

Order Up!

Season 1 | Episode 3: World's Smallest Violin

Written by Robbie Fleming

Additional Material by Christopher Hyde

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2026

Main Cast

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

Additional Cast

- Charlie Creed-Miles - Nick Parker (Chloe's father)
- Mackenzie Crook - Pete Jones (Natalie's father)
- Richard Dreyfuss - Larry Green (Justin's father)
- David Harewood - John (Sports Bar Bartender)
- Paterson Joseph - David Clifton (Reds' Warwickshire Regional Manager)
- Maxine Peake - Karen Parker (Chloe's mother)
- Steve Pemberton - Bruce (Red's Team Trainer)
- Posy Sterling - Natalie Jones (Phil's estranged best friend)
- Unknown Child Actor - Danny Parker (Chloe's Brother)
- Unknown Child Actor - Callum Parker (Chloe's Brother)

Soundtrack (Available on Spotify @KeziahHydeMedia)

1. Ride by Twenty One Pilots (Plays during Justin's journey to Red's)
2. The Joker and the Thief by Wolfmother (plays during the Fire drill activity sequence)
3. A Message to You, Rudy by The Specials (Plays in the sports bar when Justin meets his dad)
4. Digital Love by Daft Punk (Plays in Sports bar)
5. Semi-Charmed Life by Third Eye Blind (Plays outside of the sports bar)
6. Mr Brightside by The Killers (plays whilst Ryan and Justin at the sports bar)
7. Break Free by Ariana Grande and Zedd (Chloe listens to it in her room)
8. Happy Man by Jungle (Plays outside of the sports bar)
9. World's Smallest Violin by AJR (plays over the end credits)

Prologue

Justin Lawrence Green was born on July 30, 1989, in Los Angeles, California, to Julia Green, a homemaker, and Larry Green, a basketball scout. Raised in the suburbs alongside his younger brother, Cody, Justin's childhood was filled with skateboarding, TV marathons, and a growing obsession with acting—sparked at age eight after he first watched 3rd Rock from the Sun. From that moment on, John Lithgow became his idol.

While his dad hoped he would follow a path into basketball, Justin had other plans. He chased acting throughout his teens, struggling to break into Hollywood as early auditions led nowhere. Eventually, he found his footing in the local theatre scene—scraping by on a mixture of passion and stubborn persistence.

His twenties were messy: a divorce rocked the family, relationships fizzled out, and menial side jobs piled up just to stay afloat. By twenty-four, disillusioned with L.A. and craving something deeper, he moved to Stratford-upon-Avon—Shakespeare's birthplace and the same town where Lithgow had once performed. Justin made it his ultimate goal to reach the RSC stage himself.

He settled into the UK theatre world slowly, taking small roles with tight paychecks and working odd jobs, including a stint at the RSC gift shop. In 2019, he moved into a shared house with Patrick, a local waiter, and Stefan, a German film buff. For the first time in years, he had a place that actually felt like home.

In 2022, he joined Red's Coffee and Diner. Hired by the then-manager Mike Barnes, Justin bonded quickly with longtime staffer Phil Cooper and earned a reputation for his energy and ambition. A year later, he was promoted to Supervisor—a title he wore with immense pride, if occasionally with a touch too much flair.

Now a UK citizen, Justin has lived in Stratford for over a decade. Though Red's gives him stability, he's still chasing auditions between shifts, dreaming of the RSC stage. But rent, scheduling conflicts, and burnout keep pulling him back to the espresso machine.

With his family scattered across North America—his mother remarried in L.A., his dad retired in Canada, and his brother raising two kids in Texas—Justin, now in his mid-thirties, finds himself stuck. The dream feels further away than ever. The job feels stagnant. And behind the wit and charm, something is starting to crack.

Opening

The bathroom mirror was fogged around the edges, the kind of blur that made everything look softer than it really was. Justin stood in front of it, brushing his teeth with one hand and scrolling through his phone with the other.

He was already dressed for the day—a patterned button-up with the top button undone, chinos, and slightly scuffed blue pumps. It was an outfit that looked thrown together but took just enough effort to feel intentional. Classic Justin.

His phone buzzed in his hand. An incoming call.

Dad.

He stared at the name for a second, his toothbrush paused mid-motion. It had been five years since they'd last seen each other. Eleven since Justin had moved to England. And in

all that time, Larry Green had never once crossed the Atlantic to visit. Justin used to visit him in Los Angeles every year—until a stupid argument put a definitive end to that.

Now, after all this time, Larry was here. In England. And Justin wasn't sure if this was supposed to be a turning point or just another false start.

He rinsed, spat, wiped his mouth, and answered.

"Hey, Dad!" he said, forcing a layer of brightness into his voice. "How was your flight?"

Larry's voice sounded rough—like jet lag was still pressing hard against his chest. "Landed last night," he said. "Been at the hotel since. Couldn't sleep once I got in."

Justin gave a short, nervous laugh. "You're not planning on renting a car, are you? I don't want something bad to happen on your very first visit. Driving on the left is a nightmare."

"Nah, no car this time. Besides, it turns out I'm staying pretty close to you. I'm in London."

Justin blinked at his reflection, his heart sinking an inch.

"...Dad," he said, careful to keep his voice from sounding too harsh. "I don't live in London."

"You don't?"

"No. I live in Stratford-upon-Avon. Warwickshire. You know... Shakespeare? The RSC? The Bard?"

A beat of heavy, static-filled silence followed.

"So you're telling me you live in a completely different city?"

"It's not a city," Justin corrected, his eyes tracing the steam on the mirror. "Not yet. Just... a very touristy town with delusions of grandeur. It's got a river, though. And swans that'll take your finger off."

"Well, how far is that from London?"

"Two, maybe three hours by train. Depending on if the tracks have melted."

Larry sighed, and Justin could practically hear the irritation crackling through the Atlantic cable. "Great. Now I've gotta figure out the trains. This is going to be harder than I thought."

Justin smiled, but it didn't touch his eyes. It figured. Larry had booked the trip without even checking where his own son lived. He was finally in the country—but he still hadn't really shown up.

"Well, I'm not free until tonight anyway," Justin said. "I've got a training day for work—nothing exciting. But I'll call you once I'm done."

"What should I do if I get there before you finish?"

Justin shrugged, even though Larry couldn't see it. "Explore. It's a nice town. Culture, fast food, overpriced souvenirs. You'll find something to do."

Another pause.

“Fine. I’ll see you tonight, Justin. Goodbye.”

“I—love you, Dad,” Justin said.

But the line had already gone dead. Larry had hung up.

Justin stood still, phone in hand, thumb resting on the cold screen. He’d imagined this moment a hundred ways—the first time his dad would decide to make an effort. Not for his own gain, but for his son. And still, it felt like Larry was just as likely to get on the wrong train as the right one.

The mirror had cleared now. Justin looked at himself: patterned shirt, practiced smile, tired eyes. Tonight would be the first time they’d seen each other in five years. And deep down, Justin needed this to be more than just an awkward reunion. He needed to be the lead in a story that didn’t end in a hang-up.

He grabbed his bag and left.

ACT ONE (Titles)

CHAPTER 1

[1] Take on Me by A-Ha

Justin stepped out of his front door, tugged a pair of sunglasses from his pocket, and slid them on. The spring air was crisp and bright enough to make him squint. He grabbed his electric bicycle from where it leaned against the wall and glided down the road toward the town centre.

Stratford-upon-Avon was still yawning awake as he arrived. He parked the bike next to a rack, looped the heavy chain around the frame, and clicked the lock into place. Satisfied, he reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes, tapped one loose, and lit it. Smoke coiled from his lips as he took a long drag and began the short walk toward Red’s.

Up ahead, Phil was already waiting outside the diner in his usual uniform: a beanie, a Pulp Fiction T-shirt, black joggers, a leather jacket, and battered Doc Martens. He looked like a film student who had forgotten to graduate ten years ago.

“Alright, mate,” Phil called out, nodding as Justin approached.

Justin smirked, his mood light despite the morning’s phone call. “Phil, why are you wearing a T-shirt for the worst film ever made?”

Phil blinked, genuinely affronted. “Pulp Fiction is the worst film you’ve ever seen?”

“It’s not as good as Once Upon a Time in Hollywood,” Justin said with a shrug. “I could watch that movie on repeat.”

Phil grimaced like he’d just bitten into a lemon. “At least Pulp Fiction has a plot and doesn’t try to rewrite history.”

Justin grinned. “Yeah, but Pulp Fiction doesn’t have Leo and Brad.”

Phil crossed his arms, sliding effortlessly into critic mode. "Stars don't automatically make a film good, Justin. All the cogs have to work together. Yes, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* has its moments, but it's just not that great. Not to me."

"Fair enough," Justin said. "I just don't think *Pulp Fiction* is that good either."

Before Phil could bite back, Jonathan appeared. He was dressed in a pale polo shirt—buttoned all the way to the top—light blue jeans, smart black shoes, and his signature Mercedes F1 coat. He looked like he was about to give a TED Talk on time management.

"Starting trouble already, Justin?" he asked dryly, raising an eyebrow.

Phil stepped in before the tension could escalate. "We're just discussing the films of Quentin Tarantino."

Jonathan frowned, the name clearly meaning nothing to him. "Isn't he that guy who makes films where people talk for ages and then shoot each other?"

Phil gave a proud, solemn nod. "Pretty much. His filmography is legendary."

Jonathan paused. "Can't say I've seen any of his work. I'm not really a movie guy."

Phil's jaw slackened. "You're missing out, mate. There are loads of great ones out there."

Just then, Melissa arrived. She looked sharp in a green turtleneck jumper, black trousers, high boots, and a long, cream-coloured coat that billowed slightly in the breeze.

"What's Jonathan missing out on?" she asked, already pulling her keys from her pocket.

"Movies," Phil replied with a heavy sigh.

