

MANDA SCOTT
STRONGER
THAN DEATH



About the Book

The first to die was Eric. An irrepressible, seemingly indestructible pathologist he was climbing alone when he died.

Then Joey, the superstar surgeon, choked to death when drunk.

Finally Martin, a statistician, overdosed.

All apparently tragic accidents, but Kellen Stewart doesn't believe in coincidence. She knows the three colleagues had a shared past, a past also shared with pathologist Lee Adams, who just happens to be the one person she would trust with her life - and the number one suspect.

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About the Author

Also by Manda Scott

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For my father, with love

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due on this occasion to Chloë and Mike, both of whom read the early drafts and made invaluable comments; to Naziema, Debs, Tony and Christine for keeping me grounded; to Andy for teaching me everything I know about climbing; to George for finding details on motorbikes; and to Hester who, once again, made space in her life for a frenetic writer. Especial thanks are due to my father, the ultimate, ever-willing researcher, for the hours spent on the phone, in the library, talking to colleagues and particularly for one long summer's afternoon drive out to the Knapdale peninsula that started it all off.

The author wishes to thank the Arts Council of England for their generous financial assistance in the writing of this book.

Who owns the whole rainy, stony earth? *Death.*
Who owns all of space? *Death.*

Who is stronger than hope? *Death.*
Who is stronger than the will? *Death.*
Stronger than love? *Death.*
Stronger than life? *Death.*

But who is stronger than death?

Me, evidently.

'Examination at the Womb-Door' by Ted Hughes

One

Eric was on the ledge at the top of the fourth pitch, three-quarters of the way up the cliff. It was a good place to be: high and airy with a clear view of the sea and the gulls and the islands, an ideal spot to sit and watch the sun slide down behind the mountains of Jura, or to wait for two climbers on their way up from sea level, aiming for just that point on the ledge. We were not expecting him to be there, had made no arrangements to meet, but Eric was ever one for surprises and there's no reason, even now, to suppose it would have made the climb any faster if we'd known he was there. It certainly wouldn't have made it any easier.

No one said it would be easy. She didn't want it to be easy. All the way through the winter, reading the maps and the tide tables, hanging off abseil ropes in the pouring rain, bribing fishermen to take her closer in to the rock than any sane human being would want to go, Lee Adams was not looking for a climb that was easy. Just one step this side of impossible and no more, otherwise what's the point? And all through the winter, sitting at the top of the cliff catching the falls, driving the car to the jetty, going out to buy one more bottle of Scotch for a skipper who needed half a year drying out more than he ever needed another drink, I listened, as we all did, with half an ear to the moves and the holds and the nightmare of a chimney at the base of the crack and I knew that, when the time came for her to choose a partner to climb it with her, she would ask Eric. Of all of us, he was the only one who came close to climbing at

the level she climbed. He was the only one who made sense.

But then, Lee doesn't climb to make sense. I was waiting by the car on the jetty at Tarbert on a windblown, rain-sodden Saturday afternoon less than a month ago when she made the last boat trip out to the cliff: one final attempt to find a way in to the base of the crack that wasn't going to get her drowned before she ever started the climb up. I remember the sight of her, soaked and scratched and decorated in odd places with algal streaks as she came up the path from the boat. I pulled a rucksack from the boot and passed her a T-shirt as she reached the car. There was no real need to ask how it went - her whole body was alive with the buzz of it, like a horse before a race, fighting the pull of the bit. She sat on the sill of the boot, staring out to sea, her focus on something a long way out of sight.

'And so?' I asked. 'Will it go?' It's good, sometimes, to get the details.

'It'll go.' She nodded, chewing her bottom lip. 'There's only one place the boat can put in with any chance of getting out again in one piece and it's a real bitch of a traverse from there along to the crack. Sixty foot of blank rock with bugger all to hold on to but the seaweed.' She waited, expectant, as if I was supposed to have some kind of opinion on that.

Traverses are not really my thing. I haven't done enough of them to comment. 'I thought there was the ledge?' I said.

'Sort of.' She threw the wrecked remains of her old shirt into the boot and there was a pause as she pulled the fresh one over her head. The dry, laundered smell of it mellowed the ranker smells of rain and sea. 'It breaks up in places but it's better than nothing,' she said. 'We'll be fine as long as we time the tide right. Bearing in mind how much you hate the sea, the least I can do is see that you keep your feet dry before we get to the crack.'

