

Order Up!

Season 1 | Episode 5: Head Like a Hole

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 Supervisor 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

- Paterson Joseph - David Clifton (Reds' Warwickshire Regional Manager)
- Unknown Actor - Cold Latte
- Unknown Actor - Strawberry Milkshake
- Unknown Actor - Steak with Peppercorn sauce

Soundtrack (Available on Spotify @KeziahHydeMedia)

1. Falling to Pieces by Faith No More (Chaz plays at home whilst prepping)
2. Head Like a Hole by Nine Inch Nails (Chaz plays at his home and work)
3. Have Faith in Me by A Day to Remember (Lydia plays the song through Chaz's speaker)
4. California Dreamin' by The Mamas and the Papas (plays on Red's Speaker)
5. Wonderful Life by Bring Me the Horizon (ft. Dani Filth) (plays on Chaz's Speaker)
6. Busy Earnin' by Jungle (plays on Red's Speaker)
7. Juggernauts by Enter Shikari (plays on Chaz's Speaker)
8. Young Folks by Peter, Bjorn and John (plays on Red's Speaker)
9. My Way by Limp Bizkit (plays on Chaz's Speaker)
10. Lift Me Up by Five Finger Death Punch and Rob Halford (plays on Chaz's Speaker)
11. Things in Life by Dennis Brown (plays on Red's Speaker)
12. The Trooper by Iron Maiden (plays on Chaz's Speaker)
13. The Moment by Tame Impala (plays on Red's Speaker)
14. Happy Song by Bring Me the Horizon (plays during the final moments and into the end credits)

OPENING

[1] Falling to Piece by Faith No More

Ryan and Chaz were in the cramped kitchen of their flat in Stratford-upon-Avon. Chaz rifled through cupboards, pulling out spices and prepping ingredients, while Ryan sat at the dining table, nursing a can of lager. They'd started hosting these small dinners for friends—a way for Chaz to get back into cooking the way he used to before Clifton's new system crushed his passion.

"Remind me again who's coming tonight?" Chaz asked, leaning over a pot of blooming spices.

"Chloe, Lydia, and Phil," Ryan replied. "Jonathan was meant to come, but he bailed—and I didn't bother asking Justin, just in case Jonathan actually showed up."

Chaz laughed. "Thanks for sparing me Mel, too. Don't fancy her arguing with me about my cooking... especially not in my own kitchen."

Ryan shook his head. "Would be weird inviting your boss over for dinner anyway. It's not like TV, is it?."

Chaz gave a wry smile. "Mike used to come out drinking with us—made everyone feel equal. Something Mel and Clifton could learn."

"I know you and Mel haven't been seeing eye to eye, but don't bring work home with you," Ryan warned, though his tone was gentle.

"As long as she stays away from my flat, there's no problem," Chaz shot back.

Ryan grinned. "So, what's Chef's special tonight? Remember, Chloe's veggie, so I got some Quorn pieces specially for her."

Chaz stirred the pot proudly. "Chicken balti—a Brummie classic. Or a Quorn curry in Chloe's case. Dad used to drink with the owner of Shababs in the Balti Triangle, and he gave me the recipe. A top friend of the family, he is."

"You're not even from Birmingham," Ryan teased. "Shirley's closer to Solihull, mate."

"Oi, Solihull's basically Birmingham," Chaz defended. "Balti's in my blood, and that's close enough."

Ryan shook his head, laughing. "I don't think Stratford's ready for your Solihull balti revolution."

"It's not about Stratford," Chaz said, his voice softening. "It's about me. Cooking like this—for friends—makes me feel like I'm good at something again. You know?"

Ryan smirked. "Yeah—too bad you can't do it at Red's."

They clinked cans, laughter filling the flat along with the rich smell of spices and the low hum of old tunes.

Outside, Chloe parked her bike near the door, removing her helmet just as Phil and Lydia walked up together.

“Chloe! Glad you could make it,” Phil called out.

“Wouldn’t miss this curry for the world,” Chloe smiled.

Phil teased, “Surprised. Thought you were a strict vegetarian.”

“Ryan’s got me covered with Quorn,” Chloe said. “Chaz has cooked veggie alternatives for me before.”

Lydia nudged in. “There’s better options than Quorn, though.”

Chloe raised an eyebrow. “How do you know?”

Lydia shrugged. “I like trying new meat-free stuff—keeps things interesting. I’m a chef, I’ve got to know my textures.”

“What’s your favorite?”

“Jackfruit’s good, but my pick’s Lion’s Mane mushroom. You can make it steak-like, and you’d never guess. Fills you up, too.”

“I’ll have to try that sometime,” Chloe said as they reached the door.

Back inside, the doorbell rang, and Ryan opened it to find the trio waiting. “Hey, come on in!”

Phil and Lydia stepped in, but Chloe hesitated at the doorway for a second. “Sorry about the other day, Ryan,” she said quietly. “My mum insisted I visit Grandma. Didn’t want to let you down again.”

“It’s alright. I’m just glad you’re here now,” Ryan said warmly.

“I made it a priority.”

Ryan grinned. “Hope you enjoy Chaz’s trademark balti.”

Phil immediately started browsing Chaz’s CD collection. “Mate, you’ve got some great bands here—Faith No More, Black Sabbath, Slipknot, Iron Maiden, even Ozzy’s solo stuff.”

“His first album, Blizzard of Ozz, is a masterpiece. Did you know it went multi-platinum?” Chaz asked from the kitchen.

“Yeah, I know a bit about music, Chaz. My dad was a DJ,” Phil replied.

“What do you normally listen to? I only really know about your film taste.”

Phil said to him, “A bit of everything, really. Mostly Rock from the ’60s to the 2010s. Modern music mostly sucks.”

“True. Good new bands are rare these days,” Chaz agreed.

Chloe added, “Chaz has a point; it's mostly solo artists arriving on the scene now.”

Ryan chipped in, “You just need to look in the right places.”

Phil pulled a jewel case from the shelf. “Wow—Pretty Hate Machine by Nine Inch Nails. Haven't seen this in ages.”

Chaz's face lit up. “My second favorite band. I'm always trying to get tickets when they tour the UK.”

Lydia laughed. “Surprised you still have physical CDs. He always blasts Spotify in the kitchen.”

Chaz shrugged. “Hard copies still count, innit? Physical media forever.”

Phil smiled. “I'm the same with Blu-rays. Drives my brother mad—says I'm turning the living room into a CEX store.”

Chaz pointed toward the shelf. “CD player's over there. Let's spin it.”

Phil popped in the disc, and soon the industrial pulse of Head Like a Hole filled the flat.

[2] - Head Like a Hole — Nine Inch Nails

The driving beat pushed Chaz as he chopped chicken breasts with rhythmic precision, massaging them in his signature blend of spices.

“Ryan, Lyds—I need you on this!” he called out.

They jumped up, grinning. Phil leaned toward Chloe, joking, “His old assistant and his new assistant working together? What is this—a crossover episode?”

At the counter, Chaz directed like a maestro. “Ryan, you take care of Chloe's Quorn. Lydia, chop the veg.”

“Yes, Chef!” they echoed, laughing.

The kitchen buzzed with energy, laughter, and the pulsing music. Chaz was back in his element, a king in his own castle.

CUT TO:

The harsh, flickering fluorescent lights of the kitchen at Red's. Chaz stood behind the pass, his face drained and sallow. He was banging out plates with none of the fire he'd just shown.

Justin appeared at the hatch, shifting the atmosphere instantly. “Chaz. Mel wants to see you in the office. Now.”

Chaz looked up, the dread flickering across his face. He hadn't spoken to Melissa since their blow-up last week. The balti-king was gone; the employee was back.

ACT ONE (Titles)

CHAPTER 1

Melissa sits at her desk in the office, tapping at her keyboard, the low hum of the kitchen seeping through the walls. A knock breaks her focus.

"Come in," she calls, her tone flat.

The door opens. Chaz steps inside, his posture stiff and his chef whites looking slightly more rumpled than usual. "Justin said you wanted to see me," he says, his voice already defensive.

"Take a seat," Melissa replies, not looking up from her screen at first. When she finally turns, her face is unreadable—a mask of professional detachment.

Chaz sits opposite her. Silence settles between them—heavy, like the greasy residue of last week's shouting match. He shifts, the old chair creaking under his weight.

"Melissa," he ventures, his voice tight. "What did you want to discuss?"

She takes a slow, measured breath. "I wanted to let you know I've contacted repairs about 'Tony.' They're still dragging their feet on the parts."

"Fuck's sake," Chaz mutters, leaning back. "Good job I've got a backup option, then."

Melissa's eyes narrow instantly. "What do you mean by 'backup option'?"

"When the prep machine broke, I asked Lydia to pick up some extra gear—knives, pots, boards. Professional stuff. Just to keep the line moving."

Melissa folds her arms. The hum of the kitchen outside seems louder now. "Chaz, I told you—you run these things through me. David Clifton is here today for his monthly visit. I want that stuff gone before he does his rounds."

Chaz scoffs. "Oh, right—God forbid the regional manager sees we're actually trying to keep this place afloat. He'd rather see half the menu marked as 'out of stock,' would he?"

"Don't you dare twist my words," Melissa snaps. "You know what Clifton is like. One whiff of non-approved kit and he'll write us up—or worse. I'm not risking my job because you refuse to stick to procedure."

Chaz's eyes harden. "It's my kitchen—that's what you and Mike always banged on about. My responsibility, right? So what am I meant to do with no Tony and no plan B? I've gotta improvise. Max always said that's what real chefs do."

"Mike and Max don't work here now!" Melissa fires back, her voice rising. "And I'm in charge. If you don't remove those knives, I will."

He lets out a bitter, dry laugh. "At least Mike didn't bend over backwards every time Clifton showed up. He might've been rough around the edges, but he stuck up for his people."

Melissa's voice cracks like a whip. "Alright—that is enough."

Chaz doesn't flinch. The tension in the small room crackles.

"Charles," she says, her voice turning ice-cold. Your kitchen responsibilities will be limited starting now. When Jonathan comes in, he will be monitoring the kitchen. The book—proper equipment, proper procedures, no exceptions will do everything."

Chaz sits there, jaw tight. Hurt flickers behind his eyes for a split second, buried instantly under a layer of pure Birmingham steel. He holds her gaze, daring her to push him further—but he knows he can't afford to walk out. Not today.

"Do I make myself clear?" Melissa asks.

Chaz doesn't look away. His voice is low, dripping with mockery. "Crystal."

He shifts in his chair but stays there just a second too long—a final act of defiance to show he's biting down his pride on his own terms. He stands, opens the door, then turns back, simmering.

"Good luck impressing Clifton when there's nobody left here who gives a shit."

He doesn't slam the door—he just closes it, firm and final.

Melissa exhales—a long, shaky breath—then turns back to her computer. The rapid click-clack of her keys tries to drown out the quiet tremor in her hands.

CHAPTER 2

Chaz storms back into the kitchen to find Lydia scrubbing out "Heston." She glances over her shoulder, instantly clocking the tension in his clenched jaw and the way his fists are balled white-knuckle tight.

"What's up, Chef?" Lydia asks, drying her hands on a tea towel.

"Melissa and I got into it again," Chaz snaps, his voice edged with a jagged kind of fury.

"What happened this time?" Lydia asks gently, stepping away from the oven.

"She wants the new kit gone—says it's not approved. Now she's got us on lockdown. Says we're gonna be 'monitored' like we're in a bloody prison."