Melissa glanced at Jonathan. "You're not the only one. I prefer books." She unlocked the door and stepped inside, holding it open for the others. "Come on," she said. "Let's get this fun-filled day of training started."

The three men followed her in—Justin flicking the last of his cigarette into the street, Phil adjusting his beanie, and Jonathan already checking his watch.

CHAPTER 2

Chaz, wearing his signature look—a snapback cap on backwards, a 2008 Aston Villa shirt under a black denim jacket plastered with heavy metal band logos, black tracky bottoms, and bright blue running shoes—headed for the door.

He swung it open to find Lydia standing on the front step in full punk mode: ripped jeans, heavy boots, and a faded Green Day T-shirt under a studded jacket.

"You guys ready?" she asked, arms folded. "We've gotta be there in fifteen minutes."

Chaz turned his head toward the hallway. "Ryan! You set to go?" he shouted.

"Coming!" came Ryan's voice from upstairs.

Chaz stepped outside to join Lydia. "You pumped for your first training day?" he asked her, grinning.

Lydia shrugged. "I mean, it sounds boring—but hey, it beats actual work."

Chaz laughed. "We have one every year. This'll be my fifth. I could probably run the damn thing myself at this point."

Just then, Ryan stepped out, locking the door behind him. He was wearing a matching 2008 Aston Villa shirt—the one with the Acorns sponsor—under a light blue denim jacket, black jeans, and black trainers.

Lydia took one look at them and burst into laughter. "You two look like twins!" she cackled.

Chaz and Ryan glanced at each other. At exactly the same time, they both muttered, "Fuck off, I'm not changing."

Lydia howled, walking off down the street, still laughing. Chaz and Ryan followed, heads shaking in mutual annoyance.

"Great," Chaz muttered. "Now people are gonna think we're a married couple."

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Couldn't you have picked literally any other Villa shirt?"

Chaz shrugged. "I was gonna wear the 2012 one, but it had mustard on it."

Lydia laughed harder as the three of them headed off toward what promised to be a long, weird day of training.

CHAPTER 3

Chloe rolled up outside Red's on her bike, locking it opposite the front doors. She took off her helmet and shook out her hair, the pink tips of her brunette curls catching the early sun. She wore a tie-dye hoodie and denim shorts layered over black leggings, with socks pulled up high over the fabric and a pair of worn white trainers. As she made her way across the street, she spotted Chaz, Ryan, and Lydia approaching from the opposite direction.

"Oi!" she called out, waving one hand.

The trio turned at the sound of her voice.

"Hey, Chloe!" Ryan grinned. "Love the hoodie."

"Thanks," Chloe said, tugging at the hem proudly. "It was my mum's when she was younger."

"Well, it suits you," Ryan added, flashing a soft smile.

Lydia smirked and pointed at Chaz and Ryan. "Hope you're not hiding a Green Day shirt under there," she said, eyeing their identical Aston Villa tops.

Chloe looked at them, clocked the matching Acorns 2008 kits, and tried—and failed—to keep a straight face. "Nah, just a plain black sleeveless. Sorry to disappoint."

Chaz groaned. "Okay, okay, we get it. We're wearing the same shirt. The joke's wearing thin now."

"I don't have a problem with it," Ryan shrugged.

Chaz rolled his eyes and pulled out a cigarette, lighting it with a practised flick. Just then, the front doors opened and Melissa stepped out. She wore a green turtleneck under her cream-coloured coat, a clipboard in hand and urgency in her voice.

"Guys, inside. Mr. Clifton could be here any minute."

Chloe, Lydia, and Ryan headed toward the entrance. Ryan paused, glancing back to see Chaz still leaning against the brick wall, taking another long drag from his smoke.

"You coming, Chaz?" he called out.

Chaz let out a chuckle. "Soon as I'm done with this."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "Might want to finish up, mate. You don't want to be late on Clifton's watch."

Chaz waved him off dismissively. "I'm not like you wimps. Big Dave Clifton doesn't scare me, y'know."

The others slowed, turning slightly to glance back at him. Chaz didn't notice the sudden silence.

He puffed dramatically on his cigarette and launched into a mocking, high-pitched impersonation. "Look at me, I'm Dave Clifton. I'm the scariest motherfucker to ever work at Red's. I've got a training manual so thick it could kill a man. And if I follow it long enough, my managing director will marry me and we'll live in a world where everyone's a miserable twat just like me!"

Lydia's expression shifted. Chloe's eyes widened. Ryan winced, looking at a point just over Chaz's shoulder.

Chaz paused, finally catching the change in their faces. He slowly turned around.

Standing directly behind him was Mr. Clifton.

Chaz froze. His cigarette slipped from his fingers, landing with a soft hiss on the damp pavement.

"...Mr. Clifton," he said, his voice suddenly quiet, almost polite.

Clifton stared him down, his expression unreadable. "For the record, Charles, I already have a wife. And if I swung that way, Kevin Reynolds would be the last person I'd fall for."

Chaz opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

Clifton gave him one last, withering look and walked past, heading inside without another word. Chaz stood there, stunned and thoroughly "mugged off" by the regional manager. He finally looked over at the others, who were already half-laughing, half-cringing on his behalf.

"Well," he muttered, his face reddening. "That went well."

Chaz slumped his shoulders and followed the rest of them into Red's.

CHAPTER 4

Mr. Clifton stood at the front of Red's Coffee and Diner, surveying the eight employees of the Stratford-upon-Avon branch seated before him.

Melissa sat in the front row on the right, with Chaz opposite her on the left. Behind Melissa were Jonathan, Phil, and Justin. Across from them sat Lydia, Ryan, and Chloe. It felt strange for them all—the café was eerily quiet. No music playing, no clatter of cutlery, no shouting from the kitchen. Just silence, tables, and tension.

"Greetings, everyone," Mr. Clifton began. "For those who don't know me, I'm David Clifton. I'm the Regional Manager for Red's Warwickshire division, and I'll be supervising your training session today."

He glanced around at the staff, his eyes lingering for a second too long on Chaz. "Before we begin, any questions?"

Ryan raised a hand. "Yeah—what's with all the new tech?"

Everyone turned to glance at the fresh additions: sleek self-service kiosks by the entrance, touchscreen monitors behind the bar, and notably, no till in sight.

"Yeah," added Justin. "Where's the till gone, Dave?"

Clifton adjusted his tie. "Ah yes—that's the reason you're all here. As of Monday, Red's will be transitioning to a new system we've been trialing at the Leamington branch. It's a cashless, fully electronic model. Customers will now order using either the self-service kiosks or by scanning a QR code at their tables. Your role will be to fulfill the orders. Simple, efficient, cost-effective."

Phil stood up abruptly. "But sir, that's not fair to the—"

"Phillip, sit down." Clifton's voice cut through the room like a blade.

Phil sat but muttered under his breath, "We're gonna lose proper customer interaction. This is going to drive the regulars away."

Clifton leaned forward slightly, his voice calm but cold. "Leamington is now the most profitable branch in the county, Phillip. This system will make Stratford more profitable than ever."

Justin turned to Phil and whispered, "Guess money matters more than people now. Thanks, Dave."

"I heard that, Justin. Shut up," Clifton snapped.

"Sorry, Dave," Justin mumbled, eyes lowered.

Clifton let the silence hang for a beat, then straightened. "Now, before I hand over to Bruce from the Training Team, I'd like to share a few more exciting updates."

The word exciting sounded like a threat.

"Following feedback from head office, we've also implemented upgrades to streamline the bar and kitchen areas."

Lydia tensed. Chaz sat up straighter.

"You'll notice behind the bar, we've replaced the traditional espresso machine with a state-of-the-art bean-to-cup unit. One-button dispensing, no manual milk steaming, no unnecessary delays."

Melissa blinked. "Wait—what?"

Phil scoffed. "So we're a petrol station now?"

Clifton ignored them. "In the kitchen, we've also installed an automated prep machine and a high-grade commercial microwave to help reduce cook times. Effective immediately, the use of the oven will be phased out."

There was a long, horrified pause.

"What?" Chaz's voice was low, dangerous.

Clifton raised a brow. "Is there a problem?"

"You're replacing my oven with a microwave?"

"It's not your oven, Charles. It's Red's equipment. And yes. The microwave will allow for faster, more consistent food delivery."

Chaz stood up. "We serve fresh food. Not 'ping' meals. You want me to nuke a lasagne and pretend that's the same as cooking it properly?"

"It's not about pretending. It's about efficiency."

"No," Chaz said, louder now. "It's about gutting everything that makes this place worth working at. You want everything faster, cheaper, soulless. Why even have a kitchen? Why not just slap vending machines out back and be done with it?"

Clifton took a slow step forward. "Charles! One more word out of you and I'll be forced to write you up for insubordination."

Lydia didn't speak, but she stood next to Chaz in silent solidarity. Clifton looked at them like a teacher staring down unruly children.

"Anyway, let's start your training," he said tightly. "Bruce?"

A man in his early forties strolled through the doors with a clipboard in hand and an easy, somewhat vacant smile.

"Hello, everyone!" Bruce said cheerfully. "I'm Bruce, and I'll be walking you through the new system so you're all ready come Monday."

His eyes scanned the room. "Ah, some familiar faces—Phil, good to see you again."

Phil gave a polite nod. "Good to see you too, Brucey."

Bruce grinned. "Right then. Let's get started. First, I'm going to demonstrate a customer's journey through the new system. Who'd like to volunteer to play the customer?"

No hands went up. Justin nudged Phil. "You've been here the longest—you do it."

Phil shot him a look. "Bruce," he said, pointing sideways. "Found your volunteer."

Bruce's eyes lit up. "Excellent. Come on up."

Justin sighed, dragging himself to the front.

"What's your name, mate?" Bruce asked, clipboard ready.

"Justin. We met last year, remember?"

"Ah, sorry—I'm terrible with names!" Bruce chuckled. He turned to the group. "Alright, so Justin is going to be the customer and I'm going to show you exactly how this new journey works."

