

BRIGHT LIES

by A.A. Abbott

EXTRACT

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This book was written by a British writer in British English.

Chapter 1 December 2019 – Emily

“You don’t have to see him, Emily. We could just go home. It’s not too late to change your mind.”

“No, Mum. We’ve been through this. Please don’t talk. I’ve got to concentrate on the traffic.”

We’d agreed I’d drive so I’d have to focus on that rather than the meeting. I risk a sideways glance at Mum, though. Her lips are tight. It’s obvious that her support for me is costing her dearly. I feel a flood of gratitude. She’s never faltered in her love, despite my fear she would.

Just in time, I notice the lorry cutting in front of us. I brake sharply, a chill surging through me at the near miss.

To her credit, Mum doesn’t criticise. She was relaxed earlier, too, when the engine stalled and I scraped the gears. Her pink Fabulous Flowers van has already taken a few knocks in the streets of Bath. One or two more won’t make a difference.

Edgily, I crawl behind slow lines of traffic in yet another village high street, barely noticing the festive glitz in every window. Motorways would be quicker, but I’m too nervous to use them yet. I only passed my test in March, and my skills leave a lot to be desired.

Removing the L-plates should have been a rite of passage, like my eighteenth birthday. I'm technically an adult now, but I had to grow up a long time ago.

As we near the prison, the roads are quieter, the rural landscape almost without colour. Brown fields and bare trees sit under a dull grey sky. You wouldn't know a huge city like Birmingham was a few miles away. We could be travelling through a land of ghosts. I shudder.

Mum says, "Sweetheart, this is stressing you out. I can't believe Maya suggested it."

"She said I'd get closure." It's not true; my counsellor told me it was a bad idea. I still couldn't stop myself from writing one last time. When a prison visiting order actually turned up, I was surprised and relieved. Now, nerves churn my stomach as I drive into the tree-lined carpark.

Mum will stay in the vehicle. She doesn't want to go inside, and I'm fine with that. It will be hard enough doing this on my own.

"Still sure?" she asks again, before I open the door.

I nod.

"Be careful."

"Don't worry, Mum." My lips twitch as I try to smile.

It's been nearly three years. Even after all the counselling and the promises I made to myself, I can't get him out of my mind.

PART 1 Dreams Come True

Chapter 2 March 2014 – Emily

I'm embarrassed but trying to hide it from my friend. Megan is complaining about her portrait while the artist is right in front of us. Does she realise?

I noticed him right away, because he looks like Liam Payne from One Direction. They're my favourite band and Megan's too, although she's a Harry Styles fan. No-one else from 1D is allowed in her bedroom, which is plastered with Harry's posters. I can't Blu-Tack anything to my walls because our cottage is rented. A single image of Liam smiles from my wardrobe door.

Megan frowns. "It's so babyish, Em."

I wish she wouldn't gripe about it, but I know what she means. It's been painted from a school photo, not even this year's, because her mum thought the last one was prettier. Megan's frizzy red hair was longer then, her face rounder.

"It's lovely. You look pre-Raphaelite." I've surprised myself with such a long word, and I can see it's startled Mrs Harris, Megan's mum, as well.

Megan's scowl vanishes. Now, she's just puzzled. "That's a good thing, is it?"

I nod. "Yes, I love the pre-Raphaelites."

With luck, I've stopped an argument. It's so exciting to be at a real-life art exhibition and I don't want anything to spoil it.

Mrs Harris's face softens. She runs a hand through her own bob, a straighter and darker version of Megan's style. Megan says she irons it. "Emily, you're right. I've always admired the pre-Raphs, too."

"I s'pose it's okay," Megan concedes.

The artist, standing proudly by his work, seems amused. There's a mischievous grin on his face. I catch his eye and he winks, carefully, so Megan and her mum can't see.

"I'm glad I don't have to paint it again," he says.

"No, we couldn't ask you to do that." Mrs Harris is gushing. "It was a nice surprise to win your competition, wasn't it, Meg? When I sent your photo to the paper, we weren't really expecting anything, were we?"

Megan shrugs.

