

Chapter 4 – Revelations

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Gin Bottle Blues

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Revelations

“Borrow my coat this time,” Charlie insists, and I shrug into the green parka while he dashes back upstairs to retrieve his hoodie. My fingers brush over some objects in the pockets, which reveal themselves to be a rolled-up ten pound note and a vial of women’s perfume.

I hurriedly put them back and turn to face him when he reaches the foot of the stairs.

“When was the last time you wore this coat?” I say.

“Maybe like two years ago. Let’s go.”

The only pub we can find during our walk is a run-down old place filled with precisely two grizzled-looking men playing the quiz machine and a group of 18-year-olds.

Charlie strides right up to the bar and orders two tequila shots.

The young brunette barmaid gives him an unimpressed look and serves him the small glasses, lemon and salt without speaking. He winks at her, and I have to suppress a smile.

The shot of tequila burns my tongue and Charlie looks resolute as he calls for a second round, plus drinks to take back to the table.

“What do you want?” he says.

I look at the rows of glinting bottles, taking a moment to decide.

“Gin and tonic,” I say, and he orders himself a bottle of wine.

Charlie’s talent used to be stonewalling and drinking, in that order. Girls really go for the strong, silent, drunk routine: they imagine it suggestive of secret depth. I think the truth is that he is an old romantic, really.

Now, I feel like I could ask him anything I wanted and he’d tell me more detail than I’d ever want to know.

At the moment, he’s bent over his smartphone, typing furiously.

“Who are you texting?” I ask, because I know he won’t take offense. He shakes his head mysteriously, and I know my paranoia has reached unmanageable proportions when for one wild second I think it might be Lucy.

“*Racine*,” he answers, when he sees my face. He frowns. “You need some help,” he warns, seemingly reading my mind. I slump back in the plum-coloured sofa, cradling my double gin-and-tonic. I don’t know why I ordered this drink. I don’t even like gin.

“Did *Racine* tell you what happened?” I ask forlornly.

“She gave me the gist. So who’s this girl, then?”

“Lucy. I can’t stop thinking about her,” I confess. Saying her name makes me feel like there are snakes writhing in my stomach. “I thought coming here would help things. I’m sorry to drag you into my pathetic problems.”

Charlie rolls his eyes, breaking the direct gaze he had on me to take a huge gulp of wine. Somehow he persuaded the aloof barmaid to give him the whole bottle.

“Does she like you?”

“She’s Harry’s ex-girlfriend. He dumped her last week.” I realise that doesn’t answer the question.

“Shit.” Charlie pauses for a second. “And what’s so great about her?”

“She’s the most interesting person I know. And... she taught me how to really see people,” I say, totally aware of how woeful I sound. “I feel like when I talk to her she’s really listening.”

“Maybe everyone else feels like that about her, too.”

“It’s different with us. You don’t even know her,” I insist stubbornly.

“Why would she do this to you, then?” he persists. “Do you really think she’s so blinded by her own pain that she can’t see how torn up you are about this?” He stares at me with piercing eyes and I feel like he’s raking over something private that I’ve never told anyone.

How did we even start talking about this?

“I think we seek new relationships because we’re bored of feeling bad in the usual way, in the way our parents taught us. We’re looking to spice up the pain, never suspecting there’s a whole new depth to feeling bad.”

“Our parents are pretty shit, even by normal standards,” Charlie agrees.

“I fucking hate them.” I shake my head.

“Screw them.”

“They sure screwed us.”

“Don’t let them,” says Charlie, the half-full bottle of ruby red wine steady in his hand as he stares off into the middle-distance. “You used to be so full life. I think that’s why everyone likes you, and they always want to be around you. But, for some reason, that light you had – it seems to have gone out.”

I swallow, a bit uncomfortable with this revelation. The gin has stopped searing my throat, which is probably a bad sign.

“We can’t be happy all the time,” I say, since nothing else comes to mind.

“What happened?” Charlie says, blinking.

“I don’t know, maybe I stopped enjoying stuff. I thought I wanted to be this copywriter in London and I imagined it being all, you know, *Mad Men*. Turns out it’s just really depressing and I hate every second of it.”

Charlie stares at me, suppressing a hiccup and trying to look serious. “Why?” he says.

“Because everyone’s so fake and full of bullshit. We’re just selling shit to people that they

don't need, and will probably make their life worse because they'll feel so unsatisfied afterwards that they'll have to buy more shit."

"So leave." *If only it were that simple.*

"I can't."

"Why not?"

I don't have an answer and I feel really tense now. I hate the way Charlie always acts like he knows everything.

"We can't all be rockstars like you," I say, by way of evading the question.

"We don't shout the revolution," says Charlie. "We whisper it, from the corners of bedrooms, and libraries, and pubs." He swigs his wine again and the barmaid gives him a foul look; his wine glass is untouched.

"I've always thought you were too nice for that job," he concludes, giving in to a loud burp.

