

Order Up!

Season 1 | Episode 1: Wind of Change

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Additional Material by Christopher Hyde

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2026

Cast of Characters

Main Cast

- **William Gao** - Ryan Foster (Kitchen Assistant at Red's)
- **Sheridan Smith** - Melissa Bennett (Manager of Red's)
- **Charlie Wernham** - Chaz Harrison (Head Chef at Red's)
- **Pixie Davies** - Chloe Parker (Team Member at Red's)
- **Elliott Tittensor** - Phil Cooper (Team Member at Red's)
- **Bukky Bakray** - Lydia Ramsay (Ryan's Best Friend)
- with **Harry Lloyd** - Jonathan Blake (Assistant Manager at Red's)
- and **Jonathan Lipnicki** - Justin Green (Team Supervisor at Red's)

Additional Cast

- **Ricky Gervais** - Angry Customer
- **Daniel Mays** - Andrew Bennett (Melissa's rugby-obsessed husband)
- **David Schnall** - Gary (Regular customer at Red's)
- Unknown child actor - Archie Bennett (Melissa and Andrew's son)
- Unknown child actor - Alana Bennett (Melissa and Andrew's daughter)

Soundtrack (Available on Spotify @KeziahHydeMedia)

1. "Reptilia" by The Strokes (Opening Scene)
2. "Closer" by Nine Inch Nails (Plays over Chaz's speaker in the kitchen)
3. "Confident" by Demi Lovato (Chloe's Introduction)
4. "Paranoid" by Black Sabbath (Plays over Chaz's speaker in the kitchen)
5. "The Moment" by Tame Impala (Plays over the speakers at Red's)
6. "Things in Life" by Dennis Brown (Plays over the speakers at Red's)
7. "Duality" by Slipknot (Chaz and Ryan sing and dance to this together in the kitchen)
8. "Happy Hour" by The Housemartins (Plays over the speakers during the lunchtime rush)
9. "The Hand that Feels" by Nine Inch Nails (Plays over Chaz's speaker in the kitchen)
10. "Busy Earnin'" by Jungle (Plays over the speakers at Red's)
11. "Dreams" by Fleetwood Mac (Plays over the speakers at Red's)
12. "Wind of Change" by Scorpions (Plays over Chaz's speaker in the kitchen)
13. "Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger" by Daft Punk (Plays over the speakers at Red's)
14. "Pure Shores" – All Saints (Mel plays and sings this song in her car)
15. "Don't Look Back into the Sun" – The Libertines (Closing moments and end credits)

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2TPZv8VwNLHd3hQ3xP56L7?si=u0w5X2PWQOqMpGGJzvY5PQ>

Prologue

Stratford-upon-Avon, the birthplace of Shakespeare. This location, steeped in history, attracts tourists seeking poetry and riverside ambles, with locals cultivating personal tales. Near the main street, Red's Coffee and Diner, once the pinnacle of its chain, now exhibits some deterioration.

The espresso machine's hiss and bacon's scent remain, though the commotion has subsided. Regulars have drifted away, sales have slumped, and the laughter has dulled. Under manager Mike Barnes, they cut more corners than they brewed coffee.

Despite being well-liked by both customers and colleagues, Mike's time at the company came to an end when he was dismissed by regional manager David Clifton, a man who valued the business above the people who kept it running.

In his place is Melissa Bennett. Loyal, sharp, and promoted after years of hard graft, her challenge is to pull Stratford's Reds back from the brink.

But she won't be doing it alone.

Red's most veteran barista, Phil Cooper, is standing behind the counter. He's got every order memorized, and every shortcut mastered. He isn't chasing a promotion — his genuine passions lie in his YouTube channel and endless film marathons — but his laid-back charm makes him the glue of the front of house.

For grilling in the kitchen, Chaz Harrison is in charge. Loud, stubborn, and loyal, he thrives in the chaos. He shares a flat with his best mate, Ryan Foster, the quieter, steadier kitchen assistant. To Ryan, Red's is just a paycheck — or so he thinks. But the cafe's decline has lit a spark he hasn't yet recognized.

You'll find Chloe Parker on the floor; she's a final-year student who's busy with coursework and cafe shifts. Bright, independent, and likable, she's adored by colleagues and customers alike. Unbeknownst to her, Ryan's quiet crush makes every shared laugh hang just a little too long.

Also, we have Justin Green, an American whose acting career flopped before he became a supervisor. Every shift is a performance. He's ambitious, theatrical, and determined to leave a legacy, whether Stratford is ready for him.

Change is brewing at Red's. For some, it's an opportunity; for others, a threat. But for all of them, it's the start of a story where pride, rivalry, friendship, and ambition collide.

Because at Red's, it's never just about the coffee.

Opening

On Melissa's first morning as manager, Ryan jolts awake to the TV still playing—the DVD menu for Chungking Express looping its dreamy, melancholic music. His heart sinks. He grabs his phone; Lydia is calling.

"Lydia, is this important? I've only just woken up," Ryan says, clicking off the TV.

"This is serious, Ryan. I need a job. Dad had to sell the food truck. Now we're both jobless," Lydia explains.

"Fucking hell... wasn't planning to wake up to this," Ryan groans.

"Sorry to drop it on you, mate," Lydia continues. "Can you ask your work if they need more kitchen staff?"

Ryan hesitates. "Today's hectic. It's Mel's first shift as manager, plus the new assistant manager is starting. But I'll put your name forward if I hear anything."

"What time do you start?" Lydia asks.

"9:00."

"Well, better get moving—it's nearly 8:30," she says.

Ryan glances at the wall clock: 8:26.

"OH, FUCK!" he screams, hanging up and leaping out of bed.

[1] - *Reptilia* by The Strokes

No time for a shower. He yanks on his uniform, snatches his phone, and texts Chaz: ON ROUTE NOW. Then he's out the door, sprinting through Stratford-upon-Avon.

The world blurs: faces, storefronts, and traffic lights bleed together as he races. Pedestrians flinch as he weaves through them, headphones blasting, his breath sharp and uneven. He trips over a curb—almost falls—but catches himself and pushes forward, arms pumping and heart hammering. Time fractures around him, each second stretching and flickering like a scratched film reel.

He skids to a stop outside Red's, panting, his lungs on fire. Pulling his headphones down, he spots Melissa Bennett at the entrance, arms crossed, looking unimpressed.

"Bloody hell... glad I don't live in a city," Ryan said, catching his breath.

Inside, the bar dominates the center, flanked by dining areas. To Ryan's left is the manager's office; to his right, a corridor leads to the kitchen and food hatch. Further down are the toilets, staff room doors, and the back door to the crew's unofficial "space outside reality."

Melissa eyes Ryan as he steps in. "Too busy dreaming to get here on time?"

He swallows hard. "Sorry, Melissa. Got distracted," he mutters, rubbing the back of his neck, gaze down.

Melissa glances at the clock, an eyebrow raised. "8:55. My apologies—you're five minutes early."

Relief washes over him.

Her gaze drifts upward, a sly smile tugging at her lips. "Forgot something?"

Ryan freezes. His hand shoots to his head. "Fuck! My kitchen hat."

Melissa shakes her head, amused but firm. "No swearing on the floor, Ryan." She walks away, leaving him flushed, breathless, and annoyed.

Act One - Chapter One

Chaz climbed onto the counter and carefully slipped his battered speaker onto the top shelf—his usual spot. He hopped down and pulled out his phone, scrolling through his metal playlist.

"No better way to start the morning than some Nine Inch Nails," he said with a smirk as the music kicked in.

[2] - *Closer* by Nine Inch Nails

Ryan pushed through the kitchen door, the oven heat hitting him like a warm slap. Tugging on his apron, he muttered, "Why didn't you wake me? Left my kitchen hat at home again."

Chaz scrubbed his hands at the sink, shaking his head. "Melissa's been on my case all morning. First day as manager and she's already set the bar so high I'm nearly breaking my back trying to reach it."

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I heard. She's trying to turn this place into some fancy joint."

Chaz chuckled. "Not quite Michelin-starred, but close enough for Melissa's standards."

Ryan's phone buzzed in his pocket. A text from his mum: U STILL COMING UP TOMORROW? He quickly typed back: SURE! BE UP IN THE AFTERNOON x

As Ryan pocketed his phone, his gaze drifted to the wall where Chaz's Aston Villa calendar hung prominently in the center of the kitchen.

"You only hired me because we're both Villa fans, didn't you?" he said with a grin.

Chaz smirked. "That, and you seemed like a loyal, honest person. Plus, you've survived three years working with me without quitting."

Ryan laughed. "And six months living with you. That deserves some kind of medal."

"I'm still deciding if you're a blessing or a curse," Chaz joked, shaking his head.

Ryan threw a sponge at him. "Hey, at least I'm not the one who avoids the washing up!"

Chaz laughed, then his expression grew more serious. "For me, it's always been about the cooking, not the cleaning. Ever since school. I idolize Blumenthal, White, Bourdain—you know, the real masters."

Ryan nodded. "I get that. I respect the craft, but for me, it's the business side. I want to run my own place someday—not just cook in someone else's kitchen."

Chaz raised an eyebrow. "So Red's is just the jumping-off point?"

"Exactly. Every shift here is about learning the ropes—front and back of house. I'm playing the long game."

Chaz smirked, grabbing a knife to start prep. "Maybe you'd be better suited up front. Then you wouldn't have a hat to worry about."

Ryan shot him a grin. "Yeah, and you probably wouldn't last long without me."

They both laughed, the sound bouncing off the tiled walls—a moment of easy friendship before the inevitable morning rush.

Chapter 2

Justin, wearing his *Wicked* hoodie, and Phil, in a black puffer coat adorned with a Manchester United badge, walked to work side by side. The morning light caught Phil's freshly buzzed haircut—a striking change from the long locks he once had.

"Think the guys will like the new look?" Phil asked, glancing at his reflection in a shop window.

Justin gave him a grin. "Definitely. You're rocking that King of Siam vibe."

Phil snorted. "Please. I could do a better job than Yul Brynner."

Justin's grin widened. "Ah, the original King of Siam himself. I've seen more stage productions of *The King and I* than I can count—Ken Watanabe on Broadway, the Leicester revival, even that touring production in Birmingham. Each one's got its own spin, but Brynner's charisma? That's untouchable."

