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Opening extract from

Look After Me

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Chapter One

It was a wild-feeling day that day. Dad was coming to take us four out for a big walk in it; the two little boys should see some spring before it's over, he said, and we'll run Cal so he stops breaking your mother's heart. It sounded nice, but you could run Cal all the way to Birmingham and he'd still have a tantrum when he got there. Anyway, there were great big sweeps of rain all morning and when Dad finally arrived, late, there was one behind him with the gust of wind that blew him in. When we were kids Mum would drive us out into weather like that; she'd say we should love it or we'd got no blood from her; but we couldn't have taken the wheelchair off-road in the wet, and Cal was screaming, so we went bowling.

Dad looked white, and worried. Feng was excited, he sat waiting patiently while Dad struggled to get bowling shoes onto Cal's feet. Adam and I tried to look like we were

enjoying ourselves too, but it was hard for Adam because for years he hasn't enjoyed family outings on purpose. Besides, he hadn't really been speaking to Dad since he'd left. It was different for me, I wasn't exactly angry, it was just that it didn't work – Dad making up for not being there all the time with just a few hours every now and then. But I went where they asked. Adam had only come because Feng asked him. Normally he was good at not doing what other people wanted, but Feng was hard to say no to.

'God! *Bowling*,' Adam muttered to me as he came back from getting a strike, which Dad was trying to clap at the same time as moving the ramp for the little ones to roll their balls down, and holding on to Cal's hood so that he couldn't get into the next lane.

'You used to like it,' I reminded him.

'I used to like a lot of things.' He started warming up like he does, and rocking on his feet, while I was trying to concentrate on my swing. 'What a ludicrous thing to say. I *used* to like being an only child, and Dad reading *Thomas the Tank Engine* to me, and I *used* to like dancing to Destiny's Child songs.'

'Well. Don't brag about it,' I said.

Neither of the little boys wanted to use the ramp, anyway, they said it was for babies. Feng nearly went cross-eyed getting his wheelchair into position. The staff were making a bit of a fuss of him, which is probably what

tipped Cal over the edge so that he started bowling everywhere. The guy in the next lane took a ball to the ankle, and there were two big scary bald teenagers on the other side who didn't like it when Cal nipped in ahead of one of them and took his go. Dad was shouting much more than he usually does, especially in public; we never did finish our game.

'I want a Slush Puppy,' Cal said as Dad held him up in the air, away from the bowling balls, and panted. 'Or else I won't go in the car.' He stopped cycling his legs in midair like he was in a cartoon and looked crafty. Adam and I looked at each other because we knew what Mum would say if we brought him back wired with bright blue chemicals. Dad was defiant.

'Of course you can have a Slush Puppy, Cal. Sometimes it's best to just ask, you know, not threaten. You can have one as long as you sit still to drink it, and stop attacking people.' He tries hard with that kind of thing, he calls it positive reinforcement, but I don't know why he bothers because you can see Cal's eyes glazing over the moment he hears that tone in anyone's voice. Adam didn't intervene because of not talking to Dad. Normally he gets bossy in every possible situation, like he's the overlord of our family and responsible for all of us.

So we sat in the café pretending to be a normal family. Perhaps not exactly normal: as well as being in a

wheelchair Feng is Chinese, unlike the rest of us; and Cal is tiny with bright red hair, and even when he's still for a second he's coiled like one of those jack-in-the-box toys on a spring. Adam and Dad and I might look more like we belong to each other. We've all got sad pale faces and dirty-brown hair, though Dad is quite thin and I'm not, and Adam has what Dad calls rugby-player shoulders. Though, actually, he'd do anything in the world before he'd play rugby.

What made the whole thing mortifying, because I'm used to it being like that when all of us go out, was that there were some girls from my class at school there too. I'd seen them come in just as we were going to get the drinks, with some boys from the year above, and I'd hoped they'd stay on the lanes, but the girls all showed up in the café and started drinking Diet Cokes and looking at me.

'Who are they?' Adam asked.

I didn't want to make a big deal out of it because he's capable of trying to embarrass me. 'They go to my school.'

'They look interesting,' he said. The other main thing about Adam apart from being bossy, and sarcastic, is that he's a snob about people being clever. He goes to a private school where everyone has to be really smart and he thinks it's a pity that I don't too – so much of a pity that he goes on about it all the time.

'They look nice,' Feng said innocently.

Dad started catching up on what we were talking about so I left the table. The good thing about us having only boys in the family then was that at least I could go and hide in the Ladies on my own sometimes. But I met one of the girls from my school in there. Luckily it was Lily Buckley who was the one you wouldn't mind talking to so much.