"Do have a glass of wine, Sue." He hands Mrs Harris a plastic tumbler with an inch of straw-coloured liquid in it. "Sorry, it's soft drinks only for Megan and her friends. I'm a fan of the French way myself, giving children a responsible amount of alcohol, but the venue won't have it."

"Thanks. Just the one, as I'm driving."

Megan hisses, "Children," at me in disgust.

I pretend not to hear. "Let's look around."

The large, oblong room's white walls display a dozen or so images of women, and a girl with flowing blonde locks. She's probably around our age: twelve. Perhaps she's the artist's daughter. He's fair, too, his short hair longer on top and falling forward in a floppy fringe.

His name's David Anderson. It's his first exhibition. We've been invited to the opening night in Bath because the local paper ran a prize

draw for a free portrait. Megan was lucky to win such a valuable painting. I caught a glimpse of the price list when we came in: the others are all over five hundred pounds.

“Before you dash off, tell me what you know about the pre-Raphaelites. I’m a great fan of Rossetti but I wasn’t sure this audience would see the influence.” He points to the small groups dotted around, chatting and drinking wine. His brown eyes gleam.

Megan and Mrs Harris have already drifted away, I realise with a surge of panic. I shiver, tongue-tied. He’s good-looking and something within me flutters when I’m the centre of his attention. It makes me uneasy.

As he gazes at me expectantly, I finally manage to speak. “We learned about them at school. Romantic realism.” The words emerge as a stammer, but once I start talking, it becomes easier. “I love art. It’s the only subject I’m any good at.”

“Me too. My teachers despaired of me. What sort of stuff do you paint?”

Whatever we’re told to do in class, I think but don’t say. “I’m working on a still life at school. Apples and oranges. Acrylic on canvas.” There must be a million such paintings in the world already. Still, I know Mum will give it pride of place in our tiny living room.

“That’s a great start. I’m thinking of switching to acrylics, but these are oils, as you can see.”

“They’re awesome,” I say timidly, knowing instinctively why his work is so expensive. There is joy, light and movement in the images. They are better versions of their subjects. I wish Mum had entered me for the competition.

His face lights up at my praise. The resemblance to Liam is amazing. He looks so young that the girl can’t be his daughter. “Thank you. I’m thrilled that someone’s actually buying them. You’ll know that, as a creative person yourself, you seek validation for your work but you’re never certain you’ll get it.”

I nod, out of my depth. Mum loves everything I produce. Our fridge is covered with my drawings.

“You see the little red dots next to three of my paintings? That means I’ve sold them. Anyway, best of luck with your endeavours. I hope your mum and dad encourage you.”

“Dad’s dead. Mum likes art, though. That’s her, there.”

She's standing with her back to us, accepting more wine from Mrs Harris, who is on her second. I hope she's remembered she's driving.

The artist raises an eyebrow. "Your mother? I thought you were sisters."

Mum spins round, smiling. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

She wouldn't normally say something like that. Her cheeks are pinker than usual. It must be the wine.

He beams back at her. "You're two peas in a pod. Blonde hair, blue eyes... Forgive me for the presumption. When I contacted Sue to invite her, she said Megan would bring friends, and I naturally thought they'd be her age."

"I was curious," Mum says. "We don't usually get asked to this sort of event."

She's not kidding. We can't afford to buy art. Our Somerset accents are out of place, too. Whenever I catch snatches of conversation, it's in loud, snobby voices. David doesn't seem snooty at all, though.

"The exhibition's on for a week. Tell your girlfriends about it. It's free to browse, and there's no obligation to buy. I'm just pleased that my art is bringing enjoyment to others." He picks up a bottle of wine and splashes more into her tumbler.

Megan nudges me. "There's cake. Want some?"

I glance reluctantly at the artist, but I can see he's focused on Mum now. It suddenly feels as if the sun has gone behind a cloud. "Cake's exactly what I need."

Mrs Harris unlocks her grey Vauxhall Zafira, holding Mum's arm steady at the same time. "How much did you drink, Rachel?"

"Wasn't counting," Mum giggles. "What about you?"