"That's bollocks. She can't run a professional kitchen like that," Lydia mutters, her brow furrowing.

Chaz slams a prep drawer shut, the metal rattling. "She's so far up Clifton's arse she'd do anything to please him. She doesn't care about us—the ones actually suffering back here while she plays with her spreadsheets."

He reaches for the new knife set, his face contorted as if he's ready to toss the whole bag straight into the bin, but Lydia steps forward and catches his wrist.

"Oi—don't do that. That's a good set, and you know it," she says firmly, locking eyes with him until he settles.

Chaz breathes hard, chest heaving, then drops his arm and sets the knives back on the counter. "I'm done, Lyds. Properly done. I'm gonna look elsewhere—can't keep dealing with this shit much longer."

Lydia studies the exhaustion sparking behind his eyes. "Give me your phone," she says suddenly.

Chaz blinks, thrown by the request. "What for?"

"Just trust me. Give it here."

He digs into his pocket and hands it over. Lydia taps through his Spotify, then hooks it up to the kitchen's Bluetooth speaker. Soon, the melodic, driving intro of Have Faith in Me flows through the kitchen—warm, steady, and full of the kind of defiance that feels like a promise.

[3] Have Faith in Me by A Day to Remember

Chaz listens, the melody cutting through the static buzzing in his head. His shoulders drop an inch. "Who're these lot? Sounds familiar—bit softer than your usual noise."

"A Day to Remember—from Florida. This one's off Homesick. Got me through some rough nights when I first started out," Lydia says, watching him.

Chaz lets out a short, dry laugh. "Think I saw 'em at Download Festival once—didn't think much of 'em then. Too many clean vocals."

Lydia smiles. "Yeah, yeah, I know they're not Sabbath or Nine Inch Nails, but this one helps when you feel like giving up. Just... listen for a sec."

They stand there for a moment among the stainless steel and fluorescent lights, letting the chorus fill the room. I said I'd never let you go, and I never did... It creates a small pocket of calm in the middle of the corporate chaos. Chaz rolls his neck, feeling the physical tension slip away.

Lydia lowers the volume just enough to talk over it and nudges him. "How you feel now?"

Chaz cracks a small, genuine grin. "Glad we've got another band we can bond over, I suppose."

"Exactly," Lydia says, giving him a supportive look. "Now—let's crack on before the rush starts."

Chaz exhales, bracing himself. He grabs the knife set and lines it up at his station with military precision.

"What are you gonna do if Clifton or Mel or Jonathan walk in?" Lydia asks.

Chaz shrugs, his voice regaining some of its steel. "Tell 'em straight—the gear's temporary until 'Tony' is fixed. Gotta do what we gotta do to serve the customers. If they don't like it, they can cook the burgers themselves."

Lydia bumps his arm with her shoulder. "We'll cover each other."

Chaz smirks. "Damn right we will."

CHAPTER 3

[4] "California Dreamin'" by The Mamas and the Papas

Jonathan pushes open the front door of Red's Coffee & Diner as the sunshine-pop of California Dreamin' plays softly over the speakers, a sharp contrast to the grey Warwickshire morning. Ryan and Phil are working behind the bar, while Justin and Chloe weave between tables with plates and mugs for the morning rush.

The layout of Red's has become a second skin to them: the self-serve kiosks standing like sentinels at the front, the bar anchoring the center, and the two dining areas flanking it. Melissa's office sits tucked off to the left, opposite the kiosks. A corridor to the right leads down to the kitchen, staff room, and the back door—the team's unofficial escape hatch, or, as they like to call it, "the space outside reality."

Jonathan heads for the bar, a genuine grin flickering on his face when he spots Ryan.

"How was your night?" Jonathan asks.

Ryan wipes his hands on a tea towel, his face brightening. "Mate—you missed out. Chaz was on top form. A chicken balti to die for."

Jonathan chuckles, looking genuinely regretful. "Well, I do love a good curry. I'll try to make it next time. Things with me and Florence have been... stressful."

Ryan's smile drops a notch, his voice low with concern. "You guys aren't splitting up, are you? Not now?"

Before Jonathan can answer, Chloe swings by, balancing a tray of empty lattes. "Who's splitting up? Are you gossiping about me? I knew it."

"No one," Jonathan says quickly, clearing his throat. He looks between his two friends, unable to keep the secret any longer. "Florence and I are expecting. We found out last night—it's a boy."

Chloe's eyes go wide, and she nearly tips the tray. "No way! Jonathan, that's amazing! Congrats, man!"

Ryan beams, giving Jonathan's arm a playful, brotherly nudge. "A mini-Jonathan. God help us."

"Do I need to teach him to be like Harry Styles, too?" Chloe teases.

Jonathan laughs, and for a moment, the corporate pressure seems miles away. "I think I can manage that—but I'll keep you on standby just in case."

The three of them share a warm chuckle, a rare moment of genuine connection. Across the bar, Justin hovers, catching the tail end of the laughter. He looks like a kid outside a candy shop window.

"What's so funny?" Justin asks, trying to wedge himself into the circle.

Jonathan barely turns his head, his tone flat. "Go away, Justin. We're having a private conversation."

Justin stiffens, his forced smile faltering. "Whatever. Don't mind me—looks like I'm not wanted in your happy little trio." He mutters an insult under his breath and trudges to the other side of the bar where Phil is stoically polishing glasses.

"I don't get it, Phil," Justin says, his voice low and vibrating with frustration. "Why has everyone got it in for me? How do I win them back?"

Phil doesn't even glance up from the pint glass he's inspecting. "Sorry, mate. I've got my own battles to fight today. You're on your own this time."

Justin stands there, stunned by the cold shoulder from the one person who usually humors him. He accidentally bumps into a bar stool as he trudges off toward the food pass, looking smaller than usual.

Just then, the office door swings open. Melissa steps out, her eyes laser-focused on Jonathan. The air in the diner seems to drop ten degrees.

"Jonathan," she calls, her voice as firm and cold as steel. "Office. Now."

She's gone before he can even offer a greeting. Ryan and Chloe trade a knowing, worried look.

Jonathan gives them a resigned half-smile, adjusting his collar. "Right. Let's see what I've cocked up this time, eh?"

He squares his shoulders, adopts his "Model Employee" posture, and disappears through the office door. The latch clicks shut behind him with a final, echoing thud.

CHAPTER 4

Jonathan steps into Melissa's cramped office, where a half-drunk mug of cold coffee sits next to a mountain of invoices. He closes the door behind him and drops into the chair opposite her desk, forcing an easy smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"How can I help, Melissa?" he says, attempting to keep the tone light. "Am I being audited, or is this a social call?"

Melissa doesn't return the smile. She looks like she hasn't slept in a week. "After another... disagreement with Chaz, I've decided to clamp down on what's happening in the kitchen."

Jonathan raises an eyebrow. "Okay... and what does that have to do with me?"

"I want you to pop in there from time to time. Be my eyes," Melissa says, leaning forward. "Make sure they're using the proper equipment—the approved stock. Not whatever unauthorized gear they're dragging in from home."

Jonathan frowns, his relaxed posture stiffening. "You're coming down hard on him just for trying to keep the line moving while 'Tony' is down. Don't you trust his judgment?"

Melissa lets out a short, humorless laugh. "This isn't about trust, Jonathan. This is about survival. My managerial probation is nearly up. David Clifton is doing his walkthrough today,

and if anything—even a single paring knife—looks out of line...” She trails off, shaking her head.

Jonathan tilts his head, studying her. “Why are you so worried, Mel? You’re the best manager this place has had in years. You know the floor better than Clifton ever will.”

Melissa’s eyes flick to the window, watching the steam rise from the kitchen hatch, then back to him. Her voice drops, losing its professional edge. “It’s not just about the title, Jonathan. Andrew still can’t work because of his leg. I’ve got two kids at home—and I will not let them grow up the way I did.”

Jonathan watches her closely, the silence in the office stretching out.

She exhales, her shoulders sagging. “My dad died when I was ten. Left my mum and my sister with nothing but debt. We spent years scraping by. Food banks, second-hand uniforms that didn’t fit, the works. I spent my childhood feeling invisible. I swore I’d never put my own children through that. Not ever.”

A long beat of silence follows. The office hums with the distant, muffled clatter of the diner outside—a world away from the weight in the room.

Jonathan’s expression softens. The “Model Employee” mask slips, replaced by something much gentler. “You’ve done well for yourself, Mel. You’ve built a life. Don’t run yourself into the ground trying to bulletproof it.”

Melissa’s lips twitch, but the smile doesn’t hold. “If Clifton has any excuse to get rid of me, he’ll take it. He wants a machine, not a person. I need you to help me make sure he doesn’t find a reason to flip the switch.”

Jonathan lets out a dry, sympathetic chuckle. “Oh, we love Mr. Clifton, don’t we? Such a ray of sunshine.”

Melissa snorts—the tension cracking for just a heartbeat. “A real delight.”

Jonathan pushes himself up from the chair, adjusting his jacket. “Alright. I’ll keep an eye on things. I’ll make sure the kitchen stays ‘on-brand’ for the visit. But just... don’t lose your head over this, yeah? I’ve seen what burnout looks like. It isn’t pretty.”

Melissa nods, her eyes grateful but profoundly tired. “Thanks, Jonathan. I mean it.”

He reaches for the door, his hand on the handle. “Is that everything?”

“That’s it—unless there’s something you want to get off your chest?”

Jonathan pauses. He thinks about the baby news—the boy. He thinks about the “mini-Jonathan” he’s about to bring into this world. He looks at Melissa, seeing the toll that being a parent and a professional is taking on her, and he hesitates.

He shakes his head. “Nah. All good. I’ll keep the peace.”

“Take care—and Jonathan?”

He glances back.

Melissa tries for a real smile this time, one that actually reaches her eyes. “Thanks for not treating me like the enemy.”

Jonathan gives her a small, supportive grin. “You’re not the enemy, Mel. You’re just a bit of a pain sometimes.”

She huffs a laugh as the door clicks shut behind him, leaving her alone with her invoices and her history.

CHAPTER 5

[5] “Wonderful Life” by Bring Me the Horizon (ft. Dani Filth)

Chaz and Lydia work side by side in the kitchen—Chaz rhythmically chopping potatoes for chips, Lydia elbow-deep in the industrial sink. The aggressive, grinding bassline of the music rattles the saucepans on the overhead shelf.

Jonathan pushes through the swing door, wincing at the wall of sound. “Guys, can you turn the music down?” he tries, his voice lost in the noise.

“What?” Lydia calls back, her face half-hidden by a cloud of steam, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Jonathan’s face flushes, the accumulated stress of the morning finally flaring. “I SAID—TURN IT DOWN!”

Chaz rolls his eyes, wipes a hand on his apron, and swivels his phone to lower the volume. He flicks Jonathan an look that is equal parts amused and annoyed. “What kind of F1 fan doesn’t like loud noise?” he smirks.

Jonathan doesn’t bite. His shoulders are stiff, his posture defensive. “One that works at Red’s, I guess.” His eyes flick down to the professional chef’s knife in Chaz’s hand—the “Plan B” gear.

Chaz notices the stare and lifts the blade with a mock-grin. “Don’t worry, mate—don’t have to stab you today. I promise.”

Jonathan doesn’t laugh. The weight of Melissa’s desperation is sitting heavy on his chest. “Melissa says that’s gotta go, Chaz. Along with the rest of the unauthorized shit you brought in.”

Chaz barks out a disbelieving laugh, the knife hitting the cutting board with a sharp thwack. “What—you want me to carve chips with my teeth now? Or should I just use the plastic spatulas Clifton bought us?”