Phil rolled his eyes. "I've only seen the '56 film. Honestly, the guy seemed kind of stiff. Probably just the acting style of the time—but the Technicolor looked gorgeous."

Justin nodded. "True, the film's a classic, but live theatre just hits different. Bigger emotion, sharper timing, and when the orchestra swells on 'Shall We Dance?'—man, it's electric."

Phil smirked. "Guess I should catch a live show sometime. Maybe you can take me—if I survive your lecture on stage blocking."

Justin chuckled. "Deal. I'll give you the full theatre-geek tour—singing, dancing, dramatic pauses... et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

Phil laughed. "Even you have more charisma than Brynner—and you've got hair."

Justin laughed back. "Charisma's either in you or it isn't. Me? I could lose my hair tomorrow and still land the assistant manager job."

Phil raised an eyebrow. "You're not even applying, are you?"

Justin nudged him. "Actually, I have. Melissa's moving up to manager, so I figured it was time I stepped up. Nailed the interview—Melissa and that regional guy, Clifton, were both impressed. Felt like a breeze."

Phil smirked. "Well, good luck. Just don't get too cocky if you don't get it."

Justin flashed a confident smile. "Trust me, I've got a good feeling about this one."

Phil shook his head. "You and your confidence."

They pushed open the doors of Red's Coffee, where Melissa was already busy getting the place ready.

"Morning, you two," she greeted, looking up from her clipboard. "Phil, can you finish setting up? I need a quick word with Justin in the office."

Phil gave Justin a fist bump. "Good luck, mate."

Justin took a deep breath and followed Melissa toward the office, the weight of the moment finally settling in.

Chapter 3

Once inside, Melissa took a seat, and Justin settled across from her.

"So, what's up, Mel?" Justin asked, a lingering smirk on his face.

Melissa's voice was calm but serious. "Justin, I want you to know we've noticed all the hard work you've put in. Both Mr. Clifton and I were really impressed with your interview."

She paused, choosing her words with precision. "Unfortunately, your application wasn't successful. We won't be moving forward with the promotion at this time."

Justin's grin vanished instantly, replaced by sheer disbelief. "What?!"

"We've decided to go with someone from outside the company," Melissa continued gently. "He starts today. I wanted to let you know before he arrived so you'd have time to process it."

"This is bullshit, Mel!" Justin snapped. "I've busted my ass here for years, and I've got nothing to show for it. Now some guy just strolls in and gets it handed to him on a silver platter?"

"I'm sorry, Justin. If it were entirely up to me, the outcome might have been different. But Mr. Clifton had the final say. It's nothing personal; I know how much you wanted this," Melissa said, her voice steady but reassuring.

Justin leaned back, his anger softening into raw frustration. "I thought we'd level up together, you know? Side by side."

Melissa sighed. "Trust me, Justin, that's what I wanted too. I want to see everyone progress. Red's isn't a final stop—it's a stepping stone. Even Phil, who's been here the longest, always turns down promotions. Eventually, even he'll have to move on."

Justin hesitated, then asked cautiously, “Can I ask you something personal? Is it because I’m American? Because if it is...”

Melissa shook her head firmly. “Justin, I understand your head is spinning, but I can promise you this decision had nothing to do with your nationality.”

Justin let out a heavy breath and crossed his arms, a heavy silence filling the small office.

“I want to see you succeed here, Justin,” Melissa said, her tone softening further. “If you keep working hard, there will be other opportunities. I can help you put a development plan together to work toward an Assistant Manager role, if that helps.”

Justin ran a hand through his hair. “Sure. I guess it’s my only fallback while I’m still auditioning for theatre and TV.”

Melissa nodded. “Great. I’ll put something together next week, and we can sit down and go over it.”

Justin rolled his eyes but stayed silent.

“Is there anything else you want to talk about?” Melissa asked.

“No, not really, Mel,” Justin said, standing up. “I just want to get through the shift. I’m not mad at you—it’s guys like Clifton who get under my skin.”

As Justin left, the door clicking shut behind him, the office felt stiflingly quiet. Melissa ran a hand down her face, the weight of the conversation lingering.

That was awful. Absolutely awful, she thought.

A deep, shuddering sigh escaped her. *I just hope I haven’t broken something in him today. I hope I haven’t ruined his week... or his drive.*

She crossed her arms on the desk and rested her head on them, lost in the quiet before the storm of the lunch rush.

Chapter 4

[3] - *Confident* — Demi Lovato

The roar of a motorcycle sliced through the quiet morning air. Chloe parked her bike outside Red’s Coffee and Diner, pulled off her helmet, and shook out her messy brunette hair—the pink dip-dyed tips catching the light—before twisting it into a loose bun. With a casual grin, she struck a pose and snapped a selfie with her bike, quickly uploading it to Snapchat with the caption: *Another day, another dollar.*

She stepped inside and peeled off her headphones just in time to catch Phil checking the bar stock.

“Hiya Phil! How’s it hanging, sweetie?” Chloe called out, her voice light and familiar.

Phil looked up, his face breaking into a wide grin. “Hey, Chloe! Didn’t know you were back already. How’s uni treating you?”

Chloe leaned on the counter, letting out a sigh as she ran a hand through her hair. "Hectic as usual. Assignments are piled up like crazy. I swear, Business Management is so mind-numbingly dull. I wish I'd done something more creative."

Phil raised an eyebrow, smirking. "Business, huh? I always thought you'd pick something more... your style."

Chloe's smile faded slightly. "I wanted to do theatrical hair and makeup originally, but my parents called it a 'Mickey Mouse' degree. It took forever to find something they'd actually approve of. So, I caved and went with Business. I thought it'd be useful, but half the time I'm not even sure what I'm learning."

Phil chuckled, though there was a dry edge to it. "Typical helicopter parents. They think they know best, but they really don't get it. I fell out with mine ages ago—life's been better ever since."

Chloe grinned despite herself. "Exactly. It's like they want to live their dreams through me, and if I mess up, it's all on me." She paused, shaking off the frustration. "Anyway, enough about that. Have you caught up on *Hollow's Reach*?"

Melissa appeared then, walking out from the office with an urgent stride.

"Hey girl! Thank God you're here," Melissa said, looking relieved. "Can you head into the kitchen and tell the guys there's a meeting in ten? And Phil, great job on the setup—can you check on Justin for me?"

"No problem, Mel," Chloe nodded, heading toward the staff room to stash her things before rounding everyone up.

Phil nodded, finishing his task at the bar before heading toward the back.

Chapter 5

Phil opened the door to the back, pulling out his vape pen as he walked. Justin stood leaning against the fence, eyes glued to his phone as he watched some random video, cigarette smoke curling from his lips.

"Sorry you didn't get it, mate," Phil said, taking a puff from his vape.

Justin pocketed his phone and turned to him, frustration bleeding into his voice. "Honestly, Phil, it feels like I'm just treading water. I'm getting older, and I don't want to be stuck doing this forever."

Phil shifted, trying to offer a different perspective. "I get that. It's okay to feel stuck sometimes. But you've still got the supervisor role here. It's not nothing."

Justin looked up, staring into the distance as Phil's words sank in.

"And honestly," Phil added, "do you really want the extra stress of managing this place?"

Justin gave a rueful smile. "My mum always said, 'Don't put all your eggs in one basket.' I took this job when the acting gigs slowed down. What if it never takes off again? At least with Red's, I've got something steady—something I can maybe leave behind as a legacy."

Phil leaned against the brick wall, his tone becoming more serious. "What kind of legacy do you expect to build managing a franchise that's struggling? Look, I get frustrated when my YouTube videos don't get views, but I don't let it get me down. You're a brilliant actor, man. Remember your Falstaff in *Henry IV*? I was in stitches—literally. You'll get more work. I know it."

Justin sighed, a small, genuine smile finally tugging at his lips. "Yeah. You're right. Let's just see how the new guy handles the heat."

He crushed out his cigarette and headed back toward the building. Phil held the door open for him, following him back inside into the hum of the kitchen.

Chapter 6

[4] - *Paranoid* by Black Sabbath

Heavy metal played softly in the background as Chaz and Ryan worked in the kitchen, the music blasting from Chaz's speaker keeping the energy high. Ryan stacked freshly made sandwiches for the front counter while Chaz cracked eggs into a bowl for pancake batter. Their conversation flowed easily, switching between work and banter.

"You know, Ryan, I proper get sick of cookin' the same stuff all the time," Chaz said, wiping his hands on his apron. "Wish they'd let me have a bit more freedom with the menu. Like a chef's special or somethin'. Something new, y'know?"

Ryan leaned against the counter, nodding. "Exactly why I want to start my business. You'd be running the kitchen, full control over what we cook. No more same old toasties and sandwiches."

Chaz smiled wide at the thought. "Hope you get there, lad. Then I could finally cook the stuff I dream about. Like Korean food—I've always wanted to try it proper, never really had the chance to learn it right."

Ryan chuckled. "You should try cooking Chinese one day. My mum could give you lessons."

Chaz laughed. "Oi, I've cooked Chinese—did a bit of work at the Woo Wong back in Shirley."

Ryan grinned. "Is it owned by John Woo and Wong Kar-wai? My two favorite directors."

Chaz shook his head. "Nah, but the family's from Hong Kong. They guarantee authentic Chinese cuisine."

Ryan smirked playfully. "I still bet it's just the British take on it. When my place opens, you'll taste the real deal and get a proper lesson in authentic Chinese cooking."

Chaz laughed. "Oh, right—your mum's secret recipes, eh? I'll believe it when I taste it."

Just then, Chloe walked in, catching the tail end of their chat. "Would I get a taste too?" she asked, drawing their attention.

"Chloe, how's life treating you?" Ryan asked, his heart skipping a beat as he looked up.

"Busy as ever," Chloe said, shrugging. "So much uni work all at once. Between this and the assignments, I barely see my friends—or get to bike meet-ups."

"Sounds stressful," Ryan said, shaking his head. "Glad I didn't go to uni in the end. I was planning on doing Business like you."

Chloe teased, "You should've. You'd probably be better at it than me. At least you're actually interested in what I'm learning."

