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## The Island

### Rachel

It's nearly eleven. Rachel is on the boat, the *Island Princess*, it's called, churning through choppy grey seas. It's supposed to take tourists on day trips, so it has seats and a little bar area inside the cabin, and a tiny toilet that smells of diesel and sick. Craig Dunwoody brought her a cup of tea earlier and then went back to the upper deck again, leaving her clutching a steaming polystyrene cup and trying not to spill it. Craig is technically going to be her boss, she supposes, although really she's employed by the Forth Islands Trust and Craig is just her day-to-day contact, the one who's going to tell her what to do.

Besides Craig, Rachel and the boat's captain, whose name is Robert, there were five other people on the boat when they set off, all of them tourists: a mother and father with a teenage son, and an older couple in full hiking gear. People make day trips to the Isle of May, which is closer to the coast, and has seal colonies and a visitor centre. The *Island Princess* does a circuit, dropping off the trippers at May, then on to the Isle of Must, and back via May to pick them up again. May has two full-time reserve managers and several volunteers doing various things over the summer months. Craig has told her all this.

Robert doesn't talk much. He said hello and helped her aboard and that was about it.

The boat had stopped at May after about an hour. It was grey and rocky, with a steep, winding path leading up from the concrete jetty against which they moored. The tourists disembarked. On the jetty a young man in a green knitted pullover, with something monogrammed on his right chest, had greeted them. Rachel had been expecting him to lead the tourists up the path, but he'd waited for them all to get off and then Craig had handed across three of the plastic storage boxes, the sort you use for moving offices, which were then stacked neatly on the jetty. Once the boat began to chug out of the harbour again, the young man had stood on a wooden box and begun to give a talk.

Rachel had watched all of this without comment, dazed with tiredness and the effort of fighting the constant low-level anxiety. She had slept a little better last night, shattered from a day spent on trains and buses, but still she had been awake this morning from about four, worried about oversleeping and waking to find her new employer knocking at the door. As it turned out, he'd had to join her for breakfast, because the bed-and-breakfast (and Dawn, the owner) only started serving at eight. Rachel hadn't been particularly hungry but she could smell bacon cooking when she sat down in the dining room, and, being the only guest, didn't want Dawn to have wasted her efforts. So, a full Scottish breakfast, complete with square sausage – a new one on her – and black pudding and bacon 'from the farm'. She'd left the black pudding, ate as much as she could of everything else. Craig had arrived before the food, and Dawn had made him a coffee. They seemed to know each other well. Maybe he put business her way. The birdwatchers, perhaps.

Craig was okay. Hair that would be called strawberry blond on a woman, wispy-fine and receding; pale blue eyes, freckles, quietly spoken. Very grateful to her for taking on the job, flushed and a little sweaty – he had been up for hours, he said,

getting everything she needed – and jumping from one topic to the next so that it was hard to take everything in.

‘Don’t worry,’ he’d said. ‘I’ve written all down. You don’t have to remember a thing. And you can phone me if you get confused.’

He’d pulled out a crumpled sheaf of A4, folded in the middle, which had dense typescript on most of it, and notes scrawled over the top in red pen. When he’d spewed forth everything he thought she needed to know, only about a tenth of which she could possibly have repeated had anyone wanted to test her on it, he had taken a deep breath and sat back on the raffia chair in the bright little dining room.

‘So,’ he said, ‘you’re from Norwich?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve never been.’

And that was that. A moment later she was sent to grab her backpack from the room while he settled up with Dawn, then he was outside in a battered old Land Rover, the engine ticking over.

At the harbour, which was not very far away, Rachel had helped him stack plastic storage boxes on to the boat, and, once the tourists had piled on, they were away.

Must is another forty minutes beyond May, beyond the Firth of Forth and out into the North Sea. All Rachel can think of is the square sausage and the tea, swilling around inside her. By far the biggest meal she’s eaten in months – what was she thinking? To counter the movement of the boat she keeps a fixed eye on the island as it gets larger, making out details. There are not many pictures of Must online, she’d found when she first searched. There were plenty of pictures of the Isle of May, and so she’s been imagining it as May’s younger sister: more compact, prettier, greener. Instead the island before her is a squat, ugly little thing, a black and green troll crouched in a slate-coloured sea, waves striking it firmly up the arse.

