

Order Up!

Season 1 | Episode 6: This is the Day

Written by Robbie Fleming

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Starring

- 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

- Alexander Arnold - Ewan Hardy (Future Manager of Alcester's Reds)
- Gemma Chan - Faye Foster (Ryan's mum)
- Nick Helm - George Foster (Ryan's dad)
- Paterson Joseph - David Clifton (Reds' Warwickshire Regional Manager)
- Matthew Lewis - Patrick (Assistant Manager of the Green Knight)
- Daniel Mays - Andrew Bennett (Melissa's husband)
- Will Mellor - Liam Hill (The manager of the Green Knight)
- Josh O'Connor - Mark (Customer at Red's)
- David Schnall - Gary (Customer at Red's)
- Posy Sterling - Natalie Jones (Phil's friend)
- Bonnie Wright - Amanda (Customer at Red's)
- and Michael Socha - Jake Browning (Arriving Manager of Reds' Stratford)
- 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. You Only Live Once by The Strokes (Ryan listens to it whilst walking to work)
2. Copy of A by Nine Inch Nails (Plays on Chaz's speaker in the kitchen)
3. Watermelon Sugar by Harry Styles (Chloe listens to it whilst riding into town)
4. Things in Life by Dennis Brown (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
5. Somewhere I Belong by Linkin Park (Chaz plays through his speaker in the kitchen)
6. Busy Earnin' by Jungle (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
7. The Moment by Tame Impala (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
8. Enter Sandman by Metallica (Chaz plays through his speaker in the kitchen)
9. Good Vibrations by Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch (Jake plays it in his car)
10. Somewhere Only We Know by Keane (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
11. Movin' on Up by Primal Scream (Plays over the speaker at The Green Knight)
12. Dreams by Fleetwood Mac (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
13. Feel Good Inc. by Gorillaz (Plays over the Speaker at The Green Knight)
14. Harder Better Faster Stronger by Daft Punk (Plays over the Speaker at Reds)
15. Dog Days are Over by Florence and the Machine (Plays over the Speaker at The Green Knight)
16. This is the Day by The The (Plays over the final moments and into the credits)

OPENING

Ryan sits cross-legged on his bed, the room dark save for the soft, neon glow of Chungking Express frozen on his TV screen. The vibrant colors of Hong Kong flicker against his tired face. His phone buzzed aggressively next to him on the duvet—Incoming Video Call: Mum.

He lets out a small, weary sigh, rubs his eyes, and swipes to answer with a tired but warm smile.

“Hi, Mum,” Ryan says.

Faye Foster’s face fills the screen, cheerful as ever. She’s standing in her kitchen, the steam from a kettle rising behind her like a localized cloud.

“Hi, love! Thought I’d check in. We haven’t heard a peep from you in days. You haven’t gone and joined a cult, have you?”

“Sorry. Work’s been... hectic lately. Properly mental.” Ryan glances back at the paused movie, the colors reflected in his eyes. “Is Dad about?”

Faye tilts the phone. George is sitting at the kitchen table, scrolling through his phone with one hand and a mug of tea in the other. He looks up and gives Ryan a sharp, casual grin.

“Hi, Dad,” Ryan says, leaning into the camera to get his attention.

“Alright, lad? How’s things in the glamorous world of hospitality?” George asks, his voice warm but teasing.

Ryan shrugs, his shoulders slumping. “Not bad. Just... a lot going on. Justin got fired last week—right in front of the whole afternoon rush. It was a total bloodbath. And Chaz is thinking about walking, too. Clifton’s coming back in today to ‘sort it all out,’ which usually means making everything ten times worse.”

Faye tsked softly, her maternal radar pinging. “Oh, Ryan... that sounds awful. Are you alright, though? That’s what matters to us.”

Ryan nods, picking at a loose thread on his bedsheet. “Yeah, I’m good. I like being on the bar now, at least I’m not loading plates for eight hours. It’s just... You know, I still feel no closer to what I really want to do. I’m just watching the days tick by.”

George raises an eyebrow, setting his tea down. “You mean your little restaurant idea? The ‘Foster’s Bistro’ or whatever you’re calling it this week?”

Ryan half-smiles. “Yeah, that. Feels like a pipe dream some days, Dad. Especially when I’m watching people get sacked over a milkshake.”

Faye gives him that soft “Mum look”—the one that’s patient but entirely no-nonsense. “You’ll get there, Ryan. You’re good with people. You’ve got your head screwed on. Right place, right time—that’s all it takes.”

George chimes in with a crooked, pragmatic grin. “Or, worst case scenario, you can come wire up the outlets at the new flats with me. Could do with an extra pair of hands that hasn’t been burnt by a coffee machine.”

Ryan snorts, shaking his head. "Sorry, Dad. The sparky life isn't for me. I'd probably end up blowing the whole house up."

Faye nudges George off-camera. "He's just winding you up. Anyway—what time are you on today?"

"Midday. I'm closing with Chloe, so it shouldn't be too bad. She's about the only thing keeping me sane at the moment."

Faye nods, giving him a supportive thumbs-up. "Well, I hope it goes okay. Don't let that Clifton man wind you up. He sounds like a proper misery."

Ryan laughs lightly, feeling the tension in his neck ease. "I'll try my best."

George leans closer to the phone, his eyes twinkling. "What you got on the telly, then? Same old film? The one with the pineapples?"

Ryan's grin widens. "Chungking Express. My favorite."

George pulls a face of mock-disgust. "You know there are other films in the world, right? We watched that new Steven Soderbergh movie last night—now that had a budget."

"George!" Faye cuts in, giving him a playful slap on the arm. "Let him watch his art-house stuff. Anyway—pop round soon, alright? It's been ages since we've seen your face in person. I'll do a proper roast."

"I will," Ryan says, his voice softening with genuine affection. "Love you both."

"Love you too, son," George says, raising his mug in a silent toast.

"Love you, Ryan. See you soon! Bye!" Faye adds.

The screen goes black, plunging the room back into the neon shadows of the movie. Ryan puts his phone down on the duvet and lets out a long, heavy breath. He reaches for the remote and presses play. The film flickers back to life—a tiny, beautiful moment of cinematic calm before he has to head back to the chaos of Red's.

ACT ONE (TITLES)

CHAPTER 1

[1] You Only Live Once by The Strokes

Ryan walks through the winding, Tudor-lined streets of Stratford-upon-Avon, the morning air still damp and heavy from the night's rain. The driving, upbeat rhythm of The Strokes pulses through his headphones—a familiar anthem that always helps settle his pre-shift nerves. He holds his vape between two fingers, trailing thin wisps of sweet-smelling smoke behind him as he navigates the cobblestones.

As he reaches the front of Red's Coffee & Diner, he pauses, flicking his thumb over his phone screen.

A message from Chloe lights up the display:

LOOKING FORWARD TO CLOSING WITH YOU TONIGHT, WANNA HANG OUT AFTERWARDS?

A genuine grin tugs at the corners of his mouth. The "will-they-won't-they" tension from Chaz's flat seems to be leaning toward "will." He types back: SOUNDS LIKE A PLAN. SEE YOU IN FIVE.

He pockets the phone, takes one last long drag on his vape, and exhales into the damp air. One deep breath to steady himself—then he pushes the door open.

Inside, Red's looks exactly the same, which is almost unsettling given the chaos of the week before. The self-serve kiosks stand like plastic sentinels at the front; the bar sits in the middle like the beating heart of the place. Melissa's office door is shut tight to the left; the corridor to the right leads down to the kitchen, the staff room, and the unofficial "escape hatch" back door.

Phil is already behind the bar, demonstrating the coffee machine to a man Ryan doesn't recognise. Jonathan is beside them, wiping down the sticky aftermath of the breakfast rush while occasionally pointing out different areas of the café.

"...and that's the portafilter," Phil says, locking it into place with a firm twist. "Don't force it. If you're forcing it, you've done something wrong."

The stranger folds his arms with an amused smile.

"Relax, darling. I've made coffee before. I'm not completely useless."

Phil smirks.

"I've met managers before. I don't take chances."

Jonathan chuckles as Ryan walks in.

"Alright, mate," Ryan calls, slipping his headphones down around his neck.

Jonathan gives a tired half-smirk. It's less arrogant than usual.

"Hey, Ryan. Ready for another 'eventful' day in paradise?"

Ryan laughs under his breath as he heads towards the staff-only gate, nodding towards the unfamiliar face.

"Who's your mate?"

Phil looks up.

"Oh—Ryan, this is Ewan Hardy."

Ewan steps forward and offers his hand.

"Nice to meet you."

Ryan shakes it.

"You too."

Phil grins.

"Ewan's taking over the new Alcester branch when it opens. Jonathan's showing him the ropes."

Ewan glances around the café.

"'Showing me the ropes' is generous. So far I've learnt where the coffee machine is and where everyone hides when management starts asking questions."

Ryan snorts.

"You'll fit in just fine."

Jonathan sighs theatrically.

"I can already tell you two are going to be trouble."

Ryan drops his bag beside the staff gate.

"Dreading today, if I'm honest. Especially after last week. Feels like something's in the air. Change... or smoke."

"Let's hope it works out for us," Jonathan says quietly, his eyes drifting towards Melissa's office. "Some of us more than others."

Phil snorts over the hiss of the milk steamer.

"Just you wait. I've got a feeling."

Jonathan frowns.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Phil gestures with his steaming jug towards the kiosks.

"Maybe Clifton's found robots to do our jobs. We'll all be down the Job Centre by Friday. Rock 'n' roll, lads. The machine revolution is televised."

Ewan nods thoughtfully.

"I'd say don't joke... but Head Office probably has a spreadsheet somewhere."

Ryan rolls his eyes, leaning against the mahogany bar.

"Chaz is convinced that's coming. No wonder he's been looking at the back door more than the grill lately."

"He's not wrong," Phil says wryly, pouring a flat white with surprising precision. "Won't be long before he buggers off to a 'real' kitchen."

Ryan straightens up, exhaling through his teeth.

"Well, when that happens, hopefully my place will finally be ready. You lot can come work for me. No kiosks allowed. Just vibes and vinyl."

Ewan raises an eyebrow.

"Now that's the first sensible business proposal I've heard all morning."

Ryan gives Phil a little two-finger salute before disappearing down the corridor, his rucksack slung low over one shoulder.

Phil watches him go before glancing at Jonathan, who is stacking mugs with a focused, almost meditative intensity, as though organising crockery might somehow organise his thoughts.

"Got any personality besides movies and doom-and-gloom about the robot uprising, Phil?" Jonathan asks, a genuine smile creeping through.

Phil blinks, mock offended.

"Oi. I like music too, you know. I used to love football—until it became all about hedge funds and business. Ruined the beautiful game, that."

Jonathan bites back a grin.

"Do you like Formula One?"

Phil's face lights up like he's been waiting for the question his entire life.

"God, no! That's just watching expensive paint dry at two hundred miles an hour. Wealthy blokes driving in circles. No soul."

Ewan nods in agreement.

"Finally. Someone talking sense."

Jonathan barks a genuine laugh and shakes his head as he walks towards the till.

"You're both hopeless."

"Sorry," Phil calls after him, throwing his hands up. "But it's the truth!"

Their laughter and the clatter of porcelain mugs echo through the café as Ryan disappears into the back, the last strains of Julian Casablancas's voice fading from his headphones.

CHAPTER 2

[2] Copy of A by Nine Inch Nails

Jonathan pushes through the weighted swing doors into the kitchen, bracing himself for the usual sensory assault: the clatter of pans, the hiss of the fryers, and Chaz's barking orders. Instead, he finds a scene of eerie, clinical stillness. The counters are spotless, the order

screen is dark and dead, and Chaz and Lydia are perched against the prep bench, their thumbs glued to their phone screens.

“What the hell are you two doing?” Jonathan snaps, folding his arms across his chest. The silence of the room makes his voice sound louder than intended.

Chaz doesn’t even look up. “Checking when Nine Inch Nails are next touring. Priorities, mate. Life’s too short for bad music and empty grills.”

Lydia flicks her eyes up briefly, her thumbs still tapping at a frantic pace. “Texting my girlfriend Claudia. She’s been salty since I started here—says I’m never around anymore. I told her I’m currently getting paid to watch a digital clock tick, so I’ve got plenty of time now.”

Jonathan’s jaw clenches. “Get off your phones—now. Both of you. Try doing some actual fucking work before Melissa walks in.”

Chaz finally raises his head, his expression deadpan. “We would, Jonny boy. It’s a bit tricky, though, seeing as we’ve had zero orders all morning. Didn’t even get one through the lunch window yesterday.”

“Yep,” Lydia pipes up, shrugging with a casual indifference. “Clifton’s shiny new system and those budget suppliers... turns out the punters have pissed off somewhere with better bacon. Who’d have guessed that people don’t like paying ten quid for a microwave burger?”

“And don’t forget,” Chaz adds, waving his phone like a courtroom exhibit. “We’re still waiting on a replacement for ‘Tony’ and a new ‘Heston.’ So even if an order did manage to crawl through that system, what exactly are we cooking with? Hopes and dreams? Thin air?”

Jonathan rubs the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache begin to throb behind his eyes. “Look—I get it. I do. But at least pretend to be busy. Clean something. Rearrange the walk-in. Clifton could walk in here any second, and if he clocks you two loafing around like teenagers in a bus shelter, it’s my head on the block.”

Chaz barks a dry laugh. “Relax, Jonny. As soon as we see that tight-arse drifting in, we’ll be busy as bees. I’ll even polish the broken microwave if it makes you feel better.”

Jonathan lets out a long, weary breath, his shoulders sagging. “Christ. This place is falling apart.”

Lydia cocks her head at him, her tone shifting from snarky to curious. “What’s up with you, anyway? I assumed you would be very pleased with Justin out of the picture. No more competition for the ‘Employee of the Month’ badge.”

Jonathan shrugs, leaning his back against the cold door of the fridge. “I’m fine. Just... everyone’s tense up front. Melissa’s bricking it about whatever verdict Clifton’s cooked up for the ‘Restructuring.’ I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a bit on edge, too.”

Chaz leans forward, his arms folded over his whites. “How’s Ryan taking all this? He’s been quiet.”