There was another gap then, filled by the wind and the flapping of old newspaper on the tarmac of the jetty. I looked out to the sea and back again. She sat on the boot, her head cocked to one side, watching me.

'My feet?' I asked.

'Your feet,' she agreed. Her smile was indulgent; maddeningly so.

'What about Eric? I thought you were going to do it with him?'

'Only if you turn me down.' She stood up, then ducked back into the lee of the boot as a westerly gust threatened to knock us both flat. 'We'll find something with more of a challenge in it for him later. This one is for you and me. Unless you're going to tell me now you really don't want to do it?'

Maybe I should have done. I have known Lee Adams for over half my life and I know just where her limits are; a long way past mine in almost everything we do, especially on the rock. But the rain was easing and the wind was fresh and we had spent all winter planning for this one. I thought I knew where the worst bits were. Besides, in that moment, I really did want to do it.

'OK.' I pulled the car keys from my pocket and flipped them the two foot through the air to her waiting hand. 'If you're sure I can do it.'

'I'm not sure of anything. I'm not even sure I can do it. That's what we're here to find out.' She tossed the keys high up in the air and caught them again on the downswing. 'Just don't forget to trust your feet. If you can hang on to that, you'll be fine.'

You hate the sea. I don't hate it. I am terrified of it. There is a difference. Not normally, in everyday life, I'm not afraid of it then. I can walk along the shore and breathe in the salt and feel the power of it and be inspired with the rest of them. I respect it. I admire it. I wish I could paint it, or

photograph it, or do something else to catch the extraordinary, restless beauty of it and take it home. I am not afraid of it. But put me on a two-inch tightrope of sea-greased rock with the water kissing the soles of my climbing shoes, with barnacles the size of walnuts knifing the palms of my hands and leathered ribbons of weed draping themselves like malign bandages over my eyes so that the rock and the sea and the rope are all flashes seen in the darkness, then I can reach a level of terror that knows no bounds. *Trust your feet.* Believe me, I'm trying. That doesn't mean I'll succeed.

'How's it going?' I felt her voice through the rope, calm and steady, a verbal life-line. If I were to take my cheek from the rock, shift my balance outwards, I could probably see her, ten feet on, just round the curve of the cliff. I would rather not do that just now.

'Don't ask.' My voice came out muffled, gagged by the rock.

'The ledge narrows down a bit just beyond your right foot. There's a finger-hold up about eye level and another one beyond the big patch of weed. You'll need them both to bridge over the gap.'

'Thanks.'

'When you land you're on the shelf. You can sit down here if you need to.'

Really? Then perhaps I am not going to die. I reached up and found the holds: smooth-shouldered dimples in the rock, just deep enough to take the crook of a finger, just safe enough to bear weight for the straddling hop across the gap to the wider platform of the shelf. I felt her hands on my waist and heard the blessed snick of the karabiner clipping safe to my belt. I leant back against the cliff and breathed in the first full breath since I stepped off the boat. Her hand stayed flat on my sternum, pressing me into the rock.

‘Now how are you?’

‘I don’t know.’ The shelf under my feet was broad and flat and here, the barnacles made foolproof friction. She relaxed the pressure on my chest and I sat down, easing the knot on the safety rope to give me the extra length. Clumps of weed slithered wetly under my legs. The sweet-salt smell of it hit the pit of my stomach and curdled the remains of breakfast. I put my palms to my eyes and breathed through my mouth. ‘I’m fine.’

‘Liar.’ I heard the rattle of her rucksack as she pulled out her belt. ‘Sit still for a while and I’ll get the gear ready.’ She said it as if we had all the time in the world, as if she hadn’t timed this to the nearest five minutes and I hadn’t already wasted all the slack dithering on the ledge. If her timing is right, the first one up should be leaving the shelf at the turning of the tide. When we got out of the boat, the mark of its highest point was thirty feet above the top of my head. We have stepped down several feet since then.

I took my hands from my eyes. ‘How long have we got?’

She paused, thinking. I felt her shrug ripple down the rope. ‘Not long,’ she said. ‘Have a look.’

