

AJ CAMPBELL

LEAVE
WELL
ALONE



The **truth** could destroy them

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PROLOGUE

It only takes a single blow. Fury powers me beyond my perceived competence. I strike her face. She stumbles and trips, smacking her forehead on the worktop.

Bone smashing onto stone.

A sound that will stay with me forever.

Nothing registers at first. Paralysed, I glare at her motionless body.

He thrusts his fist at me. 'What have you done?'

Chapter 1

EVA

London

December 2010

That bone-chilling winter's day when my brother returned home for good was when I first contemplated murdering my mother.

Disturbing? Worse, though, was how, as time passed, the fleeting thoughts of watching her die at my hands became more gratifying.

These thoughts scared me. A mature student, I was the type of person who had piles of *The Big Issue* under the bed and volunteered weekly with my boyfriend at the local homeless shelter. I rescued wallflowers at parties, was an organ donor and wheeled the neighbour's bins out every Thursday morning. Not some psychopath who contemplated topping people.

I sat in the lounge waiting for Ben to arrive. Flames danced in the open grate, casting much-needed heat into the room. I'd just finished putting up a tree. Nothing big, only a mini artificial I'd found at Borough Market that morning. The lights flashed intermittently, as though the batteries were on their last legs. 'Tenner to you, Blondie,' the stallholder had offered with a toothless grin and hopeful expression. I'd have preferred the real deal, one of the Nordic firs stacked up next to the boxed imitations, but student loans didn't stretch to much more.

I picked up my book, *Law of Contract*, and glanced at my watch. Ben was due in twenty minutes, and to stand half a chance of handing in my essay by the end of term, I needed to finish reading the first section at least. My phone beeped. A text from Jim. I shivered as I tapped a reply that dinner at our favourite restaurant next Friday sounded perfect. If he could get a table. It was usually fully booked at weekends. But knowing him,

he'd find a way.

My stomach yo-yoed at the sound of the doorbell. He was here. Ben was at my front door. I threw my book aside and ran to greet him like a child dashing to see what Santa had delivered. It was hard to believe he'd been away for almost a decade. And I'd only seen him in the flesh once in those ten years when I'd visited him for a holiday in Barcelona. How time flies, even though most of it hadn't been fun for me. He'd left the summer after our disastrous trip to Hamburg, with a hug and a fake smile. 'You'll understand when you're older, Sis,' he'd said. And that was that. That was all I got as he boarded a National Express on the Bethnal Green Road with untied shoelaces and a half-packed holdall.

He was back now, though, in time for Christmas. My brother was back.

Opening the door, I noticed it before anything else. There it was. The jagged scar on the right side of his neck. It had faded over the years, but there was no mistaking it. A streak of pale pink shouting out, 'Here I am, don't you remember?'

I didn't need any reminders.

He flung his arms wide. 'Sis, I've missed you.'

'Me too,' I said, returning his heartfelt hug.

His arm around me, we giggled our way down the hallway like the inseparable kids we once were. Reaching the kitchen at the back of the house, I switched on the lights, and a cosy halogen glow illuminated the room against the winter afternoon shadows.

He skimmed his fingers along the chrome handle of one of the centre island drawers. 'Nice kitchen.'

'Not bad, eh?' I pointed to the unit attached to the double-door fridge. 'Especially the built-in coffee machine.'

He moved over to a section of worktop that housed a pop-up knife block. 'I'm more impressed with this.'

I filled the kettle. 'How was Peru?' I asked.

'There's a lot to tell you about.'

'You're not going back to Spain, then?' I asked.

'Nope. I gave up my flatshare before I went to Peru. I'm going to try and make a go of things here.'

I took a step back. 'You think you can settle now?'

'I think I can.'

Honestly, Ben? Why now? I knew him too well. 'What's different?'

'This and that,' he said with a shy smile.

