

MANDA SCOTT

ANY

HUMAN

POWER

sample chapters



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# Book One

## — THE PROMISE —

*Just because you die, doesn't mean you get to be wise.*

– Chris Luttichau

# PROLOGUE

February 2008

A grey midweek afternoon; raining, warm for the time of year.

The crow stoops straight out of the sun, spears into cloud and is lost for a while. It emerges into the kind of dreich drizzle that makes an umbrella seem like overkill, but still keeps the wipers moving intermittently on a stream of ambulances lining up outside the hospital below.

The hospital is the crow's target, specifically, a single occupancy room on the third floor with a west-facing window outside which stands an ash tree, skeletoned by winter and sagging under a week's weight of rain.

A final sweep brings the crow to rest in the tree's crown. From here it skip-hops down to a long branch that has grown parallel to the window ledge, close enough to see in to the solitary bed. The branch is a perfect diameter for a long sit: nine days and nine nights in winter weather. Nine, the number of Odin, and thrice three, the number of Bride, both of them deities of death, birth and battle.

Time is what we make of it, and this crow is the very embodiment of patience. Only slightly grumpy, it hunches its shoulders, sidles closer to the tree's trunk and settles in to wait.

Presently, a new occupant is brought into the room and installed in the bed: Alanna Penhaligon, sixty-two years old, grey-haired, and not known, if we're honest, for her patience.

# CHAPTER ONE

Nine days later

‘Lan?’

Finn tapped lightly on my arm. His gaze sought mine, which was odd enough for me to meet it.

‘When you come home,’ he said, ‘can we—’

I thought I hadn’t moved, but one eyebrow must have risen a hair’s breadth because he bit off the rest of the sentence and his gaze skittered sideways to the ash beyond the window and the crow that waited there.

It was a patient crow. It had been waiting for days. I thought perhaps there was more than one and they were rotating in shifts, just as Finn was doing with his mother. He was very nearly fifteen by then, which was plenty old enough, apparently, for Maddie to leave him at my bedside, watching while I drifted off to a seashore, somewhere he’d never been . . .

It was a wild place, that shore, with rocks and fierce waves and—

Another tap, braver. ‘Can we go to sit on the hill at dusk and watch the crows going to bed?’

Clever boy. He’d lived with me long enough to know that if I were given a choice of what to do with any free evening, I’d climb up to the hillside above the farm and sit for an hour or so watching the crows settle in for the night.

So, on every level, that was a smart question, not least because it wasn’t remotely what he’d been going to ask before my blasted eyebrow twitched. He’d had his World of Warcraft face on, the slightly-not-here look that meant at least half of him was away killing Orcs in the digital landscapes of Azeroth.

I didn’t think anyone else recognised that look. It was our secret.

Sixty-two-year-old grandmothers aren't supposed to play World of Warcraft. Teenagers are, although their mothers have a tendency to impose curfews and restrictions and would be aghast if they knew the ease with which both were circumvented.

Finn's mother in particular would have had screaming kittens if she'd known who was helping him do the circumventing, but he'd left home and moved in with Kate and me by then, working through the teenaged angst of a fatherless boy. We were in Suffolk and Maddie was in Scotland and he could have been dealing drugs or crashing motorbikes and she wouldn't have been any the wiser. Warcraft seemed a pretty tame option, all things considered.

I didn't introduce him to the game, I swear. It was just that when we needed a way to bond with the twelve-year-old who had called us out of the blue from Cambridge train station one evening late in October of 2005, it seemed useful to let him draw me deeper into his latest addiction.

He was brilliant and I was not, but as the years progressed, he stayed true to the partnership we built. We were never, therefore, in the top percentile, but good enough to join a solid ten-player team to fight in the player vs player battlegrounds and make the kinds of friendships that grow out of saving each other's (digital) lives.

We joined a guild called ReadyCheck and helped them organise server tournaments once a month where the best teams could slug it out for rankings on a clunky website that Finn set up to collate all the scores. And that was us: both addicted, both having fun, and definitely bonded.

