

REACTION TIME



Emily O'Beirne



CHAPTER 1

LUCE DROPS HER BAG AND does a slow circle of the tiny dorm room. The barren half of her side is shouted down by the pink and purple hues of her absent roommate's. A fuzzy purple blanket sprawls across the duvet, and a hot pink fake fur...*thing* hangs on the wall above the bed. On the wall, silver and gold jewellery dangles from a hook, and a glittery disco ball lamp rests on the bedside table. She's not exactly sure what décor choice her new roommate was going for, but going off the Bible on the bedside table, retired stripper chic wasn't it. Something clearly went wrong at the execution phase.

A pink neon sign beams the words *Live, Love* from the wall. Luce sits on her bare mattress opposite. This is what mothers and daughters do, she supposes. They go shopping together, buy neon purple bedspreads and desktop organisers and portable make-up dressers. They consult lists they've made, filling trolleys with little packs of shampoos and shower caddies and everything else they'll ever need.

Luce had waited until she'd gotten to the airport to text her mother.

Earlier, in some fuzzy grey hour before dawn, she'd hovered at Flavia's bedroom door, wondering if she should at least say goodbye. But instead, she'd stood there and breathed in that cloying scent of perfume and booze until the Uber came and she didn't have to decide. Then, in the scramble of boarding, Luce let her thumb hover over the keypad for a small forever before finally typing: *I've decided to go to uni interstate. I've left Harry a note. I'll call soon.*

Now, she sits on the edge of the bed in the middle of some tiny university town in another state, paralysed by the magnitude of leaving. She has to

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find a way to convince her brain she's actually *here*. She also has to figure out where to buy sheets. And maybe she'll get herself a blindfold to block out that pink neon crime scene opposite too.

Later, she crosses the tree-scattered lawn, breathing in the taut, cold smell of early winter dusk, clutching two shopping bags full of bedding. Kids cross the damp paths, free hands tucked deep into pockets, rushing between buildings. This is her favourite time, especially when the darkness begins to whisk in around her. She loves the smell of cold, clean air, and seeing the lights and movements through windows as people prepare dinner and turn on TVs. It always makes her feel alone but not lonely.

Here in this tiny town, the air is stripped back to leaf and dirt and green things close by. The sky is huge and filled with stars she can actually see. She's never felt so unanchored in her life. She's also never felt so possible. Maybe she'll be able to become a whole person here. Maybe she'll find some real friends, not just the company of people she selected because they were too interested in themselves and the next party to bother noticing she gave them nothing.

Freedom.

Then she yanks in a breath because, just as quick, guilt rushes in, curdling the feeling. She left Harry behind. Does Luce really think she deserves any of this?

Back in the room, a short blonde girl gives her a look that hovers somewhere between dubious and suspicious before she covers it with a bright smile. "Hi. I'm Steffi. I'm studying business."

"Luce." She starts pushing her new pillows into the new dark blue cases.

"Shouldn't you wash those first?"

"Probably."

Steffi continues to watch as she struggles with the cases. "Um, and *you*?"

"Luce. Sorry, thought we covered that."

"No," Steffi says. "What are you studying?"

"Oh. Health sciences. Nursing."

"Why nursing?"

Luce shrugs. How does she explain that the times they'd had to take Flavia to hospital, it was the nurses who'd always eased their panic? That it was nurses who, for the first time ever, made Luce feel like the burden of her mother had been lifted for a moment. They were so earthed and calm,

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but also funny and stern when they needed to be. Luce wants to *feel* like they seemed to feel. Like she can handle anything. But that doesn't seem like a first-meeting kind of explanation.

Steffi takes in the equally dark doona cover that Luce yanks out of the bag and purses her lips. "So, where are you from?"

"Sydney."

"And you came *here* to study?"

"I like being out of the city." The truth is, Luce doesn't know what she likes.

"Why didn't you start at the beginning of the year?"

She shrugs again. Because Steffi doesn't need to hear about the Lost Semester, either. That brief stint in an arts/law degree in Sydney because that's what her friends were doing. All that half-year achieved was to fuel Luce's overwhelming sense of purposelessness. It was a whole messy, depressing time. So when she wasn't putting out the usual fires at home, she'd partied to fill the void. Until she remembered those nurses and a thought seeded and eventually bloomed. But Steffi doesn't need to know that this is Luce starting over. Or why.

* * *

Later, Luce lies in her bed, inhaling the factory aroma of her new sheets. Though there's an ache of tiredness, she can't sleep. It doesn't help that the last thing she ate was a sandwich at the airport this morning. But by the time she'd sloughed off the longest day in history in the cold bathroom at the end of the hall, she hadn't been able to face the hunt for food, so she'd just crawled under the covers and turned to the wall.

At some point, Steffi's light flicks off too. Luce lies on her side, an arm over her face blocking the loud neon glow of the *Live, Love* sign, and hopes that her mother found her text message before she started drinking. At least Harry will know by now. How did she react to Luce's letter? Anger? Tears? Nothing at all?

She slides her phone out from under her pillow. *I'm sorry*, she writes. *Are you okay?*

There's no answer.

Luce wills herself not to think of home. But what else is there to think about? Finally, she sits up, sighing. Steffi's flat on her front, face buried in

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her pillows, oblivious to the bright pink light. Luce shoves the duvet back, creeps across the room, and yanks the plug out of the wall.

Live, Love fades to black.

* * *

The only person Luce meets in her first week is Dan. Diabolically polite and extremely literal, he's more of an elderly gentleman encased in a barely post-teen boy body. He also happens to be sitting next to her the day the lab tutor tells them to find partners for their presentation on critical healthcare.

He turns to her—not just his head, but his full body—and says, “Would you perhaps be interested in working with me?”

“Sure, why not?” Then she narrows her eyes at him. “You're not a weirdo or anything, are you? I mean, I enjoy weird, but just not like scary weird.”

“No.” He blinks for a second, rubs his hand through his white-blond hair, and says, “I should tell you that my house mates say that social skills aren't my forte, but I'll do my best.”

“Okay, I can deal with that.” She smiles at him. “So, anything you want to vet with me before we enter into this scholarly matrimony?”

He takes her invitation seriously. “Do you do your work? Like, you're here to study, not party?”

