

Chapter 5 – Evasions

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Gin Bottle Blues

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When I see Lucy standing on the dilapidated porch, I wonder vaguely if I'm still dreaming.

The throbbing of my cheek from where Charlie punched me last night tells me I'm not. I catch sight of a light purple bruise splayed across it like a bird's wing in the hallway mirror. I wonder fleetingly if it makes me look totally dangerous before flushing with immediate embarrassment.

Lucy doesn't seem to notice. She looks gaunt and pale, the sign of a girl who's been recently dumped.

I realise neither of us has said anything.

"Hey, Luce," I say a bit gruffly - my whole head feeling a bit tender, too. I hear Charlie tactfully slink upstairs. "Er... you must've gotten up so early."

She shrugs. "I couldn't sleep."

Finally she hugs me and my stomach rolls over – though whether from excitement or a hangover, it's impossible to tell. She smells like cigarettes and vanilla, just like she always does, but I notice she's wearing a new nose ring. I poke at the floor with my toe.

"How've you been?" she says tentatively, ending the hug, and we both sit down at the table.

I reflect as rapidly over the events of the past few days as my tattered brain will allow.

“Peachy.”

An awkward silence grows between us and she looks at the floor.

“How did you know I was here?” I ask finally, unable to bear the deafening noise between us. I never could.

“Racine,” she admits. “I begged her to tell me.”

“Fucking Racine...! Why did you come?” I’m forging on without caring about being rude anymore.

“I...” she hesitates, looking as uncomfortable as I feel. I clench my fists and stuff them in my pockets to try to hide my nerves. “I wondered if you came here to get away from me.”

“And if I did? Was it the best idea to follow me?”

“I want us to be friends, Thom. I can’t lose you, too.”

“Hey, haven’t you heard?” I say, unexpectedly harshly. “Me and Harry, we come as part of a deal.”

“No,” she says fiercely, shaking her head and reaching out to touch my arm. I jerk back before she can make contact and she looks as though I’ve slapped her. Her face crumples and I start to feel a bit guilty.

I don’t know why I’m doing this.

“Look, Lucy, I’m sorry, but Harry’s my friend, and-” *I love you. If I give in now, I won’t be able to keep my hands off you.*

She starts crying without making a sound, tears leaking from the edges of her eyes and down her cheeks. Even filled with tears, her amber eyes – ringed with a circle of black – are just so fucking beautiful.

“Are you saying we can’t be friends anymore?” she whispers. I stare at her, ground falling away. I try to hold onto what Charlie said on the pier to anchor me but we were just so drunk. The hangover starts pounding in my ears and my head spins.

I want to kiss your scars tonight. Is this story about you and I?

“Hey,” I mutter softly, reaching out to put my arm around her. I breathe in her intoxicating

vanilla scent. She hiccups and clears her throat, while I shift uncomfortably. Rather than pull away I just sit there, hugging her with one arm, while staring with fascination at the whorls on the table-top and the brown coffee rings.

"I just can't deal with this, Thom." The words are like lead. "I don't know what's happening to us."

"I think you know much more than you're letting on. Why else would you come here?"

"Because I'm scared of losing you."

"You act like it's so simple," I say, still softly. "You always pretend you don't know, but I think that's what makes you such a bitch – because, really, you know everything." I'm not sure if I'm making sense anymore.

I've always been a coward. The main allure was to get away from you, but it turns out you weren't what I was running from.

Half-made promises fade into the abyss while the challenges of adulthood remain, unvanquished. I could have kicked myself for being such a coward.

"I don't know what to do," she murmurs, not appearing to notice that I called her a bitch.

She looks at me expectantly and I lean down suddenly to kiss her gently on the lips.

I'm shocked when she doesn't withdraw as our mouths meld together. A sensation of self-loathing washes over me at the same time as a kind of desperate joy. The two battle together for a moment but self-loathing wins, and then my hand knocks against the empty blue coffee mug.

I stop the kiss and take a sharp, deep breath, alarmed at myself.

To my horror, I feel tears spring to my eyes again and we stare at each other, aghast. A flush creeps up her neck.

My brush with death must have thrown me off-balance because now we're kind of both crying – she hadn't really stopped crying before.

"You smell like sea water," she says, and we both start laughing uncontrollably.

This is so fucked up.

Harry's face swims across my mind's eye: the friend I've had through university and beyond. I've done drugs with him and he's dared me to adventures.

Harry, will it always be him?

I have the sudden urge to punch him again.

"Do you really think I did this to you?" Lucy says, jerking me back to the moment.

She's here now, flesh and blood, while Harry's a mere impression formed by the synapses of my brain - and yet he has the stronger hold on me, loyalty to him forged as it has been over years and days and minutes, crushing my animal impulse to grab Lucy and never let go.

"Why does it always have to be about ourselves?" I say, not particularly to Lucy.

"Because we don't know anything else."

The weight of friendship is so deadening.

"You have to go."

The sound of the front door closing behind her is like a death knoll.

I get out my notebook and start to scrawl, my handwriting barely recognisable as words.

I want to write the world.

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