The closer they get to it, however, the more it grows. The back end rises into black granite cliffs, white with foam at the

lower levels and pale with the guano of a hundred thousand seabirds higher up. She has seen bigger islands. She has seen bigger cliffs. But this one is going to be her home for the next six months or so, and she needs to like it. She needs it to want her as much as she wants it.

Craig leans over the railing above her. ‘Ten minutes,’ he says. ‘How you doing down there?’

‘Fine,’ she calls, knowing she’s probably green, wishing her make-up bag weren’t buried in her rucksack.

She can see more of the island now. The lighthouse is on the nearest side. Further along and about half a mile back is the small bird observatory that houses birdwatchers, and occasionally other people: ecology students and scientists. Her job will be to take care of the observatory, to clean it, and change the beds once a week ready for the next lot. She has to cater for them, too, which is why the *Island Princess* is loaded with food for the birdwatchers who will be arriving on this same boat tomorrow, not to mention bedding and duvets and other fancy shit that apparently they’re not used to. It’s been sleeping bags and tins of beans they brought themselves, up to now.

Today is Friday. She has just over twenty-four hours to get ready for them.

Rachel looks at the island and tries to imagine living somewhere so very different from the place she has left, her sister’s Victorian house just outside Norwich city centre. She has lived in various student digs, house-shares and flats. She has been in towns but mostly cities since she was a child; while the countryside has never been far away, she has never lived in it. And this is properly rural, seven and a half miles off the coast of Scotland, and even the other side of those seven and a half miles of grey choppy sea there’s barely a town with nothing but fields behind it. She tries to think how far away she is from her nearest Starbucks. Three and a half hours? It’s nearly two hours’ boat crossing. What if something happens? What if she panics?

She gets unsteadily to her feet. Craig moves to the front of the boat, picking up a rope and looping it between his hands.

There is a funny smell that gets more pungent as they get closer. It smells alarmingly like shit. Like blocked drains.

The boat rounds the south end of the island and chugs through a narrow channel between the rocks. The swell calms and it feels almost peaceful here, the wash of the boat causing huge pads of seaweed to rise and fall without breaking a wave. Out of the breeze the smell of sewage is even more pronounced and she wrinkles her nose.

Through the thickly salt-encrusted window at the front of the cabin she can see a concrete jetty, and a man and a dog standing on it. Even from this distance she can see he's huge, a real beast of a man, broad-shouldered, beard, short dark curls moving in the breeze. If you were going to picture a lighthouse-keeper – even though that isn't what he is – then you'd probably picture him. He's even taller than she first estimated, she realises as Craig jumps across the gap to the jetty and shakes his hand. Craig is over six foot, and this guy is taller still, by quite a whack. He reminds her of someone she can't quite place.

She smiles at him and waves, but, if he's seen her, he is pretending he hasn't. The dog, however, is staring right at her. It's a big dog, black and shaggy, with the long snout and upright ears of a German shepherd. Maybe it's mixed with collie. She likes dogs. This is good news. There will be at least one other sentient being on the island, even if it can't talk and is already affiliated to someone else. For some reason its presence here is comforting.

Fraser. The man is called Fraser. She doesn't know what the dog is called.

## Fraser

You only really start to feel anger once it's gone cold. Before that, it's like something outside you, something unexpected: you watch yourself getting angry and you're almost surprised

by it, because that's not you. That's not how you behave. And then, afterwards, you get the numbness and you think, *where did that come from?* and it's almost funny. Or you'd cry if it wasn't quite so hideous.

And then later, much later, days and months afterwards, the anger hasn't resolved and it's fermenting inside you because actually nothing has changed, and then you get sick with it. And you don't know why. You get what they call a stress-related illness, only you're not stressed at all, not when you don't have to go to work and actually at the moment everything's paid for, so you can't claim to be stressed. And then they change it to depression, and you think, *oh, is this what that feels like?* Because you wouldn't have called it that. You wouldn't have called it depression.

Even now he hates that word. It implies a lack of control.