“Here to study.” Back in high school, the fact that Luce was a good student was a well-kept secret between her and her teachers. She didn't talk in class, or answer questions unless she was called on, but she always studied for tests and handed her work in on time. Letting her closet geekdom slip would have destroyed the slim social life she'd managed to build with the party kids. She'd needed those nights out to obliterate the rest of her life for a minute, so she'd kept the straight As on the down-low. Now, there's no need. “And here for the grades if I can get them,” she tells him.

“Good.”

* * *

One of the first things Luce does is find a job. She needs it for the money and for something to make her so tired that she doesn't lie there in the pink neon nights, kept awake by whatever the inside-your-chest guilt

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equivalent of the elephant in the room is. She also needs a job because she needs to be somewhere where Steffi and her coven of friends are not. Every few nights they materialise, filling the air with inanities that make Luce's intestines twist with boredom. They're always nice and say hi and offer her snacks and compliments, but there's only so much she can take. The new job means nights unencumbered by giggling gasps of "did she?" and "he what?" and fighting the weird conflict of not wanting to be part of this group if someone paid her but still feeling the loneliness of not being a part of it anyway.

The job is in one of the cafés that pepper the small town, full of students and academics frowning at laptops and making a single coffee last hours into the night. She was hired after two questions, the answers to both requiring total and utter lies. The owner, a buzzy, middle-aged woman, is never there. It's mostly just Luce and Ray. He's twenty-five and a local, with the kinds of tats and haircut that might scare off the customers if he wasn't always cracking jokes and making the best coffee in town. On Luce's first night, he watched her fumble, carting a couple of dishes from table to sink, and smirked.

"So how much of that application was real?"

"Not a word," she said cheerfully, dumping the dishes onto the draining board.

He laughed, a short, sharp bullet of a thing. "I appreciate your honesty. No wonder you suck."

"And I appreciate *your* honesty. No wonder *you're* in charge."

They grinned at each other, and an alliance was born. He showed her how to carry more than two coffees at a time, how to write orders so he could understand them, and how to keep the bad customers on the right side of "I want to talk the manager."

* * *

It's Tuesday and thirty-five minutes to the end of a shift. Outside, the occasional person trudges past, head down against in the cold wind. Luce wishes it would pick up. When she's busy, her thoughts can't stray. Outside the café, two men stop and chat and then keep walking. A group of elderly women march past, rugged up in scarves, each led by a dog on a leash.

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"This is like one of those TV small towns," Luce says to Ray. "Everyone knows each other."

"Basically, if it wasn't for the uni, this place would be about the size of an intimate gathering," Ray says. "You a city girl?"

"Sydney."

"Wow. You must hate it here. All this nature."

"I might like nature. I don't know yet."

"Me and my girlfriend, Jenelle, will take you on one of our hiking trips. Brutal climbs, but the view at the end is worth it."

"Hmm, there's nature, and then there are hills."

"So why did you come here? Half the kids I went to school with would give a kidney to go study in the Big Smoke."

"No one there calls it that, you know."

"Like I care." And the beautiful thing is, he doesn't.

For once, she doesn't feel like evading. "I needed to get as far as humanly possible from my mother without having to use my passport."

"Fair enough."

The café door opens, letting cold night air rush in. Dan enters, carrying a shopping bag. "Good evening, Luce. I was going to message you tonight, but then I saw you through the window."

"You sound just like my grandpa." She grins. "Top of the evening to you, Dan."

"Do you want to work on the presentation tomorrow?" he asks.

"I've got work until eight, but I can meet you after that?"

He frowns. "That's late."

"Come on, Dan, study on the wild side," she teases. "I promise you'll be back in your bed before you turn into a pumpkin."

"I suppose I could."

A guy with wild black curls jammed under a beanie pushes open the door. "You coming, Dan?" He looks between Luce and Dan. His eyes go wide. "Could this be a social exchange you're having?"

Dan starts to say something, but a slender girl with the bottom half of her face buried in a bright blue scarf joins them. Dark bangs cover her forehead, but her brown eyes are bright and alive.

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She shivers and pulls the scarf down, revealing cheeks pink with cold. “I will never get used to it being winter in July. Never.” She has an accent. Something lilting.

“I keep telling you,” the boy with the curls says. “Welcome to Australia, my friend. Everything is ass-backwards.”

“This is Luce,” Dan tells them. He turns to her. “These are my house mates.”

“Raf,” the boy says. He jerks his thumb at the girl. “Eva.”

“And it’s Eh-va, *not* Ee-va,” Dan says.

“Thanks for the pre-correction,” Luce tells him. “Hi Raf and Eva.”

Raf appraises Luce. “Well, if it isn’t Ponytail Girl.” He turns to Eva. “Recognise the hair?”

“I do,” she says, giving Luce an amused smile.

“Her name is Luce,” Dan says. “I just told you that.”

“Relax.” Raf pats Dan’s shoulder and says to Luce, “You’re in Film Appreciation, right?”

“Uh huh.” Luce had figured watching movies for an elective credit wouldn’t be so bad.

“Well, nice to meet you, Luce, aka Ponytail Girl,” Raf says.

“Why are you calling her that?” Dan asks.

“Because she’s always got this jaunty yet serious ponytail,” Raf says. “It kind of bounces as she takes notes. That’s how we remember her.”

“She always tightens it before she answers a question too,” Eva adds. “Her ponytail means business.”

“The real question here,” Luce says as casually as she can, “is why are you even talking about me, anyway? I’ve never met you in my life.”

“We talk about everyone,” Raf says cheerfully.

“Not, like, gossip,” Eva says. “We just wonder about them.”

“Yeah, like Hot Pink Backpack,” Raf says. “You know her? Sits in the front row.”

Luce scrolls through lecture hall memories until she sees her, the tiny red-haired girl with the backpack half the size of her body, and nods.

“We’ve decided she’s some sort of child genius auteur or something,” Eva says.

“She’s gonna win an Oscar by eighteen, for sure,” Raf adds.

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Eva plucks at Dan's coat sleeve. "So, are you coming home for dinner? Raf is burning something for us all, remember?"

"Shut up," Raf says.

"You do kind of have a habit of lightly blackening most foods," she tells him.

"Goodbye, Luce," Dan says, giving her a small wave. "I'm sorry they called you ponytail."

"She doesn't seem that offended," Raf says.

"No, I enjoy being named after my most inspiring features," Luce drawls. "Makes me feel all warm and fuzzy."

Eva laughs. "Just ignore us."

Luce does exactly that and turns to Dan. "See you tomorrow?"