Mrs Harris opens the passenger door for her. "Two of those little cups. Hardly anything in them."

Mum almost falls into the car. I'm relieved that we parked right outside the gallery.

"I'm glad you came along," Mrs Harris says to Mum as Megan and I strap ourselves in behind them. "It does you good to get away from the village and out of your comfort zone. Did you meet anyone nice?"

"I swapped phone numbers with David Anderson."

“Really? You lucked out, then. He’s well fit,” Mrs Harris says. “Shame he’s a struggling artist. Lives on cold beans in an attic, I suppose.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Mum sounds smug. “He inherited a furniture business from his parents. He has a big house outside Bath.”

“Go, girl. When are you going to ask him out?”

“We’re meeting next Tuesday.”

“How about a sleepover at ours, Emily?” Mrs Harris suggests.

“Sure.” I try to sound keen, but a pang of jealousy catches me unawares.

Chapter 3 April 2014 – Jack

Next to the karaoke set, wine bottles sit on the coffee table. They’re decorated with trees and flowers. The labels are almost poetic: Blossom Hill Chardonnay and Peach Tree White. Jack suspects the daughters of Aunt Mon’s friends draw inspiration from these sources to choose baby names.

His father drank beer and cider: manly-sounding brands like Breaker and White Lightning. Uncle Ken, on the other hand, favours whisky. It’s because her husband is away that Mon feels relaxed enough to host the ladies Ken calls her coven.

Mon went to school in Bristol with all three of them, which means Ken doesn’t approve because they should mix with a better class of people. Ken and Mon have bought their council house, while the others still rent. Worse, Tracy is a single parent. Ken thinks she should have been sterilised. It doesn’t matter that both Tracy and her daughter are nurses at Southmead Hospital.

‘The girls’ aren’t aggressive drunks. Even Ken is only maudlin when he’s overdone the Johnnie Walker. Still, Jack steadies himself as he obeys Mon’s summons to the living room.

Mon is refilling glasses, her newly conker-coloured hair falling over her face. The others beam at him. Wine has brought a sparkle to their looks, easing the wrinkles collected over the course of fifty years.

“You’ve got a treat for us, Jack,” Tracy says.

“Oh?” He hopes it’s nothing onerous. Having returned from the burger bar an hour ago, he still has homework to finish.

“You’re going to sing us a tune.” Deb is Mon’s hairdresser. Her own tresses, long and bleached blonde, barely quiver as she giggles. She lights a cigarette.

Mon looks up, her hazel eyes apologetic. “Can you do that outside, please, Deb? You know what Ken’s like.”

“Sorry, my lover. I forgot myself.” Deb stubs it out on her glass.

“I was telling the girls about Ken’s Elvis Appreciation Society,” Mon says.

“Thirty of them now,” Deb says. “And you’re Ken’s young apprentice, Jack?”

“He’s been learning the songs since his voice broke at fifteen,” Mon announces with pride.

“Well, he should be word-perfect then.” Deb accepts a fresh glass and immediately gulps down half of it. “You’re what, sixteen now—?”

“Seventeen.” Jack stretches, but he’s aware he’s short for his age. At least he gets away with half fare on the bus.

“And you’re working at SupaBurger? I saw you there at little Blossom’s birthday party.” Lesley is quieter than the others, but she does like to remind them she’s a grandmother.

“It’s part-time. I’m studying for A levels.”

Deb swigs the rest of her wine and helps herself to more. “I suppose you need the money for trainers and computer games, and all the other things young people want.”

Jack is silent. So is Mon. The cash goes straight into Ken’s pocket; he has insisted on rent since Jack turned sixteen.

Deb stares at him. “Mon says you have a wig, with sideburns. Put it on for us.”

Mon has the grace to blush. “No. He’s embarrassed enough when Ken makes him wear it to Society meetings.”

“Close your eyes, Deb,” Tracy suggests.

“Shall I sing Heartbreak Hotel?” Jack asks. The sooner he begins, the faster his humiliation will be over.

