

Order Up!

Season 1 | Episode 4: What Makes You Beautiful

Written by Robbie Fleming

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2026

Main Cast

- William Gao - Ryan Foster (Team Member 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 Ramsey (Kitchen Assistant at Red's)
- with Harry Lloyd - Jonathan Blake (Assistant Manager at Red's)
- and Jonathan Lipnicki - Justin Green (Team Supervisor at Red's)

Additional Cast

- Charlie Creed-Miles - Mike Parker (Chloe's father)
- Jessica Hynes - Rude Customer
- Josh O'Connor - Mark (Customer at Red's)
- Maxine Peake - Karen Parker (Chloe's mother)
- David Schnall - Gary (Customer at Red's)
- Bonnie Wright - Amanda (Customer at Red's)
- Unknown Actor - Americano
- Unknown Actor - Breakfast Roll
- Unknown Actor - Lemonade
- Unknown Actor - Tuna Melt

Soundtrack (Available on Spotify @KeziahHydeMedia)

1. As It Was by Harry Styles (Chloe listens to it on the way to work/ plays in Reds)
2. Psychosocial by Slipknot (Plays on Chaz's speaker in the kitchen)
3. Dreams by Fleetwood Mac (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
4. A Life of Illusion by Joe Walsh (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
5. Busy Earnin' by Jungle (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
6. Silence Speaks by While She Sleeps feat. Oli Sykes (Play's on Chaz's kitchen speaker)
7. Whatever by Oasis (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
8. Crazy Train by Ozzy Osbourne (Chaz plays through his speaker in the kitchen)
9. (You're) The Devil in Disguise by Elvis Presley (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
10. Changes by Black Sabbath (Chaz plays through his speaker in the kitchen)
11. The Moment by Tame Impala (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
12. What Makes You Beautiful by One Direction (Chloe shows Jonathan the video to it)
13. Things in Life by Dennis Brown (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
14. Ashes to Ashes by Faith No More (plays through Chaz's speaker)
15. Harder Better Faster Stronger by Daft Punk (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
16. Golden by Harry Styles (Chloe listens to it on the way home, and it plays into the end credits)

OPENING

Chloe is lying on her bed, laptop open as she video calls Ryan. In the background, her favourite teen drama, Hollow's Reach, is playing on the TV.

"Ryan, you seriously need to get into Hollow's Reach," Chloe says, trying to keep one eye on the screen and the other on the webcam. "This season's been incredible. Harry Styles is even in tonight's episode."

Ryan shrugs through the laptop screen. "I'm not sure it's for me. I'm not really into those cheesy teen dramas."

"It's not just a cheesy teen drama," Chloe replies. "That's what everyone thinks before they watch it."

"So what's so special about it?"

"It starts off looking like a normal teen mystery, then you realise the whole town's built over this ancient entity that's been messing with everyone's heads for years. Every season peels back another layer."

Ryan raises an eyebrow. "An ancient entity?"

"Yeah. The mayor, Ken Doyle, knows way more than he lets on, and his nephew Richie moves to town and slowly uncovers what's really happening. Richie and his cousin Wesley basically become detectives trying to figure the whole thing out."

"So it's basically Stranger Things?"

"It's got a bit of Stranger Things, a bit of Twin Peaks, a bit of Buffy... but it does its own thing. It's creepy, funny, and the characters actually grow."

Ryan folds his arms. "Go on."

"Wesley's brilliant, Curtis is probably one of the best TV dads ever, Wanda's such a badass, and everyone loves hating Will because he's so unbelievably annoying."

Ryan laughs. "So there's actually someone you're supposed to dislike?"

"Oh, absolutely. He's the kind of character that makes you shout at the TV."

"And Harry Styles?"

"You have to earn Harry Styles," Chloe says with a grin. "He turns up in a three-episode arc as Ken's long-lost son. I won't spoil why he's important."

Ryan chuckles. "Sounds like stunt casting."

"I thought that at first, but he's actually really good. Fans loved him."

Ryan glances away for a moment. "Still sounds like one of those shows where everyone's secretly related."

Chloe laughs. "Okay... maybe a little. But that's not why people watch it. The mystery's brilliant, Richie's relationship with Taylor is one of the healthiest romances on TV, and even the weaker alien season got redeemed when they revealed it was all hallucinations caused by the entity."

Ryan stares for a second.

"That's... actually a surprisingly clever retcon."

"I know!"

Ryan smiles. "I'm still probably not going to watch it."

"Oh, come on. If I managed to get Phil and Justin hooked, I can definitely get you into it."

"I'll stick to Squid Game, thanks."

Chloe laughs, then her expression turns more sincere. "You know, these last two weeks have been great. It looks like I'll actually be passing uni thanks to you and your tips."

Ryan smiles. "Just trying my best. Although, you have to admit—work's been hectic since the new system came in. Chaz hasn't stopped moaning about it."

"You know what, Ryan? Learning from you has made me think about staying on at Red's and actually making the place better. You and the team... you're like family to me. I don't want to abandon ship and let you all suffer through its downfall," Chloe says, her tone softening.

Ryan smiles warmly. "Honestly, after working with you for a week, I see a lot of potential in you. Maybe you should talk to Melissa about going for a supervisor or manager role in the future."

Chloe pauses. The weight of Ryan's words hangs in the air, making her genuinely reconsider her path. Suddenly, there's a knock at the door.

"Chloe, can I come in?" her mum calls out.

Chloe mutes the TV and looks back at Ryan. "See you at work tomorrow."

"No problem. Bye, Chloe," Ryan says as his screen goes black. Chloe closes the laptop.

"Come in," Chloe says. Karen opens the door and walks in.

"Is everything okay? I haven't seen you since dinner," Karen asks.

"Sorry, Mum. I was just finishing up an assignment. Trying to get ahead on uni work while things are so hectic at work with the revamp," Chloe replies.

Karen tilts her head, genuinely surprised by Chloe's shift in attitude. "What have you done with my daughter? This is a 'New Chloe' I'm seeing."

Chloe smiles. "My workmate Ryan has been helping me. He's really into this stuff."

“Ryan?!” Karen grins. “Let me guess—future boyfriend?”

“Mum!” Chloe groans. “He’s just a workmate. Dating and work don’t mix.”

Karen sighs. “You shouldn’t rule it out. Your Aunt Donna and Uncle Kelvin met through work—now they’re business partners, married, two kids, the lot.”

Chloe doesn’t respond, giving her mum a flat, “stop-it” look.

“Karen!” Nick’s voice calls out from the other bedroom. “Don’t be pushy!”

“Alright, Nick, alright. Night, Chloe,” Karen says, shutting the door behind her.

Chloe picks up her phone and opens Ryan’s profile. She scrolls for a second. I have to admit... Ryan is kind of cute. And he’s got a great personality. But do love and the workplace mix?

She looks at the paused frame of Harry Styles on her TV and grabs her phone again. She types out a message:

SORRY ABOUT THAT! MUM WANTED TO TALK. I WAS THINKING, IF I GO FOR A MANAGERIAL ROLE, I CAN RETURN THE FAVOUR SO YOU CAN BE A MANAGER TOO.

She hits send. A second later, she sees Ryan has read it. He reacts with a heart emoji and replies:

SOUNDS LIKE A PLAN

Chloe smiles, looks back at the TV, and aimed the remote. “Thanks, Harry,” she says, and presses play.

Act One

CHAPTER 1

[1] As It Was by Harry Styles

Chloe cruised down the road from Kenilworth to Stratford-upon-Avon on her motorcycle, Harry Styles playing through her headphones. The sky was a clear, piercing blue, and the trees seemed to dance in the breeze as she leaned into the curves of the ride. When she arrived at Red’s, she parked, removed her helmet, and snapped a quick selfie—a playful filter stamped across the image: TIMES ARE CHANGING.

But the moment she stepped inside, that brightness dimmed. The energy in the building felt heavy. Something was off.

To her left, the new self-serve kiosks sat idle, their screens glowing with cold, white light. Ahead, the bar stood at the center of the space, framed by two dining areas that felt unnaturally quiet. Melissa’s office was tucked off to the left, opposite the kiosks. To the right, the corridor led toward the kitchen, with the food hatch waiting silently for an order that hadn’t come yet.

At the far end was the back door—the team's unofficial escape hatch, or as they called it, “the space outside reality.”

Back in the front, Jonathan was wiping down a table. He looked stiff, his posture hunched like a mannequin that had been through too many shifts.

“Morning, Chloe,” he said flatly, not looking up.

“Morning, Jonathan.” She smiled, but he didn’t return it.

She made her way to the bar. Phil stood behind it, robotically pressing buttons on the new coffee machine—gone was the flair he used to have. The art of the pour had been replaced by a digital progress bar. The soul had left the process.

“What’s up, Chloe?” Justin passed by, his voice half-hearted.

“I’m good, thanks. You?”

“Living the dream,” he muttered, flashing a theatrical smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

At the bar, Chloe leaned in. “Rough day, huh?” she asked Phil.

Phil nodded toward Jonathan. “Could be worse. I could be in his shoes.”

Chloe glanced back and saw Jonathan awkwardly trying to assist a customer at the kiosk.

“How can I help?” Jonathan asked, his voice sounding more like a pre-recorded assistant than a person.

“I’m trying to order a breakfast roll and a coffee, but I can’t figure this thing out,” the customer complained, poking at the screen with a frustrated finger.

“Just select the items you want and scan your card or phone to pay,” Jonathan explained—monotone and joyless.

“So... you don’t take cash?”

“Nope. We’re cashless now,” Jonathan replied, his shoulders tense.

The customer paused, clearly unimpressed. “Right... yeah, maybe I’ll just go to Greggs instead.” He turned and walked out, the bell on the door ringing with a lonely chime.

Jonathan’s jaw tightened. Chloe could see the doubt creeping into his expression. He’s still not settled here, she thought. I wonder why?

Justin sauntered by, ever the opportunist. “Stop scaring the customers off, Jonny. You’re meant to make money, not lose it.”

Jonathan didn’t respond. He just stared at the empty doorway, frustration bubbling beneath the surface. Ryan arrived then, catching the tail end of the exchange.

“You alright, mate?” Ryan asked Jonathan gently.

Jonathan shrugged. “Still getting used to talking to customers.”

“You’ll get there,” Ryan said reassuringly. “It takes time.”

From the bar, Chloe watched the scene play out. She turned back to Phil. "Where's Mel?"

"In her office."

"Thanks."

She nodded and made her way down the corridor, dropping her helmet and jacket in the staff room before heading toward Melissa's office. She was ready to talk about how they could turn things around—because Red's didn't feel like Red's anymore, and Chloe was done watching it fall apart.

CHAPTER 2

Melissa was sitting at her desk, staring at a wall of figures on her monitor, when a sharp knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," Melissa said, looking up as Chloe stepped into the small, paper-strewn office.