He nods, eyes wide, like he's certain there's some tension but can't figure out what to do about it.

She gives him a reassuring smile. "Bye."

CHAPTER 2

LUCE HATES HERSELF FOR EVEN contemplating it, but she runs a brush through her curly brown hair and stares into the tiny mirror, pushing it this way and that. It looks kind of okay, she thinks, squinting at her slightly warped reflection. But what if Dan's friends think she's wearing it out because of them? Every time she thinks about those two and their ponytail teasing, she gets irrationally irritated.

"Morning." Steffi skips in, carrying her shower bag, reeking of floral body spray. "Your hair looks really good out."

"Oh, uh, thanks." Luce picks up her backpack and dashes for the lecture hall, containing her curls behind her head with a hair tie as she walks. Businesslike it is, then. Still, she's hyperaware of how it bounces behind her as she walks. Jaunty too, apparently.

The lecturer is late. Luce opens her anatomy book, figuring she can cram in some study while she waits. Someone sits down next to her in a bustle of bags and coats. Luce thought she had cultivated the kind of force field that keeps people at bay, but apparently not. Eventually, curiosity gets the better of her. Might as well know who's going to be next to her, heavy breathing or yawning or fidgeting all through this morning's Film Worth Appreciating.

A long-legged girl wearing giant hoop earrings unwraps a huge green scarf from around her neck and gives Luce a relaxed smile. "Hi. I just started. Anything I should know?" she asks in a clipped, crisp accent that almost clashes with her boho vibe.

Luce shrugs. "That he picks long movies? It nearly always runs overtime."
"Okay. Is it an easy class? I was kind of hoping it would be."

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"I think it is. But then, I'm doing health sciences, so..."

"Me too." The girl smiles. "This is an elective."

"Don't worry, then. This class is pretty chilled."

"That's what I hoped. Especially today." She yawns. "Jetlag."

Luce watches the girl pull her laptop from her bag, curious. "Are you British?"

"Yep. Most people are surprised. I suspect they don't expect a British person to be Black."

"I guess I should tell you that even though it's kind of the colonial Mother Country, I don't really know the difference between England, Britain, and the UK," Luce says. "Like, is it all the same thing?"

"Don't worry." The girl smiles. "I feel like it's one of those need-to-know-basis things."

The lecturer bustles in and starts fiddling with the projector. Luce sneaks a look around the room. Dan's friends are right in the centre of the hall, looking at someone near the front. Raf's crazy hair is bouncing out of his hat again, and Eva is bundled in a thick jumper the colour of eucalyptus leaves. They're a physical odd couple. Raf is short and stocky with round eyes and dark brown skin. Eva is angular and lanky, with sharp cheekbones and a long, pale neck. As Luce watches them, Eva leans back, stretching her arms, her gaze roving the room, expression both bored and curious somehow. Luce can't decide if it's annoying or charming the way she always looks just so slightly amused by everything.

Before Eva's gaze can land on her side of the hall, Luce turns back to the new girl. "So, why'd you want to come *here*?" It feels kind of novel to be the one asking that.

"Honestly, I didn't. I wanted to go to Sydney or Melbourne, but there was this whole mess with getting the right prerequisite classes, and I ended up here." She leans in, eyes twinkling. "Where am I, anyway?"

"Not Sydney, I know that much." It's funny how Luce's hometown can be both a badge and a burden, depending on the situation. Some of the country kids automatically rule her out as a possible snob, or useless. But this girl with her stylish jacket and golden eye make-up, Luce wants her to know where she's from. "I'm Luce, by the way."

"I'm Femi. Is that short for Lucy?"

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“Lucinda.” Her father had called her Luce. Flavia wanted to call her Lulu, but Luce had refused to acknowledge it after age six.

“Nice to meet you,” Femi says. “I probably shouldn’t ask what there is to do around here, should I?”

“Most definitely not.”

After the lecture ends, Luce traipses towards the door, leaving Femi to discuss catching up with the lecturer. Someone calls her name.

It’s Eva, skipping lightly down the last few steps towards her. She gets level with Luce and stops with a smile. “Hey, I just wanted to say that we weren’t meaning to be rude at the café the other night.” Her accent is French maybe. She weaves her finger around the end of the long plait that hangs over one shoulder. “We were not being mean. We just make up stories about people we’re curious about when we are bored, that’s all. And, well, you have heard him talk.” She nods at the lecturer, eyes gleaming, and shrugs. “We get bored.”

Luce can’t imagine conjuring anyone’s curiosity, hiding in the anonymous fringes of the large lecture hall as she does. She has no idea what to say to this girl with her piercing stare and lingering vowels, so she pulls her bag higher onto her shoulder and shrugs, playing for indifference. “Okay.”

Eva looks at her for a long moment and nods slowly. “Okay, then.” She turns and walks away.

* * *

The study hall buzzes with quiet chat and laptops opening and closing. Dan clears his throat. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Only if it’s not about the renal system,” Luce replies, highlighting a paragraph in her book.

“It’s somewhat personal. About me.”

“Then go right ahead.”

He hesitates. “How do you tell someone you like them?”

“That depends. Who do you like?”

“No one.” He shakes his head vigorously. “Not yet, anyway.”

“So...you’re asking me this because you’re *planning* on liking someone?”

“Yes.” He nods vigorously. “That’s my plan for this year.”

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“Aside from successfully completing your studies, right?” she teases. She’s heard his whole academic plan already. This course. A grades all the way through. Then medicine. Then a career in radiology.

“Of course. But that part is easy. I also want to find a girlfriend. I’ve never had one, and I’m not sure how to tell a girl when I do find the right one. What do you say if you like someone?”

Luce taps her pen against her chin and shrugs. “I usually show them.”

“Show them?”

“You know, like flirt, or just look at them in that way.”

“What way?”

Luce stares at Dan. “I can’t exactly show you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t like you like that—no offence—and because I have to be at least three drinks in before I can do flirty eyes.”

“But I don’t drink.” He looks alarmed.

“It’s not an actual requirement. Well, for me it is because I possess zero self-confidence unless buttressed by alcohol.” He doesn’t need to know that the choices she makes in that state are probably not her most stellar. Hence her atrocious romantic track record so far.

“Right.” He frowns. “That didn’t help at all.”

“Why don’t you ask Raf what to do?”

“He laughed and said I’d just know when I needed to.”