And now my co-conspirator had his tournament look on. He'd been desperate to play since an Orc Warlock had vaporised him near the end of last month's final match. A month's a long time though. Things had changed. Crows, for instance, had come to sit in the tree outside—

'Lan?' He was still looking straight at me. I thought, in fact, he'd fixed his focus on the place between my brows, so it could seem as if he were making eye contact without actually having to do it, but even this was pretty good.

And because he was trying, and because the crow was not going to be patient forever, and because today was . . . what it was, I

nodded for water and when he supported my head with one hand and dribbled it off the spoon into my mouth with the other, I saved enough to let some words flow.

‘Finn, my love, I’m dying. There is no coming home from here. You know this.’

I’d been right about the between-the-brows thing because now his gaze snapped tight to mine and the feeling was quite different. His face had gone blank, a shield covering a shatteration of feeling. Except, of course, it didn’t cover anything.

‘Hey.’ I tapped his arm as he had tapped mine. ‘We’ve been talking about this for months. It’s fine. Dying happens to all of us. I just get to know when.’

Soon, obviously, but I didn’t need to belabour things. Not when I could see the crow in the fat shine of a tear when before I’d had to move my arm to get the drip bag to swing clockwise about five degrees and hope to catch the reflection on the backswing. Or wait for the particular nurse who understood these things. Nancy. She had a mirror that made crow magic. She was off shift by now, which was sad. I didn’t think there was time left to say good—

‘What happens, Lan? When you die?’ He was using words to draw me back to the room: always was a clever lad.

‘No idea.’

‘Lan, it’s your *job*.’

Well, yes. And, ironically – one could even say arrogantly and stupidly – I really had thought I was up to speed with all the possibilities of this. What I had lately discovered was the ocean of difference separating a lifetime’s academic exploration of existing and historical indigenous cultural beliefs concerning the metaphysics of death . . . and the actual lived (sorry) experience of it.

My thinking had become significantly more specific in the months since an oncology registrar who looked as if she’d had no sleep for weeks fixed her gaze on her notes and said I had multiple myeloma and while this wasn’t amenable to surgery I could have chemo if I wanted (I didn’t) but perhaps not to plan too far ahead. So, I’d had time to consider the implications with more personal interest than I’d ever done before, but there were still way more gaps than certainties.

I was fairly confident the shoreline that kept nudging into my

awareness was the Between, the transition zone said to link the lands of life to the lands of death. The Tibetan Book of the Dead names this place as one of the six Bardos. Other cultures have other names, and we all have different landscapes. You might see it differently when your time comes: a forest leading into a meadow, maybe, or the boundary of a treeline high on a hill, a riverbank, a desert oasis: what matters is the edge-ness of this place, and that it calls to you.

I have always loved wild seas: there's something captivating about the sharpness of fierce, salted air, the feel of it whisking your hair and the way the sun shines across the water, so bright, so straight, like a roadway to the skies.

Without exception, everyone I'd ever spoken to had said to go towards the light. The sun was the brightest thing I'd ever seen and I could feel its pull more strongly with every passing heartbeat.

Everyone had said, too, that the people gathered there would be the ones I'd trust most to guide me on the next phase of the journey. I was waiting for Kate, but so far I'd only heard Robbie.

It made a kind of sense. He'd been dead for decades when she'd only beaten me to the finish line by a handful of months, so (perhaps? One of the bigger unknowns) he'd had more time to get to know the landscape on the other side of the line and knew his way back to the borderlands.

Also, we'd known each other longer, which may have counted for something. Robbie was the first deep, true friend of my adult life, the first person I came out to, and he to me; the first one I could talk to about the things that mattered. We met over a Bunsen burner in the biochemistry lab and each recognised a kindred spark in the other, for all that he was a bishop's son and I was a farmers' daughter. We were both only children, which had its own stigma in those days, and the rest was too near the surface for it not to flash like a Belisha beacon.