Ryan shrugged. "Yeah, sounds interesting, but I've learnt just as much from the internet and my dad. Cheaper that way."

Chloe tilted her head, frowning. "What do you actually like about it? Because honestly, it's all numbers and... whatever 'equity' is."

Ryan smiled, amused. "I struggled at first—maths isn't my strong suit—but Dad explained it in ways I could get." He nodded to his open notebook, pages filled with scribbled notes and rough figures. "If I'm gonna carry on the Foster legacy, I need my own business, just like Dad."

Chloe crossed her arms. "You've got your dad to help you. Every time I ask my parents for help, they just say I should've picked IT."

Ryan chuckled, leaning back. "It's unfair they aren't more supportive. It's like they're wasting your potential."

Before Chloe could reply, Chaz slid in with a grin. "Maybe you should help Chloe with her coursework, Ry. She might learn a thing or two from a 'pro' like you."

Chloe giggled, glancing at Ryan with a playful smile. Ryan hesitated, his face flickering with a mix of pride and uncertainty.

"Anyway," Chloe said, giving them both a teasing look. "Melissa wants you on the floor for a staff meeting soon."

"Oh yeah, we get to meet the new assistant manager today. Mel mentioned it when I got here," Chaz said.

Ryan shook his head, his expression clouding over. "Sucks Justin didn't get it. I really thought he had it in the bag."

"Yeah, he's not happy about it," Chloe replied, her tone becoming serious. "Better get back before Mel starts breathing fire down my neck. Catch you guys later."

As Chloe left, Chaz smirked at Ryan. "Don't tell me you were tryin' to chat her up with all that uni talk, mate."

Ryan shrugged, grinning. "Maybe. Maybe not. Truth is, I almost went to Warwick for Business after college. Changed my mind last minute. Work seemed safer."

Chaz clapped a hand on Ryan's shoulder. "Oi, you'd have met Chloe anyway, wouldn't ya? Besides, if you'd gone to uni, you wouldn't have the pleasure of havin' me around as a bonus!"

Ryan chuckled. "True enough, mate. Although, I'm not sure if that's a blessing or a curse."

For a brief second, Chaz's face hardened, a shadow passing over his eyes, but he quickly shot Ryan a mock glare and pulled his hand away. Then he burst out laughing. Ryan followed, chuckling as they walked out of the kitchen together toward the front of house.

Chapter 7

[5] - *The Moment* — Tame Impala

Chaz and Ryan walked into the front area where Melissa, Justin, Phil, and Chloe were already waiting.

“Alright, you two are here—now we just need the last piece of the puzzle,” Melissa said, spotting them.

Ryan headed over to Justin. “Sorry about the news, mate. You worked hard for that promotion.”

Justin nodded, looking drained. “Yeah, it sucks. Feels like I keep getting passed over, you know?”

Ryan patted him on the shoulder. “You gave it your all. I know it’s frustrating. But this isn’t the end—your time’ll come.”

Justin gave a small, grateful smile. “Thanks, man. That means a lot.”

Ryan grinned. “Besides, when my business plan takes off, you’ll be the first I call for Assistant Manager.”

Justin’s smile faded a little. “Don’t get too hyped, man. There’s always someone ready to knock you down.”

Chaz caught sight of Phil’s new haircut and burst out laughing. “Oi, where’s yer hair gone, mate? Joined the Army or somethin’?”

Phil rolled his eyes, grinning. “How original! I just got fed up with it being so long.”

Chaz smirked. “Fair enough. Gonna take me a while to get used to you looking like Derren Brown. That long hair of yours was more of a trademark ‘round here than the red coffee cups.”

Phil laughed. “At least you noticed. You’ve got a real eye for detail!”

Chaz wiped his hands dramatically on his apron. “Skills of a chef, innit? Can’t let an order go wrong. Never messed one up yet, and don’t plan on startin’ now.”

Phil nodded. “I get that. I’m the same with films. Whenever my brother Sean and I watch one, I’m pointing out every little thing. He moans at me for it every time.”

Before Chaz could reply, the front door swung open. A well-dressed, slim man with neatly combed brown hair stepped in. His black coat—bearing a Mercedes F1 logo—was perfectly pressed, and a Rolex peeked from his cuff. The room fell silent. Melissa turned, her smile carefully fixed.

“Ah, there he is! Everyone, meet Jonathan Blake, our new Assistant Manager. We’re lucky to have him on board.”

“Hi, Jonathan,” they all chimed, except for Justin, who stood stiffly with his arms crossed.

Jonathan gave a polite, practiced smile. "Before this, I worked a few years in the stock market. Quite a change coming here, I know, but I'm here to turn this place around."

Justin raised an eyebrow. "Stock market to Red's Coffee? How do you go from stocks to a greasy spoon? I can't believe this is actually happening."

Jonathan chuckled, unruffled. "Well, sometimes you have to get your hands dirty to fix what's broken. Plus, running a tight ship means looking at the bottom line—and that's where I excel."

"Let's just make sure Jonathan gains plenty of experience from us," Melissa interrupted, sensing the frost. "That concludes today's meeting. Let's crack on."

Ryan leaned toward Chaz as they headed back to the kitchen. "He's got the skills to fix Red's. Just not sure he's got the stomach for us."

Chaz snorted. "Nah. All boardrooms and bottom lines—he won't last five minutes at Red's."

They chuckled before disappearing into the kitchen. Out front, Melissa turned to Chloe. "Chloe, can you make sure the menus are on every table before we open?"

"Sure thing, Mel," Chloe said, heading off.

"Phil, double-check the bar's all set, please," Melissa added.

"On it!" Phil replied.

Finally, Melissa turned to Justin, who was glaring daggers at Jonathan. "Justin, today I need you to show Jonathan around and help him settle in."

Jonathan extended his hand, his smile thin. "I'm really looking forward to working with you, Justin."

Justin didn't move. He didn't shake it. Jonathan's polite mask finally slipped.

"I'm sorry, did I upset you? Or are you always this miserable?" Jonathan snapped.

Justin opened his mouth, but Melissa stepped in sharply. "You know what? I'll show Jonathan around myself. Justin, just make sure the tills are ready to go when we open."

"You got it, Mel," Justin muttered.

Melissa ushered Jonathan away, but he turned back, his voice sharp. "Seriously, what's your problem?"

Justin leaned in, his tone low but loaded with venom. "I'm on to you, Jonny. Think you can just waltz in and take what's mine?"

Jonathan's eyes narrowed. "Tough luck, mate. I'm your superior now. You'll answer to me."

He stalked off after Melissa. Justin watched him go, seething. Leaning on the bar next to Phil, he muttered, "There's something off about Jonny. He ain't one of us."

Phil rubbed his forehead. "Justin, let it go. You're being dramatic."

Justin shook his head, dead serious. "He's gonna turn our workplace comedy into a full-on Shakespearean tragedy."

Act Two - Chapter 8

[6] - *Things in Life* – Dennis Brown

Phil stood behind the espresso machine, pulling a double shot with practiced ease. Jonathan watched intently, his brow furrowed as if he were trying to deconstruct a complex algorithm.

"Alright, Jonathan," Phil said, glancing over. "First step—pull the espresso shots. Always double, yeah? Like this."

Jonathan nodded, his eyes fixed on the dark liquid streaming into the glass.

Phil reached for the milk pitcher. "Then you steam the milk. Gotta get it just right—not too thick, not too thin. Creamy micro-foam is the key." He flicked the steam wand on, the hiss filling the air.

Jonathan watched the swirling milk, his lips pursed. Phil poured the milk over the espresso with a flourish. "And don't forget a dusting of cocoa powder on top," Phil added with a smile. "Balance, mate. Espresso, milk, froth—it's all gotta work together."

Jonathan gave a stiff nod, clearly trying to memorize the steps.

Nearby, Justin was half-heartedly wiping tables, shooting irritated looks toward the bar every few seconds. Chloe, setting menus on the far tables, caught his eye.

"What's up, Justin?" she asked softly.

Justin muttered, "This guy looks like he belongs in a boardroom, not behind the counter. Do you think I should have been nicer to Clifton? Is that why this happened?"

Chloe shook her head. "Seriously? Let it go. They didn't pick you—move on. Don't make the guy's first day any harder than it needs to be."

Justin sighed, his rag hitting the table with a wet thwack. "I know his type. Snobs who expect a front-row seat at the theatre and think they can run a diner because they've read a spreadsheet."

Chloe waved him toward the door. "Save the monologue. Customers inbound."

The door chimed, and Gary, a regular whose presence always filled the room, strolled in with a boisterous grin.

"Gary! What'll it be today?" Justin called out, forcing a supervisor-level smile.

Gary laughed. "Alright, Johnny! The usual—vanilla latte with soya milk."

Justin winced. "It's Justin, Gary." He pointed a thumb at Jonathan. "This is the new guy, Jonathan."

Jonathan added quickly, "Jonathan. Not Johnny."

Gary shrugged, unfazed. "Sorry, mate. I thought you were Johnny... you know, like Johnny Bravo."

Justin rolled his eyes. "Have a seat. I'll get Phil on it."

Gary chuckled and headed for his usual booth. Phil grinned as Justin called out the order. "Order up, Phil! Gary's soya latte."

Phil laughed, starting the steam wand again. "That guy calls me Otto."

Jonathan raised an eyebrow. "Otto? Like the bus driver from The Simpsons?"

"Yeah, because of the long hair I used to have," Phil said. "Gary's got a nickname for everyone."

Gary returned to the counter for a napkin, eyeing Phil's fresh buzzcut. "Nice haircut, mate. You're more Homer than Otto now."

"Cheers, Gary," Phil shot back with a wink.

"Gary's nicknames are a local institution," Chloe said, passing by with a stack of menus. "Ryan and Chaz are SpongeBob and Patrick. I'm Joy, Melissa's Elsa. Every day's a new one."

Phil finished the drink and handed it to Jonathan. "Here, you take this over. Let's see what he's got for you."

Jonathan took the cup, his shoulders tight. As he set the latte down on Gary's table, Gary's eyes locked onto the silver glint of Jonathan's Rolex.

"Thanks, Scrooge," Gary said with a wide, toothy grin.

