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Forgotten Child

Written by Kitty Neale

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KITTY NEALE

Forgotten Child

AVON

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Prologue

The argument had raged for two days, but the man couldn't give in – wouldn't give in. His wife had to agree, and once again he urged, 'We've got to do something. All right, I know they were distant relatives, but it was still a shock to hear they died.'

'You've never mentioned them before.'

He sighed – he'd been through this, told her all this, but nevertheless he tried to remain calm. 'I told you, I haven't seen them since my childhood; lost touch with them when my parents died, but nevertheless we're the only family she has left now.'

'*You're* her only family,' his wife snapped.

'Like it or not, by marrying me they became your relatives. If this was someone in your family, I wouldn't think twice.'

'That's easy for you to say, but something like this wouldn't have happened in *my* family.'

'There's no need for the high and mighty attitude. We've no idea what happened to her – how she came

to be in such a dreadful place, and I for one am not going to judge her.'

'I don't care. I can't do it. I've been unwell and you're asking too much of me.'

'And if you expect me to just walk away, you're asking too much of me. I'd never be able to forgive myself – or you.'

'Now you're using emotional blackmail.'

'If you had an ounce of compassion I wouldn't need to.'

'That isn't fair. I do feel sorry for what happened to her, really I do, but . . . but . . .'

The man saw the strain on his wife's face, but couldn't stop now. He had to convince her. His voice softened, trying honey this time. 'I'm sorry, darling, that was cruel of me. Of course you're compassionate, in fact it's one of the things I love about you. I think that's why I've been taken aback by your attitude. I somehow thought that, like me, you wouldn't be able to just walk away.'

'Please, please, we've been arguing about this for so long and my head is splitting. Let me think. I need time to think.'

He could tell she was weakening and felt a surge of triumph – sure that at last, one final push would do it. He stood up, bent to kiss her and before leaving the room said, 'All right, darling, I'll leave you to think. You're a wonderful woman, a kind, caring woman, and I feel sure you'll come to the right decision.'

It was another two hours before he got his answer. His wife had agreed, but only in part. She'd been adamant, and he'd been unable to bend her any further.

There was only one thing he could do now, but he dreaded it.

Chapter One

Wimbledon, South London, June 1971

It was home, a redbrick facade draped with wisteria, bay windows and an oak front door that appeared welcoming; yet as Jennifer Lavender pulled out her key, she knew there'd be no welcome inside. If her father was at home things would be different, but he was away again, his job often involving long periods of absence.

With a fixed smile on her face, Jenny walked into the drawing room. She had learned to be careful of her mother's moods, and said quietly, 'Hello, I'm home.'

'I can see that,' Delia Lavender said dismissively before turning her attention back to her son. She was a tall woman, slim, with immaculately groomed auburn hair and hazel eyes that were now showing concern as she asked him, 'Do you think you can manage to eat something, darling? I could make a shepherd's pie.'

'Yes, all right,' Robin said.

Her brother didn't look ill to Jenny, but as usual Robin avoided meeting her eyes. At seventeen years old he had the same colouring as their mother. He had come home from college the previous day complaining of a sore throat and headache and as always he was being mollycoddled. At that moment, her mother spoke and Jenny snapped to attention.

'Don't just stand there. Get changed and then peel the potatoes.'

Jenny ran upstairs, anxious as ever to please her mother. From an early age she'd been taught to do housework, but it had to be up to her mother's high standards or she would be made to do it again. Yet no matter how hard she tried, Jenny was aware of the gulf between them, a gulf that widened even further if she showed the least disobedience. It wasn't that her mother was physically cruel. Her punishments tended to be more mental than physical and worse when there were just the two of them at home. On those occasions, depending on her mother's mood, Jenny would either be made to scrub the kitchen floor over and over again, or be sent to her room and told to stay there.

At times Jenny felt her mother actually hated her, and for a moment she looked at her reflection in the mirror, wondering what she had done; what it was about her that was so unlovable. At nearly sixteen years old, she favoured her father in looks,

yet lacked his height. Her friends told her she was pretty, but all Jenny saw was pale skin, blonde hair and light blue eyes: a face devoid of colour.

She was confused by her brother's recent attitude towards her too. As small children they had played together and Robin had been the one she ran to when upset. Nowadays though, he had grown as distant as her mother, until Jenny felt as if her presence was unwanted by either of them.

As so often happened, a wave of loneliness washed over her, but it was something Jenny didn't really understand. She had friends, a family, yet there was this feeling of something missing in her life – something inexplicable.

She heard the telephone ring, followed by the murmur of her mother's voice. It must have been a short call as only moments later Delia's voice rang up the stairs. 'Jennifer, do get a move on!'