Jonathan puffs out his cheeks. “Haven’t had a proper word yet. He’ll be alright, though. He’s the only one Clifton actually seems to tolerate. Even I’d kick off if they tried to bin him.”

Lydia shoots him a genuine grin. “Good to know. We’d back you up on that, too. Ryan’s got his two best mates in the kitchen, after all. We’re a package deal.”

A ghost of a grin tugs at Jonathan’s lips—the first real sign of a thaw in his corporate exterior. “Cheers. Nice to know we’ve finally got something in common besides hating the kiosks.”

Chaz snorts, pocketing his phone. “You know, Jonny Boy—you’re not as much of an uptight twit as I pegged you for. Not bad for a posh lad.”

Jonathan cracks a proper smile. “Cheers, Chaz. Looks can be deceiving, eh?”

“Take care, Jonathan,” Lydia says, flicking him a mock, two-finger salute.

Jonathan gives them a small wave and pushes back through the swing doors, leaving the kitchen to its low, electronic hum and the faint, grinding echo of Trent Reznor’s voice.

Lydia turns back to Chaz, her brow raised. “Be honest—are you not even a little bit worried what Clifton’s gonna do to the kitchen? He’s looking for a scalp.”

Chaz stretches his arms out, a wicked smirk playing on his face. “Honestly, Lyds—I couldn’t give a shit.”

“About Clifton or the kitchen?” Lydia presses, folding her arms.

Chaz’s smirk widens into something dangerous. “Both.”

CHAPTER 3

[3] Watermelon Sugar by Harry Styles

Chloe zips into Stratford-upon-Avon from Kenilworth, the sharp morning wind cutting through her leather jacket as Harry Styles thumps through her earphones. She pulls her bike into her usual spot near the back of Red’s, kills the engine, and sits there for a beat—helmet perched on the handlebars, thumbs tapping out a quick, smiling reply to Ryan before slipping her phone into her pocket.

She swings off the bike with a practiced grace, yanks off her helmet, and runs a hand through her hair to shake out the helmet-flatness. The high street is already buzzing with tourists, but Chloe moves through the crowd like she owns the pavement—her boots echoing with that easy, unstoppable stride that has defined her since her promotion.

Inside, Red’s is waking up in its usual, mechanical way. Ryan and Phil are behind the bar, prepping for the inevitable lunchtime rush. Ryan is methodically wiping down a rack of mugs, while Phil is half-buried inside the coffee machine, topping up the fridge with fresh milk cartons.

Ewan weaves confidently between the tables with a tray of drinks balanced in one hand. Every so often he glances towards the self-service kiosks, still getting used to the system the rest of the team have spent the past week complaining about.

Jonathan emerges from the back corridor, his sleeves already rolled up to his elbows. He scans the floor with a thousand-yard stare, like he’s bracing for a storm front only he can see.

"Hey, boys," Chloe calls, flashing a bright grin as she strolls behind the counter.

Jonathan looks up first, and for a split second, a genuine smile breaks through his usual Assistant Manager expression.

"Morning, Chloe."

Phil doesn't even glance up from the milk crates.

"Hey, Chloe. Watch the floor by the steamer. Ryan spilt a half-shot and it's like an ice rink."

Ewan arrives beside the bar with his empty tray and smirks.

"So that's Ryan's masterplan? Take out the customers before they've even ordered?"

Ryan raises a finger in protest.

"It happened once."

"This morning," Phil mutters.

Chloe laughs before turning to Ewan.

"Hang on... I don't think we've met."

Ewan sets the tray down and offers his hand.

"My manners have clearly taken the morning off. Ewan Hardy."

Chloe shakes it warmly.

"Chloe Parker. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. I'm taking over the new Alcester branch. Melissa's got me helping out here while you're a person down."

"Well, if you need anything, just give me a shout."

"Careful," Ewan says with a grin. "I'll hold you to that."

Phil chuckles.

"Trust me. He absolutely will."

Ryan turns, catching Chloe's eye with that half-smirk that never fails to make her stomach do a quick flip.

"Good to see you again, Chloe."

She lets out a soft, melodic laugh, popping her locker key into her pocket.

"You literally saw me yesterday, Ryan. We closed together."

Ryan shrugs, twirling a tea towel around his fingers with casual flair.

"Still. Always brightens my day. Twenty-four hours is a long time in this place."

"Same here." Chloe leans against the mahogany bar, her helmet tucked comfortably under her arm. "The whole place feels about ten percent lighter when you're on shift."

Ryan winks.

"Funny—I was just about to say the same thing. Must be the hair."

Phil barks a cynical laugh, elbowing Jonathan as he stands up.

"Heard that? It's like a rom-com in here. I'm gonna be sick in the decaf hopper."

Jonathan deadpans back, though there's a glint of amusement in his eyes.

"Couldn't agree more. Get a room. Or at least get a sponge."

He snatches up a fresh cloth and drifts off to tackle the sticky aftermath of a toddler's breakfast on table eight.

Chloe turns back to Ryan, her voice dropping into something more serious.

"You ready for today? Truly?"

Ryan's face falls slightly as he stacks the last of the mugs.

"Not really. Clifton's due back any minute. God knows what new 'innovation' he's bringing with him this time."

Chloe bumps her shoulder gently against his.

"Don't let him get in your head. You're the last person in this building he needs to worry about. You're the model employee, remember?"

"Maybe." Ryan's mouth twists into a thin line. "Still... every time that man walks in here, I swear the air gets thinner."

Ewan nods thoughtfully.

"I've only met him once and even I started checking the fire exits."

Ryan laughs.

"See? It's not just me."

Chloe rolls her eyes, smiling despite herself.

"You're not wrong. He's a shark in a tailored suit. But hey—keep your hopes up high and your head down low. That's the supervisor's motto."

Ryan cocks an eyebrow.

"Did Lydia finally get you into A Day to Remember? That's a lyric, isn't it?"

Chloe tilts her head.

"Who? Is that a boy band?"

Before Ryan can answer, Jonathan reappears.

"Ryan—Melissa wants a word with you in the office. Now."

Ryan's stomach drops.

"Am I in trouble? Did I miss a temperature log?"

Ewan winces sympathetically.

"Melissa wants a word'... those are four words nobody enjoys hearing."

Jonathan shrugs.

"Nah. She just wants a chat. Probably about the new rota."

Ryan looks back at Chloe, forcing a shaky grin.

"Guess we'll catch up later? If I still have a job?"

Chloe reaches out and briefly squeezes his forearm.

"Sure. Go on. I'll have a flat white waiting for when you come out."

Ryan nods before heading towards Melissa's office, shoulders squared as though marching into battle.

As soon as he's out of earshot, Ewan watches him disappear down the corridor.

"So..." he says, turning to Phil. "Ryan and Chloe. Are they lovebirds like me and Miles, or are they just spectacularly oblivious?"

Phil shrugs as he wipes down the steam wand.

"Honestly? Couldn't tell you."

Ewan stares at him.

"You work with them every day."

"I make coffee."

"So you're useless."

"I'm selectively observant."

Ewan laughs.

"I think I'm going to like it here."

CHAPTER 4

Melissa sits at her desk, her eyes flicking rhythmically between the cold data of the admin spreadsheet and the clock ticking away above the door like a countdown. She is halfway through updating the rota—a jigsaw puzzle of hours and egos—when a gentle knock makes her jump, her hand jerking the mouse.

"Come in," she calls out, smoothing her blouse out of a nervous, corporate habit.

Ryan pushes the door open, poking his head in with that easy, disarming smile. "Hey—you wanted a word? I'm not in for a drug test, am I?"

Melissa lets out a soft, tired sigh, gesturing to the chair opposite her. "No, Ryan. Come in. Take a seat."

He perches on the edge of the chair, hands folded in his lap, looking like a student called to the headmaster's office. Melissa turns her chair to face him fully, her professional mask slipping just enough to show the weariness underneath.

"Look, I know things with me and Chaz haven't exactly been smooth lately," she begins, her tone honest. "It's been... volatile."

Ryan raises an eyebrow, staying neutral. "Okay..."

Melissa pauses, choosing her words like she's navigating a minefield. "I just wanted to thank you for not taking sides. For staying out of the crossfire. It means a lot to have a steady hand on the floor. I've heard nothing but good things about you lately—from Chloe, Phil, Jonathan... even Justin, before his 'incident' with the milkshake."

Ryan shrugs, a little bashful, his eyes drifting to the posters on the wall. "I'm just trying to keep my head down, Mel. Get closer to that restaurant goal of mine. Plus, Chaz told me not to get involved anyway. He said he didn't want my career catching his shrapnel."

Melissa cracks a small, rare smile. "Well, that comment gives me a bit more respect for him, I'll say that much." She leans forward slightly, her voice softening. "But I called you in to talk about you, Ryan. Not Chaz."

Ryan glances around the tidy, cramped office. "Honestly, it's a bit of a surprise. This is the first time I've actually sat in here since you took over the reins."

Melissa lets out a dry, hollow chuckle. "First time for everything, eh? Hopefully not the last."

"True." He grins, the tension in the room easing slightly.

Melissa straightens up, clicking back into Manager Mode. "So, Ryan—with Justin gone, there is a supervisor position open. A gap in the hierarchy. And I want you to step up. I think you should go for it."

Ryan's eyes widen, the smile faltering. "Really? Doesn't it seem a bit quick? I've only been on the bar a few months."

"It's the right time," Melissa says, her tone firm. "It comes with better pay, better perks, and more responsibility. It's a massive step closer to that goal you keep talking about. You need management experience if you want your own place, don't you?"

Ryan frowns, a small crease of doubt forming between his brows. "I don't know if I'm ready to be the 'bad guy,' Mel. I like being the one people actually talk to."

“Ryan.” Melissa’s voice is quiet but carries the weight of a command. “You are ready. You’re the glue. You’re great with the team, the customers actually listen to you, and you’ve done the hard yards in the kitchen. You’ve got what it takes—not just for supervisor, but one day, manager.”

He looks down at his hands, chewing on the offer. He thinks of the extra money, then he thinks of having to enforce Clifton’s “Small Changes.” “If you really think I’d be good at it... maybe I should. It would look good on the CV.”

Melissa’s eyes light up, a genuine flicker of relief. “Honestly, you and Chloe as my supervisors... I can picture it now. A dream team. The branch might actually stand a chance.”

Ryan cracks a grin at the mention of Chloe, the nerves settling. “Alright. Sure. Let’s do it. I’ll throw my hat in the ring.”

“Excellent.” Melissa sits back, the tension leaving her shoulders for the first time all morning. “I’ll let Mr. Clifton know the second he arrives. It’ll give him one less thing to complain about.”

Ryan rolls his eyes dramatically. “Bet you’re buzzing for his grand entrance.”

Melissa lets out a short laugh—but the sound fades as quickly as it came. She looks at the stacks of paperwork on her desk. “Don’t get me started. Sometimes I feel like someone has to stand up to him, but the man is made of Teflon.”

Ryan shakes his head, standing up. “He’d just ignore you anyway. He only hears the sound of his own voice and the ding of a kiosk.”

“Probably.” She can’t help but smile at the truth of it. “Anything else on your mind, Ryan?”

He smooths down his shirt, heading for the door. “Nah—I’d better get out of your hair. You’ve got enough on your plate today with the ‘restructuring’ and all that.”

“Thanks, Ryan. Really.” Melissa gives him a warm nod. “Take care out there.”

“You too, Mel,” Ryan says, pulling the door shut with a soft click.

Melissa turns back to her computer, staring at the flickering cursor on the rota. Under her breath, she mutters, “What if this is the last time I do this?”

She clicks back to the spreadsheet, her finger hovering over the ‘Save’ button—but her eyes linger on the closed door, the weight of the coming shift already pressing down on her chest.

CHAPTER 5

[4] Things in Life by Dennis Brown

Ryan wanders back to the bar, a soft, contemplative smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Phil is hunched over the espresso machine, wiping down the steam wand with a frantic intensity, as if the metal had personally offended him during the morning rush.

“Oh, Phil—I finally got around to that recommendation of yours last night,” Ryan says, leaning casually against the mahogany counter.

Phil stops mid-scrub, looking up. "Daisies? The Czech surrealist one?"

"No, the other one. The one with Matt Damon you recommended a few weeks back," Ryan explains.

Phil perks up instantly, his eyes glinting behind his glasses. "Ah, The Talented Mr. Ripley. What d'you reckon? Minghella's masterpiece, right? The cinematography alone is worth the price of admission."

Ryan grins. "Yeah—brilliant film. Proper suspense. But I've still got a soft spot for The English Patient."

Phil groans, rolling his eyes so dramatically that Ryan nearly laughs. "I swear you're the only person under the age of sixty who actually likes The English Patient. It's a three-hour nap with sand, Ryan."

Ryan holds up a finger in mock-seriousness. "Won Best Picture at the Oscars, Phil. I'm fairly certain I'm not alone in my appreciation."

Phil scoffed, snapping the portafilter back into the group head with a metallic clack. "Oscars, BAFTAs, Globes—doesn't mean shit, mate. Art's subjective. Just 'cause a bunch of old, out-of-touch voters like something, doesn't make it the best. It just makes it the most polite."

Ryan snorts. "You're only saying that because Forrest Gump beat Shawshank back in '94."

Phil points a dripping stir-stick at him like he's won the ultimate legal argument. "Exactly! Proves my point right there. A travesty of justice."

Ryan chuckles, shaking his head. "It's all part of the conversation, mate. That's why we watch 'em."

Phil's face softens. He drops his voice, flicking a quick, wary glance at the empty pass behind them. "Cheers for always having my back, Ryan. Seriously. Feels weird now, though. I... I actually kind of miss having Justin around. Y'know, before Jonathan showed up and everything went corporate."

Ryan's smile flickers, something sad and nostalgic settling behind his eyes. "Yeah. Me too, mate. Sure, he turned into a bit of an arsehole near the end, but there's still something missing now he's gone. A bit of the noise is gone."

A sharp scoff cuts through the moment like a blade. Jonathan appears at Ryan's shoulder, arms folded over his crisp shirt, a permanent scowl etched on his face. "Why on earth do you miss that irritating Yank? The man was a walking HR nightmare."