“Maybe he’s right,” Luce says. But she doubts it immediately. Dan seems like a guy who needs a road map. And in the five minutes she was in his presence, Raf seemed to possess the air of a guy who’d do fine winging it. “How do you know him, anyway?”

“He’s my cousin. Mum and Dad thought it would be good for me to study at the same university. I share a house in town with him and Eva and a guy who lives in the attic.”

“Do you like it?”

“They’re nice, but I don’t really fit with them.”

“Sounds like my dorm,” Luce says, thinking of Steffi and her friends. “Anyway, where are we going to find you a girl to like?” She glances around the room. “Might as well start window shopping, right?”

He looks instantly alarmed.

She laughs. “It’s okay. We’re just looking.”

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At the back of the café, there's a small courtyard scattered with crates and weeds and broken furniture where Luce spends her breaks. Tonight, she zips her thick coat against the cold, picks at a sandwich, and stares into the starry darkness. In just a couple of weeks, she's fallen into the rhythms of this place, with its benign pace and complete lack of buzz. It turns out she's fine with lack of buzz. It's a hell of a lot better than being constantly on the edge of calamity.

It's quiet moments like now when she's reminded that a few weeks ago, her life looked nothing like this. Instead of uncompromised sky, she'd be staring at the cram of terrace houses opposite and hearing the rush of traffic and, if Flavia was home, whatever drama or mood or deal she was currently ensconced in. There'd be no stars, either, only a hum of light blanketing the city. A few weeks ago, life was aimlessness and the grit of party aftermaths and trying to erase that strangled feeling that hit her every time she entered her own house. It was slapped-together dinners in their paint-peeling kitchen and Harry rolling her eyes more than she smiled because she's become a full-blown teen, and the endless procession of Flavia's late nights and their messy aftermaths. It was plans for getting out.

A shadow creeps along the fence line. A small, skinny cat crouches low, its belly almost scraping the fence.

"Hey kitty." Luce pulls a piece of chicken from her sandwich and tosses it into the courtyard.

The cat freezes.

She throws another piece. "Come on. Don't you know what's good for you?"

It sniffs the air but doesn't move.

"Trust me."

The cat looks at her, looks at the meat, and then away, as if preparing its escape route.

"Okay, well, I'll be gone soon, and you can come eat then. But don't blame me if it's frozen bird by then."

Ray comes out, carrying a garbage bag over his shoulder. "Who are you talking to, weirdo?"

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She points towards the fence. The little cat's eyes have turned wide and terrified at the sight of him. It turns and scrambles away.

He tosses the bag into the trash. "My dad would have shot it if he saw it on our farm."

"Well, that's a delightfully brutal tale."

"He says they kill native wildlife."

"So, the obvious solution is to kill *it*."

"That's how they do things around here, city girl. Not me, though." He folds his meaty arms. "I wanted one when I was a kid."

"We had a cat for a little while. We called him Frank."

"What happened to Frank?"

"We thought he'd run away. Then one night, about five years later, my mum and her friend Howard were completely sozzled, and Howard starts telling us this story about how one time he and Mum were celebrating who knows what—probably opening another bottle of wine—and Frank kept meowing to be let in. Then a minute later he'd be meowing to be let out. Mum was so annoyed about it that she convinced Howard to take Frank in the taxi with him and drop him off somewhere." Luce throws the last piece of chicken from her sandwich onto the ground.

"He did it?"

"Yup. Pushed him out of the cab by some basketball courts in Redfern."

"That is whack."

"Yep." She tosses the remainder of her sandwich into the trash. "They thought it was hilarious."

"I know I said my dad would shoot some feral cat, but your mum is seriously savage."

"Believe me, I know." She brushes crumbs off her lap and stands. The night they heard that story, Harry cried and Luce fumed. How could Flavia do that? Their mother had just laughed and started in on them, of course, calling Harry a baby and Luce a spoilt brat—her go-to insults in those days. When Luce tried to remind Flavia how much Harry loved that cat, Flavia just flapped a hand and said, "Oh, it was just some ugly street tom you were fixated on for a minute. Don't be ridiculous."

Frank had lived with them for a year. Long enough to have a chipped china bowl in the corner of the kitchen and a collar that Luce bought him from the supermarket.

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They'd first found him hanging out in the teeny back yard where they sat on summer nights, out of range of their mother and her obnoxious art friends. He was a brutish ginger boy with a ruff of thick fur around his neck and battle-shredded ears. The kind of cat that looked mean until he melted into a fluffy puddle with a machine gun purr when you petted him. They spent weeks trying to lure him inside, feeding him in the yard, then on the back step, and then, months later, on the kitchen floor. He finally accepted domestic life as long he could come and go when he wanted.

Harry considered him her personal therapy cat. Every night, she'd take him to her room, holding him like a teddy bear until she went to sleep. Frank tolerated it long enough for her to drift off before he'd slink out into the night.

It was always Luce's bed he climbed onto later. It was almost embarrassing how much she liked being the chosen ally. Every now and then, she'd reach down, combing her fingers over the soft furry bundle by her leg as she studied. He spent so many nights like that, that even when he wasn't there, Luce would keep her leg perfectly still for ages because she was sure she felt that warm lump against her calf, like some ghost limb cat haunting her. It happened for a long time after he was gone.

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After work, still stuck in her Frank memories, Luce hunts through her files, looking for the photo from when Harry pressed a dumb fake moustache to Frank's face and he just sat there, purring away, his big teddy bear face scowling but tolerant. When Harry got old enough for social media, her first profile photo was her laughing, her cheek against Frank's belly, his huge paw at rest on her head.

Luce wishes she hadn't gone down that memory path because now she knows she won't sleep until she sees that picture again. Harry's unfollowed her. In a thumbnail, she can see her sister's profile pic is different now. It's her and her best friend Lily, faces pressed close, their long hair tied together into one high ponytail, eyes coated in glitter shadow, their tongues out in the way that fifteen-year-old girls think looks cute.

The photo brings on a surge of guilt. Not only did Luce leave her sister with Flavia, but she left her right on the precipice of full-blown midterm adolescence. But maybe Harry will be better at being a teenager than Luce

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was. She pulls out her phone and dials Harry's number. No answer. Just like every time Luce has called her. She flicks between her sister's other socials, but Harry is on private on everything. Luce wishes she could find a way to watch her from afar, just to know she's okay.

* * *

The next day, in study hall, she's still thinking about it. Then the idea hits her. She jumps online and starts creating a profile.

