

Order Up!

Season 1 | Episode 2: Sucker's Prayer

Written by Robbie Fleming

Additional Material by Christopher Hyde

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Cast of Characters

Main Cast

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

Additional Cast

- Mark Addy - George (Chaz's Second Interviewee)
- Geena Davis - Julia Green (Justin's mom)
- Luke Evans - Mike Barnes (the former manager of the Stratford-upon-Avon Reds)
- Noel Fielding - Tom (Chaz's First Interviewee)
- Paterson Joseph - David Clifton (Reds' Warwickshire Regional Manager)
- Matthew Lewis - Patrick (Justin's supportive housemate)
- Daniel Mays - Andrew Bennett (Melissa's rugby-obsessed husband)
- Albrecht Schuch - Stefan (Justin's German housemate)
- Unknown child actor - Archie Bennett (Melissa and Andrew's son)
- Unknown child actor - Alana Bennett (Melissa and Andrew's daughter)

Soundtrack (Available on Spotify @KeziahHydeMedia)

1. The Fear by Lily Allen (Melissa drives to work)
2. Things in Life by Dennis Brown (Over Reds' speaker)
3. All These Things Revolve Around Me by Bullet for My Valentine (Chaz plays over the kitchen speaker)
4. Everyday People by Sly and the Family Stone (Over reds' speakers)
5. Sucker's Prayer by The Decemberists (Over reds' speakers)
6. Amaranth by Nightwish (Chaz plays over kitchen speaker)
7. Young Folks by Peter, Bjorn and John (Over reds' speakers)
8. Busy Earnin' by Jungle (Over reds' speakers)
9. Du Hast by Rammstein (Chaz plays over Kitchen Speaker)
10. The Moment by Tame Impala (Over reds' speakers)
11. Cult of Personality by Living Color (Lydia's introduction)
12. Santeria by Sublime (Ending credits)

Prologue

Melissa Jane Sinclair, the youngest daughter of John and Julie Sinclair, was born in 1985 in Royal Leamington Spa. Her early years, spent in the picturesque streets of Stratford-upon-Avon, were simple but full of warmth. She idolised her big sister, Danielle, and adored her father, who brought light and laughter into every room he entered. Childhood, for a time, felt like it could go on forever.

But that illusion shattered when Melissa was ten. Her father died in a car accident, and everything changed.

Grief came first, then the slow, grinding descent into poverty. Julie did her best—two daughters, a small flat, long shifts—but the loss had left a wound that no amount of motherly love could cover. Melissa loved her mother, always would, but she couldn't help but feel robbed. Of safety. Of normalcy. Of a proper childhood.

And so, she made herself a promise: her children would never know that kind of struggle.

Fuelled by a mix of ambition, resilience, and a quiet defiance, Melissa threw herself into her studies. She worked harder than anyone around her, and it paid off. Scholarships, straight A's, and eventually a place at the University of Worcester to study social care. Her dream was simple—help kids like her. The ones left behind. The ones the system failed.

It was in Worcester that she met Andrew Bennett, a rising rugby star with charm and a surprisingly soft heart. One night out turned into many, and soon, Melissa's days of lectures and late-night cramming were paired with stolen weekends and coffee shop conversations. When Andrew's career-ending injury struck, it was Melissa who helped him through it. And when she graduated, it was Andrew who returned the favour, standing by her side through everything.

Melissa landed a job with the Stratford Council, working as a social worker with vulnerable children. It was noble work, fulfilling in moments—but also heavy, draining, and slow to change. After the birth of her twins, Archie and Alana, Melissa started to feel the cracks. The bureaucracy, the burnout, the feeling of running on empty. Something had to give.

That something came in the form of Red's Coffee and Diner.

What started as an assistant manager position became something more. Under the laid-back but sharp-eyed direction of manager Mike Barnes, Melissa found herself falling in love with the rhythm of service work—the fast pace, the regulars, the way each day brought new challenges and small wins. She worked her way up, one shift at a time, and when Mike was abruptly let go, Melissa didn't just step up—she was handed the keys.

Now, Melissa Bennett—wife, mother, former social worker, and survivor of a broken system—is the new manager of Red's Coffee and Diner. She's already climbed one mountain. But this one's different.

Because this time, she's not just trying to survive.

She wants to thrive. She wants to lead. She wants to learn what it really means to be a great manager.

And as she steps into her second week wearing the title, one thing is clear: Melissa's story isn't about where she came from—it's about where she's going.

Opening

The kitchen hums with the comforting crackle of breakfast cooking. Andrew flips sausages in the pan while Alana and Archie, still in pyjamas, sit at the table sipping orange juice, half-watching cartoons on a tablet between them.

Melissa walks in, already dressed in her manager's uniform. Hair pinned up, makeup precise, expression composed—or trying to be.

"I thought you weren't on 'til eleven?" Andrew asks, plating up her breakfast.

"I'm heading in early," she says, unscrewing her travel mug. "Clifton's doing his visit today."

"Ah," Andrew says, knowingly. "Didn't he come by a month ago?"

"He normally comes by this time of the month," Melissa replies. "Back when Mike was still running the place. I was just an Assistant Manager then. I didn't even speak to him for more than two minutes."

She grabs her keys, her voice tightening. "This time, it's all on me."

Andrew slides the eggs onto her sandwich. "You'll do great."

"I hope so. He'll want to see the books, probably quiz me on targets, maybe throw in some surprise questions just to see how I handle pressure. And with Chaz's kitchen interviews today and Justin and Jonathan at each other's throats..." She exhales. "Perfect timing."

Andrew wraps the sandwich in foil and hands it over. "You've got this. You care more than Mike ever did. I'll handle the school run today; you just focus on the inspection."

"Thank you, babe. I'll pick us up some dinner on the way home."

She gives him a quick kiss and then turns her attention to the children.

"Bye, Mummy!" they chime.

"See you later, my loves. Have a great day and be good for Miss Honey."

She gives them both a big hug and a kiss on the forehead before leaving the house.

[1] - *The Fear* – Lily Allen

Melissa's Mitsubishi ASX cruises down Alcester High Street, the early morning sun glinting off the windscreen. Her eyes are on the road, but her mind is already deep in the day ahead.

David Clifton.

The last time he visited Red's, Mike Barnes was still in charge. Clifton barely noticed her—a quick nod, a polite "keep it up." But now she's the Manager. Now, there's no buffer. There is no one to hide behind.

She grips the wheel tighter.

If the visit goes well, maybe she can finally shake the shadow of Mike's laid-back leadership. Maybe Clifton sees the progress she's made. The changes. The *discipline*.

If it goes wrong? He'll be reporting directly to Head Office. And with the staffing issues, the turnover, and the recent dip in sales... a bad report could be all it takes to knock everything off course.

She takes a breath. The turn signal clicks—too early—and she flicks it off again.

A red Mini weaves into her lane. She barely reacts.

She's too focused. Rehearsing numbers in her head. KPIs. Menu performance. Health inspection scores. *Don't forget to mention the reduced food wastage. Lead with the positives.*

A pedestrian steps into the road.

She slams the brakes. Tires screech. The car jolts to a halt, her chest jerking hard against the seatbelt.

The pedestrian stares, frozen. Melissa stares back, breath caught in her throat.

The light is still red.

She exhales, trembling slightly, hands gripping the wheel so hard her knuckles are white.

A horn blares behind her. She doesn't move.

Green.

She blinks. Straightens. Moves forward again. In the rear-view mirror, her reflection is pale and pinched. She brushes a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"You stopped just in time," she whispers to herself.

But the question remains: Will she be able to do the same at Red's?

Act One (Titles)

Chapter 1

Melissa sat at her office desk in Red's Coffee and Diner, surrounded by the low hum of the morning rush, muffled by the door. A half-drunk coffee sat forgotten beside her mouse, gone cold long ago. Her focus was pinned to the admin dashboard on her computer—schedules, training forms, stock invoices—the unglamorous side of running a diner. And all of it was building toward one unavoidable truth: Mr. Clifton was on his way.

She was still feeling the ripple of that moment in the car. That red light. That flash of panic. The sharp slam of brakes. She hadn't fully shaken it—and now, the thought of anything else going wrong today made her stomach turn.

A knock at the office door broke through her concentration.

"Come in," she said, without looking up.

The door creaked open, and Justin stepped inside, dressed in his Front of House uniform. His tie was slightly askew, and his name badge hung crooked on his chest, but his posture was confident—even expectant.

“Hey, Mel. You got a second?”

“Sure,” she replied, eyes still on the screen as she clicked through a spreadsheet. “Take a seat.”

He lowered himself into the chair across from her desk. She finished typing a note, then turned toward him with a practiced, manager’s smile.

“How can I help, Justin?”

Justin wasted no time. “Just checking if you’ve got that progression plan sorted for me yet? You said we’d look at it this week.”

Melissa’s smile faltered. “Shit,” she said under her breath. “Justin, I completely forgot. Honestly, I’ve been neck-deep in prep for Clifton’s visit today. My head is everywhere.”

Justin sighed, leaning back in the chair and crossing his arms. “Bloody Clifton. Always getting in the way of my promotion.”

She offered a sympathetic look, leaning forward. “I’m sorry, really. Once today is out of the way, I’ll make it a priority. I promise. We’ll sit down tomorrow morning and map it out.”

He nodded slowly, but there was a tension in his jaw that hadn’t been there before. “Just feels like I’m stuck, Mel. Like nothing’s moving forward, you know? I’ve been putting in the work. Just... waiting for a break.”

Melissa folded her arms gently, trying to connect with him. “I know it’s frustrating. Sometimes life throws a spanner into everything. It doesn’t mean you’re not good enough or that I don’t see your hard work. It’s just... timing. Circumstance.”

