



Dishing up Romance

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Category: Romance

Description: Sometimes the changes we resist lead us exactly where we need to be.

Beloved café manager Gemma has everything under control until the new owner, Kent, arrives with a flurry of modern ideas threatening to change the heart and soul of their cherished community hub.

Forced to work side by side in the small kitchen, sparks fly as Gemma and Kent clash over the café's future. Before long, their heated arguments start serving up something sweeter, and Gemma begins to see a different side to the ambitious new interloper.

But as their workplace relationship blossoms, will Kent's true plans threaten to spoil everything before they get to dessert?

Total Pages (Source): 62

CHAPTER 1

Gemma reached across the coffee machine for the large brown mug stacked at the back. It wasn't like any of the other cups they served drinks in at the Waterfront Cafe. They had a lot of different cups, from tall glass-handled ones for hot chocolates and lattes to the smaller, rounded cups they used for cappuccinos. And, of course, there were the tiny espresso cups and the various-sized takeaway ones, too. But at that moment, she ignored all of those and reached for the large brown speckled mug with the extra thick handles because that was the mug Mr Jordan liked to have his drink in. In fact, he struggled to hold on to the smaller ones. At the Waterfront Cafe, it was important that the customers felt as comfortable as possible, and this mug made that happen for Mr Jordan.

"Don't forget to add a splash of cold water to the top, will you, Gemma, love?" Mr Jordan said as he rummaged in his pockets.

"Did I forget yesterday?" Gemma asked, throwing him a look. "Or the day before that? In fact, have I ever forgotten your splash of cold water?"

"I'm just reminding you," he said with a grin that further creased his already wrinkled skin. "One day, you'll be my age, and you won't be able to remember whether you put clean pants on."

"I think that's more information than I need there," Gemma said, smiling at the customer.

Mr Jordan had been coming to the Waterfront Cafe longer than Gemma had been

working there, and that was saying something because ever since she moved to the waterfront town of Maldon, with its estuary filled with boats and a high street dotted with cute cafes and favourite independent shops, she had worked at the Waterfront Cafe. It had been the reason she had moved. She had assumed the job would just be for a couple of years—some good management experience before she took a role at a bigger establishment, perhaps a restaurant or even a pub. And yet there she was, at thirty-two, having managed the Waterfront Cafe for eight years. She couldn't imagine ever doing anything differently.

“You all right there, Mr Jordan?” Gemma asked, looking at the handful of coins he had fished out of his pocket. “Do you want me to help you count them out?”

“That would be lovely, thank you. You know, my eyesight's not as good as it used to be.”

“Don't worry, just put it on the counter. I'll count it out for you.”

Following her request, Mr Jordan tipped the contents onto the counter, causing Gemma's chest to tighten a little. Mr Jordan had always paid in cash. She wasn't even sure he had any form of debit or credit card, but his pension was obviously running thin. In front of Gemma lay a vast array of one and two-pence pieces, with a few twenties and one five in the mix. Nowhere near the £2.30 they charged for a flat white.

“Is there enough, dear?” Mr Jordan asked, his face once again crinkling, although this time with worry rather than laughter. “Let me have a look here. I'm sure I have a little bit more.”

He dug into his pocket again, this time pulling out a crumpled tissue and a couple of paper receipts, but no more money.

“Don’t worry, let me count it out.”

Gemma began scooping the coins into her hand. A moment later, she looked up at Mr Jordan and beamed.

“What do you know? You have five pence more than you need.”

“I do?”

“You do.” Gemma smiled and handed him back a five-pence piece. “Why don’t you go take a seat? I’ll bring the drink over to you.”

With his smile so broad his eyes almost disappeared entirely, Mr Jordan pressed his weight through his walking stick and hobbled over to his table. Meanwhile, Gemma dropped ninety-three pence into the till. It wasn’t even half of what the coffee actually cost, but she could make up the difference with her tips. Besides, he always paid the right amount when he could. She picked up his coffee, ready to take it to his table, when her eyes fell on the warm scones fresh out of the oven. One looked a little smaller than the others. She hated charging customers for things that were different sizes. It just didn’t seem fair.

Without even questioning herself, she picked the smaller one up, put it onto a plate, and carried it over to Mr Jordan’s table with his coffee.

“Thought you might like a little bit of breakfast,” she said, smiling as she placed it on the table in front of him.

“You really are a gem, you know that?” Mr Jordan said, looking up at her. “I think your parents did well picking that name for you. Now, when are you going to find a nice young man and settle down, hey?”

Gemma shook her head and laughed. “I don’t need a young man to be happy,” she said, turning away and shaking her head.

“You know, if I was twenty years younger, I’d ask you to marry me myself.”

“Twenty? Try fifty.” She laughed.

“Well, now, that’s just mean.”

With Mr Jordan chuckling away, Gemma was heading back to the till when Sophie walked in through the front door. She headed straight behind the counter, grabbed her apron, then turned to face Gemma head-on.

“If you can’t tell me today,” she said, folding her arms across her chest. “Then I’m going to scream.”

CHAPTER 2

Sophie had worked in the Waterfront Cafe with Gemma for years, and along with George in the kitchen, she was part of Gemma’s core team. Sophie was one of those people who wore their heart on their sleeve, and while Gemma adored that about her, it had sometimes made working with her slightly difficult. Particularly when she was going through one of her messy breakups. Such events occurred because of some less-than-pleasant douchebag taking complete advantage of Sophie’s good nature, all while Sophie went above and beyond to make the relationship work. Thankfully, those days were past them now, as Sophie was finally settled in a loving relationship with Graham, another one of their Lonely Hearts Book Club members.

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The book club had been Gemma's main source of friendship when she'd first moved to Maldon, and now its members were her closest friends, although the name was becoming less and less fitting. A few years ago, every member had been single, and mostly with disastrous dating histories to boot, but that had changed, and now nearly half of them were utterly loved up. Although Gemma was not among them. Not that she begrudged her friends their happiness, of course, but gone were the days when they could talk freely about how terrible dating was and how it was impossible to find a decent person living in Maldon. Not when so many of them had proved it could be done.

Everyone but Sophie had seen that Graham was in love with her for years, and for a long time, Gemma had worried her friend would never see what was right in front of her face. But she had. And after taking a bit of time to get her head straight and go travelling, Sophie had returned, ready to open her heart to her best friend. The pair had been inseparable ever since.

"So?" Sophie said, her arms still folded across her chest. "Has Oscar told you who's taking over from George yet?"

"Nope," Gemma said, feeling her jaw tightening with tension as she spoke.

"But George finishes on Friday?"

"I know," Gemma said. "I'm well aware of that, in fact."

"And we don't have a chef to replace him."

“According to Oscar, we do,” Gemma said. “It’s just none of us know who it is.”

Oscar was the reclusive owner of the Waterfront Cafe. Although it hadn’t always been that way. When Gemma had first taken the job, Oscar had popped in weekly, at least, just to check how things were going. Some weeks, he could come in nearly every day. And Gemma didn’t mind at all. It was nice having him on hand when she wanted to suggest changes or get another point of view. But around four years ago, his wife had passed away, and he’d withdrawn himself from the cafe, and from what Gemma could tell, most of life. She had tried to reach out to him to see if she could do anything to help, as she knew he didn’t have children, and he had assured her he was fine. He just asked her to take care of the coffee shop. To keep running it as she had been doing. And so she had.

A large part of Gemma was desperate to have her own cafe, but with that a near impossibility, this was the next best thing. The freedom Oscar gave her made it feel like she was running her own place, as he had left her to make every decision, from the menu and the furniture to the opening hours and the hiring. Everything had fallen on her for the last four years, and he had played no role in the business at all.

Until now.

“Do you have any idea why he wanted to be the person to hire George’s replacement?” Sophie asked, as if she’d never asked the question before.

Since Oscar announced by text that he had a replacement chef for George, Sophie had been full of who, why, what, where, and when questions. Gemma hadn’t been able to answer any of them.

“You know I don’t. He just said he sorted it, and the new person will be ready for work by the time George leaves on Friday.”

“But you still don’t know his name?”

“I don’t know anything.”

Sophie let out a sigh that stretched for a couple of seconds before a smile twisted on her lips.

“What if he’s single, and your age, and really handsome?” she said. “Perhaps Oscar hasn’t told you because he knows you’ll go online, look the guy up, and fall madly in love with him before you’ve even met. Perhaps he doesn’t want to tell you who it is because he’s secretly matchmaking.”

“Or perhaps Oscar hasn’t told us because the shop isn’t a priority to him and because he’s getting old, so it slipped from his mind. Or perhaps it’s because he hired someone completely underqualified and knows I’ll be mad about it. Perhaps he just has some young relative who needs a job and thinks anyone can work in a cafe. It doesn’t matter. We just have to wait until Saturday, when George has gone, and we hope that someone turns up.”

Sophie simultaneously pouted and frowned, which had the effect of making her look like a toddler wearing a lot of makeup.

“That doesn’t make me feel very confident,” she said.

“No, me neither, but there’s nothing we can do.”

Gemma knew Sophie needed to talk through the issue to feel better about it, but for Gemma, talking didn’t help. For her, voicing all her worries only made things worse. In truth, though, she had spent her evenings trying to work out contingency plans. She was a more than adequate baker. Every other Saturday when George didn’t work, she did the tray bakes and sponges, but she wasn’t so good at the savoury stuff. He

prepped all of that before he went on Friday. Still, they could do a stripped-back menu for however long it took to find a replacement. There was a good network in the cafes and restaurants around Maldon that made her confident she could find someone within a couple of weeks. However, there was nothing she could do until George's retirement day came and went, and she was left on her own.

"You know they're turning two more cafes in Wickford into Coffee-Xs," Sophie said as she picked up her apron and fixed it over her clothes.

"What, two more? How? I didn't even think there were enough coffee shops in Wickford to sell up and do them."

"Apparently, this guy who owns the chain is offering the owners almost double what the buildings are worth just to make sure he gets the property to corner the market. You don't think Oscar would do that, do you?"

Gemma shook her head. "No, Oscar understands what the coffee shop means to the people around here. He'd never do that. I can't imagine he'd ever sell it, and certainly not to someone he didn't know."

She was pondering whether she should call Oscar again that day, under the guise of it being the beginning of the week and George's last one at work, when the door opened and a gaggle of women stepped through. Judging from the miniature scooters they propped up outside the building, they were all mums, having just come from the school run, and experience had taught Gemma there would be a lot more to come.

"We can talk about this later," Gemma said, fixing her face with her professional smile. "It's time to get making cappuccinos."

CHAPTER 3

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By the time the group of parents had finished their drinks and cakes, the café was nearly full. Mostly, it was regulars who occupied the tables.

There was Mr and Mrs Penfield, who came in every morning between ten and ten-fifteen. He pushed her wheelchair across to the cake counter, where she spent a great deal of time looking at what they had on offer, although she only ever ordered a lemon drizzle or, very occasionally, a carrot cake. Mr Penfield, on the other hand, kept a regular rotation with his cakes and drinks. As it was a Monday, Gemma knew he'd order a millionaire's shortbread with a ginger beer. However, if it had been colder outside, he would have opted for a hot chocolate instead.

Sitting nearest to the door was Jessica, a nanny, who came in each day with Freddie, the three-year-old she looked after. Gemma loved listening in on their conversations, which almost always involved imaginative play based on Freddy having magical powers. That day, he was invisible, which allowed him to pick at Jessica's scone while she had to pretend not to see him. The kid was smart.

There were several people from the nearby tennis club, and given how the weather had recently changed, dozens of boaters had come in to grab a coffee, though they were all after takeaways, which was lucky because there wouldn't have been room for all of them to sit down. Graham, Sophie's boyfriend, had taken his usual seat, tucked away in a corner where he scribbled away on his comic book art while Mr Jordan sat opposite.

"We're already out of sausage rolls," Sophie said as she came back to the counter. "We're going to have to start cooking more each morning. I think the summer rush is starting early this year."

“I agree,” Gemma said.

Unlike the winter months, when Gemma would be on first-name terms with everyone who came in through the door, there were plenty of people there that morning who weren't regulars. There was a young family having a holiday in Maldon, and an elderly woman with two younger women who appeared to be her daughters. The cafe door opened, and yet another man Gemma didn't recognise stepped inside. Yet before she could welcome him, Mr Jordan was out of his chair, saying goodbye.

“Thank you for today, ladies. That scone was delicious.”

“You're most welcome,” Gemma said.

“We'll see you tomorrow?” Sophie added.

“I'm sure you will.” He offered a small wink. “You know me. You can't keep me away.”