“It’s not my problem how you do it,” Jonathan snaps, his voice much sharper than he intended. “That’s the order. Get rid of it before Clifton walks through that door.”

Chaz steps into Jonathan’s space, close enough that Jonathan can see the real heat simmering in the chef’s eyes. “Look, Jonny—I don’t want to start shit. I’m not interested in messing up your friendship with Ryan. But my kitchen, my rules. I don’t give a toss what you, Melissa, or that asshole Clifton thinks.”

Jonathan's restraint finally snaps. The "Harry Styles" charisma evaporates, replaced by the cold, calculated pressure of his old life. "I'm sorry you feel that way—but you answer to the management team now. Do you understand that... Charlie?"

The name lands like a physical slap. Lydia freezes mid-scrub, the water still running, as she glances over.

"What did you just call me?" Chaz growls, his voice dropping an octave.

Before either man can move, Lydia steps in between them, towel in hand. She's calm, but there's iron underneath. "Oi—this is Red's, not some playground scrap. Take a breath, both of you."

Jonathan snaps at her without looking away from Chaz. "Stay out of this, Lydia."

She doesn't flinch. "Don't talk to me like I'm not here, Jonny. I'm the one who's going to be cleaning up the blood if you don't back off."

Chaz's jaw is tight, his pulse visible in his neck. "Don't talk to Lyds like that. She's right—you're being a dick."

Jonathan scoffs, turning on his heel to hide the fact that his hands are shaking. "Just do what you're told for once." He shoulders past Chaz and storms out through the swing door, the metal flaps vibrating violently behind him.

Silence rushes back into the kitchen, save for the low hum of the refrigerator. Lydia drops her cloth onto the stainless steel counter. "You good?" she asks softly.

Chaz blows out a long, shaky breath. "Yeah. Cheers for stepping in."

She gives him a small, wry smile. "Didn't expect you to have my back like that, to be honest."

"Course I did," Chaz says, shrugging it off, though a faint, appreciative grin returns. "He was bang out of order."

Lydia nudges him with her elbow. "Go on—get out for a sec. Smoke. Cool your head before Clifton gets here."

"Yeah. Good shout." Chaz tosses the knife onto the board and grabs his battered box of cigarette filters. "Don't burn the place down while I'm gone, yeah?"

She snorts as he disappears through the back door into the "space outside reality," leaving the faint echo of the bass still humming in the walls.

CHAPTER 6

Chaz steps out the back door, letting the heavy steel slam behind him. The cool Warwickshire air hits him, but it doesn't do much to dampen the fire in his chest. He digs out his battered pouch of tobacco, his fingers rolling a cigarette with the same instinctive care he gives his spice mixes.

By the back fence, near the overflowing recycling bins, he spots Phil. The barman is leaning against the brick wall, puffing on his vape like he's got all the time in the world.

"I finally see why Justin's got such a problem with that posh twat," Chaz says, not even trying to hide the jagged edge in his voice.

Phil raises an eyebrow, exhaling a thick cloud of sweet-smelling vapor. "What's 'the suit' done now?"

"Barged into my kitchen, throwing his weight around. Tells me to bin my gear because Melissa's on a power trip." Chaz sparks his lighter, the flame illuminating the frustration on his face. He takes a long, deep drag, smoke curling out of his nose. "Is it 'Pick on Chaz Week' or something? Did I miss the memo?"

Chaz flicks ash onto the cracked concrete, his jaw tight. "And the worst bit? He called me Charlie. That's my old man's name, Phil. Not mine."

Phil nods slowly, looking thoughtful. "I get it. That's out of line. Disrespectful." He pauses, taking another hit of his vape. "But—before you go full 'Hulk Smash' on the prep table—you do know why Mel's under such pressure, don't you?"

Chaz narrows his eyes, skeptical. "Go on then. Enlighten me."

Phil shifts his weight, the neon "Open" sign from the front reflecting faintly in the back window. "Her probation's nearly up. This visit from Clifton? It makes or breaks her. And she's the only one bringing in a paycheck right now—Andrew's leg is a mess, he can't work. If she loses this gig, she's screwed. And so are her kids."

Chaz snorts, a half-bitter sound. "So what? She throws me under the bus to save herself? How's that fair?"

"It's not fair," Phil says, his voice as calm and level as a stagnant pond. "But it's reality. Clifton wants everyone toeing the line, like little tin soldiers. Look what happened to Mike. You think Mel actually wants to kiss Clifton's arse? She's terrified, Chaz. There's a difference."

Chaz stares out at the empty car park, the glow of his roll-up burning lower. "She should stand up to him. That's what a manager does. She shouldn't be coming for me."

Phil bumps his arm lightly. "Mate, we don't all get the luxury of being stubborn bastards like you. She's got two little 'uns at home. She's fighting to keep the lights on—just like you would if it were your family."

Chaz doesn't answer. He just grinds the cigarette butt under the heel of his boot, his silence heavy.

Phil blows out a slow, final plume of vapor. "Listen—you and Mel keep butting heads, Clifton will just chuck you both and find two more robots who don't talk back. You don't want that, do you?"

Chaz huffs a humorless laugh. "Part of me does. Just to see this place burn."

"Yeah? And then do what? Buy a food truck and drive it across the country selling balti wraps?" Phil cracks a rare, genuine grin. "Come on. Be the bigger man for once. Keep the peace for the shift. I'm on your side, Chaz—but don't give Clifton a reason to fuck you over."

Chaz barks out a real laugh this time, faint but genuine. The "food truck" comment clearly hit a nerve. "Alright. I'll try and go easy on them. But I'm still standing my ground on the gear."

Phil grins, tapping him on the shoulder. "So you should. Just don't let him see the blades."

They stand there for a second longer, the tension easing just a touch in the shadow of the diner. Chaz wipes his palms on his apron, feeling the physical weight in his chest lift. "Cheers, Phil. You're a top bloke."

Phil nods, already heading for the door. "Likewise."

Chaz snorts, flicks the last of the ash off his boots, and they push back inside together, side by side, moving from "reality" back into the chaos of Red's.

CHAPTER 7

Melissa sits at her desk, her eyes fixed on the digital rota glowing on her screen. The quiet, rhythmic hum of the diner buzzes through the thin walls, but it's a sound she barely hears anymore. Suddenly, the door swings open without a warning—Jonathan storms in and drops heavily into the chair opposite her desk.

"Jonathan, knock next time," Melissa says sharply, swivelled toward him with tension already etched into every line of her features.

"I want to file a formal complaint—about Chaz," Jonathan states, his voice low but vibrating with firm, cold anger.

Melissa exhales slowly, pinching the bridge of her nose as if trying to physically squeeze away a migraine. "What now, Jonathan? What is it this time?"

"He was aggressive. Shoved right in my face—all because he refuses to ditch that bootleg equipment you told him to get rid of."

Melissa's gaze sharpens, cutting through his indignation. "And you? Did you say anything to make it worse? I know you, Jonathan. You have a way of being... provocative."

Jonathan's jaw tightens. "He called me 'Jonny.' Like I'm some kid. So I called him 'Charlie.'"

A short, bitter laugh escapes Melissa. "Right. Excellent. This isn't a playground, Jonathan. I want you to cool it. Now. In an hour, I want you to go back to the kitchen, but you keep your distance. Don't poke the bear."

Her voice hardens, the manager mask sliding back into place. "I won't have you dragging the whole team into this mess. Chaz and I—we'll deal with our issues. You stay out of it. Lydia stays out of it. Nobody else gets involved. Do you understand?"

Jonathan crosses his arms, frustration flashing in his eyes like a spark in a dark room. "And my complaint? I'm serious about this."

Melissa leans forward, her voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "Jonathan, listen to me very carefully. Clifton's visit today is everything. The last one nearly ruined us—Chloe nearly blew it, and we spent weeks doing damage control. I am not letting history repeat itself because you two have an ego problem."

She fixes him with a look colder than the walk-in freezer. "Sort your shit with Chaz. No more enemies. Especially not with the one person who actually knows how to work the line. You have Ryan. Stay in your lane."

Jonathan exhales sharply, the fight suddenly draining out of him under the weight of her stare. "Fine. I'll try. But if he comes at me again..."

Melissa nods, steepling her fingers. "He won't. Just do your job. Because if this explodes today, it won't be just your job on the line. It'll be all of us."

Jonathan stands and heads for the door without another word. As the door clicks shut, Melissa mutters under her breath, her eyes flicking back to the flickering light of the rota.

"There's something rotten in the air today," she whispers to the empty room. "And it's about to get much worse."

She sits back, fingers hovering over the keyboard, the invisible weight of David Clifton's impending arrival pressing down on her shoulders.

ACT TWO

CHAPTER 8

[6] Busy Earnin' by Jungle

At the front of house, the morning rush is in full swing. Justin weaves through the crowd carrying a tray of drinks, trying to maintain his rhythm, when a customer waves him down with a look of blunt frustration.

"Oi, this latte's gone cold. I asked for it hot, didn't I?" the man snaps, thrusting the cup toward Justin.

Justin forces a polite, practiced smile, though his grip on the tray tightens. "I'm very sorry about that, sir. I'll get a fresh one for you right away."

He hurries back to the bar, where the steam wand is hissing and Phil is methodically polishing glasses.

"Ryan, can you sort a fresh latte? Table six says this one's stone cold," Justin says, his voice tight.

Ryan nods, already reaching for a new cup without breaking his stride. Justin exhales quietly, his eyes darting around. He notices Jonathan is still missing—likely still in the office—and he looks at Ryan with a sudden, hesitant vulnerability.

"Ryan... can I ask you something?"

Ryan looks up, his expression friendly but guarded. "Yeah, what's up?"

Justin shifts his weight, the confidence he usually fakes nowhere to be found. "Are we still cool? I mean, you and Chloe... do you even like me anymore?"

Ryan raises an eyebrow, pausing the milk frother. "Why? What's brought this on all of a sudden?"

Justin swallows hard, looking down at the bar. "Because of Jonny. Ever since that night at the pub... things feel different. Like I'm on the outside looking in."

Ryan lets out a dry, weary laugh. "Justin, mate, you've changed since then. You're not the guy I used to know. You've become... difficult."

Justin's jaw tightens. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm dealing with stuff at home, alright? It's not easy."

Ryan shrugs, looking more tired than angry. "Just don't take it out on us, then. We're all in the same boat here."

"It's hard," Justin's voice cracks slightly, the sound buried under the hum of the diner. "When you're all hanging out, laughing about Harry Styles and balti nights, and I'm left out... it stings."

Ryan's expression softens for a fleeting second, but the memory of Justin's recent behavior keeps the edge in his voice. "Maybe if you stopped going after Jonathan every five minutes, we'd all hang out more."

The words hit home. Justin's eyes narrow, the hurt curdling back into defensiveness. "I can't, Ryan. After what he said that night? I just can't let it go. He thinks he's better than us."

Ryan looks at him, his voice low and final. "Then that's your problem, isn't it?"

He turns back to the coffee machine, effectively dismissing him. The silence stretches between them, filled only by the upbeat, funky brass of the music, until Phil slides a vanilla soya latte across the bar.

"Booth seventeen," Phil says quietly, his eyes lingering on Justin.

Justin grabs the cup, his shoulders stiff as a board, and stalks off through the tables without a thank you. Phil watches him go, then leans in toward Ryan. "I don't get why he's doing this to himself. If he keeps this up, he's gonna crash and burn. Hard."