Phil raises an eyebrow, not backing down. "Trust me, Jonny. Justin was a completely different bloke before you rocked up with your clipboards and your 'efficiency metrics.'"

Ryan nods, his voice steady but not unkind. "Yeah—you could tell him anything. He helped the newbies fit in, made sure the team felt tight. He started a week after me and just... slotted right in. No one's ever done that here. He made it feel less like a job."

Ewan returned from the dining area carrying an empty tray, setting it down beside Phil before joining the conversation.

"You lot talk about this Justin bloke like he's a Red's folk hero."

Phil looked up.

"Feels like he was."

Jonathan's mouth twitches, as if he's searching for a scathing rebuttal but finding his mental filing cabinet empty. He glances over Ryan's shoulder, catching sight of Chloe emerging from the corridor, tucking her order notepad into her apron string.

"Chloe!" Jonathan calls out. "Is this true? Was Justin really some sort of patron saint of hospitality before I got here?"

Chloe pauses by the bar, her expression softening as she looks at Ryan. "Absolutely. When I first started, Justin took me under his wing. He was like the older brother I never had. Always had a spare cigarette or a joke when the shift got too heavy."

Jonathan stares at her, genuinely dumbstruck. For a second, the thick layer of sarcasm that usually drips off him is gone. He looks small. Lost.

"I don't get it..." he mutters, half to himself, looking around the diner as if seeing it for the first time. "Is this place just insane—or did I just come here at the worst possible time in the history of the brand?"

He turns on his heel and stalks off toward the office, shaking his head. Phil stifled a laugh, glancing at Ryan and Chloe.

Ewan watched him disappear into the office.

"Can I ask something?"

Ryan nodded.

"Go on."

Owen folded his arms.

"Was Justin actually that good... or has everyone started remembering him through rose-tinted glasses?"

Ryan shrugs, "Bit of both."

Phil smirks, "He could be an absolute pain in the arse."

Chloe laughs, "He really could."

Ryan smiles. "But he made this place feel like home."

Jonathan walked back out of the office and towards the dining area, rubbing his head.

"Reckon we just broke his brain," Phil says, deadpan.

Ryan shrugs. "Good. A bit of a system reset might do him some good for once."

Chloe smirks, propping herself against the bar next to Ryan. "I wonder if he's going to get FOMO now. Imagine Jonathan trying to be 'one of the lads.'"

Ewan responds "If he starts smiling tomorrow, I'm handing in my notice."

Ryan flashes her a grateful smile—and for a moment, the three of them just stand there and start laughing. The low hum of the coffee machine and Dennis Brown's warm, steady voice drift through the speakers, making it feel, just for a second, like the world outside the glass doors couldn't touch them.

CHAPTER 6

[5] Somewhere I Belong by Linkin Park

The kitchen sits in a heavy, unnatural silence—far too quiet for the middle of a lunch stretch. There is no rhythmic clatter of pans, no frantic rush of tickets spitting out of the pass, and no comforting, oily hiss from the fryers. Just Chaz and Lydia perched on the stainless-steel prep bench, their legs swinging like a pair of schoolkids stuck in a particularly long detention. Linkin Park's raw, melodic angst blasts out of Chaz's battered portable speaker, filling the void where the sound of cooking used to be.

Lydia scrolls lazily through her phone, the blue glow of the screen reflected in her bored eyes. "I swear, Chaz—if I'm gonna sit on my phone all day, I might as well do it at home in my pajamas. At least the chairs are more comfortable."

Chaz snorts, flicking a stray crumb off the counter with a practiced, cynical thumb. "Tell me about it. I miss when we actually cooked proper food, Lyds. Real ingredients. When people came in specifically for our dishes, not some pre-packaged, microwaved mystery meat that tastes like cardboard and regret."

Lydia slips her phone into her pocket, picking at her nails as she stares at the dead order screen. "Yeah... sounds like I missed the glory days of Red's. I got the 'Remastered' version, and it's a bit of a letdown."

Chaz drums his fingers on the steel surface in time with the drums on the track, his eyes drifting toward the back door. "And now? Half the stuff goes straight from a supplier's plastic box to the microwave. It's no wonder the punters stopped showing up—it's all just bland, cheap slop. You can get better food at a petrol station."

He scrunched up his face, his voice dropping into a cruel, perfect imitation of Clifton's smug, clipped tone. "'Standardized, streamlined, cost-effective.' Absolute bollocks. What's the point of calling yourself a chef if you aren't allowed to actually cook anything?"

Lydia's tone softens, the snark fading. "Have you ever actually thought about leaving? Properly walking out?"

Chaz let out a short, bitter laugh that sounds more like a cough. "Every bloody day, Lyds. But for now? I'll keep pretending to work, keep taking their money, and keep my knives sharp... until the next 'cost-saving idea' finally finishes us off for good."

Lydia bumps her shoulder against his, a rare moment of physical solidarity. "So that's the plan? You'd just abandon ship and leave me to rot here in the microwave graveyard all by myself?"

“Nonsense,” Chaz scoffs, a genuine grin breaking through his scowl. “We stick together, yeah? Like Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross. Wherever I go, you’re right there with me. I need someone to tell me when I’m being a dick.”

“You mean that?” Lydia asks, her eyebrows raised in genuine surprise.

“Course I do. It was meant to be me and Ryan in our own place, but now he’s stuck upfront with the suits and the lattes—guess you’re my right-hand woman now. The Last of the Mohicans.”

Lydia snorted, regaining her cool. “I’d prefer the term ‘Executive Assistant to the Resistance,’ thanks.”

“Oh, you kids and your labels.” Chaz winks, the heaviness in the room lifting just a fraction.

They both burst out laughing, the warm, defiant sound echoing off the cold stainless-steel walls—a tiny, fragile spark of rebellion in a kitchen that feels less and less like theirs with every passing shift.

CHAPTER 7

[6] Busy Earnin’ by Jungle

Back at the front, Chloe weaves through the tables with a tray balanced effortlessly on her palm, the funky, rhythmic pulse of *Busy Earnin’* humming low through the café speakers. She spots Mark and Amanda in their usual booth near the window, and her face lights up with a genuine, professional warmth.

“Hey, you two! Back for your caffeine fix already?” she says, flashing them her sunniest grin as she approaches.

“Hi, Chloe!” Mark beams back, looking up from a travel brochure. “Things are good, thanks. We’re just celebrating.”

“Yeah, we’re finally planning that trip to Paris next month!” Amanda adds, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Paris! Look at you two. That sounds incredible.” Chloe sets their coffees down with a soft, precise clink. “I hope you have the best time. Seriously, send me a postcard so I can pin it to the staff board and be jealous, yeah?”

Amanda laughs. “We will! Thanks, Chloe. You’re a star.”

“Good to see you both. Enjoy—and good luck with all those French pastries. Don’t come back too spoiled for our muffins!” She winks and steps away, Mark and Amanda waving her off like a friend rather than a server.

As she nears the bar, she catches the tail end of a familiar debate brewing between Ryan and Phil. They are deep in the weeds of a cinematic argument while prepping the next round of drinks.

"And that is exactly why Brian De Palma is the most underrated filmmaker of all time," Phil says, waving a steaming milk jug for emphasis like a conductor's baton. "Who else has that many masterpieces and gets zero love from the modern critics? It's a crime."

"You know who else is criminally underrated?" Ryan shot back, his eyes glinting with mischief as he polished a glass.

Phil groaned, clocking the look on Ryan's face immediately. "Don't say Wong Kar-Wai again, Ryan. I can't handle the slow-motion pining this early in the shift."

Ryan chuckled, leaning comfortably on the counter. "Nope. Spike Lee. *Do the Right Thing* is still firmly in my Letterboxd Top Four. It's perfect."

Phil cracked up, snapping a lid onto a takeaway cup. "I mean, he butchered the *Oldboy* remake, but I'll give you this: at least he doesn't make wanky, soul-sucking blockbusters."

Ryan smirked, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "You know who I think loves soul-sucking blockbusters?"

Phil raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

"Mr. Clifton." Ryan's grin widened. "I bet you anything when there's a new Marvel or Star Wars film out, he's first in line with a giant bucket of overpriced popcorn, wearing a branded t-shirt."

Phil's eyes suddenly darted behind Ryan, his face going pale. "Ryan—"

"Can you imagine it?" Ryan kept going, totally oblivious to the sudden chill in the air. "A corporate guy like him probably doesn't even know what a De Palma or a Spike Lee film is. He probably thinks *The English Patient* is a medical documentary."

Phil just pointed a trembling finger behind Ryan's shoulder. Ryan turned slowly—and there was David Clifton, standing six inches away, arms folded tightly over a charcoal suit, his face set like a storm cloud over the Atlantic.

"Oh. Um. Hello, Mr. Clifton." Ryan cleared his throat, his voice jumping an octave into a squeak. "Do you, uh... do you like the films of Spike Lee?"

Phil buried his face in his hands, leaning over the espresso machine. "Oh god."

Clifton didn't blink. His eyes were cold enough to crack glass. "For your information, Ryan—I prefer the films of Oliver Stone. Spike Lee is a self-important, loud-mouthed windbag with no sense of structural discipline."

Ryan fought to keep his face neutral. *Oliver Stone? Of course he likes the guy who made Wall Street.*

"Right. Yeah. He's... okay, I guess," Ryan said lamely, his bravado having evaporated.

Clifton leaned in, his tone like a razor edge. "And I suggest you and Philip keep your pointless, amateur film chats for after hours—and get back to the work I am actually paying you to do. This isn't a film school, it's a business."

With that, he brushed past them, his shoulder nearly clipping Ryan's. He spotted Jonathan nearby, who was carrying a tray of dirty cups back toward the kitchen.

"Ah, Jonathan—just the man I want to see. Drop those. We need to talk in the staff room. Now."

Jonathan stiffened, his professional mask snapping into place. "Sure thing, David." He shot Ryan a quick, wide-eyed look—well done, mate, you've killed us all—then turned and led Clifton down the corridor.

Ryan stayed frozen for a second, the heat creeping up his neck until his ears felt like they were on fire. Not even Jonathan at his worst, or Melissa in a panic, had ever spoken to him with such raw, condescending dismissal.

Phil peeked through his fingers once the "Suit" was out of earshot. "Seriously? Oliver Stone? That self-important windbag?"

Ryan huffed out a dry, shaky laugh, the tension breaking like a soap bubble. "I know, right? The man's only got two good films: Platoon and JFK. The rest is just... shouting."

Phil smirked, tapping their mugs together in a mock toast of survival. "Sounds about right for a guy like him."

They shared a small, conspiratorial chuckle as the hum of the café and the upbeat Jungle track swallowed their embarrassment—for now. But down the corridor, the door to the staff room slammed shut, and the real "restructuring" was beginning.

ACT TWO

CHAPTER 8

Jonathan and Clifton step into the staff room, the door clicking shut and muffling the low, industrial hum of the café. Jonathan drops onto the battered, polyester sofa, spreading his arms wide with a confidence that says he's stopped being afraid of the suit. Clifton lowers himself into the sagging armchair opposite, legs crossed perfectly, a smug, feline smile playing on his lips.

"So," Jonathan says, cocking a skeptical eyebrow. "How can I help you today, David? Another lecture on milk wastage?"

Clifton taps his manicured fingers on the armrest. "Actually, Jonathan, I was looking over your CV the other day—refreshing my memory—and I realized I made a rather massive oversight when I brought you on board."

"Oh yeah? Let me guess—you finally clocked that I'd never worked a single day in hospitality before you hired me?" Jonathan deadpanned, unblinking.

Clifton snorts, a short, sharp sound. "No, no. Quite the opposite. It's that you're wildly overqualified for a floor position. Remind me again—why on earth did you want to work in a place like this when you've got high-level experience as a stock trader?"

Jonathan leans back, his posture casual but guarded. "I wanted a challenge, David. A change of pace. I thought I'd try my hand at turning around a failing business for once. Pretty sure I mentioned that in the interview while you were checking your watch."

“Mm. You did.” Clifton shifts forward, his voice dropping into that oily, confidential tone he uses when he thinks he’s being charming. “Anyway—I’ll cut to the chase. I’m leaving Red’s in six weeks. Moving on to bigger and better things at a national level. And I’ve been instructed to name my successor for the region.”

Jonathan’s brow furrows, his internal alarm bells ringing. “And?”

“I want you, Jonathan,” Clifton says, leaning in as if he’s sliding a winning lottery ticket across the table. “New Warwickshire Regional Manager of Red’s Coffee & Diner. All branches. It’s yours if you want it.”

Jonathan barks out a short laugh, more pure disbelief than humor. “A double promotion? From Assistant to Regional? Seriously? I’m not even a Branch Manager yet. Melissa’s been here for years.”

“But you’ve got the right credentials,” Clifton says smoothly, ignoring the mention of Melissa. “You have the business acumen. You have the discipline. This?”—he waves a dismissive hand at the faded, coffee-stained staff room—“This is beneath a man of your talents. Why waste your time running drinks and managing kitchen drama when you could have a corner office, a company car, and travel expenses? You’d be the one doing the inspecting. You’d be guiding all the Red’s in Warwickshire, including this one.”

Jonathan’s eyes flicker. He’s thinking of the spreadsheets, the power, and most importantly, the security.

Clifton chuckles, reaching out to clap Jonathan lightly on the knee. “Lunches on the company card. A real nine-to-five. No greasy customers, no broken microwaves, and no more steak fiascos.”

Jonathan lets out a low, long whistle. “I could definitely do with the extra cash. Especially with baby Ashley on the way... expenses are going to rack up.”

“So, shall I put your name forward?” Clifton presses, his voice velvet-smooth.

Jonathan hesitates for a fraction of a second. He pictures Ryan’s dumb movie trivia, Chloe’s easy, effortless laugh, even Chaz and Lydia’s relentless, punk-rock banter. He’d miss them, though he’d rather eat a handful of coffee beans than admit it out loud.

“Yeah,” he says finally, his voice hardening into ambition. “I mean... I’ll miss the lot of them, I suppose. But sure. Go on then. Put me in.”

Clifton’s smile spreads like oil on water. “Good lad. I knew you were a shark. I’m sure you’ll make great friends at head office. People who speak your language.”