Jonathan's jaw clenched. "Excuse me?"

"Scrooge McDuck. Richest cartoon duck in the world," Gary said, leaning back and tapping his own bare wrist. "Just like you—richest bloke to ever work a shift in this place."

Jonathan stood silent for a beat, his face flushing a deep red. He turned sharply and walked back to the counter without a word.

Phil and Justin exchanged amused looks as Jonathan muttered, "Not funny."

Melissa sighed from the end of the bar, having watched the entire train wreck unfold. She turned to Chloe, her voice tired. "Grab some clean plates from the kitchen, Chloe. We're going to run out before the lunch rush even starts."

Chloe nodded and headed for the kitchen, leaving Melissa to manage the brewing storm at the front of house.

Chapter 9

[7] *Duality* – Slipknot

The kitchen pulsed with the raw, aggressive beat blasting from Chaz's battered speaker. Chaz twirled a strip of raw bacon between his fingers like a conductor's baton while Ryan scrubbed a stubborn pot, both lost in the heavy rhythm.

Without warning, the breakdown hit, and they broke into a full-on "kitchen mosh"—offbeat, loud, and completely unfiltered. Ryan threw his arms up, accidentally knocking a metal spoon off the counter with a loud clang, while Chaz busted out a series of moves that possessed zero rhythm but maximum enthusiasm.

Suddenly, a sharp beep cut through the wall of sound. Chloe stood in the doorway, her phone raised and a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"Oh my God, this is going straight on my story!" she laughed, capturing the final seconds of their wild performance.

Ryan froze, his cheeks instantly flaming red. "No, Chloe! Delete that! Please don't let Mel see me like this..."

"Relax," Chloe teased, lowering the phone but keeping her thumb hovering over the screen. "Your secret's safe with me. For now."

Ryan exhaled, the tension leaving his shoulders. "Glad to see you know how to have fun too," he muttered, trying to regain his dignity.

Chloe pushed off the doorframe, smirking as she stepped further into the kitchen. "So... Ryan, while I'm here, tell me more about this business plan. You always sound like you've got the whole world figured out."

Ryan's eyes lit up, the embarrassment vanishing as the dream took shape. "Right! Well, picture this: my own bistro. Melissa as General Manager, Justin as Assistant, you running the entire front of house, Chaz as Head Chef, and Phil dominating the bar."

Chloe's smile widened. "That actually sounds brilliant. I can totally see it working."

Chaz, energized by the vision, chimed in. "Finally, a chance to cook proper food. None of this same-old toastie and sarnie nonsense. Real stuff—Korean fusion or something high-end. British cafés are stuck in a rut, man."

"Exactly," Chloe agreed, nodding. "Hey, since you're obsessed with business and I'm actually studying the boring theory, why don't we team up on the plan? It could be fun."

Ryan glanced at her, a spark of genuine hope in his eyes. "Yeah, I'd love that—"

"Chloe!"

The dream shattered as Jonathan burst in, his voice sharp and cold. "Where are those clean plates? We need them front of house now. Stop slacking and get back to work."

Chloe shot Ryan and Chaz a weary look. "I'll be back in a sec," she said, forcing a smile before turning on her heel to follow the new assistant manager.

Jonathan didn't even acknowledge the kitchen staff; he just turned and strode out, his Rolex catching the harsh fluorescent light.

Chloe sighed, grabbing a heavy tray of plates. "Great. Two dragons on the loose today." She waved a hand at the guys. "See you later, boys."

The sound of her footsteps faded, leaving the kitchen feeling suddenly quiet despite the music. Ryan slumped against the counter, frustration darkening his features.

Chaz clapped him on the back. "Don't sweat it, mate. You'll get your shot with her. She's not going anywhere."

Ryan groaned, burying his face in his hands. "I've liked her since day one, Chaz. I just never know what to say. When it actually matters, I freeze."

Chaz grinned. "Moaning won't get you far, lad. You gotta be ready when the moment hits. Lucky for you, I'm practically an expert in the field of romance."

Ryan raised an eyebrow, skeptical. "Because of your legendary string of one-night stands?"

Chaz's face went dead serious. "Nah. I grew up with four older sisters. That's the real schooling, mate. I've seen it all."

Ryan laughed, the image of a young Chaz being bossed around by four girls bringing him back to life. "Surrounded by women your whole life, huh?"

"Exactly," Chaz said, nodding confidently. "I know how the gears turn. I know what makes 'em tick."

Ryan smiled. "Maybe you can teach me a thing or two then."

Chaz winked, grabbing a chef's knife to return to his prep. "Stick with me, mate. I'll sort you out."

Chapter 10

[8] *Happy Hour* – The Housemartins

The lunch rush slammed into Red's Coffee like a tidal wave. The upbeat, jangly rhythm of the playlist fought to stay audible beneath the roar of clattering ceramic, the relentless hiss of the steam wand, and the rising tide of impatient voices packed shoulder-to-shoulder.

Melissa, Chloe, Phil, Justin, and Jonathan moved like a machine on the edge of a seizure—fast, chaotic, and slipping closer to a total breakdown with every passing second.

Justin darted between stations, his eyes wild and desperate to prove his worth. He scrubbed counters, restocked napkins, and snagged stray order slips—anything to stay relevant. But the moment he stepped up to a customer—

Jonathan cut in like a blade.

"No, no, no, Justin," Jonathan snapped, sliding between him and the counter with a cold, patronizing smirk. He snatched the notepad from Justin's fingers as if it were his birthright. "You always ask about milk preferences first. Basic. I can't believe you don't know that by now."

Justin's jaw clenched so hard he felt his teeth ache. His hand trembled as he stuffed his cleaning rag into his apron pocket. His eyes burned with silent fury, but the customer waited, expectant and awkward, so he was forced to retreat.

Jonathan turned smoothly back to the patron, wearing the face of a man who had just won a war. Justin stormed off to the sugar station, barely containing the fire flickering behind his ribs.

Behind the bar, Phil and Melissa worked side-by-side, trying to hold the center together. But even the veterans were fraying. Phil's hands shook as he pulled espresso shots, his usual precision slipping. He watched, horrified, as milk froth spilled over the edge of a pitcher.

Melissa caught the slip immediately. "Phil, slow down. Pace yourself."

"I've gotta keep up," he replied, his breath coming in shallow hitches.

Melissa's voice was firmer this time. "No, you don't. Not if you want to make it through without burning out."

Across the café, Chloe balanced a tray of lattes, weaving expertly through the tight crowd and dodging stray elbows. She set a cup down at a booth, only for a voice to bark out:

"Goddammit."

The sharp tone sliced through the noise. Chloe turned to see a middle-aged man with a scowl that could curdle cream—a spitting image of Ricky Gervais—staring down the latte she'd just placed.

He lifted the cup as if it were a biohazard. "This? This is your idea of a latte?" His voice dripped with venom. "It looks like a unicorn exploded in a mug. I asked for a plain latte—just coffee and milk. Not this sticky, sugar-drenched monstrosity. What's this, a prank? Because if it is, it's not funny. It's pathetic. Like watching a clown drown in sprinkles."

Chloe's professional mask cracked for a fraction of a second. She glanced at the cup—Phil's handiwork.

"Sorry about that," she said, her voice tight but controlled. "I'll get you a fresh one, on the house."

The man snorted but didn't argue. Chloe retreated to the bar. Melissa glanced up from the machine. "Nice save."

"Phil made it," Chloe muttered.

Phil froze, the color draining from his face. "Shit," he whispered, rubbing his temple. "I was rushing. Too fast."

Melissa didn't hesitate. She put a firm hand on his shoulder. "Step back. Now."

"I can handle it," Phil insisted, his voice shaky and stubborn.

"No. You're red-lining, Phil. That's when it all falls apart."

Phil's eyes flicked to the never-ending queue, but he finally nodded in defeat. Untying his apron, he retreated toward the staff room, his fingers gripping his hair in frustration. Chloe watched him go, a wave of guilt washing over her. They were all losing it.

The rush began to thin—but the tension didn't ease. Justin slammed a box of sugar packets onto the counter so hard they scattered across the floor. Melissa saw it, but she didn't have the energy to confront him yet.

Jonathan's gaze swept the room, icy and precise as he barked orders like a drill sergeant. Just as they thought they might catch their breath, the heavy front door slammed open again.

A fresh wave of tourists surged inside.

Chloe exhaled slowly, cracking her knuckles like a prize-fighter gearing up for the final round.

"Here we go again."

Chapter 11

Phil leaned against the rough brick wall at the back of the café, exhaling a long, jagged breath. He pulled out his vape and took a slow drag, letting the cool vapor soothe his frayed nerves. *This rush is really getting to me.*

He glanced at his phone, pulling up the analytics for his YouTube channel, *The Underrated Cut*. His latest video—"A Review of Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994)"—had a measly twenty views.

"Seriously? Twenty? It's a cult classic. The algorithm's going to be the death of me," he muttered to the empty alleyway.

Before he could spiral deeper into the YouTube "shadow-ban" conspiracy, footsteps approached. Ryan rounded the corner, pulling out his own vape and nodding in greeting before taking a hit.

"How's the kitchen holding up?" Phil asked, grateful for the distraction.

Ryan chuckled, though it sounded weary. "Manic. Had to step out for a breather—it was getting ridiculous in there."

Phil sighed, running a hand over his fresh buzzcut. "Same. I felt like I was moving in slow motion while everyone else was on fast-forward."

Ryan smirked. "So, did you finally watch *Chungking Express*?"

Phil straightened up, his eyes brightening. "Yeah, caught it last night."

Ryan's face lit up. "Oh yeah? What'd you think?"

Phil hesitated, then gave a non-committal shrug. "The acting was solid. The soundtrack? Definitely the highlight. Some of the shots were beautiful—that step-printing effect is cool."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "Sounds like a 'yes' to me."

Phil gave a half-shrug. "Honestly? It was just okay. The writing felt a bit thin for my taste."

Ryan laughed. "Well, Wong Kar-wai wrote each scene the night before shooting. He made the film on a shoestring budget while he was on a break from another project."