Justin stood up with a forced, tight smile. “Yeah. I get it. Timing.”

She tilted her head slightly, sensing the coldness. “Anything else you need?”

“Nope,” he said, already turning for the door. “Back to the floor.”

As the door closed behind him, Melissa remained still for a moment, frowning. Something was off with him. It wasn’t just the usual disappointment—it was something tighter, harder to read. The kind of mood that could flare up if poked the wrong way.

She reached for her coffee, took a bitter, cold sip, and thought to herself: I hope he doesn’t throw a spanner in things today.

Her eyes drifted toward the window. The sun was climbing higher over the High Street. Clifton would be here any minute.

CHAPTER 2

[2] Things in Life by Dennis Brown

The morning rush at Red's Coffee and Diner was finally loosening its grip. The usual clatter of hurried customers and the insistent ringing of the till began to subside, leaving the Front of House team to the task of restoring order. Chloe, her brunette hair with its signature pink tips catching the light, diligently wiped down a table, removing the last traces of spilled coffee and crumbs.

The diner's door swung open, and Phil entered. He was sporting an unfamiliar look—a beanie pulled low, dark sunglasses shielding his eyes, and a black leather coat that seemed more suited to a rock concert than a coffee shop.

As he steps into the front area, the bar stands at the centre of the building, surrounded by dining areas on either side. To the left of the bar, the Manager's office is tucked away, while to the right, a corridor leads toward the back and the kitchen. On the opposite side of the corridor is the food hatch, where the chefs place the orders ready to be served.

As you walk down the corridor, the toilets are on the left, the kitchen is the first door on the right, and the staff room is the second door on the right. At the end of the corridor is the back door, leading to an outdoor space where Ryan, Chaz, Justin, and Phil often go to smoke or vape—a spot they jokingly refer to as "the space outside reality."

Chloe's face brightened as she saw him.

"Hiya, Phil," she called out, her voice warm.

Phil's lips curved into a smile as he approached her. "Chloe, how's it going?"

Chloe leaned on her cleaning cloth, a hint of playful sarcasm in her tone. "Living the dream! I had the most boring lecture ever yesterday and had to ditch my plans with the girls to slave over an assignment."

Phil chuckled, a touch of world-weariness in his eyes. "This is why I went straight into work after college. I didn't want to deal with that crap."

Intrigued, Chloe paused her cleaning. "What did you study at college?"

Phil's gaze drifted off for a moment, a flicker of nostalgia in his expression. "Media and Film Studies. Did a Level 2 course, but my lecturer told me Level 3 would be too hard, so I only did the two years. Two months after I finished, I landed a job here, and the rest is history."

Chloe's eyebrows arched in surprise. "So, you've been here for ten years?"

A wry smile touched Phil's lips. "Could be worse. I could be in prison."

Chloe chuckled back. "Anyway, tell me you watched the last episode of Hollow Reach?"

Their conversation was cut short as Jonathan appeared, his presence immediately shifting the atmosphere. He strode over to them, his gaze sharp and professional.

"Chloe," he said, his voice leaving no room for argument, "can you check the tables and make sure they all have a menu?"

Chloe, though slightly annoyed by the interruption, nodded. "Yeah, sure."

As she moved away, Jonathan turned his attention to Phil. "Phil," he stated, his tone flat, "I want you working tables with Chloe today."

Phil frowned. He was the anchor of the bar; he always worked the machine. "Any reason why?"

Jonathan kept a forced, thin smile. "Just fancy shaking things up a bit."

Phil took a breath, letting the frustration simmer. "Okay. I'm just popping out for a vape, and then I'll clock in."

"Just make sure you clock in five minutes before your shift starts," Jonathan told him, checking his watch.

"Do I get paid for those five minutes?" Phil asked sarcastically.

"No," Jonathan responded bluntly.

"Then I'm clocking in when my shift starts."

Phil turned on his heel and walked away, heading down the corridor toward "the space outside reality," leaving Jonathan standing alone by the bar.

CHAPTER 3

[3] All These Things Revolve Around Me by Bullet for My Valentine

In the kitchen, Chaz and Ryan were doing their post-rush clean, the clang of pots and pans acting as a chaotic percussion against the driving rhythm of heavy metal blasting from Chaz's portable speaker. The air still hung heavy with the smell of fryer oil and spices, a testament to the lunchtime frenzy. Chaz, headbanging subtly as he wiped down the counter with a practiced hand, glanced over at Ryan with a playful smirk.

"So... is your mate still interested in the kitchen job, eh?" Chaz asked, his voice raised to be heard over the music.

Ryan froze mid-scrub, a bead of sweat trickling down his temple. "Shit! I forgot to tell you—she's popping in later to hand in her CV. Sorry, man," he stammered, his cheeks flushing slightly.

Chaz chuckled, a low rumble of amusement in his chest. "Bustin'. Got two interviews today; hopefully, at least one of 'em will get it." He tapped the counter twice for luck.

Ryan smirked, a hint of pride in his eyes. "I'm sure Lydia will be a great kitchen assistant under you. You'd get on with her well," he said, his voice confident.

Chaz raised an eyebrow. "As long as she's passionate about cooking and not a bluenose, I reckon we'll gel perfectly," he said, referring to the Birmingham City rivalry with a playful challenge.

Ryan grinned. "She's not into football at all, actually. And cooking? That's her life. She's been working in food since she was ten."

Chaz's interest was piqued. "Yeah? Alright, if she's proper decent, like you're sayin', I could just think about sayin' 'yeah, you've got the job' straight away."

Ryan's smirk widened. "Wanna wager? A pint says you do," he said, extending a hand.

Chaz sighed, looking up at the ceiling. "Alright then. If I hire her on the spot, I'll buy you a pint."

Ryan gripped his hand. "Deal. I'll consider it a leaving present from you."

They shook on it, both laughing, before getting back to scrubbing—though now Chaz was moving with a bit more energy, his head bobbing noticeably to the beat.

As they worked, Ryan paused, his scrubbing slowing. He avoided Chaz's gaze, a hint of nervousness in his eyes. Chaz noticed, giving Ryan's arm a nudge.

"Don't you worry yourself, mate. I know you're dead keen on your dream, and it's not bein' stuck in this kitchen. You gotta see how a place like this is run proper, not just be out the back with me."

Ryan hesitated. "I just... I guess I'm just nervous. What if I don't have the same dynamic with the front crew as I do with you?"

Chaz gave a warm, reassuring laugh. "Ryan, you silly bugger! You already get on great with them. Now you'll just 'ave more time for a natter about movies with Phil—and let's be honest, you'll be gettin' closer to Chloe, innit? You want that, don't ya?"

Ryan opened his mouth but said nothing, his cheeks turning red. Chaz smirked. "See? You didn't even think about the good bits, did ya?"

Ryan exhaled, a resigned but amused sigh. "Okay, point proven."

"That's the spirit, mucker!" Chaz clapped his hands together. "Right, let's get this kitchen proper spotless. Gotta look the business for these lot before they turn up."

Ryan smirked. "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"Nah!" Chaz insisted, grinning. "I just don't wanna go for a pint on me tod!"

They shared what could be their last laugh together as a kitchen duo, the metal music fading slightly as the steam from the sink rose between them.

CHAPTER 4

[4] Everyday People by Sly and the Family Stone

Melissa stepped out of her office, already sensing the buzz in the air. Justin and Phil had just entered the front area, and across the diner, Jonathan and Chloe were tidying the final bits of mess from the earlier rush. Everything was running as smoothly as a quiet midday lull allowed—which made it the perfect time to gather the troops.

"Team meeting!" Melissa called out, her voice firm but upbeat. "Got some news to share."

Justin and Phil strolled over while Jonathan, without skipping a beat, banged on the swinging kitchen door.

"Ryan! Chaz! We've got a meeting out front," he called, his tone as professional as ever.

Seconds later, Ryan and Chaz emerged, wiping their hands and sharing a muttered joke as they joined the huddle forming near the bar. Melissa waited until she had everyone's attention before taking a deep breath and diving in.

"Alright, everyone—thanks for gathering. I've got a couple of quick announcements." She turned to Ryan with a smile. "First up, Ryan will soon be transitioning into a Front of House role as soon as Chaz has found a replacement."

A ripple of applause followed. Ryan gave a modest, slightly bashful smile.

"Secondly—and this is a big one—Mr Clifton will be visiting at some point today."

The atmosphere shifted instantly. Eyes widened. Postures straightened. The casual "diner" energy evaporated, replaced by corporate dread.

"I expect professionalism, cleanliness, and your best behaviour. Especially from those of you working Front of House," she added, eyeing the group with a half-smile, half-warning.

Chaz raised a brow. "He ain't sittin' in on my interviews, is he, Mel?"

"No, Chaz," Melissa replied, trying not to smile. "But he will be inspecting the kitchen. So keep it spotless."

Chaz nodded, a rare seriousness passing over his face. "Got it. Tight as a drum."

"Alright. That's it. Let's get back to it," Melissa said, and the group began dispersing.

As Chloe lingered behind, she turned to Melissa with a hopeful look. "Melissa? Can I ask you something?"

"Of course, Chloe. What's up?"

Chloe hesitated, tucking a strand of pink-tipped hair behind her ear. "I was wondering... could I maybe start some barista training? Just when there's time."

Melissa smiled warmly. "Absolutely. I want you to get all the experience you can while you're here. We'll sort something out soon."

Gratified, Chloe wandered back toward her post, just as Melissa noticed a strange setup behind the bar. Phil was out on table duty, while Jonathan and Justin manned the espresso machine—not exactly how Melissa wanted things running today of all days.

"Jonathan?" she called, making her way over.

He looked up, his expression unreadable. "Yes, Melissa?"