He turned back to Justin. "If you could just step outside for a moment and come in when I give you the thumbs up, that'd be great."

Justin rolled his eyes, muttered "Yeah," and exited. He stood outside for a few seconds before Bruce waved at him through the window. Justin walked back in, trying to look like a hungry customer.

"Now, as Jacob here enters—"

"Justin," he interrupted, deadpan.

Bruce laughed nervously. "Right. Sorry. Justin. So, Justin would use the touchscreen to place his order, pay electronically, check his receipt for an order number, and wait over by the bar. The barista will call his number, he collects the drink, and he's good to go."

Justin returned to his seat as Melissa raised her hand.

"Yes, Melisha?" Bruce called.

"Melissa," she corrected, an eyebrow raised.

"Right, sorry—like I said, terrible with names! What's your question?"

Melissa sighed. "What happens if someone wants to eat in?"

"Great question. They can still use the self-serve kiosk, or they can scan the QR code at their table with their phone and order that way."

Melissa frowned. "Isn't that... complicated for some of our older regulars?"

Bruce shrugged. "At first, maybe. But once people get the hang of it, it'll be second nature—for them and for you."

Phil folded his arms. "Still think it's a massive mistake."

Clifton stood up suddenly. "Phillip—one more outburst and you'll be removed from this session. That would also mean forfeiting your weekly pay."

Phil clenched his jaw and went silent. Bruce, trying to keep things light, clapped his hands. "Alright—why don't we take a fifteen-minute break, and then we'll move onto the next part?"

Ryan, Justin, Phil, Lydia, and Chaz all stood up and shuffled outside for air. Melissa, Chloe, and Jonathan stayed in their seats, quietly processing the chaos.

CHAPTER 5

Outside, the late morning air was crisp, the sun just beginning to warm the edge of the café's brick exterior.

Justin and Chaz stood off to the side, leaning against the wall with cigarettes between their fingers. A few paces away, Ryan, Phil, and Lydia passed around vapes, the air thick with fruit-scented clouds.

"This new system's bollocks," Phil muttered, exhaling a minty mist. "Feels like we're training to get replaced."

Ryan rolled his eyes. "It's just the way things are now, mate. People want faster, smoother. Tap-and-go. No small talk. No fuss."

Phil crossed his arms, his expression stubborn. "Right. And what about the people who need small talk? Who don't have a smartphone or a bank account? You go fully cashless, you're basically saying 'piss off' to half the town."

Ryan shrugged. "They'll catch up."

Phil shook his head. "Not everyone can. You think my brother's going to download an app just to order a bloody latte? And what happens when the system goes down, yeah? Or there's a power cut? No cash drawer, no sales. You're screwed."

Lydia lowered her vape slightly. "He's got a point."

Phil wasn't finished. "And this thing where everything's behind a touchscreen? It's not just about convenience. It's about control. Fewer staff, lower wages, less room for people like us. We're training ourselves out of a job."

Chaz flicked ash off his cigarette. "Should've picked a trade, Phil. Like me. Cooks don't go obsolete."

"Not yet," Phil said darkly. "But give it time. We're just one broken AI away from being called 'inefficient.'"

Justin was only half-listening, his eyes glued to a message glowing on his phone screen from his dad:

ON THE WAY TO STRATFORD ON AVON NOW. SEE YOU SOON.

He let out a low groan, dragging a hand down his face.

“What’s up, mucker?” Chaz asked.

Justin sighed. “My dad. He’s flown in to see me. Didn’t even know where I lived until a couple of hours ago, and now he’s texting like he’s booked a river tour.”

Phil arched a brow. “Sounds like he’s trying, though. Even if he’s clueless.”

Justin scoffed. “Clueless is generous. He thinks culture is a type of yoghurt.”

The others chuckled, but the silence that followed lingered—not awkward, just weighted. Lydia pulled the vape from her lips. “Still,” she said gently, “he came.”

Justin didn’t answer, but some of the tension in his shoulders eased.

Back inside Red’s, the café was still. It was the lull before the lunch crowd—that moment where time feels like it’s pausing for breath. Jonathan sat alone at a table, scrolling endlessly on his phone, half-hearing the world around him but not really listening. At the counter, Melissa and Chloe stood side by side, their conversation hushed.

“How’s uni going?” Melissa asked, her arms folded, her voice warm but measured.

Chloe let out a tired breath. “Long. I’m ready to be done.”

Melissa smiled. “What comes next?”

Chloe perked up a little. “I was planning to open a salon. That’s why I took business at uni. My parents thought it’d help me run the place properly.”

Melissa’s smile wavered, just for a second. “That’s smart,” she said. “But you might want to get some proper experience first. Work in a real salon, get your hands dirty. It’s easy to dream it, but harder to live it.”

Chloe nodded slowly. “Yeah... I’ve thought about that. It’s just... I don’t want to let go of Red’s.”

Melissa exhaled gently, her voice dipping. “Well, if you’d rather stay here, I can help you progress further in the company.”

Chloe gave a half-smile. “I mean, it’s something I might consider one day. I want to get uni out of the way before I make any big decisions.”

Melissa chuckled. “Well, either way, no matter what you choose, we will all support you.”

Before Chloe could reply, Bruce emerged from the back, looking flustered and clutching his clipboard.

"Melissa. Uh... Zoe?" he said, scanning the two of them.

"Chloe," Chloe corrected, but without irritation.

"Yes—Chloe, of course." He cleared his throat. "Could one of you fetch the others from outside? It's time for Health and Safety."

He gestured behind him where a lopsided setup had been arranged: handouts, a warning cone by the coffee machines, and what appeared to be a broken mop bucket waiting for its moment in the spotlight.

Melissa and Chloe exchanged a long look—one of those silent exchanges that say this is going to be a disaster.

Chloe sighed. "I'll get them."

Melissa patted her arm. "You're a hero."

And with that, Chloe pushed through the café doors and stepped out into the cool air once more.

CHAPTER 6

Bruce wheeled in a bulky old TV on a squeaky trolley, its thick grey frame wobbling with every bump. The team slowly shuffled back to their seats, exchanging curious looks at the prehistoric technology.

"I haven't seen a TV like that since primary school," Chaz muttered.

"Why is it... thick?" Ryan asked, squinting like the machine had personally offended him.

"Does it have Netflix?" Chloe chimed in hopefully.

Bruce chuckled. "Oh no, this bad boy predates streaming. Who here remembers the golden days of VCRs?"

"This is taking me back," Melissa said with a nostalgic smile.

"I had F1 Highlights on a video cassette," Jonathan added proudly.

"What's a VCR?" Lydia asked, tilting her head.

Phil snorted. "I remember watching The Blair Witch Project at Owen's house with him and Nat on one of those. What a load of crap."

"What?! That's, like, the best horror film ever!" Justin shot back.

Phil turned toward him. "Justin, your taste in movies genuinely worries me."

Bruce clapped his hands, refocusing the room. "Alright, let's roll the tape."

He inserted a dusty VHS into the built-in player. The screen flickered and wobbled with tracking lines before settling on a Training Day parody—a painfully awkward knock-off

featuring two charisma-free actors playing discount Denzel Washington and Ethan Hawke lookalikes.

Where the real Training Day had grit and style, this featured two blokes in oversized suits reading cue cards in a deserted office kitchen. Even Jonathan, normally stone-faced, was visibly nodding off as the actors droned on about "Proper Synergistic Customer Engagement."

As the tape finally sputtered to an end with a loud mechanical clunk, Justin blurted out, "Thank fuck that's over!"

Silence fell instantly. Even Clifton lowered his clipboard, eyes wide with disbelief.

"What did you just say, Justin?" Bruce asked, his brows raised in shock.

Justin shrugged, unabashed. "I mean no disrespect, Bruce, but come on—that video was painfully boring."

Bruce sighed, his shoulders sagging. "It was made in 2003. I've been trying to get them to update it since 2004."

"School of Rock came out in 2003 and it still slaps," Justin argued. "Know why? Jack Black. Showmanship."

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "Showmanship?"

Justin grinned. "Yeah. Watch this." He leapt to his feet, struck a theatrical pose, and spun dramatically with his lighter held up like a Broadway mic—

"JUSTIN!" Clifton's voice cut through the fantasy like a guillotine.

Justin froze mid-spin. "What?!"

"Sit down and stop interrupting!"

Justin collapsed back into his chair with a sheepish grin. "Sorry, Dave."

Bruce tried to rally. "Right! Any questions?"

Chaz raised a hand lazily.

Bruce squinted at him. "Yes... I want to say... James?"

Chaz blinked. "James? Where the hell did you get James from?"

A few people chuckled as Chaz looked around in confusion.

Clifton stood, pinching the bridge of his nose. "His name is Charles, Bruce. Can we just move this along?"

"Right, right. Charles. What's your question?"

Chaz leaned forward, his expression unusually serious. "What do we do if a pigeon flies into the building?"

Everyone stared in stunned silence. Bruce blinked. "...What?"

"You know, if it flaps in off the street and starts flying around the tables—what's the protocol?"

Bruce fumbled with his clipboard. "You'd, uh... report it to a supervisor."

Justin raised a hand. "Yeah, I'm not handling birds, mate," he said flatly. "I'm an actor, not a zookeeper."

Laughter rippled through the room. Bruce cleared his throat, trying to regain his professional footing. "If you are the supervisor, you'd attempt to safely remove the pigeon using appropriate equipment."

Chaz raised an eyebrow. "What, like a net?"

"If it enters the kitchen, it becomes a health hazard," Bruce replied, recovering. "In that case, you clear the area, call your regional manager, and follow contamination protocols."

Chaz nodded slowly, looking like Bruce had just handed him the secrets of the universe.

Phil leaned over to Ryan. "Appropriate equipment. What's he want us to do, handcuff it?"

Ryan snorted, nearly choking.

Clifton clapped his hands sharply. "No more hypotheticals. Let's move on."

As Bruce turned back to his notes, Ryan nudged Chaz and whispered, "Pigeon."

