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DAUGHTER OF CROWS

BOOK ONE OF
THE ACADEMY OF KINDNESS

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Prologue

All of the people I hate are dead. Some of them I didn't even kill. Perhaps that's why I'm still angry. Perhaps if it had been my hand on the knife, my eyes the last thing they saw, perhaps then I would be at peace. Perhaps.

I am old. I have outlived my enemies and my purpose. Some people are hard to kill. I'm one of them. Whether that's a blessing or a curse can be difficult to tell. I've lived so often when I should have died. Lived when the better man or woman has stumbled into their grave. Lived when whole towns have burned. Even a city once. Twice. Three times if you count the Port of Laros, though that place catches fire every week.

Everything they said about age was true. That also irks me. All that the wordsmiths wrote, everything that toothless ancients mutter over long-nursed ales, all of it the gods' honest truth. And yet only as decades stacked upon me could I understand it. Same words, different ears.

Age took the beauty that I never recognized when it was mine. It dressed me in this tapestry of scars, and for each one of them sewn silver through my skin a dozen others lie too deep to see. Age stole my grace and left me stumbling on towards a final sunset. It exchanged a confidence born of ignorance, for a fear born of knowing that I do not know. And yet . . . and yet . . . it has gifted me a measure of peace I never thought to own. A breath of calm after a storm none of us expected to end. The fires of my rage are old coals now. Quiet, and banked against the coming of night.

I am older than anyone ever imagined I might become. Time's knife has pared away at me, revealing things I thought lost. And still I don't know if what lies ahead will be a death of a thousand cuts, or the gentle easing into the last bed I will ever lay my head in. Or maybe, at the end, the world will remember me again and we shall have a final reckoning.

One thing I have yet to learn in all this living is how to tell it. How understanding might flow from old tongue to young ear. Facts are blunt, awkward things, hard to miss, and yet the truths about how the years take from you, and what they give, are not ones that can be packed into a single sentence. They're too ephemeral, too personal, too subjective to be captured within the net of a single paragraph or page. Not even a chapter could hold them. But maybe an entire book could do it . . .



CHAPTER 1

Molly Plight

The calm before this particular storm had lasted ten years, much of which Molly Plight had spent knitting. Trouble had arrived in the shape of a man of no great height, road-dirty and weather-beaten. Save for the cruel curve of the knife at his hip and the dull glint of mail beneath his fleece, there would have been nothing to mark him. But when he paused in the inn's doorway and smiled that smile, Molly knew that the peace she'd thought would claim her final days was over. She knew what a predator's hunger looked like.

'That bull the Millers have won't last another season.' Jayne Clay, the tiny old woman on Molly's left, was given to predicting the death of prized livestock. That topic and regaling anyone who so much as paused in her vicinity with the doings of her two dozen tow-headed grandchildren constituted the majority of her conversation.

Molly's needles and ball of yarn lay on the table before her, abandoned in favour of a pipe and a drink. The village children said the pipe smelled like a burning midden heap, perhaps not unfairly, but good weed was hard to find so far from anywhere. The small, thick glass in her hand held ulik, a treacle-dark liquor the locals brewed from turnips. She watched the mercenary cross to the bar. 'Maybe.'

'Maybe?' Doubt was a slap in the face where Jayne's predictions were concerned. Her ability to number the days of anything with hooves was legendary. 'It's a certainty, girl!'

Molly sipped her ulik and made a face. Pipe smoke had numbed her tongue to the stuff's foulness, but she could still taste it. On her other side the third of their trio, Ambeth, hugged her ample belly and cackled at Molly being called a girl. Jayne and Ambeth might have a decade and more on Molly, but in no world that they knew of was anyone north of sixty summers a girl.

Cackled. Molly sipped again, winced again, and considered laughter. Age had blunted much of her sharpness but in turn it had put a harsh edge on her voice and turned laughs into cackles. Still, if that were the worst the years had done to her she would consider herself blessed.

'Another round, *girls?*' Ambeth patted her coin pouch. She'd sold all the cheeses she brought into Stones Corner on Davy's cart, even the blue that stank worse than Vale pipe-weed, and for once could back her generous instincts with funds.