"Studying hard, I see." Femi sits down next to Luce in a cloud of musk and floral scent.

Not exactly," Luce mumbles, watching Femi pull off her drape-y winter coat. How does this girl manage to be so sophisticated, even in the middle of nowhere?

"I was kidding." Femi leans in and looks at Luce's screen as she types in a random birthdate. "How are you only just signing up?"

"I'm not," Luce says. "It's...never mind."

"Okay, well, do you want to come to a party tomorrow night? Some guy invited me."

"Maybe." She peers at the screen. "What's a good girl's name?"

"For your profile?" Femi frowns. "Um, your *own*?"

"It's a fake profile."

"Are you some creepy stalker person, Luce? Please tell me now, and I'll go find another new friend."

"It's nothing creepy, I promise."

"There's an uncreepy reason for a fake profile?"

"I know it sounds weird, but I'm stalking my little sister."

"Why?"

"That's the bit I don't want to talk about."

"Okay then." Femi shrugs and opens her textbook. "Call her Penelope Winterbottom. My old physics teacher. Horrible woman."

"Penelope Winterbottom it is, then."

"Do you want me to follow you, so at least you don't look like a total loser when you request her?"

"Sure." Not that it matters. Harry will accept Penelope, anyway. At her age, it's all about quantity, not quality. Luce adds in the last few profile details, including a generic picture of a kitten as her profile pic—a ginger

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one, of course—and sends the request. “Okay, let’s study.” She pulls her pile of books within reach as someone stops by their table.

“Good morning.” Eva stands over them, hugging a stack of books, chin buried in her usual thick blue scarf. She smiles down at them.

“Hi!” Femi says. “Luce, this is Eva.”

“I know,” Luce says, flipping to the right page in her textbook.

One of Eva’s eyebrows inches up, but she ignores Luce’s coldness. “Biology, huh? Which topic?”

“Fluid mosaic model,” Femi says when Luce doesn’t. “Test is next week.”

“Oh, that one was pretty hard.”

“Great,” Luce grumbles. She finally looks up at Eva. “You’re in this course?”

“I am studying botany. I did bio last year,” Eva says. “I probably have my old flash cards if you two want them?”

“That’d be fantastic,” Femi says. “Thank you.”

“Okay.” Eva smiles. “I will find them for you. I must go.” She gives them a smile and moves away.

“How do you know her?” Luce asks when Eva’s gone, unable to contain her curiosity.

“I met her at a mixer for international students. She’s nice.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Yeah, kinda got that vibe.”

“She calls me Ponytail.” Luce watches Eva sit with some girls in the corner.

“Ponytail?”

“Never mind. It’s a whole thing.”

“I like her.” Femi pulls a book from the small pile in front of her. “She’s doing her whole degree here, though.”

“You’re not?”

“Nope. Just a semester. I’m back to London after the summer.”

“You’d leave this incredible place for London?”

“I know.” Femi smiles. “I’ll really be coming down in the world, but you know how it is. The Queen calls.”

“Now I’m beginning to wonder if I should invest in this friendship or whatever if you’re just going to leave in a few months.”

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“Friendship or whatever?” Femi laughs. “How can I leave when you make it sound so appealing?”

“You’re lucky I have no other options right now.”

“I feel truly blessed. Does that mean you’re coming to this party tomorrow tonight?”

“Why not?” Luce flips open her binder. “Especially now that I need to shop for new friends.”

CHAPTER 3

WHAT DOES ONE WEAR TO a party in the middle of basically nowhere? Luce eventually opts for jeans and a top that could go either way in the appearance of effort and no effort and lets her make-up do the rest of the work. Before she leaves, she pulls out her phone, checking for the millionth time today. This time she's rewarded with a trill of relief. Request accepted.

She immediately scrolls through some of Harry's photos and their aching in-depth captions. Never has Luce been so happy to see the litany of inanities, the FML drama of teen angst, the kitten pictures. Then there are the photos Harry's tagged in: schoolyards, camps, parties. Pouty-mouth group shots with girls in the same kinds of dresses doing the same kind of poses. Harry's friends look older now. They dress older too. She pauses on a photo of Harry and some girl posing on someone's plush white couch, showing way too much leg. Behind them, a much older guy in a baseball cap flips the bird at the camera, the bottle of vodka in his hands barely concealed by a vase. *Fuck*. Already? Harry's only fifteen. But so was Luce.

She keeps scrolling until she sees the post. June 14. A picture of Luce's unmade bed. Just three words in the caption: *I hate you*. Heart hammering, Luce grabs her bag and marches out into the hall. June 14. Two days after Luce wrote the letter and got on the plane.

Outside the student residence, Luce stops in her tracks. Does she even want to go to a party now that she's seen that? She turns back towards the front doors but stops again, because the thought of sitting in her tiny room all night, prisoner to impending incursion by Steffi and her gang, feels just as impossible. Funny how you can know barely a soul in a place and still have nowhere to hide.

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She moves out of the way of a guy carrying a steaming pizza box into the dorms and lets out a breath. What else is she going to do? Besides, the only thing that will murder this sting in her chest is the buzz of a few drinks and the anonymity of a dance floor. The same way it always has. She pulls her dark red lipstick from her pocket, swipes it on without the benefit of a mirror (about the only useful thing her mother ever taught her), and strides along the streets of the tiny town. Around her, people slice through the cold night, filling the darkness with laughter.

At the party house, kids stand in clumps on the footpath, digging their chins into their scarves and chatting. Music pulses from somewhere inside. Luce edges down the hallway, elbowing her way through a living room full of bodies shuffling to one of last summer's songs. She's suddenly blindsided by a flash of her little sister mouthing the words to the song on the radio, jumping on the couch and accidentally flipping over the end but somehow miraculously landing on her feet, making them laugh so long that the song came on again, in endless heavy rotation that month.

In the long kitchen, candles burn on the windowsill, and the linoleum beneath her boots is already wet with spilled drinks. She finds Femi sitting at a small wooden table, looking completely unruffled by being alone.

Her greeting smile turns quickly to a frown. "Are you okay? You look a bit..."

"Totally fine." Fine is the plan, anyway. She sits and pulls the bottle of wine she brought from her bag. "So, who do you know here?"

"Some guy from my residence building."

"Is it a date?"

"No." Femi's eyes widen. "Oh god, I hope he doesn't think so."

"Is he gross?"

"No, he's fine."

Luce holds up the bottle. "Drink?"

