I made myself pay attention to the all the twists and turns as the Crow led me back to Aunt Bea. I don’t truck with false modesty, so I could honestly say most strangers would have quickly been lost. Not only was the place a bit of a maze, we actually went through a door hidden behind a large painting of Bea herself. I wasn’t going to fool myself that the door was super secret or the only one in the grand place—I would bet Cletus’s eyepatch that the three-story building housing Beatrice’s Earthly Delights was twistier than a rabbit warren. The upside of being a driver like myself is that we have to memorize paths and maps, so I had a bit of an edge at Bea’s. I would be able to find my way back to her office if necessary. I didn’t think the need would arise, but you couldn’t be too prepared. The Hooded Crow helps those that help themselves.

In my absence, Bea had left. This wasn’t too much of a surprise—empires do not build themselves. Bea was a busy woman. Tella and Reed were still in the same room, sitting companionably in chairs, chatting. I know most people would get jealous walking in on that. Oh, Reed wasn’t beholden to me in any way, and I wasn’t about to make any advances. As flippant as he’d been about the whole thing, I thought it hurt him a great deal to bolt on his fiancé today. He obviously still held a lot of love for Tella, too. It seemed to me that Reed was the kind of man who made the tough choice to walk away from those he cared about when he knew it wasn’t going to work, and managed to do so in such a way that they stayed friends. Yes, Tella was a beautiful, smart woman and there was a lot to be jealous of, but honestly, I was more impressed by the fact that they stayed friends. That wasn’t an easy thing to do.

I collapsed into a chair next to Reed. “We have to sit on our hands for two hours.”

Reed winced, knowing that two hours would likely drive me up the wall.

Tella patted my hand sympathetically, noticed what she was doing, and grimaced. “That was condescending, wasn’t it? You don’t even know me, and I don’t know you—which means you don’t know I’m an affectionate person with friends and that anyone who shows up with Reed is automatically wired into my brain as such.”

Reed smiled at me, tight-lipped. “She also babbles when she’s nervous.”

Tella’s answering grin was sheepish. “It’s true.”

I reached out and patted her hand back. “I will take the gesture as it was meant, and I think we will be good friends.” Now it was my turn to grimace. “Well, if you ask Rey, I’m more trouble than I’m worth, but at least I’m entertaining.”

Tella laughed and I swear the room got brighter. She looked up as a petite woman in a suit stopped and knocked politely on the door frame. Tella shook her head and stood, holding up a finger to let us know to wait a moment as she spoke to the newcomer.

Reed reached out and grabbed my fingers. “You okay?”

“As okay as I could be,” I said, trying not to look at the hand Reed held or even move it. If I moved it, he might remember he held it, and I wasn’t sure he’d done it consciously. Apparently being around Reed was turning me into a moony twelve-year-old. “Thanks, by the way.”

“Least I could do,” Reed said. “Trust me.”

I glanced over at Tella. “I can’t believe you broke up with her. She’s amazing.”

Reed nodded. “She is, but we made better friends.”

“You loved her enough to set her free, huh?” I took one last glance at the stunning Tella, her head bent close to the other woman. “I can’t tell whether you’re a really good guy, or if you make poor choices.”

Reed laughed, surprised. “Both.”

Tella walked back over with an air of purpose, and Reed and I both straightened up, dropping hands. “We have a room open, and Bea insists that you use it.” When Reed and I both opened out mouths to protest, Tella stopped us with a hand. “She’s been following your progress, Otter, and knows roughly how long you’ve been driving. Take a break. The room has a shower and a bed. There is nothing you can do while you wait, so you might as well rest.”

“Thank you,” Reed said.

When it was clear that I still wanted to argue, Tella shook her head. “Think of it this way, even off in this corner room, people could stumble in here. They might see you. If you don’t take a room, you’re on display. Not a lot of people know what Slick Otter looks like. Let’s keep it that way, okay?”

“You win,” I said, getting up out of the chair, Reed following my example.

She hugged him again. “It was so good to see you. Don’t stay away so long next time, okay?”

“I won’t.” He hugged her off her feet again.

“Farrah will take you to your room.” Tella waved at the other woman, still standing by the door. Reed went to greet Farrah and it was my turn for a hug. Tella hauled me close. She even smelled good. Before she pulled completely away, she stopped, her hands on my shoulders, her eyes on mine. “It goes without saying that if you hurt him, I will track you down and no one would ever find the body.”