"Melissa, have you got a moment? I wanted to talk to you about something," Chloe asked.

"Sure, take a seat," Melissa replied, gesturing to the functional plastic chair opposite her. Chloe sat down, looking more focused than usual. Melissa finished typing a final note, clicked to save her spreadsheet, and turned her full attention to the younger girl. "How can I help you, Chloe?"

"I was talking to Ryan last night," Chloe began, a little nervous but steady. "He thinks I should go for a supervisor or managerial position here one day. I wanted to know... is that something we could work toward?"

Melissa raised an eyebrow. This was a sharp 180-degree turn. "This doesn't sound like the Chloe I know. Two weeks ago, you said you just wanted to keep your head down until you finished uni. What changed?"

"Ryan," Chloe replied quickly. "He's been helping me with my uni work, and we started talking about how to improve the place. I just thought... if I became a supervisor, maybe I could return the favor and help him out too. Support his dream, you know?"

Melissa's expression softened, a small, genuine smile forming. "Well, Chloe... if that's truly what you want, then I've got some good news. Mr. Clifton emailed me this morning. Head office wants every branch to have two supervisors as part of the new 'Efficiency Drive.' And honestly? I was already thinking about approaching you, if you decided to stay on."

Chloe's eyes lit up in genuine surprise. "Wow. I didn't expect it to happen this quickly."

Melissa nodded, her smirk returning—this time with a hint of mischief. "However... there is a condition. I'm going to have you shadow Jonathan for the rest of the shift so you can pick up some leadership skills."

"Jonathan?" Chloe's face fell. "Why not Justin? He's the actual supervisor, and he's always been my work buddy."

"You would be shadowing Justin... if he hadn't already blown his chances for further promotion with his behavior," Melissa said, leaning back. Her tone became more serious.

“Jonathan lacks the social intelligence and empathy that you have in spades, Chloe. He struggles with customers and connecting with the team. If he can’t improve, he’s at risk of being let go. But I think, with the right ‘social mentor,’ he could become a lot more personable.”

“So... Jonathan and I would be learning from each other?” Chloe asked, clarifying the plan.

“Exactly,” Melissa said firmly. “By the end of today, I want you to show me that you’re an emerging leader—and I expect Jonathan to be a model employee.”

Chloe stood up, her confidence returning. “Well, you can count on me. I’ve noticed morale could use a serious boost around here, and Jonathan could definitely benefit from actually talking to the team.”

“That’s a good start,” Melissa replied. “Is there anything else?”

“That’s everything. Thanks, Melissa.”

“Remember: New Leader. Model Employee.”

“Got it!” Chloe said with a grin as she walked out.

Melissa watched her go, then leaned back in her chair, exhaling a long breath. She had effectively killed two birds with one stone, but she knew that putting Chloe and Jonathan together was either a stroke of genius or a recipe for a very loud argument.

CHAPTER 3

[2] Psychosocial by Slipknot

Chaz and Lydia were in the kitchen, working steadily through the morning prep while blasting heavy metal from Chaz’s portable speaker. They knew the new equipment inside out by now—both being fully trained shift leads—but the joy of cooking had all but vanished. The only creative thing Chaz had done lately was give the machines nicknames.

The vegetable prep machine was “Tony,” after Anthony Bourdain. The microwave? “Heston,” named after Heston Blumenthal.

“At least we’re smashin’ it,” Lydia said with a cheeky grin, plating up a sandwich.

“Yeah...” Chaz muttered. “Cheers to Tony an’ Heston, eh?”

His tone was flat—not proud, just knackered. Lydia clocked it straight away. “What’s up, Chef? You’re not yourself today.”

Chaz let out a long, heavy sigh. “It’s these bloody machines, innit? Ever since Clifton an’ his lot from head office dumped this tech in ‘ere, it’s like... it’s not even cookin’ no more. I used to make food. Now I just press buttons.”

“I get you,” Lydia nodded. “If my dad was still runnin’ his food truck and someone tried bringing in a microwave? He’d have blown it up.”

Chaz let out a weak chuckle. “Even if I packed it in, it’d be the same anywhere else. Let’s face it—proper cookin’s dyin’ out.”

"Yeah...that's shit," Lydia said. "How do we even stop it? Feels like we just gotta firm it and ride the wave."

Chaz groaned, leaning on the counter as Tony whirled beside him. The kitchen was spotless. Efficient. Soulless. He'd never felt more disconnected from the job.

"I've got a plan, though," he said suddenly. "Move to Thailand and go and live in the mountains. Least they cook proper over there."

Lydia burst out laughing. "I'd pay to see that. Brummie man in Thailand, yeah?"

Chaz looked up, half offended. "Oi, Lydia—I'm not from Brum. I'm from Shirley. Solihull, thank you very much."

"Same thing. You'd still be the odd one out there," she teased.

"Nonsense. Plenty of Brits go to live in Thailand."

Lydia just kept laughing. Chaz shook his head, his frustration finally snapping. "Besides—it'd still beat slavin' in this corporate shithole!"

He hurled his cloth to the ground, fed up. Lydia didn't say anything; she just watched him storm toward the back door.

"I'm goin' for a smoke," he muttered, disappearing outside.

Lydia stared after him, her grin fading. She'd come here to learn from a passionate, skilled chef—someone who could show her what food really meant. But that Chaz? He wasn't here anymore. Not with Tony and Heston doin' half the graft.

All that was left was a tired man, ground down by systems and screens. And Lydia couldn't help but wonder if the fire—the one that made him Chaz the Chef—was ever comin' back.

CHAPTER 4

[3] Dreams by Fleetwood Mac

Ryan stood behind the bar, polishing glasses until they gleamed. Beside him, Phil methodically checked the drinks stock, quietly efficient. Ryan glanced up as Chloe emerged from Melissa's office, heading their way with a look of dazed determination.

He smiled. "Well? How'd it go with Mel?"

Chloe returned a small, nervous smile. "Turns out she actually wants me to go for the new supervisor position."

Ryan perked up, setting down a glass. "That's great news!"

Chloe raised a hand to temper his excitement. "Yeah—except I have to shadow Jonathan."

Ryan blinked. "Jonathan? Not Justin?"

"She wants me to pick up leadership skills from him," Chloe said, rolling her eyes. "And in return, I'm supposed to help him with 'social skills.' Apparently, I'm his personality coach."

Ryan let out a low laugh. "That's... ambitious."

"Tell me about it," Chloe sighed. "Where do I even start? How do you coach someone out of being... a malfunctioning Roomba?"

Ryan leaned on the bar, thoughtful. "Okay, think of someone you admire—someone with presence, people skills, and confidence. Now imagine how you'd break those traits down and make them usable for someone like Jonathan."

Chloe tilted her head, thinking hard. "Can't say anyone's coming to mind..."

Ryan smirked. "You've been non-stop about Harry Styles lately."

Chloe groaned, though a smile tugged at her lips. "Okay, fine. He's got confidence without arrogance. Charisma. People gravitate toward him. And he's a team player—not just the center of attention."

"There you go," Ryan said. "Don't try to turn Jonathan into Harry Styles—just help him tap into something warmer. Something more human."

"So I'm going for pop star charm and soft boy energy?" she joked.

Ryan shrugged. "You could do worse."

Chloe chuckled, the idea starting to click in her mind. "You're actually making this sound doable."

"That's what I'm here for," Ryan said. "Truthfully? I think Jonathan just needs someone to actually see him—not just tolerate him. He's not a bad guy... he's just stuck."

Chloe nodded slowly. "Maybe this will help him loosen up. God knows the team needs a win."

As they spoke, Justin passed by, catching their energy from the corner of his eye. He didn't say anything, but the glance lingered—curious, and maybe a little cautious.

"I just hope I'm up for it," Chloe said, her voice softer now. "There's a lot riding on this—the promotion, Jonathan's job... my own sanity."

Right then, Jonathan walked up, carrying himself like a man still figuring out how to exist in his own skin.

"Chloe," he said, his voice stiff and overly formal. "Melissa told me you'll be shadowing me today. I'll explain the supervisor's duties. Let's talk in the staff room."

He waited exactly one beat, then turned and walked off without waiting for her response.

Chloe blinked at his retreating back. "So much warmth," she muttered.

Ryan laughed quietly. "Good luck, Chloe."

She shot him a look that said I'll need it and followed Jonathan down the corridor, already mentally translating pop star charisma into bullet points on a notepad.

CHAPTER 5

[4] A Life of Illusion by Joe Walsh

A new track played softly over the speakers at Red's—upbeat, but it barely cut through the heavy mood hanging in the air. At the bar, Phil carefully measured coffee grounds into the machine while Ryan swapped out the syrup bags in the soda dispenser.

"Watched Waiting... yet?" Phil asked, almost offhand.

"Yeah, over the weekend," Ryan said, flashing a cheeky grin. "Didn't expect that recommendation from you, man. Thought you were more... refined."

Phil smirked, shaking his head. "We all need cinematic junk food now and then. I don't rate it up there with Scarface or The Shawshank Redemption, but it's a laugh."

"It's no Chungking Express, though," Ryan teased, shooting him a look.

They both laughed under their breath as they worked.

"So, what's your guilty pleasure then?" Phil asked, glancing over.

"Step Brothers," Ryan said instantly. "Could watch it on a loop. I'm not usually big on American comedies, but that one cracks me up every time."

Phil let out a small groan. "Never seen it. Can't stand Will Ferrell—but hey, fair enough."

Ryan gave him a playful shove with his elbow. "Come on, you'd love it if you gave it a chance."

Phil raised an eyebrow. "We'll see. You want another rec?"

"Hit me."

"Daisies. Czech film from the sixties. It's my mum's favorite."

Ryan blinked. "Daisies? That sounds... niche."

Phil laughed lightly. "Yeah, well, my mum's from Czechia. I've seen a lot of their old stuff."

Ryan's eyes widened. "No way—so we're both film nerds and only half-English? What are the odds?"

Phil chuckled, a real smile breaking through his usual stoic mask. "Mad, right?"

He turned back to the coffee machine just as Justin sauntered over, that trademark smirk already firmly in place.

"Hey, Phil," Justin said, leaning heavily on the counter. "Wanna hear something fun?"

Phil didn't even bother looking up. "What now, Justin?"

"Chloe's shadowing Jonny today. She's supposed to teach him how to be, like, Harry Styles or something."

Phil let out an exasperated sigh, rubbing his temple. "Justin... I probably shouldn't tell you this, but Melissa said Jonathan's on thin ice. He's close to getting the chop. Chloe's not there for a fangirl club—she's trying to teach him how to actually talk to people so he doesn't lose his livelihood."

Justin snorted. "Come on. You know Jonny—quiet, stiff, zero instincts. If it were up to me, I'd have let him go ages ago. He's not a 'Red's' guy."

