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Opening extract from

The Reckoning

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ONE

It was like two worlds. Overhead, the sun beat down from a clear blue sky. A hundred yards ahead, the dunes had already disappeared.

Fin stopped and waited, feeling his bare arms turn to gooseflesh. Even at the height of summer the sea-mist brought with it a chill. A deadening of sound and vision. A sense of reality suspended.

He could feel ribs of sand pressing into the arches of his feet. The warm water lapping round his ankles. The air was still, but the mist needed no wind for movement. Dragon's breath, boiling up out of the sea. That was how Fin had always thought of it. The sigh of ancient, leathery lungs in some vast dark cavern, fifty fathoms below.

Now the mist brushed up against him, rolled lazily around him, as if deciding whether to smother him or sweep him away.

There was a strident call, somewhere between a long honk and a grunt. The ferry, making her way out to the islands, the sound of the siren distorted by the fog.

Fin began to dismantle the metal detector and stow it away in his backpack.

The islands. We were one of them till they built the bridge, he thought. He had liked to think of himself as an islander when he was a kid. Different. That's how he'd felt as he'd watched the visitors step down onto the jetty. Proud and independent, piratical even. But now, all he could think of was leaving school and getting the hell away onto the mainland. And somewhere just ahead of him, invisible in the mist, the bridge hung like a thread of hope across the narrows. He could hear a muted rumble as something crossed it now.

He finished packing the metal detector and wished he had brought a fleece. The twenty minute walk back to the village would warm him up. His shorts pockets clinked almost musically from his morning's work on the beach. People seemed more and more careless of their loose change these days.

He stepped from the water onto firm wet sand and began to walk briskly

homewards. Not even the thickest sea-mist – and this one seemed to be thickening by the minute – could disorientate him on this stretch of shore. He had walked it hundreds, no … more like thousands, of times in his sixteen years. He knew every sweep and promontory, every dune, practically every rock pool, between Seal Bay and the village.

Any minute now he would come to the first pier of the bridge, rising up through the fog like a great steel-and-concrete giant's leg. He could hear another vehicle approaching now. Closer. Slowing and stopping. Directly ahead of him. The sound of doors opening. People getting out. The engine still running. Voices.

Fin walked forward. The pier materialised beside him, towering into the murk. He looked up but could see nothing.

The voices were raised now. No more than thirty feet above his head. But he couldn't distinguish any words. They were on the far side of the bridge. The vehicle had been heading towards the mainland.

He began to walk forward again and there came a cry. Scarcely human, more like the shriek of a sea-bird. Followed by a fleeting glimpse of movement in the mist. Then a dull, wet thud.

Fin stood where he was, rooted to the sand. There was a long moment of silence. Then a short burst of frenzied splashing. Then silence again.

He began to run forward. As he did so he heard the vehicle move off.

He was almost on her before he saw her. The splashing started again as one leg drummed the shallows where she lay, half in, half out of the water. Fin could see the sleek black curve of rock on which she had landed, a porpoise arcing out of the sand. A couple of feet in either direction and she would have missed it, for what difference that might have made. The way she lay, sprawled across the rock on her back, she looked like something discarded. But her eyes were open and they widened as she focused on Fin. She was in her early twenties, he guessed. She had high cheekbones, dark hair falling across a chalk pale face. She was slim in jeans and sweatshirt, now soaked. She could have been Maia, he thought, his heart thundering in his chest as he knelt down beside her in the water.

The fog swirled closely around them now. So thick he could see no more than a couple of yards beyond her.

She opened her mouth but no sound came out.

He leaned forward. Put his head close to her face.

Her whisper was almost inaudible. 'Help…me…'

'I'll help you,' he said.

'I'm…so…frigh…'

She groaned and her eyes clouded in pain as he lifted his head away from her.

Her mouth was still moving.

He leaned forward again.

'…frigh…tened…'

She looked up at him beseechingly.

'…of…dy…ing…'

His phone was out of credit, goddammit. What the hell should he do? Leave her to get help? Stay with her and hope someone came along? Shout out at the top of his lungs?

'Please…hold…m – '

Her body shuddered and little flecks of foam appeared at her lips.

'Your hand?'

Her eyes flickered.

Fin reached down and took it as gently but firmly as he could. As if this would somehow hold her here, even in this half-world of mist and uncertainty. Despite the chill damp air, her hand was warm and the skin felt very smooth. The fingernails were bitten low.

'It's OK,' he said, feeling utterly hopeless. 'You'll be all right. There'll be help along soon.'

She had begun to pant. More foam bubbled at her mouth, pinkish now.

Part of him longed to run away. Part of him wanted to comfort her, take her in his arms if need be. But he was terrified of hurting her. Her head lolled back over the rock. She had moved it to look at him, so her neck couldn't be broken. Perhaps supporting it would help.

'I'm going to get you more comfortable,' he said.

He let go of her hand and it fell limply at her side. He shuffled round in the water to kneel behind her on the edge of the rock. Very gingerly he lifted her head and took it on his lap. He laid one palm against the side of her face and felt the tiniest pressure from her cheek. With the other hand he stroked her head.

Through the sea-water tang came the scent of shampoo. She must have just washed her hair.

'Is that all right?' he asked.

She gave a little grunt.

'You're OK,' he said, 'I'm here. With you. There'll be help soon.'

She was panting again. Faster now and shallower.

'It's all right.' He could feel his voice rising in his throat.

Her eyes were starting to lose focus.

Fin knew nothing about death or dying, but something told him she was slipping away from him.

'Stay with me,' he said as softly as he could. 'Please. Please. Don't go.'

She couldn't go. He wouldn't allow her to. She was someone's sister. Just like Maia. And sisters didn't fall through the mist and die. He was rubbing her cheek now with one hand and stroking her hair with the other.

'It's OK, it's OK …' he was repeating it like a mantra, over and over again. Something warm and wet ran down his own cheek and splashed onto the back of his hand. 'Stay with me, stay with me …'

And then suddenly she was gone. He didn't even know how he knew. But he did.

For a moment the mist eddied above his head and thinned. A wafer of sunlight fell on her face, and Fin caught a swift movement aloft, the flash of a gull's wing against the blue.

Then the mist closed around them once more. The shocked, tearful boy kneeling in the water with the stranger's head cradled in his lap.