

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

EAT CROW

Jacob Lagadi

Table of Contents

Love is an Open Road..... 3
Eat Crow – Information 6
Eat Crow 7
Chapter One 8
Chapter Two..... 17
Chapter Three..... 31
Chapter Four 40
Chapter Five..... 51
Author Bio 57

Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

EAT CROW

By Jacob Lagadi

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two fit young men stand in a brightly lit room. They appear to be watching something together. The larger of the two runs his fingers down the smaller man's back.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The slightest brush of his skin against mine is enough to turn me into a quivering mess. The feel of his fingertips brushing up and down my spine makes me break out in chills. He completely owns me. But our life together hasn't been rainbows and puppies. It's been sacrifice and struggles. Please tell our story.

Feel free to take this wherever your muse leads. Any genre, no restrictions except what's laid down by the rules of the event. Enjoy!

Sincerely,

Lisa

Story Info

Genre: urban fantasy

Tags: shifters non-wolf/cat, billionaire bear, enemies to lovers, outdoor sex, pickpocket/thief, hinted mates, brat

Content Warnings: HFN

Word Count: 21,065

EAT CROW
By Jacob Lagadi

Chapter One

The first time he touched me, I tried to stab him.

It was a sweaty night in Midtown, and I was breaking into Deacon Maynard's house. My picks were a little slippery in my hands because of the heat, but I wasn't worried. The back door had a simple tumbler lock I could've picked with my eyes closed. Jimmy and Alan were *so* going to eat their words by the time I was done.

Maynard was definitely home. I'd watched him pull his F-150 into the driveway around eight o'clock that night. He spent about an hour cooking a huge steak and potatoes dinner, ate every scrap, and settled down on his couch to play some video games. When he got tired of that, he headed up to bed. I gave him a couple of hours to get to sleep.

Breaking in while big, tough Deacon Maynard was home was the bet. Guy had a pricey gold watch he never took off. I could have snatched it off him half a dozen times while I was learning his schedule, but that wasn't my gamble. I had to get into the house and get the watch off the guy while he was sleeping. I laughed in Jimmy's face when he made the bet. Maynard was a freaking bear. How hard could it be to sneak up on him? Money in my pocket.

I worked my magic on the door and slipped inside, jamming my case of picks into the pocket of my hoodie. The lights were off in the kitchen, but there was plenty of light coming in from the living room. Maynard had left the TV on, and that gave me more than enough light to see by as I tiptoed across the linoleum floor to the staircase leading up.

I took the stairs fast. A few of them creaked on my way up, but that didn't matter. Nobody wakes up for a few creaks unless they're a super light sleeper. When I got upstairs, I saw two doors and a hallway going in both directions. The house was pretty big for one guy. Four bedrooms and three bathrooms. That made sense, since he was totally loaded. Owned a string of hardware stores across the Southeast.

The first door was just a bathroom, completely dark. Maynard must have taken a shower earlier, because it still smelled like his body wash. It smelled kinda awesome, actually, like fresh apples. There was another smell in there, a masculine musk that made my nose tingle. I blew air out through my nose a few times to clear the smell away, ignored the way the scent was getting me hard, and shut the bathroom door.

Second door down was a guest bedroom. No one in there, and from the perfectly made bed and the thick layer of dust on the dresser, no one had stayed there in a while. That made sense too. Bears tended to be loners, at least until they found mates. I was surprised Maynard even had a guest bedroom.

I ducked back into the hallway and crept to the third door down. Before I even got there, I heard loud, steady breathing. The door was open, so it was easy for me to peek inside. Maynard was lying across his massive, king-sized bed with his arms and legs spread, snoring up a storm.

I stopped in the doorway and spent a second taking the big guy in. He looked amazing in the moonlight coming in through the window. Huge, heavy arms and legs, chest for days, and just enough fuzz on his chin for a five o'clock shadow. I knew the guy was hot. I'd seen him in the hardware store down the street from my family's townhome, back when I was staying with my grandfather. I knew what to expect, or at least I thought I did.

Without clothes, Maynard was even more gorgeous than when he was walking down the street in a suit. I was super disappointed the sheet across his thighs was covering all his best parts. The sight of him sleeping alone there made me want to zoom in, whip off the sheet, and find out what kind of artillery he was packing.

But I wasn't there to creep on a hot, muscly power tool guy. I was there to make Jimmy and his annoying little brother eat their words. I nicked shit off sleeping people all the time. This was just one more job.

I eased into the room, letting the thick, soft carpet absorb the noise my feet made. With the full moon out, most of Maynard was visible, from his big feet to the fancy gold watch glinting on his wrist. The watch was almost as shiny as its owner, drawing my eyes away from Maynard's body.

I padded over to the side of his bed and leaned in close to examine the loot. Good thing he wore the watch when he was asleep. Not that I wouldn't have just grabbed it off his side table, but taking it off his wrist was going to make a way better story to tell my cousins.

The watch's face was clear crystal, not glass, and the gold looked ancient. This wasn't any old knockoff; it was a family heirloom. Probably belonged to Maynard's great-grandfather or something. I rubbed my hands together as I looked for the clasp. It was on the underside of Maynard's thick wrist, cinched tight against his skin. One of the gold links in the band was newer than the others, like it had been resized.

No tools necessary for this kind of job. My fast fingers were all I needed. I leaned in, listening for any changes in Maynard's breathing. I was so close I could see individual hairs on his arm catching the moonlight. If those hairs ever stood on end, I'd know to get the hell out of Dodge.

The clasp was as simple as the lock on Maynard's door. I opened it, separated the ends, and pulled the watch out from under his wrist, all in one motion. I turned away and grinned to myself, enjoying the high.

Thick fingers shot out from the bed and wrapped around my arm. "What the hell are you laughing about, fishbait?" Maynard growled. I tried to break away, but the hand on my forearm was too strong. My arms and legs started seizing up with panic as I mentally chewed myself out for being so careless. I made the mistake of looking over my shoulder and saw Maynard pushing the sheets aside. He was totally naked. Even scared out of my mind, I was impressed by the size of the beast between the man's legs, but it was his eyes that really got my attention. He had these intense, dark gray eyes, like a pair of bullets. He looked hungry.

"Hey, man," I said, palming the watch. I could still get away. I just had to get him talking. "Don't eat me, okay? You don't want to. I'm all bones."

He stared at me in the dark. His hand shifted up and down my arm, like he was feeling me up through the fabric of my hoodie. "Really? Feels like you've got enough meat on you for a decent stew. You're lucky I had that big steak for dinner, or I might be getting a hankering for crow soup right about now."

I looked around the room for something that might help me escape. There was a soft, smooth object next to my left foot, maybe a slipper. I saw a heavy quilt folded up at the end of the bed and a lamp on the side table. There was something thin and made of metal a few inches from the lamp. I looked back at Maynard. "What makes you think I'm a crow?"

He yanked me forward, swung his legs around, and stood up. He was tall, maybe six-two or something. Just a couple inches taller than me, but twice as wide. His body blocked out most of the moonlight, so his face was in shadow. "You smell like feathers and guilt."

I dropped the watch, grabbed the metal thing off the table, and tried to jam the tip into Maynard's arm. He didn't even flinch. Just swatted my weapon out of my hand like I was a toddler trying to pinch him. He pulled me in so close I could feel his breath on my face. He smelled like cinnamon. "My watch."

"What watch?" I showed him my teeth.

He growled and shook me hard enough to make my eyes rattle. “Don’t screw with me, you little goon. Give me my grandad’s watch now, and maybe I’ll let you walk out of here with just your wings clipped.”

I opened both my hands and let him see they were empty. “Don’t have it anymore.” While he was looking at my hands, I covered the watch with my foot.

“Your pockets.” Maynard slid his hand up my arm, over my shoulder, and down my back. It was like some awkward move out of a shitty porno, but he had a good reason for not letting go of me. As long as he kept his hand within half an inch of my skin, I couldn’t go crow and fly out of there. My wings were right there in my mind, close as they ever were. I just couldn’t get to them because there was two-hundred-plus pounds of bear standing in my way.

“Turn out your pockets,” Maynard said. His words sounded more like grunts. *Stupid fuzzbball*. I could have had anything in my pockets. I could have had a Leatherman, or a can of mace, or even a gun. I didn’t, though. I never carried. Pulling a weapon on somebody was a great way to get shot to hell by the police.

I pulled my pockets out of my jeans and showed him they were empty. He grabbed my hands to make sure I wasn’t hiding anything in them, so he wasn’t a total idiot. He still hadn’t thought to check under my foot.

“The hoodie.” Maynard’s hand shot down from my back to my ass in a split second. “Take it off.”

“What?” I pulled back as far as I could from him, but his hand stopped me. “No way. I’m not fucking stripping for you, perv!”

His head cocked to one side, like he was surprised I refused. “You can take it off yourself, or I can rip it off you. Maybe I’ll take your arms too, maybe I won’t. You want to take that chance? Punks like you need hands, right?”

You better believe I was out of that hoodie faster than a fox with her tail on fire. “Here.” I balled the hoodie up and shoved it against Maynard’s chest. His big, thick chest that begged to be licked. “Search me all you want. I don’t have your damn watch.”

Maynard’s eyes raked up and down my body. Made me feel naked, even though I still had my tank and jeans on. He threw my hoodie—my favorite—on the floor and stomped on it a few times. My pick case clanked as his foot came down on it. When he was done, he curled his forefinger under my waistband and glared right into my eyes. “Lift up your foot.”

I stared down at the floor, thinking maybe I could distract him somehow and kick the watch under the bed while he wasn't paying attention. While I was thinking, Maynard pinned my leg with his free hand. He squatted next to my foot, shoved it out of the way, and picked up his watch.

He stood up again and fished his fingers out of my jeans. "Maybe you want to look for another line of work. You're just about the loudest thief I ever caught."

"Fuck you! I'm the best there is!"

Maynard carefully set his watch on the side table and patted my cheek. "You're in my house, kid. I know you grew up in some kind of bird's nest, but that's no excuse. While you're within these walls, you'd best watch your language." He dropped his hand to my shoulder. "If you're the best there is, how come you were so easy to catch?"

I almost spit at him. "Fu—" He bared his teeth at me, and I thought better of cussing. Keeping my hide intact seemed more important than yelling at him. "I'm out of practice, that's all. Give me another try. I'll be in and out of here without a trace."

"Hah!" Maynard chuckled and squeezed my shoulder. "Like you'll ever get this close again."

"Pft. You can't stop me."

"I did a decent job of it tonight," Maynard pointed out. "Who sent you, anyway? The Morrigan? Doesn't seem like her kind of prank, but who knows with that grabby crone?"

"Hey!" I poked him in the chin. "Don't talk about Gran like that!"

Maynard laughed again, deep in his chest. "You bust into my house, put your sticky mitts on my grandad's watch, and then complain when I call your dear old granny out for being a manipulative old witch? You've got a heavy pair, I'll give you that." He let go of my shoulder and reached down to grab a pair of boxers off the floor. He kept his eyes on me as he put them on.

"If you're done talking about my balls, I'm gonna go now," I said.

Maynard chuckled again. "Yeah, sorry, bud. That's not going to happen."

My heart sank. "Come on, man. You're obviously not planning to take me to the police or you would've called somebody by now. Just let me go."

Maynard scratched at his magnificent chest a few times and looked out his window. The moon was rising over his house, so a little less light came through. “You’re not on the street, featherhead. This is a bear’s house, if you didn’t already know. Bear territory, bear rules.”