At what? Looking up, all I could see was rock: a wide blank wall rearing up out of the water with the crack a dark shadow on the right. Looking down, there was only water: grey-green Atlantic water laced in lazy sworls with the foam of an ocean crossing. It slopped idly against the lip of the shelf, dark and oily and colour-coded for the depth. Shallow water sparkles with the colours of the sky and the clouds and the patternings of sand. There are places round here, off Arran, out from Oban, where you can lean over the edge of a dinghy and count the legs on the starfish three fathoms down. Water like that is friendly; it holds no menace. Here, it is deep, dark and silent and deep. It took the submarines out of Faslane to map the contours of the sea-bed round this coastline and I checked the maps before we ever came out: a thousand feet of hungry water, straight

down. I heard Lee curse, a quiet, savage whisper, and saw a No. 8 nut drop from the open mouth of her rucksack and slip over the edge to the water. I reached for it, too late, and we watched as it sank, straight and fast, the krab spiralling behind on its bit of a sling like a slow-motion propeller. A salutary warning, I stood up and moved in closer to the edge of the cliff.

‘Lee? Give me a time scale I can believe in.’

Her watch was clipped to the gear loop on the back of her belt. She twisted round to read it. ‘Lead climber needs be on the way up by seven minutes from now.’

‘Right.’ Just so long as I know.

I pulled my kit from the rucksack and started clipping gear into my belt: slings and krabs and nuts and hexes and the tiny 5-mm friend that I bought for a V Diff on Stanage and have never used. For eight years, it has gone with me up every route I’ve climbed, my talisman for when things go wrong, the one piece of protection that will save my life when everything else has fallen apart or fallen out. I clipped it into my belt, dead centre at the back where I could reach it with either hand, and then I braced myself in the harness, feet wedged firm in the angle between the shelf and the cliff, and turned round to look for Lee. She was across on the far side of the shelf, leaning back against the rock, head bent in concentration, tuning her belt in the way a player might tune an old and favoured lute. I watched her fit a set of hexes, seven of them in ascending order, around the loops on her belt, careful and neat, like her post-mortems. When she was done, she shifted a bit and stood there for a moment, one foot on the ledge, the other toeing the water: a slight, dark rock-being, making her pact with the sea. She looked up then and smiled, one of those images that outlasts the rest: the dark hair and the dark eyes and the odd, bright calm of her smile. As if she’s at peace doing this and all the rest is a game to pass the

time. Some of us climb for the sigh and the bit of a buzz at the top. Lee climbs because it gives her life meaning.

We stood in the silence of the ledge and I heard the tide change. The rush of it in the crack-cave to the right sounded louder suddenly and the spray began to reach higher up the rocks as the waves hit the wall with more malice. It was only then that I noticed how carefully she had picked the first stance. For thirty feet on either side, I could see waves smashing high up the foot of the cliff. Water ran off the rock, wetting the weed and the algae to a well-oiled sludge. Except where we stood. The sea beyond the shelf swirled like a pike-ridden mill-pond, but it wasn't running in over the edge. I turned round. Eight feet out, in the open sea, a rising boulder caught the shoulder of the surf, spinning it out to both sides. I looked down at my feet. For what it was worth, the rubber soles of my shoes were still dry.

I looked up and found her waiting. However calm the water it still rises with the tide. 'Shall we go?'

'I think we should.' She tossed me the free end of a rope. I tied it in a double loop and clipped it into my belt. 'Do you want to go first?'

'Absolutely not.'

'Fine.' She slid past me to the mouth of the crack, reached round and stepped in on to the knucklebone pebbles and finger-wide ridges of the walls. The rope ran out through my hands as she moved round. A red rope. Her colour, her half of the umbilical cord, an active, pro-active scarlet. My half is blue, a peaceful, dusky blue, a measure of sanity and calm.

'OK. That'll do.'

Her voice echoed and came back round a half-beat later. I looked up. She stood at the far mouth of the crack, leaning slightly towards me, hovering on the edge of balance, one finger hooked in the rock behind her.

'Ready?'

‘Ready.’ She lifted the flat of one foot to the rock. ‘OK. Let’s get her done.’

It was half past three on the afternoon of the twenty-first of June on the first day of the new moon. The longest day and the lowest tide. A turning point between the worlds. The kind of day when anything is possible. I hitched the red rope tight and then let out slack as she lifted her feet off the ground and started up. Nothing was ever the same after that.

