

Chapter 2 – Decisions

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Gin Bottle Blues

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Chapter 2 – Decisions

I slump in my chair, poking at the rubbish under my desk with my toe. I could be anywhere in the world, for all the emotion I feel. I could be in a coal mine in Wales, but I'm not.

Actually, I'm in an advertising office in Clerkenwell, it's Monday morning and there are posters adorning the walls of scantily clad women promoting sushi. I can't tell you why they can't just be fully-clothed while enjoying raw fish, but that's the Japanese for you.

My desk is a positive toy box of sample products sent by our clients, but luckily, no sushi.

Harry and I both trudged into work this morning wishing we were dead, but he thinks he got the worst of it for having so obviously been in a fight, and he's not that kind of guy. Of course the office girls had flocked around him, cooing and pretending to be shocked – and annoying me even more than usual.

Maybe it's me. Perhaps I'm disillusioned with it all: the futility of flogging endless new brands of sushi.

I rub my face and glance at the clock, for the second time that minute.

An email pops up on my personal account, and I see after blinking for a second that it's from Charlie. *Why would he contact me?* We barely speak – even on birthdays.

I wonder briefly if someone has died, before opening it.

It says: *What are you doing this weekend?*

It's so characteristically abrupt. No "*Hi, how are you?*" I frown.

It's not that we're not on good terms. Charlie and Racine might be twins, but they mix with completely different crowds.

The last I heard, Charlie was living in Australia but I assume he's back, now. Pretty much all of his friends are in bands and take the lifestyle very seriously. Charlie likes to think of himself as a budding rock star, and Racine told me recently that his band *La Boca* have just been signed to do a small supporting tour in the UK.

The people Racine and I hang out with are a bit more clean-cut, generally preferring witty wordplay to snorting cocaine – although in my opinion the latter is nothing to sniff at. We're friends with people like Harry and Lucy – arts and humanities graduates whose idea of fun is sitting around drinking whisky whilst playing *Articulate*.

I wonder whether Charlie's going to ask me to go on tour with him to be his roadie or maybe help him move house. Neither seems particularly likely and I don't have the time to help him, anyway. I wonder briefly if the clock on the wall is broken – it's only 10.30am.

All at once, several people get up from their desks in a mini-exodus.

Commotion in the office kitchen means it's someone's birthday and my colleagues will be gathering round a Sainsbury's chocolate cake.

On second thoughts, the pop of a champagne cork suggests it's actually the birthday of someone senior, so the cake is more likely to be from *Marks & Spencer*.

I feel like I should probably pretend to care, and at the very least it'll kill a bit of time in between now and lunch. Harry catches my eye from the other side of the office – we exchange long-suffering looks.

The fraying edges of our lives still intersect. I heave myself up from my desk and Harry follows dutifully, trying not to limp.

People are still giving Harry's newly aurora-patterned face furtive looks. One of the more predatory office-girls, Mira, clasps his arm in mock-horror and demands in a heated whisper to know what happened to him. Harry grins ruefully and shakes his head, looking down at the floor.

I hope my cheeks aren't going red. Luckily, a stumbling chorus of *Happy Birthday* interrupts the sickening moment and our assistant director, Mark, fakes being surprised. Lots of

cheesy jokes are batted around, and he gets heckled a bit for an imaginary receding hairline.

As soon as we finish singing, I notice Harry slink out of the room, iPhone in hand. I bet I can guess what he's gone to do.

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Indeed, Lucy calls my work phone at the end of the day, crying. Through sobs, curses and hiccups, I manage to make out that Harry's broken up with her.

"Oh, *shit*," I say, trying to sound surprised.

"I- I- I can't believe it," she whimpers – sounding more upset than I've ever heard her before.

"I'll come round," I say hurriedly, slinging my bag over my shoulder and waving goodbye to Tim, my manager. He doesn't even look up from his computer screen.

Harry's still working away, head down and sleeves rolled up – as though nothing's happened. I slip out without bothering to say goodbye to him, past caring if I look suspicious.

