

# Chapter 3 – Escape

Last Modified on 04/23/2019 6:45 am EDT

[<< Chapter 2 – Decisions](#)

## *Gin Bottle Blues*

By Catherine Heath

January 2015

### Chapter 3 – Escape

My bedroom door swings open and someone says my name. Last night I threw myself drunkenly into bed, naked, and now I have to hurriedly yank the duvet over my modesty.

“What?” I mumble into the pillow.

“Get up, Thom! We’re going to Bournemouth.”

*Huh?* I sit up and rub my eyes, horrified by the daylight, duvet falling to my waist.

My mouth falls open in shock when I see my brother standing there like some crazy apparition.

“What-what are you doing here?” I choke, starting to cough.

“You didn’t answer my texts or emails,” Charlie says simply, arms hanging by his sides and palms spread open in a *what-do-you-expect* gesture. I gape at him like a fish, still coughing a bit. “I tried to call you but just got voicemail.”

“Is it because I never gave you back your iPod?” I say. “That’s because I lost it. I’m sorry. I’ll buy you another one, I swear.”

“That’s not why,” he laughs, and then frowns. “But yes, I want another one. No, the reason I’m here is because I’m taking us away.

“You didn’t have any plans, did you?” he adds.

I take a moment to process this. A weird sensation of abandon washes over me as I think about the weekend I was going to spend staring at the wall, agonising over an impossible situation.

“Nothing that can’t wait,” I say slowly. Charlie’s face lights up.

He gives me time to grab some things to take with me and then we’re in his Volkswagen van, speeding out of smoky London into a panorama of fields and trees. I wonder dully how he can afford such great wheels.

*This is crazy.*

“Fun, right?” Charlie says, dimples appearing again.

“I haven’t seen you in like, a year,” I say dazedly.

He looks at me as though in surprise. “I know, I’m sorry, bro,” he says apologetically. “I had a call from Racine and we decided it’d be a good idea for you to get out of London.”

“So... is she coming?” *I guess not.* We’re already passing sheep by this time: Charlie drives fast.

“Racine was busy,” he says.

There’s something different about him. He has a new lip piercing and his hair’s a lot longer than when we last saw each other.

It’s not that, though - maybe he just looks old. Right now he’s grinning from ear to ear, indulging in a secret that I haven’t been told.

\*

I only realise we’ve reached our destination when Charlie swings into a gravelled carpark and kills the engine. He leaps out of the van and walks away between some trees - like he’s been here before - clearly expecting me to follow.

I chase after him like a dog along this sandy path that winds down and down through what seems to be a thick forest before it finally opens out onto a field of stones and sand, and the thick smell of seaweed hits me.

Seagulls caw as they soar between where the sea meets the sky. The scent of donuts wafts over to us and my mouth automatically waters.

I glance around for my brother, still slightly behind him, and finally spot him a few metres away.

Charlie balances on a huge misshapen rock, showing off, with his arms spread out like wings. His shoes and socks are already discarded and his jeans rolled up, exposing his ankles. His hair is blown about wildly while the wind tugs at my hat and sends a shiver down my spine.

The iron grey sky towers over us, storm clouds threatening at the edge of the horizon.

“So, are we sleeping here?” I say, sitting down on the beach and huddling into my grey hoodie, which is pathetic against this coastal chill.

Charlie lets out this kind of throaty call, so joyful to be by the sea.

When it starts to rain he jumps off the rock and we trudge back up to the carpark. It turns out that the house we’re staying in is on the other side, loaned to Charlie by a generous friend with a rich family.

It’s partly hidden by trees and the facade is old-looking, with tall white-framed windows and a terracotta roof. There’s even a crooked chimney on one side - though I have no idea if it works.

The interior is already dark, the winter sunlight nearly exhausted.

Charlie opens the door and we fumble for the light switch. A comforting yellow light floods the hallway, mismatched paintings lining the way to the basement kitchen. Various keys are hanging over the bureau with different coloured covers, and there’s a friendly note left for us by the family.

Charlie heaves the bags over the threshold.

“Little help, princess?” he grunts, giving me a sarcastic look. I pick up a carrier bag containing crisps and chocolate.

The walls are a menagerie of colour, decorated with a red, green and yellow William Morris-style wallpaper that seems to expand to fill the hallway the more I look at it. Ornate wooden posts flank each step of the narrow staircase.

“Come on,” Charlie urges, stomping off upstairs two at a time. I follow him again and see

he's already thrown my holdall into one of the rooms, so I guess that one's mine.

The first thing I notice is an antique washstand in the corner with a ceramic blue jug perched on the side. I imagine pouring water over my head with it. The bed's an old-fashioned iron frame that creaks when I lean on it, a bit like a hospital bed that wouldn't look out of place in a mental asylum. I could imagine being shackled to those bars, screaming for help with no one to hear.