Chaz shot up instantly. "WHERE?!"

He scanned the ceiling in a genuine panic. The room erupted with laughter—even Bruce let out a genuine chuckle. Clifton just slumped in his chair, rubbing his temples in despair.

"Why can't they be more like the Leamington branch..." he muttered to himself.

ACT TWO

CHAPTER 7

The team shuffled back inside from their break and slumped into their seats, the last remnants of cigarette smoke and vape mist clinging to their clothes. The mood was grim—everyone bracing for whatever fresh hell the afternoon had in store.

Bruce stood at the front, looking far too pleased with himself.

"Now that we've got all the boring stuff out of the way," Bruce said brightly, "it's time to move on to the activities." He beamed as if he genuinely thought this was a treat. "For this first activity, you'll be working individually. No teamwork. This is about instinct—thinking on your feet—proving you're not just passengers, but leaders."

A collective groan rippled through the room. Bruce clapped his hands, practically bouncing now. "You all ready?"

Chaz glanced around, frowning. "Wait—where's Dave?"

Mr. Clifton was noticeably absent. Bruce's grin only widened. "No time for questions! Remember—this one's all about instinct."

[2] - Joker and the Thief — Wolfmother

Suddenly, the fire alarm screamed to life—shrill, jarring, and relentless. The team jolted upright in their chairs.

"FIRST ONE TO THE EVACUATION POINT WINS!" Bruce bellowed, already sprinting out the front door like a game show host on speed.

Chaos erupted.

Half the team froze, their brains scrambling to recall proper procedure—Should I check the loos? Grab the sign-in sheet? The rest didn't bother thinking at all; they just bolted.

Justin surged ahead, elbowing past the others with his eyes locked on the fire exit. He reached it first, but instead of bursting through, he wrestled frantically with the push bar, jamming the door in his panic.

"Move, Justin!" Lydia shouted, pinned against the wall behind him.

Thinking fast, Ryan pivoted. He spotted one of the large front windows, unlatched it, and shoved it wide. He hoisted himself out and turned back to help the others through—Chaz first, then Phil, then Chloe, Melissa, Jonathan, and finally Lydia.

Once free, they dashed across the road to the designated evacuation point: a sad stretch of pavement outside a nail bar. Justin was already there, panting and red-faced, standing beside Bruce and Mr. Clifton, who had magically reappeared as if he'd been waiting there the whole time.

As the others arrived, Bruce lifted a hand theatrically. "And the winner is..." He paused for effect. "Ryan!"

Justin stared, incredulous. "What? I was first!"

Mr. Clifton stepped forward, arms folded across his chest. "You were," he said evenly. "But Ryan thought beyond himself. He helped others. That's what we value here—initiative and leadership. Not just being the fastest rat out of the maze."

A quiet murmur of agreement passed through the team. Chloe gave Ryan a discreet high-five. Even Lydia looked mildly impressed. Jonathan strolled past Justin with a smug, razor-sharp smile and muttered, "And you wonder how I got the Assistant Manager job instead of you?"

Justin said nothing. He just stood there, boiling inside—because for once, there was no comeback. Not even a bad one.

Ryan turned to Mr. Clifton, trying to play it cool despite the adrenaline. "So... what do I win?"

Clifton didn't blink. "You win the honour of paying for the repair of the window stay you just snapped."

Ryan froze. "Oh. Right."

The team burst into laughter as Bruce clapped him on the back. "Congrats, champ!"

Ryan sighed, already picturing the deduction from his next paycheck. Victory had never felt so expensive.

CHAPTER 8

The team trudged back in after the fire drill, only to be met with more training.

Bruce stood proudly behind the bar, next to a high-tech coffee machine that looked like it could launch a satellite. Up at the front, sleek self-service kiosks glowed like they were waiting to judge the staff.

"Alright, folks!" Bruce announced. "Time to learn how to use your shiny new tools. This is the future of hospitality!"

No one cheered.

"Justin, Chloe, Phil, Ryan—you're on coffee training. Get hands-on with our brand-new barista system," Bruce said, patting the chrome beast like it was a prize racehorse.

"Jonathan, you're up front. Melissa says you're barred from bar work, so I'll walk you through the kiosks."

Jonathan raised an eyebrow. "She says that like it's a punishment."

Bruce grinned and ignored the comment. "Let's get going!"

At the bar, the coffee machine loomed. Phil eyed it with immediate suspicion. "That thing looks like it needs a NASA engineer just to turn it on."

Justin tapped the screen experimentally. "What's a 'Froth Profile 3B'?"

Chloe leaned closer. "I think it controls the micro-foam levels?"

Phil snorted. "Great. So it's guessing foam. Like a psychic."

Ryan moved in and studied the interface. "Let's try a basic flat white."

Phil shook his head, retreating a step. "This is going to end in milk everywhere. Mark my words."

Justin tapped through the options. The machine beeped, ground the beans with a threatening buzz, and began its sequence. A stream of espresso poured neatly, followed by a clean, automated shot of steamed milk.

"...Huh," Chloe said. "That actually looks okay?"

Ryan nodded. "Pretty smooth."

Phil crossed his arms. "For now. Just wait until it decides to do something weird mid-order. Machines lull you in—then they betray you."

They tried a cappuccino next. Justin adjusted a few settings while Chloe held her breath. Another decent pour. Ryan picked up the cup, inspecting the foam. "This one looks even better than the manual one from this morning."

Phil groaned. "You're all falling under its spell. That's how Skynet starts."

Chloe took a sip of the cappuccino. "It's... actually decent."

"Exactly!" Phil said. "Decent. Not great. Not human. Just corporate-decaf-decent. This machine's got no soul."

"Neither does Starbucks," Justin countered. "At least this one doesn't try to spell your name with a 'K'."

Up at the front, Jonathan stood beside one of the kiosks, arms folded, his posture somewhere between "security guard" and "haunted mannequin." After a moment, he sighed, straightened up, and turned toward the screen.

He cleared his throat dramatically. "Hello, and welcome! Please tap the giant glowing screen to begin your journey into moderately warm satisfaction."

Bruce, who had wandered up with his clipboard in hand, raised an eyebrow.

Jonathan continued in a sing-song tone, "Select your items, question your life choices, and watch in awe as your order disappears into the mysterious digital void."

Bruce blinked. "Is... that your idea of a helpful greeting?"

"I'm workshopping it," Jonathan replied. "Trying to find the right balance between 'honest' and 'soul-crushing'."

Bruce opened his mouth, then closed it. "Just... maybe dial back the 'void' stuff."

"No promises," Jonathan said, leaning casually against the counter again.

Back at the bar, Ryan and Chloe were experimenting with drink combinations. "Okay," Ryan said. "Oat milk latte. Let's test the non-dairy function."

Phil scoffed. "You're acting like it's alive."

Chloe tapped the screen and adjusted the settings. The machine processed the drink smoothly. Justin handed it to Phil. "Here. Taste test."

Phil took a sip and winced. "That's not a latte. That's a warm lie."

Ryan chuckled. "You're not giving it a chance."

"I don't give chances to machines that could explode from a single button press."

"Then don't press any," Justin muttered.

They made a few more drinks—a mocha, a long black, and an iced coffee. Ryan got faster with the interface. Chloe started talking foam ratios. Justin actually seemed intrigued by the precision of the machine's settings.

Phil stood off to the side, arms crossed, muttering, "First it's coffee. Then it's robot chefs. Next we're out of a job, replaced by a vending machine with charm."

Bruce returned with his ever-present clipboard. "Excellent progress, everyone! You're getting the hang of it. We're nearly ready for the next stage!"

A wave of groans swept the bar. From the front, Jonathan called out without looking, "If he says 'next stage' one more time, I'm staging a walkout."

Ryan leaned on the counter. "He's got that twinkle. The 'we're about to learn something awful' twinkle."

Phil shook his head. "Can the machine do that for us, too?"

Training continued—human versus coffee-bot, with no clear winner yet.

CHAPTER 9

The kitchen at Red's was no longer the charming, chaotic mess it used to be. Two gleaming new machines hummed on opposite counters, blinking with unfamiliar lights; their presence felt sterile and smug.

Chaz eyed them like they were invaders. Lydia stood beside him, flipping through the laminated instruction manual as if it were written in a foreign language. Melissa leaned against the wall, sipping her coffee and watching the two of them with a faint, sympathetic smirk.

"These things give me the creeps," Chaz muttered. "They look like something you'd find on a spaceship, not in a diner."

"They're just tray steamers and time-savers, Chaz," Lydia said uncertainly. She tapped a button, and the machine beeped back at her with a sharp, digital chirp. "I think."

Clifton, clipboard in hand, appeared from the back office like a bureaucratic storm cloud. "They're here to make things easier, Lydia. Less guesswork, more consistency."

Chaz turned, his arms crossed tightly over his Villa shirt. "Yeah, but at what cost? You want consistent? Go eat at a hospital vending machine."

Clifton didn't flinch. "It's about efficiency. We've had complaints about the timing on your melts during peak hours. This solves that."

Chaz stepped forward, his voice rising. "You're solving a non-problem, Dave. Red's used to be about heart. About instinct. You can't train a machine to know when a grilled cheese is just starting to blister perfectly."

"You're romanticising a sandwich," Clifton replied dryly. "This isn't Michelin-star cuisine. It's a diner in Warwickshire. People want fast, hot, and decent."

Chaz's face darkened. "It used to mean more than that."

"Then maybe you're in the wrong place," Clifton said, his voice dropping to a dangerous level. "You either get with the program... or you walk."

The room went deathly quiet. Only the low hum of the new steamer filled the space.

Lydia looked up from the manual, her mouth slightly open. Melissa lowered her coffee cup, her eyes fixed on Chaz, silently pleading with him not to blow it.

Chaz looked like he might snap—his fists were clenched, and his shoulders were bunched with tension. But then, slowly, the fire dimmed. His jaw twitched as he fought back a retort. He looked away, staring at the floor.

