

Chapter One

Crow's eyes flicked open. He shifted his weight from one foot to another, trying to make himself more comfortable, but without drawing attention to himself. He'd been watching the house for three days now, snatching sleep when he could. He went over and over the last conversation he'd had with Dakhar in his mind, searching for anything he'd missed.

"This isn't going to be easy," Dakhar had said. "But you must get it. Whatever it takes."

"What aren't you telling me?" The words tumbled out of his mouth before he had chance to stop them.

"Believe me, you're better off not knowing."

So this was one of those jobs, Crow thought. "I won't let you down."

Dakhar looked up at him, meeting his eyes for the first time. "I know you won't."

The wind whistled through Crow's hiding place, and he shivered. Wait. Just wait, he told himself. Choosing the right moment was crucial. How many jobs had he been on now? He couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been a thief. The fact that Dakhar had singled him out for this job meant a lot. He wondered whether it was a test. Success would lead to Dakhar's favour, maybe even promotion. Sal would be able to feel proud of him at last.

He allowed himself a smile at the thought of Sal, the only person he trusted completely. He knew he owed her his life. Years ago, she'd persuaded the Crew to take him in after she'd found him abandoned in the streets. They'd been looking after each other ever since.

Crow fingered the crescent moon tattooed on his inner arm: the tattoo that identified him as part of Dakhar's Crew, the strongest of the underworld gangs. Between them, the Crews ruled the underworld. Being part of a Crew gave him protection - of a sort. No-one lasted long on the streets alone. He wondered, not for the first time, what his life might have been like if he'd grown up as part of a family, as a merchant's son, perhaps.

He shook himself out of his reverie. He couldn't afford to get distracted. His heart sped up. Blood sang in his veins. It was almost time: he could feel it.

The house looked much like all the other buildings in the area: a three storey townhouse, set back from the street with a small garden to the rear. It was a style favoured by the city's wealthier merchants. He would have preferred to have broken in under cover of darkness, when the people living the house were likely to be asleep and it would be easier to slip in and out unnoticed. But it was guarded much more heavily at night; the risk of being caught was too high.

They're expecting something, Crow thought again. This was definitely more than just a robbery; this was big. Three people were guarding the house. The first was hidden in the bushes at the front. Another was concealed around the side of the house, while the third watched, as he did, from across the street. Who else sought the *chet* he'd been sent to steal?

A carriage pulled up outside and two men got out. One glance told him all he needed to know: despite their fine clothes, these were no gentlemen. With the watchers momentarily distracted, Crow slipped round the back of the house and through an open window into the music room. He'd memorised the layout of the house, as he did with every job. It had saved his life on more than one occasion.

Crow's pulse raced. He was poised like a hawk: ready to move in an instant. He could hear the commotion outside. Hopefully it would buy him some time.

He glanced around the room, taking a few deep breaths to steady himself. So far, so good. If the information he'd been given was correct, the item he was looking for - a small silver vase, engraved with a pattern of roses - should be in the library next door.

He looked up and down the hall before making his move. The library was locked, but he'd been expecting that. Drawing his picks from his pocket, he inserted the metal into the lock, which yielded easily. Picking locks was one of the first things he'd learned as a thief. He still remembered Billy, one of the older members of the Crew, showing them how to work the metal into different shapes and sizes.

"Look after your picks, and your picks will look after you," Billy had said.

He'd been right, Crow thought. They'd got him out of several tricky situations over the years; he never went anywhere without them.

He opened the door a crack, just enough to check it was empty, before he slid into the room and shut the door behind him without making a sound. The room was dim; shutters blocked out the light. A single oil lamp cast shadows across the room. Oil was expensive; as the lamp was still burning, it meant someone intended to return soon.

He spotted the vase almost immediately on the mantelpiece. The silver was dark and mottled with age, making the pattern stand out. He wondered why the maids hadn't polished it; the candlesticks that flanked it gleamed. He looked around the room, checking for anything unusual – anything that could be a potential trap. But there was nothing that stood out.