'Coming,' she called back, hurrying to change out of her school uniform.

'It's about time too,' her mother complained when Jenny appeared.

'I got good marks in English today,' Jenny said, hoping to please her mother as she made a start on the potatoes.

'It's a bit late to do well now. If you hadn't failed your eleven plus exam you'd have gone on to grammar school. Instead you're only destined for some sort of menial work.'

'I've done well at typing and could get a job in an office.'

'A typist,' Delia said derisively. 'That's hardly something I can brag about at the tennis club.'

Jenny felt the sting of tears. She knew how important appearances were to her mother, how much she valued her social standing, and had always felt the pressure. So much so that when the exam papers had been put in front of her she had frozen, her mind refusing to work.

'Stop sniffing, it isn't ladylike. I sometimes regret that we didn't send you to a private school, but we have enough expense in funding Robin's education and his is more important.'

'I'm thirsty,' Robin said as he walked in to pour himself a glass of water.

'You should have called me, darling.'

'Stop fussing, Mother, there's nothing wrong with my legs,' he said, gulping the water and then asking, 'Who was that on the telephone?'

'Your father. He'll be home this weekend.'

'When is he arriving?' Jenny asked eagerly.

'Either late tonight or early tomorrow morning.'

Jenny's unhappiness faded to be replaced with joy. Her daddy would be home soon and she couldn't wait to see him.

Edward Lavender's eyes were rimmed with tiredness, the strain of such a long drive showing as he

at last pulled into the drive. It was after eleven, but the light was on in the drawing room so he knew that Delia was still up.

It had taken a long time to set up another branch for the insurance company he worked for, to get a decent manager and sales team in place. Eight weeks away from home . . . yet he wasn't looking forward to seeing his wife.

Their marriage had been fine at first, a son born on their third wedding anniversary, but eighteen months later, from the moment Jennifer had been placed in Delia's arms, she had changed from a loving wife to a highly strung, moody and demanding one.

Delia now bore no resemblance to the young woman he'd fallen in love with, one who had lost her parents and seemed so vulnerable, so alone when they met. She'd had money though, and they had used her inheritance to buy their first house, but Edward had worked like a dog since then to provide all she wanted, gaining promotion after promotion until they were able to purchase one bigger house after another, until Delia was finally satisfied. It was large, detached – perfect, she said. Yet it wasn't a home, it was a showplace, with never a thing out of place or a smidgen of dust to be seen anywhere.

There had been times when Edward had been tempted to walk out on Delia, yet he could never leave his children, especially Jenny. Instead he found

his needs elsewhere, brief encounters that he now paid for. It was less complicated that way.

Edward climbed out of the car and stretched his cramped muscles. He knew there would be a cold atmosphere to greet him, but nevertheless he made an effort, saying pleasantly as he went into the drawing room, 'Hello, my dear.'

'So you're back. I wasn't really expecting you until morning.'

'I made good time and it was pointless stopping somewhere overnight when I was so close to home.'

'I hope you're not expecting dinner at this time of night.'

'Just a sandwich will do, and perhaps a cup of cocoa.'

Delia exhaled loudly, showing her exasperation, but nevertheless went to the kitchen. Edward had barely sat down when his daughter rushed in, her face alight with happiness.

'Daddy, Daddy!'

'Hello, darling,' he said, rising quickly and hugging Jenny to him, thinking as always that she made coming home worthwhile. He'd get some sort of welcome from Robin, but his son was now a product of his mother, his manner tightly reserved. Thankfully, however, Robin showed no sign of Delia's so-called nerves, a condition Edward suspected his wife feigned to get her own way.

'How long will you be here?' Jenny asked eagerly.

'Just for the weekend, I'm afraid.'

'Jennifer, what are you doing up at this time of night?' Delia asked sharply as she stormed into the room.

'I was excited that Daddy was coming home and couldn't sleep.'

'Go back to bed, *now*!'

'Jenny, do as your mother says,' Edward urged softly. 'I'll still be here in the morning.'

For just a brief moment Jenny looked mutinous, but then she nodded. 'All right. Good night, Dad.'

'Good night, darling.'

Delia just stood there, tight-lipped, but when Jenny left the room she swung round too, heading back to the kitchen. Edward knew what this meant – another row – and once again he regretted coming home.

Delia slammed a small saucepan of milk onto the cooker. It was always the same. Edward had arrived home after two months away, but he was no sooner in the door than Jennifer got his attention and affection. She would punish him, Delia decided, just as she'd always punished him; something she had sworn to do from the moment another baby had been forced upon her. She didn't want another child and Edward had known that.