We became each other's shadows, talking, talking, talking, letting out all the words we'd held inside for what felt like forever. Everyone thought we were an item, so when some idiot drunk ran him over on Christmas Eve, the bishop invited me down to Taunton for the funeral early in the new year.

I took the train into what Robbie had always called Enemy Territory and I had always thought was an exaggeration. I was



Scottish and young and while he had said often enough that the English upper classes considered overt displays of emotion to be on a par with public sex, I hadn't understood – until I stood weeping among a host of black-garbed, stone-eyed Anglicans and felt their disdain burn acid on my soul.

Only his cousin was different: Connor, the Irish one, who was training to be a priest, but kept a low profile at the funeral because the Reformation wasn't that long ago in their scale of things, and a man displaying Papist affinities ranked lower than a woman displaying emotion. He had riotous black hair, longer than mine, and wore a black linen jacket that almost hid his collar. I was amazed they'd let him come.

We found each other in the shadows where their scorn couldn't reach, and so, at last, I had someone I could ask the question that burned inside. 'Where is he now? What happens next?'

'Oh, Lan . . .' Connor cradled me close. He was bigger than Robbie, a grand, wild oak of a man with a soft Galway voice. He smelled of woodsmoke and hot iron and the sheer strength of him held me whole. 'Do you want what my brethren would tell you? Or the bishop?'

I laughed snot onto his beautiful jacket. 'Hardly.'

'Good. Because if I know anything, it's that both sides have lost all sense of the truth somewhere in these past two thousand years.'

'Someone must know.' Indignation felt sharp and hot and good.

'I would like to think so. Just not anyone here.' Holding me out at arm's length, he thumbed the tears from my chin, then drew me in and planted a chaste kiss on the crown of my head. 'Maybe you could find out, eh? Go find the people who have the knowing and then bring it back to those who have forgotten. That would be a grand and lovely service to the world. A good remembrance for Robbie.'

I explored the idea, searching all its hidden angles and found none I didn't like. 'I could prove the bishop wrong.'

'You could publish whole papers proving him wrong.' When Connor grinned, I could see his cousin in him, and something older, like a wild Irish hero, come down from the hills. 'That would be bold.'

In the Ireland that suffered under the yoke of England, being ‘bold’ was seriously bad. When the Republic recovered itself, bold became exceptionally good.

I grinned back at him, feeling my face stretch with the strangeness of it. ‘It would, wouldn’t it?’

We skipped breakfast the next morning and shared a taxi to the train station. Connor headed west, for the ferry to Dún Laoghaire. I travelled straight back to Cambridge, where I ditched a medical degree for anthropology: the whole of my life’s trajectory redirected by the power of death, and a five-minute conversation with a man whose voice had melted my bones.

I had my one big question – what happens next? – and spent the best part of the next four decades asking it of people who might reasonably be expected to provide an answer. Among the clutter of cultural overlays, they all said more or less the same three things:

First: those whom we had loved in life and who had loved us in return (unrequited crushes didn’t count) would come to guide us from the lands of life to the lands of death;

Second: it mattered a great deal to make this crossing with full awareness of who and where we were. In their eyes, the Western habit of medicalising death was no saner than our habit of medicalising birth, and both were evidence of cultural insanity;

Third: it wasn’t a good idea to hang around in the Between. Bad things happened if the dead didn’t get on with being dead and instead hung around to tread on the toes of the living.

I did not plan to hang around: this, I will swear this on whatever you can find that we both hold sacred.

I planned to step consciously into death, and believed I knew how. I had, in fact, been practising every night for several decades on the instructions of my earliest teacher, a young Mongolian woman who had taught me that our dreams were a practice ground for being dead and anyone with sense would use the experience they offered to good effect.

