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Only We Know

Written by Karen Perry

Published by Michael Joseph

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Only We Know

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Prologue

Kenya, 1982

A woman lies in a field, sunning herself. The grass grows long around her, and from it, she hears the sibilant hum of unseen insects. Nearby, the children sit in the grass, restless and bored, but content to leave her be. Above her, the air shimmers with heat. It is almost noon.

She has flattened out a patch of grass with the tarpaulin they have used beneath their tent. It gives off a stale tang of sweat or mould, but right now that doesn't bother her as she stretches out, legs crossed at the ankles, a paperback novel unread and flattened against her belly, sunglasses covering her eyes from the white glare of the sun. For now, all she wants is to lie still and soak up the heat.

She breathes in the heavy air, feels the baking earth beneath her, and takes in the hush of the great meadows and plains that stretch out around her. The others left a half-hour ago, down the worn track towards the Masai village and she, Sally, has stayed behind to watch over the children. But the children are of an age that resists parental supervision. All summer long, they have held her at a distance, absorbing themselves in their new-found alliance, forming their own secret games, their own clandestine code. She feels driven out by their new demands for privacy. Even now, she can hear them stirring, getting to their feet,

a resolve formed between them. She sits up and watches the three of them moving purposefully towards the downward slope of the field.

'Boys!' she calls to them, and when she calls a second time, they stop, Luke turning to look at her, Nicky mumbling something to Katie.

'What?'

She has to shade her eyes to see her elder son's face, and even though it is in shadow, she can still see the sullen set of his features, the suspicious look he has been giving her for some time now. Recently, whenever she is with him, she has the sense that the boy is faintly disgusted by her.

'Where are you off to?'

'The river.'

'No, Luke, it's dangerous –'

'Dad lets us.'

'Even so, I'm not happy with –'

'Oh, for Christ's sake.'

'Luke!' she shouts, enraged.

He opens his mouth to say something, thinks better of it and stands there chewing his lip, waiting. Sally feels prickly and uncomfortable, the vast heat rising around her. When she thinks of the trees that flank the river, the relief of shade there, she finds she hasn't the heart to argue with him.

'Oh, very well,' she says, trying to sound firm and purposeful. She wishes she wasn't seated. Her authority seems diminished, stretched out on her tarpaulin sheet, her son gazing imperiously down on her. Ten years old with the haughtiness of an aristocrat. 'But you're to be careful, do you understand? All of you.'

She casts her voice out so that the other two will take note. Katie glances back but Nicky keeps his eyes fixed firmly on the dusty ground.

'Luke,' she says sharply, as he turns to go. 'I'm counting on you to watch out for the others. All right?'

He gives her a look, closed and unreadable, and there it is again, the feeling she's had lately that he's holding himself back from blurting something out and confronting her.

'All right?' she says again.

He shrugs, then turns away. She watches him catching up with the others, overtaking them, his shoulders set with a grim determination, moving towards the shady banks with a purposeful air while the others lope along in his wake. How different they are, her two sons. Where one is bold and enlivened with a kind of animal energy, the other hangs back, dreamy and shy. Sally finds it hard sometimes to negotiate the role of parent to two such different children. If she is honest with herself, she knows she leans towards her younger son, finding she understands him innately, that she can identify with his dreaminess, with the rich inner life that occupies him. Her older son remains a mystery – an enigma – even though he lives his life so openly, almost aggressively, with an energy that sometimes baffles her. A wave of feeling takes her as she watches them until they reach the trees and disappear into the shadows – her two sons, her beautiful boys.

The sun is too bright, and the stifling heat makes it impossible to linger in the middle of the field. She can feel her body becoming desiccated, like the baked earth around her. Besides, there are things to be done before the others

return. She gets to her feet and moves back towards the camp, leaving her book and the tarpaulin behind her – she will get them later, when Ken and Helen return with another driver.

The tents have been collapsed already, but the job of folding and packing them away was abandoned when Mackenzie came back and they discovered he was drunk. God, what a scene. Sally doesn't even want to think about it. She stops by the white van to check on him before she tackles the tents. Peeping in through the cab window she sees him stretched out on the seat, one arm thrown over his head, the other dangling down into the foot-well, the steady rise and fall of his chest as he sleeps it off. She cannot see his face as it is turned away, into the backrest.

'I don't like him,' she had said to Jim that first day.

They were in the office in Kianda, the two of them. Mackenzie had just left.

'Why not?' Jim had asked, surprised.

'I don't trust him,' she replied, and Jim had laughed, shaking his head, before returning his gaze to his paperwork, one hand tapping out a rhythm with his pen.

'You don't trust anyone,' he had said, but there was fondness in his tone, a light-hearted mockery that took the sting out of his words.