"Sure."

"Hang on." She shoves her way across the kitchen, towards the cupboard. A guy grins as she approaches. He has a thick wave of dark hair, and the sleeves of his unbuttoned shirt are rolled up to the elbows. Good-looking, but he definitely knows it.

She points at the cupboard behind him. "Pass me two cups?"

Reaction Time

He reaches around, plucks two mugs out and hands them to her. “M’lady.”

“Wow, smarmy.” Luce raises an eyebrow. He grins and goes to say something, but she turns and walks back to Femi. She plonks the glasses down, triumphantly pours two cups, and holds hers up. “Bottoms up.”

“Why do some Australians say that instead of *cheers*?”

Luce points at her cup. “Like, the bottom of the glass should be facing up. It means drink.”

“Just a casual tribute to alcoholism, then?”

“Don’t you know it’s rude to come to someone’s party and diss them? You don’t like our traditions or the guy who invited you here. Ungrateful wench.”

“It’s not that I don’t like him. I’m still just kind of...” Femi taps her glass with a bright orange nail. “...entangled in a situation back at home.”

“Is that a fancy British way of saying you already have a boyfriend?”

“No. I have a...friend. And right before I left, we sort of realised we might be more. But then I had to leave. Nothing happened, but it’s there, you know? And it’s, I don’t know, hard to let go.”

“Complicated.”

“Correct. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Did you leave anyone behind in Sydney?”

Luce takes a long slug of her beer, ignoring her first thought. “I’m not really great with relationships, you know?”

“Why not?”

Luce shrugs. All she knows is that she can hold someone’s interest for a night, but not much more than that. She has failed spectacularly in the relationship game from the beginning. In Year Seven, Jacob Ross dumped her for no reason after a week. In Year Nine, she dumped Vance Treebly after a fortnight because he clearly liked his basketball more than her. There was Kayen in tenth grade, who messaged her it was over after a month when he decided he liked Amber Rutger and her stupid blonde curls more. There was Ria, whom she found kissing another girl in the backyard at a party. That summer there was Rachele, a wild-haired girl from another school, full of brutally truthful observations about Luce’s emotional ineptitude and overall “closed vibe,” who told her she wasn’t girlfriend material. There

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was Dylan, who said after a month or two that she was secretive and hard to know, which was essentially what Rachelle was saying only in a more specific way, and thus, more hurtful. Luce didn't know how to fix it. When you spend your time trying to keep half your life closed off, it's hard to find a way for the rest to stay open. And when you hang out with the people she did, it's hard to find something that feels in any way real.

Kai came closest. A brown-eyed boy with private-school confidence and a wayward smile, he was two summer months before uni—her first attempt—spent wandering through hot Sydney streets looking for respite in galleries and parties and green spaces. He was funny but serious, smart but silly. She liked the way he turned everything into a story and told it again, even if she'd been there, and somehow still managed to make it entertaining. His mum was a surgeon and his dad a lawyer. And after a couple of dinners at their lush harbour view apartment, and even a day out in Bondi, where their conversations all circled around futures and aspirations and his small family's adventures together, Luce decided there was no way she could bring Kai to her house or her mess of a life. And when he started his economics course and became less and less available, she let it happen because it was easier than negotiating the rocky terrains of getting closer.

"Are your parents together?" Femi asks. "They say we learn from what we're modelled."

This is not the kind of conversation Luce planned on having tonight. But it doesn't matter because she's learned over time exactly how to shut it right down. "Well, my dad's dead, and my mother's a catastrophe."

Femi blinks. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"It's fine." Luce slugs the rest of her wine, feeling that delicious, familiar, blood-swimming sensation. The thing is, she knows that if she says too much, at some point someone's going to get to know her to the point where all that will be left is the blank space between old life and new life. The tear in the fabric. Then there'll be questions. And that's the part that's hardest to fill in. What would they think of her if she told anyone about that?

A tall, sporty guy comes up to their table with another guy in tow. "Hey, Femi!" His eyes are wide and hopeful. "You came."

"Hi, Will. Luce, this is Will," Femi says.

"Hey," Luce says, clutching her empty cup.

Reaction Time

“And this is Flynn.” He jerks a thumb at his friend. “He’s in my global studies class.”

Flynn’s the cocky guy who retrieved the cups for her earlier. “Luce has already had the pleasure,” he says.

“The pleasure?” She squints doubtfully at him. “You just said that out loud.”

Femi’s eyes widen, but Flynn just swipes at his hair with his free hand and grins.

Luce eyes the bottle tucked under his arm. “Global studies, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m planning on studying law.”

“Ew. I mean, great,” Luce says as Femi gives her another look that scuttles between shocked and amused. “Because the world needs more lawyers.”

Flynn chuckles. “So, what about you?”

“Health sciences.” She gives him a teasing smile, hoping her lipstick is still at peak flirt. “But right now, my future involves drinking a shot of whatever is under your arm and finding the dance floor.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He sits down next to her and pours a slug of clear liquid into each of their cups. “I’m going to do human rights law. Help people who need it.”

She knocks down the shot without waiting for him, savouring the stinging slide. “White saviour style, huh?”

He laughs, undaunted. “I worked at a non-profit this summer and we did a lot of good work.”

“And you’re very pleased with yourself about it, aren’t you? And you particularly enjoy telling strangers about it. Girl strangers.” She grins at him, hoping she hasn’t gone too far.

“You’re really quite brutal, aren’t you?”

She smiles.

He smiles back, clinking his glass against her mug.

That’s the thing. Glib she can do too. It requires no actual connection. No hard questions. No topics to evade.

“Well, this is a party, Flynn,” she draws. “Not a job interview. No more selling yourself.”

He laughs. “You’re right.”

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"I know." She takes the bottle out of his hand and pours another slosh of the clear liquor into the bottom of her cup and then his.

He holds his up. "So, what would you like to talk about, Luce?"

"Nothing. I know you can talk, Flynn." She waits for him this time, and they pour the shots down their throats in unison. This is exactly the kind of forgetting she needs. "But can you dance?"

* * *

One thing Luce has learned in the trenches of dealing with her mother and in her own partying life is that no two hangovers are the same. There are definitely types, though. There's the lingerer, which sticks around all day. There's the late-bloomer, which only appears and settles in after you've been lulled into a false sense of security. There's the virtually scot-free, whereby some miracle occurs and you barely feel the damage. Then there's the slammer. That one likes to deliver an instant hit. Before you've even opened your eyes, you've registered the clatter of light against your eyelids, the toxic taste in your mouth, and the familiar sickly swirl of your stomach.