There was something about the way the roses had been drawn with large, sharp thorns that made him reluctant to touch it. He drew a rag from his pocket and wrapped it

around his hand before he picked it up. He had to be sure. The maker's mark was there on the bottom, just as the Boss had described it – the initials CRW below a symbol that looked like a lightning bolt. The top had been sealed with a dark, slightly sticky substance. It wasn't technically a vase any longer, but a container. Realisation dawned on him: it wasn't the vase that was valuable, but what was inside it. Was this what Dakhar hadn't been willing – or able – to tell him?

Crow knew he didn't have time to linger. The risk grew with every moment he spent inside the house. As he wrapped the rag around the vase, he felt a prickle of warning down his spine. The door opened, and a young man walked in.

Crow found himself face to face with Denton, one of Lonmar's Crew. Bigger and meaner than Crow, they'd clashed before.

"You... Dakhar's sent *you*?" Denton lunged at Crow, who danced back, out of his reach.

"You're getting fat and slow, Denton," Crow said. His head was buzzing, running through all the possible scenarios for escape. There were no other doors to the library; he'd have to get past the other thief first.

Denton cursed. "I'm going to enjoy watching you bleed."

Crow saw the glint of Denton's knife, and knew that he meant it. "You'll have to catch me." Thrusting the vase inside his coat pocket with one hand, Crow grabbed a heavy candlestick with the other and threw it at Denton. The other thief ducked just in time. The candlestick caught him on the shoulder rather than the knockout blow to the head Crow intended. But it was enough to give him the opening he needed. Pushing past Denton, he ran for the stairs. A startled maid shrieked as he burst into one of the bedrooms. He kept on moving, slipping out of the window and into the branches of the oak tree.

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It was at moments like this, when his life hung in the balance, that Crow felt most alive. A quick glance over his shoulder told him that besides Denton, there were four others in pursuit. He jumped into the alley he'd marked earlier and took off.

Crow ran through the winding streets and alleyways like a cat: silent, unobtrusive, alert. He knew it was his talent for blending in, of becoming invisible that had probably kept him alive for so long. He remembered Billy's advice from all those years ago.

"You've got something all right. I've never seen anyone disappear the way you do. Work on it."

His was a talent that came and went: he knew he couldn't totally rely on it, but it gave him the edge he needed to survive.

Keeping to the back lanes, Crow passed few people as he ran. A drunk lying in the gutter called out something incoherent to him as he passed. Further on, he leapt over a small group of children playing marbles in the street, heading towards the heart of the city.

The fog was thick today; it had become worse the closer he'd got to the river. Pea soup, Mrs Dawkins called it, although it was a lot thicker than the soup she dished up. He slowed down, merging in with the flow of people along the river's banks. The snow had long been trodden away. Slush and dirty puddles were all that remained. Now, covered in mud and filth from his flight, he was camouflaged.

He paused by Finney's, the watchmakers' shop, then slipped into the alley behind it. He waited for a few heartbeats, then glanced around the corner, feeling the cold seeping into his body from the damp stone. He hadn't seen any sign of his pursuers for some time, but he knew from experience you could never be too careful. The Crews had eyes everywhere.

He went on, darting under the archway next to the White Rose and down the narrow passageway that opened out onto Gallows Street. This was one of the busiest streets in the city. He slipped in amongst the throngs of people. If anyone *was* still on his tail, it would be almost impossible for them to track him now.

Gallows Street opened up onto the Market, the city's heart. This was where alliances were made, and broken. Between them, the Crews ruled the underworld. Competition was fierce, and alliances changed so quickly that it was difficult to distinguish between friend and foe. But the Market was neutral ground, as safe as anywhere could be in the city. The punishment for breaking the peace, Crow knew, was death.

He glanced around. It was teeming with people here, as usual. The Market never really closed. Vendors came and went, setting up shop at different times of day or night, depending on what they were selling. The smell of freshly baked bread drifted towards him, along with other, less savoury smells of rotting fish and stale sweat.