“Why not? The King’s first, and his best.” Tracy passes over the karaoke mic, which has a pink metallic finish but feels like plastic. She flicks a switch on the speaker.

His curly brown hair is nothing like Elvis’s quiff and he can’t do the moves, but Jack belts out the old standard well. They can probably hear him five doors away.

The girls clap hands and whistle as he reaches the end.

Mon has tears in her eyes. “You have such a fine voice. Like your dad. It’s what attracted—”

She stops abruptly, obviously tipsy but not too drunk to remember his father must never be mentioned, and certainly not in a positive light.

“You didn’t wiggle your bum,” Deb says. “Sing us another and shake your hips, my lover.”

“You said just one,” Jack points out, desperately.

Tracy rescues him. “You did say that, Mon. Anyway, it’s my turn. I do a mean Shania Twain.”

Jack flashes her a grateful glance. “Bye, then.”

“Take care, Jack. Thanks for the song.” Tracy begins selecting another number.

Jack hastens upstairs to his small bedroom, feeling a sense of sanctuary as the door closes behind him. Mon’s request was harmless, but he wishes he’d pretended to have the cold that is flying around school. His fists clench with hatred for Elvis, Ken and his father. One day, he’ll go to university and they’ll be nothing more than a distant nightmare.

Chapter 4 July 2014 – Emily

Mum is in love with David Anderson, and it’s like all her dreams have come true. At first, she couldn’t believe he was interested. He’s rich, handsome and successful. When Mrs Harris heard he was thirty, she said it was cradle-snatching. Mum’s thirty-five, after all.

David treated Mum to a surprise holiday in Thailand, where he has a furniture business, then proposed to her on the beach. They chose a pearl ring made by local fishermen. She gave it to me once they were back and he’d bought her a proper one, with a massive diamond.

Suddenly, life is fun. We have a new TV on the sideboard. Mum and I sit in front of it eating popcorn and watching Disney DVDs. She always felt bad that she couldn’t afford them before. Although she says she didn’t struggle so much for cash before Dad died, I was two then. I don’t recall those times, or him, at all. Now money’s no object. David has loads.

While Mum has date nights twice a week, I've hardly seen David since the art exhibition where we first met. It's a surprise when she says he's suggested taking me shopping.

"When?" I ask.

"Tomorrow afternoon. It just seemed to fit. I mean, I know we usually spend time together on Saturday, but I actually managed to get an appointment to have my hair done. You remember Dave bought me vouchers for my birthday?"

"So you won't come with us?" I'm both excited and nervous at the thought of being alone with him.

"No. Dave said he was going out to buy clothes for himself, and he'd get you a couple of bits too." She pulls a face. "He's generous, so please don't take advantage."

"I won't," I promise.

Later, as I prepare for bed, I catch Liam Payne's eyes looking down on me from the wardrobe. His newest hairstyle is a quiff. He looks incredible.

"You're the only one I love, Liam," I whisper to him.

David picks me up in his Range Rover at two o'clock. Nerves overcome me at first. I sit in silence as we ride smoothly out of the village and past the farms beyond.

"Let's put on the radio," David says. "What kind of music do you like?"

"One Direction."

"We'll try Radio 1, then. Maybe we'll get lucky. Who's your fave out of the 1D boys?"

"Liam."

"He's definitely the best-looking."

"He used to have the same hairstyle as you," I say, shyly.

"No way."

"Yes, but he has a quiff now."

"Think a quiff would suit me?" There is a twinkle in David's eye.

I stare at his profile. He could be even more handsome than Liam. "Definitely," I say, ignoring a twinge of guilt.

"I'll have to experiment. Would you like a makeover too? You want to be a beautiful bridesmaid, don't you?"

“Yes, please.” A makeover sounds grown up. I’ve never had one and nor has Megan. She’ll want to hear all about it.

“I’ll book it for you.” David stops the car and makes a phone call.

I’m beginning to relax now. As we set off again, with the radio jangling, David talks about his art. I enjoy sitting in the passenger seat beside him, high above the road.

This is the first lift I’ve had from anyone since his exhibition. Mum doesn’t have the money to run a car. Megan is lucky to have the Zafira and two parents to drive it. Even her older brother takes her out occasionally, when he’s on leave from the Army.