Looks like this morning is going to be one of those. Luce kind of got on first-name terms with the slammer back in Sydney during the Lost Semester. What she is not familiar with is the bright light streaming onto her bed. Or the smell of wood and aftershave. A sigh and a shuffle next to her makes her thoughts hit pause. *Oh no*. She drags one eye open to see an outstretched arm and a wave of dark hair. She shuts it again, listening for slow, even breaths, registering the weighty stillness of the body next to her. Still, she doesn't relax until she hears that tiny snuffling snore.

Her brain and body skitter into action. Sitting up, she fights the urge to cradle her head and does a visual sweep of the room. Her gaze lands on a pile of legal textbooks and a tattered copy of a Kerouac paperback. Most of her clothes are scattered between the door and her side of the bed. It's a huge, weird attic room with a ceiling that nearly slopes to the floor on one side. In fact, she kind of recalls knocking her head against it as they stumbled towards the bed last night. She presses her fingers to the sides of her scalp until she locates a light tenderness.

As she quietly pulls on layers of clothes, last night smashes its way back into her memory. The shots, the dancing, swirling in a darkened room to any song that came on, the world reduced to nothing but sensations. Flynn

Reaction Time

and his bottle always there somewhere. His hand at her waist. That cocky grin. She pulls on her jumper and sighs.

Wary of the sounds of human life downstairs, she stops at the mirror by the door. The Luce in it is hollow-eyed and wan. Her pale blue eyes have faded to a concrete grey. Even her lips are pale. The only thing alive is her hair, turned back to curl overnight. She licks her fingers and swipes the worst charcoal smears from below her eyes. The voices get closer as she pads down the wooden stairs. Hopefully she'll find the front door before she finds their source. The door at one end of the hall leads to a bathroom. Through a door at the other she can see a bedspread sliding off a mattress and a pair of long feet. She wraps her scarf around her neck, steels herself, and walks through the only other door.

A mess of books and coffee cups and mismatched cushions cover every surface of a large kitchen/living area. She looks around for an exit.

"Well, well."

She turns to find Raf, grinning, a cup of coffee in his hand. There's Eva too, kettle in hand, one eyebrow raised, her hair all sleepy tangles.

Great. Just great. "Small town," Luce says, aiming for offhand. It comes out as a croak.

"Sure is." Raf turns to Eva. "Who knew that this is how we'd see her let her hair down?"

"Raf," Eva says, her soft voice chiding.

The fact that Eva seems to think Luce needs saving from this moment just makes her cheeks burn hotter. She pulls on her boots and gives them a casual smile. "It happens every now and then."

"And aren't we lucky to bear witness?" Raf teases.

"Well, bye now." Luce gives him a sneer of a smile. Her momentary cockiness dissolves at the sight of Dan coming in, sleep-ruffled and stunned.

"Luce, what are you doing here?"

"Nothing." She digs her hands deeper into her pockets. She can feel Raf's grin searing into her back.

"Did you come to see me?"

"No, I, uh..." She hunts for the right way to say it.

"She was visiting Flynn, Dan," Eva says gently, coming to her rescue yet again.

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“Yes, visiting Flynn,” Raf says slowly, teasingly. “At ten a.m. on a Sunday morning.”

“I didn’t know you even knew Flynn,” Dan says, rubbing at his face.

Why not just make the humiliation complete at this point? Luce zips up her jacket.

“Look, Dan. I’m not visiting anyone,” she tells him. “I got way too drunk at a party last night and slept with your roommate.” She points at the ceiling. “Attic guy. Kind of a dick.”

“Not inaccurate,” Raf says to Eva.

“And now,” Luce says through gritted teeth, “I am trying to make a hasty exit and none of you seem to want to let me.”

“Oh, sorry,” Dan mumbles, stepping back as if to get out of the way.

She feels a flicker of guilt because he still seems genuinely confused. “Don’t be sorry,” she says softly as she edges past him. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Have a nice day, Luce,” Raf sings behind her.

* * *

Girly shoes clack into the room, followed by a rush of voices.

“He said he wanted space from her.”

“That’s such a line.”

“I think she should just—”

“No way!” Luce sits up like a being raised from the dead and frowns in the general direction of the voices. When she finally commits to opening her eyes, three girls stare at her, lip-glossed mouths wide open. Luce picks Steffi out of the line-up and growls, “Not in the morning.”

“It’s afternoon, Luce,” Steffi says gently.

“Okay, whatever, but I’m sleeping.” She waves at the window. “And this whole campus—this whole town—is full of places where you could gather and discuss the pros and cons of whether or not she should dump him. I have work in two hours, and I need sleep.” Her head hits the pillow with a thump.

“Okay, grouchy,” Steffi says cheerfully. There’s some whispering. “We’re going to Bake and Bean. Would you like me to bring you back anything, Luce?”

“No,” she mumbles, feeling guilty. Why does Steffi have to be so damn nice?

Reaction Time

“Okay, see you later,” she chirps, and they’re gone.

Luce pushes her head back under the pillow, but she can’t sleep now. It’s over. In the shower, she lets the tepid water stream over her aching head. As she rubs in shampoo, she feels the tender spot on her head again. Why does she have to do such dumb things like sleep with cocky idiots who read Kerouac? Or who probably *pretend* to read Kerouac. At least she didn’t hurt anyone but herself. That’s always been Luce’s rule: You can get messy. You can make dubious choices. You can rely on your friends to pull down your skirt, find your phone for you, and draw you away from a dicey situation, but you can’t hurt anyone.

When she gets back to her room, Femi’s waiting outside, clutching two cups. She looks ridiculously fresh after last night.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Luce asks.

“Just thought I’d say hi. Avoiding my uptight roommate who wants to start a cleaning schedule.” Femi holds out a coffee cup. “And I thought I’d bring you this.” As they enter the room, Femi takes in the frenetic pinkness of Steffi’s side, set off by Luce’s bare half. “Wow. I can’t decide which side of the room I hope is *not* yours.”

“Very funny.” Luce tosses her shower bag onto her bed.

“Right, so Zen minimalist it is.”

“Tell me again: What are you doing here? Did you decide my hangover needed some heckling or something?” Luce sips her coffee and flinches. Maybe she’s not ready. Maybe she’ll never be ready.