"Why's Phil out on table duty today? I want everyone where they're strongest, especially with Clifton dropping in. Phil belongs on that machine."

Jonathan barely looked at her when he replied, "Thought I'd work the coffees today. Trying to shake things up a bit. It also gives me more experience on the bar."

There was a tone in his voice. Dismissive. Borderline rude. It was the sound of someone who thought they knew better.

Melissa frowned. "Jonathan, don't speak to me like that. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't just make these decisions without consulting me first, especially on a day like today!"

Justin, quick to jump in, added, "Yeah, Jonny. Respect the boss."

The words hung in the air like static. Jonathan turned slowly toward Justin, his expression darkening, his fists twitching ever so slightly at his sides. For a second, it looked like he might actually lunge—until Melissa cut in.

"Jonathan," she said calmly, "why don't you take five? Go get some fresh air."

"I don't smoke," he replied flatly.

"You've been working hard all morning. A bit of sunshine won't kill you."

With a huff, he turned and walked off, pushing through the doors and out into the street. Chloe wandered back toward the bar, trying to pretend she hadn't noticed the tension.

Melissa, now rubbing her temple, turned to Justin. "I appreciate you sticking up for me, Justin. But I don't need you to fight my battles and undermine Jonathan like that. Please, can we have no more drama today? Not with Clifton coming."

"Okay Mel, I apologise. I promise I'll be on my best behaviour," Justin replied, though his eyes still held a glimmer of satisfaction.

Phil, who'd been wiping menus nearby, couldn't help himself. "Yeah, Justin. Be careful. Word is Clifton once fired someone just for spilling a single drop of coffee on his black leather loafers."

That earned a chuckle from Chloe and Justin. But Melissa couldn't quite laugh with them. The visit was looming, and her gut told her things weren't going to stay calm for long.

CHAPTER 5

Jonathan stepped out the back door, squinting at the sudden brightness of the day. He was met almost instantly by the sweet, fruity haze of Ryan's vape lingering in the air like a stubborn fog. Ryan stood leaning against the brick wall, eyes fixed on his phone, exhaling slow plumes of vapour into the breeze.

Jonathan grimaced and waved a hand in front of his face, trying to clear the air. "You know they turn your lungs into popcorn, right?"

Ryan looked up, startled. "What? Oh—sorry, mate. Didn't see you there." He slipped his vape and phone into his pocket, straightening up.

Jonathan shook his head lightly, his posture relaxing away from the others. "Don't worry, I'm not here to tell you off. Melissa sent me out for a 'breather.'"

Ryan smirked, leaning back again. "Fairs. How are you settling in, anyway?"

"Well, you guys are all sound," Jonathan admitted, "but I find Justin insufferable."

"He's just bitter that you got his promotion," Ryan said with a cheeky grin. "Once the heat dies down, I'm sure you'll both become best mates."

"Maybe," Jonathan said, sounding unconvinced as he shrugged.

Without much shame, Ryan pulled the vape back out and resumed puffing, eyes on the sky this time. Jonathan leaned beside him, silent for a moment. Then, in an effort to break the usual tension that seemed to follow him around the workplace, he asked, "So... Front of House, eh? What made you want to make the switch?"

Ryan lowered the vape slightly, thinking. "Honestly? I'm hoping it gets me closer to where I wanna be. I want to own my own place someday. Be my own boss."

Jonathan chuckled, a short, genuine sound. "Big goals. I respect that. Before this, I was a stockbroker working for one of the big firms in the City."

Ryan blinked, his interest piqued. "Stockbroker? Really?"

"Yeah," Jonathan nodded, looking out over the alleyway as if seeing a different skyline. "I'd made a name for myself turning failing stocks into profit machines. I was one of the best traders they had. I had the nice car, the penthouse in the middle of London—the whole nine yards."

"So... what happened? Why Stratford?"

Jonathan shrugged, a bit of a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth, though his eyes remained serious. "I got ill. Too much stress, too much pressure. My doctor told me I couldn't carry on as a trader if I wanted to see forty. So, I decided to move to Coventry and work somewhere smaller. Somewhere 'quiet.' Like Red's."

Ryan looked intrigued. "You really know your business stuff, then?"

"I'm an Economics major," Jonathan replied, almost casually. "I know how the game works."

Ryan grinned, taking one last puff before pocketing the vape for good. "Sounds like I've found my go-to guy for advice, then. I could use a mentor once I start the new role."

Jonathan chuckled again, this time with a touch of pride. "I'd be happy to help, Ryan."

Ryan gave him a small, respectful nod. "Right—I'm gonna go check how Chaz is doing with those interviews. He's probably scaring them off."

"Good talking to you," Jonathan said as they both turned back toward the building.

"You too, mate."

They walked back inside together, the earlier awkwardness now softened by a new, unexpected sense of camaraderie.

CHAPTER 6

The kitchen thrummed with energy—a controlled chaos. Steam curled from simmering stockpots, carrying the sharp scent of onions and garlic that stung the nostrils, mingling with the sweet aroma of a fruit tart cooling on the counter. The rhythmic clatter of knives against chopping boards formed a steady percussion, a culinary heartbeat beneath the low hum of kitchen chatter.

At the prep table, Chaz flipped through the day's service plan, his brow furrowed in concentration. A light sheen of sweat coated his forehead, and his hair was slightly dishevelled from the heat. Behind him, a Villa calendar hung, its edges curled from years of grease and steam.

The door swung open—a sudden intrusion.

Tom entered, his crisp white chef jacket giving him an air of professionalism that stood in stark contrast to the worn, stained aprons of the Red's crew. But the way his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed and the nervous darting of his eyes betrayed his inner turmoil.

Chaz glanced up, his gaze sharp and assessing. He gestured to the chair across from him. "Alright, Tom. Take a pew," he said, his Birmingham accent thick and uncompromising.

Tom sat, posture rigid, hands clasped so tightly in his lap that his knuckles were white.

Chaz studied him for a beat, a ghost of a smirk playing on his lips. "So—what got ya into cooking? Why this and not, I dunno, accounting?"

Tom exhaled slowly, trying to steady himself. "Gordon Ramsay," he said, injecting an air of forced confidence into his voice.

Chaz nodded, his smirk deepening. "Really? That pillock? And when the pressure gets too much? Chaos everywhere, tickets pilin' up—how do ya keep it together?"

Tom didn't hesitate. "Stay organised. Prioritise. Control what I can and keep my station sharp. If you let the chaos dictate your pace, you've already lost."

Chaz's eyes flickered with a hint of respect. "Good answer," he conceded. He leaned forward, elbows on the table. "Right—say you cock up an order. What's your move?"

"Own it. No excuses," Tom replied resolutely. "Fix it fast and learn from it. Hiding mistakes helps no one."

Chaz gave a slow, impressed nod. "Solid."

Tom relaxed slightly, a small smile playing on his lips. Sensing the momentum, his hope began to rise. Chaz flipped a page in the service plan. "Alright. 'Ere's a scenario for ya. It's a busy afternoon rush, orders are piling in, and a customer returns somethin' that you know is fine, but they're kicking up a fuss. How do ya handle it?"

Tom leaned forward, eager to please. "Apologise to the customer and make them the dish again?"

Chaz chuckled—a genuine, dark laugh. "With a fuckload of orders comin' through? You can't fanny about remaking orders that don't need it." Chaz slammed a heavy X down on his notepad and gave Tom a look of pure disapproval.

Tom's face fell, the embarrassment reddening his cheeks.

Chaz folded his arms, his tone lightening. "Now, important question. Banter in the kitchen—yea or nay?"

Tom forced a chuckle. "Absolutely. As long as the job gets done. Keeps morale up."

Chaz grinned. "Right answer." There was a brief pause. Chaz tapped the table, his expression turning deadly serious. "Alright, just one last thing."

Tom nodded, his smile fading into apprehension. "Go on."

Chaz fixed him with an intense stare. "Can you make me a bacon and egg sandwich? White bap, melted cheese. No shortcuts."

Tom blinked, caught off guard but eager to prove his worth. "Sure."

He stood up and rolled up his sleeves. His movements were precise as he headed to the stove. Chaz watched with arms crossed, his expression unreadable. Moments later, Tom presented the sandwich, sliced cleanly in half. His hands were steady, his eyes proud.

Chaz grabbed one half, took a massive bite—and immediately spat it out onto the plate.

"Jesus wept!" he exclaimed, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Bacon's undercooked—it's practically still oinking. Egg ain't runny enough. And the cheese? Bloody hell, lad, the cheese ain't even melted proper."

Tom stiffened, his face a mask of shock.

Chaz met his gaze, his voice dropping to a cold, deadpan level. "Get outta my kitchen."

Tom stood frozen for a second, his eyes pleading.

"I said GET OUT!" Chaz screamed, leaning right into Tom's face. "You're a disgrace to the art of cooking!"

Without a word, Tom turned and bolted out the door, bursting into tears as he hit the corridor. The door swung shut with a soft thud just as Ryan entered, nearly getting flattened by the retreating interviewee.

Ryan frowned, watching the door. "What was that about?"

Chaz leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms behind his head. "What a tosser. Made me eat a shit sandwich."

"I hope it wasn't an actual shit sandwich," Ryan joked, trying to lighten the mood.

Chaz shook his head dismissively. "Weren't even close to the way me mom used to make it."

Ryan raised an eyebrow, looking at the untouched half on the plate. He picked it up and took a cautious bite. He chewed for three seconds, gagged, and spat the mess directly onto the floor.

"That was awful," Ryan gasped.

Chaz's eyes narrowed. He pointed at the chewed-up mess on the linoleum. "Just for that... you're cleanin' that up."

Ryan's jaw dropped. "Oh, for fuck's sake!" he whined.