A 'no' opened Molly's mouth but she bit down on it and shaped a 'yes'. One for the road. One to numb the aches before they walked the four miles back to Pye.

The tides that had left her stranded in the Vale a decade back had given no hint that her driftwood life had found its resting place. For the first few years everything had felt temporary – her pack ready by the door for a departure that never came. Instead, the slow and simple existence she'd picked up in the village of Pye had worked a strange magic on her. The steel spring that she had begun coiling in her chest at an age when she should have been chasing butterflies, or at least dreaming grand and empty dreams as she scratched a living from the soil, had started to unwind. The anger that she had for so many years bound ever more tightly at her core had somehow begun to seep away. The dark dreams, the watchful ways, the cynical poison that soured her days, all of it had started to leave her, worn away by passing seasons. Worn away by something as trivial as the community of peasants with no more learning among the lot of them than could be found in the head of any first-year acolyte of Kindness.

Ambeth struggled out of her seat and went to get the drinks, complaining of stiff legs. A mercenary wouldn't raise many eyebrows in the cities of the west, but out in the sticks where an oddly

coloured pig could be the village's main subject of debate for several weeks, the man was drawing attention. Ambeth eyed him up and down as she approached, wrinkling her nose at the unfamiliar stink of him.

Molly stood, muttering something about the privy. It had been a long time since she'd been called on to do what had once been second nature to her. She had put all that aside, buried it both literally and figuratively. It had stayed buried so long that she had started to believe that that part of her life was over. She'd started to think that this was what her death might be, the slow setting aside of the things that had once defined her. A shedding of armour, one layer at a time. Until at last, she might go to her grave shriven of her burdens – stained by guilt but no longer defined by it.

She cursed as a second, larger man banged in through the street door, this one with a sword on his belt and a blackened iron breastplate. They had to be here for her. Nothing else made any sense. There wasn't anything a mercenary could carry away from the market of Stones Corner that would compensate the long ride to get to it.



CHAPTER 2

Rue

Age would have taken her if they'd just had the sense to leave well enough alone. Some problems are like that – if you ignore them long enough, they go away. Most problems, actually.

The crow hops from one foot to the other on the haft of a broken spear. The feast before it is reflected in the black beads of its eyes. An open grave in which bodies lie in their scores, layered carelessly, sprawled face down as if they might have fallen here rather than been tossed in from the edge of the cold slot in the ground.

The crow cocks its head, choosing. The mottled patchwork shows little exposed flesh: muddy homespun, bloody shawls, grey hair here, darker locks there. No warriors these, just peasants. Hard lives and easy kills.

Cawww? The crow looks up to where a figure looms at the grave's edge, dark against the sky's pain as the last of the sun's light bleeds away. Here stands a man of war, tall in the sharp angles of his armour, unbowed by the rain-laced wind that tugs at his cloak.

'Fly away, storm crow. There's nothing for you here.'

The crow doesn't challenge the lie. But its gaze flickers to the dead.

'Greater gods than you have run before me.' A low thunder edges the voice of this man who is more than a man. 'Their temples lie in ruin. Their statues are cast down. Their priests are crucified. Their faithful call my name.'

The crow caws but keeps its place on the broken spear that is anchored in the back of a child.

The man draws his sword, pale steel that looks like a cold flame in the last light of the day.

‘Do you threaten me with that?’ The crow is gone, and in its place a woman stands in the grave, her bare feet on the uneven ground of stiff limbs and narrow backs. ‘I have no temples, no statues, no priests, no faithful.’ Despite her newfound height the woman’s head is still below the grave’s edge.

‘Play no games with me.’ The warrior levels his blade at her.

‘Games?’ She smiles up at him, her face indistinct, flickering, perhaps from that of one corpse to the next as she picks her way among them. ‘Are you going to jump down and poke at me with your little sword? I might enjoy that, Sunder.’

Sunder’s teeth show beneath his helm’s guard. ‘I know your names too. Do not think I don’t. Saraswati, Thalia, Woman of the Spiders, Morrigan, many others. You cannot hide from me. This is my empire. There is no space for you here, no souls to steal. Fly away.’