I made a dash for the door. Maynard met me in three long, casual steps, leaned past me, and pushed the door shut. I fell back against the wall, trying to put enough space between us for me to change. There just wasn’t enough room. Panic made my throat tight as I realized I really wasn’t getting away. Maynard wasn’t helping at all. He just stood there by the door looking vaguely threatening and disgustingly handsome.

Deep breaths helped me focus a bit better. Since I couldn’t use my wings to get away, I had to use my brain. I tried to act calm, like I hadn’t just been locked in a strange guy’s bedroom. “What kind of rules are we talking about?”

Maynard tapped the doorknob with his fingers a few times and let go. “You tried to steal from me. Emphasis on the *tried*.”

“Nice.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not exactly enthusiastic about how I got woken up tonight,” Maynard said. “You broke into my house. Deal.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I know you probably didn’t mean anything by it—you crows never do—but I have to report you now.”

“No you don’t.” I reached toward the doorknob, but a fierce look from Maynard made me stop. “Just let me go. I’ll never bother you again. I swear.”

“You really think I’m gullible enough to believe you’d keep that promise?” Maynard shook his head. “Doesn’t matter anyway. I couldn’t let you go even if I wanted to. Law says I have to take you to see Artios.”

I didn’t recognize the name, but I heard the reverence behind it. Maynard said it the same way a crow would’ve said “the Morrigan.” Maynard struck me as the kind of guy who wouldn’t bow to anybody, but he’d at least duck his head for this Artios person. “You want to drag me in front of the king of the bears?” I said.

“Queen, actually, and no, I don’t want to. I’ve got better things to do with my time than haul some idiot kid around with me. If you and I had met under different circumstances...” Maynard glanced toward his bed and then back at me. “Forget it. The Law is the Law. You know that as well as I do. You trespassed on my territory, so now I have to take you to be judged.”

“So... what?” I spread my hands and looked around the room. “You hiding your queen in the closet or something? That why you locked us in?”

Maynard grinned at me. “Naw. The closet’s where I keep all the bodies.”

I shivered, and he laughed in my face.

“Just a joke, kid. Don’t drop all your feathers over it.”

I punched him in the arm. It was satisfying, even if he was super meaty and didn’t seem like he felt much. “Like you’d actually keep dead bodies in there. Not enough space. But yeah, it’d be nice if you didn’t murder me.”

“You know what’d be a great way to steer clear of murderers?” Maynard grabbed my elbow. “Don’t go sneaking into houses that belong to dangerous men.” He started pulling me toward the bathroom. I beat at his arm with my knuckles, but nothing I did seemed to faze him. It was like being held by a block of living concrete.

“Where are you going to do with me?” I asked.

“Relax.” Maynard pushed the bathroom door open and flicked the light switch. The overhead light was bright enough to make me blink after squinting all night in the moonlight. “I’m just getting a glass of water,” Maynard said. He picked up a glass, filled it under the faucet, and put the cup to his lips.

I watched his throat as he drank. His Adam’s apple launched up and down in his throat each time he gulped down more water. His neck was the only part of his beard where he shaved it all away, so his skin was bare except for the shadow of stubble that had grown in during the day. When he was done, he caught me looking and tilted the glass toward me. “Want some?”

What kind of guy catches a thief and then offers him water? I made a face and shook my head. “No thanks. It’s got bear spit in it.”

“Suit yourself.” Maynard drained the rest of his water and set the glass on the counter. “You’ll have to drink something. I’m not driving you to the emergency room just because you’re finicky about a bit of saliva.”

“I wouldn’t get in a car with you anyway.”

“If you’re dehydrated, you won’t have much choice.”

I glared at his reflection in the mirror. Up close, I could see he had a thin scar that sliced a quarter of an inch into his beard on the left side of his face. Instead of ruining his look, the scar drew attention to his strong jaw and full lips. I was pissed as hell at him for catching me, but I still caught myself

running my tongue across the back of my teeth in reaction to him. The man was freaking hot.

“Okay, bear guy.” I needed to distract myself from the weird ways he was making me feel, and words were the only option at the moment. “Why don’t you just take me wherever it is we have to go and get it over with? Instead of dragging me all over your house while you brush your teeth and shit.”

Maynard yawned and rolled his head on his neck. “That’s not how it works. Artios sleeps for two-thirds of the year. You have to catch her when she’s awake.”

“So wake her up!”

“You wouldn’t suggest that if we were talking about your granny.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s because Gran keeps normal people hours! Why the hell would anyone need to sleep eight months out of the year?”

“Honestly?” Maynard touched my shoulder and pushed me back toward the bedroom. “I’m not sure she actually needs to. Sometimes I think she just pretends so people won’t bother her.”

“She sounds like a real peach.”

Maynard turned the lights out as we left the bathroom, making it impossible for me to see. People seem to think crows can see in the dark—maybe because of the black feathers—but we have crap night vision. By the time my eyes adjusted, Maynard and I were standing side by side next to his bed.

“Whether she’s pretending or not,” Maynard said, “it’s not a good idea to bother Artios right now. She’ll be up in about a week, give or take a few days. I’ll take you to see her then.”

“A week?” I felt like the walls were closing in on me. I needed to get out. I needed to fly. “You can’t keep me cooped up in here for a week!”

“I can and I will.”

“Where am I supposed to sleep? How are you going to keep me from flying away?”

“I’ll keep your wings clipped the same way I have been, by keeping you in arm’s reach.” Maynard dug his thumb into my arm meaningfully. “As for where you’ll sleep, you’ve got a couple of choices. You can sleep in the closet with the lock shut—”

“Yeah right!”

Maynard’s teeth looked very white in the moonlight as he showed almost all of them to me. “Or you can sleep in bed with me.”

Chapter Two

“Sorry. I must be crazy, because it sounded like you just told me to sleep with you.”

Maynard turned the lamp on his nightstand on and rubbed his hand across his face and up through his hair. “Don’t misinterpret my suggestion. This isn’t a proposition. I think I’m being pretty generous. After what you did, you’re lucky I’m not chaining you to the bedpost.”

“You have handcuffs? Are they fuzzy?”

Maynard scowled at me. “Don’t be vulgar. What’s it going to be? The closet or the bed? Pick fast. I have an important business lunch today, and I’d like to get a few more hours of sleep.”

I looked at the closet door. The house was huge, so the closet was probably equally roomy. Even so, I didn’t think I could take being in that enclosed space all night. I looked at Maynard’s bed. It looked comfy, even with all the covers tossed aside and the sheets ruffled from an enormous guy sleeping on top of them. “Bed, I guess.”

“Great. Don’t worry. It’s a big bed. Plenty of room.”

I rubbed my hands up and down my arms a few times. “I’m not worried. If you strangle me in my sleep, I’ll just come back and haunt you. It’s kinda stuffy in here, though. Can we open a window?”

Maynard eyed me knowingly. “So you can fly out as soon as day breaks? I don’t think so, kid. If you’re still sweaty from creeping through my house, I’ll turn the AC down a few degrees.”

“That’d be great.” I was disappointed, but it was nice to be out of the heat. Maynard pointed his hand at the wall next to the bed and tilted his index finger down at the floor. I heard the central air kick on somewhere in the house and sighed as air started flowing through the room. That was some kind of fancy temperature control. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Maynard sat down on the bed and let go of me. I could have run then, but I was worried what he might do if he caught me again. Maynard stretched out on top of the sheets and closed his eyes. He wasn’t the slightest bit concerned I might try to escape.

I picked up my hoodie and my picks off the floor and circled around to the other side of the bed. Part of me was laughing at the whole ridiculous situation. I was about to lie down next to a smoking hot, half-naked guy, and I was dreading it. Mostly dreading it, anyway. My body reacted to him the same way it would have to any other attractive guy. I used my hoodie to hide my semi until I could get under the sheets. It was warmer under there than I would have liked, but at least with the sheets there was a thin barrier between us. The situation was confusing as hell, and I didn't know what might happen if I let myself get too close to Maynard.

“Hey, kid.” Maynard sat up in bed and looked down at me. “What’s your name?”

I didn't want to tell him my real name, so I said the first thing that popped into my head. “Spartacus.”

“Be serious. Or do you want me to call up Granny Crow and ask her which of her brood tried to rob me tonight?”

“Ugh, fine! Theo.”

“Theo...?”

“Theo Vargas, all right?”

“Not really, but it’s a start. Call me Deacon. We’re stuck with each other for the next week. May as well get comfy. Get some sleep. Your punishment starts tomorrow. You’ll need your strength.”

“Punishment?” I scrambled all the way to the edge of the mattress, as far away as I could get from Deacon without tumbling out of bed. “You didn’t say anything about punishment!”

“Sweet dreams, Theo.”

Deacon turned out the light and fell asleep in seconds. I thought I’d never get to sleep myself. I was too wired, too focused on finding a way out. I lay there for what felt like hours, waiting and listening to the sound of Deacon’s even breathing. Here was a guy who didn’t feel at all bad about scaring the shit out of somebody. I didn’t deserve this. Sure, I’d tried to nick something off him, and sure, he’d caught me. You take people you catch to the police. You don’t invite them into your bed and threaten them with *punishment*.

Eventually I was too exhausted to stay awake. I’d been perching on the roof across the street from Deacon’s house since early afternoon, and the energy I

used when I went crow stayed used up when I changed back. I needed to stay awake, but the bed was super comfortable, and Deacon's soft snores were like a scary lullaby.

When I woke up, sunlight was pouring in through his window.

My mouth was dry, and the sun was trying to burn through my eyelids. It took me a few seconds to realize I wasn't in my bed at Grandad's townhome. It took another few for me to remember where I was. Deacon was sleeping on his side with his face toward me. All the better to blow his foghorn in my ear. Actually, he didn't snore that loud. More like deep, rhythmic breathing. He must have rolled over in his sleep.

His sheets and comforter were wrapped around me in a hot tangle. I always was a selfish sleeper. His AC had to be pretty awesome, because it was the middle of an Atlanta summer and it was chilly in the room. Deacon didn't seem like he noticed the cold, even though there were goose bumps all across his skin. He'd looked fine under his bathroom light. With the full force of the sun on him, his muscles looked like they'd been molded out of gold, casting deep shadows across his skin. Man, this guy was *cut*.

He was also sporting impressive morning wood. His cock tented his expensive silk boxers, almost too big to be contained. I stared at it for almost a whole minute before it twitched and I realized what I was doing. I rolled over and wrapped part of the comforter around my head to hide my blush from the world.

That gave me a few minutes of peace, and then Deacon groaned. I thought he was waking up, so I stuck my head out of the blanket cocoon and opened my mouth to unload a few good taunts before he had time to wake up all the way.

Deacon's big hand was wrapped around his dick. He'd pulled it out of his boxers and started slowly stroking, up and down, up and down. His eyes were shut. I couldn't believe it. The guy was still asleep. Who the hell jerks it in his sleep?

I threw the comforter off and covered my eyes. "Deacon! What the hell, man? Wake up!"

He let go of Little Deke and exploded off the bed, breathing hard. He looked wildly around the room until he saw me and relaxed. "Oh. It's just you. What are you doing yelling in my ear at the crack of dawn, punk?"

"Who are you calling a punk? I'm not the one jacking off in bed next to a stranger!"

Deacon frowned. “I wasn’t—”

I interrupted him, pointing at the evidence poking out of his fly. Still totally rock hard. He followed my finger with his eyes and quickly tucked his dick away in his boxers. “Fair enough. When you’re done pretending to gouge out your eyes, we can head downstairs. I’ll cook breakfast.”

I lowered my hands slowly. Half expected Deacon to finish rubbing one out right in front of me. I was relieved and maybe a little disappointed. Guy had a pretty amazing dick, even if he was a total asshole.