We soon arrive in Bath. David puts the Range Rover in the underground carpark at Southgate. The first shop we visit is MAC, where he’s booked a make-up lesson.

The only cosmetics I own are an eyeshadow palette, mascara, lipstick and two glosses from Superdrug. I bought them in the January sale, and nothing cost more than two pounds. Although MAC is stylish and shiny, I’m mortified when we walk in and I spot the price tags.

“Are you sure about this?” I point to a row of powders costing twenty pounds each.

“Let me splash out,” David says. “You won’t be a bridesmaid every week.”

The staff find a chair for me, and my make-up artist introduces herself. She’s called Chloe. Like all the boys and girls working here, she has a black uniform, but her own distinctive style. Her short hair is spiky, coloured in dark shades of purple. In contrast, her face is fresh and natural. Trained by watching beauty vloggers with Megan, I spot pink sparkle on her lids and a hint of blusher on her cheeks.

“What kind of look do you want to achieve?” she asks.

I turn questioning eyes to David.

“Maybe something a bit stronger than yours?” he suggests to her. “Say, a smoky eye and a nude lip? It’s for a wedding.”

“How exciting. What will you be wearing?” Chloe beams at me.

“We’re browsing later,” David says.

That isn’t what Mum told me, but I’m not complaining.

“Let’s do the smoky eye, then,” Chloe says. “It goes with everything. Your dad has good taste.”

“Thanks.” David doesn’t seem to mind her guesswork. He seems completely at ease. I can’t imagine Mr Harris hanging around while Megan tries on make-up.

Chloe gathers a host of products and brushes, arranging them on the surface in front of me. Directly ahead, there’s a mirror. I watch as she cleanses my skin and applies the products. The transformation is amazing.

“You see how the brushes and sponges give a flawless result?” she asks, as she sprays a fine mist over my face to finish off.

“It’s lovely,” I gasp.

“You look stunning, Princess.” David can’t seem to tear his eyes away from my face.

I glow with pride.

“I think you should try a brighter lipstick too, to stand out in the photos,” Chloe says. “Perhaps with a hint of blue. That would really make your eyes pop.”

“Can I?” I ask David.

“Of course.”

She paints on a fuchsia shade.

“It’s striking.” David sounds impressed. “But wipe it off before you get home, Emily. Your mum will think it’s too much.”

“Can I wear it now, please, around the shops?” I’m unashamedly wheedling. If I can be the new, glamorous me for only an hour, I’ll be happy.

David agrees. He insists on buying both lipsticks and all the other products.

“I’d love to take you to an art supplies shop, but I promised Rachel I’d get you some clothes,” he says, as we leave.

“That’s okay.” I already feel spoilt.

We visit six different places and I end up with two pairs of jeans, tops, shoes and even underwear. “Your boyfriend’s generous,” one of the shop ladies laughs.

“I…” I glance anxiously at David, thinking he’ll want to correct her, but he puts a finger to his lips. His gaze is strangely intense.

He takes me to a coffee bar. A scone alone is £4. Mum and I would have lived on that for a day.

We sit facing each other silently across the small table. David stares at me, his expression so serious that I begin to worry.

“What?” I ask, twisting a tendril of blonde hair around my finger.

His brown eyes never leaving my face, he says, “You won’t have to call me Dad, you know.”

I start to giggle with relief.

David reacts with mock horror. “Should I be concerned? I was about to suggest Dave, but you’ve obviously got an alternative in mind.”

“Maybe David?” To my embarrassment, I’m blushing. Some of my friends argue all the time with their stepfathers. I can’t imagine having that problem with David. Mum’s not the only lucky one.

He puts his hand on mine. “I’m so glad I found you,” he says. “There’s something special about you.”

He squeezes my hand. I feel comforted and reassured. He’ll take care of us and everything will be all right.

Mum gawps at all the bags when she opens the front door, especially as they’re not from Primark. They’re labelled as Next, Miss Selfridge and Topshop, plus an expensive boutique that David insisted we visit.

