

He's almost home when he finds her. A dark smudge against the horizon, that's all he can make out at first... a seal, he thinks, sunning itself on the shoreline while the rest of its pod basks nearby. Good tourist brochure stuff, something to see him through the lean times until the gallery re-opens. He walks on a bit to get a closer look, pulls out his phone for a couple of snaps he can work from later. And feels it slip from his fingers when he realises what he's really seeing.

The woman's body is lying on the beach. Not down amongst the dunes or hidden by the marram grass—she's out there in plain sight, sprawled unmoving across the rock the locals call Peedie Selkie.

Acid, rising to burn his throat. The familiar slickness building in his gut and the knowledge that comes with it. *Rule one: don't get involved.* But if she's injured? Or ill?

He scrambles down the dunes, his feet doing a mad, uncoordinated sand-surf. Reaching the tideline faster than he'd anticipated and skidding in a clump of seaweed, so that he lands on his knees at the foot of the rock. Contaminating the scene, he thinks. But if there's still a chance...he leans over her, assessing. No-one he recognises. A tourist? Young, maybe mid-twenties...and alive. Thank God.

Her eyes are closed and a graze at her temple is bleeding more freely than he'd like, but the pulse jumping in her throat looks steady enough. She's pale, though, beneath the tan, and dressed in just a sleeveless top and shorts. If she's losing body heat, he'll need to move fast.

He reaches out to touch her, and her eyes snap open. He has a moment to register their startling blueness before a jab to his solar plexus sends him flying.

'What the hell?' She jumps off the rock and glares down at him. 'How long have you been there?'

American, her accent mixed with something else, something he can't quite place. Winded, he holds up his hand and struggles to his knees.

‘It...it’s not what you think. I saw you from the road and you looked like you needed help.’ He squints up at her. ‘What happened to your head?’

‘Huh?’ She raises a hand to her temple. ‘Oh, I hired a bike, and took a tumble off the goddamn thing. It’s over there, I think.’

‘And you thought you’d take a nap in the middle of nowhere? Haven’t you heard of concussion?’

She shrugs. ‘I’ve got a hard head. But yeah, I guess it was a little dumb, so thanks for checking on me.’ Her face relaxes into a smile. ‘I’m Janis, by the way. Janis Connolly.’

‘Jack.’ He looks round for her bike, spots it a little distance away. ‘You should be careful here, you know. The tides...’ A thought occurs to him. ‘You’re not staying on the island?’

She pulls on a sweatshirt from the backpack at her side. ‘No, I...shit, the ferry! Have I missed it?’

He glances at his watch. Twenty minutes before the Earl Thorfinn gets in from Eday. Five minutes before it heads back out to Kirkwall. A good cyclist could probably make it. And she’s fit enough—long, lithe limbs, her arms toned and lean. *So walk away, Jack. A different world, this. A different time.*

He looks up at the darkening sky. A good cyclist could make it. Maybe. Not one with a suspected concussion, dressed for summer in Southern California instead of an Orkney spring. ‘I’ll give you a lift,’ he tells her. ‘Walk back to my house with me and I’ll drive you.’

A hesitation. ‘What about the bike?’

‘It’ll fit in the back. And once you’re on the ferry, my conscience will be clear. About your concussion.’

‘And if I’m not concussed?’

‘Then I’ll be in credit, won’t I?’

She's a student, she tells him as they walk past Halsta and the road to Marwick sands—a postgrad from UCLA, doing an MLitt at Edinburgh. Older than he'd thought, but not by much. And so brightly, luminously beautiful against the overcast April sky...he shakes his head, pushes the thought away before it can take root. *A different world, Jack. One there's no going back to.*

He pulls in to the terminal with five minutes to spare. The sky is darker now, the first spots of rain spattering the tarmac as he unloads her bike. 'Where now—back to Edinburgh?'

'There's some stuff I'd like to do here first.'

As the ferry pulls alongside the quay, she holds out her hand. 'Thanks again. I guess I'd better—'

'Yes, of course.' She wants to shake hands, he realises. Well, why not? A quick brushing of flesh, her fingers cool against his...and an unexpected shiver of warmth sparking between them as skin meets skin.

She turns to set off down the quay. And turns back, a flush of colour on her cheeks. 'Listen, I...', she scribbles something on a scrap of paper and holds it out to him. 'I'm here till the end of the week, if you fancied a coffee in Kirkwall or something?'

He looks down at the phone number she's given him. 'I don't leave the island much. But if you're ever back here...', The smile feels odd on his face, but she doesn't seem to notice. 'And you should get that head wound looked at. Concussion isn't something you mess with, Ms Connolly.'

She gives him a mock-salute. 'Yessir, Mr Hunter! But like I said, I've got a hard head.'

Has she any idea what she's just said? He makes his smile match hers, holds it until she's gone. And watches the ferry round the headland, waiting in the rain until it's a pale blur against the grey horizon.

Yes, he thinks, he'll call her—those careless final words of hers have left him no choice. Doesn't stop him regretting what might have been. *A different world*, Jack thinks. But maybe not so different, after all.