Phil shook his head, unimpressed. "See, that's too unconventional for me. I like a solid story structure. Give me *Scarface* any day—yeah, it's a remake, but it's got a tight script by Oliver Stone. Pacino's performance is phenomenal. And De Palma? He's one of the most underrated directors out there."

Ryan nodded, respecting the conviction. "Can't wait to see how you review *Chungking* on your channel. Maybe I could guest on it—help you break down the themes of Asian cinema."

Phil's eyes widened. "Yeah? I'd love that. I've been meaning to have more guests on."

Ryan grinned. "Cheers, man. I'd be honored."

"I'll sort the schedule tonight and message you," Phil said, sounding genuinely excited for the first time all shift.

Ryan took another hit of his vape, leaning back against the brick. "Awesome. Since you watched my pick, I owe you one. What've you got for me?"

Phil smirked, ready with his pitch. "Alright—*Waiting*.... It's a workplace comedy set in a restaurant. Stars Ryan Reynolds. It's not a masterpiece, but I love it—it reminds me of us. Also heavily influenced by *Clerks*."

Ryan hesitated, looking skeptical. "I dunno... Ryan Reynolds feels like he plays the same 'charismatic jerk' every time."

Phil shrugged. "Trust me, I'm not his biggest fan either, but he's perfect for this. Plus, Justin Long's in it—you like him, right?"

Ryan sighed, relenting. "Alright, you got me with Justin Long."

Phil smirked. "Told you. You'll enjoy it. It's got that 'trapped in service' vibe."

Ryan laughed. "Fine. I'll find it on streaming and let you know."

They both shared a final laugh, taking one last hit before pocketing their vapes. Ryan clapped Phil on the shoulder. "Cheers, man. I better get back in before the next wave hits. Chaz is probably juggling eggs by now."

Phil stretched his shoulders, feeling the tension return as he looked at the back door. "Same here. Appreciate the chat—the rush was doing my head in."

With a shared nod of solidarity, they pushed open the door and stepped back inside—leaving the quiet alley behind for the organized chaos of Red's Coffee.

Chapter 12

[9] - *The Hand That Feeds* – Nine Inch Nails

Ryan stepped into the kitchen, rolling his shoulders and bracing for the afternoon grind. But what caught him off guard wasn't the usual greasy mess—it was Chaz, scrubbing down the prep counters with a fierce, almost rhythmic intensity. His movements were perfectly synced to the harsh, industrial beat thumping from the speaker on the top shelf.

Ryan squinted at the familiar synths. Nine Inch Nails? Again? He shook his head, smirking, and reached over to hit pause on the battered speaker.

The silence that followed was heavy. Chaz spun around, dishcloth in hand, his eyes flashing with mock outrage. "Oi! What's the big idea, sandwich boy?"

Ryan gave him a playful nudge. "Seriously, Chaz, what's with the obsession? You've had Nine Inch Nails on a loop all morning. It's like you're auditioning for a goth club."

Chaz grinned, folding his muscular arms over his chest. "They're my second favourite band, aren't they? Love the grit, and Trent's vocals are raw as a steak."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "And I take it Sabbath is still holding the number one spot?"

"Too right, mate," Chaz said proudly, pointing a thumb at his chest. "Those Brummie boys are my home-grown legends. Heavy metal started in the Black Country, and that's where my heart is."

Ryan smirked. "Chaz, you're from Shirley, not Birmingham. You're practically a Solihull lad."

"Same difference, innit?" Chaz shrugged, unfazed. "It's all Greater Brum to me."

Ryan laughed. "Fair enough. But honestly, Trent Reznor shines way more in his film scores these days. Phil would back me up on that—the man's a genius."

Chaz rolled his eyes. "Typical film-nerd talk. You and Phil are two peas in a pretentious pod."

Ryan chuckled. "Hey, the bloke's won two Oscars for scoring films. Can't argue with the Academy, Chaz. He's gone from 'Head Like a Hole' to the Hollywood elite."

Chaz shook his head, amused. "Whatever. At least I'm cleaning. You? You're just leaning against the counter like you're waiting for a bus."

Ryan grinned. "Honestly, I'm just impressed. This kitchen usually looks like a war zone after you've been near it. I can actually see the stainless steel for once."

Chaz scoffed, flicking his cleaning cloth over his shoulder. "That's 'cause you never met my old head chef, Max. The bloke was a proper psycho about hygiene—used to check behind the fridge with a torch like a drill sergeant."

Ryan laughed. "Maybe you should invite Max over for dinner at our place. He might finally tidy up that biohazard you call a bedroom."

Chaz narrowed his eyes but couldn't hide the smirk. "Very funny. Stick to the toasties, Ry."

Before Ryan could fire back a retort, the printer at the pass started spewing out fresh order tickets with the rapid-fire *tack-tack-tack* of a machine gun. Chaz groaned, tossing his cloth aside. "Back to the grind, then." He swaggered toward the stove with a renewed energy.

Ryan sighed and moved to the prep station, reaching for a fresh cutting board. He was just about to start on a club sandwich when—**BAM!** The full, distorted blast of Nine Inch Nails exploded from the speaker again, the bass making the oil bottles on the shelf rattle. Ryan jumped, nearly fumbling his knife.

Chaz reappeared at the pass, a wicked, jagged grin on his face as he tapped the side of his head. "What? Thought you could silence the master? Think again."

They both burst out laughing, the tension of the lunch rush finally dissipating. The sizzle of the grill, the clatter of pans, and the relentless pulse of industrial rock filled the kitchen—fueling the chaos and driving them into the afternoon.

Chapter 13

[10] - *Busy Earnin'* – Jungle

Phil stepped back onto the café floor, exhaling as he surveyed the calmer atmosphere. The storm had passed, replaced by the low hum of casual chatter and the rhythmic clink of teaspoons against ceramic.

Melissa spotted him immediately. "Justin, can you cover behind the bar with Phil? I've got some admin to catch up on." She didn't wait for an answer before disappearing into the office, leaving Chloe and Jonathan to manage the leftovers of the rush.

Justin, busy wiping down the coffee machine, glanced over as Phil joined him. "How was the 'great escape'?" His tone was casual, but the adrenaline from the shift hadn't quite left his eyes.

Phil stretched his arms, the joints in his shoulders popping. "Not bad. Had a chat with Ryan—recommended *Waiting....*"

Justin smirked. "Let me guess. He said no?"

Phil chuckled. "At first. But I played the Justin Long card. Worked like a charm." His smile faded as he took in Justin's rigid posture. "How was it without me?"

Justin let out a dry laugh, his eyes darkening as they tracked Jonathan across the room. "The second wave hit fast. It would've been easier if the 'New King of Siam' wasn't breathing down my neck every ten seconds." He tightened his grip on the cleaning cloth. "It should be me calling the shots, Phil. Not him."

Phil sighed softly, placing a clean cup onto the warming rack. "I get it, mate. I really do. You're my best friend." He looked Justin square in the eye. "But Jonny got the job. You didn't. No point letting it eat you alive—you'll just end up bitter."

Justin's jaw clenched. "I just didn't like how he talked down to me in front of the regulars. I've been here three years. I know how Gary takes his soya milk."

"If he's getting to you, talk to him," Phil said steadily. "Like a professional. Just don't take it out on me or Chloe."

Justin paused, the logic sinking in. He took a slow breath and nodded. "You're right. I'll handle it—like an adult."

Before Phil could offer any more advice, Justin tossed the cloth aside and strode toward Jonathan with a determined pace. Phil watched him go, his heart sinking. "Bloody hell," he muttered, rubbing his face.

Justin stopped Jonathan mid-wipe. "Hey, Jonny. Got a minute?"

Jonathan turned, his "customer service" smile looking paper-thin. "What's up, Justin?"

Justin drew a breath, forced himself to stay calm. "Look, I didn't appreciate the way you spoke to me earlier. It was disrespectful, especially in front of the customers. Melissa wouldn't do that, and neither would Mike. I'd appreciate it if it didn't happen again."

Jonathan's smile faltered, his tone hardening instantly. "I'm managing the team, Justin. That's what I was hired to do. Efficiency is the priority here."

Justin crossed his arms. "I've been here three years. You don't just walk in and start barking orders at people who know the floor better than you. I need to see that you actually know what you're doing before I can respect your decisions." He stepped a fraction closer. "Especially when you're sitting in the chair that should've been mine."

From across the café, Phil let out an audible, "Oh, God," and shielded his eyes. Chloe paused mid-sweep, her eyes wide—she'd never seen Justin this confrontational.

Jonathan's patience snapped. The politeness vanished, replaced by a cold, corporate disdain. "Listen to me, Justin," he sneered. "I didn't take what was yours. It was *never* yours. You didn't make the cut. Get over it." He stepped into Justin's personal space, his voice dropping to an icy whisper. "And if you talk to me like that again, I'll report you for insubordination. You'll be lucky to keep your job, let alone a promotion."

Justin didn't flinch. He stared Jonathan down for several agonizing seconds before turning on his heel and retreating to the bar. Jonathan shook his head, muttering something about "amateurs" as he went back to his tables.

"Mate, just breathe," Phil whispered as Justin reached the bar. "Don't do something you'll regret. I know you're pissed, but he's the boss." He placed a steadying hand on Justin's shoulder.

Justin exhaled a sharp, cold breath, his eyes locked on Jonathan. "You know, Phil," he said, his voice eerily steady, "I'm about to take a page from a very famous cartoon rabbit's book."

Phil blinked, genuinely confused. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Justin's grin widened, looking more like a predator than a barista. "You know the line... 'Of course you realize, this means war?'"

Phil hesitated. "Justin, don't—"

"If I want my job," Justin interrupted, his gaze never wavering from his rival, "I have to make sure he doesn't keep his. It's that simple."

The battle lines were drawn. The coffee shop felt smaller than it ever had before.

Chapter 14

Melissa sat at her desk, her eyes fixed on the rota spreadsheet as the faint, rhythmic clack of keys filled the small office. A sharp knock sounded at the door, breaking her concentration.

"Come in," she called, her fingers finishing one last entry before she hit save.

Chaz poked his head through the doorway, looking uncharacteristically hesitant. "Mel? You got a minute?"

"Always. Sit down." She spun her chair around to face him.