“Where have you been?”

“We went to Bath, Mum!” My excitement is bubbling over.

“I thought you’d go to Bristol. It’s closer.”

David seems puzzled. “It’s too crowded there. Anyway, Bath has better shopping.”

“And prices to match. You shouldn’t have, Dave.” Her eyes glitter with tears.

“Come on, Rachel, I wanted our little princess to look smart. By the way, your hair is sensational. It really frames your face.”

“I’ve got a whole new wardrobe, Mum!” I can’t understand why she’s upset. Only last week she was worried I’d had a growth spurt and she couldn’t afford to replace my clothes. A warm glow of gratitude surges through me as I realise she must have confided in David, and that’s why he whisked me to the shops. All he’s bought for himself is a pair of socks.

“Well…” Mum begins to smile. “It’s very kind of you, Dave. Come in and have a cup of tea.”

“I have an even better idea.” He pulls a bottle of champagne from one of the bags. Where did that come from? I bet he sneaked away when I was in the changing rooms.

Mum fetches glasses while David and I slump on the threadbare sofa. “Emily should have some too,” he says. “Clothes shopping for teenagers is hard work.”

Mum beams, her face dimpling. David brings out her prettiness. “Emily’s not really a teenager. But I know what you mean. Twelve going on twenty.” She shakes her head. “I’ll get you a glass, young lady. But don’t imagine you’ll be drinking alcohol every day. Or wearing make-up.”

“My fault.” David is quick to spring to my defence. “I wanted Emily to get used to the idea of scrubbing up for our big day. She tried on some nice dresses too. I’ll show you the photos.” He hands her his iPhone.

They’re too childish. I wish he’d let me choose them myself, like the rest of my clothes. Anxiously, I watch her expression. I hope she doesn’t agree with him.

“Mum, you’re the bride. I thought we’d go and try things on together.”

“Of course, sweetheart,” she promises.

David chuckles. “She’s twisting you round her little finger, Rachel. She does it to me, too. Let’s get that fizz poured for our princess, shall we?”

It’s a few centimetres at the bottom of one of those thin, tulip-shaped glasses. Most of it is a layer of the creamy bubbles that rush out of the green glass bottle. The drink catches the light enticingly. Eager to sample it, I take a gulp.

“Emily, your face!” Mum laughs as I cough and splutter.

“Don’t give up, Emily. Have another sip. You’ll soon find you enjoy it.” David’s dark eyes are earnest and his smile winning.

“I suppose I could.” I make a show of holding my nose, afraid that otherwise I’ll gag on the sour taste. Then, magically, happiness fills me. I can’t stop giggling.

“I knew you’d like it,” he says.

“No more for her, Dave. She’ll get drunk.”

“You finish it, Rachel.” He tops up her glass. “Have you told her yet, by the way?”

“No, I thought you would. That’s why you took her shopping...”

“What’s going on? Tell me what?” Despite the golden feeling, I’m uneasy. They have a secret, and it can’t be good, or they would have shared it before.

David pats my knee. “Well, since your mum amazingly agreed to become my wife, we’ve been talking about where to live. I want you both to move in with me. My house is plenty big enough.”

There’s no doubt about that. David owns a mansion outside Bath. Our cottage could fit into his drawing room, with space left over.

All the same, my lip trembles. My gaze sweeps over our lounge, at the scabby paintwork and swirly red carpet. The furniture is older than me and the landlord never fixes anything, but it’s home.

“All my friends are here,” I protest, aware I sound sulky.

“You’ll make new ones.” Mum glances at David.

He watches my reaction intensely when he speaks. “I’ve found the perfect school for you. Marvellous academic results, a nice uniform, good for sport. They offer riding lessons, even.”

“It’s a private girls’ school,” Mum adds.

“No spotty boys distracting you,” David says.

“Good. I don’t like boys.”

The statement draws a chuckle from him. “You’re a scream, Princess.”

“I’d like a pony, though.”

Mum gasps, clearly appalled, but David roars with laughter.

He winks at me. “Whatever you say, Princess.”

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