He stepped out of the room, and I almost followed him. I guess I came to my senses, because I started to realize how screwed up this all was. I planted my feet on his cushy bedroom carpet. “Hold up. Last night, before you went to sleep, you said you were going to freaking punish me. You don’t get to do that and then offer me breakfast like nothing happened. That’s messed up.”

Deacon turned around and reached up to grab the top of the doorway. He leaned forward, and his arms basically doubled in size as they flexed to hold his weight. If he was trying to look intimidating, it was working. Not that I cared. He could flex his big muscles until they popped. I wasn’t going to back down.

“I also said you’d enjoy it. Figured anything I came up with wouldn’t be half as bad as what you could dream up.” He shifted his weight back and forth between his hands a few times, making his damned sexy arms dance. “Let me explain your situation to you again. You trespassed on my land. The Law says I can do whatever I want with you. I could have you stuffed and mounted on my wall.”

“I’d scratch your eyes out first!” I muttered.

“I’m sure you’d try.” Deacon rolled his head on his neck, making the bones and tendons click ominously. When he looked at me again, his eyes were the same intense, stormy gray they’d been the night before when he caught me. “Straight talk, okay? I don’t want to spend the next seven days babysitting you. I don’t even really care that you tried to take my watch, though if you try it again I’ll break your fingers. I have to detain you until we get a hearing, but I promise I won’t do anything to hurt you.”

“Breaking fingers counts as hurting,” I said.

Deacon pushed off the top of the doorway and backed into the hall. “So don’t steal from me. Now get downstairs. I’m starved.”

“What are you going to do if I don’t go?” I folded my arms and glared at him. “Maybe I’ll stage a hunger strike. It’ll be on every blog. ‘Bear holds poor, skinny crow hostage, crow dies of starvation!’”

“You’re not skinny,” Deacon said, “and I’m not holding you hostage.” He turned away and headed toward the stairs. “I’m cooking bacon,” he called over his shoulder. “Think you’ll be able to resist that smell?”

“I’m vegetarian!” I lied.

Deacon laughed and stopped on the first step, craning his neck around so he could see me. “Yeah, right. I can see you drooling from here. Get a move on, or I’ll eat all of it.”

I stayed put. He was pretty far away. I thought maybe I could get to the window and get it open in time to fly away. I didn’t get a chance. Deacon waited about three seconds for me to do what he said. When I didn’t move, he stalked over, wrapped his hands around my waist, and hoisted me into the air. Before I knew what was happening, he had me flung over one shoulder.

“Put me down!” I yelled. Man that guy was strong. I thought those muscles were just for show—not that it was a bad show. Deacon was the real deal, though. Lifted me like I didn’t weigh any more than I would have in crow shape. My face bounced against his bare back every time he went down a step, and there were a lot of steps.

By the time we got to the bottom floor, I was too dazed to resist anything he might have done. It said a lot for his character that he set me on my feet next to a wall I could lean against. He kept a hand on my shoulder, which might have been to keep me steady. More likely he was still making sure I couldn’t change and make a break for it. Since that was exactly what I’d been planning, it was hard to blame him.

In daylight, his house was bright and easy on the eyes. Somebody other than him must have furnished the place, because I saw some really unmanly lace doilies on the side table in the hall. I didn’t know Deacon well yet, but I didn’t think he was the kind of guy that shopped for frilly accessories.

“You okay?” he asked.

I brushed his hand off my shoulder and stood up straight. No way was I going to let him think I was weak. “I’m fine. You promised me bacon.”

One of the corners of Deacon’s mouth quirked up. “Changed my mind. We’re doing omelets this morning.”

“Omelets can still have bacon in them!”

He led me toward the kitchen, checking every few seconds to make sure I was close behind. I went with him quietly. My stomach was getting growly, and I figured I could make a better getaway after a meal.

His kitchen was huge and full of expensive appliances. Fancy granite countertops, stainless steel fridge, you name it. Looked like a room out of a magazine. Deacon ambled in, grabbed a frying pan off the rack hanging above the island in the center of the room, and pointed at a stool. “Park it.”

I eyed the stool for a second and shook my head. “I’m good standing, thanks.”

Deacon set the pan on the stove and waved me over to him. “That’s fine, but if you won’t sit like a guest, you’ll have to stand by me like a prisoner.” He wagged his fingers at me. “Come on. You can crack eggs while I chop vegetables.”

I zoomed over to him and reached for the knife block sitting next to the sink. “I’ll cut those for you!”

Deacon hip-checked me hard enough to make me grunt. “No knives for you.” He pulled one of the knives out of the block and set the rest on a shelf high overhead. I could reach the shelf if I stretched my legs a bit, but I’d never get a knife before Deacon caught me.

He set the knife on the counter far away from me and pulled an apron off a hook on the refrigerator. I thought he was going to put it on, but instead he ripped off one of the strings. “Give me your arm.”

I pulled my arm out of his reach. “What are you going to do?”

He made a rumbly, bearish noise in his throat and reached for my arm. I backed away and dashed around the island. He chased me across the kitchen and cornered me against the wall. His arms slammed down on the wallpaper on either side of me, and he pinned one of my legs with his knee. His chest was just a few inches from mine, so close I could smell him.

He smelled so good I couldn’t help breathing in deep. There was a hint of sweat, a bit of his faintly musky body wash, and some indescribably *male* smell I couldn’t put into words. I was so caught up I almost didn’t notice his breathing had changed, too. He sucked in a long gulp of air and tilted his chin back so he could blow it all out over my head.

“Stop testing my patience,” he said, “or I’ll have to tie you up after all.”

I grinned at him. “Promise?”

He growled and tore away from me, only to stalk back with his finger pointed at my chest. “I don’t have time for your tricks, featherhead. Hold out your arm.”

Stuck in the corner like I was, I didn’t have any choice but to do what he said. I put my arm out, and Deacon wrapped one end of the apron string around my wrist. He tied a neat knot and tugged the string a few times to make sure it wouldn’t break, then tied the other end around his wrist. He pulled on the string again and pointed at the sink.

“Stand there,” he said. “Don’t try to run away. Don’t run your mouth. Just stand there and wait while I cook.”

I was still weirded out by how strong my body’s reaction to him had been, so I did what he said without complaining. Part of me wanted to break away and make him catch me. That was the dumb, hormonal part. The part that couldn’t seem to understand how deep into the shit I was.

He tried cooking with one hand at first. I stayed right where I was next to the sink. The apron string between us was only about a foot long—great if Deacon wanted to keep me nearby—not so great when he was leaning down to grab green peppers from the bottom drawer in the fridge. I could have moved closer to give him some more slack, but I didn’t feel much like helping.

When he tried and failed to chop the vegetables one-handed, he reached out and grabbed my wrist so he could pull me closer. He went right back to chopping like nothing special had happened, but my skin tingled where he’d touched me. I hated that I was so attracted to the guy. It felt like my cock was playing for the enemy.

Deacon cooked some onions in a separate pan. They smelled awesome, but my eyes watered like a sprinkler over a banker’s lawn. My vision blurred until I could barely see. By the time my eyes cleared, Deacon had added the onions to the omelet along with a bunch of spices. He folded the omelet into a perfect half-circle pocket, let it cook for a little while longer, and then slid it out of the pan onto a fancy plate.

He led me over to a stool, set down the omelet on the island, and pulled out a fork and a spoon. I sat down and reached for the silverware, but he held the fork out of my reach. “Fork’s for me. Don’t trust you with any pointy objects.”

“I can still do some damage with a spoon,” I said.

“Fine.” Deacon cut off a piece of the omelet and popped it into his mouth. “Eat with your fingers then.”

I sighed. “If I promise not to scoop out your eyes with it, will you give me the spoon?”

Deacon nodded. “If you promise.” He pinched the spoon between his thumb and index finger and waved it back and forth, taunting me.

Jerk. I laid my arms flat on the countertop and met Deacon’s eyes. “I promise I won’t feed you your eyeballs with that spoon, okay?”

He set the spoon on the counter and slid it across to me. “I guess that’s good enough.”

I picked up the spoon and held up my tied wrist. “Are you going to untie me?”

“Not until we’re done eating.”

I took a bite of the omelet. My mouth practically exploded with flavor. The onions were savory and sharp, and the spices were so heavenly I couldn’t believe I was only eating eggs. He’d done something to get the flavor cooked into the whole omelet, so every bite was full of deliciousness. I scarfed down my half of the omelet before I knew it. For the first time since he’d caught me the night before, I smiled at Deacon for real. “That was the best freaking omelet I’ve ever had! That spice you used—I’ve never tasted anything like it!”

He shook his head. He didn’t look like he appreciated the compliment. “Yeah, that would be the saffron.”

I looked down at the plate and realized that after his first bite, Deacon hadn’t eaten anything. He untied the knots on both our arms and set the torn apron string on the counter. I stared at him. My hand shook as I set down the spoon. “You fed me saffron. You know what it does to us.”

Deacon nodded. “Standard practice for containing unruly therians: feed them enough saffron that they can’t change.”

I threw the spoon at him. “You asshole! I should claw your eyes out!”

Deacon caught the spoon and tossed it into the sink behind him. Then he dumped the rest of that stupidly delicious breakfast into the trash. “Calm down. You’ll get your wings back in a couple of days, after the saffron runs through your system.”

“I fucking know that! Dammit!” I slammed my hand down on the counter so hard I felt it bruise. “You don’t know! You don’t fucking know! You can’t fly. You don’t know.” I was so pissed off I could feel tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. I put my head down on the cool countertop, feeling defeated. Now that I wasn’t distracted by the taste of food, I realized I couldn’t sense my crow half. That had never happened to me before. It felt like part of me had died.

“Theo.” Deacon’s deep voice cut through the panic and the rage. “I’m sorry. If I’d known it would affect you this way, I never would have fed you the stuff.”

“Right.” The word came out of my mouth sounding bitter. “You would have just tied me up and stuffed me in the closet for a week.”

Deacon shrugged. “That’s one possibility.”

“Oh really?” I was still shocked from learning I couldn’t change, but seeing him so calm when I was freaking out made me want to hit him. “What other *possibilities* were there?”

He looked me up and down, and it was like he could see through my skin. “You’re an attractive kid. Pretty sure I could find a use for you.”

His words made the world tilt sideways a few degrees. From the second I’d laid eyes on him, I’d wanted him. Hell, it might even have been before that, when I smelled a hint of his scent in the bathroom. I wanted him, but him return the favor? Never thought I’d see the day.

Pretty sure my mouth dropped open, but I did my best to look like I didn’t care about what he’d said. “You’re screwing with me.”

“Not at the moment.”

“Well—yeah—good fucking luck with that! I’m not interested.”

“Hm.” Deacon turned away from me and leaned against the island. “So a few minutes ago, you weren’t panting like you were in heat?” He looked at me over his shoulder. “You didn’t like it when I pushed you up against that wall?”

I blinked to fight back the stinging feeling in my eyes that didn’t have anything to do with dirt or dust. “You’re such a tool. I was just starting to think you were...”

“I was what?”

A memory of Deacon lying in his bed with his cock in his hand jumped into my mind. He was right. I did want him. “Never mind,” I said. “Fuck you.”

He scowled. “I told you to watch your tongue while you’re in my house.”

“You don’t get to feed me poison and then complain about my fucking language!”

Deacon lurched off the island, got in my face, and jabbed a finger into my upper lip. “One more filthy word out of you and I’ll stick a gag right there.”

I bit his finger. Not hard enough to draw blood, but plenty hard enough for it to smart. I expected Deacon to howl and yell and pummel me. I’d have welcomed a chance to show him I was no weakling.