Ryan watches Justin's retreating figure, his eyes heavy. "Yeah. I just want the old Justin back. Not... whatever this bitter version is."

"Excuse me!" the customer from table six calls out again, sharper this time. "Is that coffee coming today or tomorrow?"

Justin stops and pivots. "Your coffee's being remade as we speak, sir."

"I want it now. I've got to get to work!" the man demands, checking his watch.

Justin, feeling the pressure from both sides, calls back over his shoulder, "Ryan! How fast can you actually make a cup of coffee?"

Ryan smirks, not missing a beat as he pours the foam. "How long's a piece of rope, Justin?"

Justin frowns, his patience snapped. "Ryan, I need a serious answer!"

Phil grins from behind the bar, the first bit of humor he's shown all shift. "Oh, now you decide to be the serious one."

The tension breaks just enough for a few nearby customers to chuckle. Justin forces a tight smile for his table and steels himself for the next hour, unaware that the real challenge—David Clifton—is about to walk through the door.

CHAPTER 9

[7] Juggernauts by Enter Shikari

In the kitchen, the frantic, synth-heavy energy of Juggernauts echoes off the stainless steel. Chaz pulls a black bin bag from the roll and starts gathering up his unauthorized cooking equipment. He's halfway through packing his favorite paring knife when Lydia spots him.

"Chaz. Stop. Don't you dare throw them away," she says, moving quickly. She grabs the bag from his hands and drops it on the floor with a heavy, metallic thud.

"What's the point, Lyds?" Chaz sighs, staring down at the scattered knives and copper pans like they're evidence of a crime. "If it's gonna cause this much beef with the suits, I might as well just bin it, innit? Path of least resistance."

Lydia folds her arms over her apron, a sly, defiant grin creeping onto her face. "Or... we could just hide it."

Chaz squints at her, skeptical. "Hide it where? This kitchen isn't exactly full of secret compartments. If Melissa or Jonathan decide to check the cupboards, we're screwed."

"Then we don't hide it in the cupboards," Lydia says, raising an eyebrow.

Chaz huffs, rubbing the back of his neck. "Alright, smartarse—where then? Under the floorboards?"

She tilts her head, her eyes sparkling with the thrill of the rebellion. "Does anyone ever actually go into your little side office? That glorified broom closet behind the walk-in?"

"Only me. Unless I invite someone in for a bollocking," Chaz says slowly, the gears finally turning.

"Exactly. We stash the kit in there. If Jonathan asks why it's still on the premises, you tell him you're taking it home at the end of the shift. He can't prove otherwise."

Chaz lets out a low, conspiratorial chuckle. "And the second he stops sniffing around the pass, we bring it back out?"

Lydia taps her nose. "Bingo. The 'Plan B' stays alive."

Chaz shakes his head, a genuine grin finally breaking through the morning's frustration. "Alright, Lyds—you've convinced me. We'll stash it in the office until that posh twat and his tablet are out of our hair."

Lydia bends down, picking up the bin bag and handing it back to him. Chaz takes it, but then he pauses, looking at the thin plastic with a grimace of pure professional disgust.

“Actually... find a nicer bag, will ya? This kit is top-tier German steel. It’s good shit. It deserves better than a bloody bin bag.”

Lydia rolls her eyes, laughing as she heads off toward the staff room to find something more respectable. “You’re such a diva, Chaz!”

Chaz starts arranging the equipment neatly on the counter, his mood lifting with every blade he handles. He’s not just protecting his tools; he’s protecting his soul.

CHAPTER 10

Chloe sits in the staff room, headphones in, her eyes locked on a video playing on her phone. She’s trying to find a momentary escape in a Harry Styles interview, barely noticing the door swing open until Justin enters, rummaging through his bag for his water bottle with unnecessary force.

He spots her and waves dramatically, a mock-cheery gesture that doesn't hide his mood. Chloe sighs, pauses the video, and pulls out her earphones.

“Oh—hey, Justin,” she says, offering a small, cautious smile.

“So now you actually want to talk to me?” Justin snaps, sarcasm lacing every word.

Chloe’s shoulders slump. She rolls her eyes, the “Harry Styles” patience she’s been practicing finally wearing thin. “What is going on with you, seriously?”

He pops the cap off his bottle, glaring at her over the rim. “I don’t like how you lot let ‘Jonny’ into your circle—and leave me out in the cold. It’s pathetic.”

Chloe takes a deep, grounding breath. “Justin, you have to let this thing with Jonathan go. I worked incredibly hard to help him become a model employee. You promised me you wouldn’t ruin that progress.”

Justin laughs bitterly, a sharp, hollow sound. “I’m not ruining anything. I just want you guys to hang out with me more—and send Jonny back to being the rich snob he really is. He doesn’t belong here, Chloe.”

Chloe holds his gaze, steady and firm. “If you actually took five minutes to talk to him, you’d see he’s not that bad. He’s human, just like the rest of us.”

Justin’s jaw tightens, his eyes darkening. “Not that bad? Chloe, he’s fake. He didn’t learn from you because he cares about the team. He learned from you just to boost his career—to climb the ladder. He hasn’t changed; he’s just got better at acting.”

Chloe lets out a humorless laugh. “Or maybe he actually did change. And you just don’t want to believe it because then you’d have no one left to blame for being miserable.”

Justin shakes his head, his grip tightening on the plastic bottle until his knuckles turn white. “I tried, Chloe. You were there. You heard what he said about me at the pub. You heard how he looked down on me.”

She exhales, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Justin—if he said something mean, that’s his problem, not yours. Don’t let him live in your head rent-free. Let it go.”

He steps closer, his voice dropping but remaining edged with a jagged bitterness. "Whose side are you on, Chloe? Mine... or his?"

Chloe's eyes lift, cold and unwavering. "We're all on the same side, you idiot."

She doesn't wait for an answer. She slips her phone into her pocket, scoops up her half-eaten lunch, and dumps it into the bin with a finality that says more than any argument could.

She strides past him, the door swinging shut behind her and leaving her words echoing in the cramped, silent room.

Justin stands still for a beat, the adrenaline fading into a dull ache. He accidentally drops his water bottle; it hits the lino with a loud, hollow clatter. He flinches at the noise, then sinks onto the sagging sofa. He puts his elbows on his knees and presses his hand to his forehead.

Regret flickers through the anger—just enough to remind him that in his desperate attempt to keep his friends, he's doing a spectacular job of pushing them away.

CHAPTER 11

[8] Young Folks by Peter, Bjorn and John

The upbeat whistle of the music drifts through the diner. Ryan and Phil are behind the bar—Phil methodically working the steam wand, while Ryan is on one knee, restocking cans in the under-counter fridge.

"Watched Daisies yet?" Phil asks, not looking up from his latte art.

"Not yet, but I added it to my Letterboxd watchlist," Ryan replies, sliding a pack of Coke into place.

"That's a shame. I finally got round to watching Parasite over the weekend," Phil says, glancing down at him.

Ryan perks up instantly, a can frozen in his hand. "Ah, nice! One of my favorite films of the last decade. What did you think? Five stars?"

Phil shrugs with a wry look. "Don't get me wrong—visually stunning, brilliantly acted, solid story on paper. But... it's not a favorite. One-and-done for me. Just so I can say I've seen it."

Ryan frowns, genuinely puzzled. "You've got nothing against Asian cinema, do you? I keep recommending these masterpieces, and you always say they're just 'okay.'"

Phil laughs, wiping the steam wand. "I like Oldboy, Battle Royale, Hero, The Handmaiden. It really depends on the plot, Ryan."

Ryan chuckles, leaning against the fridge. "Yeah, right. Like you watched The Handmaiden for the 'plot.'"

"No, I just think it's better than Parasite," Phil counters with a grin.

Ryan laughs as he finishes the last of the cans. "Fair enough. I just love Parasite—the way it shows that class struggle could happen anywhere. You could even do a version set in Manchester."

Phil barks a laugh. "Nah. Remakes of foreign films never work, mate. I'd hate to see a gritty, English version of Cinema Paradiso set in a Salford Odeon."

Ryan wipes his hands on his apron and stands up. "What about The Departed? Or Vanilla Sky? Those worked."

Phil points a finger at him, smirking. "Exceptions, Ryan. Not the rule."

Their film banter is cut short as Chloe hurries past the bar. Her eyes are red-rimmed, and she's aggressively wiping fresh tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. Phil calls after her, his voice dropping the sarcasm for genuine concern. "You alright, Chloe?"

She stops, shaking her head, her voice cracking under the weight of the morning. "Justin yelled at me. He just won't let it go with Jonathan. He twisted everything I've done to help... he made it all about him. I just—"

She chokes up, the sob catching in her throat. Ryan is around the bar and beside her in a second, pulling her into a hug without a moment's hesitation.

Phil gives them space, watching Chloe bury her face in Ryan's shoulder. Ryan meets Phil's eyes over the top of her head, his expression hardening into something Phil hasn't seen before.

"Can you go get Melissa?" Ryan asks quietly.

Phil nods once and hurries off toward the office.

Ryan holds Chloe tighter, rubbing her back with a slow, calming rhythm. "Hey—take a breath. What did he say exactly?"

"He came into the staff room while I was eating," Chloe says through shaky, uneven breaths. "Started on about feeling left out. Accused me of only helping Jonathan to look good for Melissa, not because I cared. I just—I can't do this today, Ryan. Not with Clifton here."

Ryan rests his chin on the top of her head. "Shit. He needs to stop before he crosses a line he can't uncross."

She snuffles, managing a small, watery laugh against his chest. "Thanks, Ryan. I wish more people in this place were like you."

Ryan smiles softly into her hair, his voice barely a whisper. "Always here for you, Chloe. You know that."

Phil reappears a moment later with Melissa close behind—her brow is knitted in a deep furrow of concern as she crosses the floor. Phil lingers near the office door, arms folded, playing sentinel.

"Chloe, are you alright? What happened?" Melissa asks, her voice unusually soft.

Ryan glances over, not letting go of Chloe just yet. "She's just had a 'conversation' with Justin in the staff room. He's back on the Jonathan feud—he's making it personal now."

Just then, Justin emerges from the corridor. He freezes mid-step when he sees the tableau: Chloe wrapped in Ryan's arms, with Phil, Ryan, and Melissa all staring him down like a firing squad.

"Look, I didn't mean to make her cry, I was just—" Justin starts, his voice small, the guilt written in the way he won't meet their eyes.

"My office. Now," Melissa cuts in. Her tone isn't loud, but it's ice-cold and final.

Justin swallows hard, his eyes flicking to Chloe's shaking shoulders before dropping to the floor. He squares his shoulders, looking like a man walking to the gallows, and follows Melissa toward the back. The tension lingers in the diner like a thundercloud waiting to burst.

CHAPTER 12

[9] My Way by Limp Bizkit

Jonathan pushes through the swing door and finds Chaz and Lydia leaning against the stainless-steel counter, both glued to their phones in a rare moment of stillness. The muted, aggressive thump of Limp Bizkit drifts from the tiny speaker tucked precariously by the dish station.

He clears his throat, regaining his "Supervisor" posture. "Don't you two have work to do? Or is 'Phone Checking' the new daily special?"

Lydia doesn't even look up from her screen. "We've done it all, Jonny. Checked, prepped, and scrubbed."

Chaz shrugs, pocketing his phone. "Kitchen's spotless. 'Tony' is still bust, though, so I've had to stash the extra kit in the back. Can't do a proper service without it once the lunch rush hits."