I swallow my annoyance and return to the bar to order more gin. It tastes better this time.

We're so drunk within the hour that we start talking about something which has literally never been mentioned between us before.

His spell in the mental asylum only lasted two months, and I've always thought it was caused by drugs.

"I've done some things I'm not proud of, but I don't care who knows about it." To look at Charlie, dressed in his perfectly chosen outfit - right on trend - you'd never think he'd once taken leave of his senses.

Who would believe someone in such tight-fitting jeans could have swapped them for a straight-jacket?

"Do you think you'll ever need to go back?"

Charlie shrugs. "I hope not - it's fucking boring."

I stare into Charlie's blue eyes after that simple statement and he doesn't flinch. A feeling like the hairs are standing up on my arms and the back of my neck passes over me, and he reminds me of our dad sometimes when he gives me that look.

Or what I remember of our dad, anyhow.

We seem to both be thinking the same thing and he quickly shakes off the seriousness, hitching his usual grin back into place.

“I’d rather be mad and see the truth than sleepwalking through life,” he declares. I wonder if he’s adopted this approach to cope with his experiences because it’s so hard to tell people, but at the same time it’s got to be so rock and roll.

I feel myself bristle, like he’s criticising my life because I’m too much of a coward to face the truth.

“And I can’t face it?” I retort, almost in challenge. I suddenly find my teeth are gritted.

“You tell me.” I notice his wine bottle is nearly empty.

How could I not face my super wonderful life endlessly churning out adverts, while I’m barely speaking to my best friend and I’m in love with someone who will never, ever want me?

“Fuck you, Charlie,” I say.

I lurch to my feet without stopping to register his reaction and stagger out into the rain. It lashes down in a thick, heavy sheet, soaking me instantly when I leave the warmth of the pub.

My feet take me on autopilot to the beach which is the only place apart from the house that I know in Bournemouth. The slapping of my soles on the ground becomes my whole world as feelings I can’t name rage inside me.

If I keep striding forwards, I won’t be overcome with panic. I won’t have to face whatever *this* is.

Perhaps it’s sheer terror that takes me to the pier, hurtling drunkenly across old rotting boards out over the churning sea. Waves actually break over the barriers, spraying over me and droplets of water batter against my face, getting into my eyes.

It feels as if water is everywhere, the night enveloping me. A wild recklessness seizes me like a demon. I’ve never felt so numb.

I must have lost it completely. It doesn’t register at first that a monster wave has swept

me over the side of the pier. My limbs flail automatically, scrabbling for the surface, but my saturated clothes are dead weight. Fighting the sensation makes me sink faster and the abyss sucks me down.

My lungs constrict, full of the sea, eyes burning and bubbles billowing in a torrent from my mouth. Desperation seizes me at last but it's too late. Pure terror blasts every thought from my mind and then a strange calm descends.

Blackness embraces me, sweetly, the lights of the pier shrinking to nothing.

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Charlie stands proudly on the pier with silver rivulets of water running down his bare torso and across his shins, pooling around his feet. I don't know where his shirt's gone, but his jeans are completely soaked and outline all the muscles in his legs.

I lie next to him coughing up water and little bits of snot, wiping my searing eyes on the back of my hand and feeling shockingly sober. My clothes are completely sodden and clinging to every crevice on my body. I notice I'm also missing a shoe.

A couple of girls standing some way away from us, inexplicably hanging out on the beach, are watching us and whispering.

Charlie swears at them aggressively, and they start to clap as they walk off. I'm relieved. For a second I'd thought they weren't actually real.

A fierce wind is blowing yet again, cutting me to my pathetic little bones.

"Don't swim while drunk," Charlie announces unnecessarily now we're alone.

"I wasn't trying to swim," I insist stubbornly.

"Were you trying to drown yourself, then?"

"I just wanted to see what it was like."

"Should I have left you in there?" Charlie smirks, much more light-heartedly than I would have expected.

"I'm surprised you're so chilled. No pun intended."

Charlie coughs, and shivers. "Every man has the right to offer himself up to the sea gods -

and every brother has the right to pull him back.”

I realise that Charlie’s still completely wasted. I stretch out my hand and he hauls me to my feet.

“We could have died,” I say, dumbly.

“That’s okay, little brother,” Charlie burps. “I’d die for you.”

And then he vomits all over the pier. I lie back down on the boards, exhausted.

When I wake up again, the sun is just starting to rise, its halo of magenta and orange streaking across the inky sky. We’re sitting on the wet pier, waves much calmer now, with the rank pile of vomit a few feet away from us.

This is getting to be far too common a feature in my life.

Charlie sits clasping his knees, head resting on his forearms while I enjoy the sensation of the first rays of sunshine pricking my pupils. He groans.

“What am I going to do?” I say.

“Come to Australia. That’s the reason I brought you here - to show you we could have fun together.”

I feel a pang and give him a half-grin.