“I was just...checking in after last night.”

“Was I that messy?” Luce asks lightly, scrubbing her towel over her hair. She’s not one hundred percent sure of the last time she saw Femi.

“Well, you were sort of like a small human battering ram. A highly intoxicated one.” She smiles. “Fun. A little crazy, maybe. Thought it might hurt a little today.”

“I’m fine.”

“And, you know, you left with that guy, and I wasn’t exactly a fan.”

“Like I said, I’m fine,” Luce replies. It comes out tighter this time.

“And then you didn’t answer my messages.”

“Because I was *fine*.” Actually, because Luce hasn’t looked at her phone once today. It’s not like she’s expecting any good news. Ever.

“Okay,” Femi says carefully. Then she stands there, watching her.

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Her expression sets off something in Luce. She looks out the window and says tersely, "It's not really your business, anyway."

"Oh, okay." Femi moves off the doorjamb. "Sorry I overstepped. I'll leave you alone."

Luce listens to Femi's footsteps until they fade. Only then does she let out a breath and throw her towel on the bed. Just another thing to feel guilty about.

* * *

At the café that night, Ray is strangely sympathetic even though her hangover makes her work at the pace of a pregnant sloth. He makes her a fresh mint and ginger tea he swears by.

She sips its soothing warmth and feels her stomach start to calm. "This is about the only thing my body hasn't rejected today."

"Ultimate hangover cure. I used to make it for my mum every Saturday morning."

"Sounds like we might have similar mothers."

"No way, man. I remember that cat story." He shakes his head. "My mum was just...sad."

"Okay, well my mum is a human wrecking ball." She watches him wipe down the counter, something she should probably be doing. "Why was your mum so sad?"

"I don't know. For some reason, every Friday, she'd just settle in and drink and cry. She was fine the rest of the week, but Fridays..." He shrugs. "It was like she needed to do that to get through the rest of it."

"Sounds depressing."

"Well, I guess she was depressed. I was too little to do much, and Dad didn't seem to notice. In the morning, I'd pick mint from the garden and make her this tea, and we'd watch cartoons together."

"I'd go get my mum a black coffee from the café across the road and painkillers from the pharmacy. She was a full-timer. Weekdays, weeknights, they all contained opportunities for Flavia May to drink."

He smiles sympathetically at her. "Every time you mention her, you really sell her for Mother of the Year, you know?"

And that's why he's one of the few people she'll mention Flavia to. "She definitely was not."

Reaction Time

* * *

On break, Luce goes out to the courtyard with a sandwich she has no plans to eat. “Puss! Puss!” she calls into the darkness. “Come here, kitty.”

Nothing. Worried, she hunts around among the broken furniture and the stack of wood, looking for signs of the food she left yesterday. It’s started getting braver lately, coming up to eat so long as Luce stays on the other side of the courtyard. The chicken from yesterday is still there. More worried now, she puts the sandwich down on a crate and climbs onto the fence, peering over into the backyard of the hamburger joint next door. There’s a scuttling sound, but it’s too small to be the cat. A rat probably. She shivers and jumps down, jamming her toe against an abandoned tire. She hops up and down, clutching her foot. And because she possesses no coordination, this makes her lose her balance and veer sideways, knocking her elbow into the fence with a loud thud.

“Shit!”

“Are you okay?”

She jumps, steadies herself, and peers through the darkness. Eva is standing by the back door, her hair covered in a green wool hat.

“Is this a thing now?” Luce grumbles, limping out of the rubble. “Every time I find myself in a super awkward situation, you’re just going to happen to be there?”

Eva smiles through the darkness. “I hope not.”

“Yeah, well, me too.”

“The guy told me you were out here.” She pulls a small bundle out of her pocket. “I wanted to drop off these.”

“What?” Luce rubs at her sore elbow.

“Flash cards. Fluid mosaic model and the next few cellular bio topics. Femi said the test was this week.”

“Oh, right, thanks.” Luce takes them and examines the neat, looping writing on the top card. “Sorry if I was kind of rude this morning.”

“Kind of?” Eva has this way of smiling at you that’s part warm but part teasing. Luce is never sure how to take it. “I am sorry if Raf was rude.”

“Is Raf your boyfriend?”

She shakes her head. “He is just my obnoxious friend.”

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"I think I might be someone's obnoxious friend too," Luce says, thinking of Femi. She eyes Eva. "So, where is your accent from, anyway? France?"

"I am French-Canadian."

"So why did you come to study here?" She grins. "Was it a mistake, like Femi? Did you actually mean to go to Sydney or Melbourne?"

"No, I don't mind being in the country. That is where I grew up." She shrugs. "I have always wanted to come here. We had some Australians who worked on our farm in the summers. The funniest people I ever met. So relaxed too, even though they made me believe that everything here can kill you."

"It's not that bad."

"Well, I know now that Australians like to exaggerate if it will make a good story." She smiles. "Also, I love your cute accents."

"You think it's cute?" Luce shakes her head. Compared to Eva's honeyed French or Femi's quaint vowels, she thinks Australians just sound lazy and backwater.

"But, really, I wanted to study botany here." Eva's eyes shine. "Your flora is so special."

"So you're saying that you're one of the few people who might actually like going to uni where there are more trees than people?"

She lets out a little breath of a laugh. "I guess so."

They stand there a moment, considering each other. And even though the whole ego-residue of the Ponytail Girl thing is still there, Luce can't help liking this girl. Because even her teasing contains a certain warmth.

"Okay, well," Eva finally says, jamming her hands back into her pockets. "I'll leave you to...whatever it is you're doing."

"I was cat hunting. Not just rooting around in the trash."

"Because that is less weird?" There's that wry smile again.

"Kind of." She tells Eva about the little stray.

"Well, I hope that you find it. I will see you, Luce." And she's gone.

Luce perches on her crate and pulls out her phone. *I'm sorry for being a bitch*, she writes.

It only takes Femi a minute to answer. *That's okay.*

No, really, I was rude. Shame spirals make me cranky.

Reaction Time

Just shame spirals, huh?

Very funny. Shut up.

But are you okay?

I'm fine.

So, we're back at fine?

No, I just really am.

And she is. For now. She looks at the neatly written cards held together by a piece of string. Whatever misery she was teetering on the brink of all day seems to have gone into hiding. Where she likes it most.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

REACTION TIME

BY EMILY O'BEIRNE

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