The floorboards in my room are bare and brown, washed pale with the years, covered only by a ragged-looking turkish rug. A photo of a severe-looking red-faced man hangs on the wall, who's blond but balding.

I trudge across the floor and unzip my holdall, looking over its meagre contents. My hairbrush, pair of boxers, a novel from the *Game of Thrones* series, and a few other things.

I can hear Charlie bouncing around in the corridor, apparently already unpacked. He pops his head round the door, breaking my train of thought.

"Risotto?" he says simply. "I brought risotto rice."

"I guess that's what we'll be having, then!" I say, trying to sound enthusiastic since he seems to be trying quite hard. I feel a bit like an invalid that he and Racine are babying, but I'm used to it from her.

From Charlie, it's a bit unexpected. He darts back down the corridor, leaping dangerously down several stairs at once.

The rattle of dishes and thunk of pans starts in earnest.

I slowly descend the stairs again, the darkened, narrowly-spaced walls making me feel oddly like I'm walking to my doom.

I rummage through the tomes huddled together on the birchwood bookcases in the lounge, curious to see what this family likes to read. It's their second home in the suburbs, their primary residence being in London, and apparently they're happy with people staying in it. All the books are boring, just about the local pottery and the history of Studland Cove or something like that. I like books about fantasy and war, the more magic the better.

Harry always mocks me for being like a big kid. The thought of him pains me so I push it away.

I wonder if it's too early for a drink. I glance out of the huge bay window, and see that the sun has already sunk behind the cliff, so I tell Charlie that I'm going out to buy some booze.

"Way ahead of you," he says, opening the fridge to reveal several rows of beer cans.

"Shit, I feel bad," I say. "Do you want me to give you some money?"

"No, don't worry about it," he says, stirring the risotto pan enthusiastically with a wooden spoon.

"But do you even have a job?" I say, leaning against the counter. I don't know why I'm pushing this. Being here, alone together, makes me realise just how little I know about Charlie.

He pulls at the collar of his check shirt. "Sort of in-between," he says vaguely.

"How do you support yourself?" I ask incredulously.

"I built up a lot of money working in Australia," he explains. I don't even bother to ask when he went to Australia. Maybe it's just my terrible memory. "And I sleep on friends' sofas a lot. And sometimes I live with... girls." He smirks.

"Oh, really?"

"You know. They love the whole 'I'm-in-a-band' thing."

Charlie's lifestyle makes me feel like I am the most boring person on earth. My body isn't flesh and blood underneath the bland shirt, tie and trousers I wear five days out of every seven but the shiny plastic of a Ken doll.

*A Ken doll has more life in it than me.*

"Your life seems really exciting," I say, without enthusiasm.

"Not really. I've done some things I'm not proud of," Charlie says unexpectedly. "I even thought I was in love, but that was a complete disaster. I'm turning over a new leaf."

The mention of love strikes me with the burning desire to snatch up the vintage burgundy house phone on the worktop, but luckily I don't know Lucy's number off by heart.

"Good for you," I say, taking a sip of beer and walking into the lounge again.

I sit listening to the patter of rain on glass: it's been raining more or less steadily since we got here. Not only that, but we're on the coast so a harsh wind tears at our clothes and hair whenever we go outside, and my skin gets not only wet, but cold, too.

It feels like the whole world is grey and blustering, totally indifferent to the troubles of men, and yet the air is fresher here.

Charlie brings the risotto in on two plates, which has been smelling pretty good while I've been sitting here. He lights a candle on the table with a flourish, and it gutters briefly between us as we sit down.

"Dig in," he says, drinking some beer.

"Not bad," I say, after the first bite.

"Thanks." We carry on eating in silence, the clink of our cutlery on the plates sounding unnaturally loud.

"So, do you want to do anything tonight?" Charlie says, leaning one elbow on the table and holding his fork in the air.

"It's been raining since we got here," I say, by way of an answer.

"You should see Wales," Charlie retorts - seemingly at random.

"Er... Did you go on holiday there?" I say, confused.

"I lived there for a year."

"You lived in Wales?" I say incredulously, and Charlie nods. "*When?*"

"I went there after I dropped out of London College of Music. Royal Welsh College of Music. Dropped out of there, too."

"*What?*" I say. "I didn't know you dropped out of uni." He looks a bit hurt.

"I guess we really don't talk about things in our family. I'm surprised Racine didn't mention it."

"Me too."

Racine is the one who kept us all together, year after year, through everything. She's like

my sister, mother and my friend, all rolled into one. I miss her suddenly, and feel bad about ignoring her this week.

