?" she demanded.

"I don't know," he said, and a loud click followed.

"Wait," Andrea demanded, an edge of urgency making her eyes open wide. She looked at Beel, frantic, and pulled the phone from her ear, staring at the screen. "No," she cried out. "He didn't tell us where she is."

Chapter Fifteen

Andrea needed Beel out of her nest. She couldn't face him, not after the depths of humiliation she'd just wallowed in so she could get the necessary confession out of Jerome Chouette.

She'd never lied in her life, not even as a fledgling. Her mother had reared both of them to fly with honor in spite of the horrific nest life they all had endured. And as close as it smelled like it was to being over, the asshole who was her sire couldn't let it end without completely ruining her chance for happiness. In order to show Beel beyond a shadow of doubt that Jerome Chouette killed his mate and stalked his daughters, trying to kill them too, she'd had to lie and humiliate herself in front of him.

The stench had been thick enough in the air to slice through with her talons. Beel had witnessed it all. And by doing so he now understood the type of male Jerome was, and he knew she was capable of lying. Andrea didn't have to ask what his reaction would be to that. Males as respectable and honorable as Beel wouldn't be caught dead flying near a female as disgraced as she was now.

She still reeked from the emotions she'd polluted the room with. There was a foul taste in her mouth, more than likely from her lies. Andrea wouldn't hang her head in shame. Maybe any chance of flying alongside Beel had just been destroyed. The asshole wouldn't falsely accuse her of something and get away with it. Now if she could just get her sister back, she would then make herself believe all this disgrace had been worth it.

"Are you going to be okay?" Beel's voice was so soft and full of concern.

Andrea almost broke down. The barrier she'd just built to shove all the unpleasant emotions behind wasn't strong enough yet. "I'm fine," she said, her tone too sharp to make her sound believable.

Hell, now she was lying without thinking about it. She really was ruined.

Beel didn't ask but pulled her into his arms, pressing her against all his virile muscles and drowning her in his rich, all-male scent. "You are much better than fine, my sweet little owl," he grumbled into her hair, pressing his lips against her scalp and kissing her. "You are quite possibly the most incredible, honorable female I've ever known in my life."

Andrea tried pulling away. "Don't try lying just because you witnessed me do it," she mumbled "I know I've disgraced myself in front of you, but I pray you understand how important it was for you to hear him admit he killed my mother." Her voice didn't break up as she ended her last sentence, which was progress in itself. The pain was still there but knowing her mother would finally be able to rest in peace once the mate who destroyed her no longer flew on this earth made all the difference.

"I know how important it was," he murmured, keeping her pressed against him with one powerful arm while caressing her lower back with his other. "Which is why I just said what I did. Not many would force a lie out of themselves, intentionally go where we're trained as fledglings never to venture in order to protect the honor of their nest."

How could he believe what she'd just done was honorable? Necessary, yes. Honorable, hardly.

Andrea heard and felt Beel's phone vibrate before it rang. He shifted, dragging his finger down the side of her face as he reached for his phone. Beel didn't take his attention from her face, which made it hurt even more knowing he saw how deep her humiliation ran.

His expression didn't change when he glanced at his phone then answered it. "Did you get my message?" he asked instead of greeting the caller.

Andrea guessed it was Heath and heard his voice through the phone in the next moment. "Yup. I got it. We also have Anna."

"What?" Andrea jumped up and bumped into Beel.

He grabbed her when she would have flown out of the bedroom. "Excellent," Beel said, remaining calm. "Where is she now?"

"With Shelly. She drove the SUV to Anna. They're driving into town now."

"Into town? Where did you find her?"

Beel was asking all the right questions. Either he sensed what she needed to know the most, or he was thinking along the same lines as her. Andrea needed to get to her sister though. She was probably safe with Heath's mate. Shelly appeared to be a good, honorable female, but Andrea wouldn't be able to relax until her sister was next to her and she knew she was unharmed.

"That's the odd part," Heath was saying. "She was walking alongside the highway north of town. Her clothes were dirty and soaked and her flesh was also streaked with mud. When we spotted her, I remained hovering over her, keeping her safe, while Shelly flew to the SUV. She drove back out here and I flew to our nest. Shelly says she isn't talking much."

"We flew all along that highway and into those mountains," Beel pointed out.

"You're right. It's all very interesting." Heath's tone was as calm as Beel's, as if all this were some wild adventure now winding down so they could analyze it.

Andrea pulled out of Beel's grasp. "I've got to go to her."

"We'll watch for the two of them. They are coming straight here?" Beel asked.

"Yes. I'm going to fly through those mountains a few more times. We've got help out this way. If Jerome is in the area, we'll find him."

"Good," Beel said then mumbled something else to his brother and hung up the phone. "She's on her way here," he emphasized, grabbing Andrea again.

"I need to go to her."

"You need to relax. The worst is over," Beel emphasized.

Andrea wouldn't explain how this was how their life was. Beel had gotten a taste and smell of the atrocities her small nest had flown through since they were fledglings. There was no point in stressing that fact. Why force him to see how terrible their life was when he was so persistent on seeing her as honorable?

Because it was the right thing to do.

She glanced at his large hand and his fingers wrapped around her arm. Beel was so strong, so perfect in every way, and everything she would dream her perfect male would be. But his image of her wasn't as accurate. In spite of all his perfection, he saw her as something she wasn't. Andrea was too wiped out to remove his rose-colored glasses at the moment.

"I need to go wash up," she mumbled.

Beel pulled her against him again. "Okay," he whispered, nuzzling his face into her hair. "I don't want you worrying about Jerome. As soon as I know the two of you are safe and protected, I'm going to hunt that owl down myself."

Andrea lifted her head, staring into his noble gaze. "You're really too good to be true," she said, her voice cracking.

Beel didn't smile but his eyes darkened when he lowered his mouth to hers and captured her in a kiss that sent her tumbling. His hands made her flesh sizzle as he moved them over her body. She arched into him, every fiber of her being aching for her world to be as he saw it and not the way she knew it to be.

He moved his hands up her back and into her hair. Her spine popped and sparks shot through her system, stealing her breath as her more carnal side ached to come forward. In their feathers, life was simpler. Pure instinct and natural logic overcame their human emotions.

Beel tugged her hair, pulling her head backward, and devoured her. A growl escaped him and every inch of Andrea reacted. She shivered, need tearing through her with an energy so hot, so impulsive, it was all she could do not to rip his clothes from his body and demand he relieve her pressure now.

Logic won over her emotions. Her sister needed her. Andrea needed her sister too. They were all each other had. Although, including Beel in her nest, in her small world of those she cared for and would fly and kill for, appealed to her more now than it ever had.

He wasn't pushing her away. In spite of witnessing her conversation with the asshole, Beel was right here, holding her tight in his arms and devouring her as if he would die without her.

His mouth moved to her neck. Andrea's head fell back as if her neck could no longer hold it up. Beel traced moist heat over her artery, which throbbed out of control with energy she could barely contain.

"Now you can go wash up," he grumbled, his voice as much torture to her overly sensitive flesh as his lips and tongue were.

"Okay," she breathed.

It took a moment to straighten. Andrea blinked, an action owls didn't often do. Beel had her whirling out of control. Her emotions were at war, one side of her head insistent she let him go and not pull him down to her level of dishonor. It would be worse than clipping his wings. Another side of her demanded she give herself the opportunity to live. For once, if not from this day forward, she had a right to fly with the parliament, be respected, honored and even loved.

When she sucked in a breath and inhaled the many emotions she'd released in her room, it was all she could do not to blush. Andrea slipped out of his arms, turned and hurried to the bathroom. She'd been right from the beginning. If she could create space between her and Beel she would be able to get her head on straight and think clearly.

A few minutes later, after splashing water on her face and fighting to clear her mind so she focused only on her breathing and heartbeat, Andrea was a lot clearer minded. When she opened the bathroom door, there was a cold breeze coming from her bedroom. Beel's scent drifted toward her from the living room. She glanced his direction but then headed to her room. Her bedroom window was still open. And her room no longer smelled clogged up with emotions. Beel had left it open to air the room.

Her heart swelled a bit as it skipped a beat. She caught her breath, pushing the window closed and locking it. He hadn't wanted anyone else smelling her emotional upheaval. Did he consider it a private matter and wouldn't share what she'd done with anyone else?

God, she hoped so.

Beel would be able to convince his nest Jerome was lying when he accused her of burning her nest to the ground with her mother in it. No sane owl would ever do that! He wouldn't need to give specifics on how he knew this to be true. Although Andrea would die if he lied to his nest to protect her.

She turned around and Beel stood in the doorway, the hallway light silhouetting his tall, masculine body. Damn! He was perfect! Every inch of him was the ultimate definition of male; so tall with silver streaks in his blond hair that showed off his maturity and growing wisdom. His body was hard-packed with muscles so perfectly sculptured she ached to run her fingertips over them. If she had to say, although it would be a tough call, Andrea would probably say his eyes were his best feature. The way he stared at her, even in the dark room with the only light flooding in around him from the hallway, as if he knew and understood every little thing about her and adored her.

"Do you feel better?" he asked, not moving in on her but leaning against the doorway.

She swallowed, her mouth dry as she admired him. "Yes. Thank you." She gestured behind her toward the window. "And thank you for leaving the window open," she added, her voice trailing off as she fumbled with her gratitude.

"You're welcome." He continued standing there, studying her.

It made her feel damn awkward. A sensation curled around in her gut as if he were working to put together words to say something to her. Apparently it was something rather difficult for him to say. Her stomach began twisting uncomfortably as she speculated on what he might be thinking. When he continued watching her, those incredible eyes of his almost glowing in the darkness, Andrea grew more uncomfortable until she fought the urge to fly past him and out of her room.

"Andrea." He broke the silence, but the way he said her name wasn't assuring.

She hated feeling caged and on display. The walls were closing in on her and as her breath quickened, she breathed in her own apprehension. There wasn't any smell coming off Beel other than his usual intoxicating scent, which she would willingly breathe in all day. But the way he trapped her in her room, in the dark, and spoke her name as if determined to get out what he must say, terrified her.

She glanced past him to the hallway, her gut telling her to flee before something awful happened.

"My sweet little owl," he murmured, although his attentive expression didn't change. "I need to say this. We both know dwelling on something, speculating and twisting a possibility around in our minds until we contort it into something it isn't, is unhealthy and illogical."

"What do you need to say?" She straightened, feeling herself stiffen as she braced herself for whatever he needed to unload on her.

"First let me say how much you've honored me by sharing your past with me. I see its ugliness for what it is and know how difficult it would be to let anyone know the terrible details. You and your sister blossomed and learned to fly out of the pit of hell. It truly helps me see why you are as incredible as you are."

She licked her lips and nodded once, not sure what to say. His compliment was mixed with brutally accurate harshness. Yet he spoke the truth, albeit somewhat opinionated. Andrea wasn't sure how to respond so remained quiet.

"I also see how it has become second nature, an instinct engraved, to continually fly. It has been the only way you believed your nest would be safe."

"It was that or be caught," she reminded him, but snapped her mouth shut when it was clear he had more to say.

"Do you believe you still fly with a risk of being caught?"

She tilted her head, studying him. Beel's expression remained impassive, which made it damn hard to learn where he was headed with this conversation. All she could do was answer truthfully. If anything came out of this evening it would be her vow to herself to never again lie. The one told had been incredibly necessary in order to make

Jerome believe another owl existed who could come forward and announce the terrible crime he committed.

"As long as he can fly, there will always be a risk," she informed him, holding on to his gaze and hoping her expression appeared as relaxed as his.

"Interesting," he muttered. Beel pushed away from the doorway, taking a step in her direction but pausing, crossing his arms. His face was now cast in shadows, making it impossible with human eyes to narrow in on any change in his expression. "I swear to you, Andrea. I will find Jerome Chouette. He will face all his charges. I will do this to set you free. With that knowledge do you now fear the risk of being caught?"

This was interesting, and damn confusing. An almost overwhelming urge to narrow the distance between them distracted her from answering for a moment. Andrea wanted to reach out, run her fingers down his chest, feel his warmth and the solid beat of his heart. She wanted to assure him there was nothing for him to worry about.

To do so though would mean telling another lie. "There isn't any way you can promise another owl's death," she said, her heart constricting since she knew her response wasn't what he wanted to hear. "You honor me more than I deserve," she added, fighting the urge to fidget in front of him. "If he were dead I would feel free though."

Beel moved so fast she barely caught her breath before he grabbed her, lifting her in the air so their faces were inches from each other. Now, even in the dark, it was easy to see the intensity burning in his eyes, in the hard lines on his face, in the way he pressed his lips together into a thin, harsh line. She forgot to breathe. Her heart stopped beating for a moment. A mixture of fear and excitement rushed around her until she was almost dizzy from it.

"I swear to you he will die," Beel growled.

"Okay," she mouthed, barely able to get the one word out.

Where her heart forgot to beat a moment ago, suddenly now it pattered against her ribs until she almost started panting. Every inch of her tingled with apprehension and acute awareness of how firmly he held her. Their bodies almost touched but not quite. Heat radiated off him though, wrapping around her until her insides quickened. Her nipples hardened and pressure swelled between her legs as moisture pooled at her entrance.

"You will swear something to me," he said, the harshness in his tone somehow adding to the warped excitement of the moment.

"What?"

"Swear to me now you won't fly again. Swear you won't fly away from me."

The door to her nest opened and the sound of females chattering softly came from the living room. Andrea couldn't look away from Beel even as she heard her sister's voice in the other room.

"Andrea?" Anna called out.

Beel lowered her until her feet were on the ground and let go of her arms. He grabbed her jaw, almost pinching her skin when he tilted her head and lowered his mouth so it brushed over hers.

"I will have your promise, my sweet little owl. You feel the passion burning between us as strongly as I do. And trust me, if you try to fly away from me, I will stalk you and capture you before you even decide where to set up a new nest."

She believed him. There was so much conviction in his tone it was impossible not to think otherwise. Beel pressed his lips against hers, nipping so she opened to him. His kiss was intense, powerful, demanding and possessive. She stumbled and he grabbed her, holding her against him and impaling her until she swallowed his dominating aroma.

As quickly as he overpowered her, Beel released her, stepping back and stroking the hair alongside her face. "Go greet your sister," he grumbled. "But I will have that promise."

Andrea damn near tripped over her own feet as she flew from her room. Not only did she need space, she needed time to digest the powerful emotions he just threw at her. Beel showed her how he would honor her privacy and protect her honor when he allowed her room to air out before anyone else entered her nest. At the same time, he also showed her his feelings for her hadn't diminished after hearing her lie to Jerome on the phone. If anything, he just willingly showed her how much he wanted to fly by her side.

She hadn't expected it. And now she had to switch gears, fly in a completely different direction, and be there for her sister.

Andrea hurried into the living room, barely pausing to acknowledge the young female lingering at the door.

"Oh Anna," she cried out, taking in the sight of her sister.

"I know. I'm a mess." Anna held out her arms as if trying to show a better angle so everyone could see how muddy her clothes were and the dirt streaked on her face and down her arms. The jeans she wore were stained and her boots were caked with dried dirt. "I was so worried about you," she stammered, and seemed to forget about her appearance as easily as she'd just mentioned it when she collapsed into her sister's arms.

"You were worried about me?" Andrea stared at Anna in disbelief. "Interesting."

"I know," Anna mumbled, hugging her sister fiercely. She smelled happy, but lingering fear and anger were noticeable.

Andrea buried her face in her sister's hair, picking up the not-so-easily detected scents when Anna had stood a few feet away from her. Anna had mastered masking her negative emotions at an earlier age than most owls, but the terror she probably experienced in the clutch of that beast would have made it impossible to smother them completely.

"You're in your nest now," Andrea reassured her then pulled away in order to acknowledge Shelly, who lingered at the front door, watching both of them. "Shelly, you honor our nest by returning my sister to me."

Shelly nodded. "You would have done the same."

Andrea had never known other nests where they'd lived in the past. The more they had kept to themselves, the safer they'd been. "You're right," she agreed, knowing in this parliament, she would do anything to help these nests. "And now we're in your debt."

Shelly waved off the admission and glanced past Andrea when Beel appeared at the end of the hallway. She didn't appear surprised to see him. More than likely her mate had already informed her he was here. With a barely detectable nod, acknowledging him, she returned her attention to Andrea and Anna.

"All that matters is Anna is safe and where she belongs." She reached for the door. "I'm heading to my nest for a shower and bed. I'll see you tomorrow morning at the shop, right?"

Andrea nodded. "I'll be there."

"Good. You can pay back your debt by putting my books in order," she said, offered a small smile and turned to the hallway.

"I'll walk you to your nest," Beel decided. He gripped Andrea's shoulder as he moved past her and Anna. "I'll be right back."

Andrea nodded. She didn't mind having a few minutes alone with her sister. It dawned on her Anna wouldn't relax and share her horrors in front of the other owls. She watched Beel follow Shelly into the hall. His backside filled her doorway momentarily before he closed the door behind him. Then, pushing his head back around the door, he caught her watching him.

"Lock this door. I'll knock when I return."

Andrea nodded, letting go of her sister. He kept his head in the door when she approached and reached around it, grabbing her face and pulling her close for a quick kiss. "I'll be back in a second," he whispered then disappeared so she could close the door and lock it.

"He's a good male," Anna muttered.

Andrea twisted the lock on the door and breathed in his scent for a moment before turning around. Her insides twisted as she remembered the fierceness in his eyes when he demanded her promise not to fly away from him. Andrea didn't want to go anywhere. Both of them had good jobs, if Anna still had hers. They were in a strong parliament and accepted. If Jerome continued flying around the area though...

Andrea fought off a shudder and turned to face her sister, hoping she appeared relaxed and confident. "Tell me what happened," she said, walking to her sister and wrapping an arm around her. "We'll get you cleaned up and make something hot for you."

Anna took longer in her shower than usual. More than once Andrea checked to make sure she was still in the bathroom and prepared hot tea for both of them as well.

"I'm sorry." Anna immediately apologized when she appeared in the kitchen, her skin pink and wrapped in a thick, warm, long bathrobe. "It took forever before I felt clean."

"What did he do?" Andrea asked, whispering, although there wasn't any need for it. Neither of them ever discussed Jerome, and bringing him up now somehow seemed wrong, although she knew it was important to discuss it. "He didn't come here to the nest, did he?"

Anna shook her head and lowered her face to stare at the ground. "I'm such a fool, Andrea," she whimpered, her voice cracking.

"No! You're not!" Andrea leapt out of her chair, wrapping her sister in her arms and guiding her to the table where hot tea waited for both of them. "Tell me what happened. I already know none of it is your fault."

"Actually, it is." Anna gripped her cup with both hands but didn't sip from it. Instead, staring at it as her long, wet hair draped over her face, she sucked in a deep breath. "He called and told me you were with him," she murmured.

There was a knock on the door and Anna jumped, spilling her tea, which she put down as she shook her hands to get the hot liquid off them. Andrea jumped up, grabbed a towel and handed it to Anna.

She gripped her shoulder. "This wasn't your fault," she stressed then hurried to the door.

Andrea unlocked it as she breathed in Beel's appealing scent. Her aroma still lingered on him, making his smell even more attractive to her. She opened the door, her insides quickening as he stared down at her. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask what took him so long, but she didn't have the chance.

Beel walked to her, gripping her face and brushing his lips over hers. "I tried to give the two of you some time alone," he whispered, his mouth moving over hers.

"She's just started talking about it," Andrea told him.

Beel pushed the door closed behind him, locking it again before glancing past Andrea toward the kitchen. Anna hadn't stood from the table and her not acknowledging a guest in their nest proved even further how distracted she was over her ordeal.

"Would it be better if I went back to your bedroom?" He wasn't offering to leave them alone longer.

Andrea tried hiding her excitement over him making it clear he planned to stay. Her sister needed her right now though. She had to keep the importance of her nest foremost in her mind. Nothing like this could happen again.

She nodded then hugged herself and headed toward the kitchen. If she lingered a moment longer she'd be in his arms again.

Anna glanced over her shoulder when Beel disappeared down the hallway then looked at Andrea questioningly.

"He's giving us time to speak alone," Andrea offered then put her hand over her sister's. "This is my fault," she stressed. "I flew out my bedroom window to the Hampton Bed and Breakfast. One way or another I was going to put an end to this."

Anna's face showed her understanding. "He said you would do that."

The bastard! He thrived on second guessing her flying patterns. More than likely, all of this was some warped game in his dysfunctional brain. "So tell me what happened."

"The phone rang," Anna began. "It pulled me out of my sleep. It kept ringing and I realized it was in your room and you weren't answering so went to your bedroom." Anna picked up her tea and sipped then placed it down on the napkin she'd put on the table. "I didn't know what to think when you weren't here. The phone had stopped ringing and I checked the living room. Beel wasn't here either."

"He flew after me," Andrea explained.

Anna nodded as if she'd guessed that. "When I checked the phone to see what number it was and didn't recognize the area code..." Anna paused, reaching for her tea again but not picking up the cup. "I didn't have long to think on what to do when it rang again."