Chaz eased into the seat opposite her, his hands fidgeting with the strings of his apron. "Look, I don't want to add to your mountain of stress, but hear me out on this."

Melissa folded her arms, her expression curious but weary. "Alright, Chaz. Go on."

"I reckon we should do a 'Chef's Special' once a week. Just one dish," he said, leaning forward with sudden energy. "It gives me a chance to actually have a bit of fun with the menu. Plus, I've been working on my own seasoning blend—it makes the food tastier, and it actually cuts down the salt and calories. It's a win for everyone."

Melissa's mouth curved into a sympathetic half-smile. "I get it, Chaz. Truly. And I'd love to say yes, but it's not my call. Mr. Clifton and Head Office dictate the menu down to the last gram of butter. You know how they are—safe, predictable, and desperately boring."

Chaz slumped back in his chair, the light in his eyes dimming. "I'm just knackered making the same three toasties every day, Mel. We need something new. Something to keep the customers excited—and to keep me from losing my mind."

"I hear you," Melissa said gently, her voice dropping to a confidential tone. "If it were entirely up to me, you'd have your specials, and Justin would've been made Assistant Manager this morning."

Chaz chuckled bitterly. "Well, here's hoping you keep climbing the ladder before we all go mad. Or... maybe Ryan's restaurant idea will actually take off. He's always going on about running his own place. Said I could have full menu freedom, and you'd be his deputy manager."

Melissa's eyebrows shot up, a small spark of interest appearing. "You know... if Ryan is more into the management side than the actual cooking, maybe we should consider moving him Front of House. Let him learn the floor while you get someone in the kitchen who's just as passionate about the food as you are."

Chaz rubbed his chin, the cogs turning. "Yeah... that could actually work. Ryan gets to play at being a boss, and I get a kitchen assistant who doesn't look at a whisk like it's a torture device. Win-win."

Melissa nodded, already mentally adjusting the rota. "We're actually looking for more FOH staff. If Ryan's game, it'd be an easy switch. Tell you what—would you be willing to handle the initial interviews for a new kitchen assistant? Since you're the one who has to work with them."

"Leave it with me," Chaz said, standing up with a newfound purpose. "I'll have a chat with him, then get back to you."

Melissa smiled. "Thanks, Chaz. I appreciate it."

He paused at the door, glancing back with a smirk. "Better get back before Ryan burns the place down trying to multitask."

Melissa laughed, but as the door clicked shut, the silence of the office felt heavier than before. She leaned back, staring at the names on her screen. The café was shifting—people were moving, roles were changing, and the air out on the floor was thick with a tension she couldn't quite name.

She could feel it in her bones. Something was about to give.

Act Three - Chapter 15

[11] *Dreams* by Fleetwood Mac

Jonathan and Chloe moved through the dining area, the scent of multi-surface cleaner trailing behind them as they prepped for the looming 4 p.m. rush. Nearby, Justin and Phil restocked the bar, their movements practiced, if noticeably distracted.

Chloe glanced over at Jonathan, who was scrubbing a stubborn ring of coffee off a wooden table. "So... what's your main interest, Jonathan? When you aren't looking at spreadsheets?"

Jonathan paused, giving her a rare, soft look that lacked his usual corporate armor. "What do you mean?"

"Your passion," Chloe clarified, leaning against a chair. "Phil has his movies, Chaz has his heavy metal, Melissa has her books... and for me, it's theatrical make-up design. What makes you tick?"

Jonathan nodded, his gaze drifting toward the window. "Car racing. Formula One, mostly. Florence always moans that I get up at stupid o'clock on a Sunday to watch a 4 a.m. race on TV."

Chloe's brows lifted. "Florence?"

"My fiancée," Jonathan said, a genuine warmth touching his voice. "She says watching F1 is about as exciting as watching paint dry, but then again, she's more into pop music."

"I can relate to her," Chloe said with a grin. "Dua Lipa, Harry Styles, Ariana Grande, Lady Gaga... that's totally my vibe."

Jonathan smiled, looking a touch wistful. "You know, you actually remind me of Florence. Ariana Grande is all over her Spotify Wrapped every year."

Chloe laughed. "No way! So, how's she handling the big career change? From the city to Stratford?"

Jonathan's expression softened even further, a mix of pride and anxiety crossing his face. "She's just happy I'm working. And, uh... she's expecting. The baby is due in a few months."

Chloe's eyes widened, her posture softening. "Wow. That's huge, Jonathan. Congratulations."

"Yeah... it changes the math on everything," Jonathan admitted, his gaze dropping to his Rolex—perhaps a gift from a life he was trying to maintain. "Makes this job feel even more important. The pressure... it's a bit heavier than I expected."

Chloe reached out, resting a gentle, grounding hand on his arm. "You're going to be a great dad."

Jonathan laughed softly, though it sounded a bit hollow. "Let's hope I don't mess up the pit stop."

Trying to keep the mood light, Chloe teased, "So tell me more about this F1 obsession. My dad's a fan, too."

"I've followed it since '97," Jonathan said, nostalgia brightening his tone. "The year Jacques Villeneuve won his championship. I go to Silverstone every year for the British GP. I've even managed to meet a few drivers over the years, including Lewis Hamilton."

Chloe raised a playful eyebrow. "Okay, now you're just bragging. What's Sir Lewis like in person?"

"Honestly? A class act," Jonathan said. "Met him at a corporate event a few years back. We're on a first-name basis at this point—in my head, at least."

Chloe laughed. "Does Florence ever go with you?"

Jonathan shook his head. "Nah. She's more into concerts. She dragged me to a Taylor Swift gig last year. Not exactly my scene, but I have to admit, the stage presence was incredible."

"I'd kill to see her live," Chloe sighed.

Jonathan smiled warmly. "Florence is the one who keeps me cultured. Left to my own devices, I'd just be sitting in a grandstand smelling burning rubber."

"She's probably stopping you from becoming best mates with the pit crews," Chloe joked.

Jonathan chuckled—a real, relaxed sound—just as Justin swooped in, wearing an overly bright, predatory grin.

"What are we all laughing about? Team bonding?" Justin asked, his voice dripping with forced enthusiasm.

"Jonathan was just telling me about his F1 trips," Chloe replied, sensing the shift in temperature.

"Ooo, F1, huh?" Justin said, leaning against the counter. "Fast cars. Very macho. You like NASCAR?"

"No," Jonathan said flatly, his "manager" mask snapping back into place instantly.

Justin pressed on, a mocking glint in his eyes. "Wait, you like auto racing but you don't like NASCAR? It's basically the same thing, right? Turning left for three hours?"

The air in the room chilled. Jonathan's eyes hardened, the vulnerability of the last ten minutes vanishing. "Justin, I'm working. Since you have so much free time to discuss American sports, take a five-minute break."

Justin lifted his hands in mock surrender. "Fine, fine. A quick smoke before the rush won't hurt anyone."

"And if you're not back in five," Jonathan warned, his voice now steely and precise, "you're going home early. Without pay. Am I clear?"

Justin didn't push further. He just gave a sharp, mocking salute and headed for the back door, pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

Jonathan exhaled slowly, the tension returning to his shoulders as he watched Justin leave. He looked back at Chloe, but the moment of connection was gone.

This wasn't over—he knew that. And with a baby on the way, Jonathan realized he couldn't afford to lose this war.

Chapter 16

As soon as he hit the crisp afternoon air, Justin lit up a cigarette and took a long, desperate drag, letting the nicotine soothe the jagged edges of his temper.

Chaz leaned against the brick wall, flicking open his Zippo with a metallic clink. He sparked up a hand-rolled cigarette, the tip glowing a fierce orange as he inhaled deeply. He shot a sly look at Justin, who was aggressively scrolling through his phone, and raised a thick eyebrow.

"How's the new bloke settling in, then?" Chaz asked, his Brummie accent cutting through the quiet as he exhaled a plume of smoke.

Ryan, already midway through a vape cloud, gave Justin a cautious, measuring nod. "You look like you're about to pop a vein, mate."

Justin sighed, shoving his phone into his pocket and pacing the small alleyway. "You know what, man? Jonny walks in, snatches the job I've been gunning for, and now he's acting like he owns the bloody building. I can't stand the guy. He's all 'efficiency' this and 'reporting' that."

Ryan exhaled a plume of vapor, his eyes sympathetic. "Sounds like he's really moved into your head rent-free, yeah?"

"Exactly, Ryan. But it's worse than that." Justin's voice sharpened, dripping with bitterness. "He's messing with the vibe. He's out to ruin everything we've built. I just wish Phil and Chloe could see he's a total fraud."

Chaz's grin widened, clearly fueled by Justin's frustration. "Oi, if you're that wound up, why not mess with him a bit? Nothing that gets you sacked—just enough to show him you're not his doormat. Give him a proper Red's welcome, yeah?"

Justin's face lit up at the suggestion, the anger shifting into something more calculating. "A prank? I'm listening. What are you thinking?"

Ryan shook his head, his voice calm but firm. "Hold on, Justin. Pranks don't fix a power struggle. You don't want to look petty or desperate. Melissa will see right through it."

Ignoring Ryan's warning, Justin smirked and glanced at Chaz. "You know what really gets me? He's all over Chloe. Chatting her up like they're old mates. You should've seen them just now—he was practically preening."

Chaz chuckled darkly, his eyes darting to Ryan to watch the reaction.

Ryan's expression tightened instantly. The relaxed posture vanished. "He's been hitting on Chloe? What exactly was he saying?"

Justin leaned in, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Bragging about his VIP lifestyle. Seeing Taylor Swift live, claiming he's best friends with Lewis Hamilton. Pure peacocking, mate. Chloe looked... well, she looked like she was struggling to stay polite."

Chaz snorted. "Why work at a shitty diner in Stratford if you're best mates with Lewis Hamilton? Bloke's a total narcissist."

Ryan's eyes flickered with a protective heat. "If he's crossing lines with the girls because he thinks he's a big shot, that's a problem."

Justin's grin grew wider, satisfied that he'd hooked Ryan's loyalty by dangling his crush in front of him. "Exactly! And that Assistant Manager spot should've been mine. He's acting untouchable. We need to remind him he's just a guy in a suit who doesn't know how to work a steam wand."