He doesn't call, not at first. *Rule two: Research. Consolidate. Conclude.* It's the work of minutes to check her out—a couple of internet searches, a call to the university, and her life is there in front of him, uneventful, transparent, blameless. Maybe a little too blameless.

In the end, he texts a brief enquiry—how is your head, did you go to the doctor—and so it starts. She answers, he texts again, she answers...friendly, getting-to-know-you stuff, the kind most people take at face value. But he isn't most people...and neither, based on her parting words, is Janis Connolly. So what is she?

He thinks about digging deeper, maybe putting in a few calls to his old contacts. But the kind of information he's looking for takes time, and she's leaving in a day or two. And if there's an innocent explanation...ten years, he thinks. Ten years of blending into the background for a bunch of inbred locals, of turning into the artist guy who lives at the old schoolhouse instead of that weirdo painter from down south. Ten years of walking away...half a life sentence, give or take a bit. He's not big on irony, but that one always gets him where it hurts.

And now? Even in his studio, surrounded by his best work, he's powerless to shut her out, her face, her voice, her *goldenness* constantly on his mind. For better or worse, Janis Connolly's got inside his head. And this time walking away won't to be an option.

Waiting to meet her off the morning ferry on her final day. Forcing down the nervous, half-forgotten scrabbling in his gut. And then she's walking off, her lime-coloured jacket and bright blue backpack a pop of colour against the gunmetal sky.

‘Jack!’ She runs to meet him, breaks into a wide, artless smile. ‘Dressed for the weather this time, see? So what’s first—seal beach or the broch?’

He shakes his head, still smiling. ‘Coffee? The Pier Café’s just opened up.’

He steers her to a table, making sure they can’t be overheard, and sits beside her. ‘Just old-fashioned milky coffee, I’m afraid. That okay with you?’

‘Sure, but—,’

‘A chat.’ He angles his body towards her, his hand closing on her arm. ‘About why you’re here—the truth, Janis.’

Deep navy eyes, widening in alarm. ‘I don’t—,’

‘You called me Mr Hunter...only I introduced myself as Jack. Remember?’

‘Huh?’ She stares at him as the waitress comes to take their order. And breaks into a shamefaced grin. ‘Oops. Okay, so...,’ she takes a deep breath. ‘Man, this is embarrassing. Look, I was in the tourist information centre in Kirkwall, and the girl was talking about this really talented local artist. Then I saw the article in ‘The Islander’, and...,’ she shrugs. ‘I was on my way to the gallery when I fell off the damn bike. When I saw you there, I genuinely freaked. And once I recognised you...I just didn’t want to come on to you like some crazy groupie. Are you mad at me?’

Relief coursing through him, making him want to laugh out loud. ‘I’m not mad at you. It’s just...Janis, I was a copper. Police, you know? A long time ago.’ *A different time. Another world.* ‘I moved here to get away from a lot of things, but some of them hang around—like being a suspicious git, sometimes.’

‘You thought I was some sort of mob hitman? Seriously?’

‘No, I...,’ he stumbles through an apology. ‘Can we forget about this and start again, or have I bugged everything up?’

She tilts her head to one side, grins. ‘Not completely—but until we’ve been to the seal beach, you’re on probation.’

‘Christ, you really want to see those bloody seals? They’re smelly buggers, you know—creepy, too, if you ask me. You know about the selkies, don’t you?’

‘The seal-people? Sure. Good-looking, dark-haired guys, a little commitment-phobic and seriously into fish.’ She winks at him. ‘What’s not to like? And afterwards...I’d love to see your studio. You think maybe we could do that?’

Janis in his studio. Gold against white. A shiver of excitement, deep within his gut. ‘Why not? We’ll need to be back here at six, though. That’s when the last ferry leaves.’

‘Oh?’ She leans in close, so close that he can smell the citrus-bright scent of her, and smiles up at him. ‘We’ll have to remember that. Won’t we?’

He takes her to Gundarswick, to the house the locals swear is haunted. ‘By a demon-selkie woman, so they say. You can hear her singing when the tide is low.’

She shivers. ‘Creepy. My guidebook says selkie-song can lure unwary travellers to their doom and carry their souls away—you’ve never heard it, have you?’

‘The singing?’ A memory rises, unbidden. ‘Christ, no. No singing.’

From Gundarswick along the shoreline in search of puffins, and a late-ish lunch near the Peedie Selkie rock. The beer she’s brought is warm with an odd dark undertaste, but she doesn’t seem to mind, so why should he?

Then back towards the bay as the sunlight fails. Leading her down the track towards the house, excitement and a slow burn of fear waging war within him. He can’t remember it being like this, not even the first time. Maybe because he’d never dared so much before. Never risked so much.

He watches her look round his living area, sees how it must look to her—bone-white walls, the bargain-basement furniture bland, impersonal. Soulless. As though a ghost makes its home here, he thinks. But in a way, isn't that the truth?

'How long have you lived here, Jack?'

'Never quite got round to decorating. But the studio makes up for it, I hope.'