Instead, he got really quiet. His face twisted up and his eyes shifted back and forth between his normal human gray and a bear’s bright orange eyes. His teeth lengthened and sharpened, and he growled from deep in his belly. I don’t know if it was anger or pain that set off the change, but at least I’d finally gotten to him.

I wasn’t afraid of him. Even without my wings, I could throw down if I had to. Not sure how well I would have done against five hundred pounds of angry bear, but anything was better than having to remember I couldn’t change.

Deacon took a few deep, shuddering breaths and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were their normal gray with no orange bits. “I have a lunch meeting in a couple of hours. I am going upstairs to get dressed. You are going to come with me, sit on the bed, and keep your gutter tongue in your mouth. Do you understand me?”

I glanced down at his hand. A ring of red was already showing up around his finger where I’d bitten him. I smirked and nodded at him. Much as I enjoyed poking the bear, I wasn’t stupid. I knew how far I could push, and it wasn’t much further.

When we got back to his bedroom, he took me by the shoulders and sat me down on the bed. Guess he didn’t trust me to find my way there on my own. He disappeared into his closet and started banging around in the too-small space. You’d think a guy loaded enough to own a chain of hardware stores could afford a bigger closet.

He came out a few minutes later, and it was like he was a different person. Without his shirt, he’d been sensual and cunning, the kind of guy who’d poison me one second, then tease me about sex the next. With an olive-green suit on,

he looked more official, but no less sexy. He ran a hand through his hair a few times to smooth it down and turned his attention to me. He stalked over to stand next to the bed and eyed my brown T-shirt and dark jeans with holes up and down the front and back. “You can’t wear that to this meeting.”

I stared up at him. “I’m not going, so it doesn’t matter.”

“You’re too short to fit any of my things,” Deacon said, completely ignoring me. “Do you own a suit? Never mind. I’m sure there’s something around here. Get up.” He hooked his hand under my armpit and lifted until I had to get up or have my arm ripped off.

“Ow!” I yelled even though it didn’t hurt.

Deacon shifted his grip around to my shoulder. “I’m bringing you with me, but we need to set some ground rules first.”

I wanted to spit at him to show what I thought about his rules, but that didn’t seem like a great idea. “Can one of them be that you don’t manhandle me all the time?”

“It could be. Can I trust you to do what you’re told until the day of your trial?”

“Sure!” I said insincerely.

“Thought not.” Deacon pushed me toward the closet, keeping his hand on my shoulder as he propelled me forward. “This meeting is with a group of important colleagues. You’ve got a couple of choices. You can be my personal assistant...”

I flipped him off. He glared at my finger until I put it down.

“You can be my PA—” He bent down and put his mouth next to my ear. “—or you can be my date.”

I almost laughed. I seriously thought he was joking. “I’ve got a better idea. Let me go, and write me a damn apology.”

Deacon spun me around so I was facing him. He didn’t look like he was joking. “You’re forgetting you’re the one that broke into my home.”

“Yeah, you fed me something awful.” I winced, feeling the emptiness inside my head where the crow usually lived. “I think that kind of makes us even.”

“I’m not going to stand here and argue guilt with you,” Deacon said. “Pick your role. Are you the lowly, put-upon personal assistant I just hired, or are you the sweet young thing I bring in on my arm?”

I didn't feel like being either of those things, but I figured Option C was getting stuffed in the closet until he came home. I watched him for a few seconds, trying to figure out which choice would give me the best chance to annoy him. If I was actually his assistant, I probably could have rearranged his schedule or something, but I wasn't. There was no way he'd let me have access to anything important.

If I went as his date, I'd have a perfect excuse to feel him up at the table. I wanted to see him try to keep calm while I touched him in all the right places. Didn't hurt that he was easy on the eyes. Like he'd started to say earlier, if we'd met under different circumstances, something might have happened between us. As it was, I just wanted to see him squirm.

Mind made up, I looked him in the eye and smiled. "Fine. I'll be your date, but if you ever call me 'sweet thing' again, I'll peck out your eyes."

"Fair enough." Deacon leaned into his closet and looked around. "Let's see if we can find you something to wear. I think Josh might've left a few things here."

I peered into the closet over Deacon's broad shoulder. He had a lot of suits hanging in there, all different colors. Plenty of button-down shirts and fancy silk ties. "Who's Josh?" I asked.

Deacon thumbed through the hanging shirts until he found one that was a lot smaller than the rest. It was shiny and blue, like a cut sapphire. "Josh? He's my ex." He pulled the shirt off the rack and checked the tag. "Yeah, I think this'll fit. Josh was about your size."

I stared at Deacon's back for a few seconds, wondering if I'd actually heard him right. "Wait. You want to stick me in something that belongs to your ex?"

"I want you to wear something that won't get us both kicked out of the restaurant." He pushed the expensive blue shirt against my chest. "Go try that on. I'll see if I can find you some slacks."

I threw the shirt on the floor and backed away from the closet. "I'm not wearing your boy toy's clothes. Shit! How messed up are you?"

"Ex-boy toy." Deacon knelt and scooped up the shirt. Draping it over one arm, he dusted it off. He looked over at me, down at the shirt, and back at me. "Wear the shirt today, and you can keep it. Josh won't miss it. Designers give him clothes all the time."

I looked at the shirt again. Fashion wasn't my area of expertise, at least not unless it had to do with precious gems, but I figured the shirt was worth more than a month's paycheck at the deli. "Won't matter how many nice things I have if I get sent to bear prison."

Deacon chuckled. "There's no bear prison."

"Really? The crows have one. It's in Santa Barbara."

"We don't need a prison. We just eat the people we don't like." Deacon kept a straight face for about five seconds before cracking a grin. "That was a joke."

"Yeah, you're not making me feel better about this whole dressing-up-in-your-ex's-crap thing."

"If I wanted you to feel better, I'd shove a cool glass of lemonade into your hand and tell you to run along home now."

"That sounds pretty good. Let's go with that."

Deacon sighed. "You don't understand how much trouble you're in, do you?"

"I understand that you're holding me against my will and blackmailing me into posing as your date. Oh, and you want me to wear your ex's hand-me-downs. Pretty fucked up, if you ask me."

Deacon frowned, and I knew it was because I'd cussed again. He hung his old flame's shirt on the closet doorknob and started running his hands through hangers full of khakis and jeans. "If you're convicted of theft—and you will be—Artios won't let you go. She'll banish you to the Peak. You might never see your family again."

Since my family was kind of what got me into this jam, I wasn't feeling too sad about the idea of losing them. Well, not sad about anyone but Gran. Gran was weird, and hardly ever around, but she always came and found me when she was in town. She taught me how to play cards and how to break into a car without setting off the alarm. She's the one that calmed the family down when Aunt Sharon caught me making out with a dude at my fifteenth birthday party.

Some people say Gran's just another thief, but they're wrong. She knows people get too attached to their *things*, and she likes to show them they don't need fancy cars and diamond rings to be happy. Also, lady can *cook*. Best barbeque in the state.

“At least I’ll be able to fly there,” I told Deacon.

“Sure, until some vulture swoops down and knocks you out of the sky.” Deacon pulled a pair of stretchy gray pants off the rack and brought them out with the blue shirt. “Have you been before?”

“Been where?”

Deacon held the shirt and pants out toward me. I guess he expected me to take them. “You know what I mean.”

I ignored the clothes. “Sure. Gran takes all of us, once we’re old enough. It’s just a big mountain.”

“A mountain where you’ll be stuck forever if you’re not careful,” Deacon said. “You value your freedom, right? I can help you keep it.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because I’m thinking it might be fun to keep you around.” Deacon shook the clothes at me. “But only if you quit complaining and get dressed. If we stand around here all morning, I’ll be late for my meeting.”

I took the clothes reluctantly. “Fine, but if you think I’m going to put out just because you’re giving me a shirt, you’re crazy.”

“So you feel like haggling?” Deacon’s eyes glinted, and he rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “Three shirts and a pair of shoes.”

“No deal.” I crossed my arms and stuck my chin out at him. “I don’t care how much money you’ve got. There’s no way you’re getting your paws on the goods.”

Deacon grinned at me. Actually, it was more of a leer. He wasn’t changing, but he looked plenty wild enough anyway. “That sounds like a challenge.”

“Huh?” My shoulders fell, and my confidence fell with them. “Wait, no! No challenge. You’re crazy. Take me to prison! It can’t be any worse than this!”

“Get those clothes on.” Deacon meandered into the hallway. “Be downstairs in five, and don’t even think about jumping out a window or something.” He tapped the side of his nose and smirked. “I’ll track you down, no matter where you go.” He turned away and closed the door behind him.

Chapter Three

Deacon's second car was a sweet little Mercedes, and he drove it like a maniac. At least, I thought he did. I didn't do a whole lot of driving, since I had wings. My friend—well, ex-friend—Mitch was always the one who drove. I got rid of all the alarm spells and disabled the mundane security systems.

Somehow we managed not to crash into anyone on our way to the restaurant. I'm pretty sure that was only because people could hear Deacon's tires squealing from miles away. I wondered if he ever got tickets for speeding. Did rich people get tickets? I got them all the time, for flying too low in residential areas, or in fog, or pretty much any excuse police hawks could come up with. Freaking birds of prey, always playing like they're better than the rest of us.

Deacon pulled into the roundabout in front of Salvete, the most expensive Italian restaurant in the city. The valet was wearing a cute orange outfit with tassels on his shoulders and a matching cap with a chinstrap. He jumped out from behind his podium when Deacon's car pulled up and ran over to meet us.

"Good morning, Mr. Maynard!" He flashed perfect teeth as he opened Deacon's door. "Welcome back to Salvete! Your colleagues are waiting in the Olive Room."

I rolled my eyes and got out of the car. Stretching my arms and yawning, I ran my eyes across the front of the restaurant. I'd never been inside. The menu was too rich for my blood, and the servers kept too close an eye on their guests to make pickpocketing profitable. The place even looked expensive, painted orange and draped with just enough ivy to let everyone know the owners paid somebody to trim it every day. They probably served their coffee on doilies.

The back of my neck itched, so I turned around to find out who was staring at me. Deacon was giving the valet a huge tip. The valet was staring at me and frowning. He hid it pretty fast when he saw me, putting on another fake smile for Deacon, but I saw he was pissed about something. I had no idea what it was. Apparently I'd annoyed him just by getting out of the car. I glared back at him for a few seconds. He pretended he didn't notice.

Deacon pressed his keys into the valet's hand, on top of the fifty-dollar tip, and came around the hood of his car. He stepped in close to me—too close—and slid an arm around my waist. I jumped and started to pull away, but Deacon

hooked his fingers around my hip and held me in place. He put his lips close to my ear. “Relax. You’re supposed to be my date.”

I wanted to pinch him, or maybe punch him, but I didn’t think I’d get away with either. “Your friend with the stupid hat was staring at me.”

Deacon glanced toward the rear end of his car, already headed for the restaurant’s parking lot. “He was surprised. You were supposed to wait for him to open the door for you.”

I started to laugh, but when I looked at Deacon, he seemed completely serious. “Wait, really? No way! Deacon, I’m not some princess you traded a herd of horses for.”

Deacon raised an eyebrow. “No, you’re the sneak thief that broke into my home in the middle of the night and then got too distracted ogling me to actually steal anything.”

“That’s not how I remember it happening,” I muttered.

“Just smile and follow my lead.” Deacon pushed firmly against my back to get me moving into the restaurant. When he let go of me to open the door, I considered bolting. It was the middle of the day with plenty of people wandering the streets looking to grab a bite. I could have lost him down an alleyway and then hidden in a coffee shop until I could make it back to Grandad’s house. The house was a long run away in Grant Park, though. Super long if I had to worry about an angry bear chasing me down. I needed Deacon to be distracted by something major so I could have enough time to run far, far away.