Jonathan raises an eyebrow, his dry wit returning. “Got anyone in mind to take over as Assistant Manager here, then? Seeing as I’ll be vacating the post?”

Clifton leans back, tapping his temple like he’s letting Jonathan in on a dark secret. “Well... actually... about that...”

CHAPTER 9

[7] The Moment by Tame Impala

Chloe drifts over to Booth 13, her tray balanced effortlessly on her palm. The psychedelic, pulsing hum of The Moment floats through the café speakers, perfectly matching the mid-afternoon haze. Perched in the booth is Gary, one of her favorite regulars—a man with scruffy salt-and-pepper hair and the permanent, crinkled grin of a bloke who's seen the world end twice and didn't think much of it.

"Hello, Gary. Good to see you today," she says, flashing him her brightest, most genuine smile.

"Alright, Joy," Gary grins back, using the old nickname he'd given her on her first week. "They still got you stuck behind these windows, have they? Haven't escaped to the real world yet?"

"Yeah, still here, Gary," Chloe laughs, setting his vanilla soya latte down with practiced care. "Even though I've finished uni now, I figured I'd stick around for a bit. Try to help make this place better from the inside."

"Oh yeah? Good luck with that, love." Gary snorts, stirring his drink. "You're trying to polish a sinking ship, you are."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence—it's proving to be more of a challenge than I thought," Chloe admits, leaning slightly against the booth.

"I'll bet. So, where's Jonny Bravo hiding then? Haven't seen the loud one in a while."

Chloe winces playfully. "Oh—Justin? He doesn't work here anymore, Gary. Got sacked last week. It was... messy."

"Shit, I loved that guy! Always had a story, didn't he?" Gary barks out a laugh. "Well, I'm glad you, SpongeBob, and Homer are still about. The place needs some familiar faces."

Chloe giggles, shaking her head at his nicknames for Ryan and Phil. "They can't get rid of us that easily. We're part of the furniture now."

Gary wagged a finger at her, his expression turning uncharacteristically serious for a second. "If they did, Joy—if they got rid of the heart of this place—I'd riot. I swear. I'd take my custom to the Nero down the street and I hate their chairs."

"Thanks, Gary. Take care, yeah?" She squeezes his shoulder as she turns to go.

"See ya, Joy. Behave yourself. Don't let the suits get ya!"

Back at the bar, Phil is half-buried in the under-counter fridge, counting up milk stock with a mutter, while Ryan wipes down the steel sides with mechanical, rhythmic focus. He looks up as Chloe approaches, that thoughtful, heavy crease visible between his eyebrows.

"Chloe—can I ask you something?" he says, his voice dropping into a low, private register.

"Course. I'm all ears." She leans on the counter across from him, mirroring his posture.

Ryan hesitates, his cloth stilling on the steel surface. "Do you... do you honestly see me as supervisor material? Like, properly?"

"Eventually, yeah," Chloe says, tilting her head and studying his face. "You're the most level-headed person in this building. Why?"

Ryan sucks in a sharp breath. "Melissa just offered it to me. In the office. She wants me to take Justin's spot."

Phil's head popped up from the fridge like a jack-in-the-box.

"You kept that quiet, mate! Holding out on the drinks already?"

Ewan wandered back behind the bar carrying an empty tray, having just cleared a table. He caught the end of the conversation and raised an eyebrow.

"Supervisor?" he said. "Congratulations... although that could either be the best news you'll hear this year or the worst."

Ryan laughed. "How d'you work that one out?"

Ewan rested the tray against the counter.

"Depends who's sitting in the manager's office."

Chloe ignored the joke, keeping her attention fixed on Ryan.

"Ryan, that's brilliant. Seriously. It'll get you so much closer to your dream. The experience alone is worth the headache."

"I don't know..." Ryan admitted, glancing at the floor. "I've only been upfront a month or two. It feels like I'm skipping a few steps."

"Ryan," Chloe said gently, "you want to run your own place one day, don't you? A bistro, a bar—whatever it becomes. That's a lot more responsibility than supervising here. You may as well learn now while you've got people around you who'll help."

"She's right," Phil said, nudging the fridge door shut with his hip. "Better you than some corporate drone they drag in from Solihull."

Ryan smiled, the tension easing from his shoulders.

"If you lot genuinely think I'd be good at it... then maybe I should give it a go."

"RYAN!"

The sharp bark of his name sliced straight through the conversation.

David Clifton stood at the end of the bar, arms folded tightly across his chest, his expression hard as stone.

Ryan straightened instinctively.

"Yes, Mr. Clifton?"

Clifton's lip curled.

"Do you mind letting Miss Parker get on with her actual job instead of gossiping all afternoon? We employ people to serve customers, Mr. Foster—not to stand around discussing their careers."

Chloe's smile disappeared. Without saying a word, she picked up an empty tray and headed towards a table on the far side of the café.

Ryan stayed where he was, cloth still clutched in one hand.

Clifton stepped closer, lowering his voice.

"And another thing. Stop distracting your colleagues. This is a place of business, not a youth club. Your potential only extends as far as your productivity. Don't make me remind you again."

With one final dismissive look, Clifton turned and strode towards Melissa's office, his polished shoes clicking rhythmically across the floor.

Nobody spoke until the office door swung shut behind him.

Ryan quietly returned to wiping the counter, his movements noticeably faster than before.

Ewan watched the office door for a moment before looking back at Ryan.

"...Does he always talk to people like that?"

Phil let out a weary sigh.

"Lately? Yeah."

Ryan forced a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"You get used to it."

Ewan frowned.

"You shouldn't."

A brief silence settled over the bar.

Phil finally broke it with a shrug.

"Welcome to Stratford."

Ewan shook his head.

"When Alcester opens, remind me to do the exact opposite of whatever he does."

CHAPTER 10

Melissa sits hunched at her desk, the harsh, artificial glow of her computer screen reflecting off the framed photos of her children on the shelf—her "why" for every long hour she puts in. A firm, rhythmic knock on the door interrupts the soft, rhythmic click of her mouse. Not a request, but a summons.

She exhales, steeling her nerves. "Come in."

The door swings open, and there he is—Clifton. He stands there in a crisp, charcoal suit, looking like a ghost she simply cannot shake.

"Hello, Melissa," Clifton says, shutting the door behind him with a finality that makes the air in the room feel heavy.

"David, hi. Take a seat." Melissa forces a polite, professional smile, powering down her screen as Clifton settles into the chair opposite her—the same chair Ryan just vacated.

Clifton adjusted the cuff of his jacket, his expression remaining unreadable.

"Before we begin... how is Ewan Hardy getting on?"

Melissa blinked, slightly caught off guard.

"Really well, actually. He's fitted in quicker than I expected. The team's taken to him."

Clifton gave a small, satisfied nod.

"Good. Alcester opens soon. I wanted to be certain we hadn't made the wrong appointment."

"I don't think you have," Melissa replied. "He's got a good head on his shoulders. People seem to trust him already."

"As they should," Clifton said matter-of-factly. "He's one of the few managers we've hired recently who understands that leadership requires difficult decisions."

Melissa resisted the urge to challenge him.

"He's still learning," she said carefully.

Clifton merely nodded.

"We all are."

She turns her chair, folding her hands in her lap to hide the slight tremor. "So—how have you been since last week? I didn't get a chance to speak to you properly after... well, everything that happened with the milkshake."

Clifton locks eyes with her, his face a mask of cold, concentrated annoyance. "Terrible. The stains wouldn't come out of my suit—it was bespoke silk—and that entire visit was the single worst I've had in my entire career with Red's. It forced my hand, Melissa."

Melissa's eyebrows shoot up. "Your hand? What do you mean?"

"I've handed in my six weeks' notice," Clifton says flatly. "Kevin Reynolds at Head Office was jumping for joy to hear it."

"You're leaving?" Melissa's voice cracks, a strange mix of relief and terror washing over her.

Clifton leans back slightly, the picture of a man who has already checked out. "Yes. And I've already appointed my successor. Jonathan will be taking over my role as Warwickshire Regional Manager."

"Jonathan? Jonathan—the Assistant Manager?" Melissa blurted, disbelief written all over her face. "He's only been here five minutes!"

"He's far too overqualified to be your assistant, Melissa. He has the temperament for the higher-level strategy. He's better suited for my role—and he knows it," Clifton says, using that familiar, patronizing tone that makes Melissa feel two feet tall.

Melissa's mind reeled, trying to process the new hierarchy. "So... what will you do next? Head Office for another chain?"

Clifton allowed himself the faintest smile.

"Tell me, Melissa... have you ever heard of Tony Chapman?"

She frowned.

"The businessman?"

"The very one."

Her eyebrows knitted together.

"The one who owns ARC Industries?"

Clifton nodded slowly.

"Among other things."

Melissa shifted uneasily.

"He's been buying up half the town recently."

Clifton stood and wandered towards the office window, looking out across the car park.

"Tony doesn't simply buy businesses, Melissa. He acquires potential. Cafés. Restaurants. Hotels. Retail parks. If something has value hidden beneath poor management, he finds it before everyone else does."

Melissa folded her arms.

"I've heard people call him ruthless."

Clifton smiled.

"Most successful people are."

He turned back towards her.

"He's invited me to join ARC as a member of the board."

Melissa stared at him.

"You're serious?"

"Very."

"So you're staying in Stratford?"

"I'll have considerably more influence than I do now."

Melissa's stomach tightened.

That worried her far more than if he'd simply disappeared.

She steadied her voice. "So, who's going to be my new Assistant Manager? If Jonathan is moving up, I'll need someone experienced."

Clifton paused—that long, calculated pause that always preceded bad news. He drew in a measured breath. "This is the part you're not going to like."

"Go on." Melissa braced herself, her hand gripping the arm of her chair.

Clifton leaned forward, his voice dropping to a clipped, clinical finality. "Melissa—due to the continuing loss of profits in this branch, a significant rise in customer complaints under your tenure, and your ongoing inability to manage the... disagreements with Charles in the kitchen, you haven't passed your probation as Manager. Head Office has decided we'll be dropping you back down to Assistant Manager."

The air seemed to vanish from the room. Melissa's face fell, her mouth opening—then closing—as she scrambled for words that wouldn't come. The photos of her kids on the shelf seemed to blur.

"So... what? Does this mean I'm fired?" Her voice came out in a hollow whisper.

"No," Clifton said, sounding almost bored by her reaction. ""The company values your loyalty. You can stay on—as Assistant Manager—if you want to continue working here. At a reduced salary, of course."

Melissa stared past him, her eyes stinging. "I don't want to go back... but what choice do I have? My husband still can't work after the accident—and I won't have the twins grow up like I did, scraping by on cereal and hope."

Clifton tilted his head, feigning a moment of empathy. "You were a successful social worker once, weren't you? Why not return to that? My wife Tanya's been in social care since she left university—she swears by the fulfillment."

Melissa let out a bitter, jagged laugh. "The fulfillment doesn't pay the mortgage, David. Besides, I like working here. I love this team—even if I am at odds with the kitchen most days. They're good people."

"That reminds me," Clifton said, standing abruptly, smoothing his jacket. "I need to speak to Charles next. The 'Restructuring' isn't finished."

"The kitchen?" Melissa echoed, her voice small and defeated.

“Yes. And you’d best come with me—Charles won’t take this well, and as the new Assistant, you need to learn how to handle these 'difficult' conversations properly.”

He didn’t wait for her reply. Clifton turned and strode out of the office. Melissa grabbed her Red’s lanyard off the desk, wiped quickly at the corners of her eyes, and followed—the sound of her shoes on the laminate floor echoing behind him like a final, heavy verdict.

CHAPTER 11

[8] Enter Sandman by Metallica

With no orders to fill, no prep to do, and half the equipment literally or metaphorically busted, Chaz and Lydia have settled for the next best thing: blasting Chaz’s heavy metal playlist at a volume that makes the stainless-steel prep tables vibrate. The opening riff of Enter Sandman rattles the hanging ladles like skeletal windchimes.

They’ve abandoned the pretense of work. Instead, they are headbanging and air-guitaring by the pass, their silhouettes frantic against the flickering fluorescent lights. Chaz’s battered, grease-stained speaker is perched on a shelf in the corner, straining to push out the bass.

“NOW THIS IS WHAT I CALL ROCKIN’ OUT, LYDS!” Chaz bellows over the roar of James Hetfield.

Lydia cackles, throwing up the horns with both hands, her apron stained with a morning’s worth of coffee grounds. “ROCK ON, CHAZ—YOUR RED’S HEAVY METAL KING!”

The swing door flies open with enough force to hit the stopper. Clifton and Melissa step inside, the wall of sound hitting them like a physical blow. Clifton’s face twists in immediate, visceral disgust as the riff crashes into the chorus.

“Lydia. Charles. Turn off that racket. Immediately,” Clifton barks, though his voice is nearly drowned out.

They ignore him for a beat too long, Chaz wagging a finger in rhythm with the drums. “Oi, respect the classics, Dave—that’s Metallica! Not racket!”

Clifton’s eyes narrow into slits. He doesn’t argue. He stalks across the kitchen tiles, snatches up the cheap portable speaker, and with one sharp, clinical motion, smashes it onto the floor. Plastic cracks, a lithium battery rolls across the floor, and wires pop out like entrails.

Silence—heavy and ringing—swallows the kitchen.

“What the fuck, Dave!” Chaz yells, stepping forward, his face turning a dangerous shade of red. “I got that from B&M for a fiver! That was a good speaker!”

Clifton brushes his palms off on his trousers, entirely unbothered. “Good. Now I have your undivided attention. We have changes to address that require a level of professional focus you clearly lack.”

Lydia crosses her arms, shooting him a death glare that would have wilted a lesser man. “Are we in trouble now? For listening to music in an empty room?”

“Not exactly,” Clifton says, his tone becoming clinical. “It’s about the branch’s continued underperformance. Profits are down twelve percent this quarter. Too many complaints about the quality of the ‘hot’ food. It’s time to make the final cuts.”

Chaz bristles. “Cuts? Oh, here we go. This is what you get when you scrap the old system and replace it with cardboard. You reap what you sow, mate.”

“Charles,” Clifton snaps, “We are not going back to the old system. Not another word about it. The ‘old system’ died with your predecessor.”