With his goodbye done, Mr Jordan lifted his hand to wave while turning around to face the door. As Gemma watched him, she noticed how difficult he was finding the turn and how much frailer he looked from when she first met him. He was looking at her and Sophie, smiling broadly, and clearly he forgot about the small step just in front of him. One second, he was pushing his weight down into the walking stick to help him turn around, and the next second, he was toppling towards the ground.

CHAPTER 4

“Mr Jordan!”

Both Sophie and Gemma rushed out from behind the counter. The old man had somehow caught himself on the edge of a table and was braced there, one hand still

on the cane, trembling, while his knees were only inches from the ground. Gemma could only imagine how much he would hurt himself if he fell fully.

By the time they reached him, two of the school mums had come to his aid, but Gemma and Sophie swept in too.

“Are you okay?” Sophie asked, helping him back to standing.

“It’s all right. We’ve got you. Come on, let’s get you a chair. You should sit down.”

Gemma glanced around. The table Mr Jordan had been sitting at was now occupied. The gentleman who had just come in had either been completely oblivious to the situation or simply didn’t care as he strode past the kerfuffle and took his spot. Thankfully, Graham was already on his feet and placing his chair just behind Mr Jordan, although the old man shook his head.

“Oh, no, don’t be silly. I don’t want all this fuss. I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“You need to sit down,” Gemma said. “That must have been quite a shock for you. It was for us.”

She wasn’t lying. Her pulse had rocketed when she thought he was going to fall, and it still hadn’t gone back to normal.

“Oh, I’m made of tough stuff. Don’t you worry.” Mr Jordan smiled, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes the way Gemma knew it should.

“Really, I think you ought to sit down. Just for a minute. I’ll get you a glass of water.”

At this, he shook his head again, and his voice dropped to a lower volume. “I don’t

like to make a fuss. Honestly, I'm quite all right. Really, thank you, girls, but I need to get off now, and I'm quite okay. See?"

He walked towards the door, reached it, turned around, and offered a little wave as if to show he hadn't hurt anything seriously. But Gemma knew that with incidents like this, it could take a few minutes before the extent of the pain set in, and there was no way he hadn't bruised his hip or arm the way he caught himself.

"Please, just take a seat outside," Gemma said. "Humour me, please. Just sit in the sun for five minutes. That's all. I'll even bring you out a slice of cake."

At this, Mr Jordan quirked his eyebrow.

"A free scone and a slice of cake? I should probably fall over more often."

Gemma smiled.

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“Sophie,” she said. “Could you take Mr Jordan a chocolate brownie outside? I should see to the other customers.”

Sophie smiled. “Sure thing, I’ll get you a water too,” she said. “Don’t you worry about anything, Mr Jordan. You just go and sit outside.”

A moment later, Sophie was behind the counter fetching Mr Jordan a brownie and water. Mr Jordan had taken a seat on a bench outside, while inside the cafe, the tables were all settling back down as their chattering recommenced. Judging by the way glances were continually darting out the window, Gemma was sure that at least one conversation was about Mr Jordan’s fall. She would have much rather he’d stayed inside so that she could keep an eye on him, but she could hardly force a grown man to stay somewhere he didn’t want to be. Still, she would check on him in a couple of minutes. Finally, drawing her attention away from Mr Jordan, Gemma went and picked up a menu from the counter.

Locals and regulars knew it wasn’t table service, but despite the sign, many onetime customers weren’t aware, so they would always take the menu to them. They would tell them to come to the counter to order if it was busy. Otherwise, she wouldn’t mind spending a bit of time going back to take it herself. It was that type of relationship that made people come back. As Gemma headed towards the man, she was absolutely certain he had never set foot in the Waterfront Café before, because if he had, she would have remembered. His hair was dark, lightly styled in a way that looked relaxed and yet well-groomed. And his dark, deep-set eyes had a definite broodiness about them.

“Good morning,” she said, placing the menu down on his table. “Sorry about that bit

of commotion there. Unfortunately, we're all getting older, and it creeps up on us, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

The man pouted. There was no hint of a smile on his face. In fact, surly was the word that jumped into Gemma's mind, but she tried not to let the thought settle. Each person had their own thing going on and likely had plenty of reasons not to smile. She would always give a customer the benefit of the doubt and assume they were lovely until they proved her otherwise.

Gemma was about to say he could go to the counter to order when the man parted his lips.

"Do you already know what you'd like to drink?" she asked, assuming that was what he was going to say.

Instead, his mouth closed again, and he inhaled deeply before he spoke.

"I wasn't going to order a drink just yet," he said. "I actually think we need to have a proper conversation about how you handled that entire situation."

CHAPTER 5

Gemma tilted her head to the side. She was certain she had misheard the gentleman, or at least misunderstood what he had said. Was he referring to the situation with Mr Jordan? She couldn't see what other situation he meant, yet why he would wish to talk about it made absolutely no sense. After all, it wasn't like he'd made any attempt to help Mr Jordan.

"I'm sorry," she said, still fighting to keep a smile fixed on her face. "I'm not exactly

sure I understand what you mean.”

“Perhaps it would be better to talk about it in the kitchen?”

She fought down a scoff. “The kitchen? No. The kitchen is for staff only.”

“I understand that but?—”

“It sounds a little like you have a problem with how I run my cafe?”

The man sniffed. “At this precise moment, yes, I do.”

His words were muttered, spoken under his breath, yet more than loud enough for Gemma to hear. Her blood began to boil.

Any benefit of the doubt had been erased. This customer was not a nice person. They had not said something without thinking, then hurriedly wished to backtrack or profusely apologise. They were entitled and rude and not the type of person she wanted to waste her time on any longer. Her jaws ground tightly together as she reached down and snatched the menu back off the table.

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid we’re not serving right now,” she said.

The man raised his eyebrows. “Excuse me. What are you talking about?”

“Let me make myself a little clearer. We’re not serving you right now,” she said. “Or ever, actually. You’re not welcome. You need to leave.”

The man’s lips parted. Though rather than looking angry or even continuing his confused expression, a smile curled up on the corner of his lips.

“Oh, I think you may have misunderstood me here,” he said.

“No, I don’t think so,” Gemma replied. “I understood you perfectly well. You were incredibly clear. You had to wait an extra three minutes for me to come over here and give you a menu because I wanted to prioritise an old man’s health. An old man who I happen to be very fond of. Who comes into this café every day and is nothing but polite and kind? Two things that you are clearly not. This is why I am telling you that you will not be served in this café. Not now. Not ever.”

Even though Gemma’s eyes remained locked on the man’s, she could feel the rest of the customers staring at her. If she turned around, she suspected she would see Sophie behind the counter, gawping wide-eyed. It wouldn’t be a surprise. Gemma had never spoken to a customer in that manner before, or any other person, for that matter. But she was furious.

Someone thinking a cappuccino was more important than coming to the aid of an elderly man made her feel near nauseous, and it was taking all her strength to control the tremble in her hand.

“You need to leave now,” she said. “I will not ask you again.”

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And yet the man did not so much as stand.

“Like I said before, you seem to have misunderstood. I’m not here for coffee and cake.”

For the first time, it was Gemma’s turn to feel confused.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean... exactly that. I’m Kent Parker.”

“Is that meant to mean something to me?” Gemma frowned.

“I’m Kent Parker. I’ll be taking over. Working in the kitchen. Does that ring any bells?”

CHAPTER 6

It wasn’t the start Kent had expected, that was for sure. Being yelled at wasn’t new to him, but for someone to take such umbrage to him so quickly was something. My god, she had fire. It was mesmerising. The way she stood up to him like that was incredibly admirable, even though she was completely in the wrong. And it wasn’t like she was on her own. The other customers glowered at him with such venom he suspected they would physically remove him from the cafe if that’s what she asked them to do. In some ways, he supposed it was understandable that she would feel a little resentment to him, given the job he had come in to do. She had the customers’ respect, that was without doubt, and it probably came from the way she knew them

all personally. Unfortunately, personal relationships could be detrimental to business, and that was what he cared about. He was there to do what needed to be done. There was no chance the cafe would keep running and be profitable if they gave free cakes to every person who had the slightest tumble. Of course, before he made any substantial changes, he needed to get a proper understanding of how the place worked, and that meant observation.

“I’ll merely be observing this week,” he said after Gemma had furiously agreed to have a conversation with him in the kitchen, away from the prying ears of the customers. Her response was immediate.

“Observing? I don’t think so. You’ll be in the way.”

“I assure you I won’t. And it will be the best way to make the transition as smooth as possible. You know, give me an idea of how everything works without having to constantly bombard you with loads of questions.”

Gemma’s eyes were still black, and although he had seen her smile at every customer who even glanced in her direction, she had not so much as offered a flicker of warmth towards him. The fact that she was still bearing a grudge for how he had spoken to her didn’t bode well.

“Bombard away,” she said, folding her arms across her chest. “It’s George you’ll need to ask your questions to. You’re taking over his position, remember? You are the new chef, right? That’s what you said. You’re working in the kitchen.”

Kent opened his mouth and contemplated what words should leave it next. He had worked in hostile environments before, and it never lasted long. One way or another, the situation would be resolved. Right now, she had a room full of people who wanted serving, and he was delaying that from happening. A fact that was probably making her hate him even more. The best thing would be to wait for a more

convenient time to inform her of the changes that would take place.

“I need to see all aspects of the business, including the front of house,” he said. “Just so I have a better overview of how you work here. I can assure you I won’t get in your way. If it gets busy and there’s not a table, then I’ll remove myself into the kitchen. And it’ll only be for a few days.”

He picked his words carefully, but still, he felt his breath tighten in his lungs as he waited to hear her response.

“And Oscar knows all this?” she said finally.

He waited. This wasn’t the right moment to bring up the situation. Not at all. Not with customers there. He’d probably lose every local possible if he humiliated her like that. Deciding he would wait before disclosing the details of the arrangement with Oscar, he smiled politely.

“He does, and he’s entirely on board.”

Her lips twisted as if she was physically chewing over the words before she spoke again.

“Fine, just stay out of my way,” she said before turning away from him and marching out of the kitchen.

As the door swung shut behind her, Kent let out a long sigh. It was going to be an interesting few weeks. That was for sure.

CHAPTER 7

“He’s been in every day this week,” Sophie said as she poured Gemma a glass of

wine.

Of course, Gemma didn't need telling this fact about the cafe's new chef, but the other book club girls did. Book club met without fail every other Thursday, although they sometimes added some emergency meetings at other times too. Those emergencies had nothing to do with books and usually involved some massive love-life catastrophe, but it was the same group of friends, whatever the situation. This was the place where they could let go of all their frustrations and rant without judgement. And that was exactly what Gemma needed.

"Gemma hasn't said a word to him," Sophie continued. "Not one."

"Really?" Marie raised an eyebrow.

It was true. Gemma had somehow got through the last three days without saying a single word to the dastardly Kent Parker, despite the fact he had been in the Waterfront Cafe for several hours a day. Every time he came within a two-metre radius of her, she skirted around him, suddenly finding a table that needed to be cleaned or a customer that needed to be checked on. At least he had spent all of Thursday in the kitchen. That had made it easier, although even when George had clocked off at 2 pm, Kent had hung around making notes on his tablet.

"I have nothing to say to a man like that," Gemma said simply. "If you ignore how rude he was to me, he was also the only person in the entire coffee shop who didn't jump up to help Mr Jordan. Or at least ask how he was afterwards. I think that says all you need to know about the person, don't you?"

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Muttered agreements followed her question, although rather than responding immediately, Flick cleared her throat. Flick was one of the newer members of the book club, but it felt like she had been there forever. She was weirdly invited by her ex-husband's now fiancé. The pair had such a lovely relationship. Gemma couldn't help but be a little jealous. After all, all her ex had left her with was a bad credit rating and debt in her name.

"I know this might go against the grain, but perhaps he thought not helping Mr Jordan was the right thing," Flick said.

"How could anyone think that?"

"I've met Mr Jordan a few times at Alex's volunteering centre," Flick replied. "He really doesn't like fuss at all. He made it known that he wouldn't come in on his birthday if people were going to sing because he hates it that much. Could Kent have maybe sensed that and wanted to stay out of the way?"

"That's a nice idea, but there's no way that Kent Parker is the type of person who can sense what anyone else wants other than himself." Gemma didn't want to rant all night. Really. She had hoped book club might be the chance she needed to get Kent out of her head, but now that she had started, she couldn't stop. "He's going to be the chef, for crying out loud, and yet he's spent more time out in the cafe, sitting there, sipping on a damn espresso, and making notes on his tablet. Besides, if you were going to come in and see your new place of work a week before you were due to start, wouldn't you at least ring and ask first? That would be the decent thing to do, right?"