The sound of people greeting one another, laughing and arguing filled the air. Crow grinned, taking it all in. He loved it here. Stallholders called out, advertising their wares, gossiping and bantering with their customers as they bargained.

"Freshest fish in the city!"

"Ow about some oysters, sir? Guaranteed to impress yer missus!"

"Cinnamon cakes, get 'em while they're 'ot. Two for ha'penny."

"Here you go, love. Anything else? I can do you half a dozen for sixpence."

There were stalls with huge rounds of cheese, trays full of eggs and piles of potatoes, carrots, turnips and apples. Chickens squawked and flapped in protest as they were pulled from their cages. Some of the stalls, although very successful, were little more than a front

for other, less legal services that the Crews had to offer – anything from stolen goods to thugs for hire.

“Crow, over here.”

He spotted his crewmate selling roasted nuts from a makeshift brazier. “Sorry, Jonas.” Crow shook his head. “No coin today.”

The tall, curly-haired boy passed him a bag. “On me.”

The roasted nuts vanished into Crow's pocket in an instant, the heat a pleasant sensation against his cold skin. “Thanks. Can't stop.” Crow winked at Jonas.

“Right you are. See you soon.”

After dark, performers came down to the main square. Crow still loved listening to old Mika, the blind storyteller. His stories were magical tales, very different from the horror stories the younger members of the Crew traded around the fire at night.

At the southern side of the marketplace stood St Stephen's cathedral. An angry gargoyle glared down at Crow as he slipped past. He pulled a face at it. Once their ugly features had scared him, but now they were old friends. He heard a carriage approaching and ducked into an alleyway as it went past, narrowly escaping a drenching as the wheels sent slush spraying out in all directions. He grinned as he heard someone further down the street cursing as they got splashed. “Too slow, my friend.”

He shimmied up the wall to the rooftop of one of the larger houses overlooking the Market. Perching next to the chimney, he took the packet of nuts out of his pocket and ate as he surveyed the marketplace. The theatre of the city played out below him.

He could find out a lot just by observing who was talking to whom, and what goods changed hands. Information was a currency of its own, just as valuable and more easily concealed than coin.

There was still no sign of the people who'd been chasing him. He grinned, thinking about how frustrated they were going to be right now, knowing that he'd escaped. Crow wondered what kind of reception Denton would get when he returned to his Boss empty handed. He froze as he caught sight of Jed, one of the other members of his Crew, arguing with one of the stallholders. What was he up to? Crow knew he had to get going. With any luck, he would make it home and back out again before Jed finished his business in the Market.

He touched the bruise on his forehead gingerly; the bruise Jed had given him last week. Jed had always had it in for him. He seemed to delight in taunting and belittling him whenever he could. Things had become worse as they'd got older, particularly since Jed had been promoted.

His spirits sank as soon as he entered the courtyard. Crow and the rest of the younger members of Dakhar's Crew lived above the stables attached to an old, ramshackle tavern south of the Market. About twenty-five of them slept there each night, depending on the jobs they were working on. Like him, most of them had been foundlings – children of the city's poor whose parents had either died, abandoned them or were incapable of looking after them.

The tavern had once been painted white, but like the rest of the city it was now a nondescript dirty grey, as if the Plague had sucked all the colour out of the city as well as the lives of so many of the people who lived there. The building leaned to one side, like the drunks who spilled out of its doors at closing time, holding on to one another for support.

He almost collided with Sal as she came flying out of the stables. She looked as though she'd been crying. She had a split lip and her cheek had begun to swell where someone had hit her.

“Hey, Sal?” he said. “Are you all right?”

Sal's eyes widened with pleasure when she saw him, then clouded with fear. “Watch out, Crow,” she hissed.

She was already too late. A hand jerked him into a dark corner of the stables. He felt the cold touch of steel against his neck.

“Careful, runt, unless you want me to stick you with my knife.”

How had Jed managed to get back before him? “What do you want, Jed?” he sighed. He'd managed to avoid the older boy for several days now, but he'd known sooner or later his luck would run out. It always did. He heard a snigger and realised that Roan and Lou were there, as usual. Crow wondered how tough Jed would be without his cronies. Jed had always reminded him of a weasel: he was sly with a vicious streak - and an enviable knack of slipping out of things.