'Are those all your brothers, Phoebe?' she asked me.

'The big one is,' I said. 'The little ones are my parents' foster kids.' I would have thought she'd have known that they foster, she'd been in my class since primary school, but Mum says people are never thinking about you anywhere near as much as you think they are.

Sure enough it was the vivid colours around Feng's and Cal's that started off that row when we got home, much earlier than Mum wanted us, she said, though she'd been standing at the window looking out for us.

Because they got to shouting straight away, Cal got highly-strung and started tearing round. He sent the little table flying, and the lamp on top of it. Only the light bulb broke but Mum had to stop and take him upstairs, she said not to punish him but to clean him up. Dad wanted to help but she hissed at him, so after he'd been reassuring with Feng and carried him up for his bath he came and sat down on the sofa with me.

I knew Cal would go to sleep. You couldn't get him down for a nap in the afternoon to save your life, but he always did pass out for a while in the evening. Mum said it was normal enough because he was only six. She said most of Cal was because he was tired all the time. Adam said why didn't she just drug him like they used to before we had him, and maybe he'd sleep past five in the morning, and she said but look at him now, it was because no one had ever dealt with him, drugs were just putting it off. Adam said if we put it off for another ten years it wouldn't be our problem anymore.

Dad was pretending to be watching TV, but I knew he wasn't because he wasn't mocking the storylines. Normally you can't concentrate at all when Dad's in the room, wondering what's going to set him off. But I wasn't watching it, either. We were both listening to upstairs. Feng was giggling in the bath and Mum was laughing, so I knew Cal must be asleep already. I could see Adam was listening too; he had his head resting on the arm of the chair so I couldn't see his face, but his ear was standing on end.

The air between us got kind of thick. Adam isn't one to hide what he thinks or even not to be blunt about it. And I could feel Dad feeling guilty, sitting there while Mum was dealing with everything upstairs.

Dad loved Feng and Cal, but I had noticed how all the

arguing, the serious arguing, had kicked off when we got them. A year or so before this, after Feng came, Dad had been trying to persuade Mum to slow down on the fostering for a while. He thought Feng was enough just then, with all the stuff that needed doing to the house as well – we'd never had a kid with physical disabilities before – but then Cal had needed somewhere to go.

I had all kinds of patience with Dad getting tired of everything he had to do and of dealing with the four of us all the time, but I didn't have much with him leaving and leaving Mum to do it on her own. Adam was really angry about it; I'd even noticed him trying to help Mum more, for a while, but that had run down a bit. It was just impossible for him or me to get Cal to do anything. It was frustrating, really, because he'd been with us for nearly a year by then, which was longer than most kids stayed. We'd got used to waving them off, and here was Cal who'd sort of become a fixture, and you kept thinking that he'd settle down a bit but he didn't seem to.

Mum got Feng dressed again and into his room. He had a rest too in the evenings, though he usually read or drew in bed. Then she came downstairs. Dad was meant to stay for dinner but I knew he wouldn't. Saturday used to be the one day we never ate together because everyone had things going on and stuff to do. That had all stopped recently and Dad was supposed to stay, but even if he did

they were usually rowing. Right then Mum was livid and she looked like she was going to cry. We went out to the shed.

The shed was mine and Adam's personal space. We were meant to have that in our bedrooms too, but it was hard for Mum to sort out, especially now with Cal who couldn't understand about privacy, Mum said. We have a really big house that we moved into six years ago. 'We'll have to fill it up!' Mum said with her eyes all sparkling, but it turned out that wasn't hard at all.

I'm not really sure if Mum and Dad moved to the big house because they wanted to foster or if they started fostering because they wanted a big house and fostering was a way to fill it up (and pay for it). I was too young before we moved here, only seven, and I don't remember, but I do remember that we used to be a different sort of family. There was just Mum and Dad and Adam and me in a house on a street close into town where all the houses looked the same as ours and had three bedrooms. We were really excited about moving, even though it meant moving schools and longer journeys. Dad said the area was on the up. I think it must have slowed down because it feels just the same as when we moved in. Even the house isn't that different, but it certainly feels fuller.

The shed was already there when we came, and it already wasn't a shed. Dad said once we should call it a summerhouse, and Mum said we could call it that if we liked, and maybe Adam could call it that at school, so we knew she didn't approve of that idea. She hates Adam's school. He got a scholarship to it and between him and Dad they convinced Mum to let him go; well, there was no way Adam wasn't going to go because he's had pretty much a ten-year-plan for his life since he was ten years old, which was just when things were getting chaotic, but Mum can't stand it, she hates private schools. She still watches Adam like a hawk in case he suddenly gets a different accent, and every time she has to go to a parent's evening there she puts on dirty trainers and her sheepskin jacket. She wears nice clothes and make-up to mine.