I searched the cupboards for the packet of Hobnobs I'd added to the week's shopping list. When we were little, we'd always joked that Hobnobs paved the way to his heart. His dark eyes glinted when I offered him one. I kept peeking over at him while I prepared our drinks. I couldn't help myself. Thanks to modern technology, we'd Skyped at least monthly in the last few years, but nothing compared to having him next to me, in the flesh. His mass of fearless curls now dangled way past his collarbones, and he still looked as if he didn't eat enough. He slipped off his jacket, a burgundy canvas more suited to an autumn breeze than the bitter cold of winter.

'You need something warmer. We wear winter coats here, you know,' I said with a laugh.

'I'm waiting for some cash from someone who owes me. I'll get myself one then.'

'Legitimate cash, I hope?'

He stuck his tongue out at me. 'Not my game any more.' He chucked his jacket across the breakfast bar. 'This is going to be the coldest December since Met Office records began in 1910.'

'How do you know?'

He shrugged. 'Heard it on the radio.'

I smiled. His ability to relay random facts and figures was the fallout from our dysfunctional childhood, whereas counting things calmed me. Not that I'd needed to for a long time. I picked up the tray. 'Come on, let's go next door. I've lit a fire.'

'Blimey, haven't you got all grown up?' he chuckled.

Warmth welcomed us as we entered the lounge. I stoked the fire and threw on another log. Falling into the deep sofa, I beckoned him over.

His eyes scanned the room. 'You've done well for yourself.'

'None of it belongs to me. It's Jim's house, not mine.'

'You know what I mean.' He glanced around the room. It wasn't big, but it was light and airy. Painted powder blue, it had a host of period features including ornate cornices and a two-hundred-year-old marble fireplace. Jim told me he had sweated blood, every evening until midnight for weeks, to restore it.

'Jim's always been the same. A man destined to be rich and successful.' He examined the photographic prints lining the walls, pointing to a picture of a group of Thai women wearing straw hats, coasting along the canals of Thailand selling their mangoes and dragon fruit, coconuts, flowers and vegetables. 'The Damnoen Saduak floating market near Bangkok.'

'How do you know?'

'If you were on Facebook, you'd know I've been there. Who's the artist?' he asked.

'Dan, Jim's friend.'

'Oh right, Dan's work, is it? How's he doing these days? I've not seen him for yonks.'

'How do you know him?'

'From when I sometimes hung out with Jim when we were younger. Who would've

thought, after all these years, you and Jim an item? Why did you keep that quiet?’

I shrugged. ‘I didn’t know if it would last.’ That was the truth. I had never thought Jim would be so interested in me.

‘How long have you been together?’

‘Soon after I started renting a room here, September time.’ I tried to remember the exact date. It was after Jim’s birthday because Jess had still been on the scene. He’d thrown a cocktail party for his friends who had packed the whole of the downstairs. I would never forget that night. Seeing Jim and her together for the first – and last – time. I felt as though I’d been in a theatre watching a play – a spectator of the suit-and-little-black-dress-show. They’d acted the perfect couple amongst their family of friends, the supreme performance.

‘Wouldn’t have put you two together.’

‘And why not?’

He thought for a moment, sipping his tea. ‘The age gap, and where you’ve both come from, I suppose. You’re such different people.’

‘What does that matter? Why should my past define my future? Anyway, he’s only ten years older than me. That’s nothing.’

He nudged my shoulder. ‘I always knew you’d make it big time. Always the grounded one, weren’t you, Miss Eva Mitchell?’

‘I had little choice. Not sure I’d call this big time, though.’

We chatted for a while longer before he slurped the last of his drink and placed his mug on the coffee table. ‘Come on. Let’s go.’

‘Where’re we going?’

His fists sank into the sofa and he pushed himself up, his eyes bright. Reaching out, he tugged me up. ‘There’s someone I want you to meet.’

We linked arms as we journeyed into town. ‘I can’t stay too long. I’ve got a shift at work tonight,’ I said.