Jonathan lets out a heavy sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. He looks at the "Staff Only" door, then back at them. "Alright—fine. You win. Use the gear if it's the only way to keep the line moving. But keep it out of sight whenever Melissa or Clifton are doing their rounds. I didn't see anything, alright?"

Chaz beams, throwing Lydia a smug, triumphant grin. "Knew I'd break you eventually, Jonny boy."

Jonathan shoots him a look, though the corner of his mouth twitches with the ghost of a smile. "Look—I'm not trying to start a war with you, Chaz. I've already got one going with that Yank twat out there."

Chaz's grin fades into something softer, more contemplative. "Justin's not perfect, mate. Believe me, I know. But he's got a heart of gold, really. He's just... lost."

Jonathan snorts. "Not today, he hasn't. He just laid into Chloe. Made her cry in front of the whole diner. Melissa's got him in the office now, probably reading him the riot act."

Lydia's eyes snap up, her protective streak flaring. "Why'd he go for Chloe? She's the nicest one here. She's the glue."

Jonathan crosses his arms. "He reckons I've hijacked his 'inner circle.' Like I'm the one pushing everyone away, and not his own shitty attitude."

Chaz's face hardens. "That's not like Justin. Him and Chloe... they were tight when she first started. He took her under his wing when she was just a runner."

Jonathan lets out a short, sharp laugh. "Yeah, well, now he's telling people I 'used' Chloe for my own motives. Like I'm some Machiavellian villain."

"Shit," Lydia mutters, shaking her head. "I bet Ryan's fuming. He doesn't take kindly to people messing with Chloe."

"He is. Last I saw, he was holding her by the bar—she was in bits, Chaz. Properly gutted."

Chaz's jaw twitches. The kitchen loyalty is shifting. "If one of us catches him out back, trust me—we'll be having words of our own."

Jonathan smirks, pushing off the counter and heading for the door. "Better get to Melissa's office. This is one show I don't want to miss. I want to see if he tries that 'tough guy' act on her."

He's halfway to the door when Chaz calls after him. "Oi—Jonathan."

Jonathan glances back, one eyebrow raised in question. "What?"

Chaz rubs the back of his neck, his shoulders dropping. The bravado is gone. "About earlier... the 'Charlie' thing. Sorry I lost it. I'm just protective of my kitchen, y'know? It's all I've got."

Jonathan's expression softens. He sees the man behind the chef's whites. "Don't worry about it. We're good." He cracks a small, genuine grin and pushes through the swing doors. The thump of Fred Durst's vocals swells for a moment before fading into the background of the diner.

Lydia glances at Chaz, her voice quiet. "Chloe and Justin used to be besties? I didn't see that coming."

"Yeah. Before you joined. He treated her like a little sister, really. Taught her the ropes, made sure the chefs didn't give her grief." Chaz's voice dips into something almost wistful.

"I always thought she was closer with Phil," Lydia says, leaning back against the counter.

"They were a trio. Phil, Justin, Chloe. The original 'Untouchables' of Red's. Then Ryan joined, and Jonathan got mixed in... and the chemistry just changed. Like a sauce breaking."

Lydia folds her arms. "Sounds like things were better before I got here. Before the new system."

Chaz shakes his head, staring at his empty prep station like it's a window to a time when work was just work. "It's not your fault, Lyds. It's just how it is. Things change. People break."

They stand there in silence, the bassline of the music rattling the metal cupboards—two chefs, stuck in the middle of a war they didn't start, watching their work family fracture.

CHAPTER 13

Jonathan slips into Melissa's office just as her calm, icy tone cuts through the stifling tension like a razor.

"Alright, Justin—let's talk about what happened with Chloe."

Melissa is standing, arms folded tightly over her chest, eyes locked on Justin with the kind of piercing look that makes grown men squirm.

"She was in tears because of something you said," Melissa continues, her voice dropping an octave. "That is completely unacceptable. We are a team here—we build each other up, we do not tear each other down. Especially not over petty, high-school jealousies."

Justin shifts in his chair, his body language bristling with a mix of shame and defiance. "I didn't mean to make her cry. I just... I felt left out. And Jonny here—" He jerks his chin toward Jonathan, who is leaning against the wall by the door. "He's got a big part to play in that. The day he started, he called me 'the biggest pain in the ass he's ever worked with.'"

Jonathan's eyebrows shoot up, caught off guard by the callback. "Oh, come off it! You were on my back from minute one—acting like I'd stolen your birthright or something!"

Justin glares at Melissa, the old wound reopening. "You know I should've been Assistant Manager. I've put in the years. I've done the shifts."

Melissa's jaw tightens, her voice remaining lethal. "Enough. Justin—you are not ready to be Assistant Manager. You lack the temperament. And Jonathan didn't steal anything; he was hired for a role. Frankly, your behavior lately proves my point every single day."

Justin tries for a retort, his chest heaving, but nothing comes. His mouth snaps shut.

Melissa leans forward, planting both palms flat on her desk. "Your attitude toward Chloe was out of line. Undermining her, twisting her hard work, and dragging your own insecurities into it? No. That is not how we operate. Consider this your final warning. Any more of this drama, and I will escalate this to the regional level—up to and including termination."

Justin stares at the floor, his throat bobbing as he swallows the bitter pill of the threat. "Got it," he mumbles.

Melissa's glare flicking to Jonathan. Her tone doesn't soften an inch. "And you—you're not off the hook either. You're supposed to be the Assistant Manager. You're supposed to be setting an example. You don't fix a feud by throwing schoolyard insults back and forth. You're better than that."

Jonathan lifts his hands, half-defensive. "But Melissa, I'm not the one who—"

"Doesn't matter!" she cuts in, her voice like a whip crack. "Grow up, both of you. Now."

Justin bristles again, his voice raw with a sudden surge of resentment. "Maybe 'Jonny' would be happier back in some cushy office, being the rich, arrogant snob he was born to be—"

Melissa slams her palm on the desk. BANG. The sound snaps the air in the tiny room.

"ENOUGH!"

Both men jump. Justin's eyes widen in genuine shock; Jonathan shifts, his lips pressed tight into a thin line.

"I have had it with this feud!" Melissa's voice is low now, but it shakes with a controlled fury. "You are both adults—start acting like it. This ends here. Today. You will drop it. You will work together. You will respect each other as professionals. Are. We. Clear?"

Jonathan lets out a slow, heavy breath, his shoulders finally sagging. "Understood, Melissa."

Justin's voice is barely a whisper, the fight drained out of him. "Yeah. Clear."

Melissa straightens up, her tone final and absolute. "Good. I expect you both to make this right with Chloe. This isn't a playground; it's a business. I do not have the time or the mental energy to babysit you."

The two men exchange a stiff, reluctant glance. It isn't a friendship, but it's a truce—a fragile, cold peace forged in the heat of Melissa's anger.

"Good." Melissa exhales, some of the physical tension leaving her frame. "Now get out of my office. Clifton is due any minute, and I don't need a single other problem today."

Justin drags himself out of the chair, staring at his shoes as he heads for the door. Jonathan lingers for just a second, his eyes meeting Melissa's—a flicker of guilt and shared pressure passing between them—before he follows Justin out.

The door clicks shut behind them, leaving only the low, mechanical hum of the air conditioning—and Melissa, massaging her temples with both hands, bracing herself for the arrival of the man who could end it all.

CHAPTER 14

[10] Lift Me Up by Five Finger Death Punch (feat. Rob Halford)

The kitchen is quiet for exactly two seconds after the doors close. Then, Chaz thumps his Bluetooth speaker onto the pass and cranks the volume. The guttural roar of the guitars shakes the metal spice racks. Lydia watches him, one eyebrow arched, as he rips the incoming ticket from the machine: Medium-rare steak, peppercorn sauce, chunky chips, onion rings.

Chaz cracks a wicked, jagged grin. "Time to make the best damn steak this place has seen since Mike left."

Lydia snaps her gum, arms folded. "Big talk for a man who almost got sacked for his kit ten minutes ago."

"Yeah, well—today we're making a point." He yanks open the fridge, grabs a marbled slab of ribeye, and slaps it down on the board. From his pocket, he pulls a tiny plastic bag of his "secret seasoning."

Lydia squints, leaning in. "Please tell me that isn't what it looks like."

"Course not," Chaz scoffs. "Secret rub. Passed down by my old man. Adds deep flavor—cuts the calories."

He works the rub into the meat like an artist with clay, his hands moving with a practiced, frantic speed. "Lydia! Chips and onion rings—triple cooked. Do not let them go soggy. Chop chop!"

"Yes, Chef!" She jumps to the fryers, the immediate hiss of hot oil and batter filling the air.

The steak hits the smoking-hot pan with a deafening roar. Chaz dances around the station, tossing in mushrooms and tomatoes—anything to push the dish over the top. He whips up a peppercorn sauce from scratch, the blue flame of the burning whisky whooshing up toward the vents. For a moment, the kitchen feels alive again—the pans hiss, the fans roar, and the metal clangs. It feels like the old days, before Clifton’s “Efficiency Drive” sucked the soul out of the room.

But when Lydia plates the golden fries and turns to see him slide the resting steak into “Heston”—the ancient, groaning microwave they’ve nicknamed for laughs—she hesitates.

“You sure about that?” she asks. “If Clifton walks in and sees the microwave running...”

“Relax.” Chaz smirks, his eyes wild. “Just keeping the plate warm.”

He spins back to the sauce, but his heavy boot skids on a fresh, slick patch of oil. Time seems to slow down. The saucepan tips. The peppercorn sauce sloshes across the steak—thick, gloopy, and grey—drowning the carefully seared meat.

“Shit!” Lydia squeaks, her hand over her mouth.

Chaz freezes. For a heartbeat, pure rage simmers behind his eyes—then he just shrugs, his jaw clenched tight. “He’d have drowned it in salt anyway. Send it.”

They wipe the edges of the plate with a dirty rag. Chloe appears at the pass, a forced, pained smile in place. “Is this for Booth Fourteen?”

“Yeah—steak’s a masterpiece, Choe,” Chaz says, his voice low and brittle.

They watch through the small rectangular window of the swing door. They see the customer’s face twist in immediate disgust as the plate lands. The man jabs a finger at the drowning steak. Chloe tries to de-escalate, but the man stands up, hurls an insult about “this greasy dump,” and storms out. Chloe catches Chaz’s eye through the glass, mouthing a silent ‘Sorry’ before she disappears into the chaos of the floor.

Silence rushes into the kitchen. Then—SMASH!

Chaz’s fist drives straight through the glass door of the microwave. Shards of “Heston” scatter across the stainless steel counter like diamonds. Lydia jumps back, her eyes wide with terror.

“Jesus, Chaz!” Lydia gasps. “You’ve lost it—what the fuck?!”

Chaz stands there, chest heaving, his breath hitching. Blood begins to well up between his battered knuckles, dripping onto the prep bench. A sick, manic grin splits his face. “Don’t worry about my hand, Lyds. Heston’s the real loss here.”

He flexes his fingers, each movement leaving a smear of red on his whites. “Think about it. Tony’s bust. Now Heston’s dead. Clifton’s precious new system? It’s a pile of shit without these machines. He’ll have no choice but to bring back the old ways. Real cooking. Real gear. Real chefs.”

Lydia’s eyes dart from the ruined microwave to his dripping fist. “You didn’t have to break your bloody hand to prove a point, you lunatic.”

"Sometimes you gotta break shit to fix shit," Chaz growls. He tears a strip of cloth from a nearby rag and starts wrapping his knuckles, a hiss of pain escaping through his teeth.