She looked around at her friends, who nodded dutifully.

“I get it,” Jules agreed. “I’d hate to have someone turn up in my classroom and start taking notes without giving me a warning that they were coming.”

“Exactly!” Gemma raised her hands with such force that some of her drink sloshed down her arm. Not that it stopped her. “I can’t believe he thought he could just turn up and then come back day after day, even though I’ve made it perfectly clear he isn’t welcome. No. I don’t like it. I don’t like him one bit.”

“I don’t get how you haven’t spoken to him at all, though,” Fleur said. “That must be really difficult.”

“Not really.” Gemma took a long sip of her drink before wiping her arm across her top. “I don’t need to speak to him. If he wants something to eat or drink, I make sure Sophie takes his order, and the rest of the time, I pretend he’s not there. It’s not as if he’s tried to speak to me, either. He’s asked me exactly zero questions. I mean, I’m the manager. I’d be happy to answer anything he’s got, but apparently, he doesn’t think I’m worth talking to.”

“I’m sure that’s not it.” Eunice, the oldest book club member, sat next to Fleur and was always quick to offer an opinion. “It sounds to me like some wires have got crossed somewhere.”

Gemma shook her head.

“Not on my part,” she said. “My wires are very much in straight lines, and every one of them despises Kent Parker.”

She paused. More than ever, she wished she’d not brought him up at all. That they were all having a nice evening talking about books. But before she could divert the

conversation back to where it was meant to be, Nina, the local librarian and long-term member of the group, spoke.

“You are going to have to work with him, though, right?” she said. Like Marie and Gemma, Nina was one of the few in the book club who was still single. “Surely you need to get past this?”

It felt as though everyone was ganging up on her, and given how Gemma knew she was in the right, that wasn’t something she was willing to accept.

“Look, I don’t want to talk about Kent,” she said. “Particularly not now. It’s going to be tough enough with George going. He’s been there longer than I have. It’s not even going to feel like the Waterfront Cafe without him.” She looked at Sophie, who nodded understandingly. She was, after all, the only other person who truly got how she felt there.

“Are you doing anything for him, a farewell?” Flick asked.

“We’re having a little get-together at the pub after. I think we’ll finish half an hour early or so, then head up and get some dinner. The Saturday girls and the part-timers are coming too, so it should be a good send-off. And we’ve got him a little gift, too.”

“That sounds great,” Jules said, smiling gently.

“Yes,” Gemma replied. “Hopefully, we’ll give him a good send-off.”

The thought of George leaving caused a knot to tighten in her chest and a peculiar lump to form in the base of Gemma’s throat.

“You know, I really didn’t like how they ended that book,” she said, getting them back on track for the first time since they had mentioned Kent. “Did anybody else

find that it was really abrupt?”

CHAPTER 8

Friday was its usual, hectic self, made even more so by the bright sunshine and the clear blue sky. Summer was desperate to make an appearance, but Gemma wouldn't believe it just yet. The weather had a way of doing this, tricking her into believing that the cold, grey, rainy days were gone by offering a brief glimpse of clear skies and weather that was far too warm for jeans. But she knew that just around the corner, there could be a rainy spell with vicious winds driving all their customers away.

One thing that did brighten her mood, however, was the fact that by 1 pm, there was still no sign of Kent.

“He starts work tomorrow,” Sophie said. “Perhaps he wanted a day away from the place.”

“Probably,” Gemma replied. “And thank you for changing shifts with me. I really didn't feel up to working tomorrow with him. The weather forecast's not great, and the last thing I fancy is a quiet day with no one to talk to except Kent Parker.”

It wasn't the most mature way of handling the matter. She knew that. Gemma was the manager, and she should have been the one to work with Kent on his first day, but the fact was, he had already rubbed her up the wrong way, and they would be starting off on the wrong foot. This way, she figured, she could find out from Sophie how good he was at doing his actual job. If he didn't upset anyone else, and they didn't get any complaints about the standard of food going down, then maybe... just maybe... she would cope. After all, the chef always came in far earlier to prep and left a couple of hours before they shut up shop. Maybe, with the help of some part-timers, Gemma could avoid seeing him altogether.

“How are you feeling, George?” she asked him just after four. Normally he would have left several hours ago, but today he had stayed in the coffee shop to say goodbye to everyone. It was a testament to what a wonderful person he was that several of the customers had come in especially to say goodbye to him on his last day of work. A couple had even brought him gifts.

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“I am looking forward to the lie-ins,” he said. “I have no plan of ever setting another four-forty alarm clock again, although something tells me that when the grandchildren are old enough to stay over, I’ll be getting up at that time, anyway.”

Gemma chuckled.

“You will still come in and visit us, though, won’t you?” Sophie asked. “You know you’ve got free cups of coffee for a lifetime here.”

“Is that right? I think you ought to check that one with the boss first, don’t you?” he said, casting a grin at Gemma, though she struggled to smile back. George had been like a father figure to her during her time at the Waterfront Cafe. He had seen her grow up and watched as she tackled so many bumps in the road. It didn’t seem right that he wouldn’t be there anymore. Particularly as the person replacing him had less compassion in his entire body than George had in his little finger.

“Of course, you get free coffee for life,” she said. “I’d extend the offer to cakes too, but I know what your sweet tooth is like—you’d put us out of business.”

A light laughter filled the air. Three tables still needed to finish before they could clear away and shut up for the day, but somehow, it already felt like it was the weekend. And it would be a great one, too, as long as the weather held.

Glancing through the window, Gemma watched as a boat drifted lazily across the river, and a feeling of peace settled in her. A sense of peace that lasted until the moment she saw him walking towards her.

Kent Parker was back.

CHAPTER 9

He looked like one of those stereotypical movie villains. Dashing handsome, with a stare that could turn you to stone and a heart that already was. News of the argument the two had shared on Monday had quickly spread, and now everyone knew two things about the person taking over in the kitchen at the Waterfront Cafe. First, he was a very good-looking man called Kent Parker, and second, Gemma did not like him one bit. A fact she made no effort to hide as he strode into the coffee shop, once again holding that damn tablet beneath his arm.

“Sorry, we’re not serving anymore,” she said, blocking him from walking too far into the building. “We’re closing early, for George’s leaving do.”

“Oh, I see.”

Kent’s lips twitched a little.

She assumed he was about to tell her how that was a terrible thing to do. Instead, he nodded.

“That makes sense. He’s been here a long time. He deserves a proper send-off.”

“He does,” Gemma replied, hoping that would be the end of their conversation and that Kent would turn around and walk back out the way he had come, but he continued to linger.

“Well, perhaps that will work out well. I was hoping you and I could have a talk. You know, just cover a few things before we work together tomorrow.”

“We won’t be working together tomorrow.”

Kent frowned. “You’re on the rota, aren’t you?”

“I was, but Sophie and I have swapped.”

At this, Kent’s frown deepened further. “Not because of me?”

Gemma wasn’t sure how she was supposed to reply. She hadn’t expected Kent to know she was meant to be working, although, in hindsight, that was foolish. The rota was stuck to the wall out back in the kitchen, and he had spent plenty of time out there the day before with George.

“No,” she said, praying that she managed not to blush, which was her normal physical response whenever she had to lie about anything. “It’s because of personal reasons.”

“Oh, nothing serious, I hope?”

Somehow, this faux caring and concerned Kent grated on Gemma even more than when he was being outright rude. Probably because she knew that it was false.

“Is there something you wanted?” she said pointedly.

Kent’s gaze quickly scanned around the room. “Well, like I said, I was hoping I could go over a few things with you. I’d really like to get them cleared before I start working. But you’ve got George’s leaving do now?”

“Yes,” Gemma said.

This conversation had gone on far longer than she wanted it to, and now she was just

repeating herself. The sooner she got rid of him, the better.

“I assume it’s not going to just be you and Sophie there?” Kent continued, although he tilted his head to the side ever so slightly now as if he was thinking as he was speaking. “The other staff on the rota, the Saturday staff, and the part-timers—they’ll be there too.”

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“Yes. Of course. It’s his work goodbye party. Anyone who works with him is going to be there.”

Gemma was surprised to see a smile spread across Kent’s face and angered by the fact it made him even more handsome. Though, she told herself just because he was handsome, it didn’t make him attractive. No, Kent Parker was not an attractive man at all. Still, the expression remained on his face as he spoke again.

“Well,” he said. “A goodbye party sounds like a perfect reason for me to come along and meet my new staff.”

CHAPTER 10

There was officially no denying it. Kent Parker was the most arrogant, self-centred, egotistical man Gemma had ever come across. And she had come across a few. She felt her hands clench as she stood there, and the muscles around her neck and back tightened. Across the coffee shop, a couple of remaining customers were looking at her. Had they heard what had happened before, she wondered? Were they waiting for her to explode at him for a second time? The pair looking at her had their phones out on the table. Perhaps they hoped to catch her outburst on camera, then place it on the internet where it could go viral. Well, she wasn’t going to lose her cool again. She was still drawing in a long breath, hoping to force her pulse rate down, when Kent spoke again.

“That won’t be an issue, will it?” he said.

Her fists clenched tighter.

Really?

Gemma couldn't believe his gall. She had met a lot of men who believed that having testicles gave them the automatic right to speak down to women, and unsurprisingly, she placed them a little above a venomous tree frog in terms of creatures she wished to interact with. But he was taking the biscuit.

"First, they are not your staff," she said.

She knew how it worked in posh restaurants, where the chefs were the top dogs, designing all the menus and bossing all the wait staff around like they didn't know what they were doing, but that wasn't the same there. This was her place. Well, it was Oscar's, but she ran it, and the way she ran it would not change because some man who thought he was god's gift was now employed there.

"Second, this is a farewell to George. A chance for the people who have worked with him, some of us for nearly a decade, to say goodbye to him. This is a chance to share our favourite stories and laugh and probably cry too, because after today, I won't come into work and talk to one of the nicest men I've ever known. Sophie and I won't have a man we view more like family than a friend to talk through our worries with, because even though people say things won't change after they leave, we all know that's not true. Today is a chance for us to tell George that this place won't be the same without him. That's what his leaving do is. It's not a chance for you to come and wheedle your way in with the staff or to share all the notes you've scribbled down on that damn tablet of yours. This evening is about George. So yes, actually, it will be an issue if you come along. You start work here tomorrow with Sophie, and it would be great if you stayed away until then."

With everything she had wanted to say out in the open, Gemma expelled a long breath. She had failed, that was for sure. So much for promising herself she was going to keep her cool. Something about Kent got under her skin in a way she had

never known anyone else to do. Just his presence was enough to make her skin itch, and he could see it by the look on his face.

“I seem to have overstepped a mark, inviting myself tonight.” He clenched his hands in front of him. “I realise that now and I apologise.”

Gemma grunted. If he thought she was going to apologise for the way she had just spoken, then he was sadly mistaken. She had meant every word she’d said.

“Is there anything else you wanted?” she asked instead.

Kent shook his head.

“No, no. I’ll see you Monday then, Gemma.”

“Yes. I’ll see you Monday, Kent.”

A moment later, he was leaving and walking towards the river.

CHAPTER 11

Kent couldn’t remember a time when he had got things more wrong. In his mind, suggesting he attended George’s leaving do had been a way to break the ice. He thought that perhaps, if Gemma saw him outside of the Waterfront Cafe, she would be a little more relaxed. Perhaps they could have had a drink or two and managed a full conversation. After all, that was the first time she had even spoken to him since the incident with the old man, and it would have been great to have been able to explain his side of things.

Although in his defence, Gemma obviously wasn’t that good at reading people, either. If she was, she would have noticed how the old man’s eyes darted around the

room when he'd nearly fallen and how the last thing he had wanted was for anyone to make a fuss over him. She should have let him stand on his own and walk out the way he so obviously wanted to. She had handled it badly, not that she realised. And he didn't hold that against her, the same way he was sure that the old man hadn't either, because they both knew she was just trying to be a good person. So maybe he should have started by saying that. But there was no way he could go back to change it, so now everything he did focused on moving forward.

He sat on the bench, opened up his tablet, and stared at the list of points he had written down. These were observations he wanted to address with Gemma as soon as possible. He was sure she wouldn't be thrilled about a couple of them, which was why he wanted to do it now. Then, they'd have the weekend to work through it. Now, though, he would have to go through it with her on Monday morning, and that wasn't how anyone wanted to start their working week. He had taken on the position at the Waterfront Cafe with such high hopes and confidence that he would make a real difference, but he could already tell that Gemma was getting ready to block his every move. Maybe that was why he found himself thinking about her so often. Why he would find his eyes drifting across the coffee shop floor to watch her talking to Sophie and feel a pang of jealousy whenever a customer made her smile, or worse still, laugh.