I brushed past him, and a bunch of amazing smells welcomed me into the restaurant. Fresh bread, rich sauces, and spices gave the air a delicious flavor. My mouth watered and my stomach twisted into knots. After Deacon’s Trojan omelet that morning, I figured I’d never look at food the same way again. At least the restaurant wasn’t likely to poison me, unless Deacon paid them off. I was going to keep a close eye on him all through lunch.

The hostess met us at the door and gave us a smile just as bright as the valet’s had been. I wondered if the restaurant’s owners only hired pretty people. The hostess grabbed a pair of gold-embossed menus and led “Mr. Maynard” and me to a private dining room near the kitchen. The dining room was cozy, decorated with olive branches around the ceiling and expensive mahogany furniture.

There were five people sitting around the big table in the center of the room—three men and two women. They were all dressed as nice as Deacon. Each of the men wore a different color suit. From left to right, Navy Blue Suit, Charcoal Gray Suit, and Brown Suit. One of the women sat next to Brown Suit. She wore a ruffled lavender sundress. She was the only one in the room that looked like she might be my age. The other woman was an older lady in an orange sari. She glared at me as I came in and curled her lip into something like a sneer.

“Good morning, everyone.” Deacon put his hand on my arm and tugged me closer to the table. “Thank you all for agreeing to meet on such short notice. This is Theo Vargas. He’ll be joining us.”

Blue Suit took a sip of water and carefully set his glass on the table. “Replacing me already, Deke? Traitor. I thought we were friends.”

Deacon laughed awkwardly, and for a second he almost looked uncomfortable. That was impossible, though. Big shot power tool emperors didn’t wince at bad jokes. “Not yet, Silas. You won’t get out of working for me that easily.”

Orange Sari tapped the tabletop with her fingertips a few times and glanced around the table. Her lips got tighter and tighter, until I could barely see them at all. It was funny, until I realized she was frowning because the only open seats were next to her.

Great. Haven’t even opened my mouth yet and one of them already hates me. What is this? High school?

“If you and your *guest* would like to find seats,” Orange Sari said. “We have been waiting for quite some time.”

“Correction.” Brown Suit held up a single finger. He was a big, broad kind of guy with graying brown hair. He was probably a bear, like Deacon. “Nadia’s been waiting. The rest of us just got here a few minutes ago.” He smiled at Orange Sari like he was trying to take the bite out of his comment. She didn’t seem appeased.

Purple Sundress leaned forward until she cut off their eye contact and fluttered her eyelashes at me. “You’re not here for work, are you, honey? Come sit by me. We can chat while the men are talking serious business.”

Deacon sighed and pointed his hand at Purple Sundress. “Theo, this is Julie Brinkman, my company’s public relations manager.” He swung his hand over

toward Blue Suit. “Silas Warner, vice-president in charge of sales, and Jiro Warner—” Gray Suit. “—his partner and our head of security. The man in the middle is Hank Barrington, manager of the Atlanta warehouse, and the lovely lady at the end here is Nadia Dalvi, my chief financial advisor.”

“Wow,” I said. “You’re all wearing *really* nice clothes. I’m way underdressed. Maybe I should run home and change.”

“Nonsense,” Blue Suit—Silas said. “You look great. That color suits you perfectly. Both of you should sit down so our server can take our orders. The poor boy’s been lurking in the doorway for the past ten minutes.”

I tried to get Deacon to sit down first, but he had to be all gentlemanly and pull out a chair for me. I had to admit, he was doing a pretty good job of pretending I was his date. Holding doors for me, introducing me to his employees... I almost felt like a real person, not Deacon’s prisoner. I just wished his sham didn’t land me next to his angry financial advisor lady. I was pretty sure she actually shifted her chair a few inches away from mine as I sat down.

Deacon slid into the seat next to me and slung an arm across the back of my chair. His forearm rested against my shoulders—a nonstop reminder of how much of a captive I was. “I have a few items I’d like to discuss with all of you,” Deacon said, “but before I start, is there anything you’d like to bring to me?”

Hank leaned forward and balanced his elbows on the table. “There was an explosion in the self-sweeping brooms section. We think some witches signed on as temps and hexed the stock.”

Deacon frowned. “Have you been able to track them down?”

“Nope. They’re in the wind.” Hank didn’t look too worried about it. He knitted his fingers together and propped his chin on them. “I reported the break-in to Atlanta PD. They bumped the case over to the Paladins. Said they don’t handle witches.”

Julie tapped Hank lightly on the arm. “Wise men. No one handles witches.”

“One of the mages in my department filed a sexual harassment suit,” Jiro said. Everyone else at the table except me and Nadia groaned.

“Again?” Silas shook his head. “That’s the third time this quarter. You have got to get your geeks under control.”

Jiro crossed his arms and sat up straighter. “They’re not my geeks, Silas. They’re our employees. Deacon asked if we had any news to report, so I reported.”

Deacon held his hands up for silence, and everyone went quiet. It was kind of hot how he was in complete control. It did something unmentionable to my unmentionables. He caught my eye, and freaking *smoldered* at me, like he knew I was into this commanding side of him. I narrowed my eyes at him and looked away. He shifted his weight until his thigh rested against mine. “Julie, can you—”

“Take care of it?” Julie pulled a phone out of her purse. “Sure. Right after we talk about the protests.”

“Protests?” Deacon’s forearm tightened against my shoulders as he tensed up.

“The usual.” Julie’s voice sounded casual, but she was flipping through something on her phone at light-speed and her eyes were really wide, like she was worried and trying to hide it. “Anticasters don’t want magic used in their backyards. They think our tools will turn their kids into wizards.”

“Ignorant!” Nadia said gruffly. “Only hard work and a talent for spellcraft will make a wizard.”

“I thought you had that situation under control,” Deacon said.

Julie looked up from her phone. “I did. When it was just a bunch of crazies posting badly Photoshopped chimera babies on Tumblr, one woman was enough. Now they’re threatening to burn down our factories. This morning the line manager in St. Louis found a bunch of snakes in his rain barrel instead of, you know, rain.”

“Is he all right?” I asked. Nadia made a disgusted noise, and Julie waved a hand at me.

“Of course he’s all right. Otherwise I’d be in Missouri corralling the press.” She eyed me. “You don’t have any experience with public relations, do you? We could use a cute, blue-eyed American boy like you on the front lines.”

“Julie,” Deacon said firmly. “This isn’t a job interview.”

“I work at a deli,” I said. Now seemed as good a time as any to start embarrassing Deacon. I figured he wouldn’t like his employees knowing he was “dating” a poor schmuck.

Silas lifted up his glasses and squinted at me. “You mean you own a deli? That’s really great. I have a lot of respect for small-business owners.”

The guy was probably trying to be civil, but I wasn’t going to let “Deke” get off that easy. “No, I mean I make sandwiches for a living. I should be at work right now. My boss is going to slay me for playing hooky.”

Julie shrugged and looked back down at her phone. Hank buttered a slice of bread and shoved it into his mouth, probably so he wouldn’t have to say anything for the next few minutes while he chewed. The Warners looked at each other and then at Deacon, waiting to see how he’d react. Weirdly, Nadia seemed interested in what I’d said. She turned toward me for the first time and actually smiled. “How old are you, young man?” she asked.

“Twenty,” I told her. I was lying my ass off. I was actually twenty-three, but I figured twenty would make Deacon seem like more of a cradle robber. I glanced to the side to see how he was reacting, but he was wearing a polite smile that hid anything he might have really been feeling.

Nadia beamed at me. “I have a son your age! He works part-time, too. Of course, he’s clerking in a prestigious lawyer’s office, but I’m certain your job must be just as fulfilling. Where are you attending classes? Who is your mother? I need to make some phone calls if you’re really going to be dating our Deacon.”

Deacon squeezed my shoulder hard. “That won’t be necessary, Nadia. This is a business meeting. We can discuss my relationship with Theo later, if you’d like.”

Nadia seemed satisfied to let things lie. I made a memo in my head to have my cousins hit her house sometime soon. Freaking arrogant old bag. *Where does she get off? I’m plenty good enough for Deacon! Wait, why do I care?*

The server edged up to our tables to take orders. He was a tall, skinny guy with a thick ginger beard. When my turn came to order, Deacon grinned and ordered for me. He even used a perfect Italian accent. Not that I knew what a perfect Italian accent sounded like, but it was close enough to fool me.

After the server collected our menus, everyone at the table started using business jargon, so I only understood about one in five words. Saved me a lot of trouble acting dumb, since I really had no idea what was going on.

I pushed my chair back and stood up. “Well, this is all super interesting, but I gotta take a leak.”

Nadia made a face like she'd smelled something bad. Deacon started to get up. "I'll go with you."

"Oh come on, Deke." Hank pointed down at Deacon's chair. "He's old enough to be potty-trained, right? He doesn't need you to hold his hand. Sit down. We need to hash this out."

Deacon frowned and looked over at me. I gave him a wide, innocent, completely fake smile. For a second I thought he'd come with me to the bathroom anyway, but eventually he sat back down in his chair.

I took my time heading to the men's room, at least until I got around a corner and out of sight. Once I was sure Deacon couldn't see me anymore, I practically ran to the bathroom and flung the door open. I listened to hear if there was anyone in the room with me.

I didn't hear any telltale creaks or drips, so I took my time looking the room over. It was a pretty big bathroom for a restaurant, with three whole stalls, two sinks, and fancy soap dispensers shaped like some kind of bird's neck. I didn't care much about the décor though. I cared about the little window high on the wall next to the sinks. There weren't any bars on it, and I thought I could just reach it if I stood on the sink closest to it.

The door behind me swung open, and I jumped. Figured I was caught before my escape plan even got started. I bolted into one of the stalls, sneaking a peek at the guy who'd come in as I went. He was just some old dude with a bad comb-over. He sighed as he did his business at the urinal. Every second he took felt like years to me. A lifetime passed in the time he took to finish and wash up, but really it was less than a minute. I was just so sure I'd be caught any second that I couldn't handle the delay.

As soon as the guy was done and gone, I busted out of the stall and climbed onto the sink. The window was shut and locked tight. I took off my borrowed shoes, held them with my teeth, and gripped the edge of the sink with my feet as I leaned toward the window. The sill was close enough I could reach it and get my hands secure on the edge. I tossed Deacon's model ex-boyfriend-person's shoes onto the sill and leaned toward the window again. My foot slipped, and I almost fell on my face. Both my hands slapped down on the concrete windowsill, and I got a mouthful of leather as I bit down on the heel of the fancy shoes. The slap of skin on wall echoed around the bathroom about fifty times, and I froze.

I prayed to all the bird gods who ever were that nobody would come in. It took me a few tries, but I managed to get the latch on the window open. I punched the glass until it swung out, then dropped down so I was hanging from the sill by my fingertips. Adrenaline gave me the boost I needed to pull up onto my forearms and get part of my body wedged onto the windowsill.

The window gave out right onto the street—the place really did need bars. I tossed the shoes out onto the street, wormed halfway through the tiny window, and took a deep breath of fresh air. My arms were getting scraped to hell, but I was getting free. Pretty soon I'd be away and out of Deacon's reach.

Something caught my feet from behind. *Shit!* I jerked and flung my hands out to both sides to steady myself.

“Theo! What the hell are you doing?” My body muffled the sound of Deacon's shout, but he still made himself heard. He yanked my ankles, slowly dragging me back into the bathroom. I grabbed the brick wall and pushed against it to keep from getting pulled back. Deacon was way stronger than me, but I had leverage since I was higher up. I twisted onto my side and got a good grip with both hands on one side of the wall.