Anyway, when we moved in the shed hadn't been used for a while by the look of it but it was still OK, with little cupboards and chairs and glass panes in the door. They said it could be a playroom for us where the older kids didn't go. When we were younger Mum and Dad fostered older kids; now we were the older kids, the ones they fostered were younger, and the shed was still ours. Cal wasn't allowed to go there. Mum said it was a shame in some ways because it meant he wasn't allowed in the garden. Our garden's massive; you can't even see the shed from the back door because the garden bends round a

corner. But the one time Cal had been in the garden, just after he arrived, he wanted to go in the shed and when Mum told him no he got out later and smashed two of the windows. It hadn't mattered that much yet, him not being allowed in the garden, because we'd only had him since the summer before, which was when he'd been so mental that nothing did matter, and since then it had mostly been winter. Anyway, Cal didn't like outdoors. The lawn's not very smooth and there's no path so Feng didn't go out there, either.

The shed was great as a place to escape, it was always peaceful, but we didn't use to go there all that much in the evenings, even in summer, because there was no TV and no computer. Besides, now that we had younger kids who went to bed earlier, after dark was the time when sometimes it was a bit like it used to be, just the four of us. But since Mum and Dad had started rowing so much, and it was worse once Cal and Feng were in bed, I spent some evenings on my own in there. Adam usually went to his room. He said he didn't trust Cal not to wander in and start throwing his stuff out of the window, if he woke up and got bored. Anyway, he had bags of homework and he needed the computer.

It was only early evening now, and still light, and even though Adam had said he had loads of work to do, going over his exam papers that he'd just finished so he'd be

ready to talk about them with his teachers – he works stupidly hard, even Dad tries to get him to ease up sometimes – he wandered down the garden with me. It wasn't raining anymore but there were drops hanging from the ends of all the leaves, and then disappearing in the odd gust of wind that would suddenly blow through you and make you shiver. We could hear Mum shouting. Next thing Cal would be up again. I noticed the curtains were drawn in the shed, which I thought was weird because I'd popped in there that morning to get my grey jumper.

Adam pushed the door open and went in first, which was why he gasped first and jumped back and I shot straight out the door again because I thought he'd seen a man-sized spider or something, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me in. It was very dim. There was someone sitting on the floor against the back wall, which was no less scary than a huge spider right then and my heart was hammering. I might have screamed only Adam had hold of my arm and he said, 'Ssshhh. Don't. It's Leanne.'

I recognised her then. Leanne was the first one Mum and Dad ever fostered. She was a few years older than Adam and we didn't have her for all that long before she went back to her mother. When she was first here I nearly asked Mum and Dad to change their minds because I thought fostering was going to be terrible. Whatever I said she either laughed at or cried, so I hardly ever spoke at all

around her. It made me so paranoid and shy that whenever a new kid used to be brought to our house it would take me days to talk to them, because I'd be worried of hurting their feelings somehow or embarrassing them or making them angry. She always called me Fat Phoeb and Phoebeast, and tripped me up and hung around in the hall so she could jump out at me. For years I had to turn on all the lights when I went to the bathroom at night because of her. And she and Mum used to scream at each other, every day, in the morning and at night.

Everyone was sorry when she left, though, except me. Adam even used to email her. For a long time we both did that for some of the kids who left, but they hardly ever wrote back and there was always someone new in the house for us to get used to. I thought it was weird anyway that Adam wanted to keep in touch with Leanne.

Now she was sitting in our shed, so still I thought she was asleep. We went a bit closer and then I saw the light catch her eyes and make them silvery and I saw she was watching us, which made my heart speed right up again.

'What are you doing here?' Adam asked. He'd shut the door and was groping around it behind me for the curtains. I backed away from Leanne towards him.

'Don't pull the curtains,' she said, in a hoarse voice that sounded as if she'd been sitting there in the dark for ages, though it was still light outside and I'd been in there

just this morning and it had been empty. 'I don't want anyone to know I'm here.'

'Well, Mum and Dad know we're out here and they'd think it was odd if we were sitting in the dark,' Adam said, though he stopped with his hand on the curtains. 'Anyway, you can't see the shed from our house.'

'You can from upstairs,' Leanne said, which was true. 'Put the lamp on.'

Light flooded the shed suddenly, and even though we'd only been in there a few seconds I half-shut my eyes. Adam was blinking, but Leanne stared straight at us. She was all wrapped up in a big coat, though it was practically summer and we'd even put the heater away in a cupboard. There was something on the floor beside her. She was holding her hand over part of it.