Racine would have been able to smooth over this awkwardness, because it's weird when Charlie and I are alone. I'm never sure of what to say.

As the empty plates soak in the sink, we watch some TV for a bit before I retire upstairs, leaving Charlie reading Kafka on the sofa.

I go to sleep thinking of her, remembering, and thinking about how I was such a fool to miss my chance.

\*

When my eyelids flutter open a long time later, the sunlight is streaming in through the window across my narrow, single bed making stripes of my legs, the iron bedstead glinting as if to challenge me. Seagulls caw outside the window.

Lucy is still on my mind, and an old memory has nudged its way back into consciousness.

*"You took the last tea bag," she said. "You should buy the next pack."*

*I stared at her in stark disbelief. We were standing in the ragged kitchen of our student house in third year, yellowing paint peeling from the walls and one of our ovens broken, smashed to bits in a chopping board accident.*

*"But it's a see-through jar," I pointed out, brandishing the offending item between us. "Why didn't you just buy more when you saw they were running out?"*

*"That's not how it works," she said primly, giving me a playful smirk. And then she produced a bag of tea bags from her rucksack, teasing me as always.*

*We walked into my room and she told me that \*I\* was her rebound, not Harry. She curled up next to me on my blue-and-white-striped bed sheets, twining one of her legs in between both of mine. Her warm breath ghosted across the side of my neck.*

*I tipped her chin up so she was facing me, eye to eye. She held my gaze, her amber eyes unflinching, while I swallowed in sheer terror.*

*I wanted to make the moment last forever; the girl of my dreams, lying unresisting in my arms, our hearts beating together.*

*I leaned down and pressed my shaking lips against hers, one hand tightly gripping the small of her back.*

Then I realise most of it never happened.

\*

I hear Charlie shuffling about in the hallway while the smell of freshly-brewed coffee drifts in under the white door. I suppose it's time to get up.

The half-shell soap dish is inhabited by a misshapen mint green soap bar, but I don't know where it's been so I don't use it. I just have a really long shower, pretending that I am once again immersed in amniotic fluid and no one can ask anything from me.

Charlie yelling my name prompts me to jump out of the bath and nearly slip, but I steady myself on the porcelain sink. Rubbing myself vigorously with the scratchy turquoise towel, I race across the hallway to throw on my jeans and a plain white t-shirt. Catching sight of myself in the oval mirror above the washstand, I realise how tired I look - despite having slept for over ten hours last night.

Charlie isn't as good at making scrambled eggs as he is risotto. They're a bit dry and salty, but I pretend to enjoy them since I haven't contributed anything to this trip so far. He even let me have the nicer bedroom; the one with the view of the ocean.

If I'm honest I'm quite suspicious about why he's being so nice to me. He seems to have had a personality transplant since I last saw him, but maybe that's being unfair.

When he's finished eating, Charlie sits down to play the baby grand piano the family have in the lounge, just in front of the open window, the lace curtains caught on the breeze. Drops of rain are falling on him.

The cry of seagulls punctuates the notes of Chopin's *Tristesse*, the song he learned to pass Grade 7. I think I remember him putting me in a choke hold in the car on the way home from his recital.

He's totally absorbed in the music, notes reaching higher and higher as his fingers dance over the black and white keys. I feel the tears spring, unbidden, into my eyes and wipe them away hurriedly on the back of my hand.

I run upstairs and come back with my notebook, sitting at the dining table again and starting to scrawl manically across the thin blue lines. I bend my head closer to the



page, nib of the biro flying faster and faster.

Some indefinable amount of time and several songs pass before a deafening silence befalls us as Charlie pauses mid-song.

“Why didn't you write before?” he asks.

The absence of music now feels naked, somehow.

“Because I didn't have anything to say, before.”

He starts to play again while my heart pounds. The slant of his cheekbone is just like mine though slightly sharper, and his skin olive-coloured rather than curdled milk, like mine.

When the rain finally abates for a bit in the afternoon, I tell Charlie that I'm going down to the beach. I think he gets the sense that I want to be alone so he waves me away.

Trudging along the coastal path reminds me of falling down a rabbit hole, beckoned by the sea below.

A lone beach towel, red and white striped, lies abandoned on the beach. I want to build sandcastles because their crumbling walls are easily surmounted, and then lie down on the disturbed ground.

I imagine a barefoot Lucy picking her way between the stones.

My Vans sink into the sand, unsuitable for this terrain. I lean down and sift some through my fingers, feeling its dampness. The swell of the waves crests endlessly, wearing away the rocks over eons. The lights of the empty-looking pier wink in the distance, an incongruous ferris wheel at the far end completely still for being forsaken by holidaymakers at this time of year.