Deacon pulled harder, and I kicked out with both feet. I felt my foot hit something hard—maybe the side of his thick skull. The grip on my ankles relaxed, and I popped free. Didn't waste any time wiggling toward the street again. Something tore as I got through—my silk shirt was caught on the bottom half of the window latch. I yanked it and ripped a huge hole down the front of the shirt. One final push, and then I was kissing concrete on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant.

A young wizard in a funky yellow pantsuit was passing by as I sat on the sidewalk, panting. She stopped walking and leaned down to look closer at me, one hand on the wand in the holster on her hip, the other hand on a bright gold parasol printed with stylized white falcons. “Bad date?”

For a second, I thought she was going to blast me back into the bathroom. I pushed the window shut and put my hands up to try and block whatever spell she was planning to use. “The worst. Ever been with a bear?”

The yellow wizard let go of her wand and held out her hand to help me up. “Can't say I have.”

I took her hand and rolled to my feet. Probably looked pretty beat up, but I didn't have time to think about that. Maybe I'd gotten a good hit in on Deacon,

but I knew he'd be after me as soon as he recovered. "Let's just say he snores. And he eats in bed. Plus, he's jealous."

The wizard smirked. She was wearing gold lipstick with glitter in it, so her lips sparkled pretty spectacularly in the sunlight. "Did you consider just telling him it was over?"

I shrugged. "And get my head bit off? Are you crazy?"

"Just a little, but then, all good wizards are. Wz. Clara McGinley."

She stuck her hand out again. I looked up and down the street to see if anyone was chasing me. It didn't look like anyone was coming out of the restaurant, and the windows behind me were still shut.

Clara leaned to one side until her face was in my line of sight. Even her eyes were yellow-gold. "And you are?"

I wondered if her eyes glowed in the dark. "What? Oh. I'm Theo. Thanks for the hand."

"Would you like me to do something about your shirt?"

I looked down at my clothes. There was a hole in my shirt from belly button to hip and a bunch of long, thin tears on my sleeves. My shoes were lying a few feet away, already covered in a thin layer of dust. "That's nice of you, but I really need to get going."

"Yes, you are on the run from the jealous ex, aren't you?" Clara twisted a small gold ring on her right hand. It looked kind of out of place with the rest of her slightly out-there look. Kind of plain. "Don't let me keep you then. Good luck!"

I ducked my head to show I was grateful and then dashed over to my shoes. They might have been overly expensive pieces of junk, terrible for running, but they were better than nothing. I slipped them on and made a break for it just as I heard shouts coming from the front of the restaurant. As I turned a corner into the closest alleyway, I checked behind me just in time to see Deacon run up to Clara and start waving his hands around. He looked pissed.

Good.

Chapter Four

I didn't know the streets of Midtown as well as I should have. It'd been years since I'd ridden along in Mitch's old Volvo, scouting for potential marks. The alley I'd turned into dead-ended into the back of a CrossFit gym that hadn't been there the last time I came this way. Sneaking into the back room of a place full of people who could probably break me with their pinkies didn't seem like the best plan, but it was better than hanging out waiting for Deacon to catch me.

The back door was unlocked, so I pushed it open and barged in, trying to act like I belonged there. I wasn't exactly dressed for exercise, so I really hoped I didn't stumble across anyone. Turned out I shouldn't have worried, since the room was empty.

I was in a big kitchen with a wide island in the middle. The gym must have been a restaurant at some point before, because the sinks looked deep enough to hold a month's worth of dishes. Someone had forgotten to clean one of the blenders sitting on the island. The grayish-green dregs from somebody's smoothie was still in the bottom of the blender. I went up to it, sniffed, and wrinkled my nose. Way too much kale.

Outside the kitchen, there was a long hallway and another door. I sniffed at the air. For a place where people exercised all the time, it was pretty fresh. I would have thought it'd smell like old, sweaty socks. I could hear noise coming from the other side of the new door: loud music and people shouting.

Deciding I'd fit in better if I stripped, I took my shirt off and balled it up in my fist. My shoes and pants were still way too fancy, but I hoped no one would notice. I pushed the door open and headed through. Out in the actual gym area, people were lifting weights and running wind sprints and generally being in way better shape than I was ever going to be. I tried to saunter in casually, but it was hard because unlike me, everyone in there was wearing a shirt.

I stuck out like a fat old cat in a puppy kennel. Multiple sets of eyes swung around to stare at me. One of the women, a short, fit brunette with a high ponytail, headed toward me. I veered away from her, rounded a spot where a guy was doing deadlifts with weights big enough to scare me, and headed for the exit.

Deacon was waiting for me. I made it as far as the gym lobby, and there he was, standing with his big arms folded across his big chest. Clara was standing

next to him, parasol closed on her right shoulder. She frowned when she saw me poke my head into the lobby.

“Theo!” she shouted. I tried to back away, but Clara swung her parasol around to point at me and shot a bolt of yellow magic at me that stopped me in my tracks. She rested the parasol on her shoulder again as she and Deacon came over to me. “Theodore Raymond Vargas,” she said haughtily. “You haven’t been very honest with me, have you?”

I was caught. My legs wouldn’t obey me, but my mouth could still move. I tried a smile. “Sure I have. It really was a bad date. Totally boring. Deacon and his minions spent the whole time talking shop. Did I mention he has minions? Definitely evil.”

Clara clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and tapped the parasol against her shoulder a few times. I tried to duck, thinking she was going to fire another spell at me, but I could only move from the neck up. Luckily for me, Clara didn’t turn me into a newt or anything.

Deacon stepped in front of Clara and looked me up and down. He had a big red spot on his cheek—that was probably where I’d kicked him. “As I was telling you, Wz. McGinley, this man tried to steal a family heirloom from me early this morning. I caught him and took him into my custody. I don’t know how familiar you are with therian Law, but I am required to—”

“To keep him restrained until his day in court comes,” Clara finished. Girl had balls, interrupting Deacon like that. He glared back at her, but she either didn’t notice or didn’t care, because she went on. “Yes, I know. Knowing is part of the job. Just like I knew your fellow here was fibbing, though I couldn’t tell how much.”

“I’m not Deacon’s *fellow*,” I said roughly.

Clara shrugged. “Semantics. Maynard, are we done here? You should be able to manage one tricky crow on your own.”

Deacon put a hand on my arm. “I’ll handle it. You can let him go now.”

Clara poked me hard in the belly with the tip of her parasol. “Be good, Theo. If you run off again, Maynard and I will have to tell your Gran what you’ve been up to. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

I rubbed my stomach and glared at her back as she sashayed out of the gym.
Traitor.

“Is everything all right in here?” asked the ponytailed brunette that had been following me. Deacon tightened his grip on my arm and smiled.

“Everything’s just fine, miss. You can go back to your exercise.”

“Are you sure?” The brunette looked at me like I’d sprouted a few extra eyes. “That guy just wandered in here from the back room. None of us have seen him before. We thought it was pretty weird. Maybe we should call the police.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Deacon was using his big-boss voice, the one he’d used to shut up his employees at the lunch table. Once again my body did me wrong. I was getting all hot and bothered, especially below the belt. Deacon’s official voice did it for me in all the right places, though I’d never tell *him* that.

“If you say so.” The brunette still looked suspicious.

“I assure you, this man will not disrupt your day further,” Deacon said smoothly. “Theo, apologize.” He shook my arm.

I wanted to spit at him and tell this girl to go screw herself, but she hadn’t done anything wrong. Judging by how persistent she was, I figured I must have really freaked her out. It really stuck in my craw to do something Deacon told me to, but I did genuinely feel bad. “Sorry if I messed up your routine or something,” I said.

The brunette shrugged. “That’s fine, I guess. If you two are doing some kind of weird sex thing, take it outside, okay? People in here need to concentrate, or somebody could get hurt.”

“We’re not—” I tried to correct her, but Deacon rode right over me.

“We’ll just be on our way then,” he said. “You have a great day now.”

He sounded so sweet and pleasant it made my teeth ache. I tried to yank my arm away from him, but he wouldn’t let go. The brunette gave us both another wary look and then went back into the gym.

“Don’t make me sling you over my shoulder again,” Deacon muttered.

I sneered at him. “Try it. We’re not in your cave anymore. People will see.”

“All right.” Deacon slipped his phone out of his jacket pocket. “Would you like it better if I called the Paladins? The local Knight Commander is an old friend. She’d love to put you up in a cozy cell all by yourself.”

I flinched. I'd been inside one of those cells one time when I was a kid. Mitch and I tried to steal a wizard's favorite hat. The wizard took it personally and had the local Paladins throw me and Mitch into the cells under the local Chapel of Light for two whole days. It's horrible down there. They give you just enough light to be "humane" and enchant the walls so you can't use any magic. That means no changing, not that they left enough room in the boxes to stretch your wings. Two days down there was enough to put me off stealing, get me to break things off with Mitch, and make me develop a lifelong fear of tight spaces.

"How'd you find me?" I asked.

Deacon tapped his nose, just like he had earlier at his house. "Told you I'd track you down no matter where you went."

"You could *smell* me?"

"Wasn't hard. You didn't get far."

He looked so smug. I wanted to hit him. I was kind of impressed, though. "I don't believe you. You got Clara to use a spell or something."

Deacon nodded at the exit and steered me that way. "Believe what you want. Just don't try to escape again. Next time I won't be so lenient."

"Lenient? You sicced a freaking wizard on me!" I tried to shove him into the wall by the door, but he was so solid I just bounced off. He growled and shoved me through the doorway, pushing my shoulder against the glass until the door swung open.

I stumbled onto the sidewalk and almost fell. Before I could drop, Deacon adjusted his hold on my arm and held me up.

"Thanks," I said sarcastically.

"You're welcome."

"Do you always have to be so fucking polite?"

Deacon pulled me back onto my feet and glanced both ways down along the street. "Yeah, I do. My mama taught me to always keep a civil tongue in my mouth, even when I'm talking to my enemies."

"So I'm the enemy now? Dude. All I did was try to nick your watch. Let it go."

"You don't have to be an enemy." Deacon shot me a look full of heat. His gray eyes showed just a hint of orange, around the rings of his irises. "I thought

I made it clear. If it had been up to me, I'd have turned you over to the police and washed my hands of you. Since it isn't up to me, I'd rather let you spend your confinement in relative comfort, but you're making that extremely difficult."

"Don't give me that shit. You get off on this, don't you?"

Deacon's grip loosened a bit, but not enough for me to break away. The orange in his eyes receded, and he dusted a few specks of dirt off his lapels. "I don't know what you mean."

If I can just distract him long enough... I thought back to lunch, about how Deacon had interacted with his employees. "You like having people under your control. What is it? Can't get it up unless a guy owes you money? Maybe that's why Joel or whoever left you."

Deacon pressed his lips together and frowned for a long time without saying anything. At first I thought I'd hit a nerve, but he didn't seem angry. He looked confused, or maybe surprised. "Let me ask you something."

An older couple out on the town ambled down the sidewalk toward us. Being in Midtown like we were, it was two guys, each better dressed than the last. They looked across the street as they passed, but I could practically hear their ears creak as they tried to eavesdrop.

"Shoot," I said. "Not like I'm going anywhere."

Deacon pointed at a pretty wooden bench halfway down the block. "If I sat you down on that bench and kissed you, what would you do?"

I almost laughed. He had to be joking, right? No way was I ever going to let him kiss me. No way. "I'd kick you in the small and danglies for getting fresh with me."