"It was him?" Andrea whispered.

Anna nodded, meeting her sister's look with her torn expression. "He didn't ask to speak to you or to me. He knew it was me," she continued. "That's what made him so believable."

"What did he say?"

"He told me you'd left your nest and he intercepted you," Anna said, her large gray eyes moist and glassy. "He laughed. It was the most hideous sound." She shivered.

Andrea gripped her hand, their fingers wrapping around each other as they interlocked and held on tightly. She knew beyond a doubt if the tables were turned, Andrea would have flown out that window without hesitating to free her sister. Anna had done that for her.

"He said the male sniffing around you wasn't a match for him." When she wrinkled her nose, her scent changed slightly, the faint pungent odors fading as she straightened and continued with her story. "I couldn't imagine that to be true but obviously he doesn't fly with the same convictions you and I do."

"We already know that's true," Andrea mumbled.

"Yes. We do," Anna agreed, her expression relaxing as she seemed to gather strength to finish her story. "There wasn't any way I would call him a liar and remain in the nest."

"I wouldn't have either."

Anna exhaled, accepting her sister not judging her poorly for her decisions. "I flew out after you, not having a clue what I would do but knowing you needed me and I wasn't going to remain safe in our nest while you were in the claws of that...that monster."

"Where did you go?" Andrea asked, squeezing her sister's hand and keeping her on track. It was doubtful he would still be wherever he had been with Anna, but she needed a starting point. If he was still in the area, she would go kill him herself.

"He told me to fly into the mountains. He said you two were in a cave for the night but would fly out at dawn so I needed to hurry."

Andrea would have flown wherever the asshole told her to protect Anna. It was hard keeping her anger in check though. And she needed to for Anna. Her sister was relaxing but the haunted look in her eyes hadn't faded yet.

"I flew faster than I had in ages." She made a snorting sound, possibly intending to laugh and release the tension inside her, but it came out sounding forced and dry. "When I reached the mountains, he intercepted me." Anna met Andrea's gaze. "Andrea," she whispered, "he flies worse than ever. He flew in circles around me but I don't think he could fly a straight line if he tried."

Andrea shook her head. "He never could."

"When we reached the cave, he already had a fire going and a tarp to cover the entrance. We changed into skin and I realized you weren't there. He tied my hands behind my back, but changing allowed me to get free from him. He chased after me, but flying straight and at full force made it impossible for him to keep up."

"So why were you walking along the highway?" Andrea asked when her sister took a breath.

"I still don't know how he got ahead of me." Anna dropped her gaze but then shot a furtive look down the hallway. "He changed back into his flesh and started shooting at me."

"With a gun?" Andrea asked, shocked even he would lower himself to using human weapons.

Anna nodded, also dumbfounded. "I knew if I were in my flesh on the highway I would get picked up or noticed easier if I did get shot. If he'd shot me over the mountains in my feathers I might not have made it."

She was right. "You handled a horrific situation with honor," Andrea assured her, but Anna's story bothered her, not to mention unnerved her worse than she could let Anna see. If that monster would shoot at her, he was more far-gone than Andrea had realized. That upped the danger factor and meant they were putting the entire parliament at risk the longer they remained here.

Chapter Sixteen

The next few weeks flew by in spite of Andrea and Anna not spending much time in their feathers. Anna kept her job at Earl's, in fact, the large Great Horned Owl seemed to take a protective interest in her, even going as far as escorting her to her nest more than once after the bar closed. Andrea started thinking the oversized owl might have a crush on Anna, but her sister insisted it wasn't the case.

Andrea didn't see a lot of her sister since she went to work early in the morning, arriving at Preston's Hardware around ten every morning and not leaving until seven. By the time she got to their nest, Anna had already gone to work. Andrea fell into her routine and barely noticed the days go by.

There had been an extensive search for Jerome following Anna's kidnapping. Andrea listened to the males and females who volunteered to sniff Jerome out. A group of owls was even organized, per their traditions, who would evaluate the series of events leading up to his capture and determine if Jerome should live or die. The search went on well over a week. Different owls volunteered. Leopards in the mountains heard the squawking from the parliament and offered to try to sniff him out. Not quite two weeks after the search began, they called it off. It was the opinion of the majority of the parliament that Jerome Chouette no longer flew in their territory.

No one mentioned Jerome after the search ended. He was gone though. Andrea sensed it in her heart. No longer would he create fear and panic inside her. Jerome Chouette wasn't worth exhausting herself as she fought off despicable emotions. Andrea had created so many tactics over the years so she could cope and fly straight while continuously looking over her shoulder. She'd even gone as far as refusing to allow his image to form in her mind. Saying his name out loud, or thinking his name, wouldn't bother her anymore. Jerome would never terrify her again.

Unfortunately, he wouldn't leave Andrea's thoughts. The hardware store wasn't far from the complex and with spring weather melting the snow and the mornings brisk with fresh breezes coming off the mountains, she enjoyed the walks to work. She hadn't managed the walk yet though without continuously glancing over her shoulder and at those who walked past her, across the street, or even drove by in cars.

Andrea prayed this time it was really over. She and Anna had found a good life flying here. Beel was an incredible male and possibly even *the* male. She and Anna had a good nest, the parliament was full of honorable, hard-working owls who looked out for each other. Everyone here flew straight. And she wanted this life, wanted it more than anything she'd ever dreamed of having. This was what true happiness felt like. The fresh breeze streaming off the mountain even smelled like happiness.

Possibly Jerome saw staying in this parliament would cause him his life. Anytime he'd flown after her and her sister before, they'd lost feathers scurrying to get out of the parliament as quickly as possible. They'd always flown alone. This time when Jerome sniffed them out, he learned they were no longer alone. The entire parliament went after him, ready to bring him before their parliament and determine if he would live or die. This time, Andrea and Anna had owls surrounding them who cared enough they flew after him on their behalf.

Jerome was definitely insane but not stupid. It would be an answer to all of her prayers and dreams if he flew away and never returned. Part of her dreams were answered already. It was only logical to admit it and accept her healing had begun. Andrea had found happiness for their small nest. They would fly here for the rest of their lives if she had anything to say about it. Rationally speaking, life always would have its up and downs. They wouldn't always fly in a straight line. But the worst was behind her. Today she walked with honor, acknowledging those she passed with a small smile. They nodded and smiled at her too. Andrea wasn't the strange owl in a parliament anymore but part of a whole. These were her owls, and they all belonged to her. If there was trouble, she'd fly to help in a second, just as many of them had done for her. That was why parliaments existed.

That morning, a Monday after having overslept, wasn't any different. Andrea hurried down the sidewalk, breathing in the crisp air and enjoying the coolness on her face, when a male crossing the street ahead of her grabbed her attention. It had been several years since she'd actually seen him, which hadn't been long enough. Anna had said he'd gotten worse though. She watched the male warily as he stumbled over something in the street, caught his footing and hurried to the other side.

Her heartbeat accelerated as tingles rushed over her flesh. The hardware store was less than a block away. There were others on the street, although most of them human. She reached the store, yanking the door open and jumping at the sound of the loud bell when it rang, announcing she'd entered the store.

"Who's got your feathers in a ruffle?" Shelly asked, giving Andrea a once-over as she stood behind the counter.

Andrea turned, still holding the door opened, when someone yelled outside. She watched a mated couple hurry down the street and grab the staggering owl. Her heart began beating normally again as she overheard the two chastise the staggering owl for tying one on until he couldn't fly straight. She turned again, releasing the door and letting it close behind her.

"I didn't mean to be late to work." Andrea glanced at the clock, noting she was seven minutes later than her scheduled time to be there. It was a convenient excuse, and the truth. She didn't want to talk about Jerome with Shelly or anyone, for that matter. There wasn't reason to mention him. But there was reason to finally let him go. He would only have the power to scare her while she walked or flew in public if she gave it to him.

"Did Beel keep you from getting here on time?" There was a teasing tone in Shelly's voice. She came around the counter and walked up to Andrea, reaching behind her and flipping the sign that said *Open* over to announce they were ready for business.

"No," Andrea said, hurrying past her to the small office behind the shop where she worked on the books.

Shelly followed her, stopping in the doorway and crossing her arms. "There isn't anything wrong, is there?"

"No. Not at all." Andrea hung her coat on the peg on the wall then slid onto the wooden seat behind her desk. She stared at the papers she'd left in a neat stack when she'd finished up the previous Friday. The only thing she had to worry about was getting all of this done before her shift ended today.

"You know, Beel really likes you."

Andrea nodded. "I know," she said, and she really liked him too. Already part of her dream was before her. She wouldn't wish for too much, too fast.

"Are you two spending a lot of time together?"

Shelly didn't strike Andrea as the type of female who did a lot of squawking. She was pleasant to any owl or human who entered her store and chatted easily about what was going on in the town. Andrea could hear most of the squawking from where she sat in her small office, but had never heard Shelly get into a discussion about the personal life of any owl in the parliament.

"I saw Beel over the weekend," she admitted. Since life had calmed down after Jerome disappeared and all their searching didn't pick up on his scent no matter where they flew, Beel no longer slept on her couch. A few times he'd joined her in her bed, but Andrea wasn't comfortable with him sleeping in her nest since Anna would come home from work after they were asleep.

"Has he told you he wants to fly with you?" Shelly pressed, her expression relaxed as if to say it didn't bother her at all pressing Andrea for personal information.

Andrea guessed Shelly would have a vested interest in her mate's brother's personal life. Anyone who would mate with either of Heath's brothers would be part of Shelly's extended nest.

"Not in those exact words," Andrea told her, glancing up to see Shelly watching her intently. Shelly wouldn't leave her alone until Andrea gave her something to satisfy her curiosity. Andrea searched for something appeasing to say to the female. "There isn't a lot I would have to offer to any male in a mating," she explained, deciding putting her reasons for not elaborating on any relationship she had with Beel on her small nest instead of on her fear of endangering any owl she might openly get too close to. "My nest is very small and it isn't like we have much to claim as our own."

Shelly waved her hand in the air and entered the office, moving to the desk then leaning on the edge of it so she was looking down at Andrea. "The Halks aren't like that, trust me. There is a lot you probably don't know about me since you aren't from

around here," she continued, and her comfortable pose indicated she was ready to share something personal about herself and might take some time in doing it.

"I'm not one to listen to squawking in the parliament," Andrea assured her.

"Which is one of the reasons I like you so much," Shelly said. "Heath took an interest in me when I lived upstairs. My nest owned this hardware store and the parliament had no problem squawking about my parents. You see, they have a rather unique mating and one many owls didn't necessarily approve of. Ever since I was a fledgling I lived with many believing I would turn out just like my sire and mother."

Shelly pursed her lips together as her scent grew stronger. She was sharing a personal bit of information about herself and it was obvious she pulled forth unpleasant memories. Andrea straightened in her chair, giving Shelly her full attention. The female wanted to talk about herself and it was only right to honor her with Andrea's full attention.

"They were very open about their promiscuity, and I admit into my adulthood, I resented them for it. I felt they'd ruined my life. Many males tried flying after me but it was obvious with each one why they tried to get under my feathers."

Andrea didn't know what to say. Shelly was anything but a slut. She dressed modestly and although she wore a lot of makeup, she wore it with class. Her honor smelled as clean and fresh as everything else did about her. Shelly was beautiful, friendly and had appeared to be a female who had it all since the day Andrea met her. This revelation was a surprise.

Shelly gave Andrea a knowing look as if to say she guessed what was on Andrea's mind. "Needless to say, when Heath flew after me, I readily accused him of wanting what every other male in the parliament wanted from me."

Andrea didn't know Heath very well but from what she'd seen of the male, he didn't strike her as the type of male who would fly after a female if her reputation was tarnished.

"I accused him of knowing what the parliament squawked about me." Shelly lowered her gaze, studying her fingernails as she took a moment to gather her thoughts. "Although he repeatedly told me he didn't care about what anyone said about me, every time we flew together we ended up having sex." She shot Andrea a quick look and even smiled. "So of course it was easy for me to continue believing that although I was quickly falling for him, he wouldn't take serious interest in a female like me. You know, one with a bad past."

Andrea stared at her. Suddenly she understood why Shelly was sharing this story with her. Shelly had guessed Andrea believed flying with Beel would be a bad idea. She was trying to assure Andrea it would be okay for her to do so because it had worked out for Shelly and Heath. The only difference though was Andrea's past was dangerous and deadly. It was worse than a parliament squawking untruths about her, although Andrea admitted that too was bad.

"Heath wouldn't leave me alone. He told me he didn't care what anyone said about my nest. He told me he loved me and wanted me as his mate." Again she paused, sighing and glancing out toward the store. No one had entered yet and she turned her attention to Andrea. "I didn't want to ruin his nest by mating with him. I did love him, and because I did, I couldn't mate with him."

"So what did you do?" Andrea asked, getting wrapped up in the story in spite of seeing clearly how Shelly's circumstances didn't match up with hers.

"When a Halk male wants something, my dear, he doesn't give up until he gets it," she said, lowering her tone and sounding conspiratorial. "But it was also something my sire and mother did. They were all for the mating. They saw it as a way for their only fledgling to step up in life, and of course they were right. I would be catching the best male in Banff," she added, her pride and love for her mate showing as her eyes glowed.

"You two do seem very happy," Andrea offered, nodding.

"Oh we are," Shelly easily agreed. "But my sire and mother approached me one day and talked to me about all the squawking the parliament had done over the two of them most of my life. They told me when there is true love, it really doesn't matter what anyone else says about you. True love is strong enough to stand up to any situation, no matter how ugly—or deadly," she added, lowering her voice, "it might be. You're a good female, Andrea, and you deserve happiness and the best there is out there."

"Thank you," she mumbled.

"I mean it. If you're holding back on Beel because you're worried your past might come back to try to tear out your feathers, you need to know Beel is strong enough to stand by your side and fight along with you. He isn't going to let you go. Trust me on this one. I know Halk males better than anyone."

Shelly's story affected Andrea more than she thought it would. Customers started trailing into the store and she was left alone with her work. Even after booting up her computer and going over sales from the weekend, her mind strayed from her figures as she thought about Beel.

They spent time together in her nest or in his. He didn't ask her to fly with him or go out anywhere. For the most part, Andrea lived for the moments alone with him. He was an incredible lover and the more they fucked each other, the more relaxed she became with him. Exploring new positions and learning more about each other's bodies had become the extent of their relationship. Not that Andrea had any complaints.

It wasn't the type of relationship that would lead to a mating. Andrea viewed it more as a healthy physical release for both of them. Beel spent his days, and often nights, with his nest, flying around Banff and even at times into the mountains, tending to matters of the many nests in the area. Sometimes they even interacted with surrounding leopard and werewolf dens. There were more of both living in the mountains than there had ever been, according to Beel. He would often join her after work and discuss his day with her, telling her of the squawkings in the parliament and the howlings from other species. Andrea found all of it very interesting and often asked

questions or commented on what he told her. For the most part though, there wasn't a connection between any of it and her life.

And she knew why. Not once in her life had she ever considered her nest permanent. Not since she was a small fledgling. At any time their lives might be disrupted and she and Anna would fly to safety, to another parliament, or anywhere where no one knew them and they would be safe, until discovered again.

The only difference this time was he already knew they were here. Andrea dropped her pen and lowered her head into her hands. Why the hell were they staying here? They were playing as if this life was good, both of them with jobs, making friends in the parliament and settling down in their new nest. They weren't safe. Just because no one had seen or sniffed him out in a few weeks didn't mean he wouldn't fly back into Banff when they least expected it. "What the hell are you thinking?" she mumbled to herself.

"I don't know but I'd love to find out," Beel grumbled in the doorway.

Andrea jumped, looking up at him, shocked. "I didn't hear you," she stammered.

"Problems with your work?" He entered her small office, making it seem even smaller as he filled the space on the other side of her desk.

She glanced past him when he closed her office door behind him. There was just her desk between them and suddenly that wasn't enough space.

"I'll be fine." She sucked in a deep breath, which was a mistake. His scent not only wrapped around her but filled her insides. It was dark, intense, full of the smells of outside, but also laced with an intoxicating aroma.

"I know just the thing." Beel moved around her desk easily for a male of his size.

"What?" But then she squealed when Beel lifted her out of her chair. "Beel," she hissed, again dragging his scent, which this time was noticeably laced with lust. "We can't do this."

"I beg to differ, my sweet, precious owl, but we've proved time and again that we can." He placed her on the edge of her desk and pushed his legs between hers.

In the next moment he began removing her clothes.

"You know what I mean," she whispered, and shot a furtive glance at the door as her heart raced and the smell of lust grew around them. "The shop is on the other side of the door."

"Then you better be quiet." He lifted her shirt, forcing her hands up and pulling it over her head. "This will make your day better. I promise."

It was hard to argue with him when his hands caressed her bare flesh. Sparks ignited up her spine, drawing the more carnal half of her whole forward as Beel caused waves and waves of lust and pleasure to ripple through her. He lowered his mouth to her neck as his fingers slid under her bra straps and eased them off her shoulders.

"I've had a rough morning too," he grumbled, his breath sending goose flesh rushing over her skin.

"What if someone walks in on us?" Andrea heard every noise out in the store as if it were magnified next to her ear.

Beel chuckled and straightened, having no problem with his cock so obviously straight and hard, creating a tent in his jeans as he stepped to the door and turned the lock on the handle.

"No one will disturb us. You have my word." His gray eyes were laced with gold as he stared at her.

"Beel, this is where I work." She reached for one of her straps and started sliding it back up her shoulder.

He eased into her space without a sound and barely a movement. His powerful thighs pushed against the insides of her legs, spreading her open. Andrea immediately felt the moisture already pooling between her legs. When he leaned into her, his hard cock brushed over the denim covering her pussy. She hissed in her next breath, every inch of her swelling in anticipation of him fucking her.

But at the same time, his willingness to take her right there, in the small office directly off the shop, during business hours, seemed a bit too risky to her.

"Shelly is my brother's mate," he said, his voice rough with need. "She doesn't outrank me."

"But she's my boss," Andrea protested, but couldn't bring herself to stop him when he removed her bra.

The fresh, cool air instantly caused her nipples to harden. Her breasts swelled and their heaviness created even more of an ache inside her as his muscular body brushed against hers.

"I promise you, my sweet owl," he murmured, again nipping at her neck then cupping her breast in his hand. "Your job is not in jeopardy. And the way you smelled when I came in here, this will help your day out as much as it will mine."

She didn't have an argument. And she should have one. Beel had this uncanny ability of turning her into a pool of fiery lust within minutes of being around her, no matter what she might have been doing. The way he touched her, took command and made whatever he suggested something she desperately needed as well, should infuriate the hell out of her.

Andrea swore to herself sometime very soon she would figure out what it was about this male. She let her head fall back when he lowered his head farther and began a slow, deliberate feast on her breasts. His hands were strong, his movements sure and confident, and his skills off the charts. No owl could possibly fly as high as Beel or with as much control of everything around him.

He unsnapped her jeans and eased the zipper down. As he slid his fingers inside the denim, at the same time pushing her jeans down her hips, fire ignited in her womb. Andrea lifted her hips off the desk, wanting him to have easier access. The argument against doing this at her work seemed to be drifting from her mind. All that mattered at

the moment was getting these clothes out of the way so Beel could appease the throbbing, painful waves of desire plummeting inside her and swelling in her pussy.

"I would love to hear what had you in such turmoil when I walked into your office." His voice seemed to come from far away as he managed to take off her shoes and slide her jeans down her legs in one fluid movement.

"Umm..." Andrea said, barely able to focus. The small part of her brain still working coherently knew there was no way she could discuss with him her worries and fears about remaining here in this parliament. She didn't want to hurt him and already knew what he would say.

"Sounds like life is challenging both of us," he continued mumbling as he pressed his lips against the soft skin below her breasts. "We flew north into the mountains this morning to hear the complaints of several leopard dens."

Andrea didn't realize she was naked until Beel lifted her legs and dragged her body to the edge of the desk. "Why..." she began then swallowed and moistened her mouth. "Why do you care about leopard dens?" she asked, barely able to focus on this conversation with the way he was touching her body.

"It's in the best interest of the parliament to remain on friendly terms with other species living in the area," he explained, and straightened, letting go of her to make quick work of removing his clothes.

Andrea stared up at him, her vision blurring over all of that roped muscle as it appeared before her. When he was naked, Beel ran his hands underneath her legs, once again sending chills rushing over her flesh.

"That makes sense." She was almost panting when Beel moved to his knees and all she saw were his eyes watching her when he moved his mouth to her soaked pussy. "Oh god," she wailed, letting her head fall back when he pressed his lips over her swollen clit. "That feels beyond incredible."

"Good," he growled, and ran his tongue along her entrance.

There seriously wasn't a damn thing this male wasn't incredibly good at doing. Beel sucked and licked, caressed and tortured. Flames burst inside her, burning her alive. He would ease her suffering then bring her right back to the edge, panting hard and aching to come.

"I can't take it anymore," she wailed then remembered where she was and covered her mouth.