Chaz smirked, clapping him on the shoulder as he walked off toward the walk-in fridge. "Don't fanny about, mucker. We've got another one coming later."

CHAPTER 7

[5] Sucker's Prayer by The Decemberists

Red's was in the thick of the lunchtime rush—or at least, it should have been. Business was slower than usual, and the atmosphere felt toxic. With fewer customers and the team shuffled into unfamiliar positions, the entire operation was out of sync.

Phil, unaccustomed to table service after years behind the machine, was visibly struggling. He fumbled over drink trays and awkwardly weaved between tables, his customer interactions clunky and unsure. Meanwhile, behind the bar, Jonathan was drowning. He was still trying to wrap his head around the complex coffee orders, moving too slowly and causing a frustrating backlog that stretched out the door.

Minutes felt like hours.

Melissa, juggling her managerial duties, tried her best to help Jonathan, but she was stopped every three steps by irritated customers.

"Where's my order?" one man snapped.

"My coffee's cold," a woman complained, shoving a latte toward her.

"This isn't what I asked for," another muttered.

It was a barrage of complaints. Melissa's patience, already frayed from the morning's near-miss in her car, was wearing paper-thin. Her jaw tightened; she was seconds from snapping.

Across the floor, Chloe noticed Phil stumbling through a service and walked over to him. "You okay?" she asked gently.

Phil sighed, balancing a heavy tray. "Not really, Chlo. Just can't get the hang of this. I'm a barista, not a waiter. Why did we have to change?"

"I get what you mean. I don't think Jonathan planned this out very well," Chloe said with a supportive smile. "Just keep going. You've got this. I'm right behind you if you need it."

Phil gave a small nod of thanks, bolstered by her confidence.

Back behind the bar, the situation turned from bad to worse. Jonathan was rushing orders just to clear the screen, resulting in sloppy, unpalatable drinks. Justin stood nearby, hovering over the several tickets still waiting to be made.

"Jonny, what's the hold-up?" Justin said firmly, his voice dripping with "I told you so" energy. "Customers are waiting."

Jonathan snapped. "I'm working through them! It's harder than it looks!"

Justin didn't back down. "If you hadn't changed things around for your own ego, we wouldn't be in this mess."

That hit the nerve.

"Well, why don't you do it, if you're so much better at it?!" Jonathan shouted, slamming a milk jug down on the counter. He stepped off the bar, glaring at Justin. "You damn Yank!"

"Well, at least I wouldn't have fucked it up like you have," Justin retorted, his voice low and dangerous.

Jonathan's eyes flared. He lunged forward, fists clenching—but Phil jumped in just in time, grabbing Jonathan's arm and holding him back. Justin squared up, refusing to move an inch.

"Go on, hit me then!" Justin challenged. "Show everyone what a professional you are!"

"ENOUGH!"

Melissa's voice thundered across the café like a whip crack. The low hum of the room died instantly. Every head turned. The room froze. She stormed over, her eyes burning with a cold, terrifying fury.

"Justin. Jonathan. My office. NOW."

No one said a word as she marched toward the back, leading the two men like schoolboys to the headmaster's office. The door slammed behind them with a force that rattled the cups on the shelves.

Chloe and Phil looked at each other for a split second, then immediately pivoted into "emergency mode."

"Go back on the bar, Phil," Chloe commanded, her voice steady. "I'll handle the floor."

Phil vaulted behind the bar, instantly at home as he began recalibrating the machine, while Chloe started running orders with clinical efficiency. In the absence of management, the "Original Crew" finally showed how the job was supposed to be done.

ACT TWO

CHAPTER 8

Justin and Jonathan sat side by side, facing Melissa, who stood behind her desk like a judge about to pass sentence. She looked them both dead in the eye, her expression unyielding.

"I'm appalled by your behaviour. Both of you," she said, her voice sharp and steady. "You're a Supervisor and an Assistant Manager—and yet my two kids act more grown-up than you."

Justin shifted in his seat, ready to defend himself. "Look, Melissa—"

"Shut it, Justin. Just this once," she snapped, cutting him off. "You're both lucky I'm not firing you on the spot. But consider this your first warning. One more fight, one more argument, one more childish dig—and you're out the door faster than Chaz can make a bacon and egg sandwich."

Jonathan leaned forward slightly, trying to sound reasonable. "I am sorry, Melissa. I just don't appreciate Justin's constant negativity toward me."

Justin shot him a glare. "And I don't appreciate your attitude—toward me or the rest of the staff. But I don't go throwing tantrums about it."

"ENOUGH!" Melissa thundered.

The room fell silent. Justin and Jonathan froze, their earlier confidence draining away. Melissa's voice dropped, low and deadly serious.

"Jonathan, you shouldn't have made so many changes to the staff roles. We all work to our strengths here. Phil, for example, is in pieces because he isn't used to doing tables. He's a barista. So, in future, any decisions about staff roles have to be approved by me first. And until you have proved yourself capable enough, you are barred from working the bar until further notice."

"Good. At least then we'll have some competency," Justin said snidely.

Melissa turned her gaze slowly toward him. "What did I just say, Justin?" She paused, letting the silence hang. "Just for that, you can forget about your progression plan for now."

"WHAT?!" Justin exclaimed, his eyes widening.

"Until you two learn to work together—without the bickering, without the egos—I'm not helping either of you move forward in this company. Now, go back out there and stay out of trouble, or else you will be out on your arses. Am I understood?"

They both sat in stunned silence. Melissa slammed her hands on the desk, making them both jump.

"DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?!"

"Yes, Boss!" they chorused. They stood and made their way out, still throwing each other bitter, sidelong glances as they exited.

Melissa stayed behind, exhaling heavily as she sank into her chair. She'd never had to discipline anyone like that—not her team, not her husband, and certainly not her kids. Her heart was racing, but she felt a strange sense of relief.

After a moment, she stood again, straightened her shirt, and said aloud to herself, "Right. Let's see how Chaz is getting on in the kitchen."

With a final deep breath to steady her nerves, she walked out.

CHAPTER 9

[6] Amaranth by Nightwish

Melissa pushed open the kitchen door, the sound cutting through the usual cacophony of the prep line. The warm scent of freshly baked bread and sizzling fat filled the air—a vibrant symphony of kitchen life.

At the prep station, Ryan hummed along to the radio, his head bobbing to the heavy beat of the music as he chopped vegetables with gusto. Chaz was in the back office, hunched over a clipboard making a list of stock that needed ordering.

“Chaz,” Melissa called, her voice sharp and clear over the music.

Chaz glanced up and walked out of his office, wiping his hands on his apron. “Melissa! What brings ya to me humble gaff?” he asked, his tone playful.

Melissa leaned against the counter, arms crossed. Despite the stress of the day, her eyes twinkled with a bit of amusement. “I was just curious how the interview with Tom went,” she asked.

Chaz paused, his grin slipping just a fraction. He wiped his hands again—a nervous habit when he knew he was about to get a lecture. “It was goin’ great, actually...” he began tentatively.

Melissa raised an eyebrow. “And then?”

Chaz sighed, leaning in and dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “He made me eat a shit sandwich.”

Melissa stared at him, her expression a mixture of disbelief and horror. “...You’re joking, right?”

Chaz shook his head, dead serious. “Nah. If ya can’t make a proper bacon and egg sarnie, I can’t be trustin’ ya in my kitchen. It’s a matter of principle.”

A beat of silence hung in the air as Melissa processed this. Then, she burst into a loud, genuine laugh that filled the room. “Oh! Chaz! I thought you meant he’d actually made you a sandwich out of... well, you know!”

Chaz shrugged, though a hint of defensiveness remained in his voice. “It weren’t even a proper sandwich, Mel. It was a disgrace. Undercooked bacon to the point it was gonna start oinking. Egg with the consistency of rubber. Cheese? Barely melted. I spat it out out of respect for my own tastebuds.”

Melissa shook her head, still chuckling. “You’re unbelievable.”

Chaz smirked, nodding toward Ryan, who had been quietly eavesdropping. “Maybe Ryan’s right about his mate being the perfect choice,” he said teasingly.

Ryan grinned, jumping in. “If he hires her on the spot, I get a pint,” he announced triumphantly.

Melissa shot Chaz a playful glare, but she couldn’t stop the smile. “Alright, alright,” she said, shaking her head. “But I’m getting Jonathan to join you for the next interview.”

Chaz chuckled, a low rumble of amusement. "Oh-ho, gettin' in on the quality control, are we?"

Melissa's smirk turned a bit more cynical. "I just want him out of my sight, to be honest, Chaz. He's caused enough trouble on the one day I want things to go well. If he's in here with you, at least he isn't winding up Justin."

"Fair enough," Chaz agreed. "Send the suit in. I'll see if he knows his way around a grill."

The door swung shut behind her, leaving Chaz and Ryan alone once more.

Ryan waited a beat, then turned to Chaz. "So... about that pint?"

Chaz shook his head, his eyes sparkling. "Patience, mucker. Let's see how this Lydia handles the heat first."

Ryan's confidence remained unwavering. "You already know you're gonna hire her."

Chaz raised an eyebrow, a playful glint in his eye. "Oh, do I now?"

CHAPTER 10

[7] Young Folks by Peter, Bjorn and John

Melissa stepped out of the kitchen and spotted Phil and Justin behind the bar. Phil was diligently wiping down the countertop, cleaning up the sticky mess Jonathan had left behind. Justin, still fuming, was counting cash in the till with quick, agitated fingers.

"Life sucks, doesn't it, Phil?" Justin muttered, his frustration still simmering.

Phil didn't even look up from the steam wand. "Just be glad I stepped in. You'd be in real trouble if I hadn't."