Her name was Uuriintuya, which meant something like Shining Dawn, and I met her when I was a new postgrad, too young to know that real academics observed their subjects but didn’t (absolutely did

not, under pain of excommunication from the ivory tower) practise the things they so meticulously recorded.

With the optimism of youth, I'd managed to pull in some grant money for six months in the Mongolian Steppe, and then on the second day, embodying the noun too literally, I stumbled getting out of the Land Rover and broke my ankle.

Uuri was six years older than me in actual years, and several centuries in wisdom. She had dreamed both my coming and my fracture far enough in advance to have ordered a pair of Western-style crutches and some plaster of Paris, neither of which were a normal part of her healing repertoire.

She offered to fix me, and I accepted without asking what 'fix' actually meant, although, to be honest, if she'd spelled it out in words of one syllable I would not have understood.

When I considered them at all, I thought dreams were night-time neuronal twitches that gave rise to a Jungian jungle of hidden metaphors and were generally best ignored. In Uuri's world, by contrast, dreaming was a deliberate act undertaken to shift someone from the mundane world to the land of the gods, guides and spirits, in order to ask for help. It could be practised while awake or asleep and was as essential to life as eating and drinking. The children of her people learned the basics around the time they learned to talk.

This being the case, it took a while before she realised I couldn't remember my dreams. The moment when she did so was ... memorable.

When she calmed down enough for us to talk, she was genuinely aghast that I had survived into my early twenties without understanding – without practising nightly – the essential fact of life: to wit, that if I could remember my name and state while asleep (I am Alanna Penhaligon and I am asleep) then I could do the same when newly dead and thus make a swift crossing to the Lands of the Dead; this last being fundamental to the welfare not only of the dead person themselves, but for the whole of their community.

I didn't believe either that this was possible or necessary. We argued. I lost. As punishment (she called it education), she held me in a state of grit-eyed exhaustion for the next nine days, waking

me whenever I fell asleep and making me tell her what I'd been dreaming.

When I had provided dreams colourful enough to keep her happy, she moved on to gaining awareness within the dream: look at your feet, look at your hand, look at the sun and the moon and the horses and the eagles and anything else that arises both in waking and in your dreams and ask yourself, 'Am I dreaming?'

If in doubt, write your name, look away and look back at it again. If you can still read it, you're either not dreaming or have been practising this a long, long time. No danger of this in my case; it took me a decade just to reliably remember my name. I am Alanna Penhaligon and I am asleep is fine when you're actually awake, but it's a lot harder than it sounds when you're not.

Anyway, in Uuri's theory, when you've got this nailed, you can begin to interact with a series of progressively more dangerous spirits, guides and gods with whom you can develop reciprocal relationships. The reciprocity is crucial, and there is a whole other curriculum that teaches what each god, guide or spirit values so you can offer the appropriate gift. I learned this on my third trip out, about a decade later, when she deemed me sufficiently adept to make use of it safely.

This first round of education spanned the length of time it took for a fractured talus to heal, plus extra for suppuration that I'm pretty sure wouldn't have happened if I'd been smarter. In the end, though, I had remembered my own name well enough through the length of one long night to find a guide of whom I could ask the question I had memorised, and to which I could not possibly have known the answer. The response I brought back into the waking world was proof that the whole thing hadn't been a fake.

None of this was reliable, or even necessarily repeatable, but good enough that Uuri deemed me safe to let loose back into the world. There were five-year-olds in her family more proficient, but they weren't expected to survive in a culture where the mere concept was career kryptonite.

I was and I did. The trip flipped some inner gate from not-knowing what real academics thought or said or did to not-caring,

except I was careful who I spoke to thereafter, and even more careful who I chose as teachers (aka ‘research subjects’).

I taught the kids, too. Correction, I taught Kate about six months after we met, when it was clear she wouldn’t either leave or have me sectioned, and then I taught Maddie when she was old enough to walk away if she didn’t like it.