Beel chuckled against her pussy, torturing her further as he relentlessly continued enjoying her misery. She closed her eyes, resting against her elbows. There was no way she'd ever view this desk, or this office, the same way again. Beel had not only crept into her life when she knew it wasn't a good idea, he had slipped into her mind, her soul, and she feared even her heart.

What would she risk if she fell in love? Her head fell back farther as she clucked her tongue several times before realizing what she was doing. The back of her head rested against the desk and with her eyes closed, brilliant colors appeared in her mind. Beel

dipped inside her, twirling his tongue and lapped at her juices. He made soft, low-humming sounds and they vibrated inside her, pushing her closer to the incredibly warm, dark edge.

Her insides hardened and she fisted her hands at her sides, feeling the pressure grow to unbearable levels.

"Breathe, my sweet little owl," Beel encouraged, his soft yet commanding tone the only stable part of her world at the moment. "Relax and come for me. Give me all you have, Andrea," he whispered, and impaled her again, twisting and curling his tongue inside her.

He stroked her inner walls, caressing her most sensitive areas. His actions were enough to push her beyond the point of control.

"I'm going to..." She hissed then released a growl that turned into a gasp as wave after wave of incredible pleasure damn near ripped her in two.

Instead of stopping, Beel increased the intensity, lapping as if he were a starving owl offered his first real kill in weeks. Andrea dug into the desk with her nails, swearing he would drain her very ability to think right out of her. There wasn't any stopping it. She had no control. Every inch of her spasmed again and again as the most incredible orgasm she'd ever experienced left her wiped out and feeling wonderfully sated.

At the same time, the throbbing began again almost immediately when Beel stood. Her head was almost too heavy to lift but Andrea managed. She would be damned if he controlled every moment of the pleasure they shared.

"Fuck me now, owl," she demanded, her voice rough and raspy. God, she hadn't cried out loud enough for anyone in the shop on the other side of the door to have heard her, had she?

"You better believe I'm going to fuck you." He didn't look as if he had a concern in the world. Beel's bright gray eyes stared down at her, giving her his undivided attention as he pressed his cock against her soaked, sensitive pussy without looking. He didn't take his gaze from hers as he filled her, moving slowly but steadily as he stretched her until every inch of him was hard and hot inside her. "I will always take care of my little owl," he grumbled then thrust.

Andrea bit her lip so she wouldn't cry out when he slid her across the desk with the force in which he fucked her. There wasn't anything to hold on to and she collapsed, no longer able to hold herself up and watch him. Beel lifted her legs, bringing her feet to his shoulders. Then, leaning over her, he folded her in two and buried himself even deeper into her heat.

When he began moving, picking up a rhythm that grew faster with each thrust, Andrea managed to open her eyes. She drowned in how incredibly sexy he was. His face grew flushed, his eyes laced with gold once again, and the muscles in his bare chest bulged. She adored every inch of him as he carried her beyond her ability to rationalize.

Andrea came again and again until she was sure she would be limp and incapable of forming a coherent thought for the rest of the day. The sex was rough and hot and she loved every minute of it. When he clenched his jaw, his lips pressing into a thin line, and focused on her, Andrea knew he'd gone as far as he could too.

"It's your turn, my sweet owl," she whispered.

Beel's lips curved up on each side, forming what only could be a smile. He lowered his mouth to hers, bringing her feet almost to the sides of her face.

"That's right," he grunted then groaned, and captured her mouth so he wouldn't make more noise than acceptable in the small office. "I'm most definitely your owl," he murmured against her lips as he filled her with his rich, intoxicating come.

Chapter Seventeen

Beel untwisted Andrea's sweater and handed it to her. "There's one den in the mountains where a hunter lives."

"Hunter?" she asked, adjusting her bra then accepting her sweater. Her cheeks were still flushed from their lovemaking and her aroma was more enticing than ever, as if they'd truly just bonded. "Those are the leopards who are in charge of the other leopards, right?" she asked, wrinkling her nose.

"It's just a different culture, and sort of." Beel wasn't surprised Andrea didn't know much about leopards. Most owls didn't. Those who did weren't impressed with their aggressive, wild nature. Leopards had no problems displaying their emotions and often threw angry fits over situations that would be handled much better with calm logic. Beel had some exposure to the different race and was used to their behavior. "We flew to the hunter's den this morning where he spoke on behalf of the dens on the mountain."

"Are there a lot of them up there?"

"Enough." He pulled his shirt over his head then tucked it into his jeans. "They're complaining about damage being done on their mountain and claiming it's one of us doing it."

"Really." Andrea combed her hair with her fingers until they ran through her silky locks freely. "Why would any owl want to damage someone's nest or den?"

"Exactly." He loved how her face glowed, how the gray in her eyes sparkled when she looked at him. Andrea was so beautiful. With her scent embedded in his flesh and his in hers, they'd created an intimate aroma any owl would be able to detect. It was hard not to beam with pride knowing any owl who came near Andrea would know exactly who she was flying with. "You'd be surprised how hard it was to explain to their hunter why an owl wouldn't consider such a thing."

Andrea sat behind her desk but he pulled her back up again.

"Beel, not again," she whispered, glancing at the door. "Not right now."

He almost laughed; his mood was so light. Her expression, and knowing if they weren't at her work she'd consider going another round, made his heart swell while a warm sensation rushed through his system. Andrea was his owl. Two weeks and she hadn't flown away in spite of knowing her sire was probably still in the area. Even though she hadn't promised him she wouldn't fly, he knew she stayed where she was because of him.

"It's lunchtime, my sweet owl. Let's find us some kill."

Andrea glanced at the clock as her fingers brushed against his chest. "Okay. I am hungry," she admitted.

The flush on her face when she spoke, although she lowered her head so he wouldn't see it, was more proof her hunger was for him. Beel would fly out of the hardware store if he didn't get rid of all his damn pride and happiness. It was logical they should be together. They were a perfect catch for each other. It was obvious and her scent was enough to show she agreed, even if she wouldn't voice her thoughts. That would come with time though. Beel wasn't worried.

He really couldn't blame her for not completely opening up to him. She shared some of her thoughts, but not all of them. It had only been a few weeks and although they'd mastered physical intimacy, emotional intimacy always took longer. And it flew both ways. Beel didn't share everything with Andrea about his morning, especially the proof the leopards had presented to them.

As he opened the office door and stepped out into the shop in front of Andrea, he immediately took stock of who was there. Shelly leaned against the counter by her register, assuming almost the same perch her mother used to take, although Beel would never say that to her.

Shelly glanced their way and straightened as Andrea moved to Beel's side and walked with him to the counter. Beel didn't know Albert Cummings real well, the male standing at the counter with Shelly. Theo Orlando and Brad Jones were also in the shop. He wouldn't call any of the males squawkers though. Although, lately he cared less if anyone in the parliament started speculating about him and Andrea.

"Andrea," Shelly said, and came around the counter and behind Beel to face Andrea.

"How're things flying, Halk?" Cummings asked, making it impossible for Beel to be part of the conversation between the females. "I was just hearing how the leopards are getting restless."

Beel wouldn't call Shelly a squawker. She'd endured a lifetime of the entire parliament passing judgment on her for the lifestyle her nest led. Heath had mentioned something about giving the parliament a heads-up so they wouldn't fly over the particular part of the mountain where the leopards were claiming trouble was brewing. It wouldn't have surprised Beel if Heath called his mate and told her to pass the word around to the customers who came into the hardware store.

"Seems to be the case," Beel said, nodding and listening to Andrea and Shelly as they spoke softly behind him.

"Heath's asked if I could have lunch with him today," Shelly said, standing behind Beel where he couldn't see her and could barely hear her over Cummings' booming voice. "We haven't flown together in the daytime for ages now it seems."

"You should spend time with your mate," Andrea said.

"I want to," Shelly agreed. "You've been here for a several weeks now. Would you be willing to watch the counter for an hour or so today?"

"What's got those leopards' hackles up?" Cummings asked as Marc Jones walked up to the counter with several items in his hand that made it appear he was going to do some work on a sink in his nest.

"If you ask me, we should have fought harder to keep those leopards off our mountain," Jones piped up. "What are they howling about now?" he asked, sniffing the air as he looked from Cummings to Beel.

Andrea was hard to hear when she answered at almost the same time as Jones spoke. She spoke quietly so as not to intrude on the males' conversation.

"If you want," she offered, her voice just above a whisper. "I don't know a lot about the merchandise, other than how much it costs," she added. "Are you sure I would work out dealing with all the owls?" she asked, this time definitely whispering.

Beel caught her question though and understood her meaning. If any owl gave her grief, his sweet little female would hand their beak and tail feathers to them without so much as blinking.

"Halk was just telling me how the leopards are starting to growl," Cummings offered, and he and Jones looked at Beel expectantly, waiting for details.

If he didn't tell them something, they would start squawking, accusing the Halks of trying to handle a matter that might deem all the owls knowing about it. There wasn't any way he'd give them all the details though.

"The leopard hunter contacted us about a situation up on the mountain," he said offhandedly. "Nothing for any of us to get our feathers bent out of shape over. It's a leopard problem but they wanted us aware of it."

It didn't surprise him Shelly was listening to his conversation as much as he focused on theirs. She stepped around Andrea, joining the males. Andrea moved as well, remaining at Beel's side but watching the males with wary interest.

"Take your female to lunch," she said, nodding to the males. "I'll get you rung up, Marc," she added, stepping between all of them and breaking up the small squawking session, which was fine with Beel.

"Good hunting," Beel said to Cummings and Jones, and ignored their curious stares when he put his arm around Andrea and led her to the door. If they wanted to squawk about something, let it be the new female flying by his side. That was fine with him.

"When you get back, I'll fly out," Shelly called after them.

Beel didn't care much for drive-through human food. They always overcooked their meat. Andrea appeared to think the same way when she unwrapped her hamburger back at his nest and looked at it with half interest. She glanced up at him, fingering the foil surrounding the hamburger. A bit of ketchup got on her finger and she brought it to her mouth, sucking the condiment from her fingertip. They sat across from each other at his table and there wasn't any change in his scent when his cock grew harder than steel

from her little suggestive act. Nonetheless, he swore her eyes glowed a bit brighter, as if she enjoyed knowing her actions could manipulate him so easily.

"Are there a lot of leopards up on that mountain?" she asked.

He wouldn't have guessed that would be on her mind. Beel shrugged. "Leopards and werewolves. There are scattered nests as well. Once we shared the mountain with the werewolves but all of that has changed."

"No one claims the territory?"

"There is a leopard hunter living on that mountain. That gives the leopards a fair amount of jurisdiction. The werewolves have lived deep in the mountain for quite a few generations and we've been here just as long. So far, in peace," he added, picking up his burger and taking a decent bite of it.

Andrea did the same and they ate in silence for a few minutes. She didn't look at him but stared at the table, lost in thought about something. Part of him thought it would be beneficial to share his concerns with her after meeting with Kane Masters, the leopard hunter. Kane was worried about fires being set in trees near some of the dens up there. He claimed there wasn't any way the fires were accidental and because they were started high in the trees it made it appear to be an owl starting them.

Beel couldn't think of any reason why any owl in their parliament would do such a thing, or any owl living anywhere. Heath had said as much, telling Masters the action wasn't logical and atypical of anything an owl would do, even one with his feathers in a ruffle over something the leopards might have done to him. In the same breath though, he agreed to treat the matter seriously and do some investigating of his own.

No sane owl would do this. It was a pointless crime, destructive without logic. Beel knew when he met his brothers' expressions the same thought went through their minds that went through his.

Jerome Chouette. But why would the odd owl do something like this? To what gain?

"What are you thinking about?" Andrea pulled him out of his musings.

"My morning," he admitted, meeting her gaze.

Andrea searched his face as she put the last bite of her burger in her mouth. He had been lost in thought not to notice her watching him. Now though, with her milky gray eyes drawing him in, his insides hardened protectively. If Chouette was up to some devious mischief he would find out and end it. Andrea wouldn't fear the insane owl ever again. She and her sister weren't going anywhere. And to keep her here he needed to show her she was safe and free to fly with him without bringing any of them trouble.

"Something is bothering you about it." She wrinkled the foil from her lunch and tossed it in the bag they'd brought the burgers to his nest in. "I smelled your worry."

"Did you?" He wasn't sure if that indicated he was growing more relaxed around her, or if he were seriously that disturbed about this morning's events. On the surface it appeared to be a prank, possibly something a few rogue owls might do to spook the

leopards. It wasn't a secret the owls didn't approve of so many leopards moving in and around Banff and trying to buy out a few of their businesses.

Beel covered her hand with his. "Forgive me for not being better company."

Andrea pulled her hand out from under his. "Tell me what has you worried," she said, holding his gaze.

Beel smelled a challenge but wasn't sure what might trigger her defenses and cause her to demand he share his thoughts. They were having a good day after an unsettling morning and he wasn't in the mood to start a fight.

"I don't like leopards accusing owls of anything," he said truthfully.

Andrea narrowed her brow. "What are they accusing us of?"

"We don't have a strong history with leopards," he began instead of answering her question. "The leopards have a seriously tainted past. One of their own destroyed many of them and tried dictating their species."

"I remember hearing some of the squawking about that but admit I didn't pay a lot of attention to their problems." She stood, tossing the bag with the French fries into his trash.

Beel had never understood the humans' fascination with the potato, which appeared to him to be no more than a swollen root that was bland at best. Andrea obviously felt the same way about them. She turned and looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to continue.

"Many of them settled here and tried buying us out of our nests and our businesses. They'd heard how successful the owls were in Banff and wanted to rebuild their dens here."

"Just because owls are successful here doesn't mean leopards or any other species would be."

Beel nodded, agreeing fully. "For now, we're at peace. I'm not the only one who wants to keep it that way, but there are owls who disagree and would just as soon attack with claws and beaks and fly them out of here."

"Is that what is happening?" she asked, dropping her tone to a hushed whisper as her eyes widened.

The last thing he'd do was put unnecessary fear in his little owl. He loved how her eyes glowed, how her flesh blushed when he made her come again and again. That wouldn't be replaced with tension and skittishness. Not as long as he had anything to say about it.

Beel's phone rang and he pulled it out of his pocket, glancing at the screen to see Heath was calling. "No," he told her emphatically then took the call.

"Where are you?" Heath asked instead of greeting him.

"My nest."

"Good. I'll be down in a minute. I'm taking my mate to lunch but want to talk to you first." Heath hung up before Beel could comment.

A minute later there was a knock on Beel's door then his brother let himself in, immediately spotting Andrea. "Forgive me, I didn't know you had company," he said, approaching them and nodding to Andrea.

"You didn't ask," Beel said dryly, standing and coming around the table to face his brother. He hoped Heath didn't want to brainstorm about their visit to the leopards, not with Andrea there. "If you're ready to get your mate, I'll take Andrea back to the shop."

Heath nodded but then walked casually around Beel and joined Andrea at the table. "I'd like to ask you a few questions," he began, his tone softening.

"What about?" Beel demanded, putting his hands on her shoulders as he stood behind her. He gave Heath a hard stare, trying to understand his thoughts before Heath bothered to explain.

Andrea stiffened against his touch and reached up to put her hand on his, her smooth, soft skin instant torture that just accentuated his primal urge to protect her.

"What are your questions?" she asked.

Heath stared at Beel a moment, giving him an assessing stare, then lowered his attention to his hands on Andrea's shoulders. There were hard lines in his forehead and his short, blond, silver hair was slightly tousled. He looked as if he'd already put in a full day. Heath took his hands off the back of the chair and pulled it out, sitting and facing Andrea.

"Has Beel told you about our morning?" He never took his attention off Andrea.

"We were just talking about it. I smell your worry just as I did his." She looked over her shoulder, staring up at Beel. "I couldn't help but think you weren't telling me everything," she mused quietly.

"What did you tell her?" Heath asked.

Beel didn't take his attention off Andrea. She continued staring up at him and as he watched, something masked over her eyes. She was stifling her emotions, her feelings from him. When she'd been lost in thought earlier while they ate, she possibly had been worrying he wasn't opening up to her, meaning they weren't as close as their intimate setting over lunch and after having sex in her office suggested.

"Not everything," he admitted, holding her gaze.

"Why not?" she demanded, her eyes flaring. "What are you holding back from me, and why?" She spun around, a faint hint of her spicy anger drifting through the air. "Does this have something to do with *him*?" she asked, emphasizing "him" instead of voicing her sire's name.

"I don't know." Heath put his hands on the table and laced his fingers together, remaining calm and giving Andrea all of his attention. "Your sire burned your nest to the ground, right?"

She nodded without saying anything. When she took her hand off Beel's on her shoulder, he felt how clammy it was before she clasped her hands together in her lap.

"I don't see any point in questioning her about the male," Beel said, squeezing her shoulders. He was prepared to kick his brother out of his nest if that was what it would take to prevent Andrea from growing more upset. When Heath looked up at him, Beel told him as much with a look.

"I want to establish character traits. If a male is capable of burning something to the ground, would he do it more than once?"

"That monster started fires before he destroyed our nest," Andrea said under her breath. "My mother would take us into town from time to time. We learned to fly on those trips and we always took the same route. More than once he would burn the trees just to scare us. He would tell us it was so we wouldn't lose our way, but my mother never believed him."

"He burned trees," Heath murmured, meeting Beel's attentive gaze.

In spite of the burning ache inside him to yank Andrea away from this conversation, fly her to a safe place where she would never have to think or talk about the monster who ruined her life again, he remained where he was, his entire body turning to stone as he gripped her shoulders and stared at his brother.

The moment of silence passing between them was apparently too long. Andrea jumped up, slapping at Beel's hands and turned on Beel, her eyes on fire as she narrowed her gaze on him. She pointed a finger at his chest as her mouth formed a small circle before she said anything.

"What is going on here?" she said, her voice a harsh whisper.

"We're..." Heath began.

Beel held up his hand, silencing his brother, then ignored the defiant stare his older sibling gave him. Heath was used to flying in the lead, controlling all situations. But he wouldn't control this one. Not when it came to Beel's female.

"If you're ready to leave," he began, speaking slowly and fighting to keep his emotions at bay as sparks ignited up his spine. "We'll discuss this more on the way to the shop."

"What are you keeping from me?" she asked, her voice too calm. "And you are holding something back, I've sensed it throughout lunch. Don't you dare think I can't fly without protection, Beel Halk. Or believe me, owl, you'll be flying alone." She stabbed his chest more than once as she spit out her ultimatum then snapped her mouth shut, pressing her lips into a straight line as she stared at him.

"There isn't anything to tell you," Beel snapped, biting his tongue when he almost told her she damn well too needed protection. If she didn't she wouldn't have been flying from nest to nest all her life.

"Why did you ask me about fires?" she demanded, spinning around and facing Heath.

"Enough!" Beel ordered, catching his brother when he opened his mouth to answer Andrea. "Heath, leave," he said, lowering his voice.

Heath simply cocked an eyebrow at him. Andrea spun around again, her anger peaking and filling the room with an obnoxious spicy smell.

"You should honor your nest better than that," she said under her breath then grabbed her coat and marched around Beel. "I'm going back to work. Heath, you may pick up your mate when you're ready."

Beel grabbed her before she could leave the kitchen, spinning her around to face him. "I'll take you to work," he said, barely able to move his mouth or he would start yelling.

"I don't *need* your protection." She matched his calm tone, although her voice wavered as she did. "I *wanted* to fly with you but not if you're going to smother me and keep information from me that you feel I shouldn't know."

When she tried harder to yank herself free from him, Beel tightened his grip, grabbing her other arm and forcing her to face him. There was no way she'd fly away from him. If there were issues, they would fly through them right now.

"No more flying away," he whispered, lowering his face so he stared into her eyes. They were inches from each other but he was able to focus on her eyes when they darted back and forth, shifting her attention from one of his eyes to the other. "I didn't share every detail with you but, my sweet little owl, you never told me why you were upset when I walked into your office this morning."

Her eyes widened. "You didn't really give me a chance," she stammered, although something changed in her gaze.

"Are you keeping secrets from me?"

"Are you from me?"

"No." He didn't hesitate. "Not telling you every detail about my morning isn't the same as lying or keeping a secret."

Andrea straightened. "So neither of us is opening up fully to the other," she surmised. "Interesting." Her expression softened. Andrea was a pro at stifling emotions. The air cleared of her spicy scent. It was only her eyes remaining turbulent that showed him how the fire still burned inside her. "Let go of me, Beel, please. I need to return to work."

Chapter Eighteen

Andrea didn't like walking to work alone. Her body tingled from the sex they'd had in her office before lunch. Her emotions were so turbulent she almost stepped out in front of a car in her effort to focus on keeping them restrained. It was clear she couldn't control her emotions when the pain from fighting with Beel was so strong.

The logical side of her clearly understood the argument. Neither of them were confiding fully with the other. Her reasons for not doing so were obvious. If she shared with Beel her concerns about staying here in this parliament, he would fly into stubborn mode and fight harder to keep her here.