He drew in a lungful of air and looked out at the boat. Maldon was beautiful in the sun, and it was no wonder there were so many older couples strolling around, hand in hand. It looked like the perfect type of place to retire and grow old together. Assuming you had someone to grow old with, that was.

The thought jerked him back into the moment. Realising he wouldn't get anything productive done sitting there on the bench, he glanced back at the Waterfront Cafe one last time, only for his stomach to flip in surprise.

Gemma was walking straight towards him.

CHAPTER 12

Gemma did not want to talk to Kent. Not at all. But that was the thing about being a manager. Sometimes, you had to do things you really didn't want to.

“You know you're not the only person who has to work here,” Sophie said as Kent walked out of the cafe.

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“Sorry?” Gemma turned around to look at her colleague, who was standing with her hands on her hips.

“You’re not the only person who works here. It’ll be fine for Chloe and Dawn. They’re part-time. And the Saturday girls, too. But I’m here full time with you and Kent, and if this is what the working environment will be like, then I might have to look for a new job.”

“What?” Gemma felt the blood draining from her face. “Sophie, you can’t think...you can’t...”

Sophie shrugged and cracked a small smile.

“Okay, I’m probably not going to find a new job. Not yet, at least, but seriously, think of it from his side. He was very polite. All he did was come to speak to his future boss and say he wanted to talk about a few things before he started the job, and you went off at him.”

“I didn’t go off at him.”

“Yes, you did. And you know you did. I get it. He was rude when you first met him, but you haven’t actually spoken to him. George seems to think he’s really nice. And apparently, he’s an amazing chef. Not that you’ve bothered to discuss anything about his previous employment with him.”

A flood of embarrassment rushed through Gemma. It was true. She hadn’t even thought about what his cookery skills were like. In her stubborn desire not to talk to

him at all, she didn't even know anything about his work history. He was a similar age to her, early thirties, and she didn't even know if he had always worked in kitchens or whether it had been a recent career. These were all things she should definitely have known as the manager of the cafe.

Now she was annoyed at herself; possibly even more than she was at Kent. Letting out a sigh, she looked at Sophie.

"You're right," she said.

Sophie grinned. "I know. It's quite fun, actually. I seem to be right a lot more, now that I'm with Graham."

Gemma's heart warmed a little. Sophie hadn't really changed at all since she and Graham had got together, apart from having significantly more confidence in herself, which meant also having the confidence to speak up to Gemma in moments like this. But at that precise moment, the reason Sophie had gained the courage to speak up didn't matter. What mattered was that she was right. Gemma needed to speak to Kent.

So, with a weight in her stomach, she headed outside, hoping he hadn't got too far.

Thankfully, Kent had sat on a bench only a few metres away. Still, she didn't know how she was going to start. Her throat was growing tighter and tighter with every step. She was just debating whether she should call his name, cough to alert him to her presence, or walk around to face him when he turned around and looked straight at her.

"Gemma?" he said.

"I can do half an hour this evening after George's party," she said.

“Oh, right.”

Deep down, she hoped Kent would say he couldn't see her then. After all, it was a Friday night, and he probably had a family, or at least a girlfriend, to go home to. But instead, he was immediately on his feet.

“Great,” he said. “After the party. Name the place. Anywhere you fancy. Though it would be great if it serves beer.”

CHAPTER 13

Gemma had lost count of the number of times she had broken down since George had handed in his notice. He'd spoken about doing it for years. At the peak of the summer every year, he said it would be his last. That he couldn't deal with the chaos for another year. But then the days grew cooler, the pace slowed, and he forgot about his desire to leave. Only this year had been different. Just after Easter, his wife had had a health scare. Thankfully, it had all been okay, but it had shaken George. He hadn't wanted to spend another summer toiling away over a gas hob, waking up at the crack of dawn when other people his age were already retired and spending their mornings pottering around in the garden and with the family.

Even when he handed in his eight weeks' notice—to make sure they had time to find someone good—Gemma hadn't actually believed he would leave. She'd assumed that at some point, the thought of retirement and the lack of structure to his days and weeks would scare him back into rescinding his resignation. Even as they got closer and closer to his leaving date and George started telling people the news, a small part of her still refused to accept it. Now, though, with every member of staff, not to mention a few old ones who had moved on, gathered together in the Swan, she knew it was happening.

“I'm not sure how I'm going to cope without you,” Gemma said, struggling to hold

back the tears as she hugged George tightly. “It means I’ve been here the longest now. I never felt bad for working in the same place for so long because you’d been here forever, but that’s changed now.”

“You’re going to be just fine,” George said. “You know Oscar rang me to wish me luck with my retirement.”

“He did?” Gemma said in surprise. She spoke to Oscar occasionally, normally when she wanted to make a big purchase like a cake fridge or a freezer, but she couldn’t remember the last time he had rung her. Obviously, she needed to retire for that to happen.

“Yup, he wanted to make sure that nephew of his settles in okay.”

“Nephew?” Gemma said.

“Aye, Kent. He’s Oscar’s nephew, surely you knew that?”

Gemma felt her head nodding in response. Now it all made sense. That was why Kent had been employed. Why she hadn’t seen so much as a CV before Oscar had said that he was coming on board. She shook her head, annoyed by both the nepotism and the fact she hadn’t seen it. She was about to say as much when Dawn, one of the part-time wait staff, called from the other end of the bar.

“George! Do you remember the time you ordered four dozen trout on the cheap from the fishmonger and we had to get it all sold before it went off?” George’s attention shifted from Gemma as he joined in the conversation.

“That was a cracking buy, that was.”

“I think you meana crackpotbuy,” Dawn countered.

“That trout pate was a genius move, though,” Sophie said. “People loved that. You know we still get asked when that’s coming back on the menu.”

Laughter continued around her, but Gemma was distracted. It appeared that she and Kent had even more to discuss than she’d first thought.

CHAPTER 14

Gemma didn’t know where Kent lived. She didn’t even know if it was in Maldon. There were plenty of nice little villages within commuting distance, although he could have been a town person for all she knew. Perhaps he lived in Chelmsford or Rayleigh. It didn’t matter to her, as long as he was at work on time each day. Still, she had suggested they meet at the microbrewery just up the road from the Swan. The place was only open in the latter half of the week and did a great draught cider. Also, it was at the bottom of town, and the last thing she wanted was to walk all the way to the top and have to come down again to get home.

The goodbyes with George had taken longer than she expected, and as such, she was nearly twenty minutes late to meet Kent. Part of her hoped that he had given up and gone already, but as she pushed open the low door and stepped inside, she saw him there, sitting in the corner, sipping on a pint of pale ale.

As he saw her coming, a smile flashed on to his face. The expression surprised her,

not just because she had never seen him do it before, but because of how much it changed him. It was as if his entire face lit up. He looked almost friendly.

“Sorry, it ran on a bit,” she said.

With a wave of his hand, Kent shook the comment away.

“Don’t be silly. You must have had a lot of memories to go over. I take it George had a good night.”

“I think so. He’s gone out for a meal with his family now, so that’ll be nice for him.”

“Yes, I’m sure it will.”

Silence fell between them. It wasn’t the type of silence Gemma normally felt with her work colleagues. The type where they didn’t need to speak, or didn’t want to, but knew that was okay. This was the awkward type of silence where it was clear they both wanted to say something, but neither one wanted to be the first to speak.

“I’ve got some notes.”

“You’re Oscar’s nephew.”

The pair spoke at exactly the same time. Gemma felt her cheeks heat. She hated blushing and had assumed that, given she was now in her early thirties, it would be something she had grown out of, but unfortunately, that hadn’t been the case. She cleared her throat, ready to speak again, when Kent got there first.

“Yes, sort of. He’s my step-uncle. But I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t qualified. This isn’t nepotism if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No?” Gemma had promised herself she wouldn’t get into an argument, but the man was as deluded as he was arrogant. “That’s funny because I didn’t see your CV, and you’d think if someone was genuinely qualified, the person running the place would have at least been allowed that courtesy. After all, if you were the best candidate, I’m sure I would have seen it.”

Kent tilted his head to the side. “Oscar had it. I assumed he had sent it to you.”

“Then you assumed wrong. I knew nothing about you. Not even your name.”

“Wow.” That was his initial response. Then, rather than apologising for an oversight, which he may or may not have had a part in, Kent simply shook his head. “That’s a shame, but I can still assure you I would have been the best candidate you had. How many chefs around here have trained in Paris and Tokyo and in Michelin-starred restaurants?”

Gemma snorted.

“Sorry, you’re telling me you worked in a Michelin-starred restaurant, and now you’ve taken up a position in your uncle’s cafe where you’re mostly going to be making bacon butties and baking brownies? I’m guessing there’s a story in there.”

“Not an interesting one. Just life. Anyway, we’re not here to talk about that. We’re here to talk about the changes I think we need to make to the cafe.”

CHAPTER 15

It was like he wanted to play the part of the comic book villain. Every time he said something that made Gemma vaguely intrigued, he would follow it up with a comment like this.

“I’m sorry, you want to change things?”

Rather than replying immediately, Kent reached down to the bag by his side and pulled out the tablet he’d had with him all week. It wasn’t, as Gemma thought, a normal iPad, but an electronic notebook. He switched it on and flicked over a couple of pages.

“One of the first things we need to address is how long single customers are taking up table space.”

“Sorry?”

Gemma shook her head in disbelief, although it was clear from the way Kent continued he assumed she actually wanted more information.

“Do you know that you have several customers throughout the week who sit at tables for over an hour and a half ordering nothing more than two cups of tea?”

“Well... Yes, lots of them are our regulars.”

“One was there with his notepad, scribbling away, and Sophie seemed to spend more time talking to him than anybody else.”

“That’s Sophie’s boyfriend, Graham. He’s always come in and done his drawing in the cafe. It’s how the pair of them met. I won’t rush customers out if all they want is a drink.”

“It’s poor business sense. And we can get triple the number of covers through just by being more efficient with a few factors. Which takes me on to table spaces. Graham, for instance, was taking up a four-person table.”

“That’s in the darkest corner of the café, that people don’t like,” Gemma continued, “and I’m sorry, but Graham has a lot more than two cups of tea. He has lunch there at least three times a week.”

“Well, yes, I’ll get onto food and drink now, starting with your menu. It’s dated.”

Gemma felt her jaw hanging lower with every word that came out of Kent's mouth.

"The menu reflects what the customers like," she said.

"I believe what you mean is that it reflects what your older customers like. You're missing out on a whole demographic just because you haven't bothered to make a few updates. And there is an issue with your prices. I'm sorry, but they're ridiculous."

Gemma could feel her eyebrows raised so high they were likely lost in her hairline, but she couldn't lower them.

"I'm sorry, ridiculous? How exactly?"

"When was the last time you raised them? It's like going back into the eighties. Do you know the price of a cup of tea in Maldon? Do you know what that costs?"

"I'd guess about two pounds."

"You'd guess? That's part of the problem; you shouldn't be guessing, you should know these things. This is your job. You should know exactly what your competitors charge and your prices should be in line."

Gemma pressed her thumb into her temples, trying to lessen the throbbing headache she could feel starting. Her instinct was to lay it on him yet again, to tell him to mind his own business and not to worry about coming into work. She would find someone else to replace him. But it wasn't that simple. Yes, she could manage a few days without a chef, but this was Oscar's nephew, which made the whole matter a lot more difficult. She drew in a deep breath and tried to speak as reasonably as possible.

"Kent, I appreciate you are experienced in your field of the hospitality business," she spoke her words carefully, making sure everything she said was entirely factual, "but

you have never worked in an environment like this before. Am I correct in thinking that?"

"I don't have to have worked in Maldon to know how a good café should run."

"But have you ever worked in a café at all? I'm sorry, I get that you're only trying to do what you think is best for your uncle's business, but you're the chef here. Your place is in the kitchen, making the food that I decide goes on the menu. That's it."

For a split second, silence surrounded them. Silence that caused her muscles to grow tense. She had said what had to be said, in a professional and reasonable manner. Yet why did it feel like she was missing something? A split second later, a strange sound erupted from Kent's lips. It took Gemma a moment to realise it was a laugh.

An awkward and strange laugh that was more like a scoff than anything joyful.

"I've not come in here just to be the chef," he paused. "I'm here to run the cafe."

CHAPTER 16

Not once had Gemma heard Kent crack a joke. Maybe it was because she'd barely spoken to him, but even so, he hadn't given the impression of someone who liked to play pranks, and at that moment, there was no hint of humour on his face.