With her blessing, I tried to teach her children as they came along. Kirsten got it the best. Niall the least, Finn somewhere in between. I never found the right incentives. ‘You’ll be glad you can hold on to a clear sense of self when you’re dying’ doesn’t have a whole lot of traction with the under-tens.

It’s true, though. Lying on the hospital bed in Addenbrookes, Cambridge (the original one in East Anglia, England, not any of the copies around the world), in those last days with my tongue turned to boot leather and my joints filled with fire ants and every breath a labour, I could hear Uuri in my head, her voice dry as the skull of the Steppe eagle that spun on its thread over the fire. ‘Every night you walk through the lands of the dream. If you can remember who you are from dusk until dawn, you will remember it, too, when the final night comes. Knowing who you are is what lets you walk clearly into the sun.’

So, with the dusk of this final night approaching, I walked along the wild sea’s shore, watching the edge places where sea met land and land met sky and looked at my hands, my feet, the crow sitting high in a tree on the headland and kept on telling myself, I am Alanna Penhaligon and I am—

‘Lan?’

*What?*

‘Lan, don’t go!’

Finn.

It was like a tightrope, my name: a thing to walk along from one high place to another and never mind the drop beneath. Never did like heights.

‘Lan, you need to tell me about dying. What happens. What it’s all about. Nobody else will.’

Not true. Maddie would do her best. We’d had a lot of conversations about death these past few months since she’d come

down from Glasgow to take care of Finn. By December, she was pretty clear on the basics and she wasn't shy of broaching the topic with the medics who had a thousand euphemisms for passing over or passing on and jolted as if she'd stabbed them with a cattle prod when she cut through the mess and spoke the word 'death' aloud.

I was proud of her, truly. We'd done a good job of rearing her, Kate and me. She was—

'Lan, *please.*'

A rope walk. One step after another, inch by inch, back to this boy who holds my heart in his hand. Thing is, I'm not enjoying the whole physicality of living right now. Breathing hurts. My mouth is an ashcan and—

'*Lan!*' Ouch, that was sharp. He was never a sharp lad, Finn; too kind-hearted and decent. Should have called him Robbie, but it wasn't my say and Maddie wanted to honour his Irish ancestry, so—

I'm back. Let me focus a moment. One . . . two . . . three . . .

Finn's gaze pounced on mine, grab-holding me in the place where he was real. His eyes were deep brown, slow-moving, like a mountain river. I could have drowned in them then, but he wanted me present, so I focused instead on the rest of him, the bits that were less of Maddie and more of his father.

Eriq Karim was Moroccan and he may not have hung around long after the thrusts of fatherhood, but he gave Finn his beautiful, smoothly olive cheeks and his thick, blue-black hair drawn back in a high ponytail so that it seemed short from in front. His was a face made to soak in the sun, but it was the middle of winter, so he looked a bit sallow.

I love him so very much.

Hard to stare at him for long, though; staring hurt. And his face kept swinging in and out of focus in a way that left me feeling sick. I let my gaze drift past his face and shifted my arm to move the saline drip bag the few degrees necessary to see out of the window. The sun had moved. The crow had not.

It was a crow I had asked for help in that first dream walk with Uuri. She'd called it a Crow and I was pretty sure what waited outside my window was a Crow, too. Certainly, there was a sharpness to its gaze that helped me think.

I nodded for water and on its wetness asked, ‘How long was I—?’ I couldn’t think of the word. Gone wasn’t right. Nor dead.

‘Away?’ Finn offered. I nodded. Without checking his watch, he said, ‘Nine minutes, six seconds, forty-fi—’

I tapped. He stopped. I smiled, and said, ‘Still here.’

The Crow scattered in a falling tear. Cold fingers cramped on my arm. ‘Don’t leave me.’

‘Everyone dies, Finn.’

‘But what happens after?’

‘Honestly, I don’t know.’ So many ideas. So many ways of distracting ourselves from this one question and the absence of its answer. ‘I’ve left you my notebooks, did I tell you?’