It was a bastard of a climb. Just standing at the bottom you could see that. Given dry rock, the crack would have made a good chimney. At the base, it was wide enough to take a small boat. Or a climber at full stretch, back jammed on one side and feet on the other. At the top, half a rope’s length up, it narrowed to maybe the width of her shoulder, side on. The rock was reasonable: ridged and uneven with places you could push down on with heel or hand and expect one or other to stay – given dry rock. But we were not given dry rock. We were given wet, tide-worn rock that spent most of its life underwater. The kind of rock beach-pools are made of, the ones you spent your childhood splashing around in, fishing for hermit crabs and sea-anemones, where you slipped and got your feet wet because the slime spread like oil and made it impossible to walk even on a dead flat surface. This crack was made of rock like that. I stood on the shelf, paying out the line of the rope like an unravelling apron string, knowing that if a foot or a shoulder or the small of her back were to slip, she’d drop out like an egg from its shell and the best I could do would be to pull her up from the water before she drowned.

The water was lapping up round my ankles by the time she reached the first stance and tied on. I followed her up. A climb, any climb, is easier on second. Courage comes easy with a rope above you and a belay you trust. On this pitch, I can say with absolute certainty that I would never

have got up it without her there to hold me. The crack was easily as bad as it looked from the floor. Every hold felt like smearing up on butter. I slipped once, about fifteen feet up, lost the traction on one foot and then a shoulder and snapped out sideways to hang, spinning, in the mouth of the crack. Getting back on the rock was harder than you'd imagine with nothing to hold on to that wasn't covered in stinking, rotten seaweed. I did the rest of it on a back-wash of bilious adrenalin and came out to stand beside her dripping with sweat and algal scum and smelling of stagnant fish.

I stepped round behind her and clipped in on the blue. 'Thanks for the lift.'

'You're welcome. Sorry you got your feet wet.'

'No problem.' We never talk sense on the first bit of a climb.

She passed me a couple of large-sized friends from her rack. 'You OK to go on up?'

'Sure.' All things are relative.

The next pitch looked better. The rock wasn't dry but it was wet only from the spray of the waves below. The barnacle-stance was long since invisible, swamped by the incoming tide.

I went up on two ropes: red to the right, blue to the left. The cliff leant out slightly which made it hard on the arms but the holds were positive and the crack took most of the protection. I reached the second stance around the time the boulder protecting the shelf finally succumbed to the water. I tied in on blue, fixed a krab for her on red and took in as she followed me up. She paused as she reached me but she didn't clip in. There was no need. I handed her the rest of the rack and then stood there paying out the twin coils of our umbilicus as she moved on up the third pitch. She smiled, I think, in passing, but she was back in her own world by then; smooth and flowing, balanced between

fingers and toes, a martial artist dancing with the line of the rock.

The sun moved round on to the rock as she climbed. Runnels of spray dried to white salt on the cliff-face in front of me and the rock warmed under my feet. The breeze backed round with the change in temperature and blew off the old-weed stench of the crack so that I could smell clean sea again with lines through it of bracken and spruce from the Forestry land up on top of the peninsula. Very peaceful. Even the sea, free from the echo-chamber of the crack, was at peace, turned down to a quiet background hush, like a radio not quite tuned, with the gulls and the wind and the odd sighing grunt from Lee weaving counterpoints over the top.

I leant back in the harness and looked round. Over my right shoulder, Gigha lay low in the surf. Behind me, the mountains of Islay and the Paps of Jura hauled up out of the sea, solid, enduring and steadfast. Down in the Sound, the water shifted from grey to green to aquamarine, curled into eddies by currents you couldn't begin to map. Sunlight caught on the surface, spinning mirrors of salt and water, breaking them and making them whole again with no bad luck in between. Life in reflection.

Lee finished the third pitch. A gull challenged her for ownership of the ledge at the top. I saw her talk with it for a while, the way I talk with the dog, and then she moved back and off to the right and set up a hanging belay out of range of the nest scrape. When I got there, she was still negotiating, looping the ropes over a separate sling out to one side so that they didn't impinge on territory that wasn't hers. 'He was here before us,' she said simply. And then, without changing tone: 'I think the fourth is the crux.'

Really? I very much doubt it. Nothing on earth could possibly be as bad as that traverse. But then she's not at war with the water.

I kept my eyes on the rock. 'Are you sure?'

She shrugged. 'See what you think.'

I gave myself eight more feet of rope on the belay and stood up on the ledge. The gull mewed and draped spread wings over its scrape, weaving its head in snake-patterns of threat. I shuffled a foot or two to the right and it settled back, bright-eyed and wary. I breathed deep with closed eyes and then stepped up on a pebble and reached for the obvious crack as it crossed above my head. My fingers slid over the lip into cool, solid darkness. The edges were sharp. I like climbing on sharp rock.