Phil shot him a look, finally meeting his eyes. "And as your mate, I'm telling you—don't stir the pot. Let Chloe do her thing. We've got bigger things to worry about."

Justin raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Like what?"

Phil lowered his voice, glancing around to make sure Jonathan wasn't in earshot. "Like how we're one kiosk update away from coffee robots replacing us all."

Justin shrugged it off with a half-smile. "Still got our jobs for now, though, right? That's something."

Phil didn't look convinced. "Just wait 'til they roll out robot waiters and self-serve baristas. Then we're all foraging for mushrooms in the woods."

Justin leaned back, his grin spreading wide. "Good thing I like mushrooms. Guess that makes me a 'fun guy.'"

Phil didn't even crack a smile. "My grandad was in nursery school when that joke was invented, Justin."

Justin laughed and pushed off the counter. "You love me really!"

Phil just snorted and turned back to the machine as Justin ambled away, humming the Joe Walsh track to himself.

CHAPTER 6

Chloe and Jonathan were sitting in the staff room. Jonathan perched stiffly on the edge of the sofa, his posture locked in place like a statue. Chloe sat across from him, legs crossed and hands neatly on her lap, trying her absolute best to stay present.

"So, Chloe," Jonathan began, his voice flat and overly formal, "as a supervisor, you will be expected to act as a bridge between the team and management. This means ensuring tasks are being completed, overseeing shift duties, and thinking two steps ahead at all times."

He droned on in the dullest way imaginable—somehow managing to sound even more monotonous than one of Chloe's university lecturers.

"You will also be responsible for providing training to both new and existing team members," he continued, "acting as a point of counsel, and escalating any concerns beyond your remit to either myself or Melissa."

Chloe rested her chin against her hand, her eyelids feeling heavy. "Okay..." she said, barely hiding her disinterest.

"You will also receive benefits," Jonathan added mechanically. "Free meals during shifts, full training including bar and first aid certifications, and a pay rise of one pound twenty per hour."

"Yeah," Chloe said flatly, her voice dripping with mock enthusiasm. "Riveting."

Jonathan paused and glanced at her, finally noticing her slouching posture and wandering eyes. "Sorry, Chloe," he said firmly, "am I boring you?"

Chloe didn't even try to deny it. "Honestly? Yes. Who did you model this performance off—the old guy from The Mask?"

"I don't understand. I am simply delivering the information Melissa requested," he said, looking genuinely confused.

Chloe sat up straighter, deciding it was time for the "Harry Styles Method" of directness. "Look, Jonathan, I'll level with you. Melissa told me the real reason I'm shadowing you. I'm here to help you improve your social skills—with the team and the customers."

Jonathan furrowed his brow, his defensive wall going back up. "And... how exactly are you going to do that?"

Chloe sighed. "Let's be real. I want this promotion, and you want to keep your job. If we help each other, we both end up in Mel's good books. It's a win-win." She extended her hand toward him.

Jonathan hesitated, clearly thrown off by the sudden shift in power. His eyes flicked around the room, searching for an out, until they landed on the "Employee of the Month" board. Justin's smug, theatrical photo stared back at him from the center of the frame.

Chloe followed his gaze and hit him where it hurt. "Last thing you want is to lose your job... and let Justin win."

That was the clincher.

Jonathan nodded slowly, a spark of competitive fire finally showing through the robotic exterior. "Deal." He shook her hand—it was awkward and a bit too firm, but it was sincere.

"So," he asked cautiously, "how do you propose I become more... social?"

Chloe smiled, the kind of smile a director gives an actor before a big scene. "Let's hit the floor. I'll show you how it's done."

Jonathan gave a resigned sigh. "Alright."

Chloe stood up and led the way out of the staff room. Jonathan followed behind, uncertain and stiff, but for the first time, he was actually willing to listen. Social Skills 101 had officially begun.

CHAPTER 7

[5] Busy Earnin' by Jungle

Chloe and Jonathan stood just outside the corridor, peering out across the diner floor. The morning shift was in full swing—the clink of cutlery, the hiss of the coffee machine, and the low hum of conversation created a familiar, busy rhythm.

Chloe pulled a small notepad from her apron pocket and flipped it open. “Alright,” she said, stepping into teacher mode. “If we’re going to make you more personable—with the team and the customers—we need a blueprint. A role model.”

Jonathan arched an eyebrow. “Go on...”

“Harry Styles.”

Jonathan blinked, his brain clearly trying to process the logic. “The pop singer?”

Chloe nodded, dead serious. “Yup. He’s got four traits that make him magnetic: confidence, charisma, presence, and teamwork. If you can mirror even one, you’ll see a massive difference.”

“So... you want me to pretend I’m Harry Styles now?”

“No,” Chloe said, tapping her pen against the pad. “I want you to learn from Harry Styles. This is Social Skills 101—The Harry Styles Method.”

Jonathan let out a quiet sigh, followed by the ghost of a smile. “Alright... I’ll bite.”

“Good,” Chloe said. “Step one: Confidence. Who would you say is the most confident person here?”

“Ryan,” Jonathan answered without hesitation. “He’s only been out front a month, but he handles people like a pro.”

“Exactly,” Chloe said, pleased. “Let’s observe the master.”

They stepped closer to the bar just as Gary—a loud, friendly regular—strolled in and greeted Ryan, who was pouring Cola from the soda tap.

“Alright, SpongeBob!” Gary grinned. “They finally let you out of the kitchen? Patrick missing you?”

Ryan laughed, smooth and unfazed. “Transferred a while ago, Gary. You’ll be seeing more of me out here from now on.”

Gary smiled. “Booth free? I could murder a coffee.”

“There sure is,” Ryan said with easy confidence. “Just scan the QR code at the table—you’re good to go.”

“Cheers, SpongeBob.” As Gary headed to his seat, he gave Chloe and Jonathan a wave. “Alright, Joy. Scrooge.”

Chloe smirked. Jonathan watched, quietly taking it all in.

"See that?" Chloe whispered. "Confidence made the difference. He didn't fake it; he owned the space."

Jonathan nodded slowly. "He made it look easy... and he used to be in the kitchen, too."

"Confidence," Chloe repeated. "That's your first step."

Just then, a woman across the room raised her hand sharply. "Excuse me? Hello?!"

Chloe straightened her apron. "Watch this," she whispered. "Confidence in action."

She approached the table with her best professional smile. "Everything okay over here?"

"No. My coffee tastes like dishwater!" the woman snapped.

"I'm really sorry about that," Chloe said, calm but firm. "Would you like me to ask Phil to make a fresh one?"

"Yeah—and make sure it actually tastes like it used to," the customer barked.

Chloe forced a sympathetic smile. "We've recently changed machines. Honestly? I'm not a fan either."

The woman wasn't having it. "Well, this place sucks—and you all suck at your jobs!"

Chloe's hands trembled slightly. She kept trying to stay composed, but the woman kept pushing, her voice rising. "Is there anyone here smart enough to make a decent cup of fucking coffee in this bloody diner!?"

And then—Chloe snapped.

"Then maybe go to a different fucking diner!" she fired back, her voice cracking with pure frustration.

Gasps rippled around the room. The woman shot to her feet, grabbing her handbag. "That's it. We're never coming back. I'll be speaking to the manager!"

Before Chloe could respond or sink into a hole of regret, Jonathan stepped forward. "Excuse me, ma'am."

His voice was calm. Steady. Totally in control. The woman paused, caught off guard by the sheer stillness of him.

"We don't tolerate abuse toward staff here at Red's," Jonathan said evenly. "You're welcome to file a formal complaint. But otherwise, I suggest you leave now—and do not return."

His tone was measured. Firm without being confrontational. And, for the first time, truly confident. The customer stared him down for a beat, realized she wasn't going to get a reaction, and stormed out with her group trailing behind.

Chloe stood frozen, stunned. Slowly, a genuine smile tugged at her lips. "Congratulations," she said. "You just passed Lesson One."

Jonathan looked puzzled. "How? I didn't use 'charm.'"

"You stood up for me," Chloe said. "Not because it was a rule in a manual, but because it was the right thing to do. That's confidence, Jonathan. Real confidence. It came from instinct."

Jonathan's expression softened, looking thoughtful. "It did feel... good. Like I was actually there, instead of just existing."

"You were," Chloe said. "And that's only the beginning."

She looked at him with pride—part mentor, part friend. She might've lost her cool, but in doing so, she gave Jonathan the space to step up.

Act Two

CHAPTER 8

[6] Silence Speaks by While She Sleeps and Oli Sykes

Melissa stepped into the kitchen and caught both Chaz and Lydia glued to their phones. Lydia was scrolling through the Instagram feed of a metal band, while Chaz squinted at the weekend's football fixtures like he was deciphering a secret code.

"What are you two doing?" she asked, arms folded and eyebrows raised in a classic managerial stance.

Lydia flinched, nearly dropping her phone. "Mel! You scared the life outta me."

Chaz didn't even look up. "Just checkin' who Villa are playin'. Thinkin' of takin' Ryan down to Villa Park."

"Chaz, put your phone away," Melissa said, her voice sharpening.

"Alright, alright..." he muttered, locking the screen and tucking it into his apron. "No need to get proper stressed."

"Why aren't you guys prepping? Or cleaning? Or doing anything remotely job-related?"

Chaz flashed her a tired half-smile. "Kitchen's spotless, Mel. Everythin's bang on."

Lydia nodded casually. "Yeah, we're just chillin'. Prep's done. Tony handled all that."

Melissa blinked. "Tony?"

Chaz jerked his thumb at the vegetable prep machine. "That bad boy right there. Named him after Anthony Bourdain."

Melissa smirked. "Let me guess—the microwave's Jamie? Or Oliver?"

Lydia made a face. "Ugh, nah. Not that wasteman."

Chaz chuckled. "Microwave's called Heston. After Heston Blumenthal. Legend. My second favorite chef—after Tony, obviously."

Melissa shook her head, amused despite herself. "You and your culinary idols."

"They ain't just idols," Chaz said, his tone turning serious. "They had passion. Craft. Real love for it. Now it's just... beep, beep, done."

Lydia leaned on the stainless steel counter. "Yeah, it's all techy now. We don't even cook no more. Just heat and serve."

Melissa let out a slow sigh. "I get it. I really do. But this wasn't my call. Head office pushed the upgrades."

Chaz's voice dipped, thick with frustration. "Spent years graftin'—knife work, sauces, timing... all of it. And now I just stand 'ere watchin' a microwave take the credit. Max would've lost his mind. Mike Barnes, too."

Melissa's expression softened at the mention of the old names. "Maybe they left before things changed too much. Before it all got... sterile."

Lydia nodded. "This ain't on you, Mel. You're still here, still holding it down."