Ryan paused, then nodded slowly, his skepticism eroded by jealousy. "I get it. But be careful. If you do something, keep it smart. Keep it small. Don't give him a reason to go to Melissa."

Chaz leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with pure mischief. "Don't listen to the voice of reason, Justin. Go big. Shake the cage. Show him who actually runs the floor."

Justin flicked his cigarette butt to the damp pavement and stomped it out with his heel, a new fire burning in his eyes. "Thanks for the backup, lads. I'm going back in. I think it's time to start the fun."

Ryan watched him go, feeling a nagging sense of dread. "Just don't let it get out of hand, yeah?"

Justin shot them both a sly, over-the-shoulder look before pulling the heavy door open. "I'll try to keep it civil... but no promises."

With that, he strode back into the café, ready to fire the first shot in a war for the soul of Red's Coffee.

Chapter 17

[12] *Wind of Change* by Scorpions

Back in the kitchen, Chaz and Ryan fell into their usual rhythm, gathering prep items for the looming 4 p.m. rush. The kitchen buzzed with its familiar mechanical energy—the hum of the fridge, the distant clatter of the dining room—but Chaz seemed distracted. He moved a tray of salad garnishes, his usual swagger replaced by a flicker of hesitation.

“Ryan,” Chaz said quietly, his voice barely audible over the whistling intro of the song. “There’s somethin’ I need to run by you, mate.”

Ryan looked up, concern creasing his brow as he wiped his hands on his damp apron. “What’s up? You look like you’ve lost a fiver and found a penny.”

Chaz took a breath, his voice low, sounding almost guilty. “I might’ve... well, I mentioned your bistro dream to Melissa. Just in passing, y’know? But now she’s askin’ if you’d consider transferrin’ to Front of House. She thinks you need to get some experience on the other side of the pass if you’re serious about the management side of things.”

Ryan froze for a moment, the lettuce in his hand forgotten. The idea of leaving the kitchen felt like a physical jolt. This was his sanctuary, the place where he could hide from the customers and just work.

Noticing Ryan’s silence, Chaz quickly added, “Look, I get it. Cooking’s more my thing than yours. You’ve got the brains for the business side, Ry. If you want to see how the place really runs, being up front is where the action is. Dealing with the punters, seeing the flow of the floor—it’s a different beast, but just as important. You’d still be part of the crew, just... in a different jersey, yeah?”

Ryan leaned against the stainless steel counter, his voice thoughtful. “It’s a massive opportunity, Chaz. No doubt. But I’ll need time to think it through. I like working back here with you—I don’t want to just walk away from the duo.”

Chaz smiled, clapping a heavy, reassuring hand on Ryan’s shoulder. “Mate, we’ll still be seein’ each other every five minutes. And if you do move out front, I’ll need a new kitchen assistant anyway. Someone as mad about food as I am. Someone I can mold into a proper sous-chef. You’ve got the heart for it, Ryan, but if the floor is callin’, I’m behind you all the way.”

Ryan’s expression softened. His mind drifted back to the conversation he’d had earlier that morning, the words replaying in his head like a looped scene from a film:

“Dad sold the truck. I need a job.”

He hadn’t thought much of it at the time—just another bit of news from a friend. But now, the words hit differently. This wasn’t just a coincidence; it was an opening. It was exactly what Lydia needed, and exactly what Chaz was looking for.

A spark flickered in Ryan’s eyes, the gears finally clicking into place.

“Actually...” he said, straightening his posture and a small grin spreading across his face. “I think I know someone who’d be perfect to take over my spot in here.”

Chaz raised an eyebrow, his interest piqued. “Oh yeah? Who’ve you got in mind? They better know their way around a grill.”

Ryan's grin widened. "Trust me. She's tougher than both of us put together."

Chapter 18

[13] - *Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger* – Daft Punk

As the final moments of her shift approached, Melissa stepped out of the office, stretching out the kinks in her back. She spotted Jonathan at the bar, where Phil was giving him a crash course on the mechanics of a frappe.

"I'm just finishing up now, Jonathan," Melissa said warmly, grabbing her coat. "I'm leaving you in Chloe's capable hands to wrap things up. She's the best we've got at closing, so I'm sure it'll be more than fine."

Jonathan didn't look up from the blender, a cocky, self-assured smirk playing on his lips. "Oh, I'm sure it'll be more than fine, Melissa. It's just coffee, not rocket science."

Phil chuckled low, the sound vibrating in his chest. "Famous last words," he muttered—just loud enough for the barb to land.

Jonathan shot Phil a sharp, sideways glance, his pride clearly pricked. Before he could retort, Chloe and Justin appeared from the back, surveying the spotless counter and the rows of empty tables—the deceptive calm before the afternoon storm.

"Now," Justin said, his voice dropping to a predatory cool, "we play the waiting game." His eyes were locked on Jonathan like a hunter watching a target enter a clearing.

Chloe clapped her hands, trying to inject some genuine energy into the room. "Alright, let's do this! We've got this!"

Melissa offered a knowing smirk to the room. "Right, I'm off. See you all tomorrow." She disappeared through the front door just as the first wave of the 4 p.m. surge began to flood in.

The rush hit like a tidal wave.

Justin kept his gaze fixed on Jonathan, tilting his head with a mask of false friendliness. "Hey, Jonny. Why don't you take the bar with Phil? I'll handle the tills. Let's see how you really handle the pressure of the point-of-sale."

Jonathan scoffed, rolling his shoulders like a gladiator stepping into the Colosseum. "Yeah, sure. I can handle a bit of a rush, Justin."

Justin's smirk deepened, becoming something jagged. "Oh, I know you can."

The next hour was a blur of clanging ceramic, the scream of the steam wand, and a relentless stream of orders. Justin blitzed through the till, his fingers dancing over the screen with a cold, robotic efficiency. Behind the bar, Phil and Jonathan hustled in a tight space, while Chloe weaved between the tables, keeping the flow of the room moving.

Then, Justin caught Phil's eye. A silent, conspiratorial flicker of a glance passed between them. The trap was set.

Justin called out over the noise, "Jonny! Large iced latte for table seven. No foam, extra cold, caramel syrup. Move it!"

Jonathan barely spared the order slip a glance, his brain already onto the next task. "Got it."

Phil slid a cup across the stainless steel, but his movements were deliberately casual—almost sluggish. The drink Jonathan began to build was a disaster in disguise: overloaded with ice to dilute the flavor, a mere splash of milk, and—the killing blow—hazelnut syrup instead of caramel.

Chloe, pausing at the pass, caught the setup instantly. She raised a knowing eyebrow at Justin, her conscience flickering, but she stayed silent. She wanted to see if Jonathan's arrogance would actually blind him to the obvious.

Jonathan, fueled by a need to prove his "superiority," prepared the drink with an air of absolute certainty. He capped it and set it on the pass.

Chloe broke the silence, her voice feigning helpfulness. "Hold on... wasn't that supposed to be caramel?"

Jonathan froze. His eyes snapped down to the pale liquid in the cup. His face tightened, the first real flicker of panic surfacing beneath the skin.

Phil barely suppressed a grin. "Yeah, Jon. Pretty sure you just pumped hazelnut into that. That's an allergy risk, mate."

Jonathan's hands clenched the cup so hard his knuckles turned a ghostly white. A slow, creeping realization began to unravel his composure. He fumbled, reaching for the caramel bottle to try and "top it off" and cover the mistake, but it was a messy, desperate move.

Chloe stepped back, her voice light. "Oh, and by the way, table seven just sent their last drink back. Said it tasted like 'chemically nuts.' Strange, huh? They're getting pretty annoyed."

The air in the café thickened. A few customers at the counter glanced over, sensing the sudden spike in temperature at the bar.

Jonathan's jaw clenched so tight a muscle in his cheek began to twitch. He whipped around to Justin, his eyes blazing with a mixture of fury and humiliation. "This is your fault! You shouted the order wrong, you idiot! You did this on purpose to make me look like a fool!"

Justin leaned against the till, looking completely unruffled, the picture of professional calm. "Nope. I called it out exactly as it was typed. Ask Chloe. Guess you were too busy playing 'Top Dog' to actually listen to your staff."

Phil let out a low, theatrical whistle. "Maybe next time, slow down, Jon. Check the labels. It's basic stuff."

Jonathan's face burned a deep, bruised red. He could feel the eyes of the staff on him—mocking, waiting for the corporate facade to crack. He ground his teeth, grabbing a fresh cup with hands that were visibly trembling.

The prank was small, but the damage was tectonic. Justin hadn't just messed up a drink; he had shattered Jonathan's aura of competence. For the first time, Jonathan wasn't the untouchable leader. He was just a guy who couldn't even tell the difference between two syrups.

And that seed of doubt, once planted in front of the team, would grow until it consumed him.

Chapter 19

[14] *Pure Shores* – All Saints

Melissa steered her Mitsubishi ASX through the quiet, winding streets of Alcester. The car glided smoothly over the damp pavement, the headlights cutting through the twilight. The low hum of the engine mingled with the shimmering, ethereal pulse of the radio. She sang along under her breath, letting the familiar melody of the track act as a decompressor. After the industrial chaos of the day, the steady rhythm and the solitude of the road felt like a fleeting sanctuary.

Streetlights cast long, golden fingers across the dashboard, flickering rhythmically as she drove past. She rolled her shoulders, feeling the tension of the "hazelnut incident" finally begin to ebb.

Turning onto her street, she pulled into her usual spot and cut the engine. For a moment, she just sat in the dark, hands resting on the steering wheel, savoring the absolute silence. No steam wands. No clattering plates. No bickering supervisors.

Inside the house, warm light spilled softly from the windows, painting the driveway with a sense of security.

Home.

The moment she pushed through the front door, she was hit by a whirlwind. Two small bodies crashed into her legs with the force of a rugby tackle.

"Mummy!"

Alana and Archie clung to her knees, their giggles echoing in the narrow hallway. Melissa laughed, the stress of the day finally dissolving as she ran a hand through Archie's tousled hair.

"Alright, you two, give your mum a chance to take her coat off," Andrew called from the kitchen doorway. He stood there with his arms crossed, a knowing, sympathetic grin playing on his lips.