Obviously not. Five full shelves in the library. ‘All yours.’

‘I won’t understand them if you’re not there.’

Ha! He wasn’t much practised at flattery, but that was a valiant effort. Spitless, I mouthed, ‘Nice try!’

‘Lan . . .’ He was crying harder now. ‘Please don’t go. I need you. Nobody else . . .’

Understood him. This was true. They tried, honestly they did; they just didn’t always succeed. I wasn’t sure I did, but I got closer than most. We were too alike, Finn and me. I had no idea how this happened when we didn’t share any actual genetic material, but nurture had won out over nature, at least for us. It’s one of the reasons he’d come to live with his crazy grandmothers in a slant-walled Tudor farmhouse with angry ghosts in the living room, instead of a perfectly nice cottage in the hills north of Glasgow with his perfectly sane mother. I didn’t think he’d—

‘Lan.’ His fingers made dents in my arm, as if he could pin me to life by sheer physical force.

Something moved outside the window. Finn’s gaze shifted right. A thousand crows reflected in his eyes.

One. There was just the one Crow. I could feel its presence like a promise of things to come, and behind it I could hear the sea. Someone was calling my name. Not Kate, yet. Robbie. ‘*Alaaaaana!*’ The vowels echoed over the surf. Too many vowels. Maybe next life, I might have more consonants.

No drifting now. The Between was as real as Finn: more so. I

could feel the sea, taste the salt spray on my cheek. Along the shoreline, I could see the incandescent sun. Its pull was undeniable.

‘Finn, love. I’m going.’

Panic lit his eyes. He half-rose. ‘I’ll get Mum.’

I put my hand over his. ‘There’s not time.’

‘Let me text her.’ He thumbed out a single letter. They must have set up a code. Maddie was going to be late, but we’d said our goodbyes a dozen times those past few months, no need to belabour things now.

Finn’s eyes didn’t leave my face. Tears pooled along his lower lids. ‘Lan.’ His voice was thin.

Mine was surprisingly robust. ‘Still here.’

‘I don’t want to live in a world with you not in it.’

‘You’d better get used to the idea or—’

Blast. His face. His eyes.

‘Finn . . .’ My mouth was full of sawdust and this time it wasn’t the fucked-up cells fucking up my metabolism that was robbing me of fluid, it was naked panic.

I created spit by sheer power of will. ‘I’m not leaving you. Trust me. I have no idea what comes next, truly I don’t. But if you need me, you can call. If it’s at all possible, if it’s in my power in any way, I’ll come to you. I promise.’

I promise.

I promise?

Alanna Penhaligon, what have you done?

Yggdrasil stood stark outside the window. A Crow waited among its branches to guide me onward. And I had just uttered an oath. A vow. A *Promise*.

There was a dead hush in which the world halted in its turning, and the gods rested their labours to peer through the veil into the realms of mortal stupidity.

Far away on another shore, Robbie, faintly alarmed, said, ‘Lan?’

We’d spent a lot of our time together, Finn and I, wading through the old myths, exploring the power of words. When I opened my eyes that last time, he smiled down at me. ‘I am going to hold you to that,’ he said.

I drowned in his gaze.



## CHAPTER TWO

The sea was wild and beautiful. A million shifting shades shimmered through it, sharper than I had ever known. I was entranced. Siren voices tried to lure me back to the world I had left. I ignored them all.

Except for one. In the valleys between the waves and the keening wind, sharp words landed somewhere yet undefended, ‘. . . do *not* get to die without my being here. And if you’ll have the grace to hang on about five more minutes. The twins are nearly . . .’

Maddie. You made it! I wasn’t trying to leave without you, I just didn’t want to make trouble.

Sorry.

Maddie was Finn’s mother, Kate’s daughter by Connor, who’d understood the value of a father who was around when we needed him, but not always on top of us.

Maddie was the first human being I had ever loved absolutely unconditionally. Adult relationships are always complicated, but I’d caught Maddie as she came into the world and between us, me and Kate, we’d—

*Kate.*

Kaaaaaaaate!