Andrea sighed, glancing over her shoulder out of habit as she continued down the sidewalk toward the hardware store. Her logical side was losing out to her human emotions. Years of training and discipline in keeping them under wraps weren't proving to be too effective right now. Pain wrapped around her heart, suffocating her with pity and anger.

How dare he think she couldn't handle knowing where he flew or what he did. Heath entered Beel's nest believing she already knew what they'd done that morning. How humiliating to sit there and face the male then watch understanding cross his face when he realized she didn't understand his line of questioning.

And she still didn't.

"I bet Heath talked to his mate about what he did this morning," she grumbled under her breath, and glared at a human who passed her and raised an inquisitive eyebrow when he overheard her talking to herself.

Her logic might not be working too well in calming her, but she sure as hell would use it to figure out what was going on. There was no way she'd enter the shop and face Shelly, appearing not to know what Shelly probably knew. Already her humiliation ran too deep.

Heath asked her if Jerome started fires before burning their nest to the ground. She picked up her pace as a cold breeze wrapped around the building and blew under her coat. She breathed in the fresh mountain air and stuffed her hands in her coat pockets. If she weren't so distracted, she would probably crave flying into the mountains and enjoying the fresh spring day.

Why would he ask her about fires? Heath said he needed to establish character traits. And he'd said something else. It was clear how much turmoil spun around in her brain when she couldn't remember all of their conversation.

Andrea worked harder to stuff her emotions. Logic only. Think rationally. She fought to clear her head, keeping only the facts present, and almost walked past the hardware store.

That would look good.

She sucked in another deep breath, ran her hand over her hair and relaxed her body. Then, pushing open the door to the store, she greeted Shelly, hoping she sounded as she always did. After heading to her office, she stopped.

"Should I bring some of my work out here to the counter?" she asked, hating that her routine with her work would be different this afternoon, especially after having her emotions sent on a precarious roller coaster ride. Andrea stood in the middle of the store, the uncanny sensation she was flying upside down with no control over her direction almost making her dizzy.

"No." Shelly was so calm, so relaxed. Her scent was appealing, a mixture of her own and Heath's. "I shouldn't be gone more than an hour."

Andrea approached the counter, again stuffing her emotions and focusing on everything around her.

"You know how to work the register," Shelly began, staring at it. "Do you want me to go over it again with you?"

Andrea remembered her first few days in the shop and Shelly showing her how to work everything in the store. She'd explained it would be helpful in doing the books if Andrea understood the setup of the entire store.

"I think I remember." She came around the counter, feeling a bit more settled as she stared at the machine and forced her brain to remember how to use it.

"Good. Just ring up anyone's sales." Shelly gave Andrea an appraising once-over.

Andrea held her ground, clearing her head even further so she wouldn't give away any telltale aromas, and held Shelly's gaze.

"A lot of customers come in here and want to squawk about the parliament." Shelly searched Andrea's face. "I know some of them will annoy you but please don't send them flying out of here on their tail feathers."

Andrea fought a smile as she exhaled. Shelly didn't detect anything wrong with Andrea. She was worried about Andrea's owl skills.

"I'll do my best," she answered honestly.

"I know you will." Shelly looked wistfully at the door. "Heath told me he was on his way."

It was obvious Shelly was excited about having lunch with her mate. The two of them were such the perfect mated couple. Both owls were obviously head over claws in love with each other. Before long, Shelly would be announcing fledglings on their way and her nest would be fully complete, her life of happiness set. Andrea never thought she'd crave such a life, but as she stared at the young female, who probably wasn't much different in age to herself, she felt a twang of approval. Shelly had a good life.

Andrea wanted a good life too.

"Shelly," Andrea began, feeling a twist in her gut as an idea came to her. She glanced around the store, searching out the two owls and one human who were in the store, all three of them focusing on items in the aisle they were in. "May I ask you a question?" she asked, facing the female.

Shelly gave her an appraising look and nodded. "Of course. I want you completely comfortable while you're here alone."

"No. That's not it." She sucked in a breath. Asking anyone for anything was unfamiliar territory. Trusting their answer smelled even more odd. "I want to ask about your mate," she said, dropping her voice to a soft murmur.

Shelly mouthed the word "Oh". "Of course," she whispered, also glancing around the store. "What do you want to know?"

"Was he always the way he is now?"

Shelly narrowed her brow.

"I mean," Andrea said, searching for the right way to word her question so Shelly would understand, "has he always shared everything with you and made sure you were confident that you two were equals?"

Shelly's eyes brightened as if she might smile. Andrea focused on the register, the items on the counter, anything to avoid blushing. What the hell was she doing? She'd never confided in another soul in her life. Now here she was, asking Shelly for advice, and it would require an explanation if Shelly honored her with an answer.

"Never mind," she said quickly, waving her hand in the air as if she could make her question disappear that way.

"No. It's okay." Shelly touched her.

She put her hand on Andrea's arm, her soft tone for a moment reminding Andrea of her mother. She'd been the only female in Andrea's life who never laughed at Andrea and who had always made her feel important no matter what they discussed. Andrea never considered she might have been friends with her mom and this was what it felt like to have a friend. At the same time, it hit her she'd never experienced this sensation around Beel.

"Heath and I didn't exactly fly at the same altitude when we first met," Shelly said, glancing over her shoulder at the door as if her mate might be able to enter without making the large bell ring overhead and announce his presence. "Did you and Beel have a disagreement?" she asked, again whispering.

"In a way." Andrea respected the fact that Heath didn't immediately call his mate and warn her to watch her employee since she might prove too emotional to work. "Do you two talk to each other about everything you do all day long once you're together?"

"Yes," she said, her happiness suddenly smelling strong. "I guess it's obvious how excited I am about lunch with him. We don't get enough time together with me in this

store all day and him flying around the parliament, making sure all nests are safe and protected."

"He's a good male."

"Beel is a very good male too." Shelly narrowed her gaze on Andrea. "Whatever argument you two had, I'm sure he's even more upset than you right now. Which might explain why my mate is late. He probably flew to his brother to demand the same answers you're asking now."

Andrea shook her head. "Heath was there. In a way, I guess you could say he started the argument."

"What?" Shelly couldn't hide her surprise. "I promise you, Andrea. Heath has already given you two his blessing. He considers it only a matter of time before you two announce a mating."

"I'm not so sure that will happen. And I mean no disrespect against your mate," Andrea continued, needing to keep the conversation off mating. Her emotions seemed under her wing at the moment and she wanted them to stay there. "We were at Beel's nest eating lunch when Heath showed up. He wanted to ask me some questions."

Shelly stared at Andrea, her expression relaxed and her emotions under check as well. It seemed the entire store grew unpleasantly quiet, as if even the customers waited for her to continue her story. She'd started it now and there wasn't any flying away from it, not without offending Shelly. Andrea needed to remember, in spite of Beel's casual reference to her only being his brother's mate, she was Andrea's boss. If she dishonored her, it could mean her job.

"Beel tensed the moment Heath sat down. Already it seemed to me since he arrived here this morning there was something he wasn't talking to me about. At the time, I didn't think too much of it, but when he appeared not to be happy his brother showed up, I started wondering."

"Maybe he wanted more time with you the way you were in the office," Shelly said, her eyes flashing with amusement.

Andrea would not blush. If she allowed even the slightest emotion through, they would all come tumbling out and she'd never recover from the dishonor and humiliation. Beel's words came back to her. *No more flying away.*

"I don't think so," she answered seriously. She would face this predicament and not fly to safer ground. Maybe doing that all her life had crippled her dramatically when it came to interacting and possibly even loving another owl. At least she knew Beel believed that with his comment about flying away. Andrea sucked in another breath, forcing herself to continue. "Heath asked if he could question me about..." She faltered.

Saying that asshole's name would tear her down too.

"I know," Shelly said, remaining calm and so perfectly composed. "He mentioned to me he wanted to ask you about him."

Shelly saved her from mentioning his name. At the same time, her words sliced through Andrea worse than a sharp knife, cutting deep into her pride. Heath had discussed his morning in detail with Shelly. Would she ever get to that stage with Beel? Was she even capable of such a solid relationship with another owl?

"Interesting." Andrea barely managed to keep her emotions in check. She clasped her hands together in front of her when she felt herself start to tremble. "Beel told Heath to leave his nest when Heath questioned me about fires."

"He did?" Shelly couldn't hide her shock. "I knew he cared about you, but wow." Shelly shook her head, making a sound deep in her throat that wasn't quite a cluck. "He has you under his wing and he doesn't want to let you free. You've got your work cut out for you in taming that owl."

The bell rung at the door and Heath entered, letting the cold spring breeze in with him. He smelled of the outdoors and extreme confidence. Andrea hadn't noticed before now how he moved with the same commanding gait Beel possessed. He looked at each one of them, his movements slowing as he neared the counter. When his expression turned guarded, Shelly hurried around the counter and into his arms.

"It's about time you got here," she cooed, running her hands up his broad chest. "Let's go," she added then looked over her shoulder at Andrea. "I won't be gone too long." She paused only for a second. "And I think you're flying in the right direction. You're a fighter. I know that much about you. Don't give up the battle."

"What was that all about?" Heath asked as he guided his mate to the door.

"Nothing." Shelly patted his rear end and the bell rang again when the door closed behind them.

The hour turned into two hours before Shelly showed up, glowing and smelling ripe from sex. Andrea had kept busy the entire time Shelly was gone, throwing herself into caring for the store and refusing to think further about her argument with Beel. As Shelly came around the counter, nearly floating with happiness, a pang of regret poked cruelly at Andrea.

"Have a good lunch?" Andrea asked as Shelly glanced at the notebook kept next to the counter where all sales were written down.

"It was a very good lunch." She didn't look up from the open page where Andrea had marked each sale. "And you did a good day's business while I was gone. Maybe I should take more lunches like that." When she looked at Andrea her eyes glowed along with her cheeks.

"You're the boss," Andrea said, keeping her tone light and not sure what else to say. Shelly could do whatever she wanted. It was her store. "I'll head back to the office. I should have this weekend's sales figured before I leave this evening."

Andrea expected to be alone in the small office that still smelled strongly of their sex that morning. It made it a lot harder to focus on her figures, and more than once she retyped information into the accounting program the store used. The desk reminded her how she'd lain on it while Beel plunged deep inside her. Sitting in her chair simply

helped recall how Beel pulled her out of it. Images of him almost ripping her clothes off, of his hands on her flesh, of him tasting her everywhere invaded her senses until she was sure she was helping keep the aroma fresh in the small office.

Beel had been out of line. That much was logical and easy to accept. Not only with him not telling her something, which obviously pertained to her, but his reaction to his brother after Heath asked her questions. Reflecting back, it became clear to her Beel almost lost control of himself and got his feathers ruffled because his brother unknowingly humiliated him. Beel guessed Heath would have shared details with her and Beel hadn't. But he dealt with the matter poorly. Andrea guessed that was due to him not often experiencing such derogatory feelings.

Which made sense. Beel was an honorable owl. His place in this parliament was secure and all owls respected him. Andrea had noticed how the females looked at him longingly with hunger, as if he were a fresh piece of meat they couldn't wait to dig their claws into. Not that any of them would have the chance.

"I'd scratch their eyes out," she murmured, staring at her computer screen with her hands poised over the keys. "Damn," she muttered, focusing on her work, then the clock. She'd told Shelly she would have this done by the end of the day, which meant not letting her imagination run amok in her head.

She glanced at the spreadsheet she'd printed out. Handling the books for this store would be a lot easier if she could convince Shelly to computerize the entire store, instead of having Andrea load all sales manually into the computer after each work day.

"Crap," she hissed, once again not focusing on her work but staring straight ahead when it dawned on her where her thoughts had gone a moment before. "You'd scratch their eyes out," she whispered, her voice barely audible as she spoke out loud to herself and allowed the meaning behind those words to sink in.

That meant she was possessive about Beel. It wasn't a hard fact to accept. Maybe they'd known each other several weeks but they'd spent every day together, had flown together, and although they hadn't fucked in their feathers yet, she didn't doubt that time would come soon.

"Not if you're mad at each other." Odd how acknowledging her claim to him caused all anger inside her to fade. Beel needed work. Shelly had advised her to not give up the battle. "The battle," she mused, finding the analogy fascinating. "Interesting," she muttered.

"What is?" Shelly appeared in the doorway, still glowing and smelling of sexual passion she seemed to wear with pride.

It was the second time today she'd been caught talking to herself. Andrea needed to quit doing that. She focused on the female and relaxed her facial expression, trying to think of an honest way to answer her question.

"Something just occurred to me." She was telling the truth and prayed Shelly wouldn't press.

Shelly entered the room, leaving the door open and perching at the edge of the desk. She looked at Andrea's printout next to her then lifted her large, round gray eyes to meet Andrea's.

"It seems logical to me to let you know all of the Halk males flew back into the mountains this afternoon." She stared at Andrea, her expression masked and her tone flat, as if she were mentioning the possibility of an upcoming storm.

"Why are they flying into the mountains?" Andrea asked.

"They're searching for Jerome Chouette," she told her matter-of-factly.

Andrea almost blinked. "Interesting."

Shelly leaned forward and lowered her voice. "You told Heath your sire used to start fires in trees when you were flying with your mother as a fledgling."

"Yes," Andrea said, their attention locked on each other.

"The leopard hunter howled for Heath and his brothers this morning because someone is setting trees on fire in the mountains. Because the fires are started at the tops of the trees, the leopards suspect an owl to be the guilty party."

Andrea stared at her and her expression obviously told Shelly what she wanted to know. This was new information to her. Shelly continued leaning over Andrea as she spoke in a hushed whisper.

"Before Heath met me for lunch, he flew farther into the mountains, wanting to see for himself what the leopard howled about." Shelly glanced over her shoulder when the bell rang, announcing another customer entering the store, then looked at Andrea. "There were five trees he spotted with the tops of their branches burned off. He doesn't see any reason or logic behind the act. None of them could figure out why any owl would do that. The trees are quite tall and the mist and rain we've had recently put the fires out before the trees burned to the ground."

"An owl who doesn't fly straight might not follow the same logic the rest of us do," Andrea suggested, keeping her voice soft as well.

Shelly slid off the edge of the desk and nodded. "That is what my mate thinks, especially after talking to you." She started to leave, apparently satisfied she'd filled Andrea in on information Beel didn't share with her. She turned though and there was a curious expression on her face. "May I ask you something? Feel free to tell me it's none of my business if you like. I'm not one to squawk or judge."

Andrea's insides tightened but she nodded. "You may ask," she said, her mouth suddenly dry. Shelly's introduction to the question was enough to force Andrea to lean toward caution. Instinct and years of practice wouldn't allow her to reveal too much about herself. Even the most honorable of owls could cause damage if information was misconstrued.

"Why doesn't your sire fly straight?" she asked then licked her lips and dropped her attention to her hands, which were clasped in front of her.

Andrea sucked in a breath. It had been only a matter of time before one of them asked her this question. She reminded herself she flew with honor. No matter the asshole who aided in her conception, he received no credit for the female she was today.

Shelly stared at her, waiting patiently for an answer. Andrea wouldn't dishonor her employer and a female she hoped to call friend. If she was going to fly after Beel and work to clip his feathers until he treated her with the respect and honor she would demand, they would be related and of the same nest. It took a leap of faith on her part but she opened her mouth, willing the words to come out.

"He's been that way as long as I could remember," Andrea told her truthfully. "He paid my mother's sire money for land and the right to mate with her. My mother never loved my father but gave him a nest and fledglings and tried her best to make it a loving nest for the sake of Anna and me."

She paused and Shelly studied her, not moving or even appearing to breathe. Andrea refused to let humiliation bubble inside her. It wasn't a life she asked for or had any control over. Only after she left her burnt nest did she control the direction she flew.

"I heard their fights when I was a fledgling," Andrea continued, feeling her flesh grow clammy as she discussed her past. "He flew around humans and told my mother it was because they appreciated him and saw how honorable he was. My mother would accuse him of being drunk or on drugs, but I never saw any proof of that."

Shelly nodded and her expression grew compassionate. "My sire and mother fought claw and beak nonstop when I was a fledgling," she murmured, and turned again to the door. "Thanks for answering my question. We can discuss our pasts more sometime if you wish, or put it behind us and talk about how great the present is." Her eyes glowed when she looked at Andrea before leaving her alone in the office.

Shelly was a good female. Andrea had to agree overall today her life was the best it had ever been. Figuring out what to do about Beel would take time. Also, confirmation the asshole still flew in the area brought her pause. More so because when she'd heard they suspected him in the area, she hadn't immediately thought of flying to another nest. Shelly told her to take on the battle. Maybe the battle was larger than simply figuring out her relationship with Beel. Maybe her battle also included coming to terms with her past and leaving it there—for good.

It was almost five when Andrea's cell phone rang. She'd finally managed to lose herself in figures and sales reports. Working with numbers was a very soothing and logical way to pass time. There were no gray areas, nothing to confuse her or cause grief. She dug her phone out of her purse, noting how much time had passed and that she was almost done with her work for the day.

Anna was calling. Andrea leaned back in her chair, staring at the store through the open door as she answered.

"Are you having a good day?" Anna asked, her tone cheerful and relaxed.

"I'm getting a lot done," Andrea said, unwilling to go into details about her argument with Beel. Maybe later she'd confide in her sister, but not over the phone.

"Good. I just wanted to let you know I got called into work. Earl is on his way over now to escort me to the bar."

Andrea was ashamed to admit she'd forgotten her sister had the evening off. With everything happening that day, she'd barely given Anna a thought. Interesting. There was a point not too long ago when Anna was all she thought about.

"At least it's more hours," Andrea offered.

"I know. When we get our next checks, we need to go shopping together."

"That sounds good."

"We can buy some new clothes and maybe even new furniture for our nest."

Andrea enjoyed her sister's easy outlook on life. For years she'd been her lifeline and it was wrong for her not to have thought about her all day. Instead, she'd been focused on her own problems.

"I like that idea," she admitted. "It's a date."

"Good. Well, I'll see you tomorrow, unless you'd like to come into the bar tonight and keep me company."

"I might just do that."

"Perfect. Fly safe," she said.

"You too." Andrea said goodbye and hung up the phone then dropped it into her purse.

Maybe getting out tonight would help her keep her emotions in check. Andrea had hardly gone out at all since starting her new job. Beel had always been there to pick her up after work and spend time with her over her lunch. She wouldn't expect to see him this evening though. His pride was too strong for him to fly to her with his tail feathers between his legs.

She thought about the best way to end the argument, accepting now she had every intention of flying with Beel and enduring the battle it would take to make him confide in her. Staring past her monitor at her desk, her mind flooded with images again.

Remembering how incredibly wonderful he made her feel when he'd gone down on her created a surge of heat inside her. She rubbed her legs together, feeling the pressure grow and her pussy start to throb. It wouldn't be a good idea flying after him when he was out searching for the asshole. Granted, if he'd shared with her his thoughts and what had happened to him earlier that morning, Andrea would have shared with him what she knew about his past. Heath wouldn't have had to question her. Beel would have had all the facts.

So her male leaned on the stubborn side and obviously needed a few lessons on how to communicate his emotions with her. Most owls didn't know how to do that since they were taught from birth to do just the opposite. But bonding with each other, flying together and carrying each other's scents also meant opening up to each other.

She pictured how she'd opened up to him this morning. Her legs had been spread so far apart she'd felt the strain in her thigh muscles. She rubbed her hands down the inside of her legs, still feeling the twinge from muscles stretched taut for so long. Beel had taken his time, feasting on her as he ran his tongue along the length of her opening. The way he'd sucked her clit and caused the small, bulging flesh to throb and swell had almost felt as good as when he'd carried her over the edge and made her come.

When he'd filled her with his cock, stretching and gliding deep inside her pussy, Andrea swore they had flown together even though they were in a small office on a wooden desk. Fucking Beel was better sex than she'd ever imagined having with a male, and by far the best sex she'd ever had with any male. Her conquests weren't a long list, but all of them paled in comparison. Beel's aggressive, dominating nature turned her on.

She shifted her attention, staring at the work she was almost finished with. It was his dominating nature she was considering clipping so he wouldn't fly so aggressively around her. Yet it was also the part of him that turned her on so much. Andrea picked up her pen, absently chewing the end of it as she considered the best way to tame him in some areas and keep him the same in other areas. Too bad males weren't as simple and logical as math.

Something told her taking on Beel might be the toughest task she'd ever endured. It was easy to lay out the logical aspects of it while sitting alone. But when she saw him next, being in his presence would make maintaining her clear train of thought difficult. Beel had the ability to unravel her faster than any owl ever had. His controlling nature and cut-and-dry way of flying with her tucked under his wing turned her on so much. Yet it was those same traits in him that also got under her feathers and pissed her off.

There wouldn't be any solving her dilemma tonight. Andrea turned her attention to her work, finishing up the last of it, then closed down her computer. She stood and stretched, filed the printouts and headed through the store.