Melissa steps forward, her voice low and drained of its usual authority. “Clifton’s right. For what it’s worth—I’m being dropped back to Assistant Manager. I’ve been demoted. You’re not the only ones being hit by the ‘Restructuring.’”

Chaz shot her a look of pure, concentrated venom. “And that’s my fault, yeah? ‘Cause I dared to care about the kitchen while you were busy licking Clifton’s boots?”

Melissa’s eyes flicker—she’s too tired to argue, too broken to defend herself. “Just don’t start today, Chaz. Please. Not today.”

Clifton cuts through them both like a guillotine. “You want to know what’s happening to the kitchen? We’re shutting it down. Permanently. Hot meals are coming off the menu as of Monday.”

Chaz and Lydia freeze. The air in the kitchen feels like it’s turned to lead.

“What?” Lydia’s voice cracks, her bravado vanishing.

“Head Office doesn’t see the point in maintaining a kitchen that doesn’t work,” Clifton says, checking an invisible speck of dust on his sleeve. “You’ve had repeated equipment breaks. Hardly anyone orders full meals anymore. And when they do, the wait times are abysmal.”

“So what?” Chaz growls, his voice low and vibrating with rage. “We’re just done? After five years, I’m out on the street because you won’t buy a new microwave?”

“Not necessarily,” Clifton says. “You can transfer—Leamington and Warwick branches are still operating full kitchens. Or you can take a standard redundancy package. The choice is yours. We’ll need your decision by the end of the shift.”

Chaz and Lydia look at each other—stunned into a rare, shared silence.

“I’ll give you time to digest that.” Clifton glances at his watch. “The new manager will be here shortly to introduce himself and finalize the transition. Melissa—let’s go. We have a bar to reorganize.”

Melissa hesitates. She looks back at the two of them, regret etched into the lines of her face. “I’m sorry, guys. Truly. I tried.”

Chaz just stares at the smashed, silent speaker on the floor as Melissa slips out after Clifton.

The silence in the kitchen feels louder and more oppressive than the music ever did.

Lydia lets out a shaky, hollow laugh. "Well... you always said you'd leave this dump one day, Chaz. Congratulations. Wish granted."

Chaz snorts, rubbing the back of his neck where the tension is coiled like a spring. "Yeah—but I wanted to leave on my own terms, Lyds. With a plan. A proper 'fuck you' exit. Not... not like this. Not as a 'cost-saving' measure."

"Be careful what you wish for, I guess," Lydia mutters, leaning her head against the cold steel of the pass.

Chaz cracks his knuckles. "Come on. I need a fag before I actually go through with smashing Clifton's face in."

He stomps off toward the back door, the heavy fire exit groaning on its hinges. Lydia gives the wrecked speaker one final, pitying glance, then follows him out—leaving the kitchen emptier and colder than it has ever been.

CHAPTER 12

Chaz and Lydia step out into the damp gravel of the staff yard, the heavy fire door groaning behind them. They find Ryan leaning against the weathered wooden fence, blowing a thick plume of vape smoke into the grey afternoon air while he lazily scrolls through his phone.

"How are you feeling about all these changes, bud?" Chaz asks, flicking his cigarette butt toward a rusted bucket to get Ryan's attention.

Ryan looks up, a small, tired smile flickering when he sees them. "Changes? What changes? I've been stuck on the bar for three hours. I haven't seen anything but the bottom of a latte glass."

"Oh, you haven't heard the gospel of Clifton yet?" Lydia says, folding her arms over her chest against the chill. "Melissa's been demoted. She's back to being Assistant Manager as of five minutes ago."

Ryan's eyes widen, his thumb hovering over his screen. "Shit. Are you serious? She was a good manager... she actually cared. Is this because of the milkshake? Because of what happened last week?"

"Who knows," Lydia shrugs, her breath hitching in the cold air. "But you're not gonna like the second half of the setlist."

"Clifton smashed my speaker—properly totaled it—and he's shutting the kitchen down," Chaz adds, his voice deadpan, masking the raw anger underneath.

Ryan's jaw literally drops. "You're joking. He can't do that. We're a Diner."

"Nope. Head Office doesn't want a kitchen here anymore. Not 'cost-effective,' apparently." Lydia says it like she still can't quite believe the words coming out of her own mouth.

"Fucking hell," Ryan mutters, the weight of the news hitting him. He shoves his phone into his pocket and walks over to them. "What am I gonna do without you guys here? It's just gonna be me and Phil talking about De Palma to a brick wall."

Lydia nudges him with her elbow, her expression softening. "I've been your best mate since we were eleven, Ry. You'll still see me all the time. I'll just be at home on the sofa instead of in that grease-trap."

"Yeah, mate," Chaz adds, clapping him on the shoulder with a heavy hand. "You've got Chloe. You've got Phil. You've even got that posh prick Jonathan to keep you on your toes. You'll be fine. You're the 'Golden Boy' now."

Ryan huffed out a short, dry laugh, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "It just won't be the same without you two pissing about back there. The music, the shouting... it'll be like a library in there."

"Don't stress about us," Chaz says, taking one last long drag of his cigarette. "We've got to figure out what the hell we're doing next. Proper adulting."

Ryan cocks an eyebrow, trying to find a silver lining. "So... you're technically unemployed now?"

"Technically," Lydia says. "We've got the choice: transfer to the Leamington branch—which sounds like a nightmare commute—or take the redundancy check and run."

"I'd take redundancy," Ryan says firmly. "At least you'd be free of Clifton. Don't let him own another minute of your time."

Chaz stubbed his cigarette out on the fence post, his face darkening. "Don't say his name in my presence again, yeah? I've had enough of that suit to last a lifetime."

Ryan snorts. "He's driving me up the wall, too. Keeps telling me off for talking to Phil and Chloe like we're schoolkids. Says I'm 'distracting' the assets."

"He's a bully, mate," Chaz says flatly. "A career-ladder climber who gets a fat bonus for slashing jobs and making everyone miserable. He's a parasite in a tie."

Ryan cracks a small grin, remembering his chat with Gary. "One of the regulars, Gary, reckons I'm SpongeBob—so I guess that makes Clifton Mr. Krabs. Except without the funny laugh."

"Who's Gary?" Lydia asked, confused.

"A regular. Top bloke. Keeps me entertained on dead shifts. He's the only reason I haven't walked out myself."

Chaz nudges Ryan again, his voice becoming surprisingly sincere. "Oi—just remember: when your fancy restaurant idea finally takes off? When you're the boss? We're there. Day one. Lydia on the floor, me on the pass. No corporate bullshit."

Ryan laughs, the first real warmth of the day hitting him. "Thanks, Chaz. I'm gonna miss you two in there. More than you know."

Chaz rolls his eyes, though he's clearly touched. "We live in the same house, mate. You'll see my ugly mug every morning over the cereal."

Ryan barks out a real laugh this time. "Yeah. True. I'll see you at home, then. For a beer." He gives them a quick, two-finger salute and heads back toward the door.

Chaz and Lydia watch him go, the heavy door swinging shut with a dull, final thud. Lydia takes a long drag of her vape, letting the sweet-smelling cloud hang in the chill air.

"I've made my decision," Chaz says, flicking a bit of ash from his knuckles.

"Oh yeah?" Lydia asks. "What's that? Going to open a food truck?"

"I'm definitely rolling a fat joint when I get home tonight. A massive one."

Lydia elbows him in the ribs, snorting. "I meant about work, you muppet."

"Oh, that too. Redundancy. One hundred percent. Fuck Red's, and fuck Clifton. Time to move on to something that doesn't come out of a freezer bag."

"Same here." Lydia grins, bumping her knuckles against his. "Here's to whatever comes next. It's gotta be better than this."

They stand there for a moment in the quiet of the yard, a tiny, silent spark of rebellion against the dying, mechanical hum of the place they'd both finally outgrown.

CHAPTER 13

[9] Good Vibrations by Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch

A matte-black Range Rover Sport rolled into the heart of Stratford-upon-Avon, its engine humming almost silently as Good Vibrations blasted through the open windows loud enough to rattle the café windows. The driver swung effortlessly into a loading bay without the slightest concern for the parking restrictions.

The door opened.

Out stepped a broad, gym-built man in his late thirties. His white polo shirt clung tightly to sculpted arms that looked like they spent more time in front of mirrors than behind desks. Designer sunglasses rested on his face despite the clouds overhead, a smartwatch gleamed on his wrist, and he carried a stainless-steel protein shaker instead of a coffee.

He glanced briefly at his reflection in the Range Rover's window, adjusted his collar and smiled to himself.

Success looked good on him.

He strode into Red's as though he'd already bought the building.

Inside, Clifton and Melissa were waiting beside the bar.

Ryan, Phil, Chloe, Jonathan and Ewan all looked up from what they were doing.

"David!" the newcomer boomed, wrapping Clifton in an overenthusiastic handshake. "Mate, this place has potential. Bit dated... but potential."

Clifton offered a thin smile.

"Everyone... this is Jake Browning."

Jake spread his arms.

"Morning, team."

Nobody answered.

He smiled anyway.

"Good. Quiet room. Means everyone's focused."

He pointed towards the self-service kiosks.

"Love these."

Ryan frowned.

Jake continued.

"See... this is the future. No awkward conversations. No ordering mistakes. No queues. Technology doesn't have bad days."

Phil muttered beneath his breath.

"Neither does a toaster."

Jake ignored him.

"I've managed Leamington, Warwick, Coventry and Nuneaton."

He tapped his smartwatch.

"Every branch doubled productivity."

Another tap.

"I run everything from this."

Ryan glanced at Phil.

Phil whispered,

"Bet it even tells him when to blink."

Jake grinned proudly.

"It tracks productivity, staffing efficiency, customer flow and labour costs in real time."

He looked around proudly.

"If I can't measure it..."

he shrugged,

"...it probably isn't worth doing."

Ryan exchanged another look with Phil.

Melissa cleared her throat.

"So... what's happening here exactly?"

Clifton answered.

"Melissa will remain as Assistant Manager."

Jake smiled.

"I prefer calling everyone coaches rather than managers."

Phil blinked.

"...Why?"

"Because managers manage."

Jake smiled.

"Leaders inspire."

Nobody said anything.

Jake nodded.

"You'll get used to it."

Chloe spoke.

"What about the kitchen?"

Clifton looked delighted he'd asked.

"Oh, brilliant news."

He walked over to the empty kitchen doorway.

"No more chefs."

Everyone stared.

"We're replacing everything with automated food dispensers."

Silence.

Jake smiled wider.

"Customers order cake."

He mimed pressing buttons.

"Machine dispenses cake."

He clapped once.

"Beautiful."

Phil stared.

"...You've invented a vending machine."

Jake laughed.

"No."

He pointed proudly.

"I've reinvented customer experience."

Ryan then quietly looked at Chloe.

"I miss the chefs already."

Ewan folded his arms.

"But we're supposed to be a diner."

Jake shrugged.

"We're whatever customers keep paying for."

Clifton stepped in.

"Exactly."

Jake wandered behind the bar, picking up one of the tablets.

"You know what the biggest problem in hospitality is?"

Nobody answered.

"People."

He smiled.

"They're unpredictable."

He tapped the tablet.

"Systems aren't."

Ryan couldn't help himself.

"You can't automate kindness."

Jake looked at him for a long second.

Then smiled.

"You must be Ryan."

"...Yeah."

"The dreamer."

Ryan frowned.

"What?"

"I read your file."

Jake chuckled.

"Wants to own his own place one day."

Ryan looked uncomfortable.

Jake stepped closer.

"Here's a bit of advice."

He lowered his voice.

"Customers don't buy kindness."

He tapped the espresso machine.

"They buy consistency."

Another tap on his smartwatch.

"Business isn't built on feelings."

Ryan replied quietly.

"I think it is."

Jake actually laughed.

"No wonder this branch is losing money."

Ryan leaned towards Phil.

"I've got a bad feeling about this bloke."

Phil nodded.

"So have I."

Unfortunately...

Jake heard him.

He slowly turned around.

"What was that?"

Ryan sighed.

"Nothing."

Jake walked over until they were almost nose to nose.

"Rule number one."

He smiled.

"If you've got something to say..."

he tapped Ryan gently on the chest.

"...say it to my face."

Ryan held his ground.

Jake smiled wider.

"Confidence."

He nodded approvingly.

"I like that."

Then his smile disappeared.

"Just don't mistake confidence for authority."

He looked around the room.

"You know what separates successful people from average people?"

Nobody answered.

"Mindset."

He pointed towards the kiosks.

"Technology."

Towards the office.

"Data."

Towards Ryan.

"Discipline."

Towards Phil.

"Negativity is expensive."

Phil rolled his eyes.

"That's definitely going on LinkedIn."

Ewan couldn't resist.

"Or a podcast."

Jake looked at Ewan.

"You are?"

"Ewan."

"Shadowing from Alcester."

Jake smiled.

"Excellent."

He looked him up and down.

"Good managers embrace change."

Ewan smiled politely.

"I also think staff deserve lunch breaks."

Ryan bit his lip to stop himself laughing.

Jake's smile faltered for the first time.

Only for a second.

Then it returned.

"We'll make a leader out of you yet."

Jake slapped Clifton on the shoulder.

"Come on, Dave."

He grinned.

"Let's find out where we're bleeding money."

The pair disappeared into the office.

Silence.

Finally...

Phil spoke.

"...I give him three days before he starts talking about cryptocurrency."

Ewan watched the office door close.

"I give him two before he tells us to replace ourselves with AI."

Ryan looked toward the empty kitchen.

For the first time since Justin had left...he wasn't worried about the future.

He was worried about who was shaping it.

CHAPTER 14

Clifton steps into the empty, echoing kitchen.

The silence is heavy. A brutal contrast to the years of clattering pans, shouted orders, and heavy metal that once defined this space. The stainless steel counters gleam beneath the fluorescent lights, almost too clean now, as if someone erased the kitchen instead of closing it.

Chaz and Lydia stand waiting by the back prep bench.

Their chef whites are gone.

Chaz is back in his battered, faded Nine Inch Nails T-shirt, his old boots planted firmly on the tiled floor. Lydia wears her worn A Day to Remember shirt, her rucksack slung over one shoulder. At Chaz's feet sits his battered shopping bag filled with his professional knives and personal cooking equipment—a small reminder of everything he built here.