"He called me a Yank," Justin said, his voice tight. "I hate when people say that. I'm from California, not New York."

"I get it," Phil replied bluntly. "But you shouldn't have antagonised him. What if Clifton had walked in and seen that? You'd be out on your ear."

Justin sighed, his shoulders finally dropping. "Yeah, you're right, Phil. I'll try to keep my cool next time. Geez. I'm just glad I'm finishing in a couple of hours—this shift has been brutal."

Melissa, who had been quietly listening from the shadows of the corridor, raised an eyebrow. A small, strategic idea started to form—getting Justin out of the building early would eliminate the risk of another flare-up before Clifton arrived.

She walked over to the bar, her expression neutral. "You know, Justin, we're quiet this afternoon. If you want to head off an hour early, that's fine by me."

Justin, oblivious to her ulterior motive, nodded eagerly. "Really? Thanks, Mel. I've actually got an audition tomorrow. The extra prep time would be great."

Melissa offered a thin smile. "Excellent. Get your prep done."

She then turned her attention to Jonathan, who was standing at a side station nearby, polishing cutlery in a brooding silence.

“Jonathan, I need you to sit in on Chaz’s next interview,” she said. “He rejected the first candidate earlier... over a sandwich. I want a second, more 'analytical' opinion this time.”

“Alright,” Jonathan replied, sounding relieved to have a task that didn't involve the espresso machine.

Just then, the front door swung open. A man in his fifties, carrying a fair bit of extra weight and wearing a chef’s tunic that had seen better—and cleaner—days, approached them. The uniform was flecked with old grease stains, and he carried the faint scent of tobacco.

“Hello there,” he said warmly, his voice gravelly. “I’m George. I’m here for the chef assistant job?”

Jonathan stepped forward with a polite, corporate smile. “Ah, great. Come with me, George—I’ll take you through to meet the Head Chef.”

As Jonathan and George walked off toward the kitchen, Melissa scanned the floor.

“Where’s Chloe?” she asked.

“She’s on break,” Phil replied.

“When she’s back, can you start showing her the ropes on the coffee machine? She asked for some training earlier.”

Phil grinned, the first genuine look of pleasure he'd shown all shift. “For Chloe? I’d be honoured. I’ll make a barista out of her yet.”

Melissa gave him a small nod of approval, took a deep breath, and finally retreated back into her office. For the first time in hours, the air in the diner felt clear. It was calm... at least for now.

CHAPTER 11

Back in the kitchen, George’s interview was about to begin. Chaz sat upright, ready to judge. Jonathan leaned forward, professional as ever, though a hint of weariness tugged at his eyes. Ryan was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, phone in hand, looking thoroughly unbothered by the unfolding drama.

Chaz broke the tension with his usual bravado. “Alright, George. I’m Chaz, that’s Jonathan, and that’s Ryan over yonder—you’d be takin’ over from ‘im if this pans out.”

George nodded politely, taking in the scene with a gravelly, “Nice to meet you all.”

Jonathan, straight to business, laced his fingers together. “Alright, George, let’s talk experience. Walk us through your background.”

George stood confidently, decades of kitchen life radiating from him. “Been in kitchens for thirty years.”

Jonathan leaned back, impressed despite himself. "Thirty years? Solid. And where was your last place of employment?"

"A greasy spoon called Trucker's Paradise," George stated.

Jonathan looked puzzled. "And you made trucker meals there for... how long?"

"Thirty years," George repeated.

Chaz shot Jonathan a look of pure alarm. "Jonathan, mind if we have a private chat?" He nudged the Assistant Manager toward the side office.

"What's wrong, Chaz?" Jonathan asked, concerned by the chef's expression.

"You ever been in a Trucker's Paradise?" Chaz hissed. "The food there is so oily, it's more unhealthy than licking the grease off this kitchen floor."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Jonathan insisted, trying to expedite the process. "Why don't you just put him through the test?"

"Alright, but I've got a bad feeling about this," Chaz muttered. They returned to the prep station where George was waiting. "Can ya make a bacon and egg sandwich? White bap, melted cheese. The works."

George frowned. "That's the test?"

Jonathan sighed, shooting Chaz an exasperated look. "Just humour him, George."

"Oi, this ain't just a test," Chaz barked, crossing his arms. "It's the test. You can tell a lot about a man from how he handles a proper breakfast bap."

George shrugged, rolling up his sleeves with practiced ease. "Alright then. Let's do this."

The sizzle of bacon filled the kitchen—a familiar, comforting sound. George worked swiftly, buttering the bap and crisping the bacon. Everything seemed to be going perfectly until George did something completely unexpected: he dropped the entire assembled sandwich into the deep fat fryer.

"What is he doing?" Jonathan asked, his voice rising in a pitch of nervous confusion.

George plated the golden-brown object. He sliced it cleanly in half, causing a pool of translucent grease to ooze out and flood the plate. He stepped back, a hint of pride in his eyes.

Jonathan reached for a half first. The grease immediately ran down his arm like he was applying a heavy layer of fake tan. He took a bite. For a split second, he chewed. Then, his face turned a violent shade of green. He vomited the mouthful onto the floor and bolted out of the kitchen toward the toilets.

George smirked, his confidence unshaken. "Told you—thirty years in the game."

"Was that the response you were expecting?" Chaz asked, staring at the floor.

"Can't please everyone, can you?" George said, smiling.

Chaz grabbed the other half, inspecting it like it owed him money. He took a bite, chewed thoughtfully, and then paused for a long, dramatic beat.

"It's genuinely disgusting," Chaz stated. He reached for a lukewarm energy drink to wash away the film of oil coating his tongue.

George blinked. "What? No, it's perfect."

"No, no, no," Chaz shook his head. "I've seen dog shit that looks more appetising. It's so greasy I can feel me arteries clogging up as we speak."

Jonathan stumbled back into the kitchen, wiping his mouth, looking like he'd just seen his life flash before his eyes. "Chaz... I don't want to admit fault, but I think you've got a point."

"What was that, Jonny?" Chaz asked, playing up his stubbornness.

George, seemingly offended, picked up the sandwich and took a massive bite, spraying hot grease all over the table and soaking Chaz's interview checklist.

"Chaz, I'm not a chef," Jonathan said, looking repulsed, "but I know when I'm wrong. You cannot hire this maniac."

As the words left Jonathan's mouth, George's face turned purple. He began to choke, his hand flying to his chest as he went into a full cardiac arrest. He collapsed onto the linoleum with a heavy thud.

"Well, it takes balls to admit you're wrong, Jonny boy. I appreciate it," Chaz replied, before looking down. "Oh, bloody hell."

"Oh, fuck!" Ryan yelled, finally dropping his phone as he watched George's body twitch on the floor.

"Quick, call the bloody ambulance!" Chaz panicked.

Jonathan rushed back to the Front of House to grab the phone. Moments later, paramedics were swarming the kitchen, loading George onto a stretcher.

"Thanks for coming so quick," Chaz said to the lead paramedic with a nervous chuckle. "I thought I was going to have to close the kitchen for the rest of the day."

The paramedic stared at Chaz with a look of utter disbelief and walked out without a word. The door swung shut, leaving an eerie silence behind.

Jonathan shook his head, muttering about Chaz's "ridiculous standards" as he walked out to help Phil.

Ryan pushed off the wall. "Well... that's something that doesn't happen every day," he said, attempting a dark, dry joke in the style of Phil.

Chaz looked at him, eyebrow raised. "Have you been hanging around Phil too much?"

Ryan didn't answer; he just turned and walked out, leaving Chaz alone with a ruined checklist and a very greasy floor.

CHAPTER 12

[8] Busy Earnin' by Jungle

Phil poured hot, silky-smooth steamed milk into a ceramic mug, creating a perfect latte as Chloe watched with rapt attention. He set the mug onto a saucer, placing the spoon on one side and two sugar packets on the other, before sliding it across the counter.

"And that, Chloe, is how you make a latte," Phil said proudly.

"I thought you were supposed to make a heart pattern or something in the foam?" Chloe asked, peering at the drink.

"Nah, that's just for pretentious people. Making a pretty picture doesn't improve the taste of the coffee," Phil replied with a shrug.

Jonathan came over, his expression still a little pale from his ordeal in the kitchen, to collect the drink and deliver it to a waiting customer. Just then, Justin emerged from the corridor, his jacket on and his bag slung across his torso. He walked over to the bar with a newfound spring in his step.

"Good luck when Clifton comes in," Justin said, offering a hopeful smile.

"Thanks," Chloe replied. "Hope the rest of your day goes well."

"After today, I need a rest. I was happy Mel sent me home early," Justin said with a grin.

Phil didn't even look up from his cloth. "You do realise you're only being sent home because she's afraid you'll kick off in front of Clifton, right?"

Justin gave Phil a puzzled look, then shrugged it off. "Either way, it'll give me time to prep for my audition."

Melissa stepped out of the office, her eyes scanning the room. She spotted Justin and walked over. "Thanks for your help today, Justin."

Justin sighed. "Thanks, Mel. Sorry about earlier. I would apologise to Jonny, but last time I tried, it didn't exactly go well."

Melissa exhaled, her gaze softening slightly. "It's fine. Try not to let it worry you. Just go home and start rehearsing," she added, gently guiding him toward the door.

Justin started to chuckle, but his gaze caught on the window. He saw a man in a sharp charcoal suit walking toward the building with a leather portfolio tucked under his arm.

"Clifton's here," Justin whispered, the words catching Melissa's attention instantly.

She spun around just as the bell chimed. David Clifton entered, his presence immediately sucking the warmth out of the room. He didn't look at the decor; he looked at his watch. Melissa smoothed her apron and walked over.

"Mr. Clifton, welcome."

