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Opening extract from **Forbidden Friends**

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Bee

The policeman came round early this morning, just before eight. It was awful. I had to sit in the living room and answer loads of questions about Dad. Did I know where he was? Did he say anything to me before he left? Did I remember anything that had seemed out of the ordinary? Nan sat next to me on the sofa, holding my hand as tight as she could, but it didn't help. My stomach was in knots. I didn't have a clue where Dad was. I hadn't seen him since Friday after school, and that was three days ago.

"Don't worry, Bee," the policeman kept saying, "you're not in any trouble. No one's cross with you. But if there's anything at all you remember..."

Mum came in, carrying a tray of tea and biscuits. She looked dreadful. Lank hair, no make-up, dark shadows under her eyes.

“Something’s happened to him,” she muttered. “I mean, where is he? How can someone just disappear into thin air?”

She tried to add sugar to the mugs but her hand was trembling so badly it spilled over the tray. I snuggled in to Nan, trying not to cry.

“Here, Val, let me,” said Nan, reaching out to take the spoon from her. “Everything’s going to be fine. You don’t want to go upsetting Bee.”

But Mum stared right through her, swaying from side to side as if she was about to pass out. I don’t think she’d even noticed I was there. She’s usually so calm and in control but it was as if someone had hypnotized her. I felt like giving her a shake or clicking my fingers in front of her face, just to wake her up, but the policeman still had lots of questions for me.

He wanted to know if Mum and Dad had been rowing or if Dad had ever gone missing before; maybe stayed at a mate’s house after a night out, that sort of thing. He even asked if I thought Dad might be seeing someone else. He didn’t use those words exactly, but I knew that was what he was getting at. I nearly died of embarrassment.

My dad's the last person on earth who would ever go off with another woman – he's just not like that. He doesn't come out of his study long enough to *meet* anyone, let alone run off with them. But the truth was, Mum and Dad *had* been arguing a lot before he disappeared.

I glanced at Mum. She hadn't said anything to the policeman about the rows when he asked her so I wasn't sure if I should mention them.

It all started when this letter arrived for Mum a couple of weeks ago. It was in a pale pink envelope and I remember thinking it must be an invitation or something. Mum opened it when she got in from work, at the table, while we were all having dinner.

I watched her face change as she read it. First it sort of froze, then she blinked a few times, frowning. She glanced up at Dad, and then looked back down at the letter, her eyes filling with tears. I was about to ask her who it was from, but before I could say anything she leaped up from the table and ran out of the room and a moment later Dad jumped up and followed her.

I heard them shouting upstairs – well, Mum was shouting and Dad just kept saying no, and that he wasn't willing to do it. At one point I heard him say that Mum was mad to even *consider it* after so much time had passed. I had no idea what was in the letter or what he

wasn't "willing to do" but they carried on rowing about it for days. Mum begged him to reconsider and in the end she was so upset she made him sleep on the sofa.

It was awful; I'd never seen her so angry. They hardly ever row, and when they do it never drags on for more than a day at most. I was desperate to know who the letter was from and what was going on, but they wouldn't tell me. They said it was private; something they had to sort out for themselves.

I was still struggling to decide what I should tell the policeman. But I had to say something, so I just told him that I'd last seen Dad on Friday afternoon when I'd come in from school and that I hadn't noticed anything strange about his behaviour. I hardly talk to him these days anyway, not properly. We used to be really close; I used to tell him everything, but not any more. And the truth was I'd been distracted on Friday. I hadn't been paying much attention to Dad. I'd had other things on my mind.

It was the last day of the summer term and I'd just survived my first year at Glendale High. Melissa Knight and some of her pathetic mates had followed me out of school and down the road to the bus stop, calling out and laughing as I hurried ahead of them. Taunting me every step of the way with their nasty jokes and mean comments.

I kept my head down, praying the bus would arrive before they caught up with me. I had a horrible feeling I'd left half my stuff at school, but I didn't dare go back. I knew Mum would flip when she found out, especially if I'd forgotten my trainers. She was always going on about how expensive everything was and how much everything cost to replace, but what was I supposed to do?