Everything he's leaving behind.

"So," Clifton says, his voice thin against the emptiness of the room. "Have you made a final decision about your future with Red's?"

Chaz doesn't hesitate.

"Yeah. We're both taking the redundancy."

Lydia nods beside him, her chin lifted.

"It's time to move on. This place... it's not a kitchen anymore. It's a vending machine with a floor."

Clifton raises an eyebrow.

"You're certain you wouldn't prefer a transfer? Leamington, Warwick. They've still got functioning kitchens. They could use experienced staff."

Chaz lets out a dry laugh.

"Frankly, Dave? Nah. I'm done with Red's. I've reached my limit on 'streamlining.'"

"Same," Lydia adds. "Not that I've been here long enough to become completely bitter like the rest of the brand."

Clifton gives a shallow, performative sigh.

"Very well. Thank you both for your service. Your redundancy calculations and final pay will be processed in the coming weeks."

"Great," Chaz replies, already picking up his bag. "Can we go now?"

Clifton raises a hand.

"Not quite yet. You're technically still employed here for two more days. Notice periods apply, even during restructuring."

Chaz narrows his eyes.

"Do I have any holiday entitlement left?"

"Two days," Clifton replies.

"Perfect. I'll take them. Starting now."

Lydia folds her arms.

"I haven't used any holiday since I started either. So I assume I'm owed the same."

Clifton's jaw tightens.

"Forty-eight hours?"

“Sounds about right.”

For a moment, nobody speaks.

Then Clifton exhales through his nose, defeated.

“Fine. Say your goodbyes and vacate the premises.”

He turns to leave.

But Chaz steps forward.

“Oi, hang on, Dave.”

Clifton stops.

“That speaker you smashed. I want compensation. That was my personal property.”

Clifton’s expression hardens.

“No. It was a workplace distraction.”

Lydia smiles.

“My sister’s a senior solicitor in London. She absolutely loves pointless property damage cases. She’d probably do it just for entertainment.”

Clifton stares at them.

His face reddens.

Slowly, reluctantly, he reaches into his leather wallet and pulls out a crumpled ten-pound note.

He slaps it into Chaz’s hand.

“Take it. Before I change my mind and deduct it from your final payslip.”

Chaz looks at the note.

Then smiles.

A small victory.

He pockets it.

“Cheers, Dave.”

He and Lydia turn away, their footsteps echoing down the corridor for the final time.

[10] Somewhere Only We Know – Keane

They step into the front of house.

The gentle, melancholic sound of Somewhere Only We Know drifts through the café speakers, softening the harshness of the moment.

Ryan, Chloe, Phil, Jonathan, Ewan, and Melissa stand near the bar, watching them leave.

Ewan hangs slightly behind the others.

He hasn't known Chaz and Lydia as long as the rest of them. He arrived after some of the battles had already been fought. But even he understands what they represented.

The last pieces of the old Red's.

The people who cared about what happened behind the counter.

Chaz takes a deep breath, looking across the group.

"Goodbye, everyone. Look after yourselves, yeah? Don't let the bastards grind you down. Keep in touch."

"Bye, peeps," Lydia says brightly.

Too brightly.

Her smile fades slightly as she looks around the room, trying not to cry.

Ryan raises a hand in a silent wave.

Phil nods solemnly, leaning against the espresso machine.

Chloe mouths a quiet "Thank you."

Jonathan, awkward as ever, gives them a stiff military-style salute.

Even Melissa steps forward, her eyes glassy behind her glasses.

"I didn't want this to happen, Chaz."

Her voice cracks slightly.

"Same here, Mel."

For once, there's no anger between them.

Just exhaustion.

They look at each other like two people who lost something they both cared about.

"See you around."

As Chaz turns to leave, Owen finally speaks.

“Chaz?”

The chef looks back.

Ewan hesitates.

“I know I wasn’t here for most of it... but I just wanted to say... I’m sorry.”

Chaz softens.

“Don’t be. Look after this place.”

Ewan looks around the café.

“I’ll try.”

Chaz gives him a small nod.

“That’s all anyone can do.”

The two of them share a brief smile.

Then Chaz and Lydia push through the heavy glass doors together.

A chef and his apprentice.

Leaving Red’s behind.

Behind them, Clifton stands in the kitchen doorway, arms folded, watching like a man who has completed an unpleasant but necessary task.

Jake sidles up beside him, chewing on a toothpick with a smug grin.

“Who were they?”

Clifton doesn’t even look away.

“Don’t worry about them, Jake. They won’t be your problem now.”

The doors swing shut.

“They’re yesterday’s news.”

Owen watches the empty doorway.

Quietly, almost to himself, he says:

“Still feels wrong.”

Ryan looks over at him.

Ewan shrugs.

"Two people just walked out, and it feels like something disappeared."

Nobody answers.

Because everyone knows he's right.

The faint sound of Keane continues playing through the speakers.

The sound of a family breaking.

One goodbye at a time.

ACT THREE

CHAPTER 15

Chaz and Lydia drift aimlessly through the winding streets of Stratford-upon-Avon, the mid-afternoon sun fighting a losing battle against a bank of heavy, grey clouds. The air smells of rain and tour bus exhaust.

"I've got to admit," Lydia sighs, kicking a loose pebble along the pavement with a scuffed boot, "there's not much fun to do in this town like there used to be. It's all Shakespeare and overpriced fudge."

Chaz snorts, flicking his lighter open and closed with a metallic click-clack that echoes against the timber-framed buildings. "Since I've lived here, it's been a shithole. Just a shithole with historical significance."

Lydia smirks at him, eyes glinting with mischief. "So why'd you leave Shirley then? I thought that was the Promised Land for guys like you."

"My ex, Kayley, was from Stratford, innit?" Chaz shrugs, his backpack shifting on his shoulders. "Moved in with her after college. Broke up, moved house—but I never left. Got stuck in the orbit."

Lydia makes a disgusted face. "You dated someone from Stratford? Even my standards aren't that low. That's basically dating a tourist."

Chaz shoots her a look. "Isn't your girlfriend Claudia from Stratford?"

"Wellesbourne," Lydia corrects him instantly, her chin lifted with pride. "So not exactly. It's a completely different vibe."

"Same thing, innit? Just smaller."

They turn a corner onto a side street, and Lydia's eyes catch a sharp, hand-painted sign hanging over a wide glass front: The Green Knight. She nudges Chaz hard in the ribs. "Hey, Chaz—look at the sign. Must be new. Wasn't that a dusty old antique shop last month?"

A neon sign buzzes softly above the wide doors, casting a warm glow. Unlike the cold, sterile lights of Red's, this place feels alive. Muffled bass and the sound of laughter spill out onto the pavement.

"Could do with a pint," Chaz says, eyeing the entrance like a traveler spotting an oasis in the Sahara.

Lydia rolls her eyes, tugging her backpack strap higher. "Are alcohol and drugs literally all you think about, Chaz? It's three in the afternoon."

"Pretty much," Chaz says with a wide, unrepentant grin.

"No wonder you're single." Lydia pushes the door open and steps inside, the bells jingling a welcoming tone.

Chaz looks at her as the door swings. "After Kayley, being single's a massive upgrade. Trust me."

Inside, the gospel-infused soul of Movin' On Up thumps out of high-quality speakers. The place is cavernous—bigger than it looks from the street—with an open floor plan, mismatched mid-century chairs, and walls covered in local art and vintage band posters.

The bar stretches down the left side, hand-carved wood gleaming under low-slung Edison bulbs. It's buzzing with the sound of real, unfiltered conversation instead of the rhythmic beep-boop of digital kiosks. And behind it—no uniforms, no polyester lanyards, just staff in their own clothes, moving with a rhythm that suggests they actually want to be there.

"I bet this is the kind of place Ryan dreams about," Lydia says, turning in a slow, admiring circle.

"Yeah," Chaz agrees, taking in the exposed brick. "Better music, too."

A man in a flannel shirt stands near the front, checking a seating plan. He looks up and greets them with a relaxed nod.

"Hello, guys. I'm Patrick, the Assistant Manager here. Welcome to The Green Knight. How can I help you today?" Patrick says with a natural, unforced smile.

"Alright, mate. We just wanna get a drink, if that's alright. Nothing fancy," Chaz says, his guard dropping just a fraction.

"Sure thing. Head over to the bar, and then feel free to take a seat anywhere that isn't reserved," Patrick says, guiding the way with a casual gesture.

Lydia walks toward the bar, mesmerized by the decor, while Chaz instinctively drifts toward the back. He spots a kitchen pass—a real one. He peers through the opening. Real gas stoves. Real prep benches. A stack of fresh produce sitting in crates. No microwaves, no pre-packed plastic trays, and no corporate "manuals" in sight. But curiously, there are no chefs visible.

He turns back, about to point it out to Lydia, but finds her staring at the bar, her mouth slightly agape.

“Hey Chaz,” she says, nudging him again, her voice a hushed whisper. “Look who it is.”

Chaz squints over her shoulder, his eyes adjusting to the low light. There, behind the bar, methodically stacking clean glasses with that same familiar, lazy grin, is a face they never expected to see again.

“Justin?!” Chaz blushes, his voice booming across the room.

Justin looks up, his eyes widening for half a second before his face cracks into a massive, genuine grin. He sets a glass down and leans over the counter. “Hey, hey! If it isn’t my favorite pair of chefs. Didn’t expect to see you two in the wild today.”

Chaz chuckles, a mixture of relief and intense curiosity flooding his chest. “Mate—didn’t expect to see you either.”

Lydia just folds her arms, a genuine, sharp grin spreading across her face. “Maybe Stratford’s not so dead after all, Chaz.”

CHAPTER 16

[12] Dreams by Fleetwood Mac

Back at Red’s, the low, ethereal hum of Dreams drifts through the speakers, filling the heavy hush that always arrives just before the lights are dimmed.

Phil pushes out of the staff room, his signature snapback pulled low over his messy hair and his bag slung over his shoulder.

The café is almost ready to close. Ryan polishes the last few glasses behind the mahogany bar while Chloe finishes cleaning the espresso machine, the final hiss of steam cutting through the quiet.

Nearby, Ewan wipes down the tables, humming along quietly to the music.

“I’m off now, guys,” Phil says, grabbing his coat. “I’m meeting Justin at his new place tonight. He says I’ll love the vibe. Apparently, they have actual vinyl.”

Ryan looks up, a small smile appearing.

“Tell him I said hi, yeah? I’m actually starting to miss the idiot. The silence is too loud.”

“Same here,” Chloe says, twisting the steam wand shut. “Well... I miss the person he was before he went full jerk-mode, anyway.”

Phil laughs.

“Don’t we all.”

Ewan glances over from the table.

“Sounds like he made quite the impression.”

Ryan smiles.

"You have no idea."

"Trust me," Phil adds. "You're better off hearing the stories rather than living through them."

Ewan chuckles.

"Fair enough."

Phil swings his bag over his shoulder and starts toward the door, but then he looks back.

"Ewan, you heading straight home when you finish?"

Owen looks up.

"Yeah, why?"

Phil grins.

"I'm meeting Natalie in a sec. You should join us too, you know. For Old time sake."

Ewan smiles at the offer.

"Appreciate it, mate. But me and Miles have got a gaming night planned."

Phil nods.

"Fair enough. Can't interrupt the sacred gamer tradition."

"Exactly," Ewan says. "We're halfway through a campaign."

Phil points at him.

"Respect. Another time then?"

"Definitely."

Phil gives him a thumbs up.

"Good lad."

Before Phil can leave, Jonathan appears from the back, hands tucked into his apron pockets.

"Ah, Phil, before you vanish into the night, I've got a bit of an announcement."

Ryan raises an eyebrow.

"What's up? Clifton found another crumb on the carpet?"

Jonathan rolls his eyes.

"No. Although knowing him, he probably would have."

He clears his throat, trying and failing to hide the proud smile creeping across his face.

“Melissa already knows—but Clifton’s leaving the branch in six weeks. And I’ve been asked to take his place as Regional Manager.”

Everyone stops.

Even Ewan looks up from the table.

Chloe’s eyebrows shoot up.

“A double jump? From Assistant to Regional? Bloody hell, Jonathan. You’ve got the Midas touch.”

Jonathan shrugs.

“Clifton reckons I’m far too overqualified to be stuck behind a bar. Offered me the whole county. Warwickshire is officially my problem now.”

Phil lets out a whistle.

“Big man now, huh? Selling your soul to the company store. Don’t forget us little people when you’re sitting in the boardroom.”

Ewan smiles.

“Wait... Warwickshire?”

Jonathan nods.

“Yep.”

“So that means you’ll be visiting Alcester?”

Jonathan laughs.

“Looks like it.”

Ewan grins.

“Guess I’ll be seeing you again then.”

“Hopefully under better circumstances than Clifton’s inspections,” Jonathan jokes.

Ewan laughs.

“Definitely.”

Phil points at Ewan.

"I'm warning you, mate. The second he steps into that fancy new office, the power will go straight to his head."

Jonathan rolls his eyes.

"Not a chance."

His expression softens.

"With the wedding coming up—and baby Ashley on the way—the pay increase was too significant to turn down. I've got a family to think about."

Ryan nudges him playfully.

"So does this mean you're gonna turn into a proper meanie now? A mini-Clifton with better hair?"

"Absolutely not," Jonathan says.

Then he looks around at everyone.

"If anything, I just wanted to say thank you. You lot showed me what working in hospitality actually means. It's not just spreadsheets and targets. It's people."

The room goes quiet.

"I'll try to do a better job than Clifton ever did. And I'll aim to be at least ten percent more likeable."

Chloe reaches over the counter and squeezes his arm.

"We know you will, Jonny. You've got a heart under that ironed shirt."

Jonathan smiles.

"Thanks, Chloe."

Ryan leans forward.

"And remember, mate, when my dream place finally happens, you've got a job waiting for you on the board of directors."

Jonathan laughs.

"I'll hold you to that."

Ryan claps his hands.

"Right. That means we're planning a massive leaving do. I'll handle the playlist."

"Just don't tell Justin," Chloe says with a grin. "He'll turn it into a rave."

Phil heads for the door, laughing.

“Yeah. He’ll try and sneak back in and reclaim his throne.”