"Wow, it is getting late, isn't it?" Shelly stood at her usual perch behind the counter, facing her register as she glanced at the large windows facing the street. "This afternoon has flown by. If you wait until I close down, we can walk to our nests together."

"That sounds fine. What can I do to help?"

"If you wouldn't mind getting the broom," Shelly said, and nodded toward the corner of the store where a small closet held all cleaning supplies. "Sweep the store and I'll close down back here."

They fell into an amiable silence, working to finish their day, when the phone rang.

"Preston's Hardware," Shelly said in her calm, soothing voice.

Andrea didn't look at her or pay too close attention to what she said as she focused on her task.

"What?" Shelly hissed. "Who did you say this was?"

Her tone alerted Andrea and she paused after getting the dust pan and focused on Shelly. Her expression had gone so pale Andrea cleared the distance between them in a few strides. A female's voice sounded too excited on the other end of the line.

"Why are you calling me?" Shelly asked, her calm tone gone.

Again the female spoke, her almost-hyper tone coming through the line as a squeal that tickled Andrea's ears. She couldn't make out the words though and stared at Shelly. When she looked up at Andrea, the horror in her eyes caused her heart to skip a beat.

"What is it?" she whispered, watching Shelly's gray eyes pale.

"Thank you for telling me. We'll fly out there right away." This time she frowned, her narrow eyebrows coming together and she almost looked pissed. "It was an expression. I realize that." Her tone was sharp but controlled. "We have a vehicle and will drive to your den. If you'll give me an address," she continued.

Andrea focused on the word den and Shelly saying she could be out there right away. Something was wrong and not knowing as the sickening sensation turned to acid in her gut caused the revolting feeling to swell and create a clammy feeling over her skin.

Shelly wrote on her notepad then thanked the female. "Good hunting. We'll be there soon." She almost dropped the receiver before managing to get it on the cradle. "Something awful has happened," she muttered, staring at Andrea with dull gray eyes. "Rock just arrived at this leopard den in the mountains. I'm not sure yet why he didn't call from his cell, instead had the female leopard call me, but," she continued, swallowing and blinking as her eyes grew moist, "Beel has been shot."

Chapter Nineteen

Andrea staggered backward. Shelly's words didn't make sense. Owls didn't use human weapons. In spite of knowing Anna had been shot at after escaping the monster, Andrea still couldn't get the words to stick in her head.

"There's some kind of mistake," she mumbled, feeling the room slowly start to spin around her. She'd spent the day trying to figure out how to make things fly straight between her and Beel and now she was supposed to accept he'd been shot? "Why would a leopard tell you such a thing?"

"Come on." Shelly flew around the counter. "Let's close down the store. Don't worry about sweeping. We can take care of that later." She hurried past Andrea to the light switches and flooded them in darkness. The neon sign hanging in the window coated the darkness with an eerie wash of bold colors but offered no light. "We need to get to the nest and get the SUV. He'll need to be driven back to the parliament."

Andrea barely remembered stumbling out of the hardware store. She watched numbly as Shelly remained inside, flipping the open sign over so it read closed. Then she pulled out her keys and closed the solid door.

For some reason, breathing in the cold night air helped clear her mind. The fog lifted. Everything registered. Beel was shot. "How bad was he shot?" she asked, keeping her voice low as she watched Shelly finish closing up the store.

"I don't know, bad enough he can't fly." Shelly struggled with the lock on the large, solid door.

"Andrea." A male spoke behind her and at the same time wrapped strong arms around her waist and dragged her backward.

"What?" Her insides flooded with pain and confusion and it took a moment to regain her senses and her instinct to fight.

"Stop it!" she demanded, digging her nails into the arms tightening around her as she was dragged backward against her will. "What are you doing?" she hissed.

"Get in the god damn car now," the male hissed in her ear.

The familiar voice hit her at the same moment she realized what was happening. "No!" she howled, suddenly fighting with everything she had.

"Andrea!" Shelly screamed, racing to the street, her frantic expression determined as she reached for her.

He overpowered her. His strength had increased a lot over the years. Andrea was doubled over in spite of her protests. Her hair fell in her face and she kicked and scratched, screaming loud enough to make her throat burn. He forced her into a car and

shoved her hard enough to make her almost fall to the floor behind the front seat. A stale stench filled her nostrils as she swiped hair from her face.

Andrea lunged at the car door he shut in her face and clawed at the side of it, searching for the door handle. Shelly was on the other side of the door, yanking at the handle and screaming at her to unlock the door. She didn't notice him moving around the front of the car until he was in the driver's side.

A human male rushed across the street, grabbing Shelly and trying to help. Shelly shoved him off balance and leapt at the car. They pulled away from the curb. Shelly held on to the handle, still screaming.

"Stop! No!" She wasn't letting go of the handle.

"Shelly!" Andrea couldn't find a door handle for the life of her.

"Unlock the door." Shelly was running too fast. If she let go in her human body she would go tumbling across the road.

"There's no handle," Andrea told her, pressing her hand to the window.

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" he asked from the front seat, a snarl in his voice.

"Yes!" Andrea squawked at him, her throat already rough from yelling. "Let me out of this car right now or I'll kill your demented ass!" she screamed, her emotions drowning the stench in the car. She didn't care. The last owl who deserved to be honored on the entire planet sat in front of her, a smug gleam in his pale, glazed eyes. She glared at him through the rearview mirror. "You're not messing with a fledgling anymore," she snarled, lowering her voice to a deadly whisper.

"Andrea!" Shelly wailed, finally letting go of the door and managing not to fall on her face as she slowed and ended up standing in the street, her hair flying wildly around her as she stared after the car.

Shelly pulled out a cell phone and put it to her ear, staring after the car. In seconds the road curved and Shelly was out of sight.

Andrea sprang off the backseat and lunged at him in the driver's seat, attacking with all she had. The car swerved but she didn't care if he flipped it. She would live through this and he wouldn't. All of this madness ended tonight. And the sooner the better. Beel had been shot!

"You lousy-ass excuse for an owl," she yelled, pounding at him with her fists and hitting hard flesh.

The car swerved off the road and he let out a stream of profanity. Andrea flew sideways in the backseat, hitting her head hard on the cold, closed window.

"Behave! You lousy little bitch!" He regained control of the car and accelerated, his headlights beaming into the darkness ahead of them as they headed out of town. "I'm done with you and your bullshit," he continued, stinking up the already disgusting car with the stench of his hatred and outrage. "You're nothing but a slut, just like that lame excuse for a mate I used to have. She didn't teach you how to fly right and I'm done chasing you!"

"She didn't teach me how to fly right?" Andrea gasped, her outrage sending sparks up her spine. She should charge, attack him with her beak and fly out the window. The thought appealed to her enough that her next sentence came out garbled. "You're the one who can't fly straight. You're insane!"

"Your logic is faulty, little bird."

There was a sudden calm to his voice that sent chills up her neck.

"You confuse insanity with genius. And I'm about to prove how smart I really am."

He yanked the steering wheel to the right and the car went off the road again, this time intentionally. There wasn't enough time for Andrea to brace herself and once again she slid across the seat. Her side hit the car door and she groaned, also noting at that moment there was no interior to either backseat door. Both had been stripped of handles and window controllers. She hit bare metal and it scraped her arm through her coat.

"All you're proving to me is what a fucking idiot you really are. You can't possibly think you can steal me away and I won't go without a fight. Not to mention, you're going to be pissing off a lot of owls."

"If you mean the Halk male who's having way too much fun between your legs, I doubt he'll be flying after you anytime soon."

Andrea didn't even try stopping the fiery anger when it damn near split her in two. "You shot him! What kind of dishonorable coward are you?" Even for him it was the lowest of low actions. Fighting without honor, attacking from a distance with a weapon humans used to massacre each other and kill their own kind.

She brought her fist up, hitting him hard enough in the side of the head she swore she heard bones crack. Jerome Chouette slumped against the window and the car accelerated down the rocky decline. Andrea prayed there were handles on the front doors of the car as she leapt over the seat and grabbed the steering wheel.

The car accelerated more, bouncing over rocks and rivets in the ground. She couldn't tell if his foot was still on the pedal or not. But that wasn't her concern. Tossing him out of the car would be a lot easier. She reached over him, finding the door handle, and yanked it open.

"Good riddance, you waste of feathers," she snarled, feeling absolutely no remorse when she shoved him out of the car.

Andrea slid behind the wheel, reached for the door and grabbed the steering wheel at the same time. Part of her didn't want to close the door and enclose her inside the car with all its stench. Everything about the vehicle squawked Jerome Chouette, from how far back the seat was to the steering wheel, to the indentation in the seat, to the glaze over all the windows that matched the dull glaze in his eyes.

Her stomach turned, bile rising to her throat. The headlights were dismal excuses for viewing into the pitch-black night. She hit another bump, unable to see a thing, and bounced hard enough her head crashed against the roof of the car.

This was a fool's mission. As was anything with the asshole. Nothing good would come out of it. The car flew over another bump, going airborne for a moment. Andrea's logic returned to her, possibly due to the moment when she no longer touched the ground. Her stronger half, her primal half, existing purely on instinct and void of all the human emotions riddling her right now, came forth with a strong vengeance.

It didn't take any thought. Andrea continued gripping the steering wheel, pumping the brake, which didn't work for shit. Big surprise there! She stared wide-eyed out the front window, not having a clue where she was and knowing only the farther she drove the farther she would be from the scumbag who had a lot of nerve trying to steal her out of her life.

Beel was hurt and she didn't know how badly. Andrea barely focused on rolling down the window or caring when it didn't sink evenly into the door. Sparks ignited and exploded, traveling up her spine as her skin thickened. The change hit her so hard she barely managed to breathe. Try as she would to hold on to the steering wheel and keep the car from hitting a tree, within less than a minute she gripped it with long talons.

Andrea stretched out her wings, wishing the car good riddance along with its owner, and flew out the window. There wasn't time to grab her clothes but right now they were the least of her concerns. She dove hard to the left, just managing not to ram into a thick tree trunk. When she landed on the first available branch, needing to get her bearing, the car slammed into a thick grove of trees surrounded by rocks. In spite of knowing it would crash hard, Andrea jumped as the crash of the impact sounded like an explosion. The sound waves tore through the night, sending every small creature and bird in the woods scampering to safety. Andrea felt as well as heard the loud crashing sound. Her nerves were already so rattled she was grateful no one was around to see her jump and shriek.

There wasn't much time to waste. Nonetheless, she'd be flying in circles worse than the jerk who lay slumped on the ground closer to the road if she didn't force her heart to quit pounding so hard in her chest. Taking a moment to sniff the air, she breathed in several times, convinced she wasn't smelling things right.

There was a human nearby – very nearby.

"Jerome?" a female called out. "Jerome? You crashed my car! How dare you crash my car! Are you alive? Jerome?"

Andrea turned her head when she heard a groaning closer to the road. Hell! The bastard still breathed.

"What the hell have you done?" the female wailed, her thick American accent adding to the pathetic wail in her tone. "Jerome! You answer me right now, that is, unless you're dead."

Andrea returned her attention in the direction of the voice. She needed to get out of here, but it was also logical to remain another moment and learn what she could about her abductor, who apparently had decided flying with humans was better than owls. In

spite of human emotions not being strong in her feathers, Andrea still experienced a wave of disgust.

"Jerome!" Now the female was yelling. "My car is ruined! Where the hell are you?"

A platinum blonde appeared through the trees, walking gingerly and holding her hands out on either side of her to keep her balance. Andrea focused her attention on the large black rifle the woman carried in one hand.

Did this human bitch shoot Beel?

She wore spandex leggings that hugged her not-so-thin legs and boots that made her feet look really large. Her hair twisted and frizzled around her painted face as she searched the darkness, wide-eyed, then poked at the car with her weapon.

"I don't see you," she said, this time not yelling. "Did you fall out? Where is the bitch you were going to fetch?"

Bitch? Andrea would show her who the bitch was.

The human female stomped around the car to the driver's side, making enough noise an owl would hear her back in Banff. She bent over, still holding her arms out and fighting to keep her balance as she squinted into the car.

"You aren't in there. There ain't no one in there. No wonder it crashed."

Damn. The female was an idiot. The two of them deserved each other.

"Jerome!" She let out a wail, actually arching her back and staring up at the sky as she howled the bastard's name in her thick, annoying accent. "Where the fuck are you?"

Then she stood perfectly still, which appeared to be a feat rather tough for her to accomplish. She turned her head, staring straight at Andrea, and blinked several times. Thick, heavy mascara coated her lashes and her eyes were painted with a funky plum color. It didn't match the rose shade of pink blotching her cheeks. The human female was so made up and artificial, her scent smelled more of chemicals than it did her frayed emotions. There was another noticeable stench on her – alcohol.

Andrea didn't worry about the human seeing her and turned to focus on the asshole when the groaning picked up again. She was actually surprised to see his silhouette through the trees. He pushed himself to his knees, holding his head, and teetered a few times before struggling to stand. It crossed her mind to attack, get rid of him once and for all. Andrea didn't know how good the female was with the weapon she waved around in her hand. She wouldn't be much help to Beel if she got herself shot too.

"Jerome? Is that you?" The woman leaned forward, the baggy t-shirt she wore hanging past her wide hips as she almost fell to the ground as she squinted ahead of her. The female bitch started laughing. "Well, hell's bells! You told me it was damn hard to kill a bird. I keep proving you wrong but there you are. What are you? Fucking Evel Knievel?" Her laugh turned shrill as she slapped her leg with her free hand then precariously stomped over broken branches, again making enough noise to wake the dead.

"Penny," he squawked, standing now but teetering and still holding his head. "She's around here somewhere. I can smell her. Shoot and kill the little bitch. Get that lame excuse for a fledgling the hell out of my life." With each sentence his voice grew louder and more aggressive until his hatred smelled almost as strong as the chemical-smelling human female did.

For all the hatred Andrea had stifled over the years so she wouldn't stink as she grew up, it surprised her how deeply his words cut through her feathers. Was there anything she could have done to make him not despise her? Her hatred was justifiable. Why did he hate her so much? What had she ever done to him, shy of continually trying to fly out of his life?

It didn't matter. He was insane. Even his scent was off. Andrea put his cutting words out of her head and focused on the rifle in the human female's hand. She had her bearings about her now and obviously had overstayed her welcome. Leaping to another branch, she pulled her attention from Penny and took to flight.

The weapon exploded in the air, the booming sound shaking every inch of Andrea's body. A bullet whizzed by her, so close it stole her breath.

Holy crap!

She focused on the branches around her, gaining speed and flying toward the sky. The woods were very thick and dark, twisted branches seemed to jump out at her, doing their best to prevent her from getting around them.

Another bullet exploded out of the rifle. Andrea swore it took off a few of her tail feathers. She ignored their screaming below her, flying faster, determined not to get shot.

A third explosion rattled her nerves. Another bullet screamed past her right wing. Pain attacked her system so hard she dived sideways before regaining control. There were cheers below. Her very own sire, the male who gave her life, was cheering on her potential death. Andrea wouldn't focus on it. Nor would she die. Let him know what disappointment felt like.

Andrea reached the top of the trees and turned toward Banff. Her right wing pulsed and throbbed with pain more intense than she'd ever known in her life. She had been shot. All she needed to do was make it back to the parliament and everything would be okay.

Beel better be okay or she'd return to the bastard and his chemical-smelling female and kill both of them!

Chapter Twenty

Beel ignored his brothers and continued dressing. When Shelly showed up to drive him into town and he learned Andrea was gone, the pain from his wound disappeared. Rage bit at him with a fierceness too strong to allow any other feeling or emotion to surface.

"We'll find her," Heath insisted. "You need to rest so your wound won't open again."

"Sit down, owl," Aunt Oley, who was still a shrewd bird for being in her sixties, used a commanding tone as she pressed against Beel's uninjured shoulder.

"I'm okay, Aunt Oley." Beel wouldn't dishonor any of the elders in his nest, especially after they'd waken her up and she'd bandaged Beel. Owls didn't go to human hospitals. Their metabolism was too accelerated and would confuse their doctors. "You said yourself I would be better after a good night's sleep," he reminded her.

"Which you're going to get now," she insisted.

"Beel, we're out the door now," Rock said, moving in front of him when Beel tried reaching for his shirt. "We'll have her back to her nest before you know it."

They turned when someone knocked on Heath's door. Aunt Oley clutched her heart, sniffing and frowning as Heath moved around them. Everyone's tension ran high. Beel felt the sting in his shoulder begin to pulse again, creating a throbbing through his chest when he straightened, and thought he recognized the smell of the owl knocking.

"What the hell?" Heath snapped, gaping at Andrea when she barged past him.

Beel stared at her as well. She was wrapped in one of the spare blankets kept on the roof in a locker for emergencies. Her hair was wild around her face and her expression strained.

"Beel!" she cried out, damn near collapsing into him. "Are you okay? Where were you shot?" She managed to hold the blanket around her and still run a hand over his body, immediately searching for his injury. "That despicable, low-life owl," she grumbled, and her fingertips brushed gently over the fresh bandage Aunt Oley had wrapped around his shoulder.

Apparently he'd struggled with his shirt for no reason. Andrea pushed it up, determined to see for herself how badly he was hurt.

"I'm fine, little owl," he whispered, his voice suddenly husky. He wasn't sure if she realized how she'd shoved her way into a nest that wasn't hers, ignoring the owl who

lived there, and ran into his arms, her concern smelling stronger than the outdoors did on her.

"Andrea!" Shelly cried out, almost smiling when she moved around Beel's brothers. She touched Andrea's arm. "I'm so glad you're safe. What happened to you?"

"Yes. My mate tells us you were abducted." Suddenly Heath was serious. He closed the door, taking in the many owls in his nest. "Shelly, escort Aunt Oley to her nest." Heath took charge, organizing everyone, which would make it easier to hear the stories and learn what their next move would be.

"Aunt Oley," Beel said, giving the old female his attention. "I regret not being able to present Andrea Prudeaux in a more honorable fashion." But not introducing Andrea to his aunt would be an insult he wouldn't live down anytime soon.

His aunt straightened and clasped her hands in front of her while giving Andrea a curious once-over. "Young female, why are you wrapped in a blanket?" she chirped, her crisp tone bringing silence to the room.

Shelly had moved next to his aunt but stilled, also straightening. Andrea let her hand fall from Beel's chest and clutched her blanket as she faced the old owl.

"It is a great honor to meet you, Aunt Oley," she said calmly, nodding her head once in a polite bow. "I apologize for my appearance. There was an unfortunate mishap and my clothes were lost while I was out flying."

"I suggest you return to your nest and dress," Aunt Oley said coolly.

Andrea simply nodded, having good sense not to argue with Beel's aunt.

"Shelly," Heath said under his breath.

His mate nodded and mumbled under her breath to Aunt Oley, who allowed Shelly to take her by the arm and escort her to the door. Beel put his hand on Andrea's shoulder, unwilling to have her leave and dress just yet. The blanket was fine for the moment.

"Thank you for tending to my wound," he said, stepping forward and keeping Andrea at his side.

Aunt Oley turned at the door and gave Andrea a pensive stare once again. As usual, she gave no indication if she approved of Andrea or not when she nodded to Beel. "Come let me know when you're better," she instructed him then left the nest with Shelly.

Beel was capable of as much control, even injured. Heath and Rock turned into the nest, Heath heading to the kitchen and Rock to the female leopard who'd come with them. Beel wasn't sure why and at the moment didn't care. The last hour had been a blur, his pain and humiliation over being taken down by a human weapon replaced with outrage when he'd learned Andrea was captured. Now with her standing in front of him, clarity washed over his brain. Along with acknowledgment of her racing into the nest to make sure he was okay.

"Andrea," he grumbled under his breath, content to simply stare into her bright gray eyes at the moment.

She lifted her face to his and something tightened inside him. Her gray eyes were glazed. She was shaking.

"My little owl," he whispered, realizing the trauma had been too much for her. He pulled her against him with his good arm, satisfied when she didn't fight him but cuddled against his chest. Her warm cheek pressed against him and her tousled hair tickled his flesh.

"I'm escorting Darla back to her den," Rock announced, turning from the female leopard who seemed to follow Rock's movements with a hungry look in her eyes.

Beel hadn't spent a lot of time with leopards over the years and the young female, with her long silky blonde hair and bright green eyes speckled with gold, could be considered captivating. He'd give Rock enough sense though to tame any thoughts the leopard harbored toward him. Owls and leopards were not compatible.

Heath appeared in the kitchen doorway, focusing on Rock and holding two large mugs steaming with strong coffee. The aroma added to the mixed emotions coming from the leopard female. Andrea also smelled strongly, tension still wound tight in her. And he smelled blood. He didn't want to think about his wound having already opened and was grateful now he had put his shirt on so no one would fuss if blood started seeping through the bandage.

Beel guessed Heath wanted to ask if the female needed an escort back to her den but didn't say anything. Instead, glancing past Rock to Darla, he nodded seriously.

"You and your den have honored our nest with your assistance today. We will reciprocate the favor." Heath's words would hold high honor if spoken to any nest in the parliament.