Anger, gone cold and hard like a body that's saponified – turned waxy and soaplike by the passage of water over fat, the passage of time. That's what anger's like, when you can't get rid of it.

They had words, yesterday.

'You've to keep out of her way,' Fraser had said.

'Oh, aye? An' how'm I supposed to do that?'

'You see her, you talk to her. Just don't seek her out. Don't make friends. She doesn't need friends, and neither do you. Get me?'

He'd understood. Fraser could see it in his eyes, the flash of alarm. He didn't see it often these days, but sometimes it was needed, that sharp burst of authority.

## Rachel

Despite the relative calm of the harbour the boat is pitching, the jetty rising and falling alarmingly as Rachel tries to judge the right moment to jump. The two men are still talking. The

boat's engine shifts into some sort of neutral gear and suddenly it's much less noisy.

'Aye, but it'll have to do for now ...' she hears Craig saying.

Robert comes out of the wheelhouse and shouts something across to the two of them and they both laugh. Even though she can hear the words Rachel's brain cannot form them into any sort of sense and she thinks they must be speaking Gaelic. Or it's Robert's incomprehensible mumbling.

The man – Fraser – looks down at her for the first time in response, frowning. She guesses that Robert said she was a southern softy – or even something more offensive than that, judging by the way he's looking at her.

Fraser leans over and holds out a hand. Rachel mistakes his intention and shakes it, awkwardly, the boat still lurching.

'No,' he says, 'give me your luggage.'

Rachel slips the backpack off her shoulder and tries to hand it to him. It's too heavy really, for her to lift one-handed, but he takes it with ease, slinging it over his shoulder and offering his hand to her again. This time she takes it and he hauls her up on to the jetty. She loses her footing and for a horrible moment she is dangling from Fraser Sutherland's arm, her foot between the boat and the jetty as the boat rises again.

He drops the backpack, grabs the waistband of her jeans with his other hand, and hauls her up just in time.

She is left on the jetty, legs still wobbly from the voyage, heart racing with how close she just came to crushing her foot. He's already turned back to Craig, as if nothing had happened. The dog pushes against her and she looks down into a pair of serious brown doggy eyes. She lets it sniff her hand until it nudges her with its nose and wags its tail and she rubs her cold hand over its head, between its ears. In response it turns and leans the weight of its body against her leg. She feels the warmth through her damp jeans and it is weirdly comforting.

Robert has started moving the stacked boxes into the deck space Rachel has just vacated, and Fraser reaches down and hauls them on to the jetty as quickly as he stacks them.

They have obviously done this before. She feels she should be helping, but Craig is also just standing there watching them, and it takes them less than two minutes.

Robert raises a hand and says something and disappears into the wheelhouse. It might have been a goodbye, although he's scarcely spoken at all today.

Rachel has recovered a little. Remembered her manners.

'You must be Fraser,' she says, offering a hand again. 'I'm Rachel.'

He looks at it, takes a firm grip and gives it a single, rough shake. Turns away before she has a chance to say anything else, hefting up two of the plastic crates as he does so. *Pleased to meet you too*, she thinks.

The smell is overwhelming, almost stinging her nostrils. She puts a hand over her nose. 'Does it always smell like this?' she asks.

Craig waves a hand at four large stainless steel drums that are on the low cliff above them. 'No,' he says. 'It's the septic tanks.'

'The what?'

'They get emptied once every few years. Helicopter comes to pick them up. Due in the next few days.'

Rachel looks at the tanks. Her stomach lurches.

They carry the crates to the end of the jetty and load them on to the trailer of a quad bike that is sitting there. Fraser brings her rucksack, hooked casually over his massive hand. Without another word he climbs on the quad bike and revs it, then bounces off up the rough track. The dog scampers ahead, knowing to keep out of the way, and Craig and Rachel follow, more slowly. It's steep, and it's not paved either, but potholed and spotted with grassy tufts and patches of loose stones, which makes it challenging to climb. Craig is trying to talk, something about puffins and gulls, but eventually he gives up. Rachel makes it to the top before he does.