"Melissa," Clifton replied, his voice clipped and formal. "I'm here for my monthly inspection. Plus, I need to talk to you about some... significant changes happening at the Stratford branch."

Before Melissa could respond, Justin—ever the optimist—approached them. He looked Clifton right in the eye and offered his hand with a wide, confident smile. "Alright, Dave? How's it going?"

Clifton stopped dead. He didn't take the hand. He simply turned and gave Justin a cold, hard stare that lasted three seconds too long. The silence was deafening.

Melissa jumped in, her heart hammering against her ribs. "Justin was just heading off, weren't you, Justin?" She gave him a firm, unmistakable nudge toward the exit.

Justin looked at Melissa, then back at the stone-faced Clifton. "Yeah, I gotta shoot. Got an audition tomorrow, so I could do with the extra rehearsal." He turned to the rest of the room. "Goodbye, everyone!"

"Bye, Justin," the team chorused—everyone except Jonathan, who was busy, and Clifton, who remained frozen.

Justin gave one last wave. "See ya, Dave!" he called out, before pushing through the door and disappearing into the bustling streets of Stratford-upon-Avon.

Melissa turned back to her superior, forcing a smile. "Shall we get started, then?"

Clifton adjusted his cuffs. "Yes. Let's go to the office. I want to discuss these changes before I begin the physical inspection."

"Of course," Melissa said, leading him toward the back. She glanced at Phil and Chloe, her expression a mix of warning and plea, before the office door shut behind them.

Act Three

CHAPTER 13

Melissa stepped into her office, Clifton following closely behind. She moved around her desk and sat down, trying to steady her fluttering nerves. Clifton took the seat opposite her, his posture sharp and confident, his leather briefcase still tucked neatly at his side.

"So, David," she began, trying to sound composed despite the fact that her hands were trembling slightly beneath the desk, "what changes are you planning to make here?"

Clifton adjusted his cuffs and offered a thin, polite smile. "At the Leamington branch, we've been trialling a new electronic system—self-service kiosks, QR codes on every table, and card-only payments. No cash. No waiting around for service."

Melissa blinked, caught completely off guard. "That sounds... a bit complex, doesn't it?"

"Not in the slightest," Clifton replied smoothly. "In Leamington, we've already reduced staff hours significantly. There is no need for full Front of House coverage during quiet spells. Fewer hires, less overhead."

Melissa sat still, her mind spinning. *Fewer staff? No cash? Barcodes on tables?* She could already hear Phil's sarcastic remarks and see the older regulars—who came specifically for the chat—walking out the door.

Clifton was still talking, but her thoughts were louder than his voice. This would flip the entire culture of Red's. It wouldn't be a diner anymore; it would be a vending machine with a roof.

He leaned forward slightly, his tone sharpening. "What do you think of the idea, Melissa?"

She froze for a second too long. Then, she forced a smile, the "Social Worker" in her retreating to let the "People Pleaser" take over.

"Sure. Let's give it a go," she said quickly. She just wanted this visit to go well. She wanted to get through the day without making waves or being labeled as "resistant to change."

"Excellent," Clifton said, visibly satisfied. "Now, with that agreed upon—let's begin the inspection."

Melissa nodded, her leg twitching with nerves. She turned to her computer and logged into the manager's dashboard.

Clifton folded his hands. "First off, I want to say I'm pleased with how you've managed the books. You've turned a small profit since stepping up. I assume Jonathan's played a significant role in that?"

Melissa nodded. "Yes, he's definitely helped. He knows how to attract business. Since he joined, we've been consistently busier. Today is actually our first quiet day in weeks."

"Exactly what I'd hoped for," Clifton said. "I thought he'd be a strong right-hand man for you. He has a certain... pedigree."

Melissa let out a breath she hadn't realised she was holding. "He's got the business brain," she said. "I'm more focused on the people side of things. It's a balance."

Clifton gave a satisfied nod, then stood up, tall and poised. "Now that the paperwork is sorted, I'd like to inspect the premises. Let's begin with the kitchen."

Melissa rose shakily from her chair, her stomach doing somersaults. She thought of the grease, the "shit sandwich," and the ambulance that had just left the alleyway.

"Of course. Let's head there now."

Please, Chaz, have that kitchen spotless, she prayed silently as she led Clifton out of the office.

CHAPTER 14

Justin stepped through the front door of the modest three-bedroom house he shared on a council estate in Stratford. It wasn't much, but it was home—shared with Patrick, a local waiter, and Stefan, a German film buff who worked the projection booth at the town cinema. The place was owned by Patrick's uncle, Richard, who also happened to be their landlord... and a notorious stickler for house rules.

Kicking off his shoes, Justin flopped down onto the worn sofa in the lounge. He let out a long, weary sigh and lit a cigarette, pulling a Hollow's Reach DVD from his bag and sliding it into the player.

Just as the disc loaded, Patrick walked in holding a steaming cup of tea. The moment he spotted the cigarette, his face dropped.

"Justin, don't smoke that in here," he snapped. "What if Uncle Rich drops by?"

"Sorry, Pat," Justin said, not moving an inch. "It's been a long day. I'll spray something after, promise."

Patrick frowned but sat down next to him anyway. "Shouldn't you be rehearsing? You've got that audition tomorrow, don't you?"

"I will," Justin muttered, taking a long drag. "I just need to decompress first. Got into it with Jonny again."

Patrick groaned. "Not again. What happened this time?"

"He called me a Yank," Justin said, his voice tight with lingering frustration. "I'm not even from New York. I'm from the West Coast."

Patrick rolled his eyes. "Mate, don't let names wind you up. You're trying to be an actor—you've got to keep your reputation clean if you want to make it big. You can't be known as the guy who gets into brawls at a diner."

Justin stared at the smoke rising from his cigarette, a thoughtful look crossing his face. "You're right. Maybe I should put more energy into acting anyway. I'll probably get further with that than I ever will at Red's."

"There you go," Patrick said, handing him his finished tea cup. "Use this for your fag end—and good luck with rehearsals tonight."

Justin nodded, flicking ash into the porcelain cup. "Thanks for the chat, Pat."

"All good," Patrick said, standing up. "Just don't forget to spray the air freshener before Uncle Rich shows up. You know how he gets about the 'sanctity of the soft furnishings.'"

Justin reached into his bag, pulled out a can of deodorant, and began spraying it around the room with aggressive enthusiasm, like he was fumigating a crime scene.

"Done!" he called out.

"Thank you!" Patrick shouted back from the kitchen.

Justin dropped the remote onto his lap, leaned back, and turned his focus to the TV. A small grin tugged at his lips as the atmospheric, dark music of the show began.

"Alright," he muttered to the empty room. "Let's see why Chloe and Phil love this so much."

CHAPTER 15

[9] Du Hast by Rammstein

Chaz and Ryan were working hard in the kitchen, surrounded by the hiss and sizzle of the afternoon service. Chaz stood over the hot plate, flipping bacon and eggs, while Ryan sliced

bread rolls at the prep station. Blasting through Chaz's portable speaker was a wall of heavy metal—thunderous guitars and guttural vocals that literally rattled the pans on the hooks.

The door creaked open. Melissa entered, with Clifton shadowing her every move.

Clifton flinched at the noise, his expression tightening with every distorted chord. He turned sharply to Melissa and gave her a pointed look, silently urging her to deal with the auditory assault. Without a word, Melissa walked over to the speaker and hit pause.

Silence dropped like a curtain.

Chaz turned, spatula in hand. "Sorry, Mel. Didn't see ya come in."

Melissa didn't respond—she didn't need to. Clifton stepped forward, clipboard in hand, surveying the kitchen with a professional, unreadable expression. Chaz spotted him and gave a casual nod. "Big Dave."

"Charles," Clifton replied crisply. "I am glad to see the kitchen is up to our cleanliness standards. I trust you and Ryan are using the correct equipment and following safety protocols?"

"Yes, boss," Chaz replied, standing a little straighter.

"Good. I'd like to check the food storage areas next," Clifton said confidently.

"Go on, mate," Chaz said with a smirk. "Ain't got no skeletons to hide."

Clifton didn't smile back. He walked to the walk-in fridge, opened it, and began his inspection. He scribbled a few notes, his expression neutral. Then he moved on to the dry store cupboard—shelves were neat, everything was labelled, and ingredients were arranged by type and date. He jotted down more notes, but as he pulled the cupboard door shut, a plastic fake skeleton popped out on a spring, rattling right in his face.

"What the blazes?!" Clifton yelped, jumping back so hard he nearly tripped over a crate of potatoes.

"Oh, sorry! That's the one skeleton I do have," Chaz said, chuckling as Ryan joined in. "His name's Dave, too."

Melissa shot Chaz a look of pure judgment. "Can you take that out, Chaz? It's completely unprofessional."

"Alright, alright, I'm sorry. Just wanted to lighten the morale," Chaz muttered, though he was still grinning.

Melissa stood by the prep table, hands clasped tightly in front of her, waiting for the fallout. Clifton straightened his tie, took a deep breath to recover his dignity, and turned to her.

"Everything seems to be in order. I'm passing the kitchen with excellent marks... despite the 'resident' skeleton."

Melissa exhaled—a slow, quiet sigh of relief that deflated her shoulders. Across the kitchen, Chaz and Ryan exchanged a silent look before high-fiving in victory.

“Well done, Ryan. Charles,” Clifton added with a firm nod. “Keep it up.”

“No probz,” Chaz grinned.

“Well done, boys,” Melissa echoed, her tone light with genuine pride as she followed Clifton out of the kitchen.

As the door closed behind them, Ryan looked sideways at Chaz and grinned. “Right, back to work, Charles.”

Chaz froze mid-motion. He slowly turned toward Ryan, his eyes narrowing into slits. “Don’t. Call. Me. Charles.”