Darla grinned and waved her hand in the air. "Your nest and our den are on good terms. You don't have anything to worry about."

Heath didn't appear insulted, which made sense since the young female probably wasn't familiar enough with owls to understand how much she'd just insulted Heath. Andrea stiffened, turning to focus on the female. Darla looked in her direction, her smile fading. Beel tightened his grasp around her shoulder at the same time Rock stepped between the females, reaching for Darla.

"Let's go," Rock said, putting his hand near the female's neck on her back and escorting her to the door.

"Good hunting," Darla called out, looking over her shoulder and waving to all of them, although her cheerful expression faded when she again focused on Andrea.

The door closed, leaving Heath alone with Beel and Andrea. Heath blew out a loud breath as he handed each of them coffee. Andrea adjusted her blanket then took the coffee.

"Thank you," she mumbled, her scent still ripe with more anxiety than usual.

Heath nodded to her, returned to the kitchen for his own cup, then gestured the two of them sit on the couch. "Now that I don't have a parliament in my nest, I want to hear what happened to both of you."

The door opened and Shelly entered, glancing at all of them, her expression turning concerned when she looked at Andrea.

"Andrea," she said, her tone breathy. "We should get you into some clothes."

Andrea sat in the middle of the couch and had pulled her legs up under the blanket she still clutched at her chest. Although Beel was in the corner and she hadn't sat next to him, he'd draped his hand over the back of the couch and was stroking a smooth strand of hair between his fingers. He studied her when she looked down at herself, tightening her hold on the blanket.

"You're right." She shot a furtive glance at Beel. "I thought I was focused but I guess I'm not or I would have gone to my nest first for clothes."

She probably flew around the complex, going to his nest first, then to the top floor to Heath's nest in search of him. Beel hated the pain racking his body after being shot in the shoulder. Thankfully it was just a flesh wound and would be an annoying dull ache by morning. But when he found out Andrea was taken, all thought to his injury faded. All that mattered was finding her. His precious little owl had felt the same way, it was obvious when she looked at him.

"Take her to our room and find something she can wear for now," Heath suggested.

"Good idea," Beel agreed. He rubbed her neck until she stood. "I'll take you to your nest later, but I want to know everything that happened to you first."

"The sooner we have all details the better," Heath said, standing when Andrea did and watching his mate move in next to her when Andrea came around the coffee table. "If we need to fly out right away, we will need all the details first. This ends tonight."

Andrea spun around fast enough to cause her blanket to slide off her shoulder. "You're right. It does end tonight. I'll personally see to it he never flies again."

Beel wasn't sure he'd ever heard Andrea sound so full of hate. Granted she'd spent most of her life flying from her deranged sire. But whatever he did to her this evening obviously rekindled all the anger and resentment she'd kept well hidden over the years. The room filled with her spicy scent as she grabbed the blanket and adjusted it around her.

"Andrea, your hand," Shelly gasped.

Beel stood so fast the room spun for a moment. He ignored his lightheadedness as he moved in on Andrea, taking her hand and grabbing her blanket to keep it from slipping.

"Why didn't you tell me you were injured?" He'd smelled blood but thought it his own.

She looked up at him then glanced at Shelly and Heath. "There really hasn't been a chance yet."

Heath swore under his breath. "How bad is it?"

"What happened?" Beel demanded.

"I was shot," she whispered.

This time Beel cursed. "Get those clothes," he ordered Shelly, and at the same time escorted Andrea down the hall to the bathroom.

Heath didn't say anything when Beel made himself at home in his brother's nest. It was the same nest all of them grew up in as fledglings and Beel felt almost as content here as he did in his own nest.

"Should I call Aunt Oley up again?" Heath asked when Beel pushed Andrea into the bathroom then turned to close the door.

He looked at his brother, who stood in the hallway, concern obvious on his face. "I'll let you know." He took sweatpants and a sweatshirt from Shelly when she hurried out of the bedroom. "We'll be out in a second," he said, and closed the door.

Without asking, Beel pulled the blanket off Andrea and let it drop to the floor. She didn't try to cover herself but lowered her head as she cradled her injured hand against her chest. There was dried blood on her arm and stomach but it was the fresh blood on her hand he smelled immediately.

"How bad does it hurt?" he whispered, taking her hand gently.

She rested her hand in his palm as he raised it for a closer inspection.

"He called me a lame excuse for a fledgling," she murmured, raising her gaze to his.

Beel had misunderstood the pain he'd seen in Andrea's eyes. Yes, it was pain, but not from a physical wound. Her pain went deeper, into her soul, attacking her pride and honor. And she opened up to him, sharing her mind and deepest, most tormented thoughts the moment they were alone.

He brought her injured hand to his mouth, gently kissing her fingertips and avoiding the injured part closer to her wrist. "I guess we have definite proof now of how completely insane he is," Beel murmured.

The glaze look in her eyes faded and she straightened, seemingly oblivious to how she stood naked in front of him. "It shouldn't have affected me the way it did," she said, her voice stronger.

"Because you fly with honor it affected you." He lowered her hand, let it go, then began a meticulous inspection of the rest of her. "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"No, other than my pride."

"And it's mending quickly?"

He'd turned her around, taking in the gentle slope of her slender back and running his fingertips along her spine. She was dirty, with dried sweat still clinging to her flesh, and her hair was tangled and tousled.

Andrea glanced over her shoulder, looking up at him. "I think it's mended completely," she whispered, her voice suddenly raspy.

Beel was positive he stared at the most beautiful creature on the entire planet. Her gray eyes glowed, growing brighter as color washed over her cheeks. He saw her nipples harden as he lowered his gaze and stared at her full breasts. When she sucked in a breath, the aroma in the small bathroom changed drastically. Even the smell of blood was drowned out by his sweet little owl's sudden arousal.

"We better get you dressed before we miss our debriefing completely," Beel growled, feeling his cock lengthen against his pants.

Something told him it would be a long night, and one he would willingly endure to put Andrea's past permanently behind her. It was her future that he focused on, flying by his side as his female. And he couldn't wait for it to begin.

Andrea pulled the sweatshirt over her head, messing her hair up even more so, then slipped into the pants, which fit her perfectly. When Beel reached for the door, knowing if they stayed in there another minute he'd say to hell with his brother and fuck his adorable owl before anything else, Andrea reached for him, turning him around.

"Little owl," he grumbled. "I promise, if you keep touching me, I will undress you as quickly as you just dressed."

"No, you won't." She was suddenly all business. Instead of looking at him, she focused on his shoulder as she lifted up his shirt. "I want to see your wound."

Her fingers brushed over his flesh, sending fire straight between his legs and pumping blood into his cock until it throbbed painfully against his jeans. As aware as she had to be of how hard he was, Andrea ignored the bulge in his jeans and pushed his shirt up farther until she fingered the bandage his aunt had wrapped around his shoulder.

"How bad does it hurt?" She finally met his gaze.

"I'm fine." He straightened a strand of hair sticking out alongside her head.

"I'm sure you are," she said dryly. "How bad is it? If you don't tell me, I'm going to unwrap this and check for myself."

The tightening inside him he'd felt continuously as of late, every time he was around Andrea, constricted more so than usual. The protective nature she'd nurtured to life within him mixed with the predatory need to claim and mark those who meant most to him. Beel ran his fingers deeper into her blonde strands, shifting his attention when the silver hair seemed stronger tonight. He tugged, grabbing her attention and lowered his mouth to hers.

"I feel completely healed now," he whispered, and captured her mouth.

It was wise to be gentle. Both of them were injured. Logic didn't win out this time. Beel was rough, possibly too rough. But the sigh escaping her moist lips when he impaled her mouth, which quickly turned into a deep moan, made him greedy.

He grabbed her, his hands immediately under the bulky sweatshirt and touching flesh. Her warm, smooth skin, still holding on to the smell of the outdoors, was like silk under his fingers. Blood drained from his brain, seeping down his body, until he was so enflamed with need and the desire to mark Andrea with his scent all over again, he almost teetered from the intensity of it.

"Beel," Andrea gasped when he leaned her over, going for her neck when she let her head fall back.

"I know." They needed to stop but she tasted so damn good.

He readily admitted her confession to him of her deep fears, of the pain she endured from the words of a monster, ignited his craving to dominate every inch of her. It was a carnal emotion, not holding a bit of logic to it. Andrea was a strong female, intelligent, beautiful and honorable. The logical side of him acknowledged they would be equal in every way, both flying straight and powerful as two owls bonded together as one.

But another side of him, a more primitive side no owl was ever able to completely subdue, overtook him at the moment. A side demanding domination, complete control and power. All of this so willingly offered by a female who completely surrendered by voicing her thoughts. Andrea shared her mind with him when she would never do that with another owl. There wasn't any doubt inside him. Beel knew how she flew into this town, her emotions simmering so close to the surface after years of torment and torture. The huge wall she'd barricaded around her had seemed impossible to get around at first.

Yet tonight, just now, with one simple sentence, her wall came tumbling down and he was inside. His sweet little owl had opened up to him.

"Beel," she repeated, gasping, yet her demand stronger this time when she fought to straighten.

It was as if his entire world were in a blur when he pulled her upright, keeping her against him, and allowed their hearts to beat alongside each other for a moment.

"Andrea," he grunted, unable to find words for everything swimming around in his brain but wanting to honor her with something to match what she'd given him. "I almost took down my brothers to get out of this nest so I could fly after you when you disappeared."

It was the best he had, yet it wasn't enough. There were better words, deeper thoughts. Years of restraint, of respectable honor, made it damn hard to share them with her.

Andrea lifted her head, moving her uninjured hand and combing her hair with her fingers while studying his face. "We fought earlier."

"Yes, we did."

"I was so angry when you didn't talk to me about everything you flew through this morning."

"I know." He'd needed to protect her. And the urge to ensure her safety was even stronger now. "I wanted to destroy that bird so he wouldn't ever get to you again."

Her expression relaxed as her lips grew full, pursing into something close to a smile. "We'll fly after him together," she whispered.

He was about ready to tell her no, no way, not a chance, when his brother yelled from the hallway.

"Do I need to call Aunt Oley?" Heath asked from the other side of the door.

Beel turned, opening the door, and met his brother head-on. "It might not be a bad idea. She's been shot too."

"Oh God," Shelly gasped from the end of the hallway.

The moment Andrea left the bathroom, standing in the hall next to Beel, Shelly pushed past her mate and hovered around her. "You haven't cleaned it yet?"

"Beel and I needed to talk for a minute," Andrea whispered.

Shelly nodded as if Andrea's response made perfect sense to her. Beel immediately wondered what the two females had talked about while they'd been at the hardware store all day together.

"Clean her in the kitchen so we can hear the details both of them have to share," Heath instructed.

Beel's coffee was still hot and strong and he sipped at it while watching Shelly brush dried blood off Andrea's hand with a washcloth. A bullet had grazed her wing, and when she'd resumed her human form, the torn flesh near her wrist was puffy and painful-looking.

He pulled his attention from Shelly administering to Andrea and responded when he was pretty sure Heath had just asked him a question.

"You were there during most of what happened to me," Beel said, meeting his brother's serious, all-business expression.

"I want to hear what happened to you." Andrea hissed when Shelly applied a salve she squeezed out of a small tube.

"Sorry," Shelly muttered.

Beel stiffened, hating the sound of Andrea suffering in any way. The despicable asshole would die a slow and torturous death for shooting his female.

"I know I saw something in the woods," he continued, returning his attention to Heath.

"Saw what?" Andrea asked, her voice tight as she fought to control herself and not react as Shelly cleaned out the wound.

Beel looked at her, seeing her pain but also something more. Andrea needed to know what he'd been doing, where he flew, as much as he did her. He was getting used to the tightening inside him when she was near, the incredibly powerful possessiveness he felt for her. But as he stared at her for a moment before answering, something warm

flooded over him as well. It made his heart swell, but not painfully. Acknowledging it made his pulse beat more rapidly. There wasn't time to diagnose it at the moment though.

"We spent the morning flying over the mountain and saw trees burned only on the top. There were at least five of them," he added. "After circling the mountain several times, I swore I saw movement in the trees."

"Where were you?"

Her question surprised him, and Heath looked at her as well.

"North of here, at the base of the mountain."

Andrea simply nodded then glanced at her hand when Shelly pulled away the cloth with the ointment on it she'd been using to clean Andrea's wound.

"That might leave a scar," Shelly muttered.

"It won't be my first," Andrea offered lightly.

Beel had enjoyed finding the small scars on her body and remembered Andrea running her fingers over a few of his. There was still so much to learn about each other, discovering each story behind each war wound they'd managed over the years. Owls were hunters and scars weren't uncommon on mature males and females.

"Call Aunt Oley and see if she can't put a stitch or two on her hand so it won't scar as badly," Beel decided, looking at his brother who nodded in agreement.

"Nonsense," Shelly blurted, shooting her mate a hard look. "It's late and she's an old owl. You're not going to bother her again this evening. I'm perfectly capable of putting a couple of stitches in her hand."

"Do you have a way to numb her hand?" Beel asked.

"I can handle it," Andrea said, although her mouth was already tight as she spoke through her teeth.

"I think we do." Shelly was already up from the table and hurrying around all of them to the bathroom.

Beel touched Andrea's hand directly above the cleaned-out and open wound, which was a neat slice alongside her wrist bone. He wouldn't bring up the possibility it might sting a bit to fly for a day or so. Instead, he continued with his story.

"After calling for Rock and Heath, I dropped down into the trees, searching for whatever it was I saw moving."

"It might have been an animal," Heath commented, bringing up an earlier discussion.

"Possibly." Beel doubted it though. He knew what he saw. A person, possibly not an owl, had been running through the trees. "I even landed on one of the upper branches. The woods were really thick in this area and although it was barely noon, it was dark among the trees."

"Did you see a female or a male?" Andrea didn't look up when she asked but focused on his hand, which was still resting over her arm near her cut.

"Interesting." Heath gave her his attention. "Why do you ask?"

"Females and males often run differently." Andrea only shot him a quick look before glancing up as Shelly returned, holding up a small bottle and cotton balls.

"If I were to guess, I would say female." Beel grabbed Andrea's attention with his comment. "I jumped from branch to branch but didn't smell any other owls. When I finally headed out with my brothers to return to the leopard's den where we'd left our clothes, I got shot."

Andrea was staring at him, ignoring Shelly when she lifted Andrea's hand.

"He grabbed me outside the store when we were locking up and getting ready to come to you," she said, her voice rough. "I was so distracted after learning you'd been shot. I could have fought better."

Shelly made a snorting sound in the back of her throat. "You fought pretty damn well if you ask me. He simply overpowered you."

Beel growled before he could stop the sound from emerging.

"He threw me in the back of the most disgusting car I've ever been in," she mumbled. "There were no door handles on the back doors, which made it harder to escape. So I attacked him, but not before he'd driven us out of Banff and north of here. When I attacked and knocked him out then pushed him out of the car, it swerved off the road into the trees and began descending down a steep decline, which was thick with trees."

"Are you suggesting you might have been taken to the area that we flew around earlier today and where Beel was shot?" Heath asked.

"I think it's very likely. I changed and flew out of the car before it crashed into a thick grove of trees. I'd barely landed on a thick, nearby branch and taken a moment to regain control of myself," she added, her voice softening as if behaving as any sane and normal owl would under such horrendous circumstances was embarrassing to her. "Someone started calling for him and approached the crashed vehicle."

"Someone?" Beel asked.

"A female. A human female," she added, fighting to hide her disgust.

Even Shelly quit working and stared at Andrea. For a moment the kitchen was incredibly quiet as they all digested her meaning. The coffee pot gurgled on the counter as Andrea continued, speaking what Beel had just suspected and removing all doubt.

"The owl has a human girlfriend." This time she did whisper, lowering her gaze to the table, not her hand, and uttering the words as her disgust created a stale stench around all of them.

Beel didn't see any reason why she should feel humiliated. As far as he was concerned, Jerome Chouette had no claim on Andrea. He had severed all rights to her many years ago and his dishonor didn't taint her in any way.

"The car was hers. She made that very clear as she moved around it, mumbling about it being wrecked. Then she began yelling through the trees." Andrea paused and glanced at Heath then Beel. "And she was waving a very large black rifle as she stomped through the trees as if she intended to let every living creature within miles know exactly where she was."

"That's how humans are," Heath explained. "Their hearing is so bad they don't know how loud they are and how easily they alert the rest of the world as to their location."

Beel wouldn't begin listing off the downsides of humans. None of that mattered right now. "Did she say anything to indicate she might have shot me?"

Andrea shook her head. "She continued wailing over the fact he had wrecked her car. Then she spotted him on the ground when he began moving."

"So, throwing him out of the car didn't kill him." Heath sounded as disappointed as the rest of them.

Beel would have loved knowing his little female would carry the honor of destroying the son of a bitch. Andrea shook her head and hair tumbled over her shoulder. Beel brushed it away from her face as she continued speaking.

"Her name is Penny. He yelled at her and called her Penny," Andrea said then bit her lip when Shelly applied the numbing solution to her hand and wrist. She sucked in a breath and stared straight ahead, not looking at any of them. "First she yelled at him, demanding to know if he'd brought the bitch with him he'd gone to fetch."

"Gone to fetch?" Heath asked.

Andrea wrinkled her brow and nodded. "She spoke with a thick American accent, which she made worse with her usage of words. But she said verbatim, 'where is the bitch you were going to fetch?'"

She didn't show any sign of how those words might have affected her, but Andrea wouldn't allow any of them to see her reaction. It was enough she showed her disgust to all of them, which was obviously too strong for her to contain. Beel prayed when they were finally alone, she would open up to him again, allow him into her mind to see her pain, her anger and any other reaction she had to her encounter with Jerome and the human female. He promised himself he would honor her by sharing his reaction to it as well. They would share their minds, their souls and their hearts.

The thought caused the pattering against his chest just as it did earlier. That flood of warmth attacked his nervous system, spreading and creating sensations inside him strong enough they would start smelling if he didn't control them. Yet he wasn't sure what the sensation was.

"Right after she yelled through the trees at him, he stood from where he'd been lying on the ground and yelled back at her."

"He yelled through the trees?" Heath asked, surprised.

Andrea simply nodded. Nothing she told Beel about the male would surprise him. The owl was insane, completely out of his thick owl skull. Although he prayed the male hadn't been born with such a peculiar nature, which might make it hereditary. It would be hard for him to believe it if he were told it was the case. Andrea was more sane than most, her emotions exactly where they belonged, and her integrity and honor stronger than many female owls.

"He yelled at Penny to shoot me and told her where I was perched in the trees." Andrea didn't tell Heath or Shelly the exact words her sire said, which Beel guessed were the words she'd shared with him, the very first thing she'd said to him in the bathroom. In spite of hating every feather on his body, Andrea's sire still had the power to wound her deeper than any flesh wound with hateful, vindictive squawking.

"I jumped from branch to branch and finally took flight. The human weapon exploded twice. She got me on her third shot."

"And it was dark," Heath finished for her. "This human female is one hell of a good shot. Humans can't see in the dark."

"Something tells me they have a nest, possibly a temporary one, but someplace where they're staying north of here."

"What makes you think that?" Beel asked.

"Before I attacked him in the car, he swerved off the road, as if he'd intended to drive into the trees before I threw him out and the car headed in that direction on its own. Not to mention, the human female was on foot. There's no way she could have walked too far to get there."

"Interesting," Heath muttered.

Beel met his gaze, ready to fly out immediately and find the human female and insane owl before they tried shooting another one of their parliament. He directed his attention to Andrea when she hissed. Her hand jerked when Shelly started the first stitch. Reaching for her, but avoiding her arm and hand, which was placed flat on the table, Beel wrapped his arms around her and buried her face against his shoulder.

"Remember, my precious owl, this ends tonight."

"I want to be the one to kill him."

Chapter Twenty-One

As much as Beel didn't want Andrea flying with them to go after Jerome Chouette and his human female, he had to fight to prevent anyone from smelling the pity when it washed over him as it became apparent Andrea couldn't fly.

Heath gathered a few males, those who were the most discreet and capable of assisting in the dangerous pursuit of a rogue owl and his human companion. All agreed the matter would be dealt with honorably and with no squawking afterward. Andrea had sat in Heath's nest alongside him well into the night, listening as Heath explained to those who joined them how perilous this flight would be. It didn't surprise Beel at all when all nodded somberly they would participate and not squawk afterward.

But when they reached the roof and changed into their feathers, Andrea took off with the rest of them and immediately dived sideways, gliding down a few stories to the ground before regaining her flight. Beel dove after her, coming up underneath her then grabbing her with his beak, ignoring her squawking, and returned her to the roof.

The others landed alongside them, remaining quiet when Beel changed back to his human form, donned his clothes and waited for Andrea to do the same.

"I'll walk you to your nest," he said quietly then turned to his brothers. "Give me a minute," he said, wrapping his arm around Andrea after she'd dressed, and escorted her to the door leading to the stairs. "Wait up for me," he whispered, and stroked the side of her head, straightening her tousled hair.