Melissa Knight had been on my case from the moment I started at Glendale High. It was just "looks" to begin with – rolling her eyes and smirking – and snorting when I said anything in class. Then it was names: "Bookworm Bee" and "Brainiac Bee" and other stupid things like that. But the last few weeks of term she'd been pushing me around, threatening me, following me out of school. I didn't fit in and she knew it.

In the end, I ran all the way back home without waiting for the bus. They were miles away by then but I could still hear their voices in my head as I raced down the street to our house and burst through the front door. Dad was in the kitchen making a sandwich. I remember *that* much. It was cheese and tomato. He looked up as I came in.

"Oh, hi, Bee."

"Hi." I dropped my bag and shrugged off my school cardie, bending over to catch my breath.

"Good day?"

I bit my lip. “Yeah, I guess.” I wanted to tell him about Melissa Knight. I wanted to tell him so much it made my tummy hurt. But I couldn’t.

“Shall I make you a sandwich? I’ve been upstairs working all day and I suddenly realized how hungry I was.”

“No thanks. What time’s Mum coming home?”

He started to answer, to tell me he wasn’t sure – of course he wasn’t, they weren’t even speaking – but then he stopped suddenly, mid-sentence. There were some tickets propped up against the toaster. They looked like airline tickets. He stared at them for a moment and then without saying another word, he turned and walked out of the room.

I wasn’t sure whether to tell the policeman about the tickets or not, and I was still wondering whether I should mention the rows and the fact that Dad had been sleeping downstairs. It all felt so private – not exactly something you chat about with a stranger. But that wasn’t the only thing stopping me. There was also the way Dad’s face changed when he first saw the tickets. He’d looked frightened. Just for a split second. Well, I think it was fear, but if only I’d been paying more attention...

The policeman was staring at me, waiting for me to tell him more. He probably thought Dad had gone off with

another woman anyway. I sat there, picking at the ragged skin around my thumbnail. I hadn't actually seen Dad again after he walked out of the kitchen. He went upstairs and then a few minutes later he came back down and I heard the front door slam. No goodbye or anything. It was as if he'd suddenly remembered he had to be somewhere very important.

I didn't think much of it at the time. I didn't even bother to look at the tickets. I just assumed they were to do with Mum's work, and anyway I was pleased to have the house to myself. It was only later, when Mum came home, that I started to feel uneasy. It was late by then and when I told her Dad had left without saying goodbye she tried calling him, but his phone was switched off.

She must've called him about fifty times after that, getting more and more agitated as the evening wore on. I asked her about the tickets then – about what they were for, why she'd left them propped up against the toaster like that and why Dad had walked out when he saw them – but she said she'd explain everything when Dad was home. By the time I went to bed I was really scared. I'd started to imagine all sorts of terrible things. It was so unlike Dad to disappear. No phone call or text message. Nothing.

I looked across at Mum now. She was still standing in

the middle of the room, staring off into the distance. It was beginning to freak me out. There had to be something we could do. I tried to remember more details about the tickets – anything at all that might help us find Dad. If only I'd bothered to look at them properly when I'd had the chance.

The policeman cleared his throat. He was still waiting for me to say something. He looked bored, as if he wanted to finish up and get away.

"Well, there were these tickets," I said softly. I didn't really want Mum to hear but I couldn't keep quiet any longer.

He sat up a bit straighter. "Tickets? What sort of tickets, Bee? Can you explain?"

I leaned forward, ready to tell him, but just at that moment Mum's phone rang. She snapped out of her trance, lurching towards the table to grab it.

"*Phillip? Is that you?*" Then she looked up at us, smiling, her eyes filling with tears. "It's him," she told us, sinking down onto the couch. "*Where are you?* I've been so worried!"

My eyes filled with tears too. I was just so relieved. Mum was quiet for a moment, listening to Dad. "I can't talk about that right now," she hissed, glancing at the policeman and then turning her shoulder slightly. "You've

got no right to say that! It's not your decision to make – this is something that affects all of us.” The policeman stood up, watching Mum closely, but she turned right round and moved towards the hallway so he couldn't hear. The conversation with Dad lasted another minute or so and then she closed her phone, her lips set in a thin, straight line.