"Sorry?" she said, unable to form a more elaborate response. "What are you on about? I am the manager. I've always been the manager."

"I get the feeling that Uncle Oscar hasn't told you as much about the situation as I thought he was going to."

"Do you think?" Gemma knew her voice was rising, and it was such a small space

that several pairs of eyes looked in her direction, but she still didn't lower her tone.
“What the hell do you mean?”

Kent reached down to his drink, although rather than picking it up, he simply held the glass.

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“The plan was—I thought you were aware of it—I thought that was where the frostiness came from.”

“Sorry, you need to step up here. Any frostiness I showed you was because of your attitude and utterly deserved. I am the manager of the Waterfront Café. I have been for the last eighty years, and I don’t plan on relinquishing that position anytime soon.”

“I get that, I do, and I’m not planning on changing your day-to-day running of things—” Kent started.

“Apart from telling me that my prices are wrong and my customers can’t spend so long sitting at the tables?”

That shut him up for a moment, at least. He tensed his fingers and pressed them to the bow of his lip before speaking again.

“I’m here to see the big picture, to see how we can make the most out of this business long term.”

“Eight years isn’t long term for you?” Gemma said. She was on her feet now. She wasn’t sure when she’d stood up, but she had no intention of sitting down again. “I have worked long term, as you put it, at this café. I know everything about it and do not need an executive manager.”

“If we could just?”

“This conversation is over. And I wouldn’t get too comfortable with that fancy title of

yours. You won't have it for long."

With that, Gemma turned on her heel and marched out of the pub.

She was fuming—beyond fuming. She could feel the blood pounding in her cheeks, causing her heart to hammer against her rib cage. How dare he? How dare he come in and start telling her about the business she had run for years and years with no help whatsoever? She knew her prices were low because not everyone could afford the top-of-the-range, organic, all-singing, all-dancing coffee beans that some places sold, and she wanted it to be possible for everyone to come and have a drink now and then. And as for a dated menu, when did a decent slice of cake become dated?

She was so furious, her hands were shaking, though as the cool air hit her skin, she realised her anger was only partially aimed at Kent. Sure, he was to blame for being such an arse, but none of this would have happened had Oscar been honest with her.

This explained why he had tried to keep his new hire quiet for so long. Well, he wasn't going to get away with it. Fighting the trembling in her hands, Gemma pulled her phone out of her bag and scrolled down to Oscar's number. It had been a while since the pair had spoken. In fact, the last time was when he had told her he'd found someone else for George's job and not to bother advertising it. It was all sorted. If only she'd pushed further then, and found out what was going on, but she hadn't wanted to rock the boat. Not when everything was working so well.

As she tapped on the dial button, there was a split-second pause before the call went straight to voicemail. A twinge of annoyance gnawed inside her. It was bound to be Kent, trying to warn his uncle that she was on the rampage. Well, if he thought delaying the conversation was going to calm her down, he was very wrong. Very, very wrong. As she tried to figure out a plan of action, she noticed a familiar face a little way down the road. Graham was walking into the Swan.

Sophie had obviously told him to join them, and Gemma knew the pair wouldn't mind if she tagged along. After all, she needed a drink. A large one. But she wasn't going to do that. No, she was going to speak to Oscar as clearheaded as possible. And so she marched home. By the time she had reached her little two-bed house, she had left three voicemails. Each in a similar vein of "call me immediately."

If she had to, she would keep leaving messages until his inbox was full.

Though as it happened, she had just flicked on the kettle when her phone started buzzing and Oscar's name flashed up on the screen.

"Gemma, dear," he said, "I hear we have a bit of an issue."

CHAPTER 17

Gemma bit down on her tongue so hard she almost drew blood. Oscar was an old man, and she genuinely liked him, but he was also her employer. The person who had ensured she had a job she adored only to stitch her up without so much as a warning.

"You've employed somebody else to be a manager over the top of me." She didn't bother with niceties; she didn't have enough energy for that. "Your nephew, of all people."

"No, no, not on top of you," Oscar replied. "Alongside you. You carry on with the day-to-day running, and Kent will oversee?—"

"The bigger picture?" Gemma cut in. "Yes, I heard that's what he said. I don't need a bigger picture. The big picture is that we're doing just fine. We are full of customers each day. Regular customers who love us. I've been doing this job for eight years, Oscar. If you had a problem with the way I was running the cafe, the least you could've done was talk to me about it."

“No, no, no, Gemma, please don’t think that. That’s not what I think at all. You know I think you’ve done a fabulous job with the place. Fabulous.”

“Well, it doesn’t feel like that right now,” Gemma replied.

She heard a slight clucking noise down the line, as if Oscar was trying to clear his throat or smacking his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

“I understand why you’re upset. I do, but Kent is a remarkable young man—remarkable, the things he’s done at these other restaurants.”

Gemma bit down on the inside of her cheek. She didn’t want to hear about Kent’s list of accolades and accomplishments and how many fancy places he had trained or worked in.

“This isn’t even about Kent,” Gemma said. “This is about me, us, the fact that I thought you trusted me to run the place. You didn’t even send me his CV or details.”

“Now that’s not true,” Oscar said. “I’m sure I did. I printed it all off to give you when I came down at Easter.”

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Gemma shook her head. “You didn’t come down then, Oscar,” she said. “The last time you were in Maldon was before Christmas.”

“No, are you sure? That can’t be right.”

For the first time, Gemma’s fury flickered. Of course, she knew he was getting old. He’d been old when she had taken over running the place, but she had seen so little of him in the last few years that she clearly hadn’t realised how much he’d aged. Somehow, despite not liking the way Kent had gone about practically anything so far, she suspected he was telling the truth about thinking Oscar had contacted her.

Resting her forehead on her hands, she let out a sigh that turned into a groan.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” Gemma said. “You understand my problem, don’t you? You get why I’m mad?”

“I can see your point of view, Gemma. I can, but I do believe Kent is best for this business. Do you know he rang me as soon as he’d spoken to you, very concerned about how the workingrelationship is going to be? He does want this to go well, you know.”

Gemma didn’t reply.

“What about a trial? Eight weeks,” Oscar suggested. “You and Kent can try to work things out together for the next eight weeks, and then at the end of that, we’ll know better if it’s going to work.”

It wasn't exactly what Gemma wanted. What she wanted was for Oscar to say he'd made a terrible mistake, Kent would be gone, and she could find somebody else of her choosing to employ, but she knew that wasn't going to happen. So, instead, she drew in a long breath and said, with more than a hint of resentment in her tone,

"I guess that's what it will have to be, then."

CHAPTER 18

Thank God he got hold of Oscar before Gemma did. That was the first thought that struck Kent as his uncle answered the call. The second was that he needed to put a plan in place, now that he knew Gemma had no idea what was going on. The truth would have been the easiest option. He should have ripped the bandage straight off when he told her he was running the place. He would have only needed a couple more words to explain the situation, but he couldn't do it. His being there had already hurt her. He could see that. And the last thing he wanted to do was cause her more upset. Stupid, really. The truth would have to come out at some point, but after the conversation with his uncle, he knew it would stay under wraps for a little longer.

"Eight weeks. Can you do that for me, Uncle Oscar, please? And the thing about the C.V. You'll need to tell her that, too."

"I'm not happy about this," he said. "We made an arrangement."

"I know. And I'm handling it. I promise. This is the only thing I'll ask of you. And you have to take a little of the responsibility for this mess too, you know."

Oscar scoffed down the phone line, but Kent knew he'd agree to it. After all, he was equally to blame for the mess. If not more so.

It had felt serendipitous at the time. Kent had spent six months in Tokyo, learning the

intricacies of Japanese pastries, when the realisation struck him. He had slept in a hotel room for six months and still had some clothes in his suitcase. Casual clothes. Jeans, shirts. Outfits to wear on nights out with friends, but he hadn't made any. On the one hand, he had come to Tokyo to learn, and he had been doing that. Still, to go six months without a single social event was ridiculous. But to make matters worse, it had been exactly the same before he'd moved.

Before Japan, he had spent a year working in Paris and rented a studio apartment that was marketed as semi-furnished. It had white goods, a bed and a sofa; the perfect setup for someone staying for a couple of weeks, but not for someone looking to make the place their home. It lacked any of those comforting extras, like cushions and bookshelves. Items he promised himself he would get as soon as he had time. Twelve months later, when he was preparing to leave, he discovered he hadn't bought a single extra item of furniture. No comfy arm chair or rugs to cover the cold tile floors. No photo frames to hang on the walls with pictures of his family or friends.

So, when the contract in Japan ended, he came back to England to figure out what his next steps were going to be, and the weekend he visited his uncle Oscar just happened to be the same weekend as the chef George announced his retirement. It felt as if the universe was sending him a sign. More than one, really.

Oscar's house was filled with memories of family life, from the cushions sewn by his sister to the paintings on the wall by his wife. It was the antithesis of how Kent was living and he had felt a surge of sadness and jealousy. He was in his mid-thirties now, but he knew how quickly the years passed. In the blink of an eye, he would be forty. His dad had had three children by that age, and Kent himself had always envisaged himself settling down somewhere with two dogs, a wife, and at least one child.

So when Uncle Oscar had mentioned this Waterfront Café, and Kent took a look the next day, he had been astounded. It was the most prime location possible, with a view

all the way out over the estuary. The possibilities were endless. This was a brilliant opportunity for him. And it was. No matter how upset or righteous Gemma might have been, it didn't change the fact that the Waterfront Café wasn't earning nearly as much money as it could do, and he was going to change that.

CHAPTER 19

Despite changing shifts so that she didn't have to go in on Saturday, Gemma found herself unable to stop thinking about the Waterfront Café. She lay in bed, with the book club's pick on the nightstand next to her, and lifted it up several times, only to place it back down after just the same couple of pages read. This was officially Kent's first day as executive manager at the cafe. What had he told Sophie, she wondered. Perhaps he'd got little badges made like they had done in larger chain stores that said "Kent, Executive Manager" underneath. Or printed out their photos to pin up on the staff room wall in a triangle shape, with him firmly positioned at the top. She wouldn't put anything past him. Eventually, she gave up on the book and decided to get up.

Despite her prediction that the sunny spell would be over the moment the weekend came, morning light was streaming through the windows, and it appeared to be yet another cloudless day, the perfect type of day for a walk along the waterfront.

"You're being ridiculous, Gemma," she said to herself as she pulled her baseball cap down lower over her head.

She was already wearing sunglasses and had no need for both garments other than it was her attempt to look innocuous. She had tried avoiding the café. Her walk started with a very large loop all the way to the top of town, where she headed to the coffee shop by the arcade for a brownie. After which, she tried to kill more time, weaving in and out of the charity shops and strolling around an art exhibition in the church. But it was no good. Now, despite her best efforts, she was standing only ten metres from the

door.

The problem was that she couldn't see what was happening inside. Were the customers happy? Was the food okay? Had Kent done anything to upset Sophie or anybody else yet? As she continued to stare at the door to the Waterfront Café, it swung open, but rather than a customer leaving, it was Sophie striding straight towards her.

Gemma dropped her head, trying to pull her cap down further, but there was no way around it. She'd been busted.

"Gemma," Sophie said. "Are you spying on us? Seriously?"

Gemma didn't see any point in denying it. They knew each other way too well for that. Instead, she pulled off her cap and pushed her sunglasses back to the top of her head.

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“I just wanted to see how things were going, that’s all. How’s he been?”

“Kent? Oh, he’s been lovely. Really, really nice. And the food, oh my God.”

“What do you mean, the food?” Gemma’s stomach tightened. “He shouldn’t have changed anything about the food. The menu should be exactly the same as it was.”

“Oh, it is, it is. It’s just like, little things. He’s put this homemade pesto on the poached eggs, and it’s so good. Honestly, every customer has said they are the best thing ever.”

“I bet they have,” Gemma muttered.

Well, pesto poached eggs on the first Saturday was one thing, but she could bet it would be a whole different kettle of fish when he’d had to be up at 4:30 every morning for a fortnight. Something told her he didn’t have to do that in his fancy Michelin-starred restaurant.

“So he hasn’t been... a problem?” Gemma said, hoping that she picked the words correctly.

“No, honestly, you two just got off on the wrong foot, that’s all. I think you’d really like him when you get to know him better and...” Sophie’s eyes glinted in a way that made Gemma feel uneasy.

“And what?”

“And he’s single, thirty-six, and hasn’t had a serious relationship for the last three years.”

Gemma didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“Why are you telling me? And how have you got all that out of him already? All he does is scowl and pout.”