The group laughs together.

For a moment, despite everything changing, Red’s still feels like Red’s.

A familiar, frayed-at-the-edges family.

A place that keeps falling apart...

but somehow still feels like home.

CHAPTER 17

[13] Feel Good Inc. by Gorillaz

Back at The Green Knight, the iconic, driving bassline of Feel Good Inc. pulses through the speakers, the vibration humming through the soles of Chaz’s boots and under the battered wooden tables. Justin strolls over to the booth where Chaz and Lydia are perched, two frosty, condensation-covered pints of Moretti balanced in his hands.

“Drinks are on the house, legends. Courtesy of yours truly,” Justin says, his grin wide and triumphant as he sets the gold-filtered pints down.

Chaz raises an eyebrow, a flicker of genuine surprise on his face. “Cheers, pal. We needed that. But how the hell did you end up in a spot like this? Last time I saw you, you were being escorted off the premises like a common criminal.”

Justin shrugs, sliding into the booth opposite them with a relaxed sigh. “My housemate Patrick is the Assistant Manager here. Told him the whole sob story about how I was ‘restructured’ out of Red’s. Luckily, they needed an experienced supervisor who actually knows how to talk to people, and they got me in straight away. Been here ever since. Best move I ever made.”

Chaz gestured around the buzzing bar, taking in the art and the lack of digital kiosks. “So, what’s the crack with the kitchen? A proper place like this has to serve more than just peanuts and crisps.”

Justin winces, his expression darkening. “Don’t. Liam—our manager—had a chef lined up for the launch. Bloke he’d worked with for years. The guy bailed at the last minute this morning; said he found a ‘better opportunity’ in Birmingham. We’re sitting on a fully stocked fridge and no one to cook it.”

“That’s shit,” Lydia mutters, taking a long, appreciative sip of her pint.

Chaz leans in, his eyes flicking between the kitchen pass and the “Now Hiring” sign. The gears are clearly turning. “Well, lucky for Liam, two highly experienced, recently liberated out-of-work chefs just walked through the door.”

Justin smirks, the realization hitting him. “Wait... you guys got fired too?”

"Made redundant," Lydia corrects him, wagging a finger with a smirk. "It sounds more professional. A bit more dignity on the CV."

Justin laughs, pushing himself up from the table. "Stay put. Don't move. I'll grab Liam. You'll like him—he actually listens when you speak."

As Justin disappears into the back office, Chaz raises his glass toward Lydia. "Ain't the first time I've wandered into a pub and found myself a career."

Lydia clinked her pint against his with a soft clink. "Where were you the first twenty-five years of my life, Chaz? I could have avoided a lot of bad jobs."

Justin returns a moment later, flanked by a stocky bloke in a faded Guns N' Roses tee, jeans that have seen better days, and a pair of battered brown leather shoes. He doesn't look like a manager; he looks like a guy who's just finished a shift on a construction site.

"Chaz, Lydia—this is Liam. The legend himself," Justin says, introducing them with a flourish.

"Alright, you two?" Liam gives them a wide, easy grin. He looks Chaz up and down, nodding at his Nine Inch Nails shirt. "Nice shirt, mate. The Downward Spiral is a masterpiece."

Chaz smirks, feeling the tension leave his shoulders. "Cheers. Nice to meet you, Liam."

Liam points a finger at Chaz. "You a football lad? I can tell by the posture."

"Aston Villa, through and through. Try to get to a game every season, though the shift work usually kills that."

Liam claps his hands together with a loud thwack. "West Ham, myself. Guess we'll have some decent banter over the results on Mondays. Better than talking about weather."

Lydia crosses her arms, her eyes bright and analytical. "So—what's the deal here then, Liam? Sell it to us. Why should we bring our knives here instead of going to the big hotels?"

Liam leans against the edge of the booth, his voice calm but underscored with a hard-earned certainty. "We're independent. Completely. No corporate manuals, no head office emails, and absolutely zero microwaved bollocks. I like my chefs to run their own show—sourcing the local suppliers, designing the daily specials, hiring their own crew, picking whatever kit they need. You answer to me, but you've got total creative control, as long as you keep the standards high and the punters fed."

Chaz's eyes widened. "Proper head chef freedom? I pick the menu?"

"Exactly," Liam said. "And I can see you brought your own equipment with you, so that's a great start. Shows you actually give a toss about your tools."

"Yeah, it's all my own. I bought every blade myself," Chaz says, patting the bag at his feet.

"Yeah, but I'm the one who had to go and lug it out of the kitchen for him while he was arguing with Clifton," Lydia adds with a wink.

“Perfect. Look, can you guys swing by tomorrow morning around ten? Show off your skills, cook me something that doesn't come out of a plastic bag? I can put your tools straight into the kitchen lockers for you right now, ready to join the team.”

Chaz didn't hesitate. He reached out and shook Liam's hand with a firm, decisive grip. “You had me at ‘no corporate bollocks.’ We'll be here.”

Lydia shakes Liam's hand right after. “I'm in too. I'll be the one making sure he actually cleans down the benches.”

Liam smiles at them both, a look of genuine relief on his face. “Excellent. I can't wait to see what you two can do. Welcome to the Knight.”

Justin beams at his boss. “There you go, Liam. I told you I'd solve your chef problem.”

Liam turns to Justin, clapping him on the shoulder. “Thanks, Justin. Seriously. You can clock off early if you want. You'll be getting a double bonus in your packet this week for bringing these two in. You saved the launch.”

Justin's jaw dropped. “You serious?”

“Deadly. Go on—have a night with your mates. You've earned it.” Liam gives him a wink, takes Chaz's heavy bag of equipment, and walks it toward the back of the building with a nod.

Justin looks at Chaz and Lydia, a grin splitting his face from ear to ear. “Give me five minutes. I'll grab my stuff and we can find somewhere that doesn't remind you of work.”

Chaz and Lydia watch him disappear into the back. They lift their glasses, the clink of the heavy glass echoing over the low, cool hum of the bar.

“To new beginnings,” Chaz says, his voice sounding lighter than it has in weeks.

“To better days,” Lydia adds.

And they down their pints, Feel Good Inc. pounding out its promise of something brighter, louder, and infinitely more real.

CHAPTER 18

[14] Harder Better Faster Stronger by Daft Punk

The repetitive, robotic pulse of Harder Better Faster Stronger thumps from the café speakers—the irony of the lyrics is lost on no one except Clifton and Jake. The floor is a chaotic blur of the afternoon rush. Melissa and Jonathan weave between crowded tables, plates of pre-packaged pastries balanced like circus acts.

At the bar, Chloe and Ryan are in perfect, unspoken sync—coffees poured, orders shouted, ceramic mugs stacked high in a gleaming wall of porcelain.

Running between the bar and the packed tables are Jonathan and Ewan, carrying drinks and checking orders with the kind of teamwork that only comes from people who know each other's rhythm. Jonathan handles the larger table orders while Owen follows behind with trays balanced carefully in both hands, still learning the chaos but quickly becoming part of it.

"Table fourteen needs two more cappuccinos," Owen calls over the noise.

"Already on it," Ryan replies without even looking up.

Ewan smiles slightly. Even during the madness, there's something strangely comforting about how everyone moves together.

Off to the side, near the window, Clifton scribbles furiously in his battered notepad. His eyes flick over the team like they are livestock at an auction, counting every second of "dead time." Jake lounges next to him, arms folded over his polo shirt, pretending to observe "efficiency metrics" but mostly just smirking at the frantic pace.

Despite the chaos, the bullshit, and the broken spirit of the place, the team holds it down. They work like a family, covering each other's backs and anticipating every move. They are a well-oiled machine, even if half of them know the machine is being sold for parts.

As the last wave finally dies down, Ryan and Chloe lean on the back bar, catching their breath. Ryan wipes a bead of sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, flashing Chloe a crooked, weary grin.

"So," he says, his voice low and intimate, "you still up for tonight? No backing out?"

"Definitely," she shoots back, her eyes sparkling despite the fatigue. "I've made sure of it—after work, I'm all yours. No orders, no lattes, no suits."

He wags an eyebrow. "Good. I wanna show you that place I mentioned. The one with the real atmosphere."

Chloe pretends to think, tapping her chin. "What place? Sorry, I've slept since then. Was it the library?"

"It's this little pub, just outside town," Ryan says, his voice warming. "Peaceful, good vibe—it's the perfect place to actually talk, you know? Away from—"

"RYAN!"

Clifton's bark cuts through the café like a whip crack, vibrating the very air. He storms over from the window, his face flushed and his eyes bulging with a manic sort of fury. "How many times do I have to tell you? Stop babbling to your colleagues and get on with your work! The condiment stand is three millimeters out of alignment!"

Ryan freezes. Something inside him—that frayed, fragile rope he's been hanging onto for months—finally snaps. He thinks of Justin's empty locker. Melissa's demotion. Chaz and Lydia walking out into the rain. Phil's distant stare. Jake's smugness. And Clifton... always yelling. He'd carried it all for the team, trying to be the bridge. But this time? The bridge collapsed.

He reaches for an empty white coffee cup on the shelf. Without a word, he marches around the bar, straight up to Clifton. With a sharp, violent motion, he hurls the cup against the brick wall. It shatters with a deafening crack, pieces of porcelain clattering across the floor like hail.

Silence falls like a bomb. Customers stop mid-sip. Chloe's eyes widen in terror. Even Jake looks up, his smirk replaced by raised eyebrows of genuine surprise.

Ryan glares at Clifton, his chest heaving. "Now I've got your attention, Dave," he spits, the "Mr." gone for good. "I've got some words for you."

Clifton crosses his arms, his jaw clenched so tight it looks like it might crack. Jake leans into Clifton, whispering, "Want me to handle him? Security's on speed dial."

Clifton doesn't break eye contact with Ryan. "No. Let's hear it. Let's see what the 'Golden Boy' has to say."

Ryan's voice shakes with adrenaline, but it never wavers. "David Clifton. You are the most vile, smug excuse for a human being I've ever met. You're a bully. You look down on everyone like we're ants under your fancy Italian shoes. This team? This place? It's not just a job to us—it's a family. And every time you show up, you chip away at it. You don't care who you hurt as long as the spreadsheet looks green. You think you're above it all—but you're not. We break our backs for scraps while you go home to your perfect life. How the hell do you even sleep at night, knowing you ruin people's lives for a bonus?"

A beat of stunned, agonizing silence.

Then, a single, sharp clap.

Chloe.

Jonathan joins in next, a proud smile spreading across his face.

Melissa follows, tears already forming in her eyes.

Then Ewan, still holding the tray he'd been carrying when Ryan snapped, slowly starts clapping too.

He doesn't know every battle that came before him. He wasn't there for Justin's downfall or Chaz and Lydia's departure. But he knows what this place means to the people standing around him.

And he knows Ryan is right.

The applause spreads through Red's like a wave. The regulars in the booths join in, then even some of the customers at the tables.

Then, unbelievably, the regulars in the booths. A wave of applause swells through Red's like a tidal wave. Even Jake, surprisingly, starts clapping, turning to Clifton with a shrug. "Gotta say, Dave—I respect the stones on the kid. At least he said it to your face instead of a bathroom stall."

Clifton stands frozen, his eyes boring into Ryan's. For a second, Ryan's stomach drops—the fear bubbling back up. Had he just destroyed his future for a five-second speech?

Finally, Clifton lets out a sharp, long breath. "Well, Foster. Turns out you're not the spineless pushover I took you for. You've got more moxie than most of the people who've worked in this county."

Ryan's pulse thunders in his ears, deafeningly loud.

"But," Clifton adds with a dry, clinical coldness, "that cup's coming out of your next pay slip. With interest."

Ryan barks out a shocked, hysterical laugh, shaking his head. "Figures. Always the bottom line, eh?"

Clifton cracks the smallest, strangest smile—it's not friendly, but it's an acknowledgement of a worthy opponent. "However... I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. Just this once. Don't make me regret it."

Ryan's jaw drops. Chloe punches his arm playfully, grinning from ear to ear. Jonathan and Melissa let out a celebratory whoop from the floor. Even Jake gives him a sharp nod of approval.

"Thanks, Mr. Clifton," Ryan says, his chest still heaving. "I won't take back a single word I said—but I won't let the team down, either."

Clifton claps him once on the shoulder—a stiff, awkward gesture that feels more like a threat than praise. "Don't mistake this for approval, Foster. You've still got a lot to prove to me. And to Jake."

As Clifton turns on his heel and walks toward the exit, Jake turns to his new team, flashing a row of perfectly white teeth. "See you all next week when I take over. Can't wait to see if you can work as hard as you can shout," he says, his voice dripping with faux cheer as he follows Clifton out.

As the door swings shut, the room erupts.

Chloe hugs Ryan tightly, Melissa claps him on the back with tears in her eyes, and Jonathan just shakes his head, laughing in disbelief.

Owen stands nearby, still looking slightly stunned.

"That was... something," he says.

Ryan laughs, finally letting some of the tension leave his shoulders.

"Yeah. Probably not my smartest career move."

Ewan looks toward the broken cup on the floor.

"Maybe not. But someone had to say it."

Ryan looks at him for a moment, then smiles.

Ryan glances at the wrecked mug on the floor, then at his team—his family. "God," he chuckled, the adrenaline finally fading into a warm glow. "I wish Chaz, Lydia, Phil, and Justin were here to see that. Justin would have filmed it."

Chloe grins, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "They'd be proud, Ry. You finally did it."

Jonathan raises his hand for a high five, and Ryan meets it mid-air.

And somewhere deep inside him, Ryan feels it—that tiny, stubborn spark. He’s one step closer. One day, he thinks, looking around at the fading red walls. One day I’ll have a place of my own—and they’ll all be there. And no one will ever be a ‘number’ again.

CHAPTER 19

[15] Dog Days are Over by Florence and the Machine

Phil pushes through the heavy, iron-latched doors of The Green Knight, Natalie walking beside him.

Florence Welch’s voice rattles the old window frames, her soaring vocals cutting through the pub like they’re chasing every last corporate ghost out of the room.

For the first time in what feels like forever, Phil isn’t wearing his Red’s uniform.

He looks like himself again.