She fought to regain her poise as she took a loaf of bread, cutting two slices, but her mind still raged. Oh, she had tried to love Jennifer, but her resentment

had been strong, so was it any wonder that the maternal instincts she had felt for Robin had been absent from the start?

Of course it hadn't helped that Jennifer had been a difficult and demanding baby, taking up so much of her time that she had felt she was neglecting her son. Then, at eighteen months old, Robin had been walking, a little unsteady on his feet, and into everything. He had needed her attention but, with the new burden of Jennifer and the demands of keeping up with the housework, it was something she'd no longer had time to give him. Of course she had made up for it since, her son developing into a wonderful young man who would go far, but Edward would continue to pay dearly for causing his early neglect and her own unhappiness.

'Thank you, dear, and I can see you're pleased to see me as usual,' Edward drawled sarcastically when she took a tray through to the drawing room.

'What do you expect? Unlike Jennifer, I didn't even get a kiss on the cheek.'

'Had I tried, you'd have rebuffed me as usual.'

'You don't know that.'

'Delia, I'm not playing your games. You're fond of giving me hope, but then withdrawing it. I'm not falling for it again. I'm content with the wonderful welcome I received from Jenny.'

'Yes, I'm sure you are. As always, you put her before me.'

'For goodness' sake, Delia, this jealousy is ridiculous. Is it any wonder that Jenny runs to me for affection? She certainly doesn't get any from you!'

'I am *not* jealous. As for my lack of affection, you're to blame for that.'

'I don't know what you're talking about, Delia.'

Delia knew she was fighting a losing battle; Edward was sure to deny it as usual. Still, there was more than one way to skin a cat.

'How many times do I have to tell you that a *jenny* is a female donkey? *Jennifer*, as we christened her, will be sixteen soon, old enough to leave home and it's time to tell her the truth – though of course not all of it.'

'No, Delia, I don't think there is any need.'

'Of course there is. She has a right to know and if you don't tell her, I will.'

'You'll do no such thing! It's unnecessary and I won't stand for it.'

Delia's jaws ground. Edward didn't know it, but she wasn't finished yet and he'd soon find that out. 'I'm going to bed. Please don't disturb me when you come up.'

'Don't worry, Delia, I know better than to come into your room.'

Without another word, she stalked out. Long ago Edward had given her the power to get her own way and she had made the most of it, insisting on

separate bedrooms, among other things. She still had that power and intended to use it.

It was time for the truth to come out – time to stop living in a house of secrets.

Chapter Two

When Robin awoke the next morning, he could hear the sound of raised voices. It was always the same when his father was home, the atmosphere rotten until he left again.

There was a soft tap on his bedroom door and moments later Jenny poked her head into the room, hissing softly, 'Robin, are you awake?'

'Yes.'

'Mummy and Daddy are arguing.'

'I know.'

'I heard my name mentioned and think it's about me. Have I done something to upset her?'

'I haven't got a clue. Now just bugger off, Jenny.'

'But—'

'Just go!' Robin snapped, relieved when his sister did as she was told. Yes, his parents were rowing, but it was nothing unusual. He blamed his father for his mother's unhappiness, and it was odd that they slept in separate rooms. There had to be a

reason, a problem, perhaps his father's, and Robin wondered if it was something that could explain his own disgusting feelings. Had he inherited some sort of deviant sexual tendencies from his father?

Yes, he knew about sex now, but the knowledge brought him agony. What he felt wasn't right – what he wanted wasn't right – yet night after night he lay awake, so aware that Jenny was only in the next room. She was his sister, and all he should feel for her was brotherly love, but from the moment he'd seen her small, burgeoning breasts, his feelings had begun to change.

If anyone found out they'd be horrified, sickened, so the only way Robin could deal with it was by pretending indifference, hiding his feelings behind the same facade his mother portrayed. He knew it confused Jenny, probably hurt her, but it was the only way to keep her at a distance – a safe distance.

Despite that, the temptation was always there and Robin knew he couldn't stand much more. He'd be finished at college next year and hoped to get the A level results he needed to go on to university. He had to be away from this house . . . away from Jenny.

Annoyed at the interruption when the milkman knocked, Delia impatiently rummaged in her purse, saying as she opened the front door, 'I think this is the right money, but I hate this new decimal currency. I'll never get used to it and why we had

to change from good old pounds, shillings and pence is beyond me.'

'That's what most of my customers say,' the milkman said. Once satisfied that it was the correct amount, he licked his pencil before ticking off the payment in his book. 'See you next week, Mrs Lavender.'

Delia barely acknowledged the man before closing the door again. The argument with Edward had been raging for half an hour, yet still the issue was unresolved. She returned to the kitchen, ready to take up where they'd left off, only to be thwarted moments later when Jennifer appeared.