But it was true – she didn't trust the man, although she had nothing to base it on, only her own gut instinct. Within minutes of him stepping inside the office, she had felt the nudge of wariness. He was small, thin shoulders braced with tension, square-faced and flat-nosed, with nostrils that seemed permanently flared. She had watched him lighting up, puffing away on his cigarette the whole time

they were making the arrangements, his small eyes flicking around the room but hardly ever alighting on her. He directed his comments to Father Jim, as if Sally wasn't even there. The whites of his eyes were tinged yellow, as if nicotine-stained, and he never once looked her clear in the face.

'He seems shifty,' she had said.

'Listen,' Jim was trying to sound reasonable, 'he knows the road well, and he knows the safari routes out there like the back of his hand. By all means, look for someone else, but you won't find anyone who can sniff out the big game like Mack, believe me.'

She had gone along with it. So, when they had woken on the last day of their three-day safari to find their driver missing, it had been, in a way, her fault.

It was mid-morning by the time the white van came skidding up the track, coughing up dust around it as it drew to an unsteady halt. She had known, as soon as Mackenzie stepped out, that he was drunk. The angle of his cap, the unsteady weave of his gait as he came towards them, the way he heaved in his breath as if trying to push down on the rising bile inside him.

'Oh, Christ,' Ken had said. 'He's pissed.'

And he was. Astonishingly and outstandingly drunk. He had staggered towards them, tried to string a few words together but they had emerged as an incoherent mash-up of an excuse. Helen, a witness to his inebriation, had blown up. Ken had lost all his patience, and Sally had felt rage ripping through her as if she wanted to kill someone. The row that ensued was awful. It was like the driver's drunkenness had put a match to a highly

flammable atmosphere, one that had been smouldering for days, setting it ablaze.

In the searing heat of the midday sun, as Sally bends to begin folding away the tents, she feels suffused with a sense of shame. She should never have let it get so far. The words she had spoken, the things she had said – in front of her own children, in front of Helen's daughter – were unforgivable.

She would have to patch things up with Helen, although time was not on her side. They would drive back to Nairobi tonight – if they could find a driver – and the next day, Helen and Katie would board their flight for home. And then what would happen?

She packs away the tents, stacks the neat bundles alongside their bags, and looks around for any stray belongings. There is still no sign of the others.

Shouts erupt from the trees down by the river – yelps of joy and delight, alongside sounds of taunting. Helen's words come back at her – *You'll keep an eye on Katie, won't you?* She feels a small stab of guilt. The shouts draw her on, as does the need to get out of the sun's glare.

Even here, under the shade of the acacias, it's still hot as hell. Sweat beads on her brow and she wipes it away with the back of her forearm, looks down into the gloom, her eyes adjusting to the sudden plunging loss of sunlight. A great whoop of delight catches her off guard – shrieked out through the shadows, it causes her to step back involuntarily – followed by a deep splash. She looks down into the water, sees it ripple and rock in the half-light, before Luke's blond head emerges, then his naked torso. His skin glistens, and when she calls to him, for just an instant she

sees unabashed glee on his face before the mask comes down, extinguishing the glittering light of his joy.

'What?' he asks sullenly.

'I told you not to go into the river,' she says.

'No, you didn't.'

'Luke, I did. It's not safe.'

'You said to be careful, and we are. But you never said not to go in.'

She hesitates – a fatal mistake. He lowers himself back into the water, keeping his eyes locked on her, challenging her.

'Where's Nicky?' she asks.

'There.' She follows the direction of his outstretched arm, sees the dark hair of her younger son a little way down. He is crouched among the shallows, and there are two girls with him, but neither is Katie.

'Hello,' she says tentatively, feeling her way carefully down to the bank. 'I see you've made new friends, Nicky.'

The boy doesn't look up, just stays there, hugging his knees to his chest and staring into the water, a strange little smile on his face.

'Hello, lady!' the girl next to him shouts up.

Sally laughs at the salutation, and turns to the girl – white blonde hair in bunches, two big square front teeth shining in their newness, gaps on either side where the adult teeth are yet but stubs. A rabbitty face busy with freckles, rounded cheeks. Her smile is open and warm but there is something about her that Sally is unsure of. Gormless. That is the word she alights on. Something in the girl's eye that is dull and slow. 'Not the full shilling,' as her father might have said.

'What's your name?' she asks brightly.

'Cora.'

'Hello, Cora.'

'And she's Amy.'

A jerked thumb indicates the presence of a smaller girl hovering behind her. A tatty dress tucked into knickers, the same white blond hair as her sister, but her eyes are sharper, the gaze more discerning. Sally guesses this child is four or five.

'Are you allowed to play here by the river?' she asks, wondering about the younger child, wary somehow of leaving her in the care of the older girl.

'Oh, yeah. Pops says it's fine.'

Sally glances behind the girl, up past the bank of trees on the other side of the river. There is a clearing there, the vague outline of some kind of house. Over the past few nights, they have seen the glow of a campfire through the trees, smoke rising into the night. When they asked him about it, Mackenzie had snorted dismissively. 'Gypsies.'

