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Opening extract from

The Devil's Triangle

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Chapter 1

'Row 41. These are ours.' Niamh dumped her little backpack on the nearest of the three seats and reached up to open the overhead locker. 'Bags I get the window seat.'

'It's yours,' Sam replied, leaning forward to look out through the little porthole window. 'It's a naff view anyway. All you can see is the wing. Do you mind if I have the aisle seat, Cal?'

'Sure,' Callum replied amiably. 'Fine by me.'

And it was. At this moment he didn't care where he sat. It was just exciting to be here. Sam and Niamh might be casual about heading out to the Florida Keys for the summer holidays, but this was the trip of a lifetime for Callum. The furthest he'd ever been from home before was to Paris on a school trip. He could still hardly believe he was about to fly to America.

'Cool!' Sam exclaimed as he settled into his seat. 'This is one of the jets with the new entertainment systems. Not all the 747s have these. Loads of films and games on demand. It helps the time pass no end, Cal. The flight takes forever without it. If you'd come with us a few years ago… aw, Dad! Do you have to?'

Callum leaned forward and instinctively pushed his glasses up his nose. Curious to see what had put the exasperated note into his friend's voice, he looked across the aisle at Mr Cutler. Matthew Cutler did not seem in the slightest bit bothered by his son's outburst.

'Yes, Sam,' he replied calmly, glancing across the aisle and then returning his attention to finding his page in the book he was holding. 'As a matter of fact, I do.'

'But you must have read that book a dozen times already,' Sam grumbled. 'You'll freak out the other passengers. Haven't you got anything else in your bag?'

'I've got my old friends Berlitz and Kusche. Would you rather I read one of those? Besides, you exaggerate. I've only read this one a couple of times and while Quasar is something of a sensationalist, his work is much more recent than the others. Some of the stuff he's dug up is very interesting.'

'Can I have a look, sir?' Callum asked, intrigued to see what they were talking about and keen to ingratiate himself with the man who was paying for his holiday.

'Certainly, Callum,' he replied, leaning across the aisle and passing the book. 'But please, call me Matt or Matthew. I have enough of being "sir" during the school term time.'

‘OK… Matt,’ Callum agreed hesitantly. After the formality of St George’s Grammar School for Boys, where all adults were ‘sir’ or ‘miss’, it seemed strange to be calling Mr Cutler by his first name, but the smile he received for using the familiar form immediately made him feel more comfortable with it.

The book had a dark cover picture of a stormy sea with a map of the North Atlantic Ocean superimposed over it. A line of dashes joined the islands of the Bermuda to Puerto Rico and Miami, and the title read *Into the Bermuda Triangle* in bold red type.

‘Is this true?’ Callum asked, pointing at the statement in smaller white type at the bottom of the front cover that declared ‘More than 1,000 ship and airplane disappearances in the past 25 years’. ‘I mean, I thought the Triangle was a sort of modern-day myth.’

‘Well, as I said, Gian Quasar, the author, appears to be a bit of a sensationalist,’ Mr Cutler replied carefully. ‘He’s probably right about the total, but not all of those ships and planes vanished without trace – far from it. The vast majority of the incidents are perfectly explainable, with little mystery about them. The Triangle is renowned for its unpredictable weather. It’s had a bad reputation with sailors since the time of the early explorers. Of course it wasn’t called the Bermuda Triangle then. It’s been given many dramatic names over the years: the Hoodoo Sea, the Twilight Zone, the Port of Missing Ships, the Limbo of the Lost. My favourite is the Devil’s Triangle. Perhaps that’s because the name implies an *intent* behind the disappearances.’

There was a strange note in Mr Cutler’s voice as he spoke.

‘So you think there might be something more to it than just weather,’ Callum suggested thoughtfully, turning the book over and skimming his eyes across the blurb. ‘Is the Triangle a hobby of yours?’

Something dug sharply into his right side. He twisted to get comfortable only to discover Niamh was jabbing him with her fingers. He opened his mouth to ask her why, but stopped. Her expression was full of warning. She was using him as a shield to keep from being in her father’s line of sight. The slightest shake of her head was enough to tell Callum this conversation was not one he should be pursuing.

‘I suppose it could be called a hobby,’ Mr Cutler said, oblivious to his daughter’s intervention and his voice sounding suddenly grim. ‘Do I believe the Triangle holds some strange mysterious force that causes ships and planes to disappear?’ He paused. ‘My head tells me no… but then my heart… well, let’s just say that I’m not sure quite what to believe any more.’

‘Give the book back,’ Niamh whispered softly to Callum. ‘And change the subject.’

Callum didn't need any further hints. He handed the book across the aisle just as a stewardess in her red and white uniform approached on her seatbelt check. She twisted her head to glance at the title of the book and chuckled as she read it.

'Oh, you don't want to read that today, sir,' she said, her blue eyes twinkling with amusement. 'We're going to be flying right through there, you know.'