Chaz nodded too, quieter now. "Yeah. You've always had our backs. Even when the suits upstairs don't give a toss."

Melissa gave them a small, appreciative smile. "It just stings, you know? Seeing you both like this. You used to have fire. You loved this job."

Chaz looked away, blinking rapidly. "You always did know how to make things sound nicer than they are."

She smiled back gently. "That's how I've made it this far. Gotta find the beauty where you can." She glanced at the clock and sighed. "Right—I better crack on. I've got a mountain of admin waiting for me, and I'm not even halfway through."

Lydia grinned. "Bet they'll bring in a robot to do that next. You'll be on furlough with the rest of us."

Melissa laughed. "If they do, I'll take early retirement."

Chaz smirked faintly. "Sooner Ryan opens up that restaurant, the better."

Melissa raised her brows. "You thinking of jumping ship, Chaz?"

He shrugged, leaning back against the cold metal of the prep station. "Well, if this place gets worse. If it means cookin' for real again? Yeah. In a heartbeat."

She gave them both a final nod and stepped back through the swinging door, leaving behind the quiet, mechanical hum of Tony and Heston—and two chefs silently wondering how long it'd be before their job felt like a calling again.

CHAPTER 9

[7] Whatever by Oasis

Chloe stood at the bar beside Jonathan, notepad in hand, ready for Lesson Two of Social Skills 101. Across from them, Phil was efficiently prepping a drink order.

Jonathan glanced at her. "What's next on the curriculum?"

"Presence," Chloe said, tapping her pen against her chin. "It's about how you carry yourself—the impression you leave behind. And we're going to practice with one of our regulars."

Phil placed a steaming mug on a tray, rang the service bell, and called out, "Table 22!"

Chloe picked up the tray and spotted Mark sitting at his usual booth. She turned to Jonathan. "Mark's one of our nicest regulars. I've built a good rapport with him. Watch how I interact—this is what presence looks like."

Jonathan smirked. "Just don't move into 'foul-mouthed' territory again."

Chloe gave a playful eye-roll and moved through the diner with the tray. Jonathan followed a few paces behind, observing like a hawk. At the back booth, Mark sat hunched over his phone, scrolling through a dating app. His shoulders slouched, his expression distant behind thick-rimmed glasses. A half-finished, cold coffee rested nearby.

Chloe's expression softened. "Oh, hi, Mark," she greeted warmly.

Mark looked up, startled, before a smile broke across his face. "Hello, Chloe. Busy morning?"

"Up and down," she replied, setting his fresh coffee in front of him. "Here's your usual."

"Cheers." He took a sip before grinning. "Caught up with Hollow's Reach yet?"

"Oh, absolutely," Chloe beamed. "That Harry Styles arc was amazing. I wasn't expecting Ken to have a long-lost son."

Mark nodded. "It was good... but I still think last season was stronger. Nothing's topped that finale."

"I don't know," Chloe laughed. "This season's giving it a run for its money."

Mark smiled before his expression became more thoughtful.

"You know who my favourite character is?"

"Let me guess... Curtis?"

"Curtis is brilliant, but it's Megan."

"Megan?" Chloe asked with a smirk.

"I don't know... she's just kind, funny, down-to-earth. She's exactly the sort of girl I'd like to meet."

Chloe folded her arms, amused. "Sounds like you've already met someone."

Mark looked down at his mug and smiled sheepishly.

"There's this girl... Amanda. She comes in here sometimes." He paused. "She actually reminds me a bit of Megan. Same smile... same sort of personality."

"Aww," Chloe teased. "I just hope her dad's as nice as Curtis."

Mark laughed. "I think that's setting the bar a bit high."

"So what's stopping you?"

"I don't know." He stirred his coffee absent-mindedly. "Every time she walks in, I bottle it."

Before Chloe could reply, the diner's front door opened. Sunlight spilled across the floor as Amanda walked inside.

Chloe glanced towards the entrance, then back at Mark with a knowing smile.

"Leave it with me," she whispered.

She gave him a reassuring wink before heading back towards the bar.

As Amanda made her way inside, Chloe intercepted her with a beaming smile. "Hey, Amanda! What can I get you today?"

Amanda raised an eyebrow, gesturing to the glowing screens. "Aren't we meant to order through the kiosks now?"

"You're a regular," Chloe said gently. "You get the VIP treatment."

Amanda smiled. "Alright then. I'll have a white hot chocolate, please."

"No problem," Chloe winked. "It's already been taken care of."

Amanda blinked. "Wait—what?"

Chloe nodded discreetly toward the back booth. "That guy over there? Mark? He offered to pay for your drink."

Amanda followed her gaze. Mark gave a shy, awkward little wave. Amanda's smile softened into something genuinely touched. "That's... really sweet."

Chloe grinned. "He's a great guy. You two might actually hit it off. Why not say hi?"

Amanda hesitated for just a second, then tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Okay. Why not?"

As Amanda headed over to Mark's table, Chloe walked to the kiosk and casually tapped her own card to pay for the drink herself. Jonathan had watched the entire exchange. He wasn't just seeing the act—he was picking up on the nuance. The empathy. The "white lie" for a good cause.

Back at the bar, Chloe turned to him. "Alright. Your turn. When Amanda's drink is ready, you'll take it to her—and show me 'Presence.'"

Jonathan raised an eyebrow. "She's not going to call me Scrooge McDuck like Gary, is she?"

Chloe chuckled. "Amanda's lovely. She'll be kind."

Jonathan took a deep, bracing breath. "Okay. I'll give it a go."

Phil rang the bell again. "Table 22!"

Jonathan reached for the tray with both hands, looking like he was carrying a bomb. Chloe gently stopped him. "One hand, flat underneath. Center the mug. Less chance of a spill, and you look more relaxed."

Jonathan adjusted his grip and walked toward Table 22. Mark and Amanda were already mid-conversation.

"White hot chocolate?" he asked. His voice was still a bit stiff, but he was holding steady.

Amanda looked up. "That's me."

Jonathan set the tray down, lifted the mug carefully, and placed it in front of her. "There you go," he said. "I'm Jonathan, by the way. If you need anything else, just give me a shout."

"Thank you, Jonathan," Amanda replied, warm and relaxed.

When Jonathan returned to the bar, Chloe gave him a satisfied nod. "You passed Presence. Next step: Charisma."

Jonathan let out a long breath. "I had charisma once, you know. Back when I worked at the London Stock Exchange. I just... I think I lost it after my health scare. Everything became about logic and survival."

"It's okay to lose things," Chloe said softly, her cynical shell cracking for a moment. "That's what makes us human. But charisma isn't gone—it's just asleep."

Jonathan looked down at the counter. "It's hard not to see this job as a downgrade. From high-stakes finance to... this."

Chloe tilted her head. "Harry Styles started on The X Factor, remember? Constant scrutiny, weekly eliminations—and now he headlines stadiums. If he can rise through that, so can you. This is just your 'bootcamp' phase."

Jonathan smiled faintly. "Maybe. I just need to bounce back."

"There you go." Chloe patted his shoulder. "Take a breather. I'll go check on our lovebirds."

As she walked away, Jonathan watched her with a small, contemplative smile. That's when Justin appeared behind him.

"Oi, Jonny—if you're not busy, grab some napkins and fold them. We're running low."

Jonathan rolled his eyes. "I am your superior, you know."

Justin smirked, completely unimpressed. "Just supervising the supervisor."

As Justin walked off, Jonathan turned his gaze back toward Table 22. Amanda and Mark were chatting animatedly, both smiling.

Chloe approached with a friendly grin. "Everything good over here?"

Amanda looked up. "Perfect. We somehow ended up talking about Hollow's Reach."

Chloe laughed. "Oh no... who's winning the debate?"

"I keep telling him Wesley's the best character," Amanda said. "He's loyal, funny, and probably the most genuine person on the show."

Mark shook his head with a smile. "I still think Megan is the heart of the series."

"I mean, that's a fair choice," Amanda admitted. "But Wesley's still my favourite."

Chloe folded her arms with a knowing smile. "Well, if Mark's favourite is Megan and yours is Wesley..." She pointed between them. "...I'd say you're the perfect match. You're basically Reds' Wesley and Megan."

Amanda laughed, her cheeks flushing slightly.

Mark chuckled awkwardly. "I don't know about that."

"Oh, I do," Chloe teased. "You two have spent the last twenty minutes talking like you've known each other for years."

Amanda glanced at Mark and smiled. "I suppose she's got a point."

Mark smiled back. "Maybe she has."

"See?" Chloe grinned. "Now I'll leave you two to your next episode discussion."

As she walked back towards the bar, Chloe felt a quiet buzz of pride. Jonathan was halfway to becoming a model employee, and she'd helped spark something sweet between two regulars. Maybe kindness really was contagious—even in a corporate-mandated "Efficiency" zone.

CHAPTER 10

[8] Crazy Train by Ozzy Osbourne

Chaz and Lydia moved quickly through the last of the lunch orders, wiping down surfaces and prepping sides. As he swiped a cloth across the stainless-steel counter, Chaz glanced over his shoulder.

"We're runnin' low on chips. Chuck a few spuds in Tony, will ya?"

"Say less," Lydia said, heading over to the potato sack. She grabbed a handful and fed them into the prep machine. It hummed to life, churning out perfect chips—until it didn't. The machine let out a dodgy mechanical cough and jammed. A half-sliced potato sat awkwardly in the blade.

"Chaz!" Lydia called out. "Tony's jammed."

Chaz stepped over, glaring at the machine like it'd just insulted his grandmother. He fiddled with the controls, but a red light blinked steadily at him, mocking his efforts.

"For fuck's sake!"

"Relax, in'it," Lydia said, trying to keep things calm. "We can do it the old-school way. Hand-cut, yeah?"

"No, we bloody can't, Lyds! They got rid of all the old gear when they revamped the place. Only knife I've got left is this blunt piece of crap that couldn't cut through custard!" he snapped, waving the knife before hurling it across the room with a loud clang.

Then, he dropped to the floor, head in his hands. Lydia stepped back instinctively, startled by the outburst. She kept quiet, not wanting to add fuel to the fire.

But Chaz wasn't finished. "I've had enough of this! Fuck you, David Clifton!" he bellowed. "You corporate knobhead. Tony's dead. I'm done!" He ripped the towel from his shoulder and slammed it onto the tiles.

Lydia, wisely, slipped out of the kitchen without another word. Chaz stormed into his cramped little office and collapsed into his chair, arms folded and head buried in them. Silence fell.

Then—soft footsteps. Chaz looked up. Chloe stood at the doorway, smiling gently but cautiously.

"Bad time?" she asked.

Chaz sat up with a tired sigh. "Nah. Just blowin' me lid."

"That's not like you."