Without Charlie's presence, my current situation starts to hammer at me again - temporarily interrupted by a golden retriever that races up to me and noses at my crotch. I smile awkwardly as the owner jogs up to it and drags it away.

I sit on the same rock that Charlie conquered yesterday and take out a rolling paper, which soon becomes spotted with rain. The terrible cigarette I make smokes comfortingly, the glowing orange tip mesmerising against the backdrop of grey.

I don't know where I went wrong. I thought Harry and I would always be friends. How

have I never noticed what a selfish bastard he is? I suppose a friendship's only tested once you have real issues to deal with.

Maybe I'm destined to be miserable and it's just the way of things.

At least I don't have a mobile phone and there's no way I can call Lucy. I wonder what she thinks of me running out of her flat: she must know that I'm desperately, hopelessly in love with her.

I'm not really sure what I blame Harry for. Perhaps it's beating me to it when Lucy broke up with her last boyfriend, so many years ago now - man, I could kick myself for trying to be a gentleman because I didn't think she was ready for another relationship, though it's not like she gave any particular sign of wanting me, anyway.

Harry had no qualms about stepping in.

Mates just don't do that to each other. Maybe Lucy's not the only girl I could ever be happy with but that hasn't stopped me pining after her.

I'm haunted by the way she makes me feel.

I kick angrily at the sand, not caring that it seeps inside my shoe and I can feel it crunching between my toes, but taking a bitter satisfaction in being uncomfortable. Charlie offered to lend me his parka but I stubbornly declined, and the near-constant drizzle has now succeeded in soaking through my layers of clothes.

I don't know how long I sit on the rock for but there are many cigarette butts littering the sand when I'm ready to go back. I pick them all up in my bare hand and deposit them in the public bin at the foot of the path that leads back up the cliff, wiping the wet ash residue on my jeans.

When I finally get back to the house, Charlie's sitting on the plush sofa reading Kafka again - a little pretentiously, I think.

"Hey," he says. "Good walk?"

"Yeah."

"Do you want to have a barbeque?"

"Barbeque?" I look out the window at the rain, which is now making rivers on the glass.

There turns out to be a sheltered area in the overgrown garden, so I sit on one of the iron chairs drinking a beer while Charlie clatters around wearing a navy and white striped apron and wielding a bag of coal.

“Did you learn how to do that in Australia?” I say.

“Ha - yes,” he laughs, leaning back quickly as the grill bursts into flames. “Maybe a bit too much lighter fuel this time, though.” He whips the oven gloves away from the crackling fire and places the lid on top.

“Some skills,” I say jokingly.

“I’ve decided to go back,” he announces, to my surprise.

I don’t understand people who can just up sticks and leave. It makes me feel like they don’t care about me at all. I’ve only ever followed people I care about.

I went to a university close to home so I could stay near my girlfriend at the time, and we broke up.

Harry and I moved to London together to the wilds of Elephant & Castle, which is the dirtiest and most crime-ridden borough of Zone 1, and we’re still together (I think).

“Really?” I respond, not really interested in more information.

“Yeah... got a job sorted on a construction site. The pay is incredible.”

“You... in construction?” I repeat dumbly, my eyes roving over his carefully coiffed fringe, the sweep of the black and silver plug in his left earlobe and his immaculate black jeans.

“Yeah!” Charlie never was one to think anything through. “There’s a job for you, too, if you’re interested. You should come.”

I don’t hear him right away. He gives me a quizzical look and eventually I realise that Charlie just invited me down under – with kangaroos and koalas, probably endless sunshine and bikini-clad women.

I’d fit right in, I’m sure.

“No way,” I say automatically, as you do when someone says something crazy. “Can you imagine?”

"Why not?" Charlie persists, leaning forward on the chair. "What's stopping you? What's so exciting here?"

"How can you possibly ask that question?" I say wryly, quirking an eyebrow and hoping he'll drop it.

Our respective beers bubble in the old pint glasses we found at the back of the cupboard, the amber liquid glinting in the fading sun like hopeful dreams.

"I just don't see what's so great about England."

"Your band?"

"I'll just start another one," he says. "You could write up our gigs. Or whatever you want."

I don't respond. The crackling of the barbeque flames make me feel safe, somehow, plus they're physically warming me.

"Shit!" Charlie exclaims, jumping up and wrenching the lid off the barbeque. "Hungry?" he says, laughing.

The sausages are charred, burgers shrunk almost beyond recognition - and the only buns we could find are seeded - but it's fun to sit in the drizzle and pretend to be intrepid.

He's succeeded in putting me in a good enough mood that I agree to go out looking for a pub when it starts to rain heavily again.

"I'm sure there must be some old ladies out here looking for a good time," he says mock-lecherously.

\*

[Chapter 4 - Revelations >>](#)

---