“Where've you been, runt?” Roan said.

“I had that job to do over on Gluvias Street.”

“Let me guess. You messed it up, didn't you?”

“No.” He tensed and his heart began to beat faster.

“Show me,” Jed demanded.

“Boss said to take it to him straight away.”

“Change of plan. Hand it over.”

Crow hesitated, and Jed pressed down on the knife. Not enough to cut him badly, but enough to break the skin. He felt a thin trickle of blood run down his neck. He reached inside his shirt and reluctantly pulled out the rag-covered vase.

The blade was lifted from his throat as Jed snatched it from him. “Is this it?”

He nodded. He knew exactly what would happen next. Jed would go to the Boss with some cock-and-bull story about how he'd stepped in to save the day after Crow had almost blown the job. As usual, Jed would get all the glory, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

Lou pawed through the rest of Crow's pockets. "He's not got anything else on him."

"Got a job for you." Jed thrust a parcel against his stomach.

Crow's heart sank at the sight of the parcel. Was this it? Word had got around that Jed was up to something, that he wanted a delivery made. Everyone had said so. Sooner or later he had known that this job would find its way to him.

The parcel was neatly wrapped in brown paper and tied up with string. It was hard and square, offering no clues as to what might be inside.

"It's to go to the old Nansidwell mansion," Jed said.

"What are you waiting for?" Roan sneered, and shoved him over. "Don't make Jed tell you twice."

Crow silently cursed his bad luck as he picked himself up, then reluctantly pocketed the package and left the stables.

Sal was waiting for him in the alleyway around the corner. "You're bleeding," she said, her eyes filled with concern.

Crow touched his neck and his fingers came away sticky. He wiped them on his trousers. "It's not much."

"They got me before I could warn you! I didn't mean to tell Jed where you were, but..."

"I know." He touched her arm. "Are you all right?"

"I've been better." She grinned. "Here." She handed him a slightly grubby handkerchief with a heel of bread and a piece of cheese wrapped up in it. "It was all I could get."

"Thanks, Sal." He was touched by the gesture. He hoped she'd eaten, and hadn't just given him her share of the meagre rations that had been dished out earlier that day. He knew that Dakhar could afford to feed them more, but in keeping with Crew tradition, the younger members were given only the minimum they needed to survive. It was supposed to make them more resourceful, to keep them on their toes. Crow wasn't sure it actually worked, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

"What do you think it is?" Sal glanced at the parcel in his hand.

Crow shook the package gently. It didn't rattle or make any other noise that might give away what was inside.

"At least it's not blood stained or breathing." Sal said.

Crow grinned. "That's a good start." They both remembered the time he'd been sent to deliver a severed ear and the trouble that had got him into. He'd had to hide out for days afterwards.

"It doesn't look valuable," Sal said.

"So hopefully no-one else will be after it. Not like the *chet* I stole this morning."

"What happened?"

"There was something off about it from the start."

Sal's eyebrows shot up when he told her about his encounter with Denton. "What was Lonmar's Crew doing working in that area?" she interrupted.

He shrugged. "I was hoping Dakhar might tell me more once I came back with the *chet*, but since Jed's got it now..." He didn't want to think about what else he might have

missed out on by not handing over the vase to the Boss himself. "I've got to go. See you later?"

"I'll be here."

As he turned to leave, she called out to him. "Crow... Be careful."

"What do you mean?"

Sal shook her head. "I don't know. It's probably nothing. Just watch out."

* * *

Down a dark, dark lane was a dark, dark house, and in that house lived a dark, dark man.

The rhyme kept going around in his head as he approached the house. Stop it! He told himself. Already, the light was fading, despite the fact it was only early afternoon. The sky was heavy with snow, lending it a strange, almost eerie glow.

