
THE JEWEL AND THE THIEF
TALES OF OERTHIA BOOK 1
CALLUM ASHCROFT

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Chapter One

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The Crow and the Coin

Ravens had lived in Duskfen longer than anyone cared to remember. They perched on every gable and guttered lantern between the docks and the upper merchant quarters, watching the streets below with an intelligence that unnerved people. Devlin Crowe had always felt a kinship with ravens. They stole things, they went where they weren't welcome, and nobody could do anything about it.

He moved through the Coppergate quarter fluidly, finding the natural gaps in the crowd and taking the path of least resistance. The streets here were narrow and cobbled, the stones worn smooth and slick by three centuries of boots, heavy cartwheels, and the steady persistence of rain. Timber-framed buildings closed in on either side, their upper storeys leaning so far out they nearly touched across the gap, turning the lane into a dark tunnel. The evening crowd pressed between the walls, merchants heading home with their day's receipts tucked close, dock workers with their wages already half spent, and a pair of city watchmen standing at the corner with the resigned look of men who knew that whatever was going to happen tonight would happen regardless of their attention.

Devlin paid attention to everything, and let none of it show on his face.

The Gilt Sow was the kind of tavern that called itself respectable simply by charging more for the same ale. Its sign, a pig wearing a crude approximation of a nobleman's chain, hung above a door painted a faded, tired green. Through its windows, Devlin could see the warm press of bodies and the shifting noise that signalled the evening was well underway. He had been watching it for three evenings, working out the patrol patterns and the vantage points, making sure he hadn't missed anything worth missing.

The right opportunity arrived in the form of Osbert Finch. The wool merchant was hard to miss, a wide, self-satisfied man who moved through the world as though he expected it to arrange itself around his presence. He'd arrived by hired carriage, tipped the driver with a loud performance for the benefit of nearby strangers, and gone inside to hold court at a table near the fire. Finch's purse swung at his belt with every step, fat, unguarded, and secured by a simple brass hook that any child could have worried open.

Devlin had felt briefly insulted on behalf of the craft.

He gave it another quarter-hour, finished a circuit of the building, noting the rear exit, the kitchen window, and the narrow gap between the Gilt Sow and the cobbler's next door, and then entered the tavern.

Inside, the heat hit first. The thick, beery warmth of a crowd pressed into too little space, heavy with tallow candles and the ghost of last week's stew. Devlin breathed it in, letting his eyes adjust. Finch was at the table near the fire, holding court with four business as-

sociates arranged around him like men eager to remain in the good graces of someone who sold a lot of wool. A serving girl moved between tables. At the bar, a group of dock workers were getting progressively louder.

He ordered ale from the bar, knowing a man standing in a tavern without a drink was a man people remembered, and drifted toward Finch's end of the room. The merchant was mid-anecdote, gesturing expansively. Nobody was watching the edges of the room.

Devlin circled wide, positioning himself at the standing rail along the wall, close enough to make his proximity unremarkable. He took a slow sip of his ale and let his attention go soft, remaining aware of everything without focusing on any single point. This was the part that couldn't be taught, the stillness that allowed him to become a feature of the room, as unremarkable as the candle smoke.

Finch laughed at something and leaned back in his chair, making the purse swing.

Devlin set down his ale.

It was over in seconds. He moved in the gap left by the passing serving girl, utilising the brief interruption in the sightlines. His right hand found the brass hook by feel alone while his eyes stayed focused on the middle distance, the expression on his face keeping the same mild nowhere look of a man enjoying a quiet drink. The hook gave with a whisper of metal. His fingers closed around the purse before it could swing, drawing it up and close to his palm in a single motion.

On his way through the kitchen, he pocketed a bread roll from the rack by the hearth. It seemed wasteful not to. He was halfway to the window when a

shout went up behind him, Finch's voice, carrying over the tavern noise with pure outrage. Finch had noticed faster than expected.

Devlin moved quickly, cleared the window in one smooth motion, and dropped into the lane below. He did not drop into empty space. The two watchmen stationed outside had already heard the commotion and were already running into the back lane to investigate. Devlin landed squarely in their path, stumbling straight into the shoulder of the jaw-heavy officer and nearly knocking them both into the mud.

The watchman steadied himself, his eyes locking instantly onto Devlin with the furious focus of a man who had just had his suspect delivered directly to his chest.

"That's him."