'Good morning, dear,' Edward said, smiling warmly at his daughter.

Jennifer went to sit next to him, her manner subdued. 'Hello, Dad.'

'Why the long face?' he asked.

'I heard you having an argument. Was it about me?'

'Of course not, and anyway, it was just a heated discussion. Now cheer up. It's a lovely day and after breakfast I thought we could all go out for a drive.'

'You can count me out,' Delia snapped. 'I haven't got time for gallivanting. I've got housework to do.'

'Can't you leave it for once?'

'No, I can't. Look at this kitchen, it's filthy. Jennifer was supposed to have cleaned it, but as you can see it hasn't been done properly.'

'Filthy? Delia, it's immaculate as usual, as is the

rest of the house. Come on, let's all four of us go out together. It'll make a nice change.'

'What will make a nice change?' Robin asked as he walked into the room.

'Your father wants us all to go out for a drive.'

Robin frowned and then said, 'No can do, Dad. I've missed two days at college and will have to study all weekend to catch up. If I want to pass my A levels next year I've got to get my head down.'

'Why were you home for two days?' Edward asked.

'I had a bit of a fever and sore throat, though I'm fine now.'

'That's good, but as I've been away for a while I'd like to see something of you. Surely you can spare a few hours this morning?'

'If Robin wants to study it's to be commended,' said Delia, 'and I for one am proud of his dedication.'

'I'm proud of him too, Delia.'

'You don't show it. Jennifer is the only one you praise.'

'Look, if you two are going to start rowing again, I'm going back to my room.'

'Don't be silly, Robin, we aren't rowing,' Delia said quickly. 'Now sit down and I'll cook breakfast. What would you like?'

'A boiled egg would be nice.'

'Yes, I'll have the same,' Edward said.

'Do you want me to help, Mum?'

'Of course I do, and don't use that term. It sounds

so lower class and goodness knows what my friends would think if they heard you. I'm Mother, or Mummy. Your father may not object to being called Dad, but I have higher standards. Now lay the table and then butter some bread.'

'Yes, Mummy.'

Delia saw the look Edward threw her, the disapproval in his eyes, but ignored it. Jennifer wasn't a child and should earn her keep, help around the house and with the laundry, something she insisted on, whether Edward liked it or not. What he'd forced on her all those years ago had ruined their marriage and if it hadn't been for her need to maintain her social standing she'd have left Edward years ago. Divorce, however, had been unheard of in their social circle and back then the women at the tennis club would have shunned her, let alone the ladies in the Women's Institute.

And so she had stayed and played her role, but not any more. The time had at last come when she could get rid of Jennifer and she wasn't going to let Edward stand in her way. She just had to bring up the subject again and this time she would force the issue whether Edward liked it or not.

Edward hated the way Delia spoke to Jenny; how she was often as cold towards their daughter as she was to him. Delia had been a reluctant mother. She had done what was necessary when Jennifer was a baby, saw that she was clean and fed, but that had

been all, any shows of affection brief. Jenny had been a beautiful baby, so easy to love, but instead Delia had rejected her.

'Daddy, will you be home again for my birthday?' Jenny asked.

'I've got three branch inspections scheduled, but I'll do my best.'

'Edward, if you aren't here,' Delia warned, 'I'll go ahead with what we've been discussing without you.'

'You'll do no such thing.'

'If you aren't here, how are you going to stop me?'

'Stop you doing what, Mother?' asked Robin.

Edward found he was holding his breath, but his fear of Delia blurting it out also forced him to a decision. With no guarantee that he'd be home for Jenny's birthday, Delia might just carry out her threat. He couldn't risk it. He'd have to tell his daughter now; at least coming from him the blow might be softened.

'All right, Delia, you've got your own way as usual. However, *I* will be the one to tell her.'

'When?'

'After breakfast,' Edward said, unable to miss the look of triumph that crossed his wife's face.

'Dad, are you talking about me?' Jenny asked.

'Yes, darling, but don't look so worried.'

'Tell me what?'

'Let's eat and then we'll talk,' he said, glad of even this small delay.

'Jennifer, do get a move on,' Delia urged. 'I want to get this meal over with.'

When his egg was put in front of him, Edward took off the top while his mind searched for the right words – the easiest and gentlest way to tell Jenny. She had always been a daddy's girl, but what he was being forced to do now could change their relationship for ever. Would he lose his daughter? God, he hoped not.

If he could reveal the *whole* truth it might help, but Edward knew that was impossible. After all, even Delia wasn't privy to it and, despite her accusations, she never would be.