I jump on the bus that drives past Lucy's road. My heart's pounding madly and I have to take a deep breath – it must be the vestiges of my monster hangover.

The bus seems to take forever, but in reality it's only ten minutes. I leap off at her stop and race up the uneven stone steps that look like they've been half-melted in a heatwave. She must have been waiting for me at her bedroom window because the door jerks open before I've had the chance to knock.

A flurry of Lucy tumbles into my arms and she's sobbing into my chest. I can feel her tears soaking through my shirt.

I tighten my arms around her while she lets it out, trying to protect her with my body and wishing I could just absorb some of her pain into myself.

Eventually, she stops crying, and – incongruously – laughs. I don't return the sentiment in case she's gone insane.

"Hey, Thom," she croaks, finally looking up into my eyes.

“Hey, Lucy,” I smile, reaching out to rub her arm gently with my knuckles. “I’m here now.”

She beckons me to follow her into her room.

It’s filled with trinkets and posters of old rock bands. It smells faintly of incense and her bed is piled high with pillows and cushions. She curls up like a cat on the floral bedspread, surrounded by a garden of crumpled tissues.

“How are you?” I say, unnecessarily. She gives a guttural laugh.

“I’m okay...” she croaks wryly. “...I knew it was coming.”

“You did?” I say in surprise. Harry’s normally a bit of a closed book – to say the least.

“Well, these things always end,” she murmurs. “And I’ve been feeling so empty inside.”

I sit down on the wooden chair in front of her desk and fiddle with a pile of papers. She has a couple of hand-written letters on there. Some sad music I don’t know is playing on her laptop, which covers up the few seconds of silence that I let slip past me.

“So, do you think it was the right thing to do?” I say, because Lucy isn’t forthcoming.

“I didn’t really have a choice. But I didn’t protest, if that’s what you mean,” she sniffs, sitting up suddenly, her black cotton dress pooling over her pale legs. She’s not wearing any socks and looks like she hasn’t slept a wink.

“Did you go to work today?”

If I ask an endless series of questions, maybe we won’t have to talk about anything real.

“No,” she groans. “I had the day off anyway, but I wouldn’t have been capable of a thing. The paintings can look after themselves.”

Lucy works in a modern art gallery, where everyone is thin as a whip and dresses all in black.

Right now, her toffee-coloured hair is tangled and the remnants of her make-up are smudged from crying.

“Want me to make you some food?” I offer. She hesitates. “I brought breaded chicken.”

A wave of relief washes over me as she cracks a genuine smile. I can deal with girls crying

but I hate to see Lucy like this. Her eyes are normally glittering and she has a habit of laughing from the pit of her stomach.

“I do feel a bit weak and shaky,” she admits.

“Come on,” I say, taking her hand and bending to retrieve the green *Marks & Spencer* bag I left on the floor.

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With dinner settling in our bellies, we’ve already gotten through most of the gin I brought. I feel self-conscious that Lucy is lying too close to me.

She is lying on her side on the bed next to me with her head cradled in the crook of her arm. Her glass of wine tilts at an alarming angle and threatens to spill on the covers.

Her breath tickles my neck.

“So are you going to work tomorrow?” I ask, to fill the listless silence that billows out between us. She’s tried to be fun but I can see she’s nearly breaking.

I can’t believe she didn’t expect this to happen now. Harry’s been spending more time with me lately than with her, and when she has been there the air of awkwardness has been palpable, I’ve thought.

“Why should I?” she says dramatically. “The paintings and the sculptures don’t mean anything. They’re poorly animated with the ghosts of old masters.”

“Everything’s been said before,” I murmur. “But you can’t just give up living. We must go on.” Even as I say it, I wonder if it’s true. *Why can’t we just give up, really?*

“I’m scared, Thom,” she says, her lip trembling, and I notice the sheen come over her eyes as the tears threaten to spill again.

I find myself talking without really knowing what I’m saying, the wine’s effects clouding my brain.

“Everyone’s scared. We’re all scared, all the time. But these things happen to all of us. You’ll be fine, Luce. I promise.”