He leaned back. "Ever since they dumped all that kit on us, I've felt it slippin'. Me passion, y'know? Tony's broke now and I just... I dunno."

"I get it," Chloe said, stepping inside. "I used to love art—drawing, painting, all that. But my teacher made it all about grades. Took the joy out of it."

Chaz nodded, his shoulders dropping a little. "Cookin's like art, in't it? Just no one's puttin' it on a wall."

"Not unless someone draws a picture of it," Chloe said, grinning.

Chaz let out a small laugh. "That's a good one. You always had sharp lines."

She smiled back. "I try."

He looked down at his hands. "It's all I've got, Chloe. Always has been. Without it... I don't even know what I am anymore."

"Well," Chloe said gently, "don't you still cook at home? For you and Ryan?"

"Hardly. When you've been sweatin' over pans all day, the last thing you wanna do is cook more when you get home," he said, shaking his head.

"Maybe that's exactly where the passion belongs now," she suggested. "Forget Red's. Forget Clifton. No stress, no customers, no deadlines. Just you and Ryan. Cook the stuff you love. Cook it your way."

Chaz paused, the gears turning. "So... put the passion into the home cookin'?"

"Exactly. Even though I've changed my dream of opening a salon, I still get creative when I'm out with the girls. I'll do bold make-up looks—wild stuff. I kept the part I loved."

Chaz stood slowly, something sparking in his eyes again. "You might be onto somethin', Chlo. Maybe I can finally have a crack at cookin' some proper Korean for me and Ryan. No punters. No feedback forms."

She grinned. "And maybe Ryan can cook you a real Chinese dish. Straight from his mum—not from the freezer aisle."

Chaz scoffed. "Oi, don't knock it—they do proper Chinese at the Woo Wong!"

"I'll believe it when Ryan tells me himself," Chloe said with a playful raise of her eyebrows.

Chaz laughed, then added softly, "He's right about you, y'know. You really do care."

Chloe blushed slightly. "Anyway, I'd better get back. I've got a charisma crisis to fix—Jonathan's still a work in progress."

Chaz grinned. "Best of luck with that. I'll get back to sortin' Tony... and figurin' out how to say sorry to Lyds."

"Good luck with your mission," Chloe said, turning to leave.

"Good luck with yours," Chaz replied.

As the door swung shut behind her, Chaz turned back to the prep machine. The red light blinked steadily. He rolled up his sleeves and muttered under his breath: "Right then, Tony. Let's see what's up with ya."

CHAPTER 11

[9] (You're) The Devil in Disguise by Elvis Presley

The speakers crackled to life as Elvis Presley's voice floated through the diner—upbeat, cheeky, and timeless. Justin moved through the tables like a showman, a tray of coffees balanced effortlessly in one hand, his shirt freshly pressed, and his smile switched on like stage lighting.

By the bar, Chloe and Jonathan watched the display.

"I know you can't stand him," Chloe said, gesturing toward Justin, "but you have to admit—he's got charisma. Like... Harry Styles."

Jonathan frowned, truly trying to follow. "Harry Styles is an actor, too?"

"Yes! He was in Don't Worry Darling—and that war one I watched with my dad—"

Without turning from the coffee machine, Phil cut in: "DUNKIRK!"

Chloe smirked. "Thanks, Phil."

Jonathan blinked. "...Right."

Chloe nodded toward Justin again. "Look, it's not about liking him. It's about how he connects with people. That's charm. That's presence. He makes customers feel seen."

Jonathan sighed but kept watching. Over at a booth, Gary leaned back as Justin approached.

"Oi, Johnny Bravo," Gary called out. "They finally let you out of wardrobe?"

Justin grinned, the practiced ease of a veteran. "Only for the A-list gigs, Gary."

Gary chuckled. "C'mon, mate. You know this ain't your dream. What happened to that Streetcar audition?"

Justin's smile faltered—just for a fraction of a second. "Didn't get it. That and some family drama has... well, it's taken a knock."

"Sorry, pal," Gary said, his tone softening. "Still—you've got the charm for front-of-house."

Justin straightened his posture. The mask came back on. "Barely holding it together."

Gary raised his coffee in a salute. "Fake it 'til you make it."

"Every shift," Justin replied with a wink. "Need anything else?"

"I'm good, cheers."

Justin gave a quick wave and turned away—his face becoming unreadable the moment he was out of Gary's line of sight. Back at the bar, Chloe glanced sideways at her student. "Well?"

Jonathan didn't miss a beat. "Still a smug wanker."

Chloe laughed. "Or... a charismatic smug wanker."

That actually got a grin from Jonathan. Then a laugh—short, real, and completely unguarded. They shared the moment, a light energy passing between them that felt far more natural than Justin's performance.

Justin, now standing near them, noticed. "Hey!" he called out, half-smirking but with a sharp edge to his eyes. "What's so funny?"

Chloe straightened up. "Just... enjoying work," she said, far too casually.

Justin narrowed his eyes. He didn't reply—he just watched them. He wasn't looking at Chloe; he was looking at Jonathan.

Chloe turned to Jonathan. "Let's find another way to teach you charisma," she whispered, steering him away.

Justin stood still, eyes following them across the floor. He turned to look at Phil, who was wiping down the espresso machine as the song changed on the playlist.

[10] - Everyday People — Sly and the Family Stone

Justin leaned on the counter. "Swear something's going on between those two. Even Ryan's never made Jonny laugh like that."

Phil didn't look up. "Stop gossiping, Justin. Worry about your job, not their dynamic."

Justin scoffed. "It's not the machines we need to worry about, mate. It's people. The quiet ones. The smart ones. The ones who actually win people over."

Phil finally met his eye.

"You mean people like Chloe?"

Justin hesitated for a moment before answering.

"Phil... as your supervisor, I'm ordering you to take a breather. Get some fresh air. You might even find someone out there who actually cares."

"Good," Phil snapped, tossing the cloth into the sink. "I'm off to find someone who gives a shit about real problems—not your workplace soap opera."

He turned on his heel and strode away from the bar, disappearing down the corridor towards the staff room without looking back.

Justin remained behind the bar, his arms folded as he stared silently across the café.

A moment later, Ryan stepped up beside him.

"You alright?" Ryan asked, wiping his hands on a towel.

Justin forced a smile. "Peachy. Just keeping an eye on our rising stars."

Ryan followed his gaze to Chloe and Jonathan at the side station, where they were laughing again. "You think something's going on?" Ryan asked. His voice was light, but his observation was keen.

Justin shrugged. "People get close fast in this job. Happens all the time."

Ryan didn't respond immediately. "She's training him. That's it."

"Sure," Justin said, his half-smile lingering. "Just looking out for you, dude."

Ryan didn't reply; he just turned back to wiping the bar, his movements a little more forceful than before. Across the floor, Jonathan caught Justin staring. He raised an eyebrow, no longer looking like a "mannequin."

"Don't you have coffees to crack on with, Justin?" Jonathan asked.

Justin turned on his heel and faced the coffee maker, his jaw tight. And just like that, the air in Red's had shifted. The performance was over. Something real—and a little bit dangerous—was rising in its place.

CHAPTER 12

Out the back of Red's, Lydia leaned against the fence, her vape held between her fingers. She dragged in slow breaths, trying to calm something deeper than just work stress. Her phone was in her other hand, but she wasn't really scrolling.

The back door swung open with a quiet creak.

Phil stepped out, his own vape already in hand, squinting in the sunlight like a vampire who had worked too many night shifts. He clocked Lydia instantly.

"Please tell me you've also had it with these bloody machines replacing humanity," he said, his voice low and dry.

Lydia glanced over, rolling her eyes. "Mate, don't even start. I just saw Chaz lose his whole head."

Phil raised an eyebrow and wandered over. "What happened?"

"Tony broke, so Chaz chucked a knife at the wall—right in front of me. I thought I was gonna end up like my mum."

Phil's brow creased with genuine concern. "You alright?"

"I mean, I'm here," she muttered, flicking her vape. "But that shook me. Ain't seen someone snap like that before. Not even my dad."

Phil leaned beside her against the fence, taking a slow puff. "Saw Chloe came out of the kitchen alive, though. If anyone's gonna calm him down, it's probably her."

"Yeah," Lydia said. "She's fixing everyone's mental state while the machines do the work."

Phil smirked, then sighed. "I swear, that coffee machine's the worst thing to happen to this place in the decade I've worked here."

Lydia let out a short laugh. "For real, though. I ain't here to press buttons and babysit tech. I came to learn from a proper chef. Someone with passion. What I got instead? A corporate kitchen and a man barely holdin' it together."

Phil nodded, glancing out at the quiet back lot. "I get it. I used to care, too. Still do, in bits. But it's like... I'm institutionalized. Like Brooks in Shawshank."

Lydia looked at him sideways, a small smile creeping through her tiredness. "You been sitting on that one, haven't you?"

"Only for about ten years."

She shook her head, laughing now. "You know what, Phil? We don't talk much. But I'm glad you're on the same page."

Phil tapped his vape. "Well... people like us gotta stick together."

"I'm just happy someone from the front knows how much it's hurting," Lydia replied, taking another puff.

"It's not just you and Chaz it's hurting, you know," Phil said. "Front-of-house feels it too. We have just trained ourselves to pretend we're fine with it."

Lydia frowned. "How are the others feelin'?"

Phil exhaled through his nose. "Justin's more concerned about what the other colleagues are up to. Melissa keeps saying it's all out of her control. Ryan, Jonathan, Chloe—they're just trying to make the best of it."

"So... just us three then?" Lydia asked. "Me, you, and Chaz?"

Phil nodded slowly. "Seems like it."

Lydia looked down at her shoes. "So what we supposed to do?"

"Honestly, I think it's time you and Chaz patched things up—for today at least. He's gonna need backup. And he needs to know I'm with him."

Lydia gave a small nod. "Alright. I'll talk to him."

Phil smiled faintly. "After the shift, we'll take him for a pint. You, me, him. Just talk it out. Start figuring out how we bring the soul back to Red's."

Lydia took one more slow pull from her vape and blew it out with purpose. "Cool. Let's do it."

Phil turned to walk back in but paused, adding, "Let's make Red's great—"

Lydia shot him a sharp look. "Phil. Don't you dare make that joke!"

He held his hands up in mock surrender. "Sorry. Couldn't help myself. Dark sense of humor."

They both laughed quietly, pushing through the door together. Two tired workers. One quiet revolution.

CHAPTER 13

[11] Changes by Black Sabbath

Lydia stepped back into the kitchen to find Chaz crouched over "Tony," screwdriver in hand. His chef whites were hanging from the hook on the door, revealing a faded Black Sabbath T-shirt underneath. One of their softer, piano-led ballads hummed from the portable speaker.

"This tune don't sound like you," Lydia said, raising a brow as she moved to her station. "It's gentle. Bit melancholic."