‘Where’re you working?’

‘Didn’t I tell you? I’ve got a part-time job in a bar and bistro about a five-minute walk from home. Marco’s. Helps keep the student debt under control.’

He nodded. ‘You did mention it. I remember now. So, is it serious? You and Jim.’

I nodded. ‘Pretty full on.’

‘He’s a decent guy. He’ll look after you.’

‘I don’t need looking after, thanks. I’m twenty-three now – not a child anymore.’

He ruffled my hair. ‘Don’t be so touchy.’

‘He’s taking me to Paris for two days next week – an early Christmas present.’

‘See what I mean? He’s one of the good guys. Always was. Ever since we were kids.

Everyone liked Jim Barnes.’

‘I can’t remember him from when we were kids.’

‘You were too young. He was always good to me.’

‘What about you? Tell me about this girl you’re so desperate to introduce me to.’

‘Her name’s Emily. Emmy for short. She’s a medical student.’ He beamed like a love-struck teenager. ‘I’ll let you make up your own mind.’

Covent Garden station was heaving, spewing out passengers into the mass of passing shoppers. The crowds shuffled us along the street as snowflakes settled on our hair like confetti. I felt an unusual tug of joy as we walked along. I smiled up at Ben. His dark eyes gleamed. I could see glimpses of the brother I’d once adored. The Ben before. Before he started not only colouring outside the lines, but off the page too – before Hamburg – before he left me.

‘I need to find a present for Gill,’ I said. Gill was my best friend. She’d just returned from a trip to Nepal in celebration of her sixtieth birthday. I guided him into a stationery shop where I found a handmade notebook with recycled paper. I knew she would adore it. She had a thing about notebooks. I found a few more Christmas gifts for Jim’s family while Ben waited outside talking on his phone.

We met Emmy in a lively coffee shop on a side street off the cobbled piazza where ‘Last Christmas’ was blasting out from a flat screen fixed to the wall. She stood when we entered and waved. Slight and short, with a chic, shoulder-length bob, she was pretty – really pretty. Her flawless skin glowed, and long mascara-thickened lashes bordered her doe-like eyes. Ben introduced us as she slid a laminated menu across the table.

‘I hear you’re studying medicine,’ I said.

She smiled. Her teeth were as straight as her fringe. And movie star white, of course. She spoke softly. ‘My fourth year now, but I want to be a psychiatrist, so I’m a way off. And you? Law?’

‘First-year mature student.’

‘Enjoying it?’

I nodded. ‘Lots of work, though.’

She laughed in agreement. ‘Tell me about it. I’ve had a week off, playing catch-up.’ She flashed her henna-decorated hands at me. ‘Oh, and a family wedding. Back on duty tonight.’

‘I’m starving; can we choose?’ Ben said.

Tinsel looped the neck of the cheery waitress who pencilled our order on to a notepad. She was high on the spirit of the season, swaying her hips and humming along to the TV now playing ‘Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree’.

I smiled, enthused by her festive mood. I fingered a bowl of pot-pourri sitting in the

middle of the table, charging the air with wafts of pine and cinnamon, apples and cloves. Warmth radiated through my body. There it was again, that tug of joy. I realised at that moment its message. I'd received the ultimate early Christmas gift – the return of my brother's unbounded enthusiasm for life.

Finally, life was good.

Who was I trying to kid?

The humming waitress delivered our third coffee before Ben broke his news. One moment we were discussing plans for Christmas day. The next he took a deep breath and announced, 'Eva, I need to tell you something.' He snuck a look at Emmy. She gave him a thumbs-up sign.

I grinned, my eyes darting between the two of them. I could sense what was coming. I just knew it. They were getting married, or she was pregnant. I felt a warm glow inside. My family was about to grow bigger than just Ben and me. I was going to gain a sister-in-law, or a niece or nephew.

He fisted his trembling hands and gave it to me like a punch in the face. 'I've found our mum.'