The island is about a mile long and half a mile wide, a rough oval in shape, should you be looking at it from Google



Earth, which Rachel has done quite a lot in the last week. The harbour and the lighthouse are in the southern half, the lighthouse on the western side, across the width of the island from the harbour. The bird observatory is on the eastern cliff. They follow the path towards it, which undulates along the top of the cliffs. Everything as far as the eye can see is green, and grey, the colours changing as the sun comes out and disappears again. A few scrubby bushes line the path, bent double by years of growing in the wind, and, overhead, seabirds wheel and call. Nearer the cliff, the noise rises until it's almost deafening. There are almost no level sections to the path. They're either walking uphill or downhill, and their steps thud on the springy turf. As if the island is hollow.

Rachel has been told already not to stray from the path, for fear of collapsing a puffin burrow. The birds mate for life, and return to the same nest site every year. She read that on Wikipedia. Anxious not to disappoint a puffin couple returning from half a year battling Atlantic storms only to find their home destroyed, she is determined to be careful.

She can see the bird observatory on the summit of the next hill, a solid, squat building with whitewashed breeze-block walls. The quad bike is parked outside it and the trailer is empty by the time they get to it. Fraser emerges from the open door with the dog at his heels, and stares at them as if they've been hours.

'I'll give you a call, shall I?' Craig asks him.

'Aye, or I could leave it here.' He's talking about the quad. 'You know how to use it?'

Rachel thinks for a moment he's asking her, but he's talking to Craig.

'Aye, right enough. I'll see you, then,' Craig says, and shakes Fraser's hand.

And Fraser walks off in the direction of the lighthouse without so much as a glance in her direction. The dog stays a moment longer, looking from Rachel to Fraser's retreating back as if it's thinking of staying, then it takes off after him.

'What's the dog called?' she asks.

‘Don’t know,’ he says. ‘Come inside, hen.’

How many times must he have been here, and he’s never once asked about Fraser’s dog?

The boxes have been stacked in a large, open-plan room. An unattractive kitchen is at one end: badly fitted cupboards, a laminate worktop warped and lifting at the edges, revealing the chipboard beneath. The rest of it is a sitting room with various mismatched chairs and sofas, and an ugly stained-pine dining table, marked with several overlapping rings where people have put mugs down without coasters. Bare wooden benches sit either side of it. The breeze-block walls are decorated with posters of birds and pictures of Highland scenery, and one framed picture of Anstruther harbour with the *Island Princess* moored in the foreground, the whole thing faded where it’s been in the sun. There is a large, squat woodburner at the far end, and a vast stack of random bits of wood inside a frame which seems to be made out of pallets, nailed together.

The place smells damp, and over the top of that Rachel can still detect the undeniable whiff of shit from the septic tanks.

‘I’ll give you the tour,’ Craig says nervously, perhaps worried by the expression on her face. Although there’s not a lot more to see.

There are three bedrooms: a double, a twin, and the smallest room, which has two bunk beds in it. There is a chilly, cheaply tiled bathroom without a bath – just a shower, a toilet and a sink. There is also a separate toilet next door to it. It feels very much like the sort of hostel you’d stay in when your budget amounted to the next step up from free, and her heart sinks. None of the beds are made. There’s her first task.

‘Right,’ she says. ‘Am I in the double?’

‘I’m sorry?’ Craig answers, confused.

They stare at each other, then he seems to follow her train of thought.

‘Oh! No, hen, you’ve a room in the lighthouse.’ He chortles with laughter – how hilarious that she thought she was staying in the bird observatory! Nobody had actually said anything

about where she was going to sleep. She had just made that assumption.

‘With... Fraser?’

‘Aye, with Fraser. Much nicer up there, there’s a telly an’ everything. Did you think you were down here, on your own?’

Rachel feels something like the beginnings of panic. ‘You want me to share with a man I’ve only just met?’

She has a particular voice that emerges when things go wrong. It comes from nowhere and it’s a bit high-pitched, not her usual voice at all. It says things, before she has time to think that saying them out loud is probably not a good idea.

Craig looks slightly horrified. ‘Ah,’ he says, lamely, ‘Fraser’s all right once you know him.’

‘But I *don’t* know him,’ she squeaks. ‘That’s the point.’

For a moment they stare at each other, until she realises that she has no choice. What’s she going to do? What *can* she do? Run? Get back on the boat?