“I just asked,” Sophie said with a roll of her eyes. “Honestly, if you talk to him, you’ll find him really nice. Promise me you’ll try, right? I think we’d all get on really well working together.”

Gemma chose not to reply, but Sophie wouldn’t let it go. “Please promise me you’ll try,” she pressed again.

“Fine,” Gemma said, sounding remarkably like a petulant teenager. “I promise I will try.”

It was only when Sophie was back in the cafe that Gemma scoffed to herself.

“Like hell, I will,” she said.

Kent might have won Sophie over, but Gemma had seen through it all. His days at the cafe were numbered, and she was doing the countdown.

CHAPTER 20

“Idon’t know what he said to her, but she thinks the sun shines out of his overly tight backside,” Gemma said as she sat in the pub.

After the encounter with Sophie, she needed a drink and a distraction. All she could

do was think about how Monday morning would be her first shift with Kent, and she would have to face him again, her new executive manager.

“Sophie is a pretty good judge of character, though,” Nina said. “Perhaps he is quite nice.”

“Are you serious?” Gemma made no attempt to hide her disbelief. “Sophie is a terrible judge of character. Do you not remember her previous list of boyfriends before Graham? I mean, Jay snogged her sister, and I’m pretty sure she might still have forgiven him.”

“Okay, Sophie is a terrible judge of men when it comes to dating,” Nina relented. “But that doesn’t mean she’s a terrible judge of character. Perhaps it won’t be as bad as you think. You’ve just got to give it some time.”

“Eight weeks,” Sophie said. “That’s how long I’ve got to give it. Fifty-six days, well, fifty-five days because he’s already had his first day of work.”

A slight sense of calm filtered through her at the thought. Sunday, they didn’t have anyone in the kitchen. It would just be her and one of the part-timers. This meant when she did finally start working with Kent, there would only be fifty-four days to go. Almost three per cent of her time with Kent would be over before she actually had to work with him. Thinking of it that way made it all feel a little more bearable.

She opened her mouth, ready to say as much, when her phone started ringing. Fleur’s name flashed up on the screen.

Like all the members of the book club, Fleur and Gemma got along really well, although they didn’t do many things, just the two of them. Fleur had fallen into a relationship with Henry not long after moving to Maldon, although she had always tried to stay involved with everything the book club did. Even when she was the only

one of them who had a partner.

“Do you mind if I get this?” Gemma said to Nina, gesturing at the phone.

“Of course not, go for it.”

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“Gemma, brilliant, you picked up,” Fleur said. “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

“No, not at all. I’m just out for a drink with Nina.”

“Oh, okay, well, I won’t be long. I just wanted to know if you’ve got plans on Monday night?”

“Monday night?” Gemma’s mind flickered forward to Monday. All she could think about was how she would be face-to-face with Kent for the first time, but she pulled that thought back. That probably wasn’t what Fleur wanted to know. Besides, that wasn’t in the evening. Gemma’s Monday evening was completely free, like most evenings that didn’t involve the book club.

“No, I’ve got nothing planned for Monday. Why?”

“Perfect! How do you fancy coming on a double date?”

CHAPTER 21

It was a good job Gemma had already finished her drink; if she hadn’t, she was pretty sure she would have spat it out everywhere. This was definitely something Fleur had never suggested to her before.

“Sorry, did you say a double date?” she said. Across the table, Nina’s eyes widened, but Fleur was still talking down the phone.

“So there’s this new guy. He’s joined Henry’s firm, and from what Henry says, I

think he'll be just perfect for you."

"Okay..." Gemma replied, intrigued to know what had given Fleur this impression.

"He is thirty-four," Fleur started, only to stop. "Do you have time to go through this now?" she said, a hint of worry in her voice. "I don't want to interrupt your time with Nina."

"It's fine. Nina will want to know everything anyway, so you might as well tell me now. He's thirty-four, and...?"

Fleur cleared her throat before she carried on. "Yes, and he studied law. That's probably obvious, given that he's a lawyer and everything."

"Right, thirty-four and studied law."

Gemma struggled to see what could've made Fleur assume they would be a decent match, but she didn't say as much. She wanted to hear what else Fleur knew about him.

"He moved to Maldon about a year ago, but unfortunately, he hasn't settled in that well. Not because he's not lovely, he is, he just spends a lot of time working. You know what these lawyer types are like. Anyway, he's a right foodie. Absolutely loves going to coffee shops, trawling through antique markets, that kind of thing. I don't know. Something about him made me think you two would be a great fit. We were just going to go for a drink on Monday night. Nothing as arduous as a meal or anything, so what do you say?"

Gemma took a moment to pause before reciting everything that Fleur had just said to Nina.

“She’ll say yes, obviously,” Nina shouted from across the table.

Nina was one of those people who came across as ever so quiet, and was most of the time, until she’d had a couple of drinks and was in the company of people she trusted. Then, she really came out of her shell.

“I don’t know. I think Monday is going to be a bit of a stressful day for me,” Gemma said, only for Nina to jump in.

“That’s why you need to go for a drink. This is perfect. You’ll be too busy thinking about what to wear for your double date to stress about anything Kent does while you’re at work with him.”

While Gemma didn’t believe that was wholly true, she could see the logic in Nina’s thinking. She would almost certainly want a few glasses of wine after a full day working with Kent. Why not have them meeting someone new?

“Okay, count me in,” she said.

“Brilliant, well, we’ll meet you at the White Horse at seven. Looking forward to it. Oh, this is going to be just perfect. I can feel it.”

CHAPTER 22

Sundays were different at the Waterfront Café. They still served an impressive selection of drinks, cakes, sandwiches, and panini. Still, they didn’t do the breakfasts or jacket potatoes they sold the rest of the week. It was a structure that Oscar had put in place long before Gemma worked there, and she saw no need to change it. It also made things far easier when managing rotas. That day, she was working with Dawn, a forty-something mum of four, who worked one day a week and one weekend a month. From what Gemma knew of Dawn, she didn’t do this for the money. After all,

she was the only staff member Gemma had ever encountered who would spend all day traipsing around the café in a pair of Gucci trainers.

Instead, she did it for the company and the ‘extra pocket money’, as she called it. She had also told Gemma that throwing it back in her husband’s face was useful when he said she didn’t know how to work. After all, she reasoned, a full day in the middle of the summer in a café was a darn sight harder than sitting at a desk all day. Obviously, Gemma had agreed because she’d known that was what Dawn had expected, yet she knew if it was a toss-up between being run off her feet at the cafe, and endless weeks in a cramped office, there would be no contest.

Still, when she woke on Monday morning, for the first time ever, she was actually dreading going in.

Nerves held her captive. On the one hand, she kept thinking about what Sophie had said and how lovely Kent was to work with, but the truth was, she didn’t know how she was meant to work with him. Or anyone who called themselves the executive manager. She had been used to calling the shots. Taking control and doing things however she thought would work best. So how would it work now? Did it mean she would have to second-guess any decisions she made? Or would she have to run everything by him? In the end, she realised that the only way of finding out how the day would go was to start it, so forty minutes earlier than usual, Gemma left her home and headed to the Waterfront Café.

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The space smelt divine. Freshly baked cakes, browning bread, and a whole myriad of other aromas flooded her senses as she stepped inside. Sophie had said Kent had levelled up the simple poached eggs to something spectacular, and despite how cynical she had been, Gemma no longer doubted it. She could smell it in the air. It smelt like the Waterfront Café, just a tiny bit better. Not that she would ever say that to Kent. And how the heck had she not noticed how chiselled his jaw and cheekbones were before?

“Is everything okay? I didn’t expect to see you for another half an hour.”

Gemma blinked rapidly as she swallowed a lump that had fixed itself in her throat.

“Yes, yes. Everything’s fine. I just sometimes come in a bit early on a Monday, that’s all.”

“Right.” Kent smirked. “Nothing to do with checking up on me, I suppose?”

Gemma went to roll her eyes, only to change her mind. After all, there seemed little point in denying it.

“Maybe, just a bit.”

With the smirk transforming into something closer to a smile, Kent carried on speaking.

“Well, George told me he does all you girls breakfast. I was just about to do some for myself. I don’t suppose you’d like to sit and join me?”

The knots in Gemma's stomach reformed tighter than ever.

"Why do I feel like sitting and joining you for food would mean you telling me more things you want to change about my café?" Gemma said.

"It's not your café, and it's not mine. It's Oscar's," Kent said pointedly. "But that wasn't my intention. Still, if you don't want to join me, I won't take offence."

Gemma didn't want to join him, but she didn't want to appear rude, either. Thankfully, there was a saving grace in sight.

"Actually, as it's such a lovely day, I'd quite like to take mine outside, and given that I'm early and everything..."

Kent nodded. "Sure thing, I was going to do sausage sandwiches. That okay for you?"

"Sounds good."

"Brown sauce, ketchup, or plain?" he asked.

"Brown sauce, it's breakfast," Gemma replied.

The tiniest of smiles flickered on the corner of his lips, causing an unnatural fluttering in her stomach. It was just hunger, Gemma told herself as she tried to quash the feelings. All this talk of breakfast and sausage sandwiches would do that. Thankfully, Kent was turning around and walking back into the kitchen, meaning she didn't have to look at his perfectly symmetrical face any longer.

"Glad to hear it," he said. "Okay, one sausage sandwich with brown sauce, coming straight up."

CHAPTER 23

Gemma got to work, sorting out the coffee machines and cutting up the cakes for the day, but she couldn't help but constantly throw glances towards the kitchen. It always seemed like a veritable hub of life when George was in there, even though he only worked on his own. He would always have the radio on and often sing along or do a little jig as he moved from one station to another. If Kent was listening to music, it was so quiet that Gemma couldn't hear it, and somehow, she couldn't imagine him doing a jig of any sort.

It was another twenty minutes before he brought the sausage sandwich out, and even then, Gemma still wasn't due to start for another ten, which was why she didn't feel the slightest bit of guilt taking her plate and heading outside to the waterfront.

Eating outside by an estuary was always a dangerous game. Just like at the seaside, seagulls would lurk on walls and posts, ready for the opportunity to jump down and steal something. However, that morning, as Gemma took her seat and bit into the sandwich, the tide was out, revealing the riverbed and the sea birds were notably few. She chewed slowly before swallowing and taking a second bite.

A moment later, she was marching straight back to the café.

"What the hell did you do with the sausage sandwich?" she said.

Kent came out from the kitchen, once again brushing his hands on the seat of his trousers.

"Is everything okay?"

"You changed something, didn't you? You changed something about the sandwich."

He tilted his head to the side quizzically.

“Are you saying you didn’t like it?”

“I’m not saying that at all,” Gemma said. The truth was the exact opposite. She had taken one bite of that sausage sandwich, and her taste buds had been set alight with the explosion of flavour. This wasn’t the way that George did them—bread, lightly toasted, butter, and a bit of sauce slapped in the middle.

This was another level, but how or why Kent had managed it she didn’t know.

“What did you change?” she said again.

“Did you like it? Yes or no.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a plain sausage sandwich. That’s what people expect when they come here. Nothing fancy.”

“That’s hardly fancy,” Kent said. “All I did was caramelise some balsamic soaked red onions, purée them down and add them to the brown sauce. It’s good, right? Really good.”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s good or not,” Gemma said, feeling like she was hitting her head against a brick wall. “What matters is that it’s not the way people like it here.”

“How do you know?” Kent said. “They liked the poached eggs with pesto, and I bet you would have kicked up a fuss if I’d told you I wanted to do that too, right?”

Gemma wasn’t going to warrant that with a reply.

“We’re talking about the sausage sandwich. You’ve changed something that is a staple. That people love, and I do not approve.”

Was this where he pulled his executive manager line, she wondered? She would love to see him try.

“Look,” he said, his voice measured and calm. “Your customers all loved George. I get that. But they also know that George is gone and a new chef has come. Your customers also, we can assume, love sausage sandwiches. Now, if you can forget the fact that you obviously despise everything I do?—”

“That’s not—” Gemma started, but Kent’s gaze shut her down. After all, it was probably true.

“Let’s forget that I am involved in this in any way. I want you to answer me objectively: was that sausage sandwich better, worse, or the same as the one you normally serve? And answer truthfully.”

Gemma hated him.

She hated how he could look at her with his unwavering stare like he didn’t need to blink at all. And she hated how his lips pressed together, almost as if he was holding back a smirk. But most of all, she hated how he knew he was right. And he was. He was right.

“Fine, keep your bloody balsamic onions, but you’re not changing anything else,” she said.

CHAPTER 24

As annoying as the start of the day had been, the rest of it went by with relative ease.