His arm round her shoulders, he guides her down the steps. As she peers into the greyness, he lights the old-fashioned trolley lamps, one by one, setting them down where their creamy glow illuminates each perfect, silent beauty. Karen, Melissa, Jennifer...all eclipsed by the golden woman at his side. How long has he been waiting for someone like her?

She turns to him, her eyes wide. 'All of these...how did you manage it? With your work in the police, I mean?'

'There were times I considered giving up,' he tells her. 'Couldn't see how to make it work any more. But then I met someone.'

'She modelled for you?'

'She showed me it was worth going on. And so have you.' He touches her arm, breathing in her scent. Breathing in *her*. 'I want to paint you, Janis. Will you let me do that?'

'Are you sure, Jack?' A strangeness in her voice, as though she understands how much this means.

'I've never been more sure.' He walks out into the garden and looks over the bay, his heart sledge-hammering in his chest. 'Janis?'

'If that's what you want.'

He starts to turn, and something moves behind him. And his world turns black.

His eyes open slowly, grudgingly, but the blackness remains. Blind? He knows a moment of sheer gut-churning panic before he realises there's something covering his eyes. There's a

sour taste in his mouth and wetness, sticky on the side of his head and trickling down his face. Wetness he can't wipe away, because his hands are tied behind his back. An odd rushing in his ears. And he's cold, colder than he can ever remember being in his life. What in Christ's name...?

'Janis?'

He tries to turn his head, and a tug on his neck slams him back against something hard and wooden. A fence-post? No, it feels too slippery, and he can smell the tang of ozone on the rising wind. And his feet...Jesus, his feet and lower legs feel wet.

He opens his mouth to yell for Janis, for anyone...and then there are hands on the back of his head. Someone's loosening his blindfold, someone whose skin smells citrus-fresh...and then Janis is standing in front of him, a length of rope held loosely in her hands.

'Stop it, Jack. It won't do you any good.'

'Janis, for God's sake! If this is some weird fifty shades thing, I'm really not into—,'

The rope round his neck jerks again, the pressure on his windpipe choking him into gasping, gurgling incoherence. When he manages to draw breath, he grits his teeth against the urge to scream. 'Janis, please. You—,'

'I know you.' She crouches beside him, her face ghost-pale under her tan. 'The women you've killed, the lives you've ruined—you're the Artist, Jack. And I've been looking for you for a very long time.'

And suddenly, there's no point in lying. He looks up and meets her eyes—ordinary, grey-blue eyes without the coloured contacts—and a memory stirs.

'Who are you?'

'My name's Jess. Jess Carter—and no, you don't know me. But you knew my sister, Jack. You knew her very well.'

The memory shifts, hardens. Not the eyes, but the voice, the accent...the accent that's lost all trace of California. A slow twist of fear uncoils inside his gut.

'Roisin.'

Janis nods. 'Roisin was twenty-two, Jack. Her life in front of her, all that stuff. Only she met you. And you were the end of everything, weren't you? Her life, my parents' marriage...every good thing we had, you took away from us. Time to redress the balance, don't you think?'

He runs his tongue over his dry lips. 'What are you going to do to me?'

'Nothing. I won't have to.' She takes out her smartphone and holds it in front of him.

'You won't be able to see where you are, so I made a little video for you. Here.'

At first, all he can make out is the tumbled drystone wall where his scrubby garden slopes down to the shore. Then the camera pans out, showing him the jetty's rotting timbers...and the trussed-up figure tied to one of the posts, just above the water-line. And the knowledge of what she's planning rushes through him, turning his bones to water.

'Janis...Jess...you don't need to do this. Please.'

She shakes her head. 'I wondered if I'd got it wrong at first. You were so bloody...nice. But that's how you did it, wasn't it? Right up until the end, right up until the moment you slit their throats and painted your disgusting pictures, you were always *nice*.'

Her voice is trembling...unsure whether she can see it through, he thinks. So use it, Jack.

*Use it.*

'Jess, listen to me.' Pulling against the post, his neck raw and bleeding. Cold—Christ, his legs are so fucking *cold*. 'I...I don't think you can do this.'

She pulls on her jacket, picks up her backpack. 'It's done, Jack, more or less.'

'You won't get away with it. You think I won't be missed?'

She puts her head to one side, considering. ‘Not for a while, no...the whole reclusive artist thing, you know? And I’ll be long gone by then.’

‘There will be forensics. And we’ve been seen together.’

The cold is advancing. Up to his waist now. If he could only get one hand free...he imagines her skin bruising, bleeding beneath his hands. Teeth tearing. *Rending*. Jesus, let him get one finger on her...

‘Who did they see, Jack? A blonde American tourist.’ She opens her backpack and pulls out a shapeless sweatshirt and a pack of hair dye. ‘Trust me, by the time I leave, I’ll look a little different. And if I’m caught...well, I’ll take my chances. It’s more than you gave them, isn’t it? A sporting chance.’

She gets to her feet, brushes off the stray bits of seaweed clinging to her knees. ‘Oh, and the legend of the demon selkie-singers? I made that bit up, Jack. At least, I’m pretty sure I did.’ She starts to say something else, then shakes her head.

As she walks towards the house, the seals begin to sing.