“It’s not like that,” I said. “But I understand.”

She tilted her head to the side, a fond look on her face. “Oh, that’s cute. Lie to yourself, Otter, but you can’t lie to me. It’s *exactly* like that. Make good use of the room. Someone will knock just shy of the two hour mark.” Tella dropped her voice to a whisper. “He’s ticklish behind the knees.” She patted my cheek and then shooed me away. “Go on then.”

I went to join Reed, staring back at Tella in confusion. She just smiled.

The room was really nice. I mean, I didn’t expect a trash heap or anything, but even I was impressed. A plush carpet full of purples and silvers covered most of the wooden floor. The large bed nestled against the back of one wall with a thick blue and silver bedspread already turned down. It was hot out, so someone had cleaned the fireplace and filled it with lit candles. Two wide chairs were arranged in front of the fireplace, a small table with a gift basket sat between. The basket was full of fruit, chocolate, a few small vials, and what appeared to be an array of condoms.

I couldn’t help it. I picked one up. “So classy.”

Reed laughed, shucking off his boots. “I told you, Bea is all about protecting her people. Go check out the bathroom.”

After I finished yanking off my own boots, I ran into the bathroom and was not disappointed. There was a shower big enough for several people, with a toilet modestly hidden to one side behind a half wall. The tile was a light blue and beautifully glazed. Across from the shower there was a large window, the sheer purple drapes obscuring what went on in the room, but not completely hiding it from the outside. In front of the window was a tub that was more of a hot tub than anything. It had *jets*, not to mention several bottles of scented oils and bubbles. The tub was already full of steaming water. Thick, fluffy towels were stacked in a filigreed silver metal shelving unit along the wall.

“If I die, bury me here.” Aunt Bea was a genius. If I was ever back here, I would rent the room just for the bathroom.

Reed went over to the shelves, dug out two towels and two robes. He handed one of the robes to me and stacked the rest of it on the floor next to the tub.

I stared at the robe blankly. The fabric was as soft as it looked.

Reed pawed through the bottles, settled on one, and popped the stopper, sniffing it. He smiled and added a generous pour to the water and turned on the jets. The water started to bubble. He grabbed the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head.

“What are you doing?” I wanted to say I looked away, but I tried to not lie to myself. I ogled. I was ogling. Half-naked Reed was worth an ogle, trust me. Leanly muscled, with a smattering of hair across his chest. A thin scar edged down his side.

“I would think that was obvious,” Reed said, reaching for his socks and showing me his back. “I’m taking a bath.”

People should write sonnets about Reed’s back, or at the very least a dirty limerick. Muscles moved and shifted and I caught a flash of color—a tattoo—on his shoulder. I stood there stupidly holding the robe.

“I should…”

Socks off, Reed reached for the buttons on his trousers. I stopped talking, my tongue suddenly thick. The trousers, along with undergarments, hit the floor. I stood there clutching my fluffy robe as a fully naked Reed climbed into the tub. It was a scene I would be replaying in my head until the day I finally keeled over and croaked.

Reed sunk into the water with a sigh, closing his eyes, his arms resting on the rim of the tub. After a full minute, he opened his eyes back up and looked at me. I hadn’t moved since Reed had started his glorious disrobing.

Reed laughed. “Are you going to get in, or what?”

I dropped the robe to join him, my clothes quickly falling alongside his on the floor. Reed didn’t pretend to look away, either. I hold no delusions about my appearance—I do well enough to know that I’m decent looking. I could hold no handle to Tella, and I’ll freely admit that. Measuring yourself against other people doesn’t bring you anything good. You just have to accept and let your body be, and if someone doesn’t like it, move on. I’m not going to waste time and energy on someone who doesn’t appreciate me.

But with Reed’s eyes on me, I felt beautiful. Wanted. Maybe this was a terrible idea, I don’t know. I’d met him in wedding whites just this morning, for Crow’s sake.

I climbed into the tub and Reed pulled me to him.

“This okay?” His voice is husky, his brown eyes patient. If I tell him it’s not okay, he’ll listen.

“I don’t know,” I say slowly, “Is it?” I brushed his hair back from his forehead with one hand. “You’ve had a bit of a day, if I recall.”

His hands settled around my hips, a faint smile on his lips. “It’s had its ups and downs. I’m counting this moment as a definite up.”

“Okay then,” I said, and slung my arms around his neck. His lips were soft and he tasted faintly of honey.

We made good use of the room.