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Footsteps

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Extract

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Chapter One

Present

1

On the morning of that day Helena received a letter from a stranger.

Flat 3, 27 Greville Rd,
Putney SW15
25th March 1992

Dear Helena Mayrick,

I am writing to you because you are a researcher and the granddaughter of Hubert Donaldson, the photographer.

My interest in Donaldson is twofold. In the first place I am a photographer myself and have always been a great admirer of his work. Secondly, I have been commissioned to compile a retrospective of his life and photographs, and thought you might like to collaborate, or at least advise on the project.

If you are at all interested, perhaps you would get in touch.

Yours sincerely,
Nick Broadbent

Helena read the letter twice and then put it aside, taken aback by so abrupt and unexpected an approach. You can have no idea, Nick Broadbent, she thought, of the distress such an undertaking will cause my family.

She was aware that the mention of Donaldson's name had already aroused in her a familiar sense of oppression.

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In the afternoon she and Nina walked into Shrewsbury to go swimming. Afterwards Helena was to wonder that she had felt no pang or jolt at the moment of Michael's accident. Probably it happened while they were crammed into one of the cold-floored changing cubicles. Nina's voice was high-pitched in the echoing, watery warmth of the pool. On the way home the dying sun cast long shadows among the trees in the Quarry Park. There were rowers out on the river, their noses and elbows red with exertion. Nina raced along beside them, and then stood on the bridge, panting, and peered down into the slick, chilly water.

They ate supper in the kitchen where late sunlight lit up Nina's gallery of paintings on the larder door. Every so often Nina paused between mouthfuls to ask: 'Is it nearly time for Daddy to ring now?'

Helena looked at her daughter's tangled brown hair and anxious face with exasperation. 'I've told you, Nina, he said he might not phone tonight as he's coming home tomorrow.'

'What will he be doing now?'

'He'll be having his supper, probably.'

'I expect he'll be tired after climbing the mountain.'

'You know Daddy, he never gets tired. But with any luck all the children who are with him will be worn out. Some of them have never done any climbing, you see, and I expect Daddy will make them go right to the very top, however much they complain.'

After coaxing the child into bed, Helena at last returned to the letter which had been an unfocused but nagging intrusion into her activities all day.

Sighing, she unfolded the single page.

At that moment the doorbell rang.

From her place at the kitchen table, she could see along the narrow hall to the glass-paned front door. Two heads, one at shoulder height to the other, were dimly outlined. A little troubled, Helena tiptoed into the dark sitting room which overlooked the street and the porch. The taller figure was

standing nearest the bay window. At once she noticed that he was in uniform.

As she walked to the door, Helena had time to register that she was moving from one phase of her life and into the next. Fear, like a cold sword, cut through her.

The woman had bleached hair and eyes harshly outlined by thick pencil. She smelt of cigarettes and crowded rooms. Helena heard her voice as if from the end of a long tunnel, and noted an attempt at softness. They were in the familiar kitchen again, at the table where the letter lay buckled on its fold-line.

The policewoman had hold of Helena's hand; her own was small and blunt with carefully manicured nails. Her words were thin, half-heard echoes in Helena's consciousness. 'He died instantly. No pain. So brave. A boy tumbled down a steep escarpment. Your husband went after him. Saved the boy's life. But then fell himself. A long way. Everyone else is all right. Have you someone we could telephone?'

Behind them the man moved about with the kettle and cups. A suffocating blanket seemed to press on Helena's lips and nose. Nauseous, she fixed her gaze on the woman's small mouth.

Wave after wave of black, comfortless silence blotted out the pictures on the cupboard door opposite, the white gleam of the letter and the empty doorway leading to the dark hall.

2

On the fourth night after Michael's accident Helena at last noticed Nina's pain. At tea that evening she saw the child's white face with a sprinkling of freckles frighteningly prominent on her small nose. Behind her glasses Nina's eyes were bleak with misery. Not even her grandmother could persuade her to eat. She merely turned her face into her grandfather's sweater, her unbrushed hair a tousled mop against his chest.

'Come on, Nina, and give me a hug,' Helena said, and they all looked at her with their habitual expressions of concerned alarm. But the little girl climbed onto her lap and Helena

clasped the bony body and buried her nose in her daughter's hair, which smelt of plasticine.

Across the table Helena's mother Joanna coughed and then stood to clear the table.

'You'll be worn out, Mum,' Helena said.