"Fine," he muttered. "I'll stay. Doesn't mean I have to like it."

Clifton gave a short, curt nod and turned on his heel, vanishing back through the office door without another word.

The moment the door clicked shut, Melissa moved closer to the prep station. "You alright?" she asked gently.

Chaz shrugged, the tension still visible in the cords of his neck. "Yeah. Just needed a minute to mourn the loss of my soul, that's all."

Lydia gave him a soft, encouraging smile. "For what it's worth, I still think your breakfast sandwich is the best in town. Machine or not."

Chaz cracked a small, weary smile. "Thanks, Lyd. I'll try not to let the robot take all the credit."

Melissa nudged him playfully. "Don't worry. We'll make sure you outcook the machines every time."

He chuckled, though it lacked its usual gravelly energy. "Damn right. But if one of them starts learning my secret omelette technique, I'm yanking the plug and throwing it in the Avon."

CHAPTER 10

The team reassembled once more, now "fully trained" on the new technology. They were back in their original positions as Bruce stood at the front, clutching his well-worn clipboard.

"I've got to say—I was impressed with how quickly Jonathan picked up the new self-serve kiosks," Bruce said, clearly pleased.

"Well done, Jonathan," Melissa added, offering a proud nod to her Assistant Manager.

"However," Bruce continued, his smile faltering slightly, "I think Ryan, Phil, Justin, and Chloe will need more time to get used to the new barista system. It's a bit more temperamental than it looks."

Ryan, Phil, Chloe, and Justin looked equally annoyed but didn't bother to comment.

"How did Charles and Linda get on in the kitchen, David?" Bruce asked, turning to Clifton.

"Lydia," Lydia corrected, let out a long, weary sigh.

Clifton glanced between Chaz and Lydia. "Both of our kitchen staff seem capable of using the equipment, but Charles here became confrontational again."

Chaz took a breath, his chest swelling. "They're ruining the art of cooking, that's why. It's a valid point."

Clifton gave him a hard, cold stare. "Don't answer back, Charles. Not today."

Bruce clapped his hands, desperately trying to keep the energy positive. "Anyway—who's ready for the final part of the day? A team-building activity!"

Absolute silence met his enthusiasm.

"Right! For this last activity, you'll be working in groups of four."

"You know what, Bruce?" Clifton cut in, his voice sharp. "Let me pick the teams. Unlike some, I actually know everyone's names."

Bruce chuckled nervously and stepped aside. "Well, I guess that mixes things up. Take it away, Dave."

Clifton began pacing the floor like a football manager eyeing his starting line-up before a cup final.

"Melissa, you'll be Team Captain for Group A. You're with Chloe, Phillip, and Charles. Jonathan, you'll lead Group B with Ryan, Lydia, and Justin."

He folded his arms, looking immensely satisfied with the friction he had just created. The team groaned internally, but no one dared speak up.

Except for one.

"Can I swap with Chloe?" Justin asked, his voice strained. "Me and Jonny don't exactly see eye to eye. It'll be more productive."

Clifton shot back immediately, not even looking at him. "No trading. Either join his team or leave the session and forfeit your pay for the day."

Justin gritted his teeth, the muscles in his jaw bulging. "Fine."

Ryan gave him a hopeful, supportive glance. "I'm sure you'll be happy working with me anyway, Justin. We'll smash it."

Justin exhaled a long, shaky breath. "We'll see, Ryan. We'll see."

CHAPTER 11

Inside Red's, the teams were split between two booths.

Jonathan, Ryan, Justin, and Lydia were huddled together in the first booth. Next to them, Melissa, Phil, Chloe, and Chaz claimed the other. Bruce stood between them, clipboard in hand, with Mr. Clifton looming nearby like a bored security guard.

"Right!" Bruce said brightly. "Next activity. You're working together in your teams to come up with strategies to make Red's as profitable as possible." He handed each team a sheet of paper and a pen. "Talk. Communicate. Plan. I'll be back in twenty minutes to see what you've got."

Jonathan leaned in straight away. "Okay," he said. "What's Red's biggest moneymaker right now?"

Ryan grinned. "Breakfast deals. People love a Full English around here."

Jonathan nodded, scribbling notes. "Cool. Maybe we run a weekday breakfast promo—pull people in during the slower mornings?"

Ryan added, "Yeah—and upsell coffee refills. Easy profit."

Lydia scribbled along quietly, focused on the task. Meanwhile, Justin lounged back against the booth wall, his arms crossed, staring moodily out the window toward the street.

Jonathan glanced over. "Anything you want to add, Justin?"

Justin shrugged. "Seems like you two have it all figured out," he muttered.

Ryan frowned. "We're just bouncing ideas, mate. Jump in."

Justin shook his head. "Not much point, is there? You two are like Paul Newman and Robert Redford now."

Jonathan's expression hardened. "What is your problem today?"

Justin didn't answer. His jaw tightened, his eyes flickering briefly to Lydia—who didn't even look up from her notes. The booth fell into an awkward, heavy silence. Jonathan sighed and turned back to Ryan, pressing on without him.

At the next booth, Melissa's team moved like a well-oiled machine. Melissa leaned forward, energized. "Alright—top sellers?"

Chloe grinned. "Milkshakes. Especially when the schools let out."

Phil chimed in, "Cake slices. The Victoria sponge goes mad on weekends."

Chaz added, "We should do meal deals. Or loyalty cards—keep 'em coming back."

Melissa smiled. "Perfect. Chloe, write it down. We'll propose meal bundles, loyalty discounts, and upselling desserts."

No egos. No conflict. Just real teamwork.

Twenty minutes later, Bruce called time. Both teams handed in their papers, and Bruce and Clifton reviewed them at the front while the staff waited, the tension thick in the air. Finally, Bruce looked up with a big grin.

"Congratulations to Group A!" he announced. "Excellent ideas, clear teamwork—exactly what we're looking for!"

Melissa, Chloe, Phil, and Chaz exchanged triumphant smiles. Clifton handed each of them a bottle of wine and snapped a photo for Red's website. Melissa raised her bottle. "Teamwork makes the dream work!" The others laughed and posed around her.

Meanwhile, across the room, Justin sat stiffly, his jaw set tight.

"I guess I can't win all the time," Ryan said, trying to soften the blow.

"At least you won the fire drill. I haven't won anything all day," Justin replied.

Lydia finally looked up. "And do you ever question why?"

Justin frowned, throwing his hands up. "I don't know, Lydia. Why don't you tell me?"

Ryan tried to intervene. "Guys, let's not get too tense here—"

But Lydia cut him off. "No, I think it's best Justin hears this. Right now." She turned back to Justin, her voice steady and clear. "Seriously, Justin? First, you showed you only cared about yourself during the fire drill. And now, you made zero effort to help us—and that's why we lost."

The team watched, stunned into silence. Justin had no answer.

Lydia kept going. "You need to work as a team, Justin. Being part of a team means listening, adapting, and owning your mistakes. Until you learn that, you're going to keep sabotaging yourself."

Justin stood frozen, the weight of her words sinking in. Jonathan let out a low, mocking chuckle. "At least I'm not the only one who thinks that."

Justin turned sharply. His voice came out like a knife: "Fuck you, Jonny."

"Language, please, Justin!" Clifton snapped, just as Justin stormed off into the back corridor toward the toilets.

After a moment, Ryan glanced toward the hallway, then back at the others. "I'll go check on him."

Chaz leaned over. "You need me to back you up, mate?"

Ryan shook his head. "Nah. I just want to talk to him. One-on-one. See if he's alright."

Chaz nodded in understanding. He headed to the front with Phil and Lydia following behind. Ryan lingered a moment, exhaling a long breath, then headed toward the back after Justin.

CHAPTER 12

Justin leaned against the metal fence at the back of Red's, pulling a battered pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. He tapped one out, slid it between his lips, and sparked it up with a worn, silver lighter. He exhaled slowly, his mind a thousand miles away.

The door creaked open behind him. Ryan stepped outside, vape already in hand. He clocked Justin immediately and wandered over, taking a slow puff before speaking.

"You don't seem yourself today, mate," Ryan said, his voice easy, no pressure. "Everything alright?"

Justin breathed out another cloud of smoke, watching it drift lazily into the grey afternoon sky. "Sorry, dude," he said eventually, his voice low and tired. "It's just... my dad's coming over. First time he's ever visited me here. I used to go see him every year in L.A. until... well, until things got complicated."

Ryan nodded, letting the silence stretch comfortably. Justin took another drag, gathering his thoughts. "Let's just say... we haven't exactly been close the past few years."

Ryan leaned back against the fence beside him, folding his arms. "Wanna tell me about it?"

Justin hesitated, the cigarette burning low between his fingers. "He never wanted me to act," he said finally. "He wanted me to be a basketball player. Like it was his second chance at a career or something."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "Do you even like basketball?"

Justin shook his head. "No. I always preferred baseball, honestly. But I don't have the knack for sports. Never did. But acting? That's where I fit. Not that he ever noticed."

Ryan puffed on his vape thoughtfully. "Yeah, I get that. My parents wanted me to get a proper office job. I tried that for a bit—sitting at a desk all day, staring at spreadsheets. It drained the life out of me. I needed something different. This job? It's not perfect, but it feels real, y'know?"

Justin gave a half-smile. "At least you gave it a shot. I never even tried the basketball thing."

Ryan chuckled. "Probably saved yourself some time."

Justin chuckled back, taking a final drag.

"When are you meant to be meeting him?" Ryan added.

"After this," Justin said. "He should be getting into town any minute now. If he manages to find the right train station."

Ryan paused, then smiled slightly. "I've got a plan, mate."

Justin glanced sideways. "What's that?"

Ryan grinned. "Me, Chaz, Chloe, Lydia, and Phil—we're all planning to hit the Sports Bar after the training session. Come with us. Bring your dad along if you want. We'll have your back."