Chaz didn't look up from the machine's casing. "It's Changes. Black Sabbath. My favorite band. Most of 'em are Villa fans—and from Brum. I call 'em my home band."

"I thought you were from Shirley?" Lydia teased.

"Same thing, innit?" Chaz finally looked up, a genuine grin breaking through the grease on his face.

They both chuckled. The heavy, volatile tension from earlier had lifted, replaced by a weary but stable peace. Chaz wiped his hands on a greasy rag and stood up.

"Look, Lydia... I'm sorry. For earlier. You shouldn't have had to see me blow me lid like that."

Lydia nodded slowly. "It's alright, Chaz. You snapped. Machines'll do that to a person. But... turns out we're not alone in this."

His brow lifted. "Go on."

"I had a chat with Phil outside. He's on our side. Says he's fed up too. Thinks the soul's being sucked out of the place."

Chaz raised an eyebrow. "Funny. Chloe came by earlier. Got me thinkin' about why I started cookin' in the first place. Made me wanna push through, in a weird way. That's why I'm tryin' to fix Tony myself instead of waiting for a corporate technician."

Lydia smiled. "We've got to pull it together—even if it's all held together with duct tape and sarcasm."

Chaz smirked. "Or... we could give the worst service ever and get ourselves sacked. Start a YouTube channel—Cooking With Chaz and Lyds. Phil can edit. He looks like he knows his way around a computer."

"Chaz..." Lydia said with a small laugh. "That's not who you are. You're the one who told me: no matter what, you always give your best in the kitchen. Even if it's a burger, it's your burger."

He looked at her—really looked at her. Her face was calm, but there was a flicker of that old fire in her eyes. She believed in the "Chef" version of him, even when he only felt like a "Button-Pusher."

He took a long breath, his shoulders squaring. "Alright. We'll fix Tony. Get everythin' back up to standard. And I'll find a way to sharpen that blunt-ass knife."

"As long as you promise never to throw it again," Lydia said, her voice half-joking, half-serious.

"I promise, Lyds." His tone was soft. Genuine.

She smiled, her eyes glistening slightly as she stepped forward and pulled him into a hug. He hesitated for a second, the screwdriver still in his hand, then hugged her back. It was firm. Solid. Like two soldiers in a foxhole, realizing they were the only ones who knew how the battle was really going.

CHAPTER 14

[12] The Moment by Tame Impala

Jonathan approached Table 4, tray in one hand, shoulders back—just like Chloe had taught him. The Black Americano sat dead center, perfectly balanced. For once, he felt... calm. Focused. Present. He reached the table and smiled; it was a little tight, but it was genuine.

"Black Americano?"

The customer nodded. "Yes, please."

Jonathan carefully lifted the cup and placed it down with both grace and caution. "There you go," he said.

"Thank you."

He lingered for a second, testing the waters. "I'm Jonathan, by the way. If you need anything else, just give me a shout."

The customer smiled politely. "Thanks, Jonathan."

He gave a sharp nod and turned, walking back toward the bar where Chloe was already returning from her own table check. They met by the coffee station.

"Well?" Jonathan asked, his eyes searching hers for approval. "Did I pass that one?"

Chloe gave a half-smile. "Confidence and presence—definitely improved."

He looked hopeful, the robotic mask finally beginning to crack.

"But..." she added gently, "you're still lacking charisma."

Jonathan sighed, the wind leaving his sails. "Right."

"I know it's the hardest part," she said, her voice softening. "But it's the difference between just doing the job and making people feel something."

Jonathan leaned on the bar, his posture slumping back into its usual stiffness. "I don't know, Chloe. Maybe this whole thing isn't for me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... it's not the Stock Exchange." His voice was hollow. "It's not sharp suits and sharp minds. It's coffee cups and soft skills and... smiling all the time. It's exhausting."

Chloe's expression shifted—concern giving way to a sudden flash of defiance. "My parents didn't raise me to be a quitter," she said, stepping into his space. "And I'm not going to let you quit either. Imagine Red's is the London Stock Exchange—and the team? They're all just stockbrokers. You've got to make trades. Earn trust. Make connections."

Jonathan looked at her—really looked—and a faint, appreciative smile touched his lips. "You know... that's not a bad analogy. It's been months since I left finance, but... maybe I could dig up a bit of what I had back then."

Chloe beamed. "That's the spirit."

Just then, a customer at Table 6 raised their hand. "Excuse me?"

Chloe nudged him. "Go on. This one's yours. Think of it like your trading floor moment. Be like Harry Styles when he walks on stage."

Jonathan drew in a breath, adjusted his posture, and made his way over with measured, professional strides. He approached with poise. "Is everything okay over here, sir?"

The customer—a middle-aged man holding his phone—looked up, clearly frustrated. "I'm trying to order a lemonade through the app, but there's no option to take the ice out. No comment box. I just want it without ice."

Jonathan leaned in. "Let me take a look."

The man angled his phone. Sure enough, there was no comment field. No way to customize. Jonathan frowned. "I'm... really sorry, sir. There doesn't seem to be a way to request changes like that through the interface."

The man sighed and stood up. "It's alright. I'll nip to Tesco. Get a bottle there—it's cheaper, anyway."

And just like that, the customer walked out. Jonathan stood there, deflated, in the center of the floor. Chloe walked over, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"That wasn't your fault. That's on head office—they designed that app, not you."

But Jonathan shook his head. "No. It is my fault. This whole day's been a performance. Me trying to act like someone I'm not."

"Jonathan—"

He turned to her, not angry, but deeply tired. "Chloe, I appreciate everything you've done. Really. But shadowing me, this whole 'social skills' crash course based on a pop star... it's not working. I can't force something that isn't there."

Chloe tried to reach him. "Even Harry Styles has off days—"

But Jonathan was already walking away, leaving her standing alone in the middle of the diner. She watched him disappear into the staff corridor, his shoulders hunched. For the first time, Chloe wondered if she'd reached the limit of what she could do.

She turned slowly back to the bar. They were supposed to be turning things around, but they'd both hit a wall. Maybe she wasn't cut out for leadership after all.

Act Three

CHAPTER 15

Melissa sat at her desk, surrounded by a fortress of paperwork and spreadsheets, the low hum of her computer fan her only companion. Her fingers tapped steadily on the keyboard until a soft knock broke the rhythm.

"Come in," she said, her eyes still locked on the screen.

Jonathan stepped in, his shoulders stiff and his expression tight. "Sorry to bother you, Melissa," he said, shutting the door gently behind him.

Melissa finally looked up, pushing her glasses atop her head. "Everything alright, Jonathan?"

He sat down across from her, perched on the edge of the chair. "I just wanted to say... I don't think the shadowing is working."

Melissa arched a brow. "With Chloe?"

He nodded. "She's trying; I know she is. But her methods—they're not for me. I'm not wired that way."

Melissa leaned back slightly, her chair creaking. "What way would that be?"

Jonathan exhaled, a sound of pure exasperation. "She's trying to teach me how to be social by comparing it to... Harry Styles. I mean, come on, Melissa."

A faint, uncontrollable smile tugged at the corner of Melissa's mouth. "He is very successful."

"She's got charisma, I'll give her that. But I'm not a pop star," Jonathan said, his voice rising slightly. "I'm a man trying to prepare for fatherhood and a marriage. And she wants me to... sparkle."

Melissa's smile faded instantly. She folded her arms, her managerial mask locking back into place. "Jonathan. Do you know why I paired you two together?"

He shook his head.

"Because you both have something the other doesn't. She's got heart and charm. You've got structure and discipline. I thought if anyone could learn from each other—if anyone could find a middle ground—it would be you two."

Jonathan looked down at his hands, quieter now. "You can't teach charisma to someone who's lost it."

Melissa's tone sharpened. "Then find it yourself."

He looked up, startled by the coldness in her voice.

She continued, steady and unyielding. "We're all missing something, Jonathan. Every person in this diner is grieving a version of themselves. But you're still here. And that means something. What Chloe's trying to show you—that human connection—is the one thing you haven't tried yet. You've tried logic. You've tried rules. Look where that's got you."

Jonathan was silent.

Melissa leaned forward, her voice dropping to a serious whisper. "Look. You're on thin ice. David Clifton's already been sniffing around about 'streamlining roles.' I've been buying you time, Jonathan. I've been your shield. But if you don't start showing growth—real, visible growth—then I won't be able to protect you anymore."

Jonathan swallowed hard. "So... what are you saying?"

"I'm saying: go apologize to Chloe. Let her lead. Truly learn from her. Come back to me as the man I know you can still be—a leader, a model employee, and a human being. Or walk out now and let Clifton replace you with another hollow suit."

Jonathan nodded slowly, the weight of his reality finally settling in his gut.

"Do I make myself clear?" Melissa asked.

"Yes, Melissa," he said quietly.

She returned to her keyboard, the click-clack of the keys signaling the end of the conversation. "Good. Now go. New leader. Model employee. Those are your marching orders."

Jonathan stood. He didn't say anything else, but the air around him felt different—heavier, but purposeful. He left the office, the door clicking shut with a finality that echoed down the hall.

CHAPTER 16

Chloe was curled up on the worn staffroom sofa, thumbing through her socials, when the door creaked open. She looked up, her expression guarded. "How'd you know I was in here?"

"Phil said you were on break," Jonathan replied, hovering a little awkwardly in the doorway.

Chloe smiled faintly. "Yeah, I usually hide in here. It's better than out the back—all that vape smoke? Smells like chemical rain."

Jonathan stepped in, closing the door behind him. There was something different in the way he moved—calmer, less like he was wearing an invisible suit of armor.

“Look, Chloe...” he began, his voice steady. “I wanted to say I’m sorry. About earlier. I was out of order. I don’t want to be the villain in your story.”

Chloe studied him for a moment. The edge of defensive irony was gone. In its place was a softness she hadn’t heard from him before.

“It’s fine,” she said gently. “Apology accepted.”

“I spoke to Melissa,” he continued. “She laid it all out. I can’t afford to lose another job, and I really can’t afford another breakdown. So... if you’re still willing, I’d like to keep learning. I want to get better at all this. Social stuff. Presence. Being a... human being.”

He smiled, and this time, it felt less like a practiced mask and more like a genuine expression.

Chloe tilted her head, a slow grin tugging at her lips. “Well, would you look at that...”

Jonathan blinked. “What?”

“You just passed Lesson Three,” she said, rising from the sofa. “You sounded natural. Confident. You weren’t pretending. That’s charisma, Jonathan. It was in you all along—you just stopped trusting it.”

He chuckled, scratching the back of his neck. “Alright then. Let’s do this. What’s the final test?”

Chloe pulled out her phone and tapped through her gallery. “The last lesson... is Teamwork.” She held up the device and hit play. The bright, acoustic guitar intro of “What Makes You Beautiful” filled the small room.