I’d really believed she’d be here by now; one of the upsides to dying was imagining the conversations we could have when we met again. Not the frustrating wool-world of her final eighteen months, but actual, honest-to-goodness words that meant the same thing to each of us. And hugs: I wanted to hold her, to be held, to feel the purpose in her strong sculptor’s hands, to smell the scent of planed wood in her hair.

Kate, love, I am on my way, but our daughter is making a point and I need to gather what is left of my attention and wrench it one last time to the place I am leaving.

‘ . . . text. Two more minutes and you can go. We’re not going to drag you back. You asked us not to. I’m hoping that’s still what you want.’

I squeezed the hand wrapped in mine and Maddie squeezed back. A last goodbye. I love you, but I have to go now. It’s fine. Truly. I wish I could tell you how fine it really is. Kate had the sketches ready for a piece that was going to show my ideas of the Between, so the whole world could know how fine, and—

Oh! The twins made it, too! Kirsten and Niall, Maddie’s chalk-and-cheese firstborns. Kirsten was ash-blonde and willowy: her father’s colouring, her mother’s shape and style Niall harked back to Connor, his grandfather, so his hair was as dark as mine, though the curls were much tighter.

He was a hand’s breadth taller than his sister, his features were square rather than elfin, and he was fiercely vocal in his opinions, where she spoke rarely, without rancour and always to keep the peace. People thought they were not alike, and they were wrong. They thought as one mind, these two, and time spent apart pained them both.

Seven years older than Finn, they had lives of their own up in Scotland. I hadn’t expected them to come all the way down to Suffolk but was really pleased they had. I tried to thank them. The best I could manage was another squeeze.

Maddie said, ‘She says hello.’

‘Hello, Lan.’

‘Thank you for holding on.’

They spoke together and then separated. On one side, Kirsten looped her fingers through Finn’s. On the other, Niall wrapped his arm round Maddie’s waist. No sign of their father, but Torvald and his specialist Scandinavian vodkas had been the spectacular mistake of Maddie’s youth. She had dumped him when she dumped the last bottle around the time the twins turned five, and he hadn’t been seen since. Nobody was mourning his absence.

Finn’s father was never a mistake, but Eriq was just as absent. Not that he didn’t love Maddie, just that Glasgow was cold and wet, and the southern hemisphere was a better match for a boy who had worked his way out of the Moroccan suq by dint of charm and juggling. He sent birthday and Christmas cards to the son he’d

never seen and threw in some cash for Maddie if he had some, which wasn't often.

And so, this was my family: all of them that were left.

Maddie leaned in and pressed her lips to my forehead. I barely felt her. I was no longer in my body but hovering over the bed. Looking down, I could see—

Is that me?

I'd had no idea I looked that rough: withered, bald, gaunt . . . sucked to a red-eyed husk. It was easy seen why Nancy had used her mirror to show me the crows but nothing else. I'd have died at the sight of me.

Now, though . . . a pulse of something pure folded out of the me that was hovering over the bed towards the me that was dying on it. For my own ears alone, I said, 'I love you', and meant it.

Well.

That was a distinctly odd sensation. There hadn't been a single moment of the past sixty-two years when I could have said this with any honesty, but things change when life loosens its hold.

This was the me-that-had-been. Too many vowels. Too fixated on patterns: patterns of numbers, patterns of language, patterns of story and thought and relating. Too thin, too tall, too sharp with those I cared for, not good enough at loving.

This was the body that had carried me through a whole life. It had done its best and that best hadn't been perfect, but it had been good enough and I was grateful.

Kissing my own brow goodbye, I tasted sour sweat and this last frisson of life unhinged me. I was no longer Lan. I was the echo of an idea around which the passions of my family spun ever faster as I took my leave.

Nancy joined the circle; crow-magic nurse-girl. She filled a gap in the swirl and the kaleidoscope spun anew.