Justin flicked some ash onto the ground, looking unsure. "I think I've already upset Lydia," he muttered. "I'm honestly not trying to make enemies with the newbies."

Ryan laughed and shook his head. "Just apologise to her, mate. She doesn't hold grudges—she just tells it how it is. She'll get over it."

Justin managed a small, genuine smile. "Thanks, man. For being there. Honestly, after today... I thought Jonny was going to turn you against me."

Ryan laughed. "Just because I get on with Jonathan doesn't mean I've stopped liking you, mate. I think you're both great people."

Justin smirked. "But I'm the better one, right?"

Ryan grinned, pushing off the fence. "For now, you are."

They both laughed, the tension finally easing between them. Justin stubbed out his cigarette and clapped Ryan lightly on the back.

"Come on," Ryan said. "Let's finish this day."

Together, they headed back inside Red's—not everything was fixed, but the bond between them was quietly repaired.

CHAPTER 13

Ryan and Justin walked back into Red's, returning to the same seats they'd started in. A strange calm settled over the room—a kind of exhausted relief, like the final bell of a long school day.

At the front, Bruce beamed proudly. "So, this concludes today's training session," he announced. "I want to say it's been a privilege working with you all—especially you, Brian, you've been our man of the day."

He looked straight at Ryan. Ryan smiled politely. "It's Ryan, Bruce. But thank you."

Bruce clapped his hands together. "Enjoy the rest of your day! I'll see you all again next year." He grabbed his battered suitcase, gave an enthusiastic wave, and disappeared out the door.

Mr. Clifton stepped forward, looking much less enthusiastic. "Thank you all for attending," he said, his voice clipped. "For completing today's session, you'll receive your average weekly wage as compensation for the refurbishment closure. You're free to go."

Chairs scraped against the floor as the team stood up, stretching and collecting their things. Jonathan approached Ryan with an outstretched hand.

"Hey, Ryan," he said. "Thanks for today. You're the first person here I've really connected with. I'm looking forward to working with you more."

Ryan shook his hand warmly. "You know, after all the drama with you and Justin, I wasn't sure how we'd get on. But honestly? You're not the stiff, boring assistant manager I thought you might be." He smirked. "I'm hoping to learn a lot from you."

Jonathan chuckled. "At least now there's another new guy around to relate to. And since you know the local branch better than I do—I think we'll be good for each other."

"Definitely," Ryan said. "Hey—why don't you come out for a drink with us?"

Jonathan sighed, looking genuinely apologetic. "Maybe another time, mate. Florence and I have dinner plans with her parents tonight."

"No worries," Ryan said. "Catch you later." Jonathan gave a small wave and headed out.

Across the room, Justin approached Lydia, his hands stuffed awkwardly into his hoodie pockets. "Hey, Lydia," he said. "I just wanted to apologise for earlier. I hope we can still get along—despite... well, everything."

Lydia turned, her arms crossed, but her expression was softer now. "Thanks for apologising, Justin," she said. "It's all chill."

Justin let out a quiet breath of relief. "I'm just glad the training sessions are over. Now I just hope things go alright with my dad."

Lydia nodded. "Don't worry about it. We're here for you."

Suddenly, Chloe's phone buzzed loudly. She glanced at the screen—and her face dropped. "FUCK'S sake!" she blurted, catching everyone's attention.

"What's up?" Ryan asked.

Chloe shoved her phone back in her pocket and grabbed her bag. "Mum just texted. I've gotta go—it's urgent. I'll see you guys next week!" Without waiting for a reply, she dashed out the door.

Nearby, Mr. Clifton approached Melissa, who was quietly packing up. "Aren't you joining them for a drink, Melissa?" he asked.

Melissa smiled politely. "Not tonight. I'm visiting my mum—I try to catch up with her once a week, and since she lives on West Green Drive, it's on the way home. What about you, David?"

"It's Tiffany's 15th today," Clifton said. "Me and Tanya are taking her and her friends out for pizza tonight. Just annoying I've gotta pay for other people's kids."

Melissa chuckled. "They grow up so fast. I'm dreading the day my two turn into teenagers."

"I'm more dreading the day she finds a boyfriend," Clifton replied. "Then it's only a matter of time before I'm being called 'Grandpa'."

Melissa laughed. "I guess it's all part of the circle of life."

Clifton nodded. "Ah, fair enough. Enjoy your evening."

Melissa gave a small wave and slipped out, calm and composed as ever. One by one, the team drifted out into the twilight—heading toward the next chapter of their night, their own little worlds waiting just outside Red's.

ACT THREE

CHAPTER 14

[3] A Message to You, Rudy by The Specials

Justin sat in the beer garden at the Stratford Sports and Social Club with a cigarette in one hand and a pint in the other. He took a long swig before setting the glass down and flicking ash into the tray beside him. Across the table, Ryan, Lydia, and Phil were all glued to their phones in silence.

Chaz walked over, clocked the group, and raised an eyebrow. "We're all sociable creatures tonight, aren't we?" he said sarcastically as he flopped into his seat.

The others looked up, grinning sheepishly. Chaz pulled out his rolling tobacco and started building a cigarette with practiced fingers. Once rolled, he popped it in his mouth, then paused. "Justin, got a light?"

"Yeah, sure," Justin said, handing over his lighter. As Chaz sparked up, Justin checked his phone again and sighed. "I told him where we are... why hasn't he replied yet?"

"Give him a chance, mate," Ryan said. "You only texted him ten minutes ago."

"Yeah," Phil added. "And remember, he's new to the country."

Justin shrugged. "He took us on holiday here when I was a kid... I thought he'd remember more."

Suddenly, he spotted a man walking into the garden—late fifties, a little weathered, but sharp in a casual blazer and jeans.

"There you are, son," the man called. "Tried calling, but the signal here is bloody awful."

Justin muttered under his breath, "Oh, thank fuck," and stood up with a forced-but-warm smile. "Dad! How's the UK adventure going?"

Larry Green grunted as he reached the table. "Eventful. I feel like I've seen more fields and roundabouts than landmarks."

Justin chuckled. "Well, come sit—meet my friends. Everyone, this is my dad, Larry Green. Dad—Ryan, Chaz, Lydia, and Phil. I work with these guys."

Larry raised a hand in greeting. "Pleasure to meet you all," he said, settling into the seat next to Justin. He placed his pint down and glanced around the table. "So, how long have you been working with Justin?"

"Three years," said Ryan.

"Same," said Phil.

"Me too," Chaz added.

"Two weeks," Lydia piped up last.

Justin added, "Lydia's just joined in the kitchen with Chaz. Ryan and Phil work up front with me."

"Do you all live in the city?" Larry asked.

"It's a town, actually," Phil corrected mildly.

"I'm originally from Birmingham, so I'm a city boy at heart," Chaz replied.

"No, you're not," Ryan said, teasing him. "You're from Shirley. That's the suburbs, mate." Chaz rolled his eyes as the others laughed.

"I'm a London girl, originally," Lydia added.

Larry nodded slowly. "And you all hang out outside of work?"

Justin shrugged. "Not all the time. We just finished a training day, so we figured we'd unwind."

Phil added, "Yeah, some of us actually have other friends."

Justin snorted. "Oh yeah? Since when, Phil?"

Phil rolled his eyes and necked the rest of his carling. "I'm going to get another drink."

Phil gets up from the table and walks off into the building

Larry raised his eyebrows, looking at the easy banter. "Sounds like you get along pretty well with your workmates." Justin chuckled without commenting back.

Chapter 15

[4] Digital Love by Daft Punk

Inside the Sports Bar, Phil made his way through the Saturday-night crowd towards the bar. As he waited for a gap, he noticed a woman standing a few feet away.

Freshly painted red nails tapped lightly against the wooden counter while she waited for her drink. Her brunette hair was tied back in a ponytail, and she wore a faded Hollow's Reach T-shirt that immediately caught Phil's attention.

"Sauvignon Blanc, lemonade, loads of ice, please, John."

"No problem, Nat," John replied from behind the bar.

The woman turned and froze.

"Phil? Phil Cooper?"

Phil blinked.

"Natalie Jones?"

A huge smile spread across her face before she pulled him into a hug.

"Oh my God, it's been years. How are you?"

Phil laughed as they stepped apart.

"Bit up and down, to be honest. Still working at Red's. Fell out with my parents a while back, so we're not exactly doing Christmas dinner together these days. My brother's got a new girlfriend, so I barely see him either."

Natalie winced sympathetically.

"Yeah... that sounds rough."

"How about you?" Phil asked. "How's Theo?"

Her expression softened instantly.

"Eleven now. Starts secondary school in September."

Phil shook his head in disbelief.

"Bloody hell. I remember when he was in a pushchair."

"Tell me about it."

She took a sip of her drink.

"He got diagnosed with autism last year."

Phil nodded gently.

"How's he handling it?"

"Better than I am some days," Natalie admitted with a small laugh. "He's brilliant. Just sees the world differently."

"You always were a good mum."

Natalie looked down into her glass.

"I try."

A brief silence settled between them.

"Doing it on your own can't be easy," Phil said.

Natalie's smile faded slightly.

"I didn't really have a choice. His dad ran when I got pregnant."

Phil frowned.

"Oh yeah. I remember him. What a cunt."

"Oi," John called as he returned with Natalie's drink. "Say that again and you're barred."

Phil raised his hands innocently.

"Sorry, but it's true. What kind of bloke walks away after that?"

"Men like Ethan Callaghan," Natalie said, her voice suddenly sharper.

The name seemed to drain the humour from the conversation. Even John looked uncomfortable.

After a moment, he cleared his throat.

"Right then. I'll allow it once. What can I get you, mate?"

"Another Carling, please."

"Put it on my tab," Natalie said.

"Natalie, you don't have to."

"Don't worry about it. It's great seeing you again."

Phil smiled.

"You too. If you ever need anything, don't be a stranger."

Natalie hesitated.

"Actually... if you hear of any jobs going, let me know. Me and Theo could do with something a bit more stable. Bills, school runs... life."