'No, no. Good heavens, I can't do much but I can do this.' Joanna tied on her blue and turquoise floral apron – brought from home in her suitcase on the night of Michael's death – with the deft movements that were so typical of her.

'Then I'll put Nina to bed.'

'Let Dad do that.'

'I'm all right. What story shall we have, Nina?'

They did not waver from the familiar bed-time ritual. Undressed, Nina trotted along to the laundry basket in her parents' room with her discarded underwear. Then she and Helena went into the bathroom for a wash of face and hands and a clean of teeth. Back in the bedroom Nina chose *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* and both climbed beneath the duvet with the book, Nina tucked under Helena's arm, thumb in. For a while they were lulled into a false sense of normality. Michael was often out at parents' evenings or nights at the pub to plan the next expedition. Later he would be back with a clink of his key in the lock and a wolf whistle at the bottom of the stairs.

After the story Helena sat for a while with the child cuddled against her aching ribs. The gnawing pain in her chest and abdomen had been unremitting since the police arrived with news of Michael's death. She took a breath and said: 'You and I will be all right, Nina, you'll see,' and at once felt a surge of relief that she had made a commitment to her child, and even believed her own words. Until that moment she had struggled through a thick fog with only the thoughts: He's dead. I can't manage. He's dead. What will I do? whispering over and over again through her head.

'Shall I get Grandma to come up and say good night?'

'Yes please.' One last hug and Helena was released.

On the surge of energy created by her own optimistic words,

Helena went to her bedroom and closed the door. She sat on the green checked quilt, a wedding present from one of Michael's Mayrick cousins, and confronted the row of baggage lined up neatly along the wall. Michael's possessions had been brought to the house that morning by the same blonde policewoman who had delivered the news on the night of the accident. There was a plastic bag of clothes, his walking boots and his rucksack which looked even shabbier than usual propped against the shiny radiator. Michael had decorated the bedroom the previous summer and its paintwork had not yet lost its freshness.

Helena touched the hard nylon top of the rucksack.

'This rucksack's been the equivalent of several times round the world on my back,' Michael had protested when she offered to buy him a new one for Christmas. 'It wouldn't be right to abandon it.'

It had numerous bulging pockets. Occasionally Helena had felt irritated by the officiousness of that rucksack. 'Other people just go for walks,' she said. 'Why must you make every outing such a palaver?'

'I'm responsible. I take precautions.'

There were stains on the fabric from years of walking through rain and mud.

His boots, by comparison, were quite new. Helena found herself thinking: He only bought them last year. Ninety pounds, they cost.

She was afraid of the rucksack, the bag of clothes and the boots and wondered how his things could go on existing now that he was gone. And yet they already had the slightly decayed air of items put out for a jumble sale. We're used and discarded, they seemed to say, we shall never be important again.

Helena dealt first with the boots, which were clean. Even he would have let me put them away as they are, she thought. But the leather on the heel of the left boot was badly scuffed and, in a couple of places, torn back. The soles also had graze marks. She rested her palm on the roughened places as if they were sore but her mind shied away from picturing the force of impact

which had left such scars on the boots. She placed them carefully on Michael's side of the wardrobe.

The clothes in the carrier bag had been beautifully folded. Helena visualised the policewoman with her smooth, oval nails packing them away. The last time Helena had seen them was when Michael was tucking them in curved wads into the rucksack. He had summoned her to dig him out an extra pair of boxer shorts from the back of the airing cupboard. Now she could do no more than touch the soft cotton of his shirt inside the bag. She withdrew her hand as if burnt.

The contents of the rucksack were less intimate for in it were stored all the paraphernalia of climbing and survival. She arranged the things in a row under the radiator: Kendal mint cake, survival blanket, rope, pitons, hammer, first aid kit, compass, map, camera, water bottle, kagool, cartons of soft drink. In the side pockets were paper and pen, spare socks, chocolate, fruit sweets, tissues and a list of emergency phone numbers.

The last pouch was for rubbish. Helena used to jeer at Michael for such organization. 'Only you would have a designated rubbish pocket,' she said.

Nevertheless, she arranged each bit of litter as if it was of great value. She smoothed out the wrappers, made a pile of the balls of tissues and unfolded the papers: a shopping list and a couple of receipts.

Right at the bottom was a well-worn sheet of notepaper.

A letter.

The paper was of good quality and the note was handwritten.

Can you feel me in your shadow? I could never be close enough to you.

I envy the mountains your footsteps.

Take care, precious man.

Love, and love, and love.