I stepped back on to the ledge. The gull hissed. Lee lifted one brow. I smiled and the world was at peace. 'I'll need all of the friends,' I said.

I was climbing then as well as I have ever climbed. The angled section of the crack was like walking up stairs - endless protection and good, solid holds. Disappointingly easy. You don't want anything to be too easy on a first ascent, you want it to be as difficult as possible without being fatal. That way lies fame and long life. Unless you peel off halfway up. That way lies a bed in the spinal wards and a long time wondering why.

Don't think about that.

The vertical section was less of a cruise, long and narrow and not quite the right width to hold hands or feet without them slipping. I jammed on up anyway, leaning out on clenched fists, working my feet into the back of the crack, bracing against anything that would hold. The skin shredded on the backs of both hands. Good climbers don't have scars. I have lots. I am not a good climber. This is not a good time to remember that, or to imagine what will happen if both hands slip out while a foot is jammed in the crack. Keep moving. Don't look down.

A small horizontal break, twenty feet up from the last hex, took a No. 6 nut, the kind of size I might be prepared to trust my life to. Ten feet above that, I felt a twitch in the rope and a hiss from the gull. Or maybe not the gull. I

looked down. A long, long way down, the Atlantic flashed mirrors. Somewhere between me and it, a small piece of grit-worn steel spiralled down the rope like a single dandelion seed blown from a clock.

'Protection's out.' Her voice was more level than mine would have been.

'Right.'

'You could do with some more.'

'Yup.'

Later. I can't stop now. Later.

I moved on up.

The crack ran out sooner than I'd expected. Something changed in the contour of the rock and the right-hand wall stood eight inches proud of the left. You can't jam on that. I stood on a ledge no wider than the rope and I ran my fingers blindly over blind rock, searching for something to hold.

'I think it's a layback.'

No. I don't think so. I'm not laying anything back. Not on lead. Not forty feet over the last bit of decent protection. That's an eighty-foot fall. More if the friend rips out. I stood under a crag once and saw Bobby Renton fall two hundred feet down the line of a crack. Every one of his friends popped out as he fell; a long rippling crackle, like fast-opened press-studs. He landed at my feet and snapped both of his femurs. It could have been so much worse.

My right foot began to tremble - a spastic St Vitus dance of lactic acid and fear. Mostly fear. It comes when you stand too long on something too small and contemplate the frailty of flesh and the fragility of bone. For me, it comes when I start to see phantom X-rays with my name on the label and shattered fragments of bone scattered over the film: a spiralling, self-perpetuating, self-fulfilling prophecy. Every climber in the world knows that when the shaking starts, it's only a matter of time before you fall off. Unless you can find a way to go up.

I laid it back, hooked both hands over the rim of the crack, leant back on stretched arms, lifted a foot and braced it on the far wall, lifted the other to join it, then shuffled up crab-wise on arms that burned and legs that cramped and a mind that went into white-out.

The fourth is the crux.

How do you know?

Because I spent half of the winter hanging off an abseil rope working out the moves.

Why didn't you tell me?

I tried.

You don't want anything to be too easy . . . you want it to be as difficult as possible without being fatal . . . unless you peel off halfway up. That way lies a bed in the spinal wards and a long time wondering why.

I could peel off any moment now.

This is impossible. Madness. Insanity.

The crack ran out for real. It narrowed to the width of two fingers and then simply stopped. Somewhere, three feet below that, the gods left a break: two inches of horizontal rock where everything else followed gravity into the sea. I got a foot on it and stood up; my other foot was wedged at an angle in the depths of the crack. I jammed my right hand into the top end of the main crack, clenched hard and lost more skin to the famished rock. Fresh blood slid between skin and stone. Good lubrication. Bad friction. It'll do.

I leant in with my face flat to the rock and breathed in the fresh breath of the sea.

'You OK?'

'I'm alive.'

'You need to step up for the ledge from there.'

'Is it worth going for?'

'Like a playing field. Eric found a sheep on it last time we came down.'

'A live one?'

'Yup. There's a track from the far edge that goes up to the top. You can walk off from there if you want.'

Thanks.

I kept my cheek on the rock and turned my head up to look. The black line of the ledge stood out charcoal against the blue of the sky. Thin spikes of grass waved outwards, billowing on the rising thermals. Forget the sheep. If there's grass, then it's a good ledge. That way lies safety.