"Not the answer I was looking for." Deacon swept my legs out from under me and pulled me into his arms. I couldn't believe how strong he was, even though I should have guessed from how easily he'd carried me down the stairs at his house. I tried to elbow him in the jaw, but he ducked his head out of the way. Before I could do anymore damage to his face, he walked us over to the bench and dropped me on it.

He squatted and put one hand on the bench next to me. He looked so goddamn handsome from that angle. I couldn't decide if I wanted to rip his face off or rip his clothes off.

“I think you’re full of shit,” he said. “I think you want me to fuck you while those two old roosters watch. Did you get off seeing me touch myself this morning?”

I was so surprised to hear him cuss it took me a few seconds to understand his question. “Did I—what? No! That’s nasty!” *You were awake?*

“You think so?” Deacon rubbed his thumb across his chin a few times. “I think you’re lying. Maybe I should run and get McGinley to check.”

I glared at him and at the two guys watching us. “Go for it. She’ll probably turn you into frozen custard for bothering her.”

“McGinley’s not so bad.”

“Sure. You say that because she helped you. She didn’t knife you in the kidneys.”

Deacon smiled. “She helped me apprehend a criminal who deliberately deceived her. There. Doesn’t sound much like backstabbing when you say it like that, does it?” He drummed the tips of his fingers on the bench next to me. “McGinley aside, tell me what you really feel.”

“I really feel somebody should come and put you away for screwing around with your prisoner.” I propped my right foot on my left knee to put a bit of a barrier between Deacon’s face and my crotch. “What is this? Some kind of weird torture? Chase me down when I try to get away and then ask if you can *kiss* me? Don’t you see how fucked up that is?”

“Maybe.” Deacon closed his eyes, giving me a second to wonder if I could take him out with a punch to the jaw. He opened his eyes again before I decided. “If this is all so horrible for you, tell me you don’t want me.”

“I don’t...” I couldn’t finish the sentence. I’d never had any trouble lying before, but here I was, tongue frozen in my mouth. “All right, fine! You’re hot! Smoking fucking hot. I admit it. Is that what you wanted? I’m still not letting you into my pants. You kidnapped me. You forced me to sleep in your bed.”

“I told you why that was necessary.”

“So? I don’t care what the Law says. I tried to steal something. That’s all. All this, it’s way over the top.”

“I agree.” Deacon wrapped his fingers around one of the bench slats and rocked back and forth on his heels. “I don’t want to be chasing you around the city.” He did some funky rolling thing with his feet and stood up without

pushing off with his hands. “I’d rather be taking off what’s left of your clothes.”

I blushed. For real, blushed. Part of me was flattered that this maniac was interested in me. Maybe the biggest part of me. “Too bad! You gave me these clothes. No take backs!”

Deacon’s lips curled into a smirk. “Really? That’s your response? All right. Keep the clothes. You’re right. They were a gift.”

“Damn right they were!”

“What do you want to do now?”

Deacon kept shutting me up with his words, throwing me off balance. Did he really care what I wanted? I couldn’t tell. For all I knew, this was another step in a plot to torment me as much as possible. “I want you to let me go.”

“You know I can’t do that. The Law—”

“Fuck the Law! Your queen or whatever, she’s asleep, right? She won’t even know this happened. Not if you don’t tell her.”

“I have to tell her.” Deacon looked genuinely sad about that.

“So... what? You figured you’d corner me on this bench and bully me into sleeping with you? Nice romance, Hugh Grant.”

“I thought—” Deacon clenched and unclenched his hands a few times. “—I don’t know what I thought. You’re right. This was a terrible idea. I should have left you at the house and hired someone to keep track of you.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, and for the first time I saw he was just as off kilter as me. He put on a great front. Most of the time he was all confidence and in-your-face sexiness. Now, though, standing in front of me and that stupid bench, with that nosey old couple looking on, he seemed nervous, almost vulnerable. I realized I’d been playing this all wrong. I’d assumed the only way out of being his prisoner was to run away. If he really was into me, that opened up some interesting possibilities.

I wasn’t the kind of guy to use sex to manipulate people. One boyfriend that held out when he wanted something was all it took to let me know I never wanted to put someone else in that position. Deacon wasn’t giving me much of a choice. He wanted me, and I wanted my freedom. I bit my lip and choked back the little voice in my head that told me I wanted him too.

“I’ll make a deal with you.” I leaned back, slung my arm across the arm of the bench, and spread my knees wide. “You can have one night with me. Do whatever you want. I’ll give you what you need, but in the morning, you have to let me go.”

He was tempted. I could see it in the way his eyes closed halfway for a split second. He was thinking about what he’d do with me if he got me in his bed again. It wouldn’t be hard for me to fake enjoying it, probably since I’d be enjoying it for real.

“You have no idea how much I want to say yes,” Deacon said.

Oh I’ve got an idea. “So go ahead. Say it.”

“No,” Deacon growled with frustration. “I won’t lie to you. Your freedom isn’t mine to give. You forfeited it the moment you trespassed in my house, and you know it. If our situations were reversed, would you look the other way?”

“Hell yeah I would! I mean, it’s hard to think of a way I’d be able to pin you down and force you to do anything, but yeah. I’d let you go.”

“Even if it meant going against the wishes of your flock?”

I made a face when he called my family a *flock*. At least he didn’t call us a *murder*. “Crows don’t have stupid rules about property. If you can take it, it’s yours.”

“Maybe that works for birds, but you’re a man, too.” Deacon undid the bottom button on his jacket and sat down next to me. “Tell you what. If you agree not to fly the coop again, I won’t feed you any more saffron. You’ll be able to fly wherever you want, as long as you come back in time for your trial.”

“Well that sounds a hell of a lot better than squatting in your closet for a week. What’s the catch?”

“The catch is you have to actually come back, like I said.”

I looked sideways at him and lifted an eyebrow. “Okay, you’re not an idiot, and you have no reason to trust me. Lots of reasons not to, actually. Why do you think I’d ever come back?”

Deacon folded his hands together and rested them on his stomach. The shirt he was wearing under his suit was tight enough to show every one of his six outstanding abs. “Plenty of reasons. This city is your home. If you fly off, you’ll never be able to come back to Atlanta. I can locate you pretty much anywhere in the city, and if I don’t sniff you out, someone else will. There’s

also McGinley. Now that you've gotten her involved, she's obligated to see you to trial."

"Ooh, a lady with a fancy umbrella!" I did my best to look unimpressed. "I'm so scared!"

"You should be, but if you're too arrogant to recognize a threat when it's standing right in front of you doused with glitter, nothing I can say will fix you."

"So now I'm arrogant? You really know how to sweet-talk a guy."

Deacon shifted so his shoulder pressed against mine. His body was warm beneath his suit, as warm as the hot summer air swirling around us. "There's one more reason I think you'll stay. The sex will be so mind-blowing, you won't want to leave."

I choked out a laugh. "Wait, you're serious, aren't you? Man, you had your chance."

"I'm offering you a compromise." Deacon smirked again. "You know the concept, right?"

"Sure. It's the *concept* you can shove up your ass, because I'm not taking it. I walk, or you're not getting anywhere near the goods."

"Suit yourself." Deacon unlocked his phone and started fishing through his contacts. "I'll call the Chapel of Light and let them know to make room for one more."

I reached over and covered his phone with my hand. "You wouldn't."

"I don't want to, but you've made it fairly clear you won't behave under my supervision. If you won't accept my authority and do as you're told, I'll have to transfer you to someone who can watch you around the clock. The only organization in town with that kind of manpower is the Brotherhood."

"You're trying to blackmail me again." I jabbed an accusing finger into his thigh. That was a mistake. His leg was all muscly—hard and soft at the same time. Touching him made me want to see what was under his pants again.

"I don't extort men into sleeping with me." Deacon yanked his phone out from under my palm. "I only want them there if they want it. You don't want it, so I'm making other arrangements." He tapped something on the phone and held it up to his ear.

"Don't!" I tried to grab the phone, but he caught my arm and held it.

“Don’t what?” he asked.

I could hear the phone ringing. “Don’t send me back there.” I hung my head. “Please. Once was enough.”

Deacon slowly lowered his phone, but he didn’t let go of my arm. “I thought you might have paid the Radiants a visit or two. Don’t worry. I’m not going to send you to the Paladins. You were right. Stealing isn’t the worst crime you could have committed. You did inconvenience me, though. The least you could do is consider my offer.”

“The sex part or the not poisoning me part?”

“Both, if you want.”

I was still pretty sore about him clipping my wings, but he’d apologized for that. If I got over myself and tried to think rationally, I knew he hadn’t had many choices either. If Grandad had caught somebody sneaking around his townhome, he’d have shredded the guy’s face, or at least found a way to send him running for the hills. I believed Deacon didn’t want to be anybody’s jailer—my dig earlier about his performance was just me trying to get a rise out of him. I believed he wanted me, too. Why else would he go to so much trouble trying to make me as comfortable as possible when everything was awkward and strange? Why else would he sit this close to me and hold onto my arm like he never wanted to let go?

“All right,” I said finally. “You got me. I’ll stick around, for a little while. Your bear lady better not lock me away in a dungeon somewhere.”

Deacon grinned. “Doubt she will. That’d require actual effort. And paperwork. Artios hates paperwork.”

I shrugged. “So I guess you need to get back to your meeting now. I’ll just hang around here or something. There’s a park a few blocks away. Maybe I’ll take a walk. Since, you know, I can’t fly.”

Deacon rubbed his hand up my arm to my elbow and back down to my wrist, raising goose bumps everywhere he touched. “I canceled the meeting. Didn’t know how long I’d be chasing after you. Honestly, I thought you’d make it further than a block away.”

I gave him the stink-eye. “Could’ve gotten away if I’d had my wings.”

“I believe it. You’d have gotten us both into a heap of trouble, too.”

“Might’ve been worth it,” I muttered.

“So we’re agreed then?” Deacon must not have heard me, or he pretended he didn’t. “You won’t run away, and I’ll promise not to limit your movements.”

“You’re still holding my arm,” I pointed out.

Deacon rubbed his thumb across the thin scar on my wrist, from when Mitch was trying to teach me knife fighting. “Do you want me to let go?”

“Yes? No! Definitely no.”

Deacon brushed his fingers through my hair a few times, adjusting my bangs. That touch made me feel self-conscious, but kind of happy too. When his hand slid down to cup my cheek, I turned my face into his palm, enjoying the way his lines crisscrossed my skin.

“Make out!” yelled one of the two older guys that were watching. Deacon’s head whipped around like he’d just now noticed we had an audience. He pulled my head against his chest like he was trying to hide me from them. He was kind of rough. Not that I was complaining. He had a pretty amazing chest, and the fabric of his expensive shirt was smooth against my cheek. A few strands of his chest hair poked past his collar and tickled my skin.

“Let’s go somewhere a bit more private,” he suggested.

“There’s a park a few blocks from here,” I murmured against his chest.

Deacon wrapped his arm around my shoulders, and this time I didn’t resist. “I’ve got a better idea. Come on.”

He got to his feet, bringing me with him. I stuck my tongue out at the old couple as we strolled by. One of them gave me a friendly middle finger before they both turned and walked the other way.

Chapter Five

Deacon led me to one of the tallest buildings in Midtown, a huge high-rise stacked at least thirty stories up. There wasn't a door attendant outside the front entrance, but the place was plenty swanky enough to need one. Deacon waltzed in the front door and waved at the young guy manning the lobby desk.

"Great to see you again, Mr. Maynard!" The attendant picked up a tablet and gave it a few swipes. "Elevator's all set up. Have a wonderful evening!"