As soon as the customers started arriving, they were all Gemma focused on. The only time she would see Kent was when she took an order through to the kitchen and when he rang the bell for her to take it to a customer. At such times, she didn't need to have any conversation with him at all. That wasn't the case with the customers, though. One woman, a woman in her early sixties called Margaret, came in almost an hour later than usual. She was typically a very well-dressed lady whose makeup skills were far better than Gemma's and who never appeared to miss a hair appointment. But, Gemma noticed, there was a solid inch of root growth on her hair, and her nails were bitten down to the quick.

"Is everything okay?" Gemma asked after taking Margaret's standard order of a black Americano and a cheese scone.

"Yes, sort of, no, not at all really," Margaret said. "My mother's in hospital again, and it doesn't look good."

"Oh Margaret, I'm so sorry."

Gemma remembered all too well the stress that Margaret had been under when her mum first fell ill. They had been living together at the time, and Margaret would often come in, pushing her elderly mother's wheelchair. But the stress and strain of caring for her had become too difficult, and eventually they decided a nursing home was the best option. During those first few weeks that Margaret had come in alone, Gemma made a concerted effort to always sit with her for as long as she could manage, just to make sure the table didn't feel too big and empty on her own.

"It's been coming for a long time," Margaret replied, "but it doesn't make it any easier, you know. And this back and forth to the hospital is mentally exhausting, you know."

Gemma nodded sympathetically, though, in truth, she didn't actually know at all. Her

mother had passed away when she was only seven, and she had been raised mainly by her grandparents. But they were still a sprightly pair in their late sixties who she sometimes felt went on more holidays in one year than Gemma had done in her entire life. But she knew that someday, she would likely have to face what Margaret was going through.

“You go sit down. I’ll bring your drink and scone over,” Gemma said. “It’s not too busy if you want to sit and talk about it for a bit.”

Margaret smiled gratefully, but she shook her head.

“No, not today, but thank you for the offer. Today I think I’m just going to read,”

“Well, I’ll get you this, then let me know if you need anything else,” Gemma said. Five minutes later, Margaret had a book open on the table in front of her, although from what Gemma saw over the next half an hour, she didn’t turn the page once.

CHAPTER 25

Sophie was only working half a day and she turned up at one o'clock, full of beans and ready to start.

Although first, she needed to catch up on any gossip.

"Oh, my God, you've got a date tonight, and you didn't tell me," she said.

"I haven't seen you to tell you," Gemma said as she unloaded plates for the dishwasher. "It's not a proper date, anyway. It's a double date drink with one of Henry's work colleagues."

"And from what Nina says, he sounds amazing. She told me everything Fleur said on the phone. We are so excited for you."

It was lovely how supportive the book club was of one another, although at the same time, it was undeniably annoying that nothing could be kept a secret.

"Well, I'll let you know how it goes tomorrow," Gemma said. "But don't get your hopes up. You know what I'm like when it comes to dating."

"Completely standoffish and unwilling to open your heart to anyone?" Sophie suggested.

"That feels a bit harsh."

“Maybe, but it’s true.” A smile twisted on her lips. “And now, how’s today been? With Kent. Have you two got along well?”

Gemma had been anticipating this question, and thankfully, she had prepared a truthful and non-problematic answer.

“I’ve hardly seen him,” she said, skipping the part about the amazing sausage sandwich and him calling her out for checking on him first thing. “He’s been punctual with the food and we’ve had no customer complaints.”

“Well, you two are going to get on amazingly. I can feel it. Also, we should probably sort out the tables and chairs outside,” Sophie added.

“The chairs, why?”

Most of the time, they left the outside furniture where it was; it was only when they were expecting heavy rain that they ensured all the chairs were tucked under the tables so that they were useable after the rain had stopped.

“There’s a massive thundercloud coming this way,” Sophie said. “And haven’t you listened to the weather forecast? It’s meant to be pouring down all afternoon.”

“Are you sure?” Gemma went over to the window.

Just as Sophie had said, a massive black thundercloud was looming overhead, darkening the water to a deep, murky grey.

“Well, it’s going to go one of two ways,” Gemma said. “I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

CHAPTER 26

Sudden downpours of rain meant one of two things for the Waterfront Café. The first thing that could happen was that everybody who had been outside, enjoying the view and walking their dogs, would make a dash for the nearest place undercover where they could wait out half an hour with a cup of coffee. On such occasions, the Waterfront Café would become rammed. Gemma and Sophie would inevitably be run off their feet until the rain stopped and the people dispersed en masse. The other option was that everyone headed for their cars or directly home, in which case, the café would be absolutely dead. And that was what happened that afternoon. Rain pelted down outside, and heavy droplets fell so densely that they blocked the view between the café and the waterfront. They hammered on the roof like hailstones.

“It’s going to be dead all afternoon now,” Sophie said.

“Not necessarily,” Kent replied. “I’m sure people will want to come out and stretch their legs when the rain stops. The shower is only meant to last a couple of hours.”

After receiving no orders for over twenty minutes, he had come out of the kitchen, wondering what was going on. Now, he was simply sitting at a table, staring outside with Sophie.

“I guess, in restaurants, people still come out; they’ve made bookings,” she said. “But here, it’ll be dead. It’s only really the dog walkers that will come out. None of the parents want their children splashing in all the puddles and getting crazily muddy. Plus, the paths here get quite slippery because of the hills, so none of the old folk like walking down when it’s really wet. Trust me, it’s going to be dead.”

“Why are you still here, anyway?” Gemma said before realising just how rude her question sounded. “I just mean, well, you’re done for the day. We stop serving hot meals now, you know that. Your day finishes at three.”

“I know,” Kent said, “but I wanted to see what a full day was like. And it’s not like

I've got anywhere better to be."

At his comment, Sophie shot Gemma a look that involved both a raised eyebrow and a smirk. However, Gemma masterfully ignored the expression entirely. She had enough matchmaking going on in her life. Sophie sticking her nose in when it definitely wasn't wanted was the last thing Gemma was in the mood for. Still, at 3:30, with only one customer, Gemma made a decision.

"You go home, Sophie," she said. "There's no point in us both hanging around here when there's no one to serve."

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“Are you sure? I don’t mind staying. Although Graham has got this new board game he wants us to play tonight, and by the look of the rulebooks, I really think I could do it by watching a few online videos just so I know what we’re doing before we start. It’s annoying; he thinks I’m naturally good at these games now. At some point, I’m going to have to confess that I’ve been watching how-to tutorials online.”

Somehow, Gemma suspected Graham already knew this about Sophie, but it was very sweet how hard they worked to keep each other happy.

“You go home, watch your YouTube videos,” Gemma said.

“And I’ll tell you what, I can always come in early tomorrow, you know if you turn out to have a really good night and want to stay out a little later.”

“You have exciting plans later then, Gemma?”

Gemma turned around to find Kent standing in the doorway to the kitchen. He had gone back in there shortly after that discussion about the effects of rain, and from all the clattering, Gemma assumed he had been sorting out the cupboards to his liking. But now he was looking straight at her, with an intensity that caused her stomach to flutter nervously, although why, she wasn’t sure. Probably because she didn’t want him knowing anything about her personal life. Yes, that made sense.

“Nothing too exciting,” she lied. “Just going out for some drinks with friends. That’s all.”

“Well, that sounds exciting to me,” he said before turning his attention to Sophie. “I

agree with Gemma, by the way. You might as well go home. I'll stay here just in case there's a sudden rush."

"You don't need to do that," Gemma replied.

"I know," he said. "I want to."

And just like that, the fluttering in her stomach kicked up a whole new notch.

CHAPTER 27

This was an opportunity. An opportunity to tell Gemma the truth of the situation. That was what Kent was telling himself. That was why he had suggested Sophie go home and he remain with Gemma. It wasn't because he wanted to spend some time alone with her. To get to know her, was it? Of course not. That would be ridiculous. After all, he was here to do a job, and any sentimentality attached to the workers could stop him from being as productive as possible. In fact, it could be seriously detrimental.

But if he was honest with himself, Kent knew he thought about Gemma a lot. Far more than he could remember thinking about anybody for a long time. Naturally, a lot of that had to do with how annoying she was. The way she was constantly judging him, waiting for him to fail. Unfortunately, she didn't know about that streak in him, which meant the more somebody expected him to do badly, the more he had to prove them wrong. It was probably something from his childhood. Growing up, his older siblings had always been considered smart, while he was just average. Not that average was bad, except for his parents.

In someways, Kent knew he should probably thank them. It was his drive to prove them wrong that had seen him achieve somuch. But sometimes, he wondered what it would be like not to have to prove himself all the time. To have people accept him

regardless of what he accomplished.

It wasn't just work situations with Gemma that he found himself thinking about though. In fact, since Sophie had mentioned Gemma's evening plans, Kent's mind had had them on replay constantly. It was a date, right? That's what Sophie was implying. Gemma was going on a date, which made sense. She was beautiful, intelligent, fierce as hell. She probably had several dates a week.

Biting the bullet, he grabbed a cloth, walked across to a table she hadn't reached yet, and began to wipe it down. It had been over half an hour since Sophie had left. During that time, Gemma hadn't said a single word to him. However, it didn't feel like she was deliberately ignoring him—more like she had too much to do to waste time talking to him. She had already emptied the chiller cabinets and cleaned them until they were spotless and was now going around checking that all the undersides of the tables were clean, too. She was certainly fastidious in all areas of her job. Not just the fun parts, like dealing with nice customers or taste-testing the produce. That was something he admired. Still, he needed to have a conversation with everyone. Although it felt wrong to just go in and tell her. A little bit of small talk first would probably be appropriate.

“So these friends you're heading out with tonight, they're local, I take it?”

She looked up from her cleaning. Her eyes were wide with surprise, as if she had forgotten he was even there, or perhaps just forgotten he'd been there during her earlier conversation with Sophie.

“Yes, just going out with a friend from the book club and her husband,” she said.

“Right. Sounds good.” He took the cloth to the otherside of the table, although rather than wiping it down, he merely stood there. Her answer hadn't given him the confirmation he hoped for. He needed more and so he asked what he actually wanted

to know. “With your boyfriend too, I take it?”

He had hoped the question had been innocuous, that it simply flowed in with the conversation. After all, he was ninety per cent certain she was single. That’s what Sophie said at least, and they were clearly great friends. Still, he could see Gemma being the type of person who would keep a relationship secret until she knew it was the real deal. That was a sensible thing to do. You probably had to when you got as much attention from guys as she was likely to. The thought caused a ridiculous pang somewhere near his stomach and as he watched Gemma, he saw a slight pink rise in her cheeks. A bashfulness he hadn’t quite expected, but that was irritatingly even more endearing than her fire. She cleared her throat, and his pulse ticked up as he waited for the answer. It made no difference, he told himself. What did it matter what she replied to him? Still, he could feel his breath tightening in his lungs as she parted her lips to speak. But before a word left her mouth, her eyes moved past him and onto the clock on the wall.

“Look at that, five o’clock,” she said. “We can both go home now.”

Without thinking, he reached out a hand, ready to stop her. Only to hesitate. She was probably really looking forward to tonight. Maybe it was someone special she was going to meet. The last thing he wanted to do was ruin her evening before it even started. And what he needed to tell her would definitely ruin her night. He knew that.

“Sure,” he said, twisting his lips into a smile. “Going home now sounds good.”

CHAPTER 28

For a long time, Gemma, just like Sophie, struggled for confidence with dating. She recalled now, with a sense of embarrassment, the hours she would spend choosing an outfit or fixing her makeup, and even then, even when she was as perfect as she could make herself, she would be terrified that they might not like her.

But all that changed when she met Robert—or rather when Robert left her.

In terms of breakups, it was a right royal mess, and for a short while, she felt the need to shoulder some of the blame. There were things she could have done differently. Signs she should have seen and matters she could have handled in a manner that may have resulted in a different outcome.

Or would it?

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That was what she realised after over a month of self-pity. Ultimately, it wouldn't have mattered what she had done because it was Robert's actions, not hers, that led to the mess she found herself in. Robert's decision had broken more than just her heart. So, rather than continuing her wallowing, Gemma took it upon herself to learn everything she could from the incident.

The moment she decided that she would never again let a man, or anyone else, take her for a fool, it was like a weight lifted from her. The weight of other people's expectations. She would never focus her happiness on trying to please someone else or be the version of herself that she thought they wanted. Instead, she would be the version of herself she wanted to be. So that was what she had done.