Sally takes in these girls with their washed-out dresses, dirty faces and feet, and feels a jab of uncertainty.

'Where's Katie?' she asks.

'Here I am.'

The voice, directly behind her, causes Sally to jump. She swings around, sees the girl sitting still in the shadows, sandalled feet together, hands clasped around her knees, and those big round eyes, solemn and staring up at her through the gloom.

'What are you doing?' Sally asks, unreasonably sharp, but she is still recovering from the fright.

'Nothing,' Katie says, her eyes fixed on Sally.

'Well, it's time to go back to camp now,' she says firmly.

'Is Dad back yet?' Luke asks.

'No. But he will be soon.'

'Ten more minutes.'

'Now.'

'Aw, please, Mum,' he says, a plaintive whine in his voice. It strikes Sally forcefully that, for the first time in days, he has addressed her as 'Mum'. Something inside her falters.

'All right, then.'

What's the point in arguing anyway? Best to leave them here playing, where they're happily entertaining themselves, than have them under her feet, whining and moaning and questioning her constantly about when the others will return.

She scrambles up the bank, stops to take one look back at them – Luke gliding through the water, Nicky turned to the girl with the buck teeth, whispering something to her, Katie sitting and gazing down at them, still and impassive. Sally watches them for no more than a minute, before turning away. And as she steps back out into the blinding heat, feeling the dryness of the grass brushing her ankles, she has no idea that this is the last time she will see them as innocent children, the last time she will feel such uncompromising love. She doesn't know it yet, but in less than an hour, her whole life will have changed.

Everything is packed and ready now, but still the others have not returned. Sally lies down again on the tarpaulin, resting on her front, and tries to read her book. But the words blur on the page, sweat running into her eyes; soon she gives up, rolls onto her back and closes her eyes.

She feels her body swamped in heat, imagines herself as a tiny insect trapped beneath the searing gaze of the African sun. Three years they have been here, and now that Ken is coming to the end of his contract, a decision must be made. Do they return to Ireland or will he push to extend his contract for another year? The boys are growing up and there is their education to consider. There is also Sally's own work in Kianda, and the growing pull it has on her life. She thinks of the house back in Ireland, remote in the Wicklow hills, each room crowded with inherited antiques, and tries to imagine going back there, picking up where she had left off. Africa has changed her. She is not the same person as the woman who kept house in those rooms. A door has been opened inside her and she fears returning to Ireland will mean slamming it shut.

Tiredness pulls at her limbs, dragging her towards sleep. She should go and fetch the children. Five more minutes, and she'll get up and go to the river.

A decision needs to be made – Ken will begin to push her on it soon. The truth is, she had hoped to know by now, had thought that somehow it would grow clear to her what she should do. But her thoughts are so muddy and opaque. And there is another decision that pulls at her conscience – an ultimatum delivered before they left for the Masai Mara, an ultimatum from someone else entirely.

'I have to know,' the man had said. 'I can't hang on here waiting for you for ever.'

The three days away on safari were supposed to be spent in thinking it over. But somehow, whenever she has a quiet moment to herself, the last thing she wants to do is think about it.

Sleep comes to her then, swooping down and taking her; under the burning sun, she lets it all go – the argument this morning, her decaying friendship, the ultimatum delivered, the indecision and dread that she has been dogged by lately – all of it obliterated by the blanketing darkness of sleep.

A scream.

The shrill note of terror.

It comes to her through her dream. Instantly, she opens her eyes, squints under the glare of the sun, feels the tightness of sunburn across her forehead and cheeks.

Another scream. She pulls herself up, head heavy and swimming with sleep. She looks about her, confused, the searing knot of a headache announcing itself at the back of her eyes.

Silence surrounds her. Only the gentle hissing of a breeze through the grass, the click and hum of insects. Birds in the trees. And yet the absence of any other sound strikes a chord of urgency within her. She cannot hear the children now but, remembering the scream, her heart gives a sudden lurch of fright. She knows it wasn't imagined.

She stumbles to her feet, scans the empty field, and turns towards the river. She moves swiftly, the ground hard and unforgiving beneath the soles of her feet, propelled by a fear that has come alive inside her.

The silence seems to deepen, to gather density as the dark clutch of trees looms in front of her.

A voice whispers in her head.

The boys, it says.

And then it starts, the stream of frightening possibilities – a fall, a broken limb, a gashed head, a snake-bite – all of it running through her as she pounds a ragged path through the bush. The silence seems to roar around her now, and a warning voice sounds in her head, a voice that tells her to hold steady, to steel herself for whatever is to come.

Another scream – this time from the opposite bank – stops her in her tracks.

And it comes to Sally then, with a striking clarity, an insight so clear that she knows it to be true.

The river.

A child under water.

Momentarily the fear drains away as she reels from the impact, coldness flushing through her body. It lasts but a second. Then, she starts to run.