Phil nodded.

"I'll ask at Red's on Monday. We're always short-staffed."

Her face brightened immediately.

"Really?"

"Yeah. No promises, but I'll ask."

"Cheers, Phil."

A brief pause followed before she smiled.

"Imagine that. Maybe you'll get sick of seeing me again."

Phil smirked.

"I don't think I'd ever get sick of seeing you."

Natalie rolled her eyes, though she couldn't quite hide her smile.

"Still got the charm, then."

Before Phil could reply, a man in his late fifties approached the bar.

"Natalie, I'm heading home. You coming with me?"

"I literally just ordered another drink, Dad," Natalie laughed. "Look who I bumped into."

She pointed towards Phil.

The man looked over and immediately recognised him.

"Phil Cooper. Haven't seen you in years."

"Alright, Pete," Phil replied, shaking his hand.

"Still causing trouble?"

"Only professionally."

Pete chuckled.

"Good to hear."

Natalie shook her head.

"Ignore him."

Pete glanced between them.

"You alright getting home later?"

"I'll be fine."

"Actually," Phil said, "I'm outside with a few workmates. You're welcome to join us if you want."

Natalie looked pleasantly surprised.

"Really?"

"Course."

She smiled.

"Yeah. I'd like that."

Pete nodded approvingly.

"Sounds good to me."

He pointed a finger at Phil.

"Just make sure she gets home in one piece. Theo will be waiting for her in the morning."

Phil nodded.

"You've got my word."

"Good lad."

Pete kissed Natalie on the top of her head.

"Don't stay out too late."

"No promises," Natalie replied.

Pete laughed and headed for the exit.

As he disappeared through the front door, Phil gestured towards the beer garden.

"After you."

Natalie picked up her drink.

"Lead the way."

Together, they headed outside.

For the first time in years, neither of them felt quite like strangers anymore.

Chapter 16

[5] Semi-Charmed Life by Third Eye Blind

Phil walked back outside into the smoking area, glass of Carling in hand, and rejoined the others at the table—Natalie following just behind him.

Ryan, Chaz, and Lydia were still firing questions at Larry, while Justin sat slightly apart, smoking another cigarette in silence.

Justin glanced up as Phil approached.

"Who's the new friend, Phil?"

Phil pulled up an extra chair from a nearby table and set it down.

"Everyone, this is Natalie," he said. "Old school friend. Nat, this is Ryan, Chaz, Lydia, Justin, and Justin's dad, Larry."

"Hi everyone," Natalie said, smiling as she sat down.

"Alright, Natalie," Chaz grinned, giving a small wave.

Justin looked between Phil and Natalie, smirking slightly.

"So this is one of your 'other friends', yeah? Nice to meet you, Natalie."

Natalie smiled back. Phil shot Justin a warning look, but she didn't seem bothered.

Across the table, Ryan broke the brief lull.

"So, Larry... what's it like in Los Angeles?"

Larry gave a polite nod.

"Actually, Ryan, I moved to Canada after I retired last year. Spent over thirty years working as a scout for the Los Angeles Lakers."

That got everyone's attention.

"I've always wanted to go to Canada," Ryan said.

"I heard weed's legal there," Lydia added, raising an eyebrow.

"I just want to try poutine," Chaz said with a grin. "That chips-and-gravy thing."

Larry chuckled.

"I don't personally approve of the legal stuff, but each to their own. And poutine? Chaz, it's brilliant."

Phil leaned in slightly.

"Is it true most films get made there?"

Larry nodded.

"That's right. I live just a few miles from the mansion they used in the X-Men films."

Phil's eyes widened.

"No way."

"Oh, and the house I bought?" Larry added with a grin. "Used to belong to Avril Lavigne and Chad Kroeger. Got it for a steal."

A few laughs went around the table.

Natalie, who had been listening quietly, tilted her head.

"Hollow's Reach is filmed in Canada too. I'm a massive fan. Most of it's shot in Vancouver. I've watched loads of behind-the-scenes stuff online."

Larry nodded thoughtfully.

"You're right. They shot most of it in British Columbia. Beautiful place."

He took a sip of his drink, then added casually:

"Funny enough, I know one of the VFX guys who works on it."

That got a reaction.

Natalie straightened slightly.

"No way. Which one?"

Larry thought for a moment—

before Justin abruptly cut in.

"So anyway, Dad... how come it took you eleven years to visit your son in England?"

The humour dropped instantly.

Larry exhaled slowly, his expression shifting. He looked down at his hands, then back up at Justin.

"There's something I've been meaning to tell you," he said quietly. "I just didn't want to drop it on you in front of everyone earlier."

Justin's brow tightened.

"What is it?"

A pause.

"I didn't move to Canada just for a fresh start," Larry said. "I moved because I was sick. Still am. I've been diagnosed with a terminal illness."

Justin went still.

"What... what kind?"

"Pancreatic cancer," Larry said plainly. "They caught it late. I didn't want to burden you with it while you were finding your feet here. But the care in Canada's been good—better than I expected. More good days than bad, anyway."

He let out a breath.

"I know we've had our differences. But I didn't want you hearing it from anyone else. I didn't come back for sympathy—I just wanted time with you again. That's all."

Justin sat frozen, eyes flicking between his father and the table.

"I had no idea," he said quietly. "You should've told me."

"I didn't want that to be the first thing you saw when you looked at me," Larry replied. "I wanted you to see your dad. Not... a diagnosis."

Justin studied him in silence.

Larry gave a faint, tired smile.

"On a better note—I bought a basketball team in Vancouver. Minor league. Nothing major. But I'm trying to build it up, maybe sell it on. And I want you to come back with me. Help me run it."

Justin blinked.

"Dad... I've got a life here. Friends. Work. Auditions are coming up."

Larry shrugged.

"Just think about it. It's your own team. Legacy stuff. You build it, flip it, walk away with something real."

Justin glanced around the table.

"You want me to ditch all this and move to Canada?"

Phil let out a short laugh.

"Don't ask Jonathan. He'd have booked the flight already."

A few quiet laughs broke the tension. Justin didn't respond.

He looked down at his empty glass.

"I'm gonna get another drink. Ryan, you coming?"

"Yeah," Ryan said, standing with him.

The two of them headed back inside.

Natalie pulled out her phone.

"I'll leave you guys to it while I check in on my mum and Theo."

"That's fine." Phil nodded as Natalie turned to look at her phone and started texting away.

As they disappeared through the pub doors, Ryan glanced around casually.

“Wonder how Chloe’s getting on with her ‘urgent family meeting’?”

CHAPTER 17

Chloe pulled up to her family’s house in Kenilworth, the familiar driveway bathed in the orange glow of the evening light. She cut the engine of her motorbike, pulled off her helmet, and ran a hand through her windswept hair before walking up to the front door.

She let herself in. “Hello?” she called, her voice echoing through the hallway.

“We’re in here, Chloe,” her mum’s voice drifted from the kitchen.

She walked in to find the Parker family already staged around the dinner table. Her dad, Nick, sat at the head; her mum, Karen, at the opposite end. Her brothers, Danny and Callum, were squeezed together on the left side. Chloe took the empty seat opposite them.

Dinner was served—chilli con carne with rice, tortillas, and nachos. Except for Chloe. Her vegetarian version sat in front of her: a heap of lentils and sweetcorn that looked dull and uninviting compared to the beef. She poked at it with her fork.

“So... why exactly was it 'urgent' for me to come home?” she asked, glancing between her parents.

“We just wanted to check in,” Karen replied, her tone thinly veiled in casualness. “It feels like we barely see you anymore.”

Chloe scoffed. “That’s the emergency? Seriously? I bet everyone else is still down the pub having a great time.”

“Chloe,” Nick said, trying to maintain the peace. “We just want to know if you’re okay. Work, uni... relationships.” He gave her a pointed look. “Got a boyfriend?”

“No.” Chloe’s voice was clipped. “With work and uni, I barely have time to breathe, let alone date.”

Karen added with a smirk, “Besides, Chloe wouldn’t want one. Then she’d have to agree with someone for once.”

“Karen, not now,” Nick said sharply, before turning back to Chloe. “How’s uni going? You’re nearly finished, right?”

Chloe stabbed at her rice. The lentils were failing miserably at pretending to be meat. “Honestly? I don’t know. It’s just not working. Business isn’t for me.”

Karen’s fork hovered in mid-air like a loaded weapon. “Well, if you’d listened to us and done IT like we suggested, maybe you wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Nick groaned, setting his phone down slowly on the table. “Karen. Please.”

Chloe felt the heat rise in her chest. Her jaw clenched. “Oh, right—because I messed everything up by not doing exactly what you told me to do.”

Karen's voice sharpened. "I'm just saying, Chloe. If you'd made a smarter choice—"

"Mum, please." Chloe's voice cracked, trembling with restrained emotion. "I never wanted this. I wanted to do something else. Anything else."

Nick tried to soften the blow. "Look, I get it. Art school didn't turn out the way you wanted. But you've got the talent. You could open a salon—you need a business degree for that."

Chloe let out a dry, bitter laugh. "Dad, I'm not doing that. After uni, I'm done with business. I'm not even sure I care about makeup anymore. Maybe I'll just quit and work at Red's full-time."

Nick's face darkened. "Chloe, we didn't raise you to be a quitter. You've only got a few months left. Finish it—then do whatever you want."

"You should be grateful," Karen jumped in, her tone cold. "A lot of people would kill for this opportunity."

Chloe pushed her plate away, the food untouched. "Grateful? For wasting three years of my life on a degree I never wanted?"

Karen stood up. "You don't get to speak to us like that."

"And you don't get to decide what my life is!" Chloe snapped, her voice finally breaking.

She shoved her chair back with a screech that pierced the quiet kitchen. Mike opened his mouth to speak, but she was already gone, storming upstairs with footsteps that thudded like a drumbeat against the floorboards.