[13] - What Makes You Beautiful — One Direction

Jonathan groaned, though there was no real heat in it. “Of course it is.”

Chloe laughed. “Hey, Harry Styles didn’t get where he is without learning to work in a group. He was one of five—Louis, Zayn, Niall, and Liam... God rest his soul. They all had to pull their weight, and they became the most successful boy band of all time.”

Jonathan smirked, watching the classic beach scenes roll by on the small screen. “This is significantly more painful than the Stock Exchange.”

“Exactly,” she said, pausing the video and tucking her phone away. “But it worked because they had each other’s backs. That’s the secret. You can’t lead a team if you aren’t part of it.”

Jonathan nodded slowly, the logic finally clicking. “So, the final test: play nice with the whole team?”

“Yep,” she said. “That includes Phil, Ryan, Chaz, Lydia, and Melissa.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Even Justin?”

Chloe sighed. "Justin's... optional. Just don't let him wind you up. Focus on the people who matter."

Jonathan exhaled. "Fair enough. He stays out of my way, I'll stay out of his. But I'll try with the others. I'll make a real effort."

Chloe beamed. "See? That's the spirit."

Jonathan relaxed, leaning against the doorframe. "You know... I've gotta admit. Your little 'pop star method' has taught me that you know more about organizational structure than I expected. If you keep this up, I might even give you a passing grade on your shadowing."

She extended a hand. "Deal."

He shook it—this time, there was no awkwardness, no stiff posture. Just two people shaking hands like teammates.

As they stood there, the distant sounds of the café filtered through the walls—the clink of porcelain, the hum of the grinder, the low murmur of happy customers. For the first time in a long time, Jonathan felt like he belonged somewhere. And Chloe? She felt like she'd finally made a difference that actually mattered.

CHAPTER 17

[13] Things in Life by Dennis Brown

At the bar, Phil poured milk into the frothing pitcher beneath the espresso machine. Ryan, on the other side, prepped saucers with sugars and spoons—precise, quiet, and efficient.

Justin sauntered up, arms folded, that ever-present smug grin plastered across his face. "How's your 'Rage Against the Machine' coming along?" he asked Phil, his tone casual but dipped in sarcasm.

Phil didn't look up from the steam wand. "Great, thanks. Found myself an ally out back over a vape. How's the gossip column holding up?"

Justin shrugged. "Bit dry. Thought Chloe might actually fix Jonny—but I saw them arguing earlier. Looks like the lad's beyond saving." He turned toward the corridor, ready to make a grand exit—and froze.

Chloe and Jonathan had just emerged, side by side. They weren't stiff. They weren't strained. They were laughing. Actual, unforced, genuine laughter.

Justin blinked, caught completely off-guard. It was like watching a play he hadn't rehearsed for.

"You were saying?" Phil smirked, not missing a beat.

Justin stared at Jonathan, his eyes narrowing. "Oi, Jonny," he called out, trying to regain the high ground. "What's so funny? Finally found that charisma you were looking for?"

Jonathan stopped—but he didn't rise to the bait. There was no flash of anger, no rigid defense. Just calm, cool composure.

Before Jonathan could reply, Chloe stepped forward. "Jonathan," she said gently. "Deep breath. Keep your cool." Then, she turned to Justin—firm, direct, and unshaken. "Swallow your pride, Justin. Just for the rest of the shift. I'm not losing today."

Justin clocked her tone. It wasn't a request; it was an order. It wasn't just about backing Jonathan anymore; she was finally wearing the supervisor's mantle. He raised his hands in mock-innocence. "Crack on then, Chloe. Keep up the good work."

And with that, he walked off, uncharacteristically quiet.

Jonathan turned to her, looking surprised. "Thanks. I think that's the first time anyone's ever actually stood up for me here."

"You did the same for me earlier," Chloe said. "With that nightmare customer. You've got my back—I've got yours. That's what teamwork is. Very One Direction of us."

Jonathan smiled. "So... I'm passing?"

She grinned. "Yes, Mr. Stockbroker. You're officially passing."

They both laughed—relaxed and open. The barrier between mentor and student had dissolved. Chloe checked the wall clock. "Afternoon rush is coming. You ready?"

Jonathan rolled his shoulders, a professional glint in his eye. "Let's finish this."

"Now you're talking," she said, and they moved onto the floor in sync.

Across the bar, Justin drifted over to Ryan, trying to stir the pot one last time. "Hey, Ry," he said, his voice low. "Notice how cozy Chloe and Jonny are getting?"

Ryan glanced over. Chloe and Jonathan were working the floor like clockwork, their chemistry undeniable. "She's doing her job," Ryan said simply. "And she's doing it better than anyone expected."

Justin raised a brow. "I'd keep an eye out. Chemistry like that doesn't always stay professional, mate."

Ryan turned, his expression calm but his eyes sharp. "Chloe doesn't like Jonathan like that, Justin. Don't be weird."

Justin smirked, leaning in. "They say hate is the first sign of love."

Ryan smiled coolly, returning to his work. "Then by that logic, Justin, you and Jonathan must be soulmates."

Justin's face darkened, his smugness finally evaporating. He scowled and walked off toward the stockroom, leaving Ryan and Phil to exchange a knowing, satisfied glance.

As the afternoon rush began, the bell at the door chimed—and for the first time in weeks, Red's felt like it had a pulse again.

CHAPTER 18

[14] Ashes to Ashes by Faith No More

In the kitchen, Chaz sat hunched over a whetstone, attempting to sharpen his old, faithful knife. Lydia moved around him, pulling pre-packaged sandwiches in and out of "Heston"—the state-of-the-art oven they both quietly resented. They weren't arguing anymore; they were just tired. A bone-deep, mechanical kind of tired.

Chaz paused, holding up the blade to the light. It was rusted, chipped, and the tang was loose—it was barely holding together. He looked over at "Tony," the sleek, broken prep machine sitting uselessly in the corner. It was flashy, fragile, and soulless.

With a heavy sigh, Chaz didn't throw the knife this time. He dropped it into the bin with a final, hollow clatter.

Lydia caught the movement and froze. "Oi! You promised you wouldn't throw that!"

Chaz stood up, wiping his hands on his apron. He pulled out his wallet and handed Lydia his bank card. "We need our equipment back, Lyds," he said, his voice low and determined. "Real equipment. You run to the catering shop down the road and get us a proper set of knives. I'll hold down the kitchen."

"You mad, Chef?" Lydia blinked, looking at the card. "I can't just leave mid-shift. What if Melissa or Jonathan catches me?"

Chaz jerked his thumb toward the back of the pantry. "I'll sneak you out the fire exit. Same way you'll sneak the stuff back in."

Lydia tilted her head, confused. "There's a fire exit in here? I thought it was just a closet."

Chaz smirked, a bit of his old spark returning. "You think Clifton'd sign off on a kitchen revamp without a fire exit? Safety regs are the only thing that man actually follows."

Lydia shook her head, amused. "Alright. I guess the corporate knobhead's got some brains."

Chaz pushed open the heavy steel door. Lydia walked over but hesitated at the threshold.

"You can't go out in your chef whites," Chaz reminded her. "You'll look like a runaway."

Lydia peeled off the white jacket, revealing a faded The Clash T-shirt underneath, and tossed it to him. Chaz caught it with a nod. "Good luck. Don't get the cheap ones."

"I know what I'm doing," Lydia grinned, slipping out into the cool air of the alleyway.

The door clicked shut, the sound echoing through the sterile kitchen. Back inside, Chaz took a deep, centering breath and turned back to Heston. With a focused, almost musical rhythm, he got to work—loading and unloading sandwiches, wiping down surfaces, and keeping the station moving like clockwork.

He didn't love the machines. He never would. But for today? He was going to own them. Because even if they hated the system, even if the heart had been stripped out of the job... they still had something to prove.

CHAPTER 19

[16] Harder Better Faster Stronger by Daft Punk

Out front, Melissa stepped out of her office—and froze. The place was buzzing.

The music pulsed with a synthesized beat, and the staff moved with a rare, collective rhythm. Justin cleared plates with actual focus. Ryan and Phil were acing the bar like the quality of the pour truly mattered. Chloe and Jonathan zipped across the floor—balancing trays, checking on tables, and communicating like a seasoned duo.

Even the kitchen pass was firing; meals were landing like clockwork. Melissa blinked. This wasn't just a good shift. It was the kind of "flow" you didn't get in a workplace like this anymore. Not with the cuts. Not with the tension.

She approached the food hatch and noticed something off. Lydia was nowhere in sight.

"Chaz," she called, leaning over the pass. "You on your own?"

Chaz didn't stop moving. "Yeah. Tony broke. I sent Lydia to get the tools to fix it."

Melissa frowned. "You sent her off-site? Without telling me?"

"Didn't want to wait for Clifton's slow-ass replacement," Chaz said, finally looking up. "I've got mouths to feed. I'm fixing it myself."

"You should've told me, Chaz. If someone leaves the premises, I need to know."

Chaz straightened, his jaw tightening. "Why? So you can report it? Pass it up the chain to someone who doesn't know the difference between a fish slice and a spatula?"

Melissa stepped closer, her voice dropping to a dangerous level. "Because I'm still your manager, Chaz. You've worked with me long enough to know how this goes."

"You're right," he said, his voice suddenly sharp. "I have worked with you long enough. Long enough to remember when you and Mike used to say, 'It's your kitchen, Chaz. Your problem, your solution.' So I solved it."

Melissa's expression darkened. "Don't twist my words. Mike's not here and I'm in charge now. We have systems, and if you don't follow them, I'm the one who catches the heat."

"You chose the systems, Mel. You backed Clifton. You let this place become soulless—and you expect me to just smile and play along?"

"That's enough!" Melissa snapped.

Chaz decided to stop staying quiet. "You want me to pretend this kitchen's still mine after someone ripped all the heart out of it. You replace chefs with machines, diners with data—and then wonder why morale's dead."

"Don't talk to me like I'm the villain," Melissa fired back. "You think this is easy? I'm fighting battles every day to keep this team together. If you keep pushing, Chaz, I'll find someone who actually wants to be here."

"Sure," Chaz snapped. "Find someone who'll serve corporate sludge with a smile. Because that's all this is now—a factory dressed up as a diner."

Melissa's tone turned ice-cold. "Charles. One more word like that, and you're in my office. Today."

A long, heavy beat passed. Chaz said nothing, but he slammed a Tuna Melt onto the counter with a thud. He wiped the plate's edge clean, took a breath, and placed it gently on the pass.

"Order up," he said, staring her down with fire in his eyes.

Melissa stared back, steel meeting steel—then turned and disappeared into her office without another word.

Jonathan appeared at the hatch, picked up the plate, and delivered it to Table 12. "Here you go. One tuna melt," he said calmly.