Melissa met his gaze with a tired smirk. "Says the man who's had the easy shift."

Andrew scoffed, ruffling Archie's hair as the kids scurried toward the living room. "You try keeping those two from reenacting the Battle of Hastings in the garden all afternoon, then tell me who's got it easier."

Later, after the kids were finally tucked in, Melissa sank into the corner of the sofa. She stretched her legs out, swirling a deep, ruby-red Malbec in her glass. A copy of *Nightbitch* by

Rachel Yoder rested in her lap—the cover was promising an escape, but her brain was still stuck on the floor of Red's Coffee.

Andrew wandered in, a cold beer in hand, nodding toward the book. "You know they made a film out of that? Amy Adams, I think."

Melissa smirked but didn't look up. "Doubt it's as good as the prose. They never are."

He flopped into his armchair, taking a slow sip. "So... Day One as the Official Big Boss. How was the transition?"

She sighed, lowering the book to her knees. "Could've been worse. Could've been a literal fire."

"That doesn't sound like a ringing endorsement."

Melissa rubbed her temple. "I had to tell Justin he didn't get the promotion. It went about as well as you'd expect. Now there's this... cold war between him and Jonathan, the new guy. I can feel the static every time they're in the same room. It's messing with the flow."

Andrew considered that, leaning back. "Sounds like you need to lay down the law, Mel. If they're acting up, nip it in the bud. That's what I do with my rugby lads—either they sort their attitudes out, or they're running extra shuttle sprints until they're too tired to argue."

Melissa chuckled dryly. "I don't think I can make Justin do shuttle sprints in the stockroom, Drew."

"Hey, whatever works." He shrugged. "Point is, you care about the team. That's your strength. But if they start stepping out of line, you've got to be the mother hen—with teeth."

Melissa chewed on the advice, the wine warming her chest. "I just felt awful letting Justin down. He's been there so long."

Andrew leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "That's on him, not you. You gave him a fair shake at the interview. It's up to him how he handles the loss." He paused, a smirk growing. "From what you've told me about this Jonathan guy, he sounds like Arnold Rimmer from Red Dwarf."

Melissa burst out laughing, the image of Jonathan with a "H" on his forehead appearing in her mind. "God, you're right. Except with a much more expensive watch."

They shared a quiet moment, the humor softening the lingering tension of the shift. Andrew stretched, setting his empty bottle on the coaster, then leaned down to press a quick kiss to her cheek. "I'll leave you to your 'dog-mom' book. Heading to the man cave to check the scores."

Melissa watched him go, then returned her gaze to the pages and her wine. She exhaled deeply, sinking further into the cushions as the house settled into its nighttime rhythm.

I love my life, she thought, a genuine smile curling her lips as she finally turned the page.

Chapter 20

As the workday wound down, Ryan and Chaz stepped out of the kitchen, their aprons off and their shift officially over. They paused near the bar, spotting Jonathan and Chloe still deep in the grind, finishing the last of the closing duties.

"Now's your chance, mate," Chaz whispered with a cheeky, instigating grin. He gave Ryan a sharp nudge toward the counter. "Go on. Don't be a spectator."

Ryan took a deep, steadying breath and approached Chloe. She was focused on wiping down the espresso machine, her movements fluid and practiced. He hesitated for a heartbeat, then pushed forward.

"Chloe? Can I ask you something?"

She looked up, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "Always. What's up, Ryan?"

"Do you think... I mean, Chaz mentioned it earlier... do you think I should transfer to Front of House?" Ryan asked, trying to sound like a man with a casual career plan, though his pulse was drumming in his ears.

Chloe offered a warm, thoughtful smile. "Honestly? If you really want to manage your own place someday, you need to see how the floor works. You've got the kitchen down, but the front... that's where the chaos lives. I think you'd be great at it."

Ryan's smile grew, a wave of genuine relief flooding through him. "Thanks for the tip. I appreciate that. Hey, since you're the expert... maybe we could grab a drink sometime? Talk more about the business side of things?" The words tumbled out before he could talk himself out of them.

Chloe considered it for a second, her expression unreadable, then she nodded. "Sounds good, Ryan. When I get a free day in my rota, I'll let you know."

Ryan felt a surge of adrenaline—no awkwardness, no "just friends" disclaimer. It was a victory.

"Great! There's a cool spot just outside of town that I—"

Before he could finish the sentence, Jonathan strode over, cutting through the moment like a gust of cold wind.

"Ryan, stop holding her up. Let the girl finish her closing duties, yeah? I've got a life to get back to and I want to lock up," Jonathan snapped, his tone making it clear he viewed Ryan as a nuisance.

Ryan's jaw tightened. He glared at Jonathan, the "Scrooge" nickname from earlier feeling more appropriate than ever. He turned back to Chloe with a soft, resilient half-smile. "Message me later, yeah?"

He walked off toward the exit, Chaz trailing behind him and mouthing 'In there!' with a thumbs up.

But the air in the café remained heavy.

Just as Ryan left, Justin and Phil emerged from the staff room, coats on. Justin had spent the last twenty minutes reflecting. The high of the "hazelnut prank" had faded, replaced by a nagging sense that he was better than a petty saboteur. He decided to try one last time to fix the bridge.

He approached Jonathan, his usual cockiness replaced by a rare, sincere tone. "Listen, Jonny—can we talk for a sec?"

Jonathan stopped what he was doing, his posture stiffening.

"I know I was a jerk earlier," Justin said, his voice level. "I didn't mean for it to go down like that. Honestly, I was just gutted about not getting the promotion and I took it out on you. That wasn't professional. How about we call it a clean slate tomorrow? Start over?"

Justin extended his hand, an open offer of peace hanging in the air.

Jonathan didn't even look at the hand. He met Justin's gaze with a look of pure, icy loathing. He folded his arms tightly across his chest, closing himself off.

"Let me make this very clear to you, Justin," Jonathan said, his voice a low, dangerous hiss. "I don't like you. And in the short time I've known you, you've been the single biggest pain in the arse I've ever had the misfortune of working with."

The color drained from Justin's face.

"If it were up to me," Jonathan continued, stepping closer until he was in Justin's space, "you'd be out on the street already. So here is your one and only warning: one more bit of 'nonsense,' one more prank, one more sarcastic comment, and I will personally see to it that Clifton throws you out without a second thought. Got it?"

The words landed with the weight of a physical blow. Justin's extended hand dropped slowly to his side. He looked at Phil, then at Chloe, but both were frozen, stunned by the sheer venom in Jonathan's voice. Justin, usually the first with a comeback, found himself speechless.

Without another word, Jonathan turned his back on them and walked toward the office, the click of his expensive shoes on the linoleum the only sound in the room.

Justin stood alone in the center of the floor, the offer of peace dissolved into the bitter air. The war wasn't over. It had just turned into a bloodbath.

Chapter 21

[15] - *Don't Look Back into the Sun* – The Libertines

As Justin stalked away from the café, frustration simmering just beneath his skin, Phil fell into step beside him. He shot a sidelong glance at his friend, reading the rigid set of his shoulders and the white-knuckle grip he had on his bag before breaking the silence.

"I'm not gonna lie, Justin... that was out of order," Phil said, his tone unusually measured, lacking his usual banter. "Even for a corporate type, that was cold. But you can't let him see it get to you, mate. That's exactly what he wants."

Justin exhaled a sharp, jagged breath, his jaw still tight enough to ache. "If that's how he wants to play it? Fine," he muttered, his eyes narrowing as they tracked the streetlights ahead. "One of us won't last another month in that building—and it sure as hell won't be me."

Phil smirked, shaking his head. Despite the tension, he couldn't help but admire the fire. "Well, you technically won this round with the hazelnut fiasco. Come on, let's grab a pint. My treat. You look like you're about to implode."

Before Justin could answer, Ryan and Chaz stepped out from the shadows of a shop doorway up ahead, looking like they'd been waiting for the fallout.

"Alright, lads," Chaz called out, spotting them. He looked at Justin's face and whistled low. "Bloody hell, Justin. You look like you've just gone ten rounds with a heavy-weight."

"Who are you lot waiting for? The bus doesn't run this late," Phil asked, his mood lifting at the sight of the others.

Ryan stepped forward, a small, genuine smile on his face. "We were gonna ask if you wanted to come over and chill at ours. Watch a film, if you're up for it. The pub's gonna be packed with tourists anyway."

Chaz grinned, leaning against a lamp post. "Yeah, and something that isn't Chungking Express this time. I've had enough slow-mo pineapples to last a lifetime."

Phil rolled his eyes with a laugh. "I'm game. You in, Justin? You could do with a chilled one tonight. Better than brooding in your room."

Justin hesitated, the toxic static of Jonathan's voice still ringing in his ears. Then, a slow, sly grin spread across his face—the look of a man who was ready to clock out of reality for a few hours. "If we're watching a film, I could do with something to relax me first. Properly."

Phil chuckled, unsurprised. "Fine. We'll detour to mine on the way so you can grab your supplies, but you're the one rolling the joints."

Justin snorted, his grin widening. "Fair enough. I've earned a smoke after today. What's the flick tonight, then? More subtitles?"

Ryan nodded, a spark of excitement in his eyes. "We're watching *Fallen Angels*. It's Wong Kar-wai's follow-up to *Chungking*. It's grittier. Darker."

Justin raised an eyebrow. "What's the hook?"

"It's about a series of eventful nights in Hong Kong. Hitmen, strange encounters, people looking for connection in a city that doesn't care if they live or die," Ryan said with a sly smile.

Justin grinned, the theme of "eventful nights" and "hitmen" sounding exactly like the escapism he needed. "Sounds like my kind of chaos. How eventful we talking?"

Ryan chuckled as they began to walk. "You'll see. It's got a vibe you won't forget."

The group started moving toward the residential streets, the tension of the "Cold War" at Red's Coffee easing into the easy, familiar camaraderie of the crew. The streetlights cast

long, flickering shadows on the damp Stratford pavement, the night air cool and smelling of rain.

The town carried on around them, indifferent to the petty rivalries of a local coffee shop—but Justin wasn't indifferent. As he walked, he felt the plan for Jonathan starting to take a more permanent shape in his mind.

This wasn't a prank anymore. This was a siege.

THE END

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