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Opening extract from

Forbidden Island

Written by

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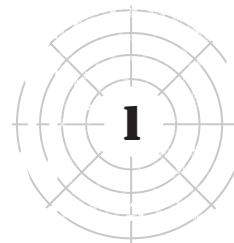
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"There's land ahead!" Mike shouted above the growl of the motor.

"Don't be stupid," said Hugh as he steered the boat south. The Scottish island of Mull had disappeared behind them some time ago and they were still a long way from the islands in front. "There's no land out here. Not according to the

map." Keeping his hands on the wheel, he nodded towards the GPS screen attached to the sunshade, next to the boat's radio.

Unsteady on his feet, Mike gripped the fibreglass canopy with one hand and pointed with the other. "What's that then?"

They all screwed up their eyes to peer across the sea. There was certainly something ahead, where there should have been only water and waves.

"Maybe it's a trick of the light," said Hugh's girlfriend, Lauren. "People crossing a desert sometimes see water that's not there. Maybe we're seeing land that's not there."

"Like we're all going to see the same mirage," Annie replied. "Looks pretty solid to me."

"Now you mention it… But…" Hugh tapped the chart above his head.

"Not on the map, eh?" Mike replied. "Fantastic. We can be the first ever human beings to explore a secret island. Set a new course, captain!"

Hugh groaned.

Annie thumped her brother playfully on the shoulder. "Come on, Hugh. Mike's right. It'll be fun."

"Okay."

It was crazy but, as they got closer, no one could deny that they were approaching an island. It wasn't enormous and it certainly wasn't mountainous, but it was there. At a distance, there were no signs of life. No trees, no houses, no movement. There didn't seem to be any beaches either. It was just a low dome of rock with patchy yellowed grass.

Over and over again, Hugh glanced at the electronic chart as if land might magically appear on it. But it didn't. He pressed a few buttons on the control panel and then shook his head in disbelief. "That's the satellite image of where we are. Nothing. I mean, how can a whole island – it must be a couple of kilometres across – not show up? That's not right."

The boat rose and fell as its prow cut through each wave. Holding onto Mike's arm, Annie said, "I heard

a rumour that there was a haunted island out here somewhere. A ship got wrecked on it and all the crew were drowned. Everyone keeps away, so they say."

"Who's *they*?" said Hugh.

"You know. The locals," Annie explained.

"Huh," Hugh muttered. "Probably the same ones who talk about the Loch Ness monster."

Mike butted in. "It just keeps getting better. Hidden *and* haunted!"

"How do you explain the chart?" said Hugh. "It's just sea."

Mike shrugged. "Someone's fiddling with the satellite signal."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"I do," Annie said with a big grin. "To keep the island secret."

Hugh sniggered at the idea, but it was clear from his face that he couldn't think of a better one.

On holiday in Scotland, Mike had run into Annie

and her family five days ago. Even though he was camping in a cheap tent and they were cruising in two boats between posh hotels on the west coast, he'd hit it off with Annie straight away. When Annie, her little brother Daniel, big brother Hugh and his girlfriend Lauren took their motor cruiser out for the day, Annie asked Mike to come too. Mike knew there was another sister as well, but apparently she wasn't invited – or maybe she just wasn't interested.

Annie told him that the small motor boat had been a joint birthday present for the four of them from their parents a couple of years earlier. Sometimes, it got left behind and they all went on the big motorized yacht. This time, they'd brought both boats to give them flexibility. Lingering in Oban for a week, Mr. and Mrs. Firth could use the yacht to go in one direction while the youngsters went somewhere else in the motor launch.

To Mike, Annie's parents seemed very trusting. They expected their kids to stay safe and be

responsible. They didn't check out exactly where they were going or what they were doing. But there was a reason for the trust. Annie had told him that her family took to the sea every school holiday and quite a few weekends if the conditions were good, so the kids were very experienced. Also, the weather forecast for the day was ideal. Besides, they could always make contact over the boat's radio or use their mobile phones if there was an emergency. On top of that, Mike believed that Hugh had never done anything wrong or risky in his entire life. He was a sixteen-year-old who acted more like he was forty.

Standing apart from the rest of them, Annie's other brother, Daniel, gripped the rail at the stern and watched the approach to the mysterious, barren island. His face was crinkled with concern. At thirteen, he was younger than the rest. Maybe he also felt out of it because he didn't have a girlfriend.

A couple of hundred metres from the shore, Hugh let the engine idle while they took a good

look. There were some rocky inlets and a few outcrops but nothing that welcomed a boat – not even a small one.

"Let's land," Mike said, the excitement clear in his voice.

"Be sensible," Hugh replied. "It's not like a bike you just jump off and prop against a wall, you know."

Annie was examining the shoreline through binoculars. "I can't see anything… Oh, hang on." She handed the binoculars to Hugh. "Along there. A few hundred metres. Isn't that some sort of jetty?"

"Mmm. If it is, it's knackered."

"It might not matter," Annie replied. "Let's go and find out."

The motor cruiser rocked gently as Hugh steered it parallel to the shore. Mike kept his eye on the land but he didn't spot any roads or even tracks. No animals stared back at him or ran away in fright. No birds were squatting in the nooks in the rock face. The place was strangely quiet and still.

Expertly, Hugh manoeuvred the boat alongside what remained of the small wooden jetty. "It's ruined," he said.

"But we can still use it," Annie replied.

"I don't like the look of it," Hugh said. "It's not just rotten. I think it's been wrecked – deliberately. Someone didn't want people landing…"

"The sea's bashed it about a bit, that's all," Mike said, not really knowing if it was true but eager to explore.

Lauren pointed to the left. "What's that, then?"

It was an old warning sign, lying on its side. It was dirty and worn, but part of it was still readable.

Danger. Keep away from this island.