The customer took a bite, paused... and spat it out. "This is shit," the man said, loud and blunt. "The tuna doesn't even taste like tuna. I'm never coming back." He tossed his napkin onto the plate and stood up.

From the kitchen window, Chaz heard every word. He froze, slowly untying his apron. He didn't speak. He just walked away from the hatch, defeated by the very ingredients he was forced to use.

At the door, Jonathan caught up with the customer. "Excuse me, sir. I'm sorry about the food. The kitchen's had a rough day. We're trying to turn things around."

The customer hesitated. "I've got no complaint about the staff. But the food? You can't fake quality."

Jonathan nodded. "I understand. But spitting on the floor? That is a hygiene issue. I'm going to have to ask you not to return."

The customer blinked, stunned by the calm authority, and walked out without a fight. Nearby, Chloe clapped softly. "I'm proud of you, Jonathan."

Jonathan exhaled. "Thanks. I actually feel like... I belong now. Even if the food is a disaster."

"Don't thank me. Thank Harry Styles—and Ryan, for the inspiration."

He chuckled. "I know I come off stiff. I like plans. But this place is slowly knocking that out of me."

Chloe smirked. "You say you don't know how to switch off."

Jonathan laughed, his cheeks going a little red. "Alright, fair. But honestly? Formula 1 is the only thing that shuts my brain up. I go feral when Silverstone rolls around."

Chloe's expression softened.

"That weekend is the one time I properly let loose," Jonathan continued. "Back when I was studying Economics at Cambridge, I didn't just want to succeed—I wanted to feel free. Silverstone was that escape."

Chloe's eyes widened. "Weird. I'm doing Business at Warwick."

Jonathan lit up. "Well, if you ever need a hand with the finance modules—"

"That's Ryan's job," she teased. "He's helping me pass."

Jonathan nodded, a knowing look in his eye. "He's a good guy. You've got something real there." He paused. "Just promise me you won't fall for me now that I've become Harry Styles 2.0."

Chloe laughed, leaning against the counter. "Only as a friend, Jonathan."

"Come on," he said, his smile lingering. "Let's go see Mel."

As they walked toward the office, the back fire exit creaked open. Lydia stepped inside, bags of professional knives and supplies in hand. She froze when she saw Chaz's face.

"What happened?" she asked softly.

Chaz shut the door behind her, his eyes hollow. "Everything, Lyds. Everything." He walked out into the locker room without another word.

Lydia stood alone in the kitchen, the bags at her feet. She realized the system wasn't just breaking Chaz. It was erasing him.

CHAPTER 20

Melissa sat alone in her office, the glow of her computer screen dimming as it finally shut down. Her jaw was tight, the remnants of her argument with Chaz lingering in the air like smoke. Her bag sat on the desk. She was minutes away from heading home to Andrew and the twins, but mentally, she was still standing at the kitchen pass, staring down Chaz's fury.

A soft knock at the door pulled her back to the present.

She exhaled sharply, rubbing her eyes. "Come in."

Chloe and Jonathan stepped inside.

Melissa looked up. Her face softened—but only slightly. The edge of the day's stress hadn't fully left her. "Well," she said, leaning back in her creaky leather chair. "My two star pupils."

Jonathan offered a polite, professional smile. Chloe managed a grin, though she could tell Melissa's mood was brittle.

Melissa gestured for them to step in, then folded her arms over her chest. "I won't lie—it's been a hell of a day. But I've been watching. You two? You held it together when a lot of others were falling apart."

Jonathan stood straighter, sensing the weight behind her words.

“Jonathan,” Melissa continued, “you’ve grown more in one shift than most people do in six months. You’ve picked up people skills, you’ve built trust, and you proved you can lead under pressure. You aren’t just a suit anymore.”

She turned her gaze to Chloe. “And you—you’ve gone from someone struggling to find direction to someone with genuine leadership instincts. I’m honestly proud of what you’ve done today, Chloe.”

Chloe’s smile widened, the validation hitting home.

Melissa sighed, pressing a hand to her temple. “Sorry if I seem off. I had a... difficult conversation with Chaz earlier. But you two gave me the one thing I really needed today—a win.”

The tension in the room eased, the silence becoming comfortable rather than strained.

“I’ll be telling Clifton I want you to stay on permanently, Jonathan—as the Assistant Manager,” she said.

Jonathan’s eyes widened, the relief visible. “Thank you, Melissa. That means a lot. Truly.”

Melissa then turned to Chloe. “And Chloe, I’m officially recommending you for the upcoming Supervisor post.”

Chloe blinked, stunned. “Seriously?”

Melissa nodded, a hint of a real smile finally breaking through. “Seriously. You’ve earned it. The way you stepped up? That matters more to me than perfect spreadsheets or spotless counters. Especially right now, when things feel... sterile.”

Jonathan adjusted his posture, looking every bit the part of a leader. “Thanks, Melissa. I’m looking forward to helping fix things around here. Properly this time.”

Chloe added, “Me too. I feel like I’ve got a direction again. Between my degree and this... who knows? Maybe I’ll end up sitting behind that desk one day.”

Melissa gave a tired, knowing chuckle. “If you do, make sure there’s wine in the bottom drawer and a door you can lock during tantrums—from both the staff and the toddlers.”

That earned a real, shared laugh from all three of them.

Melissa slung her bag over her shoulder, still visibly worn but carrying herself with renewed purpose. “Right,” she said. “Time to get home to the chaos of bedtime. Andrew and the twins are probably trying to negotiate for late-night snacks as we speak.”

As she opened the door, she paused and looked back at Chloe. “I meant it, Chloe. Supervisor suits you.”

With that, she disappeared down the corridor, her footsteps fading into the persistent buzz of the diner. Chloe and Jonathan stood in the quiet office for a beat, the weight of their new roles settling between them.

“Well,” Jonathan said softly. “Guess we survived the 'Harry Styles' era.”

Chloe smirked. "Guess we did."

They exchanged a look—calm, mutual, and deeply respectful. There was no tension left, just the quiet understanding of two people who had survived the trenches together. They stepped out into the warm, neon-lit chaos of Red's, side by side, ready for whatever David Clifton had planned for them next.

The shift was ending. But for the new leaders of Red's, something much bigger was just beginning.

CHAPTER 21

Chaz stood out front, a cigarette in hand, staring at the pavement like it had answers. The street was quiet. His chef whites were stuffed into a crumpled carrier bag at his feet. He looked like a man who'd just walked off a battlefield—not victorious, just finished. His shoulders slumped; the fire was gone, replaced by the dull ache of burnout.

The door creaked open behind him. Lydia and Phil stepped out, still in uniform. They spotted him instantly—back turned, smoke curling from his fingers.

"Don't let one customer get in your head, Chaz," Lydia said, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

Chaz didn't move. He just took another drag. "He's not wrong, though. We're cookin' shite. The whole kitchen's a joke now. These machines... they're killing what we do. And Mel? She just let it happen."

Phil joined them, folding his arms. "It was a tuna melt, mate. You've made worse."

Chaz exhaled smoke in a dry laugh. "Cheers for the vote of confidence, Phil."

"Come on—you've got new gear now," Lydia said, trying to lift the mood. "You can do something with that, right?"

"Maybe," Chaz muttered. "Still doesn't fix the fact Melissa basically threatened to replace me today. Told her the truth—that Clifton turned this place into a soulless grindhouse. She told me one more word and I'd be out."

"Still standing, though," Phil noted.

"Barely," Chaz replied.

They stood in that silence for a moment—the kind that settles after a storm. Then Phil, ever the oddball, cracked the stillness. "You know... we could always start a secret menu. Staff and regulars only. No Clifton. No feedback forms. Just food with a soul."

Chaz didn't laugh, but he didn't scoff either. He flicked his cigarette to the curb. "Actually, I've got a better idea. Tesco run. Grab some proper ingredients. I'll cook us up a chow mein. Like they taught me at Woo Wong."

Lydia's eyes lit up. "Wait, for real?"

Chaz nodded. "For us. No orders. No Mel. Just a meal."

Phil grinned. "Now that's a plan."

As they rounded the corner toward the supermarket, Lydia looked at him. "You really worked at Woo Wong?"

Chaz smirked. "Started out as a pot-wash boy, didn't I?"

Phil snorted. "So you never actually cooked there?"

Chaz shrugged, a mysterious glint in his eye. "You don't cook and tell, Phil."

They disappeared into the night—three tired hospitality workers chasing a flicker of rebellion.

Inside Red's, the lights had begun to dim. Justin wiped down the last table while Ryan shut off the coffee machine. Chloe and Jonathan stood by the bar, sharing easy, earned smiles.

"It's good to see you both leaving stronger than you started," Ryan said. "You should be proud."

"Honestly, Ryan," Chloe said, "I couldn't have done it without you. The 'Harry Styles method' was genius."

Jonathan chuckled. "Yeah. I still picture Harry every time I say hello to a customer."

They all laughed—even Justin, polishing a glass nearby, his lips twitching in reluctant amusement.

"Well, I'm off," Jonathan said. "See you next shift." He gave Chloe and Ryan a nod and headed for the door, leaving them alone under the warm glow of the bar lights.

Chloe turned to Ryan. "You sure you'll be alright closing with him?"

Ryan shrugged. "He's harmless. Annoying, but harmless."

She smiled. "Don't stay too late. And... text me when you're home, yeah? I might actually have a date for that drink now."

Ryan grinned, his eyes softening. "Looking forward to it. Night, Chloe."

Their eyes lingered a beat too long to be casual. Something was there—quiet, earned, and real. As she passed the bar, Chloe gave Justin a polite nod. "Bye, Justin."

"See you, Chloe," he said, his voice softer than usual. "Thanks for today."

He and Ryan watched her leave—helmet on, stepping into the dark. After a moment, Justin leaned in. "You don't think something's going on between her and Jonathan?"

Ryan, mid-shutdown on the coffee machine, slowed. "No," he said carefully. "Why would there be?"

Justin shrugged. "Just... they've been close all day. She stood up for him earlier. Felt like something more."

Ryan kept wiping the bar, his jaw tightening. "She was training him. And she's good at it."

"Just saying," Justin smirked. "Things move fast in places like this. Just looking out for you, mate."

Ryan turned to him, cool and sharp. "You wanna look out for me? Stop stirring shit."

Justin raised his hands in surrender, but Ryan's attention drifted back to the door. The tension was small, but it was there.

[15] Golden by Harry Styles

Outside, the town buzzed low under the glow of streetlights. Chloe swung her leg over her motorbike and kicked it into gear. The red tail-light sliced through the dark as she rolled onto the high street.

Inside her helmet, "Golden" played through her headphones—confident, warm, and free. She didn't look back at the diner. Not once. She just rode off, straight into whatever came next.