Devlin didn't run, knowing running only attracted attention. Instead, he glanced over his shoulder with the bearing of mild interest, as though the two city watchmen emerging from the alleyway opposite were a minor curiosity rather than a significant professional inconvenience.

They were large men. The one on the left was broad-shouldered and thick-necked, with a jaw like a siege implement. The one on the right was short but almost as wide, a squat, barrel-chested man whose head connected directly to his shoulders without the formality of a neck. Both had their hands on their batons.

"Gentlemen," he said pleasantly. "Lovely evening for a walk."

"Don't move," said the jaw-heavy one.

"Of course." Devlin smiled. "In fact, I'll stand perfectly still while you chase this."

He flicked a bright silver piece from his own pocket high into the air, and while both watchmen's eyes tracked it on instinct, he turned and bolted down Coppergate Lane.

They were faster than he'd expected. Most watchmen gave up after the first corner, but these two did not. He could hear them behind him, the jaw-heavy one's boots marking a heavy rhythm, the barrel-chested one striking a quick percussion, and the gap between them was not growing fast enough.

He took the left at Render Street without breaking stride, ducked under a low-hanging sign, and cut right through the covered passage between the tanner's and the grain merchant's. It was a shortcut that only worked if you knew to crouch at the third beam. He crouched. The sudden sound of a watchman's skull connecting with old timber suggested at least one of them had missed the layout.

One down.

The barrel-chested one had better instincts, because his footsteps barely faltered. Devlin emerged from the passage onto Silt Row and immediately revised his route, knowing the long, open street gave a fast runner behind him too clean a line.

He went up instead.

The drainpipe on the side of the chandler's shop was old, rusted iron, groaning under his weight. He was a few feet up before the watchman reached the base and clamped a thick, iron grip around his ankle. For one unpleasant moment, Devlin hung suspended between

the drainpipe's reluctant support and the watchman's considerable conviction.

"Got you," the man said.

Devlin looked down, then glanced at the drainpipe bracket above him, which had pulled half-free from the wall. He did the arithmetic.

"Temporarily," he said.

He grabbed the bracket with both hands and wrenched it free. The pipe shrieked and lurched outward, swinging him in a wide arc away from the wall. The watchman's grip broke. Devlin let go at the top of the swing, caught the edge of the chandler's signboard, and rolled up onto the flat roof in a single untidy motion that he would later describe as perfectly controlled.

He lay on his back for a moment, staring at the night sky and breathing. Then he stood up, rolled his shoulders, and walked across the rooftops of Silt Row with his hands in his pockets. Below him, the watchman said something that the Watch's code of conduct almost certainly didn't permit.

The rooftops of the Coppergate quarter were navigable if you knew the levels, the old buildings stepped up and down across centuries of expansion. Devlin knew the levels. He crossed three buildings unhurriedly, listening to the city settle into its nighttime rhythms.

He was halfway across the cooperage roof when a lantern swept up from the street and caught him square.

"There! On the roof!"

He glanced down. The barrel-chested watchman was standing in the lane below with his lantern and

baton. Beside him was a third watchman Devlin hadn't accounted for, younger, already charging toward the cooperage's external staircase with something to prove.

Devlin stopped congratulating himself and ran.

He dropped six feet onto the lower extension, took the corner at a blistering pace, and came down the far staircase three steps at a time into the service lane behind the Saltfish Market. The younger watchman was fast in a straight line, but Devlin wasn't running in one. He cut left between two storage sheds, right through the fishmonger's unlocked back gate, and came out into the alley at a dead sprint as the footsteps faded behind him.

* * *

The alley behind the Saltfish Market was a place where broken crates and split barrels accumulated in the dark. Tonight it was serving as the temporary home of Caper, who was sitting on an overturned barrel eating a massive leg of mutton, completely unbothered by the distant shouting.

Caper was not a complicated man. He would have been the first to admit this, if the concept of complexity had ever occurred to him long enough to be dismissed. He was enormous, the kind of size that made doorframes a daily negotiation, with a neck like a ship's mast and hands that could crack walnuts without the walnuts having much say in the matter. His sword, propped against the alley wall, was a comically large two-handed weapon that he habitually swung one-handed simply because it hadn't crossed his mind that he shouldn't.

Devlin arrived at speed, skidded on a patch of damp cobble, corrected his balance, and came to a stop three feet away.

"Getting chased again?" Caper asked without looking up from his mutton.

"Briefly." Devlin checked over his shoulder. No footsteps. He allowed himself a breath. "You're in my hiding spot."

"This isn't a hiding spot. It smells like fish."