His snapback is pulled low over his eyes, a faded Foo Fighters T-shirt hangs over his shoulders, and his battered black cargos sit loosely above his scuffed Docs.

Natalie looks around the pub, taking in the battered guitars hanging from the walls, the indie posters, and the warm glow of the bar.

“Wow,” she says with a smile. “This place looks great.”

Phil laughs.

“Yeah. Bit different from Red’s.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

He spots the table near the front immediately.

Chaz, Lydia, and Justin are already there, sitting in a sun-drenched booth with drinks in hand.

They look different.

Lighter.

Like the weight they’d been carrying for months had finally been lifted.

Chaz spots them first.

“Well, look who finally decided to show up.”

Phil grins as he approaches.

“Nice to see you too, mate.”

Lydia's face lights up when she sees Natalie.

"Nat!"

The two immediately hug.

"Feels like forever," Lydia says.

"It has been," Natalie replies. "How are you both?"

"Alive," Chaz says from across the table. "Which is more than I could say a few weeks ago."

Justin raises his glass.

"Good to see you again, Natalie."

She smiles.

"Still causing trouble?"

Justin places a hand over his chest, pretending to be offended.

"Me? Never."

Everyone laughs.

Phil pulls out a chair beside Chaz while Natalie sits opposite Lydia.

"I didn't realise this was a full reunion."

Justin shrugs.

"They invited themselves, Phil. I'm just the host with the most."

Chaz raises his pint.

"So, is Red's already burning to the ground without me there to keep the grease fires under control?"

Phil drops into his chair, letting out a tired laugh.

"Well, I only left an hour ago, but Chloe just texted me something you lot aren't going to believe."

Lydia immediately leans forward.

"Go on then."

Phil pulls out his phone.

"Ryan finally snapped. Told Clifton exactly what he thinks of him. In front of everyone."

Justin's eyes widen.

"No way."

"Yeah," Phil says. "Broke a mug and everything."

Justin bursts out laughing.

"Wish I'd tried that. Might still have a job."

Lydia shakes her head.

"Ryan? Little rule-following Ryan?"

She smiles.

"He was the guy who apologised to a bully after the bully insulted him."

Natalie laughs softly.

"Sounds like he finally reached his limit."

Phil nods.

"Yeah. I think everyone has."

Chaz leans back, tapping his glass against the table.

"Anyway, enough about the red-walled prison."

He raises his drink.

"Tonight is about celebrating."

Phil raises an eyebrow.

"Celebrating what?"

Lydia smiles proudly.

"Us."

Phil looks between them.

"What, did Justin finally learn how to pour a Guinness?"

Justin looks offended.

"I have many talents."

"Pouring drinks isn't one of them," Chaz replies.

The table laughs.

Lydia points between herself and Chaz.

“We’re officially the new kitchen team at The Green Knight.”

Phil’s eyebrows shoot up.

“No way.”

Chaz grins.

“Head Chef.”

Lydia points at herself.

“Sous Chef.”

Phil smiles genuinely.

“That’s brilliant. Actual cooking again?”

“Actual food,” Chaz says proudly.

Justin taps the table.

“Right. Drinks. First round is on me.”

Phil looks thoughtful.

“Pilsner Urquell, if they’ve got it.”

Justin points at him.

“Excellent choice.”

He turns to Natalie.

“And you?”

She thinks for a second.

“Kopparberg, please. Mixed berries.”

Justin nods.

“Still got it.”

He heads towards the bar.

Chaz looks at Phil.

"What even is Pilsner Urquell?"

Phil laughs.

"A Czech beer. Crisp as hell. Original golden lager."

He takes a sip of his empty glass.

"I went to the brewery in Plzeň once."

Lydia raises an eyebrow.

"You've been to the Czech Republic?"

Phil nods.

"My mum's from Prague. Spent summers there when I was younger."

Lydia smiles.

"See? This is why I like this group. Everyone's got some random connection somewhere."

Chaz taps his chest.

"I'm part Irish, thank you very much."

"Explains the temper," Lydia says.

"Exactly."

Justin returns carrying the drinks.

"One Pilsner Urquell."

He places Natalie's bottle down too.

"One Kopparberg."

"Cheers," Natalie says.

Phil lifts his glass.

"Na zdraví."

Natalie laughs.

"You still do that?"

Phil looks confused.

"What?"

“The dramatic foreign drink appreciation.”

Phil grins.

“Some things never change.”

He looks around the pub.

The mismatched tables.

The battered guitars.

The posters.

The people laughing at the bar.

The exact opposite of Red’s.

“You know what?”

Everyone looks over.

“I actually love it here.”

Chaz smiles.

“If Red’s gets any worse under this Jake guy, you know where we are.”

Phil chuckles.

“I might take you up on that.”

“Good,” Chaz says. “We need someone to wash dishes.”

Phil laughs.

“I’m glad to know that people appreciate my skills.”

“I’m thinking bigger,” Chaz replies. “Director of Kitchen Operations.”

Phil shakes his head, laughing.

The sound disappears into the chorus of the song.

“I’m just glad we’re all still here,” he says quietly.

He looks around the table.

“Together, somehow.”

Natalie watches them.

She understands exactly what he means.

They're not all in the same place anymore.

But they're still connected.

They raise their glasses.

"To Ryan."

"To the Knight."

"To better days."

And as Florence belts out *Dog Days Are Over*, they drink like the worst days really are behind them.

And for the first time in a long time...

it feels like the truth.

CHAPTER 20

Melissa pushes through the front door of her little semi-detached in Alcester. The late evening light spills across the hallway floor, illuminating the scattered shoes and the frantic, beautiful mess of a life in progress. She barely has time to hang up her coat before the floorboards vibrate with the sound of thundering footsteps.

"Mummy! Mummy!" Archie and Alana squeal, crashing into her legs like two bouncing cannonballs.

The tension in Melissa's neck finally snaps. She drops her bag and wraps them up in her arms, breathing in the scent of baby shampoo and crayon dust like it's medicine. "Hey, you two—have you been good for Daddy today?"

"Yeah!" they chorus, beaming up at her with gap-toothed grins that make the corporate jargon of David Clifton feel a million miles away.

"Good. Now—go be good for ten more minutes in the living room, yeah? I need to talk to Daddy about work for a second."

They shoot off, giggling, and Melissa lingers a second longer in the hallway. She closes her eyes and steels herself, physically shaking off the "Assistant Manager" title before stepping into the kitchen.

Andrew is there, bent over the stove, the steam from a bubbling pot of pasta fogging up his glasses. He's wearing his battered apron—the one that says *King of the Grill* in peeling, heat-cracked letters. He glances up, wooden spoon in hand, and offers her a genuine, tired smile.

"Good evening, Your Majesty. How was work at the palace?" he asks, his voice light and teasing.

Melissa lets out a soft, tired laugh—but it cracks halfway out. She feels the warm tear slide down her cheek before she can catch it with her sleeve.

“Eventful,” she says, her voice wobbling dangerously.

Andrew’s face falls instantly. He crosses the kitchen to her, wiping his hands on a nearby tea towel. “More eventful than last week? What happened, Mel?”

“I’ve... been demoted,” she says, her eyes flicking down to the lino floor. “Back to Assistant Manager. They’ve cut my salary back to the old rate.”

Andrew lets out a low, long whistle of disbelief. “Jesus. What did they say you’d done? You’ve been working sixty-hour weeks for that place.”

“Clifton happened. He came in swinging—said my performance numbers had dropped because of the new system he brought in. Like any of this mess was my fault. It’s a setup, Andrew. It’s a total setup.”

Andrew’s jaw tightens. He’s been through his own struggles since the accident, and he knows a bully when he hears about one. “Sounds like a problem on their end, not yours. They’re using you as a scapegoat.”

“That’s not even the worst bit,” Melissa says, her voice thickening with grief for her team. “He shut down the kitchen, too. Chaz and Lydia are gone. Redundancy.”

Andrew’s brow furrows. “Someone needs to stand up to that prick. You can’t just let him gut the place like that.”

Melissa lets out a half-laugh, half-sob, remembering the image of the shattered mug. “Funny you say that—Ryan did. You remember Ryan, the one I’ve told you about? Quiet, sweet kid. He snapped. He gave Clifton an absolute earful in front of the whole shop. Customers were cheering.”

Andrew’s eyes widened. “He got fired on the spot, surely?”

Melissa shakes her head, still disbelieving. “No. Clifton actually admired his honesty. Said he’s got ‘moxie.’ He kept his job.” She gives a watery laugh. “It felt like something out of a bloody TV show, Andrew. I just stood there like a spare part.”

Andrew’s mouth twitched into a small smile. “Fair play to the kid. Maybe it’s about time someone realized how good the people on the ground actually are.”

Melissa’s shoulders sag, the adrenaline of the day finally leaving her. She looks around the kitchen—the half-chopped veg, the kids’ finger-paintings pinned to the fridge with magnets—all of it so normal, so safe, and yet so fragile.

Andrew’s voice softens. He steps closer and takes her hands. “So, what now? You gonna stay? Or should we start looking at the local council jobs again?”

She shrugs, her eyes filling again. “I can’t risk being unemployed, not with your back still the way it is. And I can’t abandon the others. If I leave, there’s no one to protect them from Jake, the new guy. It’s a catch-22.”

Andrew slips his arms around her, tucking her head under his chin the way he always does when she's tired of fighting the world. "Mel—you need to do what makes you happy eventually. But for now, we'll work out the rest. We always do."

She doesn't answer—just melts into him, letting his warmth and the safety of the house wash the day away. His lips press to her forehead, a quiet, solid promise in the middle of her chaos.

"I'm sure things will work out in the end," Andrew murmurs, as Archie and Alana's laughter drifts through from the other room like a soundtrack to a better life. "They always do."

CHAPTER 21

Back at Red's, Ryan is shutting down the bar, polishing the last few glasses with a slow, meditative focus, as if the clarity of the glass actually matters tonight. Chloe moves through the empty tables like a ghost in the dim light, picking up stray napkins and wiping down spots that nobody would even notice tomorrow morning.

Ewan grabs his jacket from the staff room and swings his bag over his shoulder.

Ryan looks up from the bar.

"Heading off?"

"Yeah," Ewan says. "Think I'm done here for now. Just been covering while I shadow different managers."

Chloe looks over.

"So does that mean we won't see you again?"

Ewan shrugs with a smile.

"Maybe. Depends if you lot ever need cover."

Ryan grins.

"So basically you're saying we can call you when we're short-staffed?"

"Exactly."

Chloe laughs.

"Good to know."

Ewan gives them both a small wave.

"See you around, guys."

"See you, mate," Ryan replies.

"Bye, Ewan," Chloe says.

The door closes behind him, the bell chiming softly as he disappears into the evening.

Another familiar face leaving Red's.

Another reminder that things are changing.

Jonathan comes down the corridor from the office, his coat draped over his arm and that calm, newfound grin still in place.

"Wow—you two are nearly done. I won't be long behind you, then," he says, his voice echoing in the hollowed-out cafe.

Chloe shoots him a look over her shoulder, a strand of hair falling across her face. "We've got somewhere to be, Jonathan. So the quicker the cleaning's done, the quicker we're out of this uniform."

Jonathan raises an eyebrow, looking between them with an amused glint. "Joining the others? I saw Phil was heading down to The Green Knight to see Chaz, Lydia... and that yank, Justin."

Ryan shakes his head, a quiet, private smile playing on his lips. "Nah. Just us tonight. Found a little spot on the edge of town. Somewhere quiet, where the coffee doesn't come out of a dispenser."

Jonathan chuckles, nodding. "Thought you two would work well together. You're a good match. You balance each other out."

"Do you think work and romance can actually mix?" Chloe asks, half-joking, but her eyes are searching his for a real answer.

"Of course it can," Jonathan says, his voice softening. "I met Florence when we worked together. Now we've got a house, a wedding coming up, and a baby on the way."

"Pretty good odds then," Ryan says, his grin widening.

Jonathan nods, pulling his coat on and straightening his collar—already looking the part of the Regional Manager. "Anyway—I'd better get home before Florence kills me for being late again. Great work today, both of you. Truly. You should be proud of how you handled things."

"Night, Jonathan," Chloe says, her voice warmer than it's ever been toward him.

"Night, mate," Ryan adds, giving him a little wave.

Jonathan walks out, the front door giving that soft, final jingle of the bell—like the last page of a book closing on this chapter of the diner's life.

[16] This is the Day by The The

A few minutes later, the lights at Red's flick off, plunging the red booths into shadow. Chloe locks the front door, her keys clinking rhythmically in the quiet, cool air of the street. She turns to Ryan, who is standing by the curb with her spare helmet in his hands, that familiar mix of nerves and pure excitement written all over his face.

"So..." he says, trying and failing to sound cool. "You ready?"

Chloe doesn't answer right away. She just walks over to her silver bike, the orange glow of the streetlights bouncing off the chrome frame. She takes the helmet from him.

“Jump on,” she says, that rebellious spark back in her eyes.

Ryan laughs, fitting the helmet over his head and clicking the strap. “If I fall off, I’m blaming you in my will.”

Chloe’s laugh rings out in the quiet street—easy, real, and untethered. “Noted.”

He climbs on behind her, his hands hovering awkwardly for a split second before he settles them firmly around her waist. The engine roars to life beneath them—not a scream, but a deep, mechanical pulse. Chloe revves it once, the sound echoing off the timber-framed buildings. Ryan settles in, his arms tightening around her now. No hesitation.

Then they are off.

They tear through Stratford’s sleeping streets, the tires humming against the asphalt, the wind peeling away the weight of the long shifts and the corporate bullshit. Streetlights streak past them like fireflies. The canals, the crooked Tudor buildings, the corner where the night bus usually turns—all of it vanishes in a blur of silver and shadow.

Ryan holds tighter as they hit the main road out of town, the world stretching wide and dark in front of them like an open chord.

He can feel her laughter rise again—sharp, wild, and full of something that had been waiting all day to come loose. It cuts through the rushing wind and hits him straight in the chest.

“What?” he calls out, grinning under the visor.

She doesn’t look back. She just raises one hand off the handlebars for a second in a loose, flying gesture toward the stars.

“Nothing!” she shouts back into the wind.

And it wasn’t nothing. It was everything.

THE END OF SEASON ONE.