The woman’s face hardens, ages, wrinkles spreading, eyes shading to pale, holding a cold and empty light. ‘Knowing my names is not knowing me. You have nothing I want, little boy. It’s not in my nature to take . . . only to test. You wouldn’t want to go untested, would you? Older gods than I would be displeased by that.’

He throws the sword like a spear, swift and true. But the woman is gone, and the returned crow has fluttered skywards, snatched away by the wind. The man remains a few moments longer, sniffing at the air, scanning the blasted heath, peering into the grave’s gloom as the shadows thicken. He does not, however, climb in to retrieve his sword. He leaves between one heartbeat and the next, as if he were never here, as if there had been no man, no woman, just a crow already too full of carrion to dip its beak. And of course, the corpses.

A night settled in, and later a grey dawn struggled over the horizon. But not until the first rays of the sun reached into the grave and found her outstretched fingers did the old woman draw in a sudden, unexpected breath, and raise her face to the world. If any other

within the corpse heap were still among the living, then the cold light burning in her eyes would have persuaded them to play dead a little longer.

Rue had been born screaming at the world with an anger that took sixty years to fade. Even then her new neighbours had known that though she might look like them, she carried something else within her. *Hard as nails*, they said. *A mean streak. Something in the way she looks at you.* Had they known how deep that difference ran, they would have quietly left their homes in the night and never come back. She had told them a name that was true, though it had been so long since she had used it that it had felt like a lie.

The crow that had been following her since the grave landed close by.

'Stop following me, bird.' Rue wouldn't normally waste words on a crow, but she needed distraction from her pain. 'If I was going to die, I'd have done it back there.' Her head ached as if what had struck her had been an axe and the blade was still buried in the back of her skull. 'Fuck off!'

'I can't.' The bird's croak sounded like words to Rue's scrambled brains.

Rue stopped walking and finally reached back to examine the damage. Clearly the blow had fractured her thinking. 'Whoresons!' The oath escaped her through clenched teeth, but questing fingers had found no obvious fracture, just the tar-like adhesion of old blood in matted hair.

She turned on unsteady feet to examine the crow, now watching her from a rock five yards back along her trail. She had not expected a reply. Even on a day when she'd hauled herself from an open grave this was still the strangest thing to have happened.

'Don't test me, bird.' She eyed the ground for a suitable stone, though the thought of bending to pick one up made her teeth grind against the anticipated pain. Every part of her hurt and the sole advantage to the agony in her head was that it at least shut out the rest of her body's complaints – for the most part.

'Test *you*? That's not what I'm here to do.'

The crow's croaking was at once a human voice and also just a

bird's chatter. Rue took it as more confirmation that the blow that had put her down, deep enough to be taken for dead, had rearranged her mind. 'Madness' was the word that suggested itself. With a groan, she bent and scooped up a stone from the side of the track.

'I can't stop following you!' Panic in the croaking now. The voice was somehow familiar.

More madness. Rue raised her arm to throw.

'She told me I had to!'

'She?' Rue knew better than to feed a delusion. But there had been a *she*. Somewhere in the depths from which Rue had hauled herself, a climb that began long before she could raise her head and contemplate escaping the grave, there had been a woman. A woman of uncertain age. Of uncertain everything. But the climb had begun with her touch. With the pressure of her bony foot between Rue's shoulder blades, perhaps a great enough pressure to squeeze out a reluctant beat from a still heart.

'She. You know. *Her!*' The crow hopped nervously from foot to foot, eyeing the stone in Rue's hand.

Rue did not *know*, but another thought possessed her. 'You sound like Senna Weaver.'

The bird said nothing.

'I don't like Senna Weaver.'

The bird shifted its feet.

'The only good thing about getting attacked was seeing that old cunt take an arrow in the—'

The crow launched itself at Rue in an explosion of feathers. She caught it around the neck, its beak two inches from her eye.

'I'm slow, but not *that* slow.' Rue snarled the words while tightening her grip on the fragile neck.