"All of Duskfen smells like fish. The fish is not the problem." Devlin slumped against the wall.

Caper tore off a piece of mutton and chewed it thoughtfully. "I thought you were meant to be a good thief."

"I am an accomplished thief, Caper. The theft was flawless. The running afterwards was a minor administrative issue that I have since resolved." He gestured vaguely at the empty lane. "Note the complete absence of watchmen."

Caper looked at the empty lane, then back at Devlin. "So you lost them."

"I lost them with style, yes. The problem is that Finch's purse has about half what I expected in it, which means either the wool trade is suffering or the man keeps a secondary purse somewhere, and now I'll never know which."

Caper considered this with slow gravity. "Did you need the money that badly?"

"I always need money badly. That's the nature of money." Devlin fished through the purse and counted by touch. "Enough for two rooms at the Tallow House and a few days' worth of meals, if we're sensible."

Caper looked at him.

"If you're sensible," Devlin corrected. "You eat like a garrison."

"I'm big."

"You're enormous. It's a genuine achievement." Devlin turned his head, studying him. "I once calculated what I've spent feeding you. I've decided never to do that again."

Caper tore off another piece of mutton. "I don't cost you anything."

"Caper. Last week you ate our entire food budget for three days in a single sitting and then looked genuinely confused when I suggested that might be a problem."

"I was hungry."

"You're always hungry. It's your defining characteristic. If someone asked me to describe you, I would say: large, hungry, hits things. In that order."

Caper thought about this with earnest deliberation. "What's wrong with that?"

"Absolutely nothing," Devlin said pleasantly. "I find it deeply reassuring. The world makes sense when you're in it. The sun rises, the tide comes in, and Caper is hungry. I did nearly get caught tonight, incidentally. One of the watchmen grabbed my ankle while I was hanging off a drainpipe."

"Did you fall?"

"No, I did not fall."

"Then you're fine."

"I am fine, yes," Devlin said, "but I felt the near falling and the ankle grabbing warranted at least a mild expression of concern."

Caper looked at Devlin steadily. "You're fine," he

said again, considering the matter settled.

Devlin opened his mouth, closed it, and then laughed honestly. There was something restful about Caper's simplicity. The world was complicated and full of people who wanted things from you, and then there was Caper, who wanted mutton and uncomplicated answers. Devlin found he couldn't entirely argue with the philosophy, even if he was constitutionally incapable of living by it.

He pocketed the purse and rolled his neck until something clicked. "Kane find anything?"

"He went north. Said he'd be back before dark." Caper glanced at the sky, which was very dark indeed. "He's late."

* * *

Kane was not late. He had been where he needed to be, doing what needed to be done, and had arrived when that was finished.

He came back over the northern wall via a sequence of handholds cut into the old stone where a demolished watchtower had once stood, invisible unless you knew to look. Kane knew. He had spent some time learning every wall, approach, and sightline in and out of Duskfen. A ranger without knowledge of his terrain was just a man with a bow, and Kane had never been content to be merely that.

He stopped at the top of the wall, resting one hand on the parapet, reading the city below to pick out the details that mattered. The Watch patrol patterns. The torches along the merchant quarter. The two men loitering near the north gate's secondary arch, too com-

fortable in their position, who had been there when he'd left three hours ago and were still there now. Kane was fairly certain they were bad at surveillance.

He let the observations settle and dropped silently down into the city.

He moved through the upper alleys without sound, placing each foot with deliberate care to distribute his weight. It was a habit built over years in wilder terrain than this: forest floors where a snapped twig meant going hungry, mountain passes where silence was a matter of survival. The city was louder, which gave him cover, and its patterns were predictable.

His bow was unstrung across his back; the quiver at his hip held twelve arrows, two more than he had when he left that morning. He had spent the afternoon tracking down the shafts he had let fly earlier in the week, hunting through the mud of the low ditches and pulling one clean out of a rotten timber boundary post. Each arrow he made himself from carefully selected materials, knowing the difference between a good arrow and a poor one was the difference between a clean outcome and a complicated one. Leaving one behind felt like leaving part of himself.

The others were in the Saltfish alley, marked by the faint amber cast of the small lantern Caper always carried so other people wouldn't walk into him. Kane had spent time considering this logic and had concluded it was perfectly sound.

He dropped from the alley's low roof and landed without announcement.

Caper looked up. "You're late."