Will I go to hell for lying, if I don’t really know for sure?

"I know I'll get over it but I don't want to lose you as my best friend," she admits, finally getting to the point we've been skirting around. I feel an icy hand close itself over my heart at the word *friend*.

"I think it's going to be hard for us to be friends for a while." The gin has loosened my tongue and I hadn't realised I felt that way until now. *Man, the truth is bitter - just like this goddamn gin.*

We have to drink before we can say anything real.

"Can you really abandon me just like that?" Yes.

"Harry's my best friend. I just... don't want to be disloyal to him."

"Don't evade the question, Thom! We were friends first, you know..."

"Things change, Luce."

Her face is hovering close enough to mine that I can see every eyelash.

Even with yesterday's makeup smears, she still takes my breath away. I want her. Especially her endless legs, disappearing enticingly beneath her dress.

No atom of my being doesn't want to gather her into my arms in an endless embrace. I could imagine our breath circulating, lung to lung, because she's ready and waiting for me to reach out.

Almost like snapping off my own arm, I sit up suddenly, gin sloshing on my grey jeans. *Damn.*

"I have to go," I blurt in a panic. *Before impulse takes over. Before I can't stop myself from doing the unthinkable.*

She looks hurt and reaches out to clasp my arm nearest her. I feel every muscle in my body tense at the electric contact as though someone has sent several hundred volts through me.

I wonder if it feels like anything close to that for her.

"What do you want me to say, Thom?" she says in a strangled voice. I start fumbling for my tobacco.

“Don’t say anything,” I say hurriedly. “Don’t say what you think I want you to say, or even what you should say. I came round to comfort you, because you’re my friend and I love you.” Saying that makes it feel like someone has poured water down the back of my neck. “I didn’t come here like some predator to take advantage of you.”

“I don’t think that, Thom!” She sits up too and kneels on the edge of the bed, twining both her arms around my neck from behind. Her long hair tickles my skin and my fingers freeze midway through rolling the cigarette. “I could never think that.” Her breath ghosts over me.

Her fingers play across my collarbone and out of the corner of one eye I can see her scarlet lips: a splash of colour on a white palette that morbidly beckons my ardour.

I feel my body betray me and hope my jeans are loose enough to hide it. Without saying another word, I untangle myself from her arms and bolt out of the flat.

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“Are you still going on your Tinder date?” Harry asks at lunchtime the next day while he’s perched on the edge of my desk, referring to a girl I met online.

“Yea, dim sum,” I say. “It’s cheap and Chinatown is close by. Also, my nan is Chinese.” *I’m babbling.*

“I’m sure your dating methods have a decent success rate,” Harry says, in what I think is a patronising manner.

There’s a pause where my mind goes blank. My hand hovers over the keyboard, the cursor flashing angrily at me in an empty Word document.

“So... What did you get up to after work yesterday?” Harry continues, in an obvious attempt to fish for information. I ended up getting home after he’d gone to bed yesterday.

“Umm...” I say, slyly.

“It’s cool if you went to see Lucy,” he says, spreading his palms.

“I didn’t think I needed your permission,” I snap.

He looks taken aback. “Sorry, man. I just...”

I take a deep breath, fiddling with the tip of my skinny grey tie and studying the stack of

three Styrofoam coffee cups on the table.

Our awkward exchange is thankfully interrupted by my manager, Tim, who ambles over to my desk.

“Thom - can I have a word?” he says. I stand up quickly without saying anything and follow him to one of the free meeting rooms on the upper floors. I feel like there’s a buzzing in my head and know I fail at making small talk with him, though we normally get on quite well.

We sit down at the large table on one of the many chairs. Tim is slightly overweight and kind of older so the walk up the stairs has made him perspire. I study the soup stain on his woolen v-neck vest with its repeating pattern of geometric shapes.

“So, Thom,” he says, glancing at a piece of paper he’s brought with him.

“Yes, Tim,” I say, staring at him.