'Are we?' Callum asked, surprised. A nervous knot tightened in his stomach. 'I hadn't realised.'

'I shouldn't worry too much,' the stewardess said, her smile clearly genuine. 'Our pilots today have a pretty good track record of finding their way to Miami.'

Almost as if he had heard the comment, the aircraft's public address system burst into life and the pilot began his welcome to the passengers.

'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Phil Hanson and I'm going to be your captain today. Together with my first officer, Mark Gillies, I'll be flying you out to sunny Miami. Our estimated flight time today is eight hours and fifty minutes and we'll be cruising at an altitude of …'

'Eight hours fifty!' Sam groaned.

'Is that longer than usual?' Callum asked, the feeling of tension in his stomach twisting a little tighter.

'Not much,' Niamh said calmly, flicking through the in-flight entertainment magazine she had pulled from the seat pocket in front of her. 'Ignore Sam's moaning. What's a few minutes here and there when you're going to be stuck in this seat for the best part of the day anyway?'

The captain finished his announcement by requesting all passengers to watch the safety video and the demonstration of the location of the nearest emergency exits by cabin staff. Callum was happy to comply, though he saw that Sam and Niamh weren't paying the slightest attention, and Mr Cutler was already lost in his book. There was a buzz of happy excitement in the aircraft. Young children were chattering excitedly and parents were trying to keep them in their seats and amused while the cabin crew began their final checks.

Callum failed to notice the movement at first, but then he did a double take as his eyes glanced around at the window.

'We're rolling backwards!' he gasped.

'Don't be daft!' Niamh chuckled. 'Relax. It's totally normal. We're being pushed back away from the terminal building, that's all. Haven't you flown before?'

'No. Never,' Callum replied, doing his best to look casual about it. 'Does it show?'

‘Only a lot!’

‘Well, I guess I’ll just have to live with that,’ he muttered.

Taking off was the most exhilarating experience Callum had ever felt. As the powerful engines of the enormous Boeing jet accelerated them down the runway, he could not help wondering how such an enormous machine could ever climb into the air. It didn’t seem right that air could support something that weighed so much. Just as he felt sure the laws of nature were agreeing with him and the runway must be running out, the front of the aircraft tipped upwards. Much of the vibration ceased instantly, and the dominant sound changed from the deep rumble of wheels on tarmac to the clean roar of the jet engines driving them away from the ground. They had been airborne for more than a minute before Callum realised his fingers were clasping the seat arms in a white-knuckled death grip.

‘Wow!’ he breathed, relaxing his fingers and wiggling them to release the tension.

Niamh glanced down at Callum’s hands as he interlocked his fingers and flexed them back and forth. ‘So did you squeeze us into the air today?’ she asked, affording him a knowing smile.

Callum could feel his face flushing. ‘I’d have thought you’d be thanking me,’ he replied quickly. ‘We’d be sitting in a smoking wreck halfway to Windsor if I hadn’t squeezed at the critical moment.’

Niamh laughed. ‘I can’t wait to see how you intend to get us down again,’ she said.

Callum didn’t notice when the aircraft stop climbing. They had still been rocketing skywards when a stewardess worked her way along the aisle handing out little plastic bags containing headsets. Sam showed him where to plug the jack into the armrest and Callum spent the next couple of hours happily watching a film on the small screen that was set into the headrest of the seat in front. Sam, he noted, was watching a different film, but Callum didn’t recognise it from the little he saw out of the corner of his eye.

When both their films had finished, Sam challenged him to various computer games and, before Callum realised it, another hour had passed. After being beaten for the umpteenth time at ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire?’ Callum had to admit that Sam had better general knowledge than he did.

‘So much for my reputation as a geek!’ he said. ‘That’s enough thrashings for now, Sam. I need to pee and stretch my legs. Try Niamh. Maybe she’ll give you more of a game.’

‘You mean, you need the *rest room*,’ Niamh corrected. ‘We’re going to the US. You might as well start getting used to their terminology.’

‘Fair enough,’ Callum replied, squeezing past Sam and into the aisle. ‘I’ll see you in a minute, y’all. I’m just off to the *rest room* … for a pee.’

Sam gave a bark of laughter. Niamh shook her head, but smiled as she did so. Callum looked a total nerd, but his appearance was deceptive. When he had first appeared at the house with Sam after school one day, she had found it hard to hide her surprise. He seemed an unlikely friend for her brother. Sam was tall, athletic and trendy, with a sharp haircut and clean-cut features, while Callum was a full head shorter, comparatively weedy-looking, with an unruly mop of hair and glasses straight from Austin Powers’ shelf. But Niamh had quickly warmed to his self-deprecating nature and sharp sense of humour.

When Callum returned, Sam had started watching another film. Callum didn’t fancy staring at the little screen again for a while so, settling into his seat, he reached down into his hand-luggage bag and pulled out a book. Niamh was also reading. Callum glanced across at Mr Cutler; he was still totally absorbed in his book.