"I'm not." Kane crouched and began re-examining

one of the retrieved arrows for straightness, sighting down its length with one eye closed. His voice was even and unhurried. "The north road is being watched. Three men, hired, not Watch. They're wearing Merchant Guild colours but they're not guild men: wrong posture, too comfortable with the swords."

"Crane's thorough, I'll give him that," Devlin said.

"He's not thorough," Kane said, without looking up from the arrow. "He's patient. There's a difference. Thorough men can be hurried. Patient ones wait you out." He stopped. "The road west is clear. If we need to move quickly, that's the way."

"We don't need to move quickly," Devlin said. "Where are we going?"

Kane gave him a look that communicated that the question of how long they stayed was not settled. He went back to his arrow; the fletching on the recovered one was slightly loose. He began working at it with patient attention, letting the others talk around him like a river letting rocks sit in its bed.

* * *

She had been in the alley for some time before any of them noticed.

This was not unusual for Sian, who had a gift for occupying space without disturbing it, easy to overlook like a shadow. She had learned it young and had never quite managed to unlearn it. She was sitting on a crate near the alley's far end, a small leather satchel on her lap, watching them with wide, quiet eyes.

Caper was straightforward, solid, and reassuring. She found she liked him immediately. Devlin was more

complicated, an intelligence moving quickly behind his eyes, always evaluating beneath his practised pleasantness. The third one, crouched over his arrow, she couldn't read at all.

She was still deciding what to do when Devlin noticed her.

He turned, saw her, and felt the familiar minor vertigo of realising someone had been present without his knowledge. She watched surprise and rapid calculation cross his face, finding the performance rather impressive.

"How long have you been there?" he asked.

Sian considered the question seriously. "A while," she said, her voice soft and carefully measured. People sometimes mistook this for timidity.

"The entrance is back that way." He pointed.

"I know. I came the other way." She didn't elaborate. Then her gaze settled on Caper's left forearm, where a gash from a recent fight was poorly bandaged with a strip of his own shirt. The edges were red with a tightness around the skin.

"That's infected," she said.

Caper looked at his arm with mild interest. "It's fine."

"It isn't." She was already opening her satchel. "It will be, but it isn't yet."

She worked quickly, producing a small clay jar of drawing salve and a roll of proper linen bandage. She was shorter than she'd seemed sitting down, yet the calm authority with which she crossed to Caper was remarkable. He gave her his arm without argument. This massive man simply extended his limb and

watched her with uncomplicated curiosity, like a child waiting to see what happened next. She found she liked him even more for it.

Her fingers found the edges of the wound with focused attention. Then she let the other thing come, the gift she usually kept carefully leashed, letting it move through her hands like warm water finding its level. It was a visceral memory of health, pressed back into flesh that had forgotten it.

Caper's look shifted to faint surprise.

"What is that?" he asked.

"Healing," she said simply, letting it use her as a conduit rather than fighting it.

Devlin watched her work with a calculating expression, while Kane catalogued it from the corner of his vision. She was aware of both of them and chose to ignore them. When she finished, she wrapped the linen neatly and stepped back, feeling the familiar mild exhaustion that followed.

"You should keep it dry for two days," she told Caper.

"I'll try." He flexed his fingers with cautious wonder. "Thank you."

She nodded once. Caper looked at her with simple appreciation, unclouded by complication, so she decided she might stay a little longer. She sat back down on her crate.

"You have a name?" Devlin asked.

"Sian."

"Just Sian?"

She looked at Devlin steadily. "For now."

He accepted this with a small nod. "Where are you

going?" he asked.

Sian looked at the alley entrance, then at the dark street beyond it, then back at him. "I don't know yet," she said. "Where are you going?"

Devlin glanced at Kane, who didn't look up from his arrow, then at Caper, who had resumed eating his mutton. He looked at the purse in his pocket, the city beyond the alley, and the shade of trouble that Duskfen wore at night like a second skin.

"That," he said, "is an excellent question."

* * *

The raven on the alley's gable watched all four of them for a long breath: three visible in the lamplight, and a fourth on a crate at the far end of the alley who had arrived considerably earlier than any of them had noticed. Then it spread its wings and flew east over the rooftops of the Saltfish Market, the cooperage, and the covered passage between the tanner's and the grain merchant's, until it reached Coppergate Lane, where a bright silver coin lay on the cobblestones exactly where it had landed. The raven dropped, picked it up, and flew away into the dark. It had, all things considered, been a more productive evening than most.

Keep reading

That is chapter one. There are twenty-three more, and a prologue.

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