‘There are other buildings...’ he says. ‘There’s the old lightkeeper’s cottages, the ones we’re thinking of making into holiday lets. Maybe you could look, see if you’d rather stay there. But it’s a lot of work, so for now you’ll have to stay in the lighthouse. And you don’t really want to be all on your own. This is a lonely enough place without making it more so.’

They unpack the plastic crates. Craig unloads everything directly on to the counter, as if he’s in a hurry to get away as quickly as he can. Rachel starts to put things away, but the cupboards are already occupied: ratty cardboard, cobwebs, a packet of porridge oats with a hole in it, its contents scattered. Everything needs cleaning.

As the plastic crates are emptied they are nested neatly inside each other. Rachel had taken her backpack out of the quad’s trailer but now she puts it back in for Craig to cart on to the lighthouse, along with the empty crates, which are going back with the boat.

The birdwatchers have very basic needs when it comes to catering. They’ll do their own breakfasts, and there will be

bread and ham and cheese and tinned soups and beans for them to make lunch with. Rachel's catering role comes in the evenings, when she will dish up something simple and hearty. Lasagne. Shepherd's pie. Tuna pasta bake. Stew. In between groups of visitors, she will change the beds, clean, and do the laundry. Other than that, there is an extensive list of small but important jobs including checking the level of water in the well which provides the bird observatory with water (a dry spell might mean showers are rationed), making sure the generators are stocked with fuel, collecting driftwood for the woodburner when walking on the beach, litter-picking on the beach (apparently plastic items are washed up constantly; there are two huge metal bins by the jetty which are collected every once in a while and taken to the recycling centre on the mainland), and keeping birds out of the bird observatory. It seems they have a tendency to wander in, if the door's left open. 'Helping the warden as required' is also on there.

She had asked Craig about that over breakfast, scanning through the list and barely taking it in. 'What sort of things will he need help with?'

'Counting birds, most likely. Ringing and netting. Taking pictures. General maintenance.'

All of these things are whirling around Rachel's mind, twisting themselves around the notion that she's sharing a house with a man she's only just met. A man who, she now realises, reminds her of Captain Haddock from *Tintin*, if Captain Haddock had been six foot five and built like a wall.

There is a pile of plastic-wrapped duvets and pillows that were in several of the largest crates.

'You'll need one set for your bed, hen,' Craig tells her. She counts them out. There are two double duvets, so she takes one of those and a pack of pillows and separates it from the rest.

They have finished unloading all the boxes and Craig has shown her the outhouse with the generator, and the washing machine, and the heavy iron grating that covers the well. They are back at the quad.

‘Backsies?’ he asks warily.

Really she would prefer not to have to hold on to him, but it’s a fair walk back to the lighthouse and she’s tired now, still tired from yesterday’s long journey. She throws the duvet and pillows into the trailer along with her backpack, clambers on to the back of the quad and he fires it up, lurching off down the hill and up the other side, nearly tipping her off the back of it. She squeals and grabs at his waist, thinking about helmets and people who’ve suffered brain injuries following quad accidents, never mind miles out in the North Sea; but, by the time she has opened her eyes and looked at the grey-green landscape bumping past, the lighthouse is looming large ahead of them.

He stops the quad outside the lighthouse and kills the engine. Rachel collects her backpack from the trailer, eases it on to both shoulders. Duvet in one hand, pillow in the other.

‘Call me if you have any problems,’ he says in a tone that suggests he might even answer.

He manages an awkward jog down the hill to the harbour. The *Island Princess* is waiting for him, rising and falling next to the jetty, ready to head back to May to pick up the tourists.

Already thirty-six hours have passed since she left Lucy in the station car park. It feels like a lifetime ago.

## Fraser

Fraser is no more keen to share the lighthouse than Rachel is. He has lived here for the past four years, and the way of life has suited him just fine. He isn’t supposed to be on his own, there is supposed to be an assistant, but whoever they were they never appeared and he never bothered to ask, because the answer would have been ‘funding issues’, as it always was. And he’s glad, under the circumstances, to be left to his own devices here. Fraser is not a man who plays by the rules. And, so far, he has been able to do things his way.