She watches him, unsettled but strangely impressed by the raw defiance. "So what now? We just keep sabotaging the place?"

Chaz grins, his teeth bared. "We're not just cooking anymore, Lyds. We're fighting a insurgency. One broken machine at a time."

Lydia shudders, grabbing her vape from her pocket. "You're a psycho, you know that?" She ducks out the back door into the alley, needing the cold air.

Chaz stands alone in the haze of meat smoke and the sharp, metallic tang of his own blood. He stares at the shattered microwave—the literal "black box" of corporate catering—and cracks a dry, echoing laugh.

"Clifton wants a war?" he mutters, tightening the bloody bandage on his fist. "War's what he'll get."

ACT THREE

CHAPTER 15

Lydia pushes open the heavy back door, blinking as the midday sun bounces off the grimy concrete of the delivery yard. She spots Justin leaning against the battered wooden fence, a half-finished cigarette dangling from his fingers, ash drifting onto his trainers.

She raises an eyebrow, flicking her vape on with a practiced click. "Heard you managed to upset just about everyone in a three-mile radius today."

Justin doesn't look over. He drags deep on the cigarette, his eyes fixed on a singular crack in the concrete. "Not now, Lydia. I really don't need another lecture from the back-of-house."

She snorts, blowing out a cloud of sweet-smelling vapor. "Relax—I'm not your mum. And I'm certainly not Melissa."

He flicks his ash, his jaw working as he tries to find the words. "I feel like shit about Chloe. She's like a little sister to me. Hurting her was the last thing I wanted to do."

"That, my friend," Lydia says, tapping her vape against her palm, "is called guilt. It means you've still got a conscience tucked away under all that bitterness. Now, the question is: what are you going to do with it?"

Justin lets out a short, bitter laugh, smoke curling past his lips. "It's just... she's been so tight with Jonny lately. Ryan, too. It makes me feel like I'm the odd one out. Like they're just waiting for me to quit so they can be a happy little trio."

Lydia shakes her head, half-amused, half-pitying. "They do want you around, you muppet. But you made everything about you. This beef with Jonathan? That's your mess. Chloe was just standing in the way when you decided to let the shrapnel fly."

Justin rubs his temple, squinting at a sad little patch of weeds by the bins. "I didn't mean to lose it. I just thought... maybe she was turning on me, too. Choosing the 'Model Employee' over the guy who's been there since she first walked in."

Lydia's voice softens, though she keeps her edge. "You know Chloe. She's fought tooth and nail to get where she is. She's trying to move forward, Justin. You were supposed to have her back—not twist the knife because you're paranoid about a guy in a slim-fit suit."

Justin doesn't fight it. He just nods, his shoulders sagging as the bravado finally evaporates. "I've gotta fix it. But... what if she doesn't forgive me? I wouldn't blame her if she didn't."

Lydia shrugs, pocketing her vape. "Then at least you tried. That's what matters in this dump. Nobody's perfect, but owning your shit? That's where the change starts."

Justin lets out a huff—a bit lighter this time, like the pressure in the yard is finally equalizing. "Yeah. You're right. I'll talk to her."

"Good lad." She elbows him in the ribs. "Go on. Get in there before you overthink it and turn back into a dick."

He hesitates, his voice dropping low, barely audible over the hum of the kitchen extractor fan. "Can you keep a secret, Lyds?"

Lydia cocks an eyebrow. "Try me. I'm a vault."

He glances around the yard to ensure they're alone. "Ever since missing out on that promotion... I feel like my time's up here. If my acting gigs keep drying up and I can't move up in this place—maybe it's time to get out. Start over somewhere else. Somewhere without kiosks."

Lydia's face falls for a fleeting second. "Don't say that. You'd be giving people like Clifton—and yeah, even Jonny—exactly what they want. A clean slate with no one left who remembers how things used to be."

Justin gives a small, tired laugh. "Honestly? This place isn't what it was. Mike would hate what it's turning into. He'd hate that we're all at each other's throats."

Lydia hums, her eyes narrowing in thought. "Yeah. Maybe he would. But don't run just because it's hard right now. You run, they win. You stay? You've still got a chance to fix the culture."

Justin lets that sink in. The corner of his mouth twitches—almost a smile. "Guess I'd better go out there and face the music, then."

"Good. Get back in there." She flicks her vape off with a snap. "Prove you're still worth fighting for."

Justin stubs out his cigarette on the fence post, crushing it under his boot. He straightens his apron and meets her eyes—and for a moment, he looks like the old Justin again. The one before the promotion passed him by.

"Thanks, Lydia. For not tearing me a new one."

She smirks, tugging the back door open. "Lucky for you it was me out here. If it was Chaz? You'd be wearing a soup ladle as a hat right now."

They both chuckle, the tension breaking just enough to feel like hope. Justin claps his hands together, psyching himself up. "Right. Time to fix my mess."

“Damn right.” Lydia gives him a playful shove toward the door. “And for what it’s worth—you better come back. We’re not done with you yet.”

Justin shoots her a grateful smile, then steps back inside—leaving the quiet of the yard for the storm brewing in the diner.

CHAPTER 16

Melissa sits alone in her office, the low, irritating hum of her computer fan and the soft scratch of her pen the only sounds in the cramped room. Stacks of reports, cost forecasts, and feedback forms are spread across her desk in precise, clinical piles—but her eyes glaze over them, her mind already spinning three moves ahead to the next crisis.

A knock slices through her focus—soft, but deliberate. It isn’t the frantic rap of an employee or the tentative knock of a regular. It’s a knock that expects an answer.

She takes a quick, sharp breath, smoothing her hair and fixing her face into a mask that is bright but unreadable. “Come in.”

The door swings open. David Clifton steps inside like a chill creeping under a doorframe—his tailored charcoal suit is immaculate, and the subtle, sharp scent of expensive aftershave drifts behind him, instantly colonizing the small space.

“Hello, Melissa.” His voice drips with a forced, oily warmth. His eyes are already sweeping the room, scanning the stacks of paper like a hawk sizing up a field of prey.

She forces a pleasant, professional laugh. “David, hi. I wasn’t expecting you quite this early. Please—take a seat.”

Clifton closes the door with a click that echoes off the narrow walls, then lowers himself into the chair opposite her desk. He crosses one leg over the other, opens a slim leather notebook, and taps a heavy gold pen against the page with a rhythmic, hypnotic click-click-click.

“You look surprised to see me,” he says, his tone almost amused. “You did know I’d be dropping in today? I trust my calendar invite didn’t end up in your spam folder.”

“Of course.” Melissa gives a small, casual shrug, clasping her hands on the desk to hide the white-knuckle tension in her fingers. “I just had a lot to deal with in the office today. Phil’s even working overtime to help keep the floor moving while I’m tied up with the figures.”

Clifton’s eyes flicker, and he smiles—all teeth, no warmth. “Yes, well. I thought we’d begin at the top of the hierarchy this time. Work our way down.”

Melissa clears her throat. “Was anyone around to greet you, David? I hope the front of house was attentive.”

He pauses, relishing the tiny win of her flinch. “Yes, it was that young lady who spilt coffee on my shoe during my last visit. Miss Parker, isn’t it?”

Melissa nods stiffly. “Yes, Chloe. She’s one of my new supervisors. She’s come a long way in a very short time.”

Clifton makes a noise halfway between a laugh and a scoff, flipping through his notebook. “Tell me again why you thought she was ready for a leadership role? Last time I checked, she was more interested in her phone than our KPIs.”

“Because,” Melissa says, her voice remarkably even despite the pulse thudding in her throat, “she turned Jonathan into a model employee. She works harder than people twice her age when she’s given a reason to care. She deserved the chance to prove herself.”

Clifton hums, the gold pen tapping again. “I see. And how is that ‘care’ paying off for the company now?”

“She’s only been in the role a week, David. Give her a chance to find her feet.”

Clifton leans forward, his eyes suddenly sharp as scalpels. “Melissa, I’ve given you a chance at this job. Since we implemented the new cost-control system, your branch has been... underwhelming. Footfall is down. Sales are down. And don’t get me started on the locals—I hear they’re migrating to that dingy Wetherspoons up the street just to avoid our kiosks. How embarrassing for us.”

“It’s a transition period.” Melissa’s voice remains steady, but her nails are digging crescents into her palms. “The regulars don’t like the new interface yet. And the staff—well, it’s taking longer than I’d hoped for them to adjust to the automated stock logs.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Ah yes, the staff. It’s always ‘the staff’ with you, Melissa.” He flips a page, scanning. “I heard from an... ‘interesting’ anonymous review that you and Charles had a bit of a heated disagreement over the food pass this morning.”

Melissa’s eyes flash, but she tamps the fire down. “Chaz can be stubborn. He takes immense pride in his kitchen. He’s never liked management meddling with his workflow.”

“So you let him run riot?” Clifton’s tone hardens, and the room feels like it’s shrinking by the second. “Remind me, who is the manager here? You... or him?”

She fights to keep her breathing level. “I am the manager. And Jonathan has been keeping a closer eye on the kitchen, making sure the pass and stock control are up to the new corporate standards.”

Clifton’s pen stops tapping. The silence that follows is deafening.

“Jonathan is ‘monitoring’ your chefs?” he says, his voice low and dangerous. “Interesting. And yet... the steak that just went to table fourteen was a disaster. Things still keep slipping, Melissa.”

Melissa feels a bead of sweat trickle under her collar. She shifts in her seat, but his stare pins her in place like an insect in a display case.

He shuts his notebook with a soft, final snap. “I think it’s time I had a word with Charles myself. Make it clear to him who is really in charge of this kitchen—and exactly what happens to people who keep resisting our system.”

Melissa forces her lips into a brittle, porcelain smile, but her throat feels like it’s closing up. “Of course. I’ll take you through now.”

Clifton stands, tugging the cuff of his suit jacket until it’s perfectly smooth. That same predatory smile plays at the corners of his mouth. “Excellent. Let’s go remind your staff who they actually work for.”

Melissa rises, gathering her paperwork just to have something to do with her shaking hands. She feels the weight of him behind her as they step out of the office—his footsteps are crisp, deliberate, and loud. Hers are careful, desperate not to betray the knot twisting in her gut.

CHAPTER 17

[11] Things in Life — Dennis Brown

The hum of the diner picks up again as the afternoon lull gives way to the next wave. The clink of cutlery, the hiss of the steam wand, and the low chatter of the Stratford locals—the everyday noise that used to comfort Justin—now feels like a test he’s only just barely passing.

Justin is restocking napkins near the pass when a young guy at Booth 4 raises a hand. “Excuse me, mate?”

Justin glances up, his posture reflexively bracing for a conflict. “Hey—everything okay?”

The customer shifts awkwardly, looking at his empty table. “Yeah, sorry—I ordered a strawberry milkshake about five minutes ago on the kiosk. Just wondered if it was coming?”

Justin’s eyes flick toward the bar. Ryan and Phil are slammed, their hands moving in a blur of glass and steel. Chloe is just returning to the counter after taking a large order at the window. He nods, keeping his voice level. “I’ll check on that for you right now, sir. Sorry for the wait.”

The guy gives him a polite smile. Justin walks back behind the pass and spots Chloe placing clean cups onto a tray. He clears his throat, his heart hammering against his ribs.

“Chloe.”

She doesn’t look up. Her movements are efficient, cold. “What now, Justin? I’ve got orders backed up.”