He shivered, forcing his feet to move. While he did not want to get stuck out here in a snowstorm, apprehension and fatigue turned his feet into lead. Indeed, he thought that his feet might have literally turned to lead, for he could no longer feel them. Soaked through from running around the city in the slush all morning, he'd barely had time to warm himself at the fire before he'd had to go out again. Jed had given him one look after coming back from his triumphant meeting with Dakhar, and Crow had scuttled out.

He tried singing another song to take his mind off the stories that he couldn't help remembering, but the words faltered on his lips and the tune drifted into nothingness. It wasn't that he was afraid. He didn't believe in fear. In his experience, people who gave in to fear ended up dead, or worse. He was a survivor.

His head swam: he felt disorientated. Everything around him was white, from the snow that covered the ground to the storm-heavy sky. He knew these streets like the back of his hand, yet things seemed different today. Familiar landmarks were concealed, and he found himself becoming aware of other previously unnoticed details.

He felt compelled to continue on his errand. It was the strangest feeling. He discovered that when he paused, the box seemed to grow cold, so cold it was almost painful to touch. It grew warmer when he started walking again. Almost as if whatever was inside the parcel *wanted* to be delivered. He shook the thought off. He was exhausted. It was no wonder his imagination was running wild. When he looked back over his shoulder he felt strangely comforted to see his footprints clearly outlined in the snow: solid, physical evidence of his passing.

Taking a deep breath, he blinked and tried to focus. He realised he was still holding the package. Just get it over with, he thought to himself. All he had to do was deliver it. If anyone had asked him, Crow couldn't have said why he didn't want to come here. It wasn't the distance, or the snow, or the tales some of the others told about the old, run-down mansion as they sat around the fire at night. It was just a feeling. Given the choice, he wouldn't have taken the assignment for a hundred pounds – a king's ransom.

But he hadn't been given a choice.

The heavy gate creaked as he pushed it open. The snow in front of him was pristine, an unblemished white expanse separating him from the house beyond. Nobody had walked this way since the last snow had fallen. Not even any bird or animal prints were visible.

There were rumours that this place was haunted. People had reported seeing strange lights and shapes moving in front of the windows. Others said that Crazy Charley

had gone into the house for a dare. He'd never spoken about what he had experienced in there, but when he came out, two days later, he'd lost what little wits he'd once had.

Crow took a deep breath, and ran across the lawn to the door. He reached up, gripped the lion's head knocker and rapped hard three times.

He waited for a while, then knocked again. Still nothing. Nobody came to answer the door. He didn't want to leave the parcel lying in the snow on the doorstep, so he went around the back of the house to try and attract someone's attention.

He found what he assumed to be the servants' entrance, knocked again and waited. He shivered, blowing on his hands as he waited. No-one came. He tried the handle of the door, which to his surprise, opened easily. "Is there anyone there?" he called. He didn't want to get into trouble for trespassing, but at the same time, he needed to find someone so he could complete his delivery.

The fireplace had been lit in the kitchen and there was something simmering in a large cast iron pot. There had to be someone here, he thought. His stomach rumbled as the smell of stew wafted towards him.

He lingered by the fire for a few minutes, trying to warm his frozen hands. By now, he was getting anxious: he didn't want to be there a moment longer than he had to. He walked through the kitchen and found himself in a long hallway. He called out a few times, half expecting to come face to face with someone demanding what he thought he was doing, wandering around the place like he thought he owned it. But the house remained silent.

He tried some of the doors. Most were locked, the others yielding only empty rooms. At the end of the hallway, he turned the handle. This door opened easily. What he saw made him gasp in surprise. It was a huge room; large chandeliers hung from the high

ceiling and he blinked as his eyes adjusted to the light. His mouth fell open as he looked around in astonishment. In many of the houses he had been in, he had seen strange or beautiful things. He had seen things made him shudder. Things he'd tried hard to forget. But he had never seen anything like this.

The walls were lined with shelves, which were filled with hundreds of glass bottles, stoppered and labelled, of varying shapes, sizes and colours. Tall wheeled ladders gave access to the upper shelves.