"Like I could sleep," she muttered, staring at her hand, which needed to be rebandaged. "Go get this over with. I can make it to my nest alone."

Beel took her chin, tilting her head and stared into her beautiful gray eyes. "I will be honored to kill him for you," he whispered. "I pray we're in our flesh when I do."

"Why is that?" she asked, her chin relaxed in his hand. "And you're the one who said the parliament had to determine his life must end. If I can't take his life in my claws you sure as hell shouldn't have the right."

"Because I want the last words that male hears before leaving this earth to be my telling him I plan on mating with his daughter." He tightened his grip on her chin when she lowered her gaze. "And right now, my sweet owl, I don't give a damn about laws and traditions. You matter to me more than anything else."

Andrea stared at him and her mouth slowly took the shape of a small circle. She didn't say anything, didn't hiss at him or smile. Her expression and eyes were so blank, he swore for a moment she didn't have a reaction to his words at all.

There would be time to discuss this later. Beel lowered his mouth to hers, brushed his lips over her still-round mouth, then dropped his hand.

"Head down to your nest and crack your bedroom window. I'll come to you when I return."

She barely nodded and didn't move as he backed up and returned to join the others.

The night had turned cold and crisp, with a sky so black and stars so large on another night Beel might have soared, taken his time and enjoyed the beauty of it. It was the kind of night to allow an owl to clear his head, become one with nature and his stronger, true self. Unfortunately, he wouldn't be taking advantage of any of that tonight.

Instead there were six of them, flying hard and full speed north of town. Beel's heart repeated a solid, dull pounding in his chest. His mind was as clear as the sky, although his thoughts were completely on Andrea. The stress was gone, his fear, his worry and almost near panic when she took off the roof and did a nose dive to the ground. In his feathers, the relationship growing between the two of them made perfect sense. They were incredibly compatible and headed toward mating. She was everything he wanted in a female had he ever taken time to consider the traits and qualities his perfect mate would possess. Which he hadn't.

It was for the best he hadn't. Again, it was all logical. Had he given thought to what a female would do to please him, or to annoy him, he would have looked at their gender completely different. He'd needed the years behind him, chasing after every pretty tail. It had taken the urge to enjoy as many of them as he could out of his system. Accepting the truth that he'd not given another female a thought since Andrea flew into town didn't bother him. The reason was simple. Andrea was his other half, his soul mate, his flying companion for life.

After tonight, they would focus on building their relationship. As he flew, with Rock on one side and Heath on the other, it wasn't quite as important as he sensed it had been earlier to know every emotion streaming through her and for him to share his feelings with her. He understood this in his feathers. The human side of him needed that bond. They would be together in their skin as well as in their feathers, so it was logical to accept the needs of both their forms. Just at the moment, he didn't see the crucial need for it.

Possibly analyzing what they needed and didn't need was hindered from the pain in his shoulder. He knew it was why his brothers decided to fly on either side of him. Beel didn't miss their side glances, the way they kept an eye on him. He would catch hell from his aunt when she learned he flew after taking a bullet. But he could fly. It hurt like hell, but he was doing a good job of ignoring it, just as he ignored the beautiful night surrounding them.

Instead, when they shifted as a strong breeze picked up, Beel focused on their destination. He remembered how far he'd flown from the leopard's den. As the town disappeared underneath them and the ground grew more rugged, the trees taller, Beel dropped in altitude, the others taking his lead. He swooped lower, turning when Heath let out a warning call.

His brother slowed, letting out several more warning cries. Then, hovering and moving in a circular pattern, he focused on Beel then the others and nodded. They dropped at the same time, diving toward the tops of the thick grove of trees beneath them. Even in his feathers, Beel forced his eyes to adjust to the increasing darkness when they flew around branches until the six of them found nearby perches to land.

Rock paced the length of his branch, anxious to continue. Beel understood their regrouping. They would have to search. As disgusting as the thought was of a human being involved in this serious owl matter, her presence would make Jerome and Penny easier to find. The strong smell of a human wouldn't be missed. Already there were aromas in the air that obviously weren't part of the woods.

Owls didn't experience the same emotions as humans, and they certainly didn't bombard the brain all at once in a serious situation. Nonetheless, Beel felt his feathers prickle, his skin crawl as a wave of anxiousness rushed through him. He wanted to find them, search and locate and destroy. His talons dug into the thick branch where he perched, and even shaking out his feathers didn't take the sensation away. It was so imperative tonight went off without a hitch, without any of them being harmed, without the owl or human surviving. If any part of it went wrong, Andrea would hold the weight of it on her shoulders. Beel wouldn't allow her to endure any more pain.

Heath was quiet this time when he squawked at Peter Osborne, the only Great Horned Owl with them. Peter leapt off his branch, which was next to Beel's, and dove deeper into the woods. Beel followed him with his eyes as the male swooped lower, gliding around trees and branches as he moved closer to the ground then began a concentrated sweep of the area. Before the male was out of Beel's sight, he turned his attention to Heath, glaring at him for not choosing him to scout out the area. Rock paced harder, making small noises in the back of his throat, apparently voicing his complaints as well.

If Beel had been in his skin, his brother's sounds would have annoyed the crap out of him. As it was, after a moment, he hissed at Rock, who shot him a defiant glare but shut up. The other two males, perched on the same branch beneath Beel, remained quiet, which was a smart move.

He was wound tight, too damn tight. His shoulder throbbed and his heart pounded painfully against his chest. Heath made the logical choice. Beel was already in pain and injured. It was logical he not risk any more injuries tonight. He'd made a promise to Andrea though, and he meant to keep it. Beel had every intention of taking Jerome Chouette down and watching him collapse then whisper the words he would say to him before the male died.

In spite of rational thoughts ringing clearly in his mind, proof of how much tonight meant to him grew more apparent as anxiety continued rippling over his flesh. He glanced at his shoulder. Flying here aggravated the wound a bit. He carefully adjusted his feathers over the open flesh wound before glancing up to catch both his brothers watching him.

Beel straightened, ignoring the tinge of pain, and dared either of them to make a sound. A whooshing sound in the air saved all of them from being distracted. Peter appeared beneath them, his large, long wings spread wide as he let the air carry him back to his original perch. Beel leapt to the edge of his branch, as close as he could get to Peter. The moment the male nodded then tilted his head to the ground, Beel took to flight along with the rest of them.

Pain attacked Beel, and for a moment he thought he'd fall to the ground the way Andrea did when she leapt off the roof. He maintained control, pressing his beak shut tightly and ordering himself to focus on anything but his shoulder right now. And there was plenty to focus on. A sharp, nauseating scent grew apparent the lower they descended. It was inanimate and familiar. He breathed in his second gulp of air and recognized the odor. Anti-freeze, oil, gasoline—the car Andrea said wrecked into the trees. Beel searched below and found it a moment later, smashed against a thick tree trunk and large rock. Hours before, the male, the human and Andrea had been right here.

The front end of the car was smashed in pretty good. Being an older model, it was easily totaled, although not a loss if someone with mechanical skills wanted to put it back together. The car was the least of Beel's concerns. Instead, he spread out, along with the others, searching the area, sniffing the air and dissecting the scents around them until one of them squawked.

Beel turned his head quickly, coming around, searching through the trees as he spotted Rock, James and Brad, the other two males, then Peter. Heath, farthest from him, landed on a rock and stretched his wings, signaling to all of them. Beel flew close to the ground, keeping his wings close to avoid the many obstacles around him, and followed his brother when he leapt from the rock and headed deeper into the woods.

Then he smelled what Heath must have picked up on. Fire, as in a fireplace. Someone was burning wood, and the thick, warm odor grew stronger as the six of them closed in together, flying silently through the blackness surrounding the trees until a dump of a cottage came into view.

More than likely it was abandoned. The walls were thin in places, smoke billowed unevenly out of a dilapidated brick chimney and the one visible window was opaque from dirt and age. Bushes grew thick around the foundation, covered with snow. Dead vines clung to the old structure, twisted and gnarled as they stretched to the lame excuse for a roof. Beel couldn't imagine the cottage offered much shelter from the environment. Even from his distance, Beel heard voices, speaking quietly to each other inside the cottage.

Peter landed first, finding a large boulder less than ten meters from the cottage. If this were an owl's nest, it belonged to someone with no pride or honor. Beel landed on the uneven, broken ground, ignoring the other males who landed around him. He tilted his head, listening only to the voices inside. A male and female, owl and human, were inside the dilapidated structure. They spoke in soft tones, sounding relaxed and unconcerned of anything around them.

Odd, when Beel thought about it. Any owl would sense other owls outside his nest. He sniffed the air again, confirming what he'd detected at first. There was definitely an owl and human inside. He closed his mind to everything around him and focused only on their conversation.

"I can't imagine what it would feel like. I want you to take me next time." The female definitely had an American accent and said her words oddly, just as Andrea had described. "You know, darling, some might say you're possessed by the devil instead of it being a gift from god."

"What do you say?" The male had a deep, thick voice with a rich, French accent.

"Oh my dearest sweetheart," she said, her voice rising to an annoying high pitch as her accent thickened. "You are most definitely god's greatest gift to me. Can you imagine how stinking rich we'll be when you appear before crowds, flying into the sky then landing before their eyes?"

Her laughter turned Beel's stomach. That would be one dream the female would never see come true, and even more reason to see to both of their deaths. No human would ever extort owls and live to see the next day. Not that Jerome Chouette sounded too coerced into the idea.

"Interesting," Jerome mused.

"I'm very interesting, darling," the female purred, her voice turning throaty. When she chuckled, it sounded raspy. "What of my many qualities do you find so interesting? Is it my beauty? How good of a fuck I am?" she whispered.

A cold shiver rushed over Beel. Any owl who would have sex with a human seriously needed his head examined. Not that any of them didn't already know Jerome Chouette was insane.

"Your fascination with money," Jerome told her.

"Darling, one can never have enough money," she informed him.

Beel had heard enough. The stench from the two of them turned his stomach. The pain in his shoulder was growing annoying. And there wasn't any reason he saw not to end this madness now.

He didn't bother confirming his next move with the males surrounding him. Beel adjusted the strap holding his clothes against his chest then started changing. Suddenly the annoying pain turned unbearable as his skin changed and stretched over his growing body. Beel clamped his beak together, even as it softened into lips, as pain rushed over him in torrents almost too strong to bear.

His ears rang. His vision blurred. For a moment all senses failed him as he swore the wound on his shoulder opened farther. Heat scourged his flesh, shooting down his wing then his arm as he straightened to his full height as human. It lashed out into his chest.

It was too much, too intense. And if he gave in to it he would fail Andrea.

He gulped in the cold night air and almost gagged on the stench surrounding him. Coughing would give them away. The slightest movement would jeopardize their mission. Beel held his ground, willing the pain to surrender and his determination to see his plan through prevail.

Just as his eyes focused—the darkness shrouding him in a thick, cold envelope—a human hand grabbed his uninjured arm. Beel spun to his left, raising his hurt arm and creating a fist, then stared into his brother's concerned face.

Rock studied him, holding up his free hand, palm flat and facing Beel. He tilted his head, shifting his attention to Beel's shoulder then back to his face.

All of them were dressed, each of them watching the two brothers as the faintest hint of curiosity and concern mixed in with the stench from the human and owl inside.

You okay? Rock mouthed, not making a sound, although his question was clear.

Beel gave him a curt nod, grateful he couldn't speak right now. He wasn't sure he'd be as convincing if he did. There was no finding a perch with this one though. He would fly in with the others, and he planned on taking the lead.

The other males didn't make a sound. All of them were well experienced for many years now on how to move as humans or owls without disturbing the nature around them or underneath them. No one said a word as Beel dressed, doing his best not to let anyone see how much pain he was in when he pulled his shirt over his head. If he took a bit longer to fasten his boots while blood rushed to his injury as he bent over, none of the males around him showed any sign when he finally straightened and gestured for them to move ahead. They walked over broken branches and patches of snow without so much as a snap or crackle. Silence had its advantage in many different situations. They closed in around Beel but focused on the dismal cottage, or nest, or whatever the fuck it was. Neither and both. As used up and needing to be demolished as the two inside were.

Heath shot him a pensive look, barely turning his head but focusing on Beel. Possibly it was noticeable in his expression. If not, Beel would make it as clear as needed. He was in charge of this attack.

Before Heath could challenge him, if he planned to at all, Beel held up his hand, grabbing everyone else's attention as well. Pointing at the structure, he cupped his hand around his ear. They all understood. The two inside were no longer talking.

They'd been detected. Beel gestured again and all of them separated, taking cover nearby behind rocks and trees. A cool, whispering wind came through the trees, blowing the smells of the cottage away from them. Beel wouldn't curse nature. The wind picked up intensity, sending a hard and painful chill rushing over him. It made him shiver and created yet another stab of painful searing, fiery pain down his arm. But it cleared the air of all smells, which would make it harder for the two inside to pinpoint exactly where they were hiding outside.

Beel crouched behind a large boulder nearest the filthy window. He couldn't see the door but snapped his attention to the corner of the building when one opened and light from inside created an odd-shaped, long triangle on the ground.

Every inch of him tensed, his eyes straining so he wouldn't miss a thing in the dark. There was the sound of a footstep crunching on snow. The wind slowed, stilled, and the following second was silent. No one moved. Anticipation built. Every inch of him tensed as his shoulder throbbed.

He did his best to ignore it, pulling his attention from the stream of light at the end of the cabin to take in the rest of the structure. If the two of them inside had any level of intelligence at all they would split up and not come out together. Although their lack of rational thought reeked terribly, one didn't need to be smart to be cunning. Beel wouldn't underestimate either one of them. Jerome had lived this long after killing his mate. It was a fact Beel would be smart not to forget. Jerome had convinced Anna to leave her nest when she believed Andrea was captured by the asshole. He'd also managed to steal Andrea from outside the store in the middle of town without anyone stopping him. Jerome Chouette might not fly straight but he was a shrewd and manipulative waste of feathers.

No, Beel wouldn't underestimate him. Not to mention, it would be even more honorable if there were a bit of a challenge to the fight. The victory would hold the most honor though. Beel would free Andrea and her sister of the shackles that had held them down for way too many years once and for all.

"Little bitch, did you bring reinforcements?" Jerome called out, breaking the silence around them with his cackling. He took another step and his tall profile became visible as light from inside helped form his shadow.

Jerome thought Andrea had flown back here. Possibly he didn't realize his human female had shot Andrea. Then it dawned on Beel—the owl smelled her on him. Beel contemplated how this might be to his advantage as he decided silence would be the best answer to Jerome's question. He remained behind his rock but moved his uninjured arm, straightening his hand and holding it out next to him just enough for the males around him to notice.

Hold your attack, he let them know with a hand gesture.

There wasn't a sound from the other end of the old cottage but a dark shadow grabbed his attention less than a second before a loud explosion violated the air. Beel jumped in spite of himself when the human female fired her large black rifle. This wasn't his first ambush or attack on others who'd violated their peaceful way of life. Beel wasn't used to guns though. No honorable species would use one of those despicable things. There was too much history behind the human weapon and close annihilation of too many different species for any of them to see the things as useful. Besides, owls had built-in weapons and didn't need to haul around additional weight the way humans did. Without them, the only species on earth who were half of a whole were defenseless.

Tree branches ruffled. The loud explosion from the weapon echoed off large boulders around them. Leaves went flying. Small birds higher in the trees shrieked in terror, taking flight and causing an incredible commotion when another shot split the air and went flying past Beel. There was a loud thud, and for a split second, he feared one of them had been shot. A large tree branch fell to the ground but not before Beel's heart lurched into his throat, still beating so fast he couldn't catch his breath.

"Where's the fucking bitch?" the female shrieked. "Who all is out here? You all are trespassing. I'm going to keep shooting until every one of you flying freaks is dead. Show your faces right now!" she demanded, taking another step around the opposite side of the cottage from where Jerome stood until Beel was able to focus on her.

Lord, she was ugly even for a human. Her hair was dyed a gaudy platinum color and frizzed around her face, which was twisted into a wrinkled scowl. Her beady eyes narrowed on the darkness, searching it, and she moved her weapon as she moved her gaze. Humans were damn near blind in the dark. It was a proven fact. Beel didn't think for a moment the female wouldn't keep shooting, even if she couldn't find a target.

She wore a black oversized leather jacket and black spandex leggings. Her legs were thick, stretching the leggings and showing off a not-so-attractive figure. Even as she squinted, he still saw enough makeup on her face to damn near disguise her true appearance. The hodgepodge of grotesque smells coming off her was enough to turn his stomach. What would even a deranged owl want with a human female like this one?

Beel shoved the thought out of his head as soon as it came to him. He couldn't care less who Jerome spent his time with. It didn't matter. What did matter was they'd found both of them and all he needed to do now was determine the best way to take both of them out.

Something grabbed his attention in the trees near the female. It was barely a shadow. Jerome and Penny wouldn't be able to move without him knowing, but Beel took a second to make sure he hadn't imagined what he just saw. His human eyes were his biggest handicap right now, yet they were all he had.

A nervous rush of energy surged to life inside him when he realized Heath stood, not moving, in the trees just over a meter from Penny. Something shifted above Heath, and Beel spotted Peter, who'd changed back into his feathers and landed silently on a branch behind the tree where Heath stood.

"I said come out now!" she screeched, her tone shrill, and her accent adding to its annoyance.

Peter spread his wings, leaping off the branch, and dove at the female.

"Penny!" Jerome yelled, moving with incredible agility for a male who couldn't do much better than fly in circles when in his feathers.

Beel took advantage of Jerome being distracted when he warned his human female. He wasn't sure how Jerome knew two males were closing in on her from where he'd been standing, guarded by the dilapidated structure. Jerome's senses might be more

acute than Beel originally thought as he watched the male leap over a rock with the normal agility of a grown male owl.

Penny fired her weapon and screamed at the same time. The loud, evasive noises provided enough confusion and helped Beel hit his target. He couldn't fly in his skin, but using the rock to help propel him through the air, he landed on Jerome. Both of them crashed into the side of the dilapidated cottage, which surprisingly didn't send it tumbling to the ground along with the two of them.

Pain from his shoulder exploded in his brain. First he hit the splintered wood then the two of them tumbled to the rough earth, their arms and legs twisted around each other. For a moment it dazed him. His body moved on instinct though, knowing he'd attacked and needed to carry through or be attacked in return. When he managed to focus, Beel stared into hatred. Cold, unleashed rage and a terrifying level of evil left Jerome's eyes flat, almost lifeless.

Another chill rushed over his body. Pain pulsed through Beel with more intensity than he'd ever felt before, but his hands were on the bastard, keeping him down, crushing him against the rough, uneven ground.

There were more sounds, the males around him leaping from their hiding places. The damn rifle exploded again. Penny screamed louder. Wings flapped and males grunted and even yelled as the attack began.

Beel couldn't focus on what all of them were doing. Pain threatened to overtake his ability to focus or think. Jerome was a good-sized owl and at least twenty years older than Beel. More than likely years of flying, keeping a low profile and continuously searching for Andrea and Anna had kept his senses stronger than they might have been otherwise. Beel had no idea how often the male fought. But he was strong.

There was an advantage in an ambush, but Beel wasn't cocky enough to believe he'd hold on to that edge if he didn't keep his head clear. All he would focus on was the male he'd just tackled to the ground.

Jerome lashed out, almost succeeding in sending a brutalizing blow to the side of Beel's head. He missed, although he grazed Beel's temple. Jerome let out a frustrated wail and kicked the side of the structure with his boot. The wood splintered and crackled loudly against the impact and Beel worried for a moment it would collapse on both of them. As much as he'd love for the male to suffer, feel the pain he'd inflicted on his fledglings from such an early age, if Beel didn't take advantage of every moment, his injury would become more than a handicap.

He used strength he didn't know he had at the moment and jumped to his feet, pulling Jerome up by the collar of his shirt, then tossed him against the old structure. This time the splintering sound sounded as if lightning exploded around them. The wall tore in two, capturing Jerome's arms as splintered wood tore into his flesh.

"What the fuck?" Jerome wailed and slumped to the ground. His shirt tore as the old wall tried holding on to him.

"You're going to pay for the hell you've inflicted on your nest," Beel hissed, whispering with his face within arm's reach of Jerome's. The metallic smell of blood hung heavily between them but it didn't turn Beel's stomach as much as the unadulterated hatred on Jerome's face, and reeking from his body did.

The large male focused on Beel, piercing him with his ruthless glare. "You're the one fucking the little slut," he snarled, his face contorting as even more evil inside him surfaced. "I hope to hell she's worth dying for, you fucking son of a useless nest. There's no way that female, spawned from such a useless bitch, will ever smell good to an owl with honor."

"Andrea smells better than any female on this earth," Beel informed him, relaxing his voice so he sounded calm. He couldn't pull off a smile, but if he could have, he would. "And she's definitely worth killing for," Beel added, grabbing the male by the neck and securing his grip before he started squeezing and twisting.

"Jerome!" Penny's voice was strained, constricted as if she were in pain.