He flinches but pushes through the wall of her silence. “Look—I just wanted to say sorry. For the staff room earlier. For making everything about me when it was never meant to be. You’ve done so much for this place... for Jonny... and for me. And I twisted it. I was out of line. Way out of line.”

Chloe pauses, her hands hovering over a stack of saucers. Her eyes are guarded as she finally looks at him. “You hurt me, Justin. You know that, right?”

“I know.” His voice is rough, lacking any of his usual theatricality. “And I hate myself for it. You’re family to me, Chloe. I’m not proud of how I’ve been lately.”

Chloe sighs, watching him for a beat, searching for the “old Justin” behind the bitterness. Before she can answer, Ryan pipes up from the bar, not stopping his work but clearly listening.

“You apologizing to her means you’re apologizing to all of us, yeah?” Ryan asks, glancing over.

Phil leans on the counter, arms folded over his chest, his expression deadpan as ever. “You’ve been a proper pain in the arse today, mate. Even for you.”

Justin lets out a small, shaky laugh. "I didn't want to lose you lot. I felt so left out that I just... I lashed out at the people who actually care. I'm sorry. I'll do better. No more feuds. No more dragging you into my shit."

Ryan gives him a long, measuring look—then finally breaks into a grin. "Good. Because you're stuck with us, whether you like it or not. We need someone to complain about the kiosks with."

Phil elbows Justin lightly as he passes. "Especially now we know you're crap at holding a grudge."

Chloe lets her guard drop, just a fraction. A small bit of the "Hollow's Reach" bond returns to her eyes. "No more guilt-tripping. No more bitterness. Are we clear, Justin?"

Justin nods vigorously. "Crystal."

She offers the smallest, most tentative smile—then nods toward the diner floor. "Good. Now get out there and be useful. And Justin? Don't forget Booth 4's milkshake."

Justin laughs under his breath, feeling the weight in his chest finally begin to dissolve. "Yeah. On it."

As he steps away to wipe down the tables, the blender finally whirs to life. The ticket for that strawberry milkshake still hangs above the bar—a small, pink promise waiting to be made right.

As Dennis Brown's warm, reggae groove fills the space, the team slips back into their familiar dance: the job, the banter, and the tiny, fragile feeling that maybe—just maybe—there's hope for the Red's crew after all.

CHAPTER 18

[12] The Trooper - Iron Maiden

The kitchen swing doors fly open just as the galloping triplets of The Trooper begin to echo off the white-tiled walls. Chaz stands at the pass, his sleeves rolled up to the elbows, a defiant scowl hidden behind a half-grin. Lydia is by the industrial sink, clutching a mop as if it might serve as a shield against what's coming.

"Charles."

Clifton's tone is crisp—no warmth, no hint of humor. It's the sharp crack of a whip in a small room.

Chaz doesn't flinch. He tosses a damp cloth onto the stainless-steel counter and turns, flashing his teeth. "Big Dave. Surprised to see you back here. What's the matter? Not posh enough for you out front? Too many peasants?"

Clifton doesn't blink. He takes a single step closer, radiating a suffocating calm that makes the air feel heavy.

"Two questions, Charles. Why is your hand wrapped in a bloody rag? And why does my microwave have a shattered door?"

Melissa's eyes dart from Chaz's bandaged fist to the glittering shards of glass piled in the bin. "Chaz, please tell me you didn't—"

"I slipped," Chaz interrupts, his voice drenched in a mock, sugary innocence. He lifts his hand like Exhibit A. "Cut my hand open on a shelf. Lucky I know first aid, eh? Occupational hazard."

Lydia pipes up from the corner, her eyes flicking nervously between the managers. "Yeah. Total accident. Wet floor, bad step. These things happen in a high-pressure environment."

Clifton ignores her entirely. His gaze pins Chaz to the spot. "So. First, the prep machine 'breaks.' Now this. Do you realize this system is designed to keep you from playing 'Chef Cowboy' in your little outlaw kitchen? It's about consistency, Charles. Not ego."

Chaz's smirk finally falters. His jaw twitches, a vein pulsing in his neck. "The system's broken, mate. Everyone knows it. The machines break because they're cheap, the food is shit because it's frozen, and the customers notice. When they notice, they walk. Bring back the old ways—proper cooking, real prep. Let me run this the way it's meant to be run."

Melissa opens her mouth to speak, but Clifton lifts a hand, silencing her without a look. His stare hardens into something predatory.

"No."

Chaz steps forward, the heat rising in his face. "You'd rather keep pushing out crap reheats? Have us cover it up with fancy plating so the rubes don't notice? You'd rather let the reviews tank while we stand here pretending we're actual chefs?"

Melissa cuts in, her voice tight and high-pitched. "Chaz, stop."

"No, Mel!" Chaz's voice cracks like a blade hitting bone. "Back me up for once, yeah? You know it's shit. You know 'Tony' is a paperweight, the new system's a joke, and the food's bland enough to make a dog sick—"

"It's not your call!" Melissa snaps back. She looks small standing next to him, but her eyes are as sharp as broken glass. "This isn't your kitchen anymore. It's not Mike's kitchen anymore. It is David's decision."

The mention of Mike hits Chaz like a physical blow to the stomach. His fists tighten, fresh red blood beginning to seep through the white gauze of his bandage.

"Oh, brilliant," he sneers, his words slurring with a cocktail of fury and exhaustion. "So you're just bending over for this suit? A man who's never lifted a ladle in his life? How's that feel, Mel? Does it taste like a promotion?"

"Don't you dare—" she starts, her voice trembling.

Chaz steps closer, his voice dropping to a low, guttural growl. "It's pathetic. You're just his pet now. Same for all of you. Maybe Mike should've known you'd sell him out the second they put a shiny new tablet in front of you."

The room goes dead still. Lydia freezes, the mop dripping onto her shoes. Clifton's expression barely changes—only a slight tightening at the corners of his eyes betrays his presence.

Then Clifton's voice slices through the silence—low, lethal, and final.

"One more word, Charles. Just one. And you are out. I will personally see to it that you never set foot in a kitchen with our logo on the door ever again. Am I clear?"

Chaz looks at Melissa. He sees the sheer exhaustion in her eyes, the resignation of someone who has already lost the war. Then he looks at Clifton—the unflinching, corporate machine that is currently winning.

He opens his mouth, the air catching in his throat. No words come. Instead, his breath comes out in a ragged, broken hiss. He slams his bandaged hand against the metal prep table—a loud, hollow ring that sounds like a warning shot.

Clifton watches him for a beat, unmoved, then turns on his heel. "Let's go, Melissa. We have much to discuss."

Melissa hesitates, her voice barely a whisper as she passes the pass. "Don't make this worse, Chaz. Please."

The swing doors flap shut behind them. The mop clatters to the floor as Lydia edges toward the side office, closing the door behind her and leaving Chaz alone with the soaring Iron Maiden riffs and the roar of the ventilation fans.

He stares at his bleeding knuckles, breathing hard. For the first time in ten years, the kitchen doesn't feel like his at all. And as the music fades into the distance, that realization hurts more than the glass in his hand.

CHAPTER 19

[13] The Moment by Tame Impala

Back on the café floor, the late-afternoon buzz feels different now—heavier, like the thick, humid static before a summer storm. Justin weaves between the tables, his tray balanced on one hand and a practiced, manic grin painted on his face. It's a mask that looks like it might crack at the slightest touch. He knows every pair of eyes in the building is tracking him: the exhausted staff, the impatient customers, and David Clifton's ever-judging shadow looming near the bar.

At Booth 4, the young man raises his hand again—the polite version of a physical slap.

"Excuse me?" he says, his voice tight with a suppressed, mid-afternoon rage.

Justin pivots on his heel, forcing a warmth into his tone that he doesn't feel. "Yes, sir—what can I do for you?"

The customer stabs a finger at the empty, sweating coaster on his table. "That strawberry milkshake. I ordered it nearly an hour ago. An hour, mate. People have been served three-course meals in less time."

A single bead of sweat slides down Justin's spine. "I am so sorry, sir. We've just been hit with a massive rush. I'll chase it up at the bar right now. Personally."

He spins away, his throat feeling like it's closing up. Over at the bar, the "system" is failing. Ryan is wrestling with a broken syrup pump that's leaking blue liquid over his hands, while Phil is hammering a fresh milk jug into the steamer, a cloud of scalding white mist fogging up his glasses. Chloe brushes past, a tray of lattes in her hand; her eyes flit to Justin for a fraction of a second, but she moves on—she's too slammed to throw him a lifeline.

Near the corridor, Clifton walks the floor like a warden on an inspection tour. Melissa trails him, her smile looking more like a grimace as she tries to keep up with his brisk, predatory pace.

“Honestly, Melissa,” Clifton sneers, flicking through his little black notebook without looking at her, “it’s becoming painfully clear who is dragging the standards of this branch down into the gutter.”

“We’re doing our absolute best, David—”

But she’s cut off by the sight at the pass. Justin and Jonathan are squared off like prizefighters over a single glass. Jonathan’s jaw is clenched so tight his teeth might snap. Justin’s shoulders are quaking with adrenaline.

“Justin,” Jonathan’s voice is low, vibrating with a lethal, corporate authority. “Hot drinks first. That is the system. That is the priority list.”

Justin points a trembling finger at the lone pink milkshake sitting on the pass. “Jonny, that man is ready to walk out. You want him leaving a one-star review on his way out over a bloody milkshake? Just let me take it!”

Jonathan reaches for the glass, his face a mask of cold logic. “We do the hot drinks first. Always. The machine is backed up.”

Justin blocks him with a sharp, desperate elbow. “He’s been waiting forever for this, man! He’s had enough of your ‘system’!”

Jonathan tries again, his voice rising, drawing the attention of the nearby tables. “You are not the boss here, Justin! Step aside!”

They lock eyes, the ambient noise of the café curling around them like barbed wire. Chloe slows down near them, her eyes darting between her friends. Ryan and Phil freeze mid-shift. Even Clifton’s lips curl into something hungry—he’s finally found the spark for the match he’s been waiting to light all day.

“Gentlemen,” Clifton says, every syllable dipped in slow-acting poison, “is there a problem here that requires my intervention?”

Justin, pushed past the point of reason, spits back before his brain can catch up to his mouth. “Stay out of this, Dave—”

In that moment of distraction, Jonathan lunges for the drink. Justin jerks the glass back in a panic—and it slips.

Time slows to a crawl.

The bright pink milkshake arcs through the air like a doomed, sugary firework. A thick, strawberry wave explodes across Clifton’s pristine, starched white shirt. It spatters his silk tie, drips down his jaw like neon-pink blood, and a single, lonely chunk of strawberry clings to his stiff collar.

A collective, jagged gasp rips through the café. Forks freeze mid-air. A teenager at the window table snaps a photo. Even the coffee machine stops hissing, as if the boiler itself has died of shock.

Justin's hand hovers in empty air, fingers still curled around a glass that isn't there. His mouth flaps uselessly. "Mr. Clifton—I... I'm so incredibly sorry."

Clifton looks down at his chest, then back up at Justin. The disbelief on his face melts into something truly monstrous—a cold, quiet fury that is worse than any shout.

"You... YOU IDIOT!" Clifton's voice suddenly booms across the diner like a thunderclap. "Do you have any idea how much this shirt cost?! I HATE strawberries!"

The baby at Table 2 starts wailing. Chloe's hand flinches toward Justin's arm, but she's frozen, unable to bridge the gap.

"It was an a—" Justin tries to stammer.