“Is everything okay, Mrs. Brooks?” the policeman asked.

“Yes, fine. Everything's fine,” she said. “I'm so sorry. He's fine. We didn't mean to waste your time. I was just... you know...I was just so worried.”

The policeman waved his hand. “No, you were right to call. Best to be on the safe side. I'll have to fill out a report, so if you could just help me with a few last details...” He sat back down, taking an official-looking form out of his bag. Then there were more endless questions – it seemed to go on and on, and I began to wonder if he'd ever go.

“Thank you so much,” said Nan, when he'd finished. “We really appreciate you coming round. It's just so out of character, you see.” She led him out to the front door, chatting on about Dad and how reliable he usually is and how he'd never done anything like this before.

As soon as they were out of the living room, I turned to face Mum on the couch. “Where is he? Is he okay?”

Mum took hold of my hands, but she couldn't quite meet my eyes. "He's fine," she said brightly. "He's gone to stay at Uncle Ron's for a little while. It won't be for long."

Uncle Ron is Dad's brother, but they've never been close. We usually only see him at Christmas. My heart started to thump in my chest. "Are you and Dad breaking up? Is that why he's there?"

"No, it's nothing like that," she said, smoothing my hair away from my face. "Look, why don't you go back to bed, Bee? You must be exhausted. We all are. I really don't want you to worry about any of this. Come on, I'll take you up."

She was trying to reassure me, but I shook my head. I didn't want to go to bed. I wanted to know why Dad had been at Uncle Ron's for three days without calling us and what it was about those tickets that had made him leave in such a hurry. Just then, Nan came back in from seeing the policeman out.

"So where is he, Val?"

"He's gone to stay at Ron's for a few days," said Mum. Her eyes darted from Nan to me and then back to Nan. She obviously didn't want to say anything else while I was in the room.

"Be a good girl, Bee. Make us a fresh pot of tea, would

you, darling?” said Nan, taking the hint from Mum. They were trying to get rid of me so they could talk. It was so frustrating.

“But I want to know what’s going on as well. I’m not a baby!”

Nan smiled. “Of course you’re not, and we’ll have a good chat about everything as soon as you’ve made the tea, won’t we, Val?” Mum nodded vaguely, but I was sure she had no intention of telling me anything. She’d been really secretive over the past few weeks, ever since the mysterious letter and the row with Dad. Nan handed me the tea tray. “Go on, darling. We’ll wait for you, promise.”

They started talking as soon as I left the room. They were whispering but I could still make out some of what they were saying. Mum was talking about the letter. She said Dad didn’t believe she’d go through with it until he saw the tickets. I couldn’t hear what Nan said back. Something about panicking and the truth, but her voice was muffled, as if she’d put her hand over her mouth.

I trailed into the kitchen and flipped the switch on the kettle. I couldn’t quite believe any of this had actually happened: the letter, the row, Dad disappearing and the policeman coming round. Nan was right when she’d said it was out of character. Nothing *ever* happens around here. We’re just the boring Brooks family. The knot in my

stomach pulled tighter. I was so relieved that Dad was okay...I just wished that I could rewind the clock to Friday and hide those tickets before he ever saw them.

I took the tea back in, determined to get some answers.

"There she is," said Mum. She was still trying to pretend everything was normal, but her voice was so brittle it sounded as if it might crack into a million pieces.

"This isn't funny any more!" I burst out. "Can one of you please tell me what's going on!" I was beginning to feel really anxious. I'd tried not to let the thought enter my head but maybe the policeman had been right. Except maybe it was *Mum*, not Dad, who was seeing someone else, some other man, and the letter had been from him. Maybe Mum and Dad were splitting up and they didn't know how to tell me. I looked over at Nan. "Please, Nan, you promised. Just tell me."

And that's when Nan said the strangest thing of all.

"We need to pop out and buy you a new suitcase, Bee, my love, because first thing Saturday morning we're all going to Spain."