‘So what’s with your dad and the Triangle?’ Callum whispered to Niamh. ‘All that rib-digging earlier has me curious.’

‘Didn’t Sam tell you?’ she replied softly, surreptitiously peeping round him to check for herself that her father was not listening.

‘Tell me what?’

‘Why we go to the Keys every year.’

‘No. Should he have?’

‘Typical! Sam hates talking about anything emotional.’

Niamh took another furtive look across at her father and then leaned right back into the seat to make sure she was as shielded as she could be by the two boys. ‘It’s where Mum disappeared nine years ago.’

‘Disappeared? You mean she just left?’

‘No,’ Niamh breathed. ‘She disappeared. Vanished.’

‘How?’ Callum asked.

‘Who knows?’ Niamh replied, her eyes wary and her voice sounding suddenly tight. ‘Dad’s pretty obsessed with finding the answer to that question, but aside from learning a lot of history, he doesn’t seem to have achieved a lot. To be honest, I don’t remember much about what happened. Sam and me were only five at the time, so all I can tell you is what Dad’s told us. Apparently, Mum was out in a boat with her dive partner studying nurse sharks. She was a marine biologist. Dad says she was involved in a project with a private

marine research lab. One day, her boat didn't return to the lab. The circumstances were so strange that Dad's been haunted by the Bermuda Triangle phenomenon ever since.'

'I'm sorry. That must have been tough.'

'Yeah,' Niamh said, unable to totally conceal the bitterness in her voice. 'You could say that. Dad went through a really tough time with the police investigation,'

'I didn't realise the Keys were inside the Triangle,' Callum admitted, not fooled for one moment by the dispassionate front Niamh was displaying. The pain in her eyes was obvious and although she was trying to sound cool and detached as she talked about it, hints of emotion kept leaking through. Although he didn't want to pry and upset his best friend's sister further, he found he couldn't curb his curiosity. He had often wondered why Sam and Niamh lived alone with their dad. He had assumed it had been the result of a divorce. The idea that their mother had disappeared under mysterious circumstances was horribly fascinating.

'The boundaries of the Triangle seem to vary depending on which book you read, but inside or out is a bit irrelevant really,' she explained, her eyes distant.

'Could the boat have sunk?' Callum asked gently.

'Mum and her partner were supposed to be working in shallow water. That's where nurse sharks breed, so most of the research was being done in water that was only a couple of metres deep. If the boat had sunk, it should have been found. And even if they had gone out into deeper water, they had masses of emergency equipment: radios, emergency locator beacons and flares. They should've had no problems raising the alarm with the coastguard at the first sign of trouble.'

'Maybe they were kidnapped,' Callum whispered, lowering his voice still further.

'Dad suggested that to the local Sheriff's Office. But why would anyone want to kidnap two marine biologists?' Niamh asked. 'And if they had, then surely the kidnappers would have sent a ransom note or something. No. It was very strange. The two of them just vanished. There was a search of course. But after a few days it was called off, and Mum became a statistic. Just another missing person.'

The hollowness in her voice as she said those final four words sent a shiver down Callum's spine. He knew he couldn't ask any more.

'I'm really sorry,' Callum said, trying to think of something comforting to say. There didn't seem to be any adequate words. 'It must have been horrible for all of you,' he added, knowing how lame his sympathy sounded.

Niamh nodded and gave him a weak smile.

It was a strange story. Callum pushed his glasses up his nose again before stealing another glance across at Mr Cutler. He seemed so ordinary. How was it that something so extraordinary could happen to a man like him? It was like something out of a Marvel comic. He could almost see the blurb:

Meet mild-mannered teacher, Matthew Cutler, forty-something father of two by day – paranormal investigator by night.

What superpowers would he have? Callum nearly laughed aloud as he momentarily pictured Mr Cutler wearing a spandex suit, cape and mask. The image was ridiculous. The science teacher had a receding hairline, a few too many pounds round his middle and little rectangular reading glasses that were clearly not for show.

'Dad has never truly given up on Mum,' Niamh volunteered suddenly, breaking his ludicrous train of thought. 'I'm pretty certain he still believes there's a chance she's alive somewhere, but I doubt he would ever admit that out loud. The life insurance company was slow to pay up after the coastguard called off the search, but when they did, Dad spent all the money he got on buying our house in the Keys and on kitting out a boat that he could use to search the waters there for clues. He gave up his career with Lloyds Bank and took up a teaching job so that he could use the long holidays to continue his search. I guess it's nice to know that he loved Mum so much, but it's also a bit sad that he can't let her go.'

'I'm just glad that I didn't offer to lend him my book when Sam made that fuss earlier,' Callum said.

'Why?'

Callum closed his book and turned it face up on his lap to reveal the distinctive black cover. It was a copy of *Gone* by Michael Grant.