'Wait! Don't!' Everyone croaks when they're choking, but a crow double-croaks.

Rue squeezed a touch harder, then with an oath threw the bird away. It landed poorly and stared up at her, eyes black beads of malice.

'Killing you would be a waste of a good joke. Stay a crow.' She turned her back. 'I hope you like worms, Senna.'

‘Why didn’t you kill me when I was a person?’ the crow cawed after her. ‘She said you’d killed more people than the cholera.’

‘I’m not a killer,’ Rue muttered.

The path before her wound around a rise where thorn bushes and stunted trees huddled together, toughing out the wind. On the far side, sheltered by the ridge, the village waited for her. Her small house, her narrow bed, the peace that had become her normal far faster than she had ever expected it to. ‘I’m not a killer.’

‘Everyone said you were. Everyone said back in the day they called you—’

‘The only person who said that was you, Senna Weaver. Stirring up trouble for me from the day I arrived. Starting rumours. You took against me—’ Rue clamped her jaw shut to keep back the loose thoughts spilling from her rattled skull. She might not want to be a killer, but to say that she wasn’t didn’t make it so. She had to be again the thing she had once been, the one who wore this name. The Rue who succeeded in part because of skill, in part because of venom, but truly because she was part of that rare fraternity of individuals grouped only by a single characteristic. Namely that they were, for some gods-touched reason, hard to kill. That where others would fall or freeze or be overtaken by the horror of violence and adversity, Rue’s kind evened the odds by stabbing someone in the throat. Rue was the sort that somehow washed ashore when everyone else from captain to cabin boy drowned. The kind found limping from the bloodiest quarter of the battlefield. The kind that crawled from the grave spitting earth and ready for vengeance.

She’d said more to this crow along a dusty mile of road than the old Rue would have said to any person in the course of a typical week. If death had kept her this time, Rue thought, it would have been an ignominious end, sucker punched from behind. Her time might be coming soon, but she planned to put on a show more in keeping with her reputation. Certainly, she intended to take a lot more people down with her when death came knocking again.

Another wave of pain flooded her head. Rue snarled and bared her teeth, challenging any more sentimentality to try its luck.

‘You shouldn’t go back,’ the bird croaked. ‘The sell-swords will have burned it all.’

‘No smoke.’ Rue nodded to the pale sky above the trees’ reaching arms. ‘Don’t you want to warn your friends, Senna? Your boy? His young ’uns? That niece of yours?’

Senna had been quick enough to warn everyone when Rue came to settle in the village. The stranger wasn’t to be trusted. She was dangerous. A witch perhaps. Children had started to avoid Rue in the main street within days of her arrival.

Senna made no reply. A talking crow wouldn’t last long in Pye. Senna would have been the one to cast the first stone too. In a place where the young men had chased off a stranger for ‘wearing foreign clothes’, anything bearing even a hint of magic about it was treated with deep suspicion. Even the worthless healing charms they purchased at the grey markets were worn beneath their clothes, too shameful for the light to see.

On the long slow climb to the ridge, recent memories returned, images surfacing in Rue’s mind every few paces: a horseman black against the sky as if seen from hoof height, Maddy Spinner’s face twisted by terror, the pounding of Rue’s heart becoming the gallop of mercenaries charging from the field.

Rue paused at the halfway point, shaking her head to rid it of the pictures. ‘Shit . . .’ The shaking was ill-advised. She put her hands to her temples and squeezed, trying to contain the hurt.

‘Bad?’ The crow could have been asking about the pain, or the memories, or both.

‘Seen worse.’ And Rue *had* seen worse. Worse than a band of hired blades cutting down peasants on their way back from market. But not for many years. Years spent trying to forget, trying to divert herself with the scratching of a living from unforgiving soil, raising goats, haggling for grain, all the dull, hard business of normal lives that can be lived without others having to die to make room for you.

Rue stopped again just shy of the ridge and whatever scene would be revealed to her on the far side. ‘Why are you a crow?’

Her head still ached as if ten devils were trapped in her skull and wanted out in a hurry, her wits still felt loose and apt to spill