I was entranced. Why did life not have this much . . . life?

*It did*, a dry voice observed. *You just chose not to notice it.*

'Crow?' I knew that voice. I'd known it since the first dreams with Uuri and definitely these last nine days. 'Is that kind?'

*Perhaps not. But it's true.*

No. There had – absolutely had – been moments with this much

depth and heart, and the miracle of this moment was that I could bring them into being again.

As clearly as if each was happening anew, I could see Maddie being born. And the twins. And Finn. Pain and joy and the feeling of helplessness and tears and can I hold her again? And her and him? And him? How do we bear it, when whole pieces of our hearts take form and walk out into the world?

I could taste each separate memory, roll it across my palate and down to my solar plexus, chase it with another and another and another: a fragment of a day by the loch, playing with shells in the sand; an evening sitting on the hill with my back to the hundred-year-old hawthorns, watching the sun go down; a Christmas dinner, littered with easy, unconscious fun, first one at the farm with Kate when . . .

Kate.

Do you remember the first glance across a train carriage? It was your hair that caught me first, a living fire half a head taller than anyone else, and then your hands: made for making. But then you smiled, and there was a spark of connection I hadn't felt in years. You'd never known it at all. A shrug of invitation, a choice to get off two stops early, just to walk together through the turnstile, the brush of a hand on the back of your arm and the electricity of it . . .

First late-night conversation, first coffee at the Chip off Byres Road, first sex, first row, first exhibition with me at your side instead of Ger . . . never mind.

. . . First night at the farm after Grandad died and talking through to dawn about whether to move south and all it might mean for your career and mine. My old alma mater, Bancroft Hall, was offering me the wardenship, which was beyond huge and you had so much more room to create a studio to . . .

*Stop.* The Crow tapped on the hollow dome of my thoughts. *Alanna, you need to cut these ties now.*

. . . First bed we bought together, first sex, first row, first thoughts about family. Was having Maddie not the best idea in the world? Your living sculpture, wrought with your whole body. Our magical, powerful, glorious, girl. First steps. First run. First time on the stage. First—

*Alanna, of all people, you know better than this. If you care for those you are leaving, you will stop now.*

First boyfriend. Why are you with a m—? OK, I didn't say that. I didn't even think it. I'm sure he's fine. Tall, blond, fitter than fit, looks like Thor crossed with Baldur, great sense of humour when he's had a drink or six. Actually, now I know him better, I'd say more Loki than Baldur. Please don't stay with him. Except you're pregnant. Twins. Right. We'll support you whatever—

*Alanna! You must let go now. You do know this.*

I did know.

What I discovered was that knowing and doing were not the same thing. I'd thought I was prepared, but now that I was here, I didn't want to sever the links to my family.

*See it as a rite of passage.*

Hmm. I did used to say we needed more rites of passage in our world, more challenges to push us beyond ourselves.

Right, then. I have always had the kind of mind that makes metaphors into shapes. You might hear music, or scent something intricate. I shape ideas into things. In this final test of my life, I took the ties of love and made of them knotted threads that I could unravel, one by one by one; all the knots of a lifetime teased apart and let go until memories streamed through my hands too fast to taste or touch or hear or feel. Their loss ripped something from me, but with their passing, I was lighter and in the edge place of the shoreline, lighter was stronger, and more solid.

I untied the last knot and released the two ends.

Back in the room, the swirl of feeling round the bed split apart in a spray of colour that was pure and bright and heartbreaking.

Maddie sank to her knees. The twins, stunned by the power of her grief, folded in to hold her between them. Finn's grief made its own black hole. I was too far gone to comfort him.

I was lightness itself, easily pulled away. A lurch, a hop and for a fractional moment, I was in the tree outside the window, looking crow-eyed at the human clutter on the bed. Then I was on the shore by the jewelled sea.

Just here.

Nowhere else.

I spread my arms and turned towards the white-bright sun.