I reached up. Nowhere near. I stood on tiptoe and then on one foot on tiptoe and was still nowhere near. I spread my hands, one at a time, across featureless rock searching for holds and found none. I went back to my crack.

'How's it going?'

'Lousy.'

Some folk climb because it gives their life meaning. The rest of us climb for the buzz and the adrenalin rush at the top. We are the ones who know when to stop. This is what sets us apart from the rest. This is what keeps us alive. Whatever it was I was trying to prove, I have proved it. Or I will never prove it. I have had enough of this. There is always down.

I said it out loud, pushing my voice down the ropes. 'Lee, I can't do this. I'm coming down.'

Silence.

'Did you hear me?'

'I heard.' She sounded uncannily calm. 'Do you think you can lay back down the crack?'

Are you mad? No one does laybacks downwards. Not without a seriously well-developed deathwish. I didn't bother to look down. 'Fuck off, Adams.'

'So then can you put in some decent protection and I'll lower you off?'

More silence.

'Kellen, did you hear me?'

'I heard.'

There is no protection up here. But then she knows that.

The fourth is the crux.

Fuck it. I hate this. When we get back to safe ground, remind me that I hate this.

I found a hold, small and insecure, more like a one-finger jamming crack, a long way off to the left. With a bit of persuasion, it took my tiny half-size friend. My talisman. I didn't test it. I clipped a long sling on the end, then eased the left-hand rope up and clipped it, one-handed, to the sling.

'Clipping in on red.'

'Fine. I've got you. You OK up there?'

'Don't ask.'

I turned back to face the rock and breathed in the sea and the sweat and the earth-hard smell of stone. Cramp knifed in waves through the arch of my right foot. I eased it in the rock. It slipped.

Oh, Mother, I hate this.

'Lee, take tight . . . I'm falling.'

I fell. On to a 5-ram friend. It held. Hard rock scraped holes in the side of my T-shirt as I slid sideways across the face. The red rope ran in a single, thrumming lifeline from her belt up to the sling and down to my belt. I swung out and back in a pendulum arc and slowed to a stop in the middle.

I turned into the rock and clawed back to my toehold. Breathing was harder than I remembered.

'Do you want me to lower you off that friend?'

'No.' It has held this long. I don't want to push it further. 'I'll find another.'

'If you like.' I could hear the shrug in her voice. The lift to the tone that said *there isn't one to find*.

I hate this. Please God never let me forget how much I hate this.

'Kellen, is there not a pebble up there on the right near where that pale patch of rock starts?'

'No.' There's nothing up there. We both know that.

I tried for it anyway. Rough rock sandpapered the ends of my fingers.

'Further up . . . and right a bit . . .'

'Shit . . . yes . . .'

There was a pebble. The kind of tiny, jammed-in pebble that the weather leaves behind for desperate climbers. It was there, poking out of the rock, about the size of my thumbnail, not huge, but big enough to make the difference. Big enough to hold on to while I moved my feet up and out of that bloody crack. Big enough to push up from and reach the ledge, solid and positive and there's no way I'm going to slip off this one. I pulled up in one big, joint-wrenching pull.

Safe.

'Hey, you made it.'

So I did. 'Thank you.'

'How's the sheep?' Her voice ran up the rope, alive and buoyant.

'How the hell should I know? Just let me fix a belay and then . . .'

And then any sheep that there was could have taken wings and flown and I wouldn't have noticed it. Because Eric was there, Eric Dalziel, lying in the sunlight with one arm tucked under his head, grinning his big-bear grin as if he was waiting for me and I was late. Four hundred feet off the ground on a climb no one was supposed to have done before.

'Lee . . . Lee. Eric's up here.'

'What?' Rope rippled live through the dead of my fingers. 'He can't be. This one's ours.' Her voice climbed ahead of her. Still buoyant. She could have been standing beside us. 'Hey, Eric, you bastard, what are you doing on our climb?'

No. It isn't like that. You don't understand. 'Lee. Stop pissing about. Just get up here, can you?'

We've climbed together long enough. The laughter stopped. I felt her testing the placements around her and then take them out as I fixed in the belay. She tugged on the ropes. 'Coming up.'

I sat with my legs dangling over the edge and coiled the ropes as she climbed. Red coiled on blue coiled on red. A spaghetti coil of colours. I took them in so much faster than she had paid out. You can climb anything with a rope above you.