“Ah- I’ve, er- I’ve got something to talk to you about.” *Clearly.* He twirls a pen between his fingers and clears this throat.

“What’s that, then?” I say encouragingly, because this is just too painful.

“Well, I, er... I’ve been having some feedback about your- and, I must say, I’ve noticed- er... A change in- in your work.”

“A change?” I say, stalling for time.

“I’ve had some feedback - don’t worry, nothing too serious! - that you’ve, that you’ve not been meeting deadlines, quite as well as you might. Or your work is... not up to its usual high standard.”

“Oh.”

“Is there something I can help with, Thom? Something wrong?”

It’s as though a filing cabinet opens inside my mind and I flick through all the possible responses I could possibly give Tim. Each one seems more unappealing than the last.

I shake my head tightly. “Nothing’s wrong. I’ll sort it out, Tim.”

We're sitting in our lounge on Friday evening and Harry's smoking a joint, which is something he does on quite a regular basis. He's the most high-functioning stoner I know.

We've just come home from drinks with work friends and neither of us have had dinner but this isn't mentioned. Harry throws himself down on one of the dining chairs, his tall frame splayed out, and kicks off his brogues.

As we're out of everything else, I pour myself a whisky in a cut-glass tumbler, the amber liquid splashing over the ice cubes and making them crack. I take a sip and enjoy the fiery sensation in my throat.

I look at Harry and weigh up my words, noticing that even though it's been less than a week, his face is already starting to return to its usual colour. I wonder if he meant to match his blue shirt with his bruises and his eyes.

I sit down opposite him at the table and play with the tumbler, watching the electric light play on its jagged surface.

"Umm," I say, then stop.

He cocks his head to the side, pulling the ring on a can of beer. The gas escapes with a hiss.

"Yeah?" he says.

"Lucy's not good," I say finally. Though I'm loathe to tell him anything about her, it's gotten to the point where it's more weird not to. I don't plan to mention the fact that I ran out of her flat and haven't spoken to her since - it's probably not relevant.

Harry doesn't answer right away, instead resting the joint on the ashtray and picking up his smoking stuff again.

"I know, man," he says, starting to roll a normal cigarette - just for something to do, I'm sure. "I'm worried about her."

"Right," I say, deciding not to comment.

"Yeah... I want her to be okay. Course I do." For some reason, his words have an odd ring to them, as though they've been rehearsed.

"And how do you feel about everything?" I ask unsympathetically.

"Oh... Bad."

Harry lights his cigarette and exhales a huge plume of blue-ish smoke in between us. He taps the ash and leans back in his chair, staring out of the window at the buildings opposite. "But I'll get over it," he assures me.

That's pretty much all I'm capable of talking to Harry about. He takes out his iPhone and starts fiddling with it, so the conversation is over anyway.

We make stilted smalltalk for a while before I give my excuses and escape to my room. I hear him start playing Metallica loudly, giving the illusion of space between us.

Relief washes over me now I'm finally alone.

I sit with my elbows on the desk, clasping my head in my hands while my mind roves over the events of the last week. A haze of cigarette smoke hangs over me, seeping into my curtains and clothes, and the dull roar of the traffic outside punctuates my racing thoughts.

Harry's at once my best friend, housemate and colleague - you don't get closer than that unless you're married as well. I know which way round he hangs his shirts and the music he listens to in the morning. People could be forgiven for assuming we're a couple.

Despite all that, right now I can hardly stand to look at him.

Why won't these feelings go away?

Lucy in a blue and white polka-dot dress floats into my mind's eye, her head turned to the side in mid-laugh. Her silver bird necklace hangs just below her throat. I banish it with a fierce gulp of whisky.

I play with the label on a glass bottle, peeling it off in sticky clumps. The sound of an incoming email pops up on my laptop so I slam the lid shut.

I take another large mouthful of my drink and my thoughts finally begin to recede - though I still feel like I might be fraying at the edges.

I lie on my back on the dusty wooden floor and close my eyes. Maybe if I pretend the world doesn't exist, it'll all go away.