'What the bloody hell is that?' Adam asked, his voice rising as if he was scared.

'Baby,' Leanne said.

'What?' Adam shot forward but I stayed where I was. It *was* a baby, too. It was all wrapped up in a blanket, like pictures of baby Jesus I used to draw when I was little. It was asleep.

'Is it yours?' he asked her, looking down at them. She shrugged. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know anything about people having babies, except how it works, with their bodies and stuff, the basic things. 'Is it, Leanne?'

'I had it,' she said. 'But I don't want it. That's why I brought it here.'

'What?'

'Is it new?' I asked. I had to go a bit closer to have a look. You couldn't see much except blanket.

'You didn't have it here, did you?' Adam sounded really scared now. He was looking round, for bloodstains or mess, I suppose, but the shed looked just the same except for Leanne and the baby itself.

Leanne laughed, which made me remember her living with us even more. 'You're a cretin, Adam. I had her a week ago. Two weeks ago. I wouldn't be sitting around here if I'd just pushed her out.'

'Why did you bring her here?' he asked, kneeling down beside the baby.

Leanne shrugged again. 'I don't want her. I haven't been well and I can't look after her. So it was either leave her in a phone box or come here, and they've boarded up all the phone boxes.'

'Why here?' I went and sat down near Adam. He kept looking from Leanne to the baby. I just looked at Leanne. She looked just the same age, or even a bit younger. When she lived with us she'd seemed practically grown up. I suppose I must have got a lot older in the meantime. Her face was puffy, which I might have thought was having had a baby recently, except that there were finger

marks in the puffiness and a purple patch at the bottom of her neck.

'I can't look after her,' Leanne said flatly, 'but I don't want her to go into Care.'

'Why did you have her, then?' Adam sounded mystified.

Leanne looked at me, almost rolled her eyes, as if it was me and her against the stupidity of all males. She must have noticed I was older too. She used to treat me like a toddler.

'I thought I was going to have help,' she said finally, 'but I don't. As it turns out.'

'Mum will help you,' I said unwillingly. I didn't want Leanne back. I didn't want her back at all. Things were hard enough. But there was the baby, not to mention the bruises.

'I don't want help. It might be hard for you to believe, with your bloody smiley parents and your big eyes, but I don't actually want her.' She wiped her nose on the back of her arm. 'I would have left her on a step, only I don't want her in Care, like I said. Then I thought of here, I thought here wouldn't be too bad. It was the best place I ever lived. Your parents are all right. They'll look after her, she'll have a family.'

I opened my mouth to tell her Dad wasn't living with us at the moment, but Adam said over the top, 'You're going to leave her here?'

'Yeah. I don't want anything more to do with it.'

'But they'll come looking for you!' I said.

'They won't.'

'Don't be daft,' Adam said. 'Of course they will. You can give her up for adoption, or whatever, but they'll have to do all that interviewing you and stuff first.'

'No. They don't know she's mine. No one knows she exists yet.'

'No one? What about at the hospital?'

'I didn't have her at the hospital. And this is exactly why. No bloody social workers yet, not till I'm well out the way. Don't look at me like that, you,' she said to me. 'You know nothing.'

'I know they'll be after you,' I said. 'And what are we supposed to do with her?'

'Wait a bit, Fat Phoeb, then take her to your Mum and Dad,' she said. 'They'll know. Only don't say it was me.'

'Why shouldn't we?' I said.

'Why would you? Don't you think she'll be better off without me?' she asked, and I did, after all, not that I thought we would really be able to keep it a secret who the mother was.

'But you . . .' Adam hesitated. 'Are you going to be OK?'

'I'm going to be fine, I'm going to be on my own and I can look after myself. And she'll be fine with you. Just say you found her left here. I've got her clothes, too.' She

pulled a carrier bag out from under the chair behind her and held it against her chest for a moment. 'They'll keep her, your mum and dad, won't they?'

I was going to tell her again about Dad moving out, but again Adam spoke over the top of me. 'They'll try, anyway. Mum loves babies. She'll say this was Fate.'

Leanne got up, all stiff from sitting too long on the floor, and dumped the bag on the red chair. 'Give me a couple of hours' head start before you take her in,' she said. 'Can you do that?'

Adam said yes just as I was thinking no.

'If she cries there's a bottle in there, and a carton of milk. She doesn't drink that much.' She didn't look at the baby or anything but she bent down and touched it on the blanket over its tummy. Then she was gone and there was just Adam and me looking at each other over the baby.