“I wouldn’t mind going to the other side of the world with you, if only to get away from Lucy,” I joke, but it falls a bit flat.

“Maybe it’s not really about Lucy,” he says suddenly, speaking into his groin, and it’s as though we’d never stopped talking about her. “Perhaps Lucy’s just a distraction from the real ethical dilemma.”

“I think avoidance is an entirely rational tactic, in the short term.”

Charlie is still talking. Maybe he’s gone mad again. “It could be that you only love her because you can’t have her. Maybe you’re chasing this ideal because you know it will never be real, and that means you’ll never have to change.”

“She’s Harry’s ex-girlfriend. He’s my best friend.” I’ve repeated the words so many times in my head that they’ve started to sound hollow.

“What’s Harry ever done for you?”

“Maybe he is a bit selfish,” I admit. “I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Then you’re being naïve.”

“And you’re being a twat,” I say foolishly.

Charlie punches me. He’s definitely still drunk and maybe he was angry at me for almost killing myself. Either way, he knocks me out for a few seconds.

The next thing I know, he’s pulling me up the cliff path, gravel crunching beneath his boots with one of my arms lynched over his shoulder.

“Sorry, dude,” says Charlie like he’s talking to himself. I waver in and out of consciousness, a dead weight for him. “I’m not very good at this whole rescuing thing.”

“What are younger brothers for, if not a good beating?” I mumble, before consciousness starts to fade once more.

“Shit, I punched my little brother,” I hear him say, before everything goes black again.

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I lift her dress strap after it’s tumbled from her shoulder and replace it on smooth skin.

You can drive all night, looking for the answers in the pouring rain. You never said it wouldn’t work.

“We never said it would be easy.”

Lucy, I always come back to you. I just think we would be good together. I think we would make each other happy.

I wake up slumped on my little single bed, on my knees leaning forwards onto the bedspread with my neck twisted to the side.

The dream rapidly fades but the impression of Lucy’s distinctive smell is so strong I feel like she’s beside me in the room, witnessing my humiliation.

But then I’ve always felt a bit like that.

I'm still soaked to the skin and my whole body feels horrible.

When I finally trudge downstairs for breakfast and coffee, Charlie's already sitting at the little wooden table looking freshly washed. Facing away from the door, he's wearing only grey jogging bottoms and my eyes travel for the first time over a long, thin white scar on his back.

Before I can ask him how he got it he turns round, resting one hand on the back of the chair.

"I'm sorry I punched you," he says simply, quirking up the corner of his mouth in an apologetic grin.

"Don't worry about it," I say. "I think I had it coming. You were right about everything."

He looks at me without saying anything and takes a sip of his coffee. His grin spreads a bit wider, reaching the other side of his mouth almost reluctantly.

"Maybe I should work on my delivery," he says.

"Nah," I say. "It was the most well-timed punch I've ever received."

The absurdity of it all washes over me when I remember us driving down from London two days ago, and the feeling of sinking into the abyss.

I'm standing on the edge even now, and one wrong step will be the end of me.

I remember the waves crushing me last night as I struggled to swim and Charlie's arms closed protectively around me, saving me - the only thing between me and death.

I feel weirdly vulnerable now.

Even through the raging hangover, Charlie eyes me intently. "Dude. You don't look so good."

His eyes are like shards of sky, open and clear, though there are dark purple smudges beneath them.

There's a lump rising in my throat but I swallow it down angrily.

Blood pounds in my ears, mixing bizarrely with the ticking of the wall clock. I stand there as though braced against a fierce wind, fists clenched as panic shakes my body. I fight

against the fog that steals across my vision, deleting my consciousness inch by inch, before surrendering to it entirely.

It's a relief to cry, like the release of a long-held poison seeping out of a self-inflicted wound. I'm not sure how long it lasts but when I open my eyes again I'm sitting down on one of the yellowy chairs, exhausted.

Charlie is gazing at me sympathetically and looking unsure about whether to touch me or not. I'm glad he's not laughing.

"I feel like I'm unravelling," I say when the threat of my crying like a baby again has subsided. I draw a shaky breath. "I don't recognise myself anymore."

Charlie reaches out and clasps the back of my neck without speaking. I know some of my sweat has slicked off on his palm but he doesn't mention it.

Eventually he sighs. "Sometimes, you have to lose yourself to appreciate who you really are." It sounds like he read that in a book. I don't want to call him out on the cliché but I'm irrationally angry at him for this - as though assuming my life can be reduced to epitaphs.

"Is that what you did?"

"Hell, I'm no role model." He shakes his head and sits back down. "I've done some things I'm really not proud of. But I do know that madness is the coward's way out."

"You never tried to *kill yourself*."

"I was never in your position."

"But it's lucky you were there."

"Don't go painting me as a saint. I think I partly drove you to throwing yourself off that pier with my jabbering."

"What a family," I say, for lack of anything else.

We're so alone... Or maybe not. The doorbell rings, startling both of us.

It's 9.30am.