"How DARE you talk back to me! How DARE you humiliate me in front of these people!" Clifton roars, his eyes practically bugging out of his head. "YOU'RE FIRED! Do you hear me? FIRED! Hand in your apron and get out!"

Justin's mouth remains open, but nothing comes out but shallow, ragged breaths. A soft, pathetic squeak of a protest.

Ryan mutters under his breath, his eyes wide. "Oh, shit..."

Melissa tries to step in, her voice small and pleading. "Mr. Clifton, please—it was an accident, they were just under pressure—"

"Enough!" Clifton turns on her, his face a mottled purple. "One more word from you and you're out too! ALL OF YOU—replaceable, pathetic, amateur little children!"

He rips a napkin from the bar dispenser, smearing the pink foam across his shirt in a frantic, useless motion that only makes the stain bigger and uglier. His expensive leather shoes squelch in the puddle of strawberry carnage at his feet.

With a final, guttural snarl, Clifton storms through the swing doors toward the back—the thud of the door echoing like a slammed coffin lid.

Justin stands frozen in the wreckage. The sticky pink puddle drips off the counter, seeping into the toes of his shoes. The chatter in the room picks up again in jagged, excited whispers. Another phone snaps a photo. The Tame Impala track continues to loop overhead, bright and airy—cruel in its synth-pop calm.

Chloe's voice barely breaks the hush. "Justin... I—"

He turns to Melissa, his eyes shining with unshed tears, his throat raw. "Mel—please. Don't let him do this. I can fix it. I was just trying to help the customer..."

Melissa's eyes brim with a deep, weary pity, but she's already shaking her head, her gaze dropping to the floor. "I'm sorry, Justin. There's nothing I can do. Not after that."

Through the big glass window, the entire staff watches as David Clifton stomps away down the Stratford high street, blotches of pink trailing behind him like a corporate curse. Justin feels the weight of every eye in the café—each one carving him up until he feels like he's already gone.

CHAPTER 20

The adrenaline of the day has curdled into a ghost of itself. The frantic hum of the coffee machine has sputtered out its final, weary hiss, and the lights have been dimmed, glowing low and amber across empty tables wiped clean of crumbs, salt, and complaints. It feels too quiet—as if the café itself is holding its breath, waiting for a noise that isn't coming.

Only Phil and Jonathan remain behind the bar, the rhythmic, hollow clink of glasses the only thing keeping the silence from swallowing them whole.

From the staff hallway, the back door creaks open. Justin steps out, his heavy backpack slung over one shoulder, his uniform shirt untucked and hanging loose. He pauses, his feet finding the familiar spot on the floorboards, taking in the scene one last time: the menus stacked by the till, the stale, lingering scent of fryer oil, and the faint, sticky smears of pink on the floor that they'll likely be finding for weeks.

It hits him then, deep in his chest. This is it. It's really over.

He crosses to the bar where Phil is rinsing out the last milk jug. Phil's eyes are rimmed red, but his posture is defiant.

"Guess this is it, mate," Justin says, his voice rough but steadier than he expected. "No more screaming matches over the milk trap."

Phil lets out a short, sharp laugh—but it's brittle, catching in his throat. "Nah. Red's won't be the same without you winding us up. Or launching milkshakes at Clifton's overpriced shirts." He tries to smirk, but his eyes betray him. "Even when you were being a right knob, you were *our* knob."

Justin's grin flickers at the edges. "I could always count on you to back me up, Phil. Even when you really shouldn't have."

Phil sets the jug in the sink with a soft clatter and wipes his hands on a grey tea towel, his shoulders pulled tight. "You gonna be alright? I mean, proper alright?"

Justin looks around the empty café floor, his eyes tracing the dents in the bar and every crooked poster on the wall, memorizing the geography of his youth. He swallows hard against the lump in his throat. "Yeah. There's work out there. Maybe somewhere that doesn't serve strawberries."

Phil barks out a real laugh this time, his voice cracking. "Oi—promise me you'll text, yeah? Ghost me and I'll break into your new gaff and tell everyone you can't even make a decent latte."

Justin throws an arm around him, and they hug—a messy, bone-deep embrace that tries to say everything words can't quite manage. When they pull apart, Justin's eyes drift to Jonathan. The Assistant Manager is still behind the bar, methodically stacking glasses as if their alignment is the only thing keeping the building from collapsing.

Justin takes a breath and steps closer. "Well, Jonny boy..." he starts, but the old, sharp bite isn't there. There's only exhaustion. "Looks like you win."

Jonathan doesn't look up at first. He just keeps aligning the glasses—neat, precise, and cold. "It was never about winning, Justin. You did this to yourself. You know that."

"I know." Justin's voice is low now. Honest. "I was a dick. I pushed everyone too far. You lot deserved better than the version of me that showed up lately."

Jonathan's eyes flick up—a brief, flickering spark of something human behind the corporate frost, but it vanishes as quickly as it appeared. “For what it's worth...” He shrugs, his face returning to its mask. “You didn't deserve Clifton's temper. But don't look for pity. Not here.”

Justin lets out a soft, tired laugh. “Same old Jonny. Always too straight to bend.”

“Someone had to be,” Jonathan shoots back, his jaw tightening. “You were nothing but chaos.”

The silence swells between them—filled only by the low, mechanical hum of the fridge and the sound of Phil's mop sloshing through the last of the pink residue. The place suddenly feels too big for just three people.

Justin adjusts his bag, hugging it close to his chest like a shield. “Look after them, yeah? Ryan, Chloe, Phil. Even Lydia. They're good people, Jonny.”

Jonathan bristles, his professional ego flaring. “Don't tell me how to do my job.”

Justin holds his hands up, surrender in his shoulders. “Yeah. Fair enough. No hard feelings.”

He turns and pushes through the swing door—the soft *whoosh* of the air sounding like the end of a movie reel. A moment later, the front door bell gives a final, lonely jingle as he leaves Red's behind, taking the last of the day's warmth with him into the London night.

Phil leans on his mop, staring at the empty doorway as if he half-expects Justin to burst back in with one last smart remark. But there's nothing. Just the hum of the fridge and the soft, repetitive clink of glass on glass.

Jonathan finally feels the weight of Phil's gaze but won't meet it. “What?” he snaps, defensive and sharp. “He made his bed.”

Phil's voice is tired but cutting as it slices through the hush. “You ever think you could've helped him fix it? Instead of just piling the blankets higher?”

Jonathan stiffens, his eyes locked on the row of spotless, identical glasses. “I'm not his babysitter, Phil.”

The silence lands heavy—a silence that sounds like something vital is missing. Like the laughter has been sucked out of a place that badly needs it. Jonathan places the last glass down, lining it up perfectly.

Behind the bar, the café hums in its half-lit, lonely hush—smaller now, emptier, and echoing with the ghost of a voice that once filled every corner.

CHAPTER 21

Chaz and Ryan were slouched on the battered old sofa in Chaz's cramped flat, takeaway boxes scattered across the coffee table like relics from a long, losing week. The low hum of the TV filled the quiet, broken only by the occasional rustle of grease-stained paper or the dull clink of a glass.

Chloe sat nearby in a mismatched armchair, scrolling through her phone, but her eyes flicked up every so often, tuned into the heavy mood of the room. Lydia leaned against the kitchenette doorway, arms folded over her chest, observing them all with a small, knowing smile.

"Sucks about Justin losing his job," Ryan said finally, picking at a stray, cold chip with half-hearted interest.

Chaz let out a dry, rattling chuckle. "Yeah. Honestly, I'm just lucky I didn't get the chop too. Clifton was practically vibrating with rage—threatened to make sure I never work at a Red's again for 'speaking my mind.'"

Chloe looked up, her expression softening into genuine concern. "Are you okay, Chaz? Really?"

Chaz shrugged, staring at his bandaged hand. "I guess. Just feels like maybe it's time to move on. Find somewhere I can actually cook the way I want to, y'know? No more frozen stock, no more kiosks, and no more broken burners."

Lydia nodded slowly. "You've been itching for that change for a while. Can't blame you for wanting to jump ship before it hits the iceberg."

Ryan frowned, his gaze drifting to the empty takeaway boxes. "But with Justin gone, and now you maybe leaving... I don't know what Red's is gonna look like anymore. It'll just be a building full of tablets. And Chloe—if you leave for a better gig, that's the heart of the place gone too."

Chloe reached over and gave Ryan's arm a gentle, grounding squeeze. "I'm not going anywhere just yet. And hey—we've still got each other. That doesn't change when the clock-out happens."

Ryan raised an eyebrow, a small smirk playing on his lips. "Ah, right. Keep the love alive while the rest of us fall apart. The Ryan and Chloe survival strategy."

Chloe blushed faintly, her fingers lingering on his arm for a second too long before she pulled back, not denying it.

Lydia rolled her eyes, but there was a deep warmth behind the sarcasm. "Jobs come and go. Bosses like Clifton? They're just weather—they blow through and leave a mess. But this?" She gestured to the four of them in the dim light of the flat. "This is the part that lasts."

Chaz leaned forward, his eyes brightening for the first time all day. "Exactly. The places don't matter. The people do. Mike knew that. We know that."

Chloe lifted her can of cider and clinked it gently against Chaz's. "Here's to people."

Ryan and Lydia followed suit, their quiet toast echoing softly through the room. The flat smelled faintly of stale fries and late-night stories—the kind of space you don't plan for, but you eventually grow into.

Lydia clapped her hands suddenly, shattering the melancholy. "Alright, enough sulking. I can't stand the sight of you lot moping. Chaz, you and me—kitchen. Now."

Chaz raised an eyebrow, smirking. "What, you want a midnight snack? I've only got half a block of cheddar and some wilting basil."

"We're making something *real*," Lydia said, her eyes gleaming with a rebellious spark. "No suits. No corporate manuals. No portion-control scales. Just good food and better company."

Ryan sat up straighter, the energy in the room shifting. "Count me in. I'll prep."

Chloe hopped to her feet, her depression lifting. "Me too. I want to see what magic you two can cook up when there isn't a regional manager breathing down your necks."

Laughing, Chaz threw his good arm around Lydia's shoulders as they made their way toward the tiny kitchenette. He detoured to his CD rack, pulled out his well-worn copy of *That's the Spirit*, and slipped the disc into the stereo. With a few clicks, the opening beat of his favorite track filled the flat.

[14] - *Happy Song* – Bring Me the Horizon

As the heavy, rhythmic chant of *Happy Song* kicked in, Lydia grabbed a cast-iron pan and Chaz rummaged through the cupboards. Ryan found the olive oil, Chloe picked through a bundle of fresh herbs, and the tiny kitchen began to hum—a steady, rising energy like something important was being built from the wreckage of the day.

Garlic hit hot oil with a sharp, aggressive sizzle. Fresh basil followed, its sweet, peppery bite cutting through the air. The small space filled with movement: laughter, frantic footsteps, and quiet curses as someone nicked a finger slicing too fast. Chloe hummed along to the chorus, Ryan tapped his knife to the beat on a wooden board, and Lydia twirled a wooden spoon like a drumstick.

Chaz glanced around at the scene—Chloe leaning close to Ryan with a smile, Lydia calling out directions like a maestro, the steam rising into the air—and felt something finally settle in his chest.

This was theirs.

No managers. No pressure. No "systems." Just a kitchen, some heart, and the people who reminded him why he started cooking in the first place. He didn't know what came next—whether he'd walk away from Red's tomorrow or stay to fight Clifton another day.

But right now, in this cramped flat filled with heat and hope, he felt something he hadn't in a very long time.

He felt like a Chef.

THE END