He flicked his speaker back on, letting the wall of German metal resume at full volume as he returned to the fryer. Ryan winced at the noise and shook his head with a bemused frown, returning to his bread rolls.

Back to business as usual.

CHAPTER 16

[10] The Moment by Tame Impala

Clifton and Melissa stepped back into the front of the diner. Clifton’s eyes swept the room, clipboard poised. Behind the bar, Phil multitasked with cynical precision, pouring drinks while keeping a sharp eye on the till. Jonathan delivered plates from the service station, and Chloe glided between tables, drinks balanced expertly on her tray.

“The place looks tidy. Staff are working hard. Customers seem happy,” Clifton observed, his pen scratching across the paper.

He approached the bar. “Phillip, may I check that the bar is up to our standards?”

“Go ahead, sir,” Phil replied, stepping aside with a neutral expression.

Clifton inspected the countertop, the glass racks, and the gleaming chrome of the coffee machine. He nodded approvingly. “Great job, Phillip. Especially the coffee machine—spotless.”

Phil offered a rare, small smile. Melissa finally allowed her shoulders to drop an inch.

Clifton turned to her, his tone softening slightly. “Well, I think we’re just about finished here, Melissa. And I’ve got to say—you’re doing a much better job than Michael ever did. I’m impressed.”

Melissa nearly sagged with relief. “Thanks, David. I’m glad you’re happy with everything.”

Clifton gave a rare smile and lifted his clipboard. “Now, I’ll just mark down your score. Let’s see...” He clicked his pen. “Let me just write a line for the—”

Just then, Chloe walked past with a tray holding a black Americano. She stepped onto a faint wet patch near the till and stumbled. Time seemed to slow as the cup tipped—and a single

drop of dark coffee arched through the air, landing squarely on Clifton's polished black leather loafer.

The silence that followed was absolute. Melissa, Phil, and Chloe all gasped in unison.

Clifton looked down at the tiny, dark splatter spreading across his shoe like a crime scene. Chloe froze, her eyes wide. "I'm so sorry, sir!"

Clifton's face tightened, his jaw setting firmly. Phil stiffened, and Melissa genuinely forgot how to breathe.

Jonathan hurried over, sensing the shift in the atmosphere. "Everything okay?" he asked, taking in the scene.

Clifton inhaled deeply... then exhaled, his posture slowly easing. "Just a minor spillage, Jonathan. Nothing to worry about."

The entire staff released the breath they were holding.

He turned to Chloe, his voice calm but firm. "Just be more careful next time, Miss Parker."

Chloe nodded quickly and hurried away, her cheeks turning a deep crimson. Jonathan stepped forward with a clean paper towel. "Allow me, sir."

"Thank you, Jonathan," Clifton said, watching as Jonathan gently dabbed at the leather. When he finished, Jonathan whisked the towel into the bin.

Clifton resumed writing, finishing his final notes. Then he looked at Melissa. "Congratulations, Melissa. You've passed your first inspection. But remember—I'll be back next month, so keep on top of things."

"I will. Thanks, David. I won't let you down," she replied, her voice finally steady.

Clifton checked his watch. "I'd best be off. I have an interview with the new manager for our Alcester branch."

"Oh, no way—my mate Ewan applied for that. Ewan Hardy," Phil piped up.

Clifton smiled. "That's exactly who I'm interviewing. Small world, isn't it?"

"Definitely," Phil said.

Clifton straightened his jacket. "Take care, Melissa."

"Thank you, Mr. Clifton. Enjoy the rest of your day," she said sincerely.

The bell above the door chimed softly as he exited. Melissa watched him head down the street until he disappeared around the corner. Despite the scares, the visit had been a success.

She turned to find Chloe lingering nearby, looking sheepish. "I'm not banned from serving drinks now, am I?" Chloe asked, half-joking, half-pleading.

Melissa glanced at her, then at the spot on the floor where the "crime" had occurred. Then she, Phil, and Jonathan burst into genuine laughter. Chloe joined in, her face still flushed but the weight of the day finally lifting. The tension was broken.

CHAPTER 17

The kitchen, moments ago a whirlwind of activity, had settled into a quiet hum. The sharp, lingering tang of vinegar mingled with the fading richness of fried onions and sausages. Ryan sliced bread rolls with practiced ease, while Chaz finished off the last of the orders.

Chaz glanced at the clock. "When's your mate due, Ryan? Knock-off time's nearly here."

Ryan checked his phone. "She said 4:30." The clock read 4:29 PM. A smirk played on his lips. "Any second now."

[11] Cult of Personality by Living Color

The back door swung open right on cue, a cool, mint-tinged breath of air drifting into the warm space. Lydia Ramsay stepped in. She carried her Hackney roots in her walk and her Nigerian heritage in the effortless warmth of her voice.

Lydia had moved to Stratford when she was ten with her father, Eric, and sister, Zara. Since the loss of her mother, her childhood friendship with Ryan had been her anchor. With her alternative style—a blend of rock and punk—and a captivating personality, she was instantly noticeable.

As she stood at the entrance, the faint, rhythmic pulse of AFI hummed from a dangling earbud. She wore a faded black jacket with "WOMEN RULE THE WORLD" emblazoned across the back and a rainbow pin gleaming on her collar. Her braids, threaded with tiny silver beads, caught the kitchen light.

Ryan grinned, stepping forward. "Lydia! You made it." They hugged briefly—a comfortable, long-standing warmth between them.

Ryan turned to the group. "Everyone, this is Lydia. Phil, Chloe, and Jonathan—the Front of House crew."

Phil nodded from behind the till. "Hey, Lydia."

Jonathan flashed a polite, professional grin. "Hello there."

Chloe's eyes lit up. "Finally—another girl on the team!"

"Great to meet you all," Lydia said, her voice confident.

Melissa approached with a warm smile. "Hello. Ryan's friend? I'm Melissa, the manager."

"Nice to meet you, Melissa," Lydia said, extending a hand.

Chaz stepped forward with a smirk. "Oi, hope you haven't forgotten about me, Ryan."

Ryan chuckled. "Chaz, this is Lydia. Lydia, this is Chaz—my best mate and the man who keeps this engine room running."

Chaz turned to Lydia and flashed a hopeful smile. "Alright, Lydia. Fancy popping into the kitchen for a chat?"

Lydia didn't answer straight away. Instead, she glanced at Ryan.

"Go for it," Ryan mouthed.

Looking back at Chaz, Lydia gave a small nod. "Sure."

She followed him into the kitchen, with Ryan trailing behind. Once inside, Chaz and Lydia sat opposite each other at the table while Ryan leaned against the wall between them.

Chaz's eyes drifted to the band logo on her T-shirt.

"Living Colour, eh?" he said with a teasing grin. "Bet you don't even know 'Cult of Personality.'"

Lydia raised an eyebrow.

Lydia didn't miss a beat. She tapped her foot, finding the rhythm, and launched into the opening lyrics with a voice that was strong and clear. Chaz grinned, joining in for the chorus. Their voices blended for a brief, shared moment of musical connection.

"That's one way to interview," Ryan observed, amused.

Chaz chuckled, suddenly turning businesslike. "Right, let's get down to it. Tell me about your cooking experience."

Lydia's smile softened, a flicker of nostalgia in her eyes. "After my mum passed, my dad used the insurance money to buy a food truck. It was everything to us. I'd skip school to help him—he worked so hard. But..." Her jaw tightened. "He had to sell it recently. Now, I've got nothing."

Chaz nodded, his expression empathetic. "A food truck? What kind of food?"

"Everything," Lydia replied with pride. "Burgers, tacos, jerk chicken. My dad was a magician. You could smell his cooking three streets away. He taught me how to draw out flavour and how to make people happy with a plate of food."

Chaz was intrigued but stayed direct. "Sounds good. But you don't have any formal qualifications, right?"

Lydia shook her head. "Just hands-on experience. Grill work, prep, the lunch rush. I can handle anything."

"Honest. I like that," Chaz admitted. "Now, the elephant in the room: can you handle the banter? I talk a lot of rubbish and I'm a bit of a lad."

Lydia laughed, a hearty, genuine sound. "Mate, I love girls as much as you do. I'm basically one of the lads. Bring on the banter."

He leaned back, satisfied. "Perfect. One last test. Make me a bacon and egg butty. If it's rubbish, you're out."

Lydia cracked her knuckles. "Guess I'd better not mess it up then."

She grabbed an apron and tied her hair back with practiced efficiency. She scanned the fridge, pulled the ingredients, and soon the kitchen was filled with the comforting sizzle of

high-quality bacon. Minutes later, she slid a perfect sandwich onto a plate—cheese melted just right, a precise dash of ketchup.

Chaz took a bite.

Suddenly, a **flash of memory** hit him—his own mother comforting him after a fall when he was a kid, sliding a similar sandwich toward him. He swallowed hard, a rare wave of emotion flickering in his eyes.

Lydia and Ryan watched him anxiously.

Chaz suddenly dropped the rest of the sandwich on the floor in a dramatic, "drop the mic" gesture.

"That," Chaz declared, his voice thick with praise, "is the best booty I've had since I was ten years old."

Lydia leaned forward, hopeful. "So...?"

Chaz's smile widened. "Welcome to the team, Lydia."

Lydia exhaled, the weight of the world lifting off her shoulders. "Thank you! You won't regret it, I promise."

Ryan, grinning, reached for the remaining half on the prep board, took a bite, and swallowed. "Tastes like a winner to me."

Chaz narrowed his eyes playfully. "Just for that, mate—you're on pots tonight."

Ryan groaned as Chaz strolled off smirking, leaving him to face a sink full of greasy pans.