Beel didn't look in her direction and this time didn't jump as another shot exploded in the night.

"Kill him!" Jerome tried screaming, but Beel had a solid grip on the male's neck. He constricted his vocal cords so all that came out was a pathetic cry for help from a waste of feathers, a male so useless he would yell for a human female to save him. "Kill," he tried again.

Beel tightened and squeezed, every inch of him hard as a rock as he applied his body weight, using it to keep Jerome from standing or trying to throw Beel off him. Jerome tried though, twisting and gyrating as if he were a fish out of water. He brought up his fist, aiming once again for the side of Beel's head. Beel was ready to release his neck long enough to block the deadly blow when another fist sliced through the air behind him, punching Jerome in the face.

Blood splattered across Jerome's face. The male howled in pain as his nose broke and cartilage snapped loudly.

"Can you hear me?" Beel asked.

Penny howled, her voice not as loud this time, but loud enough Beel wasn't sure Jerome heard him. The male managed to twist his head, fighting desperately to look in her direction. His eyes bulged, his lips turned white, contrasting grossly with the red fluid soaking his mouth and turning Beel's hands sticky.

"Can you hear me?" Beel asked again.

Jerome looked at him, his eyes cold with outrage. No doubt the male was in incredible pain, but interestingly enough, Beel didn't smell pain but breathed in the rank smell of blood mixed with cold, despicable fury.

"Nothing you have to say will impress me, asshole," Jerome spat out, and looked up past Beel. "Both of you can rot in hell."

Beel couldn't smell who stood behind him. He didn't care.

"I have no intention of going to hell," Beel said, a surreal calmness spreading through him and making him feel as light as if he were in his feathers. "But I do have every intention of your final thought being the knowledge the male who killed you will be the male who mates with your eldest daughter."

"You do not have my per..."

Beel twisted harder, hearing the bone snap as he broke Jerome's neck. The male's head slumped, his body went limp, yet his eyes remained open. He looked as dead now as he did when he was alive.

Beel didn't fight the male who reached around him, grabbing Beel and lifting him off the male. "Wash the blood off you before his tainted soul dries on you," Rock whispered as he held his brother long enough for Beel to regain his ability to stand on his own.

Beel nodded, looking away from the dead owl slumped next to the wall. He looked at the female, who lay on the ground, her body contorted in an unnatural position. The other males stood around her and Peter was putting his clothes back on.

"We'll use the fire inside to burn their bodies." Heath moved around them and headed inside. "Let both of their souls mix together in their smoke."

Beel almost fell over when he squatted and used a large patch of snow to clean his hands. He watched the fresh snow stain with blood and his vision blurred. It was all he could do to see. It was over though. Soon enough he would be flying into Andrea's nest. He would spend the night fucking her, reminding her over and over again with each thrust into her smoldering, moist heat, how she was now his.

Thinking about her naked body underneath him and picturing how her firm, large breasts would bounce as he fucked her helped ease some of the pain. He thought of calling her right now. More than likely there wouldn't be a signal but already he knew it would be better telling her in person. He wondered if she already knew, if the pain and anguish the asshole had administered to her and her sister over the years was so great she would instantly feel lighter the moment his soul no longer walked or flew on this earth.

He almost fell over when someone tapped the back of his head and realized it wasn't the first time Rock had said his name.

"Beel, are you okay?" There was enough worry in Rock's tone to pull Beel out of his thoughts.

"I'm great," he managed, but when he stood, everything around him went black.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It had been two days and no matter how many times Andrea heard the story she couldn't believe Beel endured being shot, again, and still managed to kill Jerome Chouette. Shelly hadn't said anything about Andrea not getting her work done the day before. She'd sat up all night with Beel, watching him breathe, jumping every time he trembled. The fever had ransacked his system yesterday but this morning it broke.

"Andrea?" Shelly called from the front counter.

She looked at the female's expectant face as she held up the phone receiver. Andrea hurried around the desk and out of the small office. At least today she was determined to catch up with all her work. The sun couldn't fall quick enough though. She was anxious to get to Beel's nest and see how he was doing.

"Phone is for you." Shelly's face didn't reveal if it were good or bad news.

"Hello?" A twinge of nerves buckled in her tummy. She braced herself against the counter, her hand slightly sore as she stared at the scar left after she'd taken the stitches out herself earlier that morning.

"I think you need to take the rest of the day off."

"Beel." Andrea almost crashed into the filing cabinet along the wall as her nerves shattered and relief swarmed through her. "How are you?" she asked, barely managing to maintain composure.

"Terrible." He didn't sound terrible. "I woke up and you were gone."

Andrea grinned and looked down quickly, unable to search the store to see who might be watching her. "I have to work."

"You have to take the rest of the day off."

"Go ahead." Shelly rocked on her heels, holding back her grin when Andrea looked at her. "Your work will be here for you tomorrow."

"Okay," she told Beel, staring at Shelly. "I'll be at your nest soon."

"Not soon enough," he grumbled, and ended the call.

Andrea didn't look over her shoulder as she hurried down the sidewalk toward their nests. Beel had lifted a thousand pounds off her shoulders. She glanced at her hand and the puffy pink flesh where a slight scar would be. It didn't bother her. She never wanted to forget this time when she not only gained freedom for the first time in her life but also found true love. Beel wouldn't have done what he did, when already injured, if he didn't love her.

There wasn't any denying she loved him. When he flew off after her the other night, his only intention capturing Jerome Chouette...

Saying his name grew easier to do each time he entered her thoughts. There was no fear, no remorse, nothing.

But as she watched in the doorway to the roof as they flew into the night, Andrea had never known fear as she had the other night. In all the years she'd moved her nest, always keeping an alert eye and ear, and knowing in her heart and soul she and her sister might disappear from the parliament they were in the next day, none of it compared to the powerful emotions she couldn't contain as Beel flew away.

Her hand had hurt like hell, and taking time after he left to rebandage it helped her remain focused for a bit. She'd cracked the window as he'd instructed, but as the hours dragged on in the night and he didn't return, her heart swelled painfully in her chest until she could barely breathe. Emotions she'd never known before ransacked her system. Feelings more powerful and dangerous than any owl could possibly have experienced before clung to her like a wet blanket, refusing to adhere to logic and rational thought.

It wasn't until the hours leaned toward morning when Andrea finally understood the suffocating sensation she couldn't shake. She was in love. Head over tails, full-fledged in love.

The large apartment complex smelled like a welcoming nest. In less than a month she'd found her nest, her place in this world. This was her parliament and her male was upstairs, waiting for her. She bound up the stairs, hearing fledglings at play on different floors and a couple of owls squawking about current events. It was a welcoming sound. The smells were comfortable, peaceful, and at the same time, powerful and protective.

When she opened the door to her floor and immediately focused on the door to Beel's nest, it was ajar. He was inside. His smell compelled her further, drew her inside as if she could float in her flesh.

Andrea moved through his nest, breathing him in with every breath. At his bedroom door, she paused. Beel sat upright in the middle of his bed. Blankets and sheets were pushed down to his hips. His shoulder was wrapped and there was a new bandage secured tightly around his ribs. The bandages were clean, his bare flesh taut and stretched over muscle, which was too powerful to be taken down. Not by her sire. Not by the ugly baggage she'd flown into the parliament with, not by anything.

"Come here." He didn't say anything else.

She didn't remember moving to the bed.

Beel reached for her, his hand wrapping around her arm and pulling her onto him.

"I'll hurt you," she complained.

"No." He gripped her jaw, holding her in place on top of him, and devoured her mouth with a fever she couldn't fight.

She didn't want to fight him.

All her life she'd waited for this moment, yet she hadn't known this was what she'd been flying toward. His arms wrapped around her, pressing her against his warm flesh. Immediately he was hard as stone. His cock stretched and throbbed between them, a quiet promise of how the rest of their day would be.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Her head fell back against his arm and he lifted her closer, devouring her neck so she barely managed to get the words out.

"Never been better," he grunted, nipping and licking at her flesh as if she were the medicine he needed.

Maybe she was. Andrea lifted her head, staring into his glazed eyes. This time she saw deep into his soul, saw his pain but also saw his love, an overpowering, incredibly strong emotion. It smelled better than all the spring flowers struggling to blossom outside. It smelled stronger than any emotion she'd ever breathed in before.

"He's dead." Beel lifted her, adjusting him on top of her. "And you've got way too many clothes on."

Andrea almost laughed out loud. The death of her sire—no, not her sire—but the male who helped give her life and spent the rest of his trying to end it, didn't rate enough importance to be discussed longer than in one breath. Instead, Beel already focused on removing her shirt, tugging and pulling until she feared he'd rip it off her if she didn't help.

Within moments all her clothes were tossed to the floor. Her flesh tingled where he touched her. Her body ached for him to touch her more. She wanted him everywhere and wanted to feel every inch of him against her. As she spread out on top of him, stretching her legs, Beel yanked the blankets from between them.

Andrea nestled over his hard, throbbing cock and stared at his face as he watched her.

"You've given me the greatest honor," she whispered, willing herself to share her thoughts with him. More than anything she wanted to know his mind. If she opened up maybe he would too. "I think I floated up here."

"You're glowing." He brushed his lips over hers then created a path of moist kisses down her neck. "And I plan on honoring you for a very long time."

It wasn't exactly opening up to her. Andrea decided it was a start though. She wouldn't ask Beel to change overnight. When he slid his hands over her breasts and captured her nipples between his fingers, she forgot about pressing.

"Beel." She hissed in a breath and brushed her hair over her shoulders to give him free rein. She grabbed his forearms, her eyes rolled back in her head when he pinched her already-puckered flesh.

"You're going to fly for me tonight, my little owl."

She blinked but couldn't focus. He was sending her places she wasn't sure she'd been to before and it was unfair of him to speak to her and say things she didn't understand.

"We're not flying anywhere," she said on her next breath. "You're injured."

His chuckle was deep, raspy. She decided she liked the sound of it and would do her best to create enough happiness in him so he'd laugh more often, or at least when they were alone. She ran her hands up his arms, feeling roped muscle twitch under her touch.

"Not that kind of flying, my precious owl," he grumbled. "I'm staying in bed and am going to watch you soar to heights you've never been to before."

Just the way he played with her breasts and squeezed her nipples was enough for Andrea to know it wouldn't be hard for him to send her where she hadn't gone before. She reached the bandage around his shoulder and tenderly brushed her fingertips over it then dragged her hands over his hair. A vibrant warmth simmered through her, up her arms, into her brain and down her middle to her pussy. His heat was so full of honor, pride and a sensual domination. It filled her, along with his scent, and she experienced his power, his aggressive side and compassionate side. Did he know her as well too? If so, what words would he use to describe her?

It was too hard to think. But when Beel moved his hands under her arms and lifted her off him, bringing her breasts to his mouth then scraping her nipple with his teeth, Andrea's brain turned into a clouded fog of lust. She tried watching him, but her world was a blur. She forgot what thoughts had just been in her head.

Beel moved to her other nipple, looking up at her as he sucked it deep into his mouth. The pressure was overwhelming. It was damn near too much.

"That's...so...good," she said, panting almost too hard to speak. If he kept it up she'd sprout feathers and float to the ceiling.

"Yes. It is," he agreed, his voice rough.

His cock throbbed against her rear end, gently reminding her there was more to come. At this rate, she'd be limp and a boneless pool of lust on his bed. More than anything though, she wanted to experience every moment, fly with Beel, even if they weren't in their feathers.

"You've got skills." Andrea needed to come down to earth. Watching him torture and torment her breasts was as erotic as the sensations he sent rushing into a whirlwind inside her.

"And you're beautiful." When he leaned into her, holding her and leaning her backward at the same time, the tension vibrated through his body.

It hit her through the hazy state of her brain that holding her as he was might be too painful for him. She definitely wasn't thinking straight. Bracing her weight with her knees, she let go of him and pressed her hands into the bed on either side of them.

"You should relax. I want to enjoy you now," she decided, easing down his legs as she scooted backward.

"I'm not done with you." He reached for her.

Andrea slid her legs between his instead of straddling him and was careful not to touch the bandages wrapped around his chest when she pressed her hands into his flesh and pushed him back on the pillows.

"You're right. You aren't." She licked her lips, which appeared to captivate him, and moved to her hands and knees over him. "Lie just like that," she ordered when he appeared to be relaxed against the pile of pillows behind him. "You'll get another turn soon."

Beel didn't answer but growled, watching her intensely as she gently kissed his lips then his chin, his collarbone, and lower. Her rear end stuck up in the air when she dragged her tongue down his stomach, following the thin line of dark hair toward his cock.

His cock swelled and lengthened. Beel hissed and made a guttural sound deep in his throat. Anticipation was killing him and Andrea liked the sudden rush of control she experienced. He might be strong, dominating, incredibly aggressive and more of a male than she'd ever handled before, but at the moment, he was hers to do with as she pleased.

She created a moist path to the tight curls covering his flesh at the base of his shaft. She raised her attention to him, her heart swelling at the sight of him. There was a thick cloud covering his intense gray eyes. His lips were parted as his breath came quickly. And he'd balled his fists on either side of him, rolling the blankets into his hands as if holding on to them would keep him from controlling her actions.

He wanted her running the show. Not knowing what she'd do next, or when she would finally touch his cock, pushed him as close to the edge as he'd just sent her. Her insides fluttered. A cool sheen of perspiration erupted all over her body. As much as she tortured him, she also was driving herself nuts.

"You're going to regret tormenting me, little bird," he whispered, his voice sounding harsh, threatening.

All he did was create a pressure inside her, which swelled so fast it was like a flood, dragging her under. She brought her tongue dangerously close to his cock and watched him quit breathing. His eyes cleared. His mouth puckered and he watched, waited, anticipation pushing him closer to where she wanted him.

"I doubt I regret it," she whispered, and ran her tongue up the length of his cock.

"Oh my god!" he wailed, his head falling back on the pillows as he grabbed the blankets, yanking them into a tight, twisted rope.

Andrea barely maintained her control. She wasn't prepared for how he would taste. The thick, pungent and so incredibly enticing fragrance filled her nose and soaked her mouth. She grew greedy, immediately wanting to taste more of him, and lapped at his cock again.

Grabbing it, she wrapped her lips around him and sucked him into her mouth.

"Oh Andrea." His words barely made it out of his mouth.

Andrea thought she might choke on him, yet Beel seemed to be the one trying to figure out how to breathe. His face grew red and muscles contorted and bulged across his chest, against his bandages and in his arms. Roped muscle hardened in his legs. And before he ripped the blankets, he let go and grabbed her hair.

The tight sting she experienced when he pulled, once again fisting his hands, but this time tangling her hair in his fingers, caused her insides to explode. She lapped at him, sucked and swallowed, fought not to choke and took him as far into her mouth as possible. Small bubbles dripped from the tip of him and she devoured them greedily, running her tongue over his swollen head, searching for more.

"Enough!" he roared, letting go of her hair but grabbing her and dragging her up his body before she could catch her breath. "That's enough," he repeated, whispering now.

"You didn't like it?" She almost smiled, fighting to keep her expression relaxed and her eyes wide and innocent as she stared at him.

"My little female, like is hardly the word to describe your seductive skills."

Her heart swelled. Not that she'd thought he wasn't enjoying himself, but hearing him brag about her ability to give him head brought her more pleasure than she would have imagined it would.

"Then possibly we're evenly matched."

He pulled her to him and kissed her lips, entering her immediately and devouring her mouth as if he wanted to claim every inch of her tongue and inside of her mouth after she'd had him inside her. Once again, he dragged his fingers through her hair, tugging and pinching as he tilted her head and continued kissing her until she was drowning in him.

Their bodies were pressed together. His heat and hard cock, thrusting against her, continually reminding her the pleasure they were sharing was just beginning, distracted her. Andrea wanted to control the kiss, devour him as he did her. But the way she was stretched out over him was as mind-blowing as his kiss.

"We're a perfect match," he whispered into her mouth when he let her up for air.

"I think so." She took the moment, positive she wouldn't get another if she didn't move, and scooted over him, stretching her legs and bringing her soaked pussy over his swollen cock. He looked at her as she slid down on him. "Perfect," she murmured as he filled and stretched her.

Beel grabbed her hips, holding her as he began moving underneath her. She would have thought having been shot twice would have limited his abilities somewhat. Obviously she thought wrong. Beel didn't start out slow and gentle. He didn't take his time bringing her to a climax. Instead, he thrust hard, impaling her, damn near knocking her over as he repeated the action.

Friction turned into scalding heat between them. Beel was right. They would fly together. He would take her high over their world, spin her around, and let her float, suspended in a breathtaking moment of passionate lovemaking.

"Damn," she moaned, wanting him to know how incredible he was but unable to figure out what words to say.

He was relentless. Beel didn't slow down or break a sweat. Instead, holding her over him and in place, he continued driving inside her, stroking her pussy as the pressure grew inside her.

Every inch of her swelled. Her breasts were full, bouncing, as her nipples tingled. Her inner thighs tingled, her muscles stretched taut to accommodate him. Her hair clung to her back as perspiration soaked her skin. Her pussy was so soaked, her thick, rich cream coating both of them. As hard as he fucked her, she didn't anticipate him becoming rougher.

Without notice, his very next thrust pushed her over the edge. "Oh crap," she cried out, knowing she had to have just squawked loud enough for the entire parliament to hear her. "Beel. Damn! Shit!"

Her world tumbled around her as she fell forward, her body suddenly incapable of holding her upright. She constricted around him, convulsing and exploding as her orgasm tore through her.

"That's it, my perfect sweet owl," Beel encouraged, his voice sounding as if it drifted to her on some thick cloud. "Come for me, Andrea. Give me all you have."

"I...am," she managed, grunting and making sounds she never thought she'd make in another owl's presence. This wasn't just any other owl though. This was Beel, her male, her owl who would know everything about her just as she would him. "You're so amazing," she whispered, and bit her lip as more words almost tumbled out of her.

She loved him. God, she loved Beel more than she thought herself capable.

"Andrea," he whispered, holding her over him.

She realized how much of her weight he managed and tried easing herself on top of him. All that did was cause his cock to thrust deeper inside her. He was hard as steel. His cock was thick, long, and touching every part of her that needed to be touched.

"Look at me."

She thought she was.

"Let me ride you now," she said, grabbing his wrists and prying his hands off her hips. Her thighs stung but she didn't care. Andrea held herself over him, with his cock deep inside her, and placed his arms on either side of him. "Don't move," she ordered.

He devoured her with his eyes. If she thought before he needed his hands to touch her, she was just shown otherwise. With a look he made her melt, made her skin tingle and her muscles tremble. She almost forgot how to move and wasn't sure she could manage a steady rhythm when she started riding him slowly.

"You're going to kill me," he grunted, although he wasn't complaining.

Andrea decided slow was good. She felt him swell, enjoyed him twitching inside her. Keeping it easy, moving with gentle tenderness as she rode his thick cock, her

world crept into a state of incredible need faster than it should have. She was going to come again and there didn't seem to be anything she could do about it.

"Andrea," he said, his voice so rough it sounded as if he were changing and losing the ability to use his tongue. "My darling owl," he murmured.

They stared at each other, both of their worlds floating together as one. As he grew more, trembling against her soaked inner walls, she saw the moment he was at the edge. Joining him with little effort, Andrea drowned in his solemn stare as he exploded inside her and she came all over him.

She wasn't sure how much time passed before she breathed normally. And the last thing she wanted was to slide off him. Beel solved her problem, easing her to the side and rolling with her so he leaned on his non-injured shoulder. Then, wrapping her against him, with his semihard cock still throbbing inside her, he kissed her nose.

"I told Jerome I was going to make you my mate," he said after they'd cuddled in silence for a few minutes.

Andrea tried raising her head but relaxing against his chest was so perfect. She listened to his hear beat, the solid repetition easing her into a sated state.

"Oh yeah?" she whispered, feeling more relaxed and content than she ever remembered feeling.

"Yes." His legs intertwined with hers. "I want you to fly by my side."

"Okay."

"Forever."

Andrea moved and stared at him. "Forever?"

"Mate with me, my precious owl. You're already mine. I want to be yours."

"You are mine." She stretched against him, immediately feeling empty when he slipped out of her. "And yes, I will be your mate."

"I love you."

Andrea stared, positive her heart just forgot how to beat. Her mouth went dry and the tingles flushing over her grew stronger.

"What did you say?" She barely got the words out.

"I love you."

"Beel." God, she loved him too. Everything about him was so damn perfect. His honor, his pride, the way he flew after her, not backing down when she attacked him. The way he saw the good in her when all she saw was fear and terror over a past she couldn't fly fast enough to get away from. And the way he flew after the male who had tried to destroy her life. All of it made Beel everything she'd ever wanted. "I love you too," she said, her heart suddenly pounding in her chest as she realized her past was behind her. Her life wasn't destroyed. In fact, she was just beginning to soar.

"Good," Beel grunted, tucking her in against him. "You changed the name of your nest to remain alive. Now you'll change it again so you can finally live."

Andrea prayed for many years to enjoy how perfect life could be.

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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