Time moved as she climbed. The sun swung round the face of the cliff, warming the air, raising the cloud layer, shortening the shadows. There was a sheep, a small, wiry, brown-fleeced sheep with tight-spiralled horns and a pair of fire-ember eyes; hot gold with long vertical slits that narrowed to knife edges in the full face of the sun. It twitched its cleft rabbit's lip and blethered wetly at the man and the man grinned back and it was clear they'd had plenty of time to get acquainted. The sheep considered conversation with me and thought better of it. It strolled instead along the ledge to a broader spot and lay down, inches from the edge, to ruminate. A sheep without vertigo. I checked the fastenings on my belt one more time and stared straight out into space.

The breeze gathered pace, carrying wisps of cloud and shadows with them so that the day became parti-coloured. The sheep belched methane spiked with the acid-sharp undercurrents of fermenting grass and the smell of it covered the other smells of the ledge. A pair of hooded crows appeared from nowhere, riding the thermals. They rose with Lee as she climbed then banked out sharply, one to either side, and vanished into the open sky as she topped out. She didn't use my pebble at all, but found other handholds in the unblemished rock and stepped up as if it was an over-graded Severe. I thought we'd found ourselves a new E3, E2 at the very least. It dropped grades with every move she made.

She saw him at much the same time I did – just in that moment when the pitch is done and you can take your mind away from the rock to whatever’s around. I handed her the krab as she came up over the edge and she clipped in but she did it blindly and she didn’t move. She didn’t go to him. She crouched, unmoving, two inches from the edge of a four-hundred-foot drop and stared past me to the man beyond. The man who was lying at all the wrong angles against the rising wall of rock, waiting for something that was never going to happen, grinning to himself and the gods and the open sky at the immense, ridiculous irony of it.

‘Eric?’ She said it softly. A half-question. The way you would wake a friend in the morning, or offer a fresh mug of coffee. He gazed back as he had gazed at me for the eternal half-hour of her climb; a fixed-wide stare, seeing nothing. The breeze shifted round to the side and the smell of him flooded the fresh, barnyard smells of the sheep. He was not newly dead.

‘Eric?’ One more time, to wake him up. She’s a pathologist, she’s used to death – just not this one. She moved forward eventually and slipped her hand in his. One small, living hand lost in the bear-paw grip of the dead. She was shaking all over, a fine, vibrating tremor that rippled through her to him. His hand shuddered gently but not the rest of him. He was too big to shake much. Too solid, too long dead.

‘My phone’s in your pack. The flare’s in mine. We can finish the route if you think it’ll go. Otherwise, we’ll have to follow the sheep path off and up to the top.’ I have had half an hour to think about this. Thirty minutes of colour-coiled spaghetti to think the unthinkable. ‘One way or another, we need to call the Rescue and get a team in here to get him off.’ And we need to get him to a hospital where someone will have to do a post-mortem. She has a promise on that. I

heard her make it. I never thought she'd be called on to honour it.

'I'm not on call.'

'You will do him, though, won't you?'

'Yes.' No question. 'Yes. I'll do him.' Because Eric was more than a friend.

Two

Time slowed down for a while after we found him. I sat with my legs dangling over the edge, my fingers still tight on the red rope. Lee sat there behind me, her legs crossed at the ankles, one hand in his, the other somewhere up on his arm, as if any minute now she would stand and he would stand with her and we'd walk off the ledge, a thin line of climbers and a sheep. They talked together, I think. At least, she talked and there were gaps for him to answer and the cadence of it sounded like a late-evening natter. The kind of conversation you'd have in the pub after any day's climb, chewing through the route and the holds and the protection and whether it's really safe to be lying on a ledge, even a wide one, four hundred feet up from the sea with no belt and no rope and no one there to hold the belay if you fall.

I sat out of the way and gave them time to be together and watched the sun crack open on the southernmost Pap, spilling all the light of the first half-year down into the cleavage of Glen Astaile. Down below, the water of the Sound caught the overspill and spread a carpet of living fire from tide-line to shoreline and out into the open sea beyond. Somewhere in all that ardent brilliance is the moon, an invisible sliver of calm.

In time, the dark pushed forward over the top of Kintyre, shrinking the daylight. Rounded shadows flowed out over the Sound and wrapped clammy fingers across the bare skin of my legs. Even the longest day has to end eventually and the night, when it comes, is just as cold as the rest. My skin warped into goose-flesh and my fingers whitened to