CHAPTER 18

Justin stood in his bedroom, wearing a dressing gown over joggers, with socks tucked into sliders. A well-thumbed script lay open on his bed, the pages curled at the corners. He cleared his throat, loosened his shoulders, and launched into the iconic line.

"STELLA! STELLA!" he shouted, his chest heaving with faux anguish. He leaned into the mirror, face contorting. "STELLA!"

A sudden, sharp bang rattled his bedroom door.

He froze, then walked over and yanked it open to find Stefan standing there—arms folded, a look of amused frustration on his face.

"Justin, please," Stefan said calmly, his voice carrying a slight German inflection. "Can you keep it down a bit? My girlfriend is over and you're kind of... killing the mood."

"Sorry, Stef," Justin replied, instantly sheepish. "I've got an audition tomorrow. I'm going for Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*."

Stefan gave him a skeptical once-over. "I figured. But you don't have to go full Brando at dinner time."

Justin grinned. "I'll try to channel more... Ned Flanders."

Stefan chuckled, the tension breaking. "Cheers, Justin." With that, he turned and disappeared back down the hallway.

Justin closed the door and grabbed his phone off the bedside table. He noticed a missed call from his mom, Julia—still back in the States. He sighed, sat on the edge of the bed, and tapped the screen to call her back on FaceTime.

The screen blinked, then her familiar face appeared, framed by the warm lighting of her kitchen.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, sweetheart! I was starting to think you'd disappeared," Julia said with a raised brow. "Busy?"

"Yeah, kinda. The diner's been non-stop the past couple of weeks, and I've had a few theatre auditions around town," Justin said, intentionally making his life sound a bit more glamorous than a supervisor shift at a diner.

"That's good to hear. I've got lots to update you on," Julia replied.

"How's Cody?" he asked, a genuine note of curiosity in his voice.

"He's doing well. He and Jess brought the girls up this weekend from Texas. They're getting so big."

Justin smiled weakly. "That's great. And... have you heard from Dad?"

Julia paused for a second, her expression shifting to something more guarded. "He's actually planning to visit you soon, but he says he's been struggling to get hold of you."

Justin rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "He could message me on socials. Doesn't he know how to use a phone that isn't a Nokia from the '90s?"

Julia gave him a gentle, motherly look. "Have you tried messaging him? Or Cody?"

Justin exhaled, rubbing his forehead. "No. I haven't really had the time, Mom. Work, auditions, trying to keep this house from falling apart... it's a lot."

"I know it is," Julia said softly. "But maybe when you get five minutes, reach out. Stay close to your family, honey. We're still here, even if we're an ocean away."

Justin frowned, reluctant but quietly aware she was right. "Okay. I'll message Dad tomorrow. Leave it with me."

"Good." Julia smiled. "Anyway, Bill's taking me to Olive Garden, so I'd better run. Love you."

"Love you too, Mom," Justin said. The screen went black as the call ended.

He tossed the phone onto the duvet and stood still for a beat, the silence of the room feeling much heavier than it had before the call. He picked the script back up and took a long, steadying breath.

"Stella. Stella," he repeated—quieter this time. More controlled. Less Brando, more bruised.

He began again.

CHAPTER 19

Ryan lingered in the kitchen for a moment longer than necessary, a sense of finality settling over him as he looked at the familiar stacks of plates and the blackened grill. Chaz approached him, a crumpled ten-pound note extended in his hand.

"Right, ready for the pub?" Chaz joked, his tone light, trying to break the heavy atmosphere.

Ryan took the note, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Cheers, mate," he replied, his voice thick with gratitude.

Chaz's brow furrowed, his gaze sharp and assessing. "Alright, spill it. You look like you've just lost your last portion of chips," he observed, his tone turning concerned.

Ryan sighed, the weight of the moment evident in his slumped posture. "It just... feels weird. End of an era, you know? No more kitchen for me," he confessed, his voice tinged with melancholy.

Chaz chuckled, a reassuring hand landing on Ryan's shoulder. "Ryan, nothing's changing that much. We'll still see each other here, and at home. And if Front of House turns out not to be your thing, the kitchen door is always open," he assured him, his voice steady and supportive.

Ryan smirked, a hint of playful defiance flickering in his eyes. "Yeah, but then Lydia would be out of a job, wouldn't she?"

Chaz rolled his eyes, but a genuine warmth filled his voice. "Ryan, you're gonna nail it. You, Justin, Phil, Chloe—you're the dream team out there. And me and Lydia? We've got your back from in here," he declared with confidence.

A moment of hesitation passed before Ryan finally nodded. A real smile broke through, his eyes lighting up with a touch of newfound enthusiasm. "Yeah... you're right. I'm actually looking forward to it," he admitted.

Chaz clapped him on the shoulder, a surge of brotherly camaraderie passing between them. "That's the spirit!" He lowered his voice, his tone shifting to a conspiratorial whisper, a playful glint in his eyes. "And listen—if you ever need a breather, a chat, or a sneaky vape, just knock on the back door. I'll be out there. Always here, mate."

Ryan's smile deepened. "Thanks, buddy," he replied.

They shared a brief, heartfelt hug—a silent acknowledgment of their bond—before turning to leave the kitchen behind. They walked out together, ready to face whatever the Stratford-upon-Avon evening had in store for them.

CHAPTER 20

Melissa and Phil were closing up for the night when Jonathan appeared from the corridor, wearing a sharp black coat with a Mercedes F1 badge on the lapel, car keys already in hand.

"You two alright finishing up?" Jonathan asked.

Melissa nodded, her tone professional. "We're fine. When it's just me and Phil, we actually get out earlier."

"At least the hard part of the day is over," Jonathan said, adjusting his collar. "And it was... mostly successful."

Melissa chuckled, the weight finally lifting from her shoulders. "Tell me about it. I thought Chloe's coffee spill had finished us."

Jonathan gave a small, stiff nod. "Right, I'm off. Long drive back to Coventry." With that, he exited the diner and stepped into the quiet Stratford-upon-Avon night.

A moment later, Chaz and Ryan emerged from the kitchen, smelling of soap and degreaser.

"So, Ryan—looking forward to Front of House next week?" Phil asked.

"Absolutely. I can't wait to learn the ropes," Ryan said with genuine optimism.

Before Phil could respond, Chaz strode over to Melissa, practically glowing. "Melissa," he said, beaming. "She's in. Lydia's in."

Melissa looked up from wiping the counter, smiling back with matching energy. "That's fantastic, Chaz! What convinced you?"

Chaz ran a hand through his messy hair, still looking a bit stunned. "Mel... it was something else." He leaned on the counter, his voice softening. "Gave her a simple test. A bacon and egg buttty."

Melissa raised an eyebrow. "Just a sandwich?"

"Just a sandwich," Chaz echoed. "But it wasn't just that." A flicker of rare vulnerability crossed his eyes. "It tasted like my mum's. Comfort food from years ago. Pure, simple... and perfect."

Melissa's smile warmed. "That's lovely, Chaz."

He quickly shook off the emotion, slipping back into his usual bravado. "Anyway—enough of the mushy stuff. She's eager, she's quick, and that buttty sealed the deal. She's got the knack." He clapped his hands together. "With her in the kitchen and Ryan up front, we might actually have a decent team for once."

"Excellent," Melissa said. "I'll email Mr. Clifton before I head off. We'll get her inducted on Monday." She gave him a knowing smile. "Good call, Chaz."

Chaz rubbed the back of his neck, uncharacteristically sheepish. "Well... credit to Ryan. He nudged me."

"Looks like he's got the knack too," Melissa teased.

Chloe emerged from the corridor, helmet in hand. "There she is," Phil said. "The girl who survived Clifton and lived to tell the tale."

"At least I made work exciting without Justin being here," Chloe laughed. She turned to Ryan. "Hey, I haven't seen you all day. You alright?"

“Hey, Chloe. Me, Chaz, and Lydia are heading to the Sports Bar to celebrate. Want to join?”

“Oh, I wish I could, but I’ve got loads of coursework and a cup of tea planned,” Chloe said tentatively.

Melissa stepped in. “Chloe, go. You deserve a break after today.”

Chloe hesitated, then smiled. “Sure. Why not?”

Chaz nudged Phil. “Looks like I’m chaperoning tonight.” He headed out the door with Chloe and Ryan following close behind.

“Bye, guys!” Melissa called. “Thanks for your help today!”

“Goodbye!” they chorused as the door swung shut.

Phil lifted a hand in a lazy wave. “See ya.” He turned to Melissa, his expression softening. “Be proud of yourself, Mel. No one here could do a better job.”

“Thanks, Phil. I just wish Mike was around to see it,” she said quietly.

The door opened again. Melissa turned without looking. “Sorry, we’re closed—”

She stopped mid-sentence.

A man stood in the doorway wearing a smart sport jacket, dark jeans, and polished black shoes. His hair was neatly combed back, his glasses catching the light of the diner’s neon sign.

“Hello, Melissa,” he said.

“Mike!” she exclaimed, walking over to pull him into a hug. “It’s great to see you!”

Phil turned, a wide grin breaking across his face. “Mikey B! What brings you to these parts?”

Mike smiled warmly. “I was in town and thought I’d stop by, see how the old place was holding up.”

Phil shrugged. “Still a shithole. But Melissa keeps making it a bit less of one.”

Mike faced her again. “I’m proud of you, Melissa. I know things have been hard since I left, but it looks like you’re doing a great job.”

Melissa smiled, touched. “Thanks, Mike. That means a lot. I did learn from the best, after all.”

Mike blinked in mock confusion. “Really? I was a pretty shit manager.”

[12] - *Santeria* — Sublime

The three of them laughed together, their reunion a warm, welcome blast from the past as the final lights of the diner dimmed.

THE END