He studied the contents of the shelf in front of him, hesitating for a moment before picking up one of the bottles. On the label, someone had written in a flowing, spidery hand '*Of flying*', followed by a series of numbers. As he looked closer at the bottle, he realised that the sky blue substance inside it was not liquid, as he had originally presumed, but gaseous, continually moving. When he returned the bottle to its shelf, the contents became still once more.

He wandered around, intrigued by this strange room. It reminded him of the libraries he'd seen in rich people's houses, only without the books. The package, though still in his hand, was forgotten.

He picked up another bottle. This one was smaller and more delicate, containing a pale pink substance. Like the first, it seemed to leap into life of its own accord as soon as his fingers touched the glass. The label on this one read, '*Of true love.*'

Some of the bottles were covered in dust. Cobwebs clung to them; they obviously hadn't been touched in some time. While he could read a little, he couldn't understand all the labels. Some seemed to be written in some sort of code: although he could make out the letters, they made no sense, even when he said them aloud.

Towards the far end of the room, hidden behind the shelves, was a staircase that led up to a gallery. Ignoring the voice in his head that told him he should just leave the package and go, he started climbing the stairs.

The wooden planks creaked loudly in the silent room. He froze, alert and ready to run. He waited for the sound of footsteps that would be followed by raised voices, a hand roughly gripping his shoulder and the familiar sensation of someone's fist against his body.

No-one came. He let out the breath he'd been holding.

A spiral staircase tempted him further, and he found himself in a tower room. A huge wooden bench ran half the length of the room, its surface scarred and pitted from use. A variety of objects was scattered across its surface: a small set of brass scales, a mortar and pestle, a crucible with the remnants of a dark powdery substance inside it, and a strange-looking set of interconnected glass tubes.

Large, leather-bound books filled several shelves in this room. He ran his fingers down their spines. He had always been drawn to books. There were several in other languages, some of which looked as though they were very old. The pages were yellowed with age and they had obviously been repaired several times.

He found a collection of jars which both thrilled and repulsed him. There were tiny jars containing colourful powders or herbs, as well as much stranger things. A pickled frog watched him through the glass. He turned away in disgust, but not before he had caught sight of something that could only be a human hand.

A polished brass telescope stood in front of a window overlooking the gardens at the back of the house. It was an impressive-looking instrument. Surely it wouldn't hurt to take a look?

The compulsion was too strong. It was almost as if there was something pushing him towards it. As he approached the telescope, he felt as though he was being watched.

He glanced around the room. There was no one there, nor anywhere to hide. For a moment he hesitated. His hand trembled as he reached towards the instrument and looked through it.

A huge green eye stared back at him.

Crow blinked and rubbed his face, unable believe what he was seeing. It was just a trick of the light. It had to be. But when he looked again, it was still there, flecked with amber and bisected with a dark vertical slit. It looked like the eye of a lizard, or a snake.

Panic rose, tightening around his chest like a vice. He couldn't breathe. All his senses were crying out, telling him to flee, but he couldn't get his legs to work. With his heart pounding, he looked through the lens once more. The eye was gone.

A dial on the side of the telescope adjusted the focus when he turned it and the garden sprang into view. A large ginger cat was walking across the snow-covered lawn. As he watched, it stopped and looked up towards the tower room. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled as if in warning. It was looking right at him. It's just a cat, he told himself, as he backed away from the telescope. Just a cat.

He tensed, instantly alert as he heard a sound. He had to get out of here. He could probably explain his presence in the house, but he had no business in this room. He raced back down the spiral staircase, through the gallery and back through the room full of bottles. In his haste to leave, he tripped and fell heavily against one of the shelves. Pain shot up his arm. The bottles shook, a musical sound of chinking glass which echoed around the room. It seemed as though they were moving of their own accord. Almost as if they were communicating.

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One of the bottles teetered on the edge of the shelf, just out of reach. He leapt forward to catch it, but he could not get his chilled limbs to move quickly enough. It smashed before his horrified eyes.

Smoke rose up from the remnants of the bottle. His last thought was that he was never going to be able to talk himself out of this one...

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