Deacon smiled and nodded, like this kind of attention was normal for him. When I thought about it, I realized he probably had people bending over backward to please him all the time. That thought made me wonder how many times he'd brought one-night stands here, since the attendant knew exactly what he wanted without having to ask. I wondered if all those dates had been as impressed as I was by the bespoke furniture in the lobby.

I kicked those thoughts to the curb so I could focus on how expensive everything in the lobby was. Looked like the elevators were plated with *gold*. "So the house in Buckhead, it just doesn't have enough room for your power tool collection?"

Deacon shrugged. "The house doesn't have a pool."

"Oh right. No pool. Of course."

The elevator let out a pretty chime, and the doors opened smoothly. Not rickety at all, not like the elevators in my mom's apartment building. We went up, and up, and up, until a bright, white "P" showed on the floor counter.

"You rent the penthouse?" I stared at Deacon. The man probably spent more on rent each month than I'd make in ten years.

"Of course not." He flashed both rows of white teeth at me. "I own it."

The elevator doors slid open, and a fresh breeze wafted in. Turned out the penthouse was a small cottage in the middle of a garden full of peach trees and sculpted bushes. Deacon had mentioned a pool—it was more like a moat, making a U-shape so it surrounded the cottage on three sides. The water was perfectly clear, flashing in the sunlight so bright I had to cover my eyes.

"Better than the park, right?" Deacon stepped out, turned, and held his hand out to me.

“Still not your princess, you tool.” I brushed past his hand. Didn’t make it far, because I had to stop and turn in a circle so I could gawk at all the sights. Someone had strung up a comfy-looking hammock, and there was a family of starlings singing creakily in the trees. I realized I recognized the place. I must have flown over the apartment building a hundred times, going about my business in Midtown. I’d never seen Deacon here, though, and I’d never flown close enough to appreciate how beautiful the place was.

“How much money do you have, exactly?” I toed the thick carpet of grass that grew right up to the edge of the elevator. The turf had a just-mowed, manicured kind of look.

Deacon stepped up next to me and folded his arms as he looked out at his domain. “Why do you want to know? Regretting that you didn’t set your sights higher than my watch?”

I glanced down at his hand. He was still wearing the watch. My fingers still itched to lift the piece off of him. Trying to get at it would probably end with me getting tossed off the side of the building and falling thirty stories. Without my wings, I’d just go splat on the concrete, so I kept my hands to myself. “Just feeling out what I’m getting into. You probably get your pizza delivered by helicopter, don’t you?”

Deacon pulled me close, pressed our hips together, and pointed at the cottage. “There’s a Transporter terminal in the kitchen. I can have them send us a few pies from my favorite place if you want.”

I couldn’t keep my jaw from dropping. “You get your food *teleported* up here?”

“Only when I’m working, usually.” Deacon grinned. He was obviously getting a kick out of watching me gawk at all the flash.

“Maybe we can order something later,” I mumbled. “I want to try out that hammock.”

Deacon held me back when I tried to break away. He twirled me so I was facing him. “The hammock can wait. Right now I’m going to throw you down on the grass and show you why you won’t ever want to run away again.”

He didn’t really throw me, but he did pick me up and laid me down with my back flat against the turf. The grass was warm and dry from all that hot Georgia sun. He settled his hands on either side of my chest and leaned in to kiss me. This close, his extra size made him seem huge and powerful. He kissed my chin

first, teasing. His beautiful suit was getting grass stains all over it, but he didn't seem to care. He kissed his way along the curve of my chin and tangled his fingers in my hair.

I was hard from the moment his lips first brushed my skin. My hips thrust up without any orders from my brain, and I felt Deacon getting thick and long next to me. We ground our cocks together, panting and sweating in the heat. Deacon kissed his way up my chin to the edge of my lower lip. I closed my eyes, ready for those amazing lips of his to line up with mine.

He didn't follow through. His mouth lifted off my skin. When I opened my eyes, he was struggling out of his tight jacket. He growled, and the deep, primal noise made my dick throb as it inched up to full mast. I almost laughed when I saw what the problem was. Deacon's shoulders were so wide his jacket was stuck, and his big, bulgy arms probably weren't helping.

Straddling me with his knees, he rolled his shoulders, trying to peel the jacket off. I grinned and reached up to help. Between the two of us, we got his arms out of the jacket. He hurled it twenty feet away, just far enough to land one of the sleeves in the edge of the pool. I was going to make fun of him for messing up his fancy threads, but he interrupted me with a real, perfect follow-through on his kisses.

He tasted amazing, all man and a salty tang of sweat. His tongue jabbed right past my lips, no hesitation and no more teasing. While he kept our mouths sealed together, his fingers fumbled at the buttons on my shirt. He growled again, sending vibrations shooting down my throat straight to my cock. "Been wanting to do that since you showed up at my place last night," he said.

I closed my hands around the back of his neck, pulling myself up so my mouth was close to his ear. "Don't stop."

He grinned evilly and cupped his hand over my cock. I bucked against his palm, throwing my arms back against the grass. He shimmied back a few feet and worked my fly open. I was already three-quarters of the way there, just from his kisses. I'd never responded to a guy this way before. I'd had plenty of first date sex, but this wasn't just a date, and it wasn't just sex. There was sex, and then there was soul-shattering, life-altering closeness. A very quiet, faraway voice in my head whispered the word "mate" as Deacon swirled his tongue around the tip of my cock.

When he pulled me into his mouth, he took a part of me. I didn't mind. That part belonged to him. He cupped my balls with a big, rough hand, and slid his

lips up and down and up and down. I held back against the tiny electric shocks that shot across my whole body, panting and squeezing my eyes shut. Even with me fighting it with everything I had, I came. I shot straight into Deacon's hot mouth and loved every crazy second of it.

When it was over, Deacon pulled away and started getting to his feet. I touched his chest and gasped for enough air to squeeze out a few words. "Where are you going? Don't you want me to return the favor?" I started to fall onto my back again.

Deacon caught me and held me up with one arm. "You'll get your chance." He played with my bangs again, completely messing up my look. "Before that, I want to get as deep inside you as I can go." He got up and disappeared into the cottage, leaving me to roll onto my back and stare up at the sky.

A cluster of clouds floated overhead, like my own personal shade. I wanted to be up there stretching my wings. If Deacon kept his promise, I'd be able to fly again soon. I wouldn't go far, maybe to Gran's house in Kennesaw, just to see if I could catch her. For some reason, I felt this need to tell her about Deacon. Just one day of him. Just one day and I was hooked. He was infuriating and domineering, but I had to admit it. I wanted more.

He'd done a lot of things that annoyed me. Taking away my wings—that was the worst of it. I wondered if the tugging feeling in my chest would go away once I took to the sky, once I could fly anywhere I wanted again. *Screw Kennesaw. I'm flying to the Bahamas.*

In the afterglow, it was easier to see he had reasons for every move he'd made. He was loyal and honest and fair, qualities I was starting to appreciate more than I ever thought I would. More importantly, I wanted him. I wanted him more than anything I'd ever wanted before in my life. I just wasn't sure if wanting him was worth getting tied down.

He came back with a bottle of lube. The label was shiny and gold. I wondered if there were gold flecks in the bottle. I hoped no one would be dumb enough to stick metal in their delicate bits, but I'd seen worse decisions happen. Deacon laid out next to me. "You'll be up there again, soon."

"Shit yeah I will!" Tossing out doubts like the trash they were, I kicked my way out of my pants and shimmied closer to Deacon. His bulky forearm made a surprisingly great pillow. He set the lube down between us and ran the tip of his finger down my chest, down my stomach, all the way down past my waist. I was never so glad to not be wearing underwear. Turning my head toward him, I

saw he was naked except for his watch. It was a decent look on him. More than decent.

“You know, anybody that flies over will see us lying here with our dicks out,” I said.

Deacon gave me a quick kiss and pawed my cock in a possessive way that almost got me going again, even though he'd just wrung me dry. “Let 'em watch.” He threw his other arm over my shoulders and pulled me in close. “You know they'll enjoy the show.”

His scent plus grass and sweat drove me crazy. He stroked my back, and it felt great, but I wanted more than just a stroke. I fished the lube out from between our thighs and popped the bottle open.

Deacon saw the lube in my hand and grinned. “You sure you want to put out on the first date? I might get the wrong idea.” He put on a good show of nonchalance. Might've even believed he didn't care, except his big, thick dick was poking me in the leg.

I kissed him and put the lube in his hand. “I always put out on the first date, or there's never a second date. You sure you want to spend the night with a sexy burglar? Slumming it with the lower classes isn't going to ruin your image?”

Deacon rumbled. The deep, powerful noise vibrated in his chest hard enough I could feel it echo through into my skin. His answer to my question was a big, slick finger in my ass. He slid in, slow and torturing, feeling around inside me for that perfect spot.

My nails bit into his skin as I clenched my hands and pulled closer and closer, trying to merge our bodies into one. I was so hot I could have burst again just from the one finger, but Deacon wasn't satisfied with my reaction. He added a second finger, stretching me open further and further, and this time he hit the spot. My whole body shook as a bolt of lightning shot through my nerves. I grabbed desperately for his cock and found it, hard and ready. I wanted him inside me, but he was in control, finger-fucking me until I couldn't think anymore.

I moaned. I tried to beg him to get on with it. Words wouldn't fit into my mouth. My hand glided up and down the length of his cock, and I felt blood pulsing through him. Finally he pulled his fingers out and flipped me over. I arched my back to shove my ass closer to him, trying to tease him into giving

me what I wanted so badly. He tolerated my shenanigans for a little while, then grabbed my hips and held me down.

His broad palms hugged my skin, made me feel safe and wanton all at once. With Deacon steering this ship, we might sail off the edge of the earth, but we'd never regret doing it. He thrust his hips forward, splitting my cheeks so he could fit his thick cock between them. He took his time, slowly sliding his cock across my entrance. Frustrated, I clamped down as hard as I could. His low groan of pure pleasure was my reward.

When he finally touched his cock to my hole, I almost imploded with anticipation. He eased his way in at first, wrapping an arm around my chest to get leverage. "Don't look now," he said. "There's a hawk circling above us. He's watching."

I mumbled something incoherent and clenched around the head of his cock. With my face pushed into the grass and both hands bracing my weight, I couldn't have looked up even if I'd wanted to. I didn't want to. I wanted Deacon inside me, up to his balls if he could manage it.

Pain creeped in as I stretched to fit more and more of Deacon. He felt huge and hot, filling me up until I thought I couldn't take anymore, always pushing further, driving us closer and closer together. This wasn't my first rodeo. I knew I had to relax to get what I needed. Sucking in deep breaths, I tried to calm my body's urge to resist Deacon's intrusion.

"Easy," he said. "Easy, Theo." He bent his head down and kissed my shoulder. "Shit. You feel so good. So fucking tight. Let me in, okay? Almost there."

Almost there? This fucker's cock was bigger than anything I'd ever handled. My hands tightened around fistfuls of grass as Deacon plunged in deeper and deeper. The pain was still there, but it was nothing compared to the blast of ecstasy that shot through me when his cock hit the same spot his fingers had teased seconds earlier.

While I twitched and tried not to scream with pleasure, Deacon wrapped his arms around my waist and rolled us over so I was on top. Gravity did the rest of our work for us, sliding me down those last, sweet inches. My ass bumped against his thighs, and he put his arms around me, holding me tighter than I'd ever been held.

To Be Continued...

Author Bio

Jake lives in Atlanta, Georgia, where he plays far too many video games and reads just the right number of fantasy novels. When he isn't writing, he enjoys walking the trails north of the city, dabbling in amateur photography, and singing in his car. His favorite place to work is in the library, holed up in the nonfiction section so he can look up facts about Tudor fashion (and other equally interesting topics!) during breaks.

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