SLAM. Her bedroom door rattled in its frame, leaving the rest of the Parkers in a heavy, silent kitchen.

CHAPTER 18

[6] Mr Brightside by The Killers

Justin and Ryan stood side by side at the bar, waiting to be served. The low hum of sports bar chatter and the driving beat of the music buzzed around them, but Justin's frustration cut through the noise.

"There is no way I'm moving to Canada," he muttered, his eyes fixed on the rows of spirit bottles behind the bar. "I moved here to get away from him in the first place."

Ryan leaned on the bar, glancing over. "Then tell him, mate. Better to be honest than miserable, right?"

Justin scoffed, a bitter edge to his voice. "You don't get it, Ry. My dad's never cared about my happiness. Even when he was with my mum, he didn't give a shit. It was always about him. His career. His 'legacy.'"

Before Ryan could reply, John appeared, wiping the counter with a cloth. "What'll it be, guys?"

"I've got these," Ryan said, turning to him. "Two pints of Carling, please."

As John pulled the taps, Justin stared ahead, his jaw tight. "He never moans about Cody," he said, the comparison clearly a long-standing wound. "Cody's the golden boy—married, stable job, living the American dream in Texas. But his older son? Nah—he's the mess. The one who works in a coffee shop in England and still 'chases' acting gigs like a dreamer."

Ryan let out a soft breath, his tone grounding and empathetic. "Look, I know it's not the same. My parents are still together, and I don't have any siblings... but my dad wanted me to take over his electrician business for when he retires. I said no. He didn't love it—not at first—but he respected it. He supports me now. Sometimes... you've just gotta say it straight, man."

John returned with the two condensation-filmed pints. Ryan tapped his phone on the card reader and offered a quick nod of thanks.

Justin hesitated, his confidence flickering like a bad bulb. "What if he disowns me for this? Especially now... with the diagnosis."

Ryan shrugged, looking Justin square in the eye. "Then that's his loss, not yours. You've gotta live your life, Justin. Not a curated version of his."

Justin took a long moment, the lyrics of the song swelling around them. He looked over at Ryan, a new resolve settling in his features. "You know what? You're right. I'm going to go out there and tell him. Properly. I don't like basketball. I don't want to work for him. And I definitely don't want to move to Canada."

Ryan grinned, clapping him on the shoulder. "That's the spirit. Go out there and give it your best performance—show the old man exactly who you are."

Justin nodded slowly, his mind finally made up. "Thanks for the drink, Ry. And for today. You've been a star."

He raised his pint, took a deep, bracing gulp, and headed back toward the beer garden—ready to face the man he'd spent half a lifetime running from.

CHAPTER 19

[7] Break Free by Ariana Grande and Zedd

Chloe sat hunched at her desk, the glow of her laptop screen washing her face in pale blue light. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. She typed a sentence. Paused. Deleted it.

Business Management.

The words blinked back at her like a dare while pop music played quietly from her speakers—a sugary distraction trying to drown out the hum of frustration building in her chest. She let out a long, tired sigh and pushed back in her chair, the creak of the wood echoing in the stillness of her room. Her eyes drifted across the desk, landing on a sketchbook. Its colorful, worn cover stared back at her like a forgotten friend—a relic from the version of herself she'd slowly packed away.

She picked up her phone, her thumb hovering over Ryan's name in her contacts.

Should I ask him for help? she wondered.

Before she could decide, a sharp knock at her door broke the silence.

"What?!" she called out, quickly pausing her music.

The door opened, and Nick, her dad, stepped in. "Hey," he said gently. "I just wanted to apologise for earlier—at the dinner table. It wasn't my idea to stop you from seeing your friends. Your mum's just... worried. That's all."

Chloe leaned back, rubbing her temple. "It just feels like she's always against me," she said. "Every decision I make—even when I try to do the 'right' thing—she finds something to criticise."

Nick offered a small, weary smile. "That's your mum for you. She was like that even before we had you. She worries in her own... intense way. But she loves you, Chloe. So do I. Never doubt that."

Chloe looked up at him, her eyes softening. "Thanks, Dad."

"You're more than welcome, kiddo," he said, turning to leave. But before he could shut the door, she stopped him.

"Wait... there's this guy at work. Ryan. He's into business stuff. Do you think I should ask him for help with my coursework?"

Nick chuckled. "Maybe you should. Who knows—you and this Ryan lad might end up in business together one day."

Chloe smiled—the first genuine one she'd felt in a while. Nick gave her a wink and closed the door behind him.

Left alone again, Chloe stared at her phone for a beat longer, then finally tapped out a message to Ryan, asking if he'd be up for helping her with her uni work. She hit send.

And for the first time that evening, the blinking cursor on her laptop didn't feel quite so intimidating.

CHAPTER 20

[8] Happy Man by Jungle

Justin and Ryan returned from the bar, fresh pints in hand.

Back at the table, Chaz and Lydia were chatting with Natalie, while Phil listened as Larry continued talking about sports marketing like it was still a pitch meeting rather than a personal conversation.

Justin slid back into his seat and set his pint down with a definitive thud.

Larry turned toward him immediately, eyes hopeful.

"So, Justin... what do you think? Will you come to Canada? Help me run the team?"

Justin exhaled slowly. He looked at Ryan first, then his father.

Larry leaned forward slightly.

"I mean it. We build it properly—together."

Before Justin could answer, Chaz let out a short laugh.

"Mate, he's not a franchise you can sign and trade."

Larry blinked, caught off guard. "I'm talking about his future—"

"And he's talking about his life," Chaz replied, sharper now.

Lydia nodded. "Yeah. It's not a job application, is it?"

Phil stayed quiet for a beat, then added calmly:

"You're still talking like he's twenty years behind where he actually is."

Larry frowned. "I'm talking like his father."

Ryan shook his head slightly.

"No," he said. "You're talking like you're still trying to steer him."

That landed heavier.

Justin looked down at his pint, jaw tight, the tension building—but not exploding yet.

Larry pressed on anyway.

"Basketball trials with the Lakers. A future in Canada. A legacy—"

Natalie spoke softly, but clearly.

"He doesn't want your legacy," she said. "He wants his own life."

Larry looked at her. "With respect, this is a family conversation—"

"It is," Phil cut in immediately. "That's exactly why we're all speaking."

A beat.

Ryan leaned forward slightly.

"He's not doing this to hurt you," Ryan said. "He's doing it because he's been trying to breathe on his own for years."

Chaz nodded. "And honestly, mate, he looks a lot better when he's not trying to impress you."

That got a short, strained laugh from Lydia—but no one fully relaxed.

Larry looked around the table now, realising the shape of it had shifted. He wasn't just talking to Justin anymore.

Justin finally spoke—but his voice was quieter than before.

"You don't get it," he said.

Larry's eyes snapped back to him. "Then explain it."

Justin swallowed, then leaned forward slightly.

"You keep offering me versions of my life that don't belong to me."

A pause.

"I work in a coffee shop. I'm single. I live in a shared house. And yeah—it's not what you imagined."

His voice tightened slightly.

"But I've got auditions. I've got people I actually care about. I've got something that feels like mine."

Phil nodded once, like that confirmed something.

Natalie watched Justin carefully now—not interrupting, just anchoring.

Larry shook his head. "I gave you opportunities most people would—"

Chaz interrupted again, less joking now.

"You gave him outcomes you wanted."

That silenced the table.

Justin finally looked up properly.

"I'm not saying you didn't try," he said. "I'm saying it didn't fit me."

A long beat.

Larry exhaled.

"So that's it? You throw it all away?"

This time Ryan spoke immediately.

"He's not throwing it away," Ryan said. "He's putting it down."

That reframing shifted the air slightly.

Justin's hands loosened on his glass.

Natalie stepped in quietly again, but more pointed this time—not at Larry, but at Justin.

"You're not deciding whether to accept him," she said gently. "You're deciding whether to keep arguing with him."

Justin blinked at that.

Something in him settled.

Not anger. Not resistance.

Clarity.

He looked at Larry again.

"I'm not coming to Canada," he said.

Larry stiffened.

But Justin didn't stop.

"And it's not because I'm trying to win anything."

A pause.

"It's because I'm done letting my life be a response to yours."

Silence.

That landed properly.

Larry opened his mouth—closed it again.

For once, there wasn't a counterargument ready.

Justin leaned back slightly.

"I didn't cut you out because I hate you," he added more quietly. "I did it because I needed to figure out who I was without you in the room every time I made a decision."

A beat.

Larry looked down at his hands.

Something in him shifted—but didn't resolve.

Finally, he stood.

"If that's how you feel," he said quietly, "I'll leave you and your friends in peace."

He looked at Justin one last time.

"Take care, son."

Justin nodded.

"You too."

Larry turned and walked away.

The pub door shut behind him.

Silence lingered.

No one rushed to fill it.

Natalie broke it first, but softly now.

“You didn’t just say no,” she said. “You all backed him into being honest.”

Chaz gave a small shrug. “Yeah, well. Took him long enough.”

That got a few tired laughs around the table—enough to release the tension slightly.

Justin exhaled and leaned back into his chair.

For a moment, he didn’t speak.

Then:

“Didn’t think I’d need a committee to dump my dad’s life plan,” he muttered.

Ryan smirked. “We’re a support group, mate.”

Phil raised his glass slightly.

“Badly organised one.”

Lydia nodded. “Very badly.”

Natalie smiled faintly.

“But effective.”

Justin looked around the table properly now—really looked.

And something in his expression softened.

Not triumph.

Not relief.

Something closer to recognition.

He wasn’t standing alone in it.

Ryan checked his phone.

“On a brighter note—Chloe just messaged me.”

Justin let out a dry laugh.

“Shame she missed all the family drama.”

Phil lifted his glass higher.

“Here’s to surviving training day and Justin’s daddy issues.”

[7] World’s Smallest Violin — AJR

They clinked pints.

And for the first time that night, Justin smiled—not because he'd won anything.

But because nobody had let him disappear into himself.

THE END

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