It had taken a while, especially with all the baggage Robert had left behind, but Gemma was confident with who she was as a person now, and that was a person she liked—a person who had good friends who would do anything to support her, and whom she would do anything to help. She had a job that she adored, and one that allowed her to help people, perhaps not as directly as being a teacher or a doctor, but she knew that her presence in her customers' lives each day made a difference to them. She liked who she was, and if she was going to find somebody to fall into a serious relationship with again, then they needed to like her as she was, too. And so, it was with only a quick shower to get off the smell of the day, and a change into a simple pair of jeans and a black top that she walked up to the White Horse.

It wasn't a pub she went to often, but it was close to where Fleur and Henry lived, so she understood why they had chosen it. With one last glance at her reflection in the window, Gemma took a deep breath and stepped inside.

“Gemma!”

Gemma had barely gathered her bearings when she spotted Fleur on her feet, waving at her.

“Over here.”

As Gemma walked across the pub to join them, Fleur stepped forwards, and kissed her on both cheeks.

“I’m so glad you could make it. Gemma, I want to introduce you to Angus.”

As Fleur stepped to the side, Gemma’s eyes moved past her friend to the man sitting next to Henry.

Her jaw dropped.

Angus, it turned out, was absolutely gorgeous.

CHAPTER 29

Gemma liked to tell herself that she didn’t have a type. It was more about personality than looks. But at the same time, she suspected Angus was almost every straight woman’s type. Or at least straight women who liked tall, immaculately dressed men, with bright blue eyes and shoulders that told her his body wouldn’t have been out of place in a swimsuit magazine. He was dressed impeccably but in a way that didn’t come across as conceited. A pale blue shirt, dark denim jeans, and shoes that looked undeniably expensive.

“Gemma, I’m so pleased to meet you,” he said as he followed Fleur in kissing Gemma on both cheeks. His voice was deep and rich and tickled the hairs on the back

of her neck. “I have just ordered a bottle of Bordeaux. You will have a glass, won’t you?”

Gemma definitely considered herself more of a cider drinker than a wine drinker, although when she was with the girls, they would often share a bottle of white. She couldn’t remember the last time she had drunk red wine and wasn’t sure if she even liked it.

“Actually, I?—”

“Trust me. You will love it.”

With a swift grin and a flash of his perfectly straight, white teeth, Angus sat back down, took a glass from the table, and started to fill it.

“That’s plenty,” Gemma said when the glass was halfway filled, and yet he continued. “Honestly, I’m not a red wine drinker.”

“That’s because you probably drink cheap rubbish. This is the decent stuff.”

Only when the glass was full did he stop.

“Gemma, come and sit here,” Fleur said, shuffling around the seats so that Gemma was tucked in next to Angus. Gemma wasn’t best pleased to be squeezed into the corner. There was no way she could get out unless other people moved, but even without customers, she had been on her feet all afternoon. A sit-down was a welcome break.

“Angus was just telling us about this case he was working on in London. It all sounds very interesting.”

Angus took a sip of his wine before smacking his lips together.

“Well, I can’t tell you that much. NDAs, you know. Non-disclosure agreements,” he added as if Gemma didn’t know what an NDA was. “Big company, massive. Some of the stuff they were covering up would make your skin crawl. Of course, when they pay as well as they do, it’s easy to overlook a little thing like ethics, right?”

He chuckled. It was deep and fruity and probably would have been an attractive laugh had it not been for the context of the conversation. With a tight smile as her only response, Gemma sipped at the Bordeaux, confirming her previous assumption that she did not like red wine. She tried to disguise her dislike as best she could.

“It’s great, right?” Angus said, clearly misreading her expression. “Worth the price tag. To be honest, I was surprised a place like this had such a decent drop.”

Once again, Gemma struggled to know how to respond. Fortunately, before she could figure out how, Angus was on his feet. “Do excuse me, just need to head to the little boys’ room.”

With that, he slipped out from behind the table and walked across the room. Immediately, Gemma glared at Fleur, lowering her voice to a hiss.

“Seriously? You seriously thought he and I could be a decent match?”

CHAPTER 30

Fleur reached out and took Gemma’s hand.

“It’s just nervousness, that’s all. He just lacks confidence. People can over compensate when they are nervous. You know that.”

“Fleur,” Gemma raised her eyebrows. “He’s an arse. That guy doesn’t lack confidence. He lacks humility. There’s a definite difference. Sorry, but someone who doesn’t even bother asking what I want to drink or can overlook ethics for a payday is not my type of person. I can’t imagine he’s anyone’s if I’m honest.”

She felt bad for the character assassination, particularly as Fleur glanced at Henry and bit down on her bottom lip.

“He’s not like that at work,” Henry said, trying to reiterate Fleur’s point and rescue the situation. “In fact, all the female staff think he’s delightful.”

“Then maybe he should date one of them?” Gemma shook her head. “I’m sorry guys, it’s just been a long day, and I don’t think I can deal with this, this evening.”

Fleur nodded and looked at Henry. “I get it, I get it. It’s a shame though, because I think if it was just you and him, you’d discover he really is quite a nice chap. Once you get past the bravado.” It was at those words that Gemma saw the spark light in Fleur’s eyes. A spark that simultaneously filled her with a feeling of dread. She knew

exactly what was going to happen.

“Fleur...” she said with as much threat in her tone as she could manage. “Don’t you dare.”

But it was already too late. Fleur was on her feet and tugging Henry up to standing as she went.

“I promise, you and he are going to get along brilliantly when it’s just the two of you,” she said, already moving towards the door with Henry in tow. “Let us know how it goes, won’t you!”

CHAPTER 31

Gemma couldn’t get out of her seat fast enough to follow them, and even if she could, did she want to? Angus was not a pleasant guy. That was clear, but to come back and find the table empty didn’t seem fair, even to someone as vile as he was. But what was the alternative? She couldn’t bear the thought of time alone with him. Grabbing her bag from the floor, she went to stand, only to second-guess herself. Wasn’t one of the things she prided herself on being nice? Being kind to people? If that was the case, then leaving a grown man on his own in a pub when he had just gone to the toilet didn’t fit the image she had of herself, meaning this wasn’t about what type of person Angus was, it was about what type of person she was. Which meant, like it or lump it, she knew what she had to do.

Letting out a long sigh, she took a sip of her drink, only to wince at the taste. She would have to take big gulps, she decided. Like you made children do with medicine. That way, she would finish it quickly, then she could make her excuses to leave.

It was barely a moment later when Angus returned and found, to his confusion, two empty seats.

“Henry and Fleur had to go unexpectedly,” Gemma said, hating the fact she was now having to make up lies on the spot because of her friend. Fleur was definitely going to be getting an earful at the next book club. “I think it was Henry’s aunt. Eunice. She lives with them and she has a couple of health issues, too.” Gemma felt the need to elaborate on the lie a little, just to make it more convincing. “I think she had a funny turn.”

She assumed Angus would say something sympathetic, the way most people did when they’d just learned their friend had a family emergency, but instead, he reached out and picked up the bottle of wine.

“Well, that means more Bordeaux for us, I guess,” he said as he topped up his glass.

Yes, Gemma thought as he began prattling away. Fleur owed her for this one. Big time.

CHAPTER 32

“So, that was why I decided to change from the Alfa Romeo to the Aston Martin,” Angus said.

Gemma glanced at her watch. How was it possible that time was moving so slowly? It felt like she was back at school, listening to her old physics teacher drone on about things she had zero interest in. It didn’t matter that, unlike the physics classes, she actually understood what Angus was on about. His tone was enough to send her to sleep. So much for thinking he had a sexy voice. Twenty minutes into this conversation, she was certain there was nothing less sexy than a man who only spoke about himself. She had been waiting for that single moment when he asked her one question about herself. One question. That was all she wanted. And yet, there was still no sign of it.

As for this wine, she really didn't think she could stomach any more of it. She glanced at the bar, looking longingly at all the ciders on tap, when she saw someone sitting there turning a beer mat over his fingers.

"Will you excuse me for one second?" Gemma said, pushing her chair back and standing up.

"Oh yes, of course. Is everything okay?"

There it was, she thought. The first question he had asked her.

"Yes, fine. I'll just need to speak to that gentleman. He's a colleague of mine. I'm a bit concerned that there's something wrong with work. He was just trying to get my attention."

"Oh. Okay then."

Gemma squeezed herself out of the gap between the table and the wall and sprinted across to the bar. Kent had now put the beer mat down and was sipping his drink.

“Kent, I need?—”

“Gemma? I’m sorry, I didn’t realise this was where you were coming for a drink with your friends. I promise I?—”

“Look worried,” Gemma said as she glared at him.

“What?” His eyes narrowed in confusion.

“Yes, that’s it. Just keep looking worried at me.”

“I’m sorry, any chance you can tell me what’s going on?”

Gemma didn’t want to glance back and see if Angus was looking at them. Part of her suspected he wasn’t. He was probably on his phone or simply staring into his glass of Bordeaux and working out all the stories he would tell her next. She couldn’t do it. It didn’t matter how much of a terrible person in made her. She couldn’t listen to another one of his ridiculously conceited, egocentric tales.

“I am on the most disastrous date possible,” she said, lowering her voice and moving in close to Kent to ensure she wasn’t overheard. “It was meant to be a double date, and my bloody friend went and left me, and he is horrific. Honestly, I can’t do it anymore.”

She glanced at the glass in Kent’s hand, only to note that it wasn’t a pale ale like he’d drunk before, but the light, golden hues of a cider. She picked it up, took two large gulps, then put it down in front of him.

“Okay,” Kent said slowly, looking at his substantially depleted glass. “What do you want me to do? Am I to step in, pretend I’m the ex that you’ve never got over?”

Gemma crinkled her face up.

“No, of course not. Why would you do that? I need you to tell me there’s been an emergency at work. That a fridge has stopped working or something.”

It was Kent’s turn to crinkle up his nose.

“Surely, I wouldn’t have come down and had a drink if there was a major incident. I would’ve rung you, wouldn’t I?”

Gemma chewed on her bottom lip. She got the impression that Angus wouldn’t question the details of any matter too greatly, but she still felt she owed him the dignity of a decent lie.

“Okay, well, we could say it’s something to do with the suppliers,” she said, verbalising her thoughts as they came. “Maybe there’s been an issue with something we ordered, and it can’t come in until tomorrow. I can’t come in tomorrow like normal, and we will have to work through the menu together. Yes, that would work, wouldn’t it? You came here because it was a nice environment to work in, considering the stress and the extra hours we will have to put in. I think that’ll sound believable, right?”

Kent looked at her with a mixture of amusement and bewilderment.

“Why don’t you just wait here for one second,” he said. “It’s that guy over there, right?”

“Yes,” Gemma said as he nodded towards Angus.

“Okay, I will deal with him. And you might as well help yourself to some more of my cider while you’re here.”

Not needing to be asked twice, Gemma picked up his glass and took a big gulp.

She wasn’t entirely sure what was happening, but when Kent stood up and walked over to Angus, a sense of dread churned through her. Maybe she should have gone with him, she thought? At least that way, she would know what he was saying. As it was, she could only imagine. Still, she kept her eyes focused on the two men, and a moment later, Angus’s gaze met hers. With a strained smile on his lips, he offered a timid little wave, at which point Kent turned around and strode back to her.

“Come on,” he said, holding his arm out in a manner that implied he wanted her to take it. “It’s just until we are out of here.”

There was no way Gemma could refuse. Not when she didn’t know what was going on. Still, she was surprised at how easily her arm slipped into Kent’s and how much more secure she felt now she was holding him. It was unnervingly comfortable. So much so that the second she was out of the pub door, she let go and took several steps away from him.

“What did you say to him?” she said as she glanced through the window to check that Angus was still there, nursing his Bordeaux.

A perfect smile slanted upwards on Kent’s lips.

“Oh, I just told him you and I had been dating for a couple of months and that I wanted it to be exclusive. I also added that if he laid a hand on you, I’d break every bone in it.”

CHAPTER 33

Gemma went to bed on Monday night feeling totally bemused. That Fleur and Henry could ever have thought she would be a match for somebody like Angus irked her, but so did Kent's attitude. Considering how heated some of their exchanges had been so far, he could've easily told her to get lost when she accosted him in the pub, but instead, he had helped her and lost half his drink in the process. It was a nicer side of him that she'd not encountered before, and she wasn't sure she liked it. It was bad enough that he was physically attractive. Not that she was attracted to him, of course. It was purely an objective observation, that was all. Still, she didn't like the fact that he was still rolling through her thoughts as she tried to get to sleep. Kent had no place in her bed, whether that was physically or imaginatively.

"So, how did yesterday go?" Sophie said in the cafe the next morning.

“Yesterday?”

“The date?” Sophie clarified. “What else would I have meant?”

“Right, yes. Well, there won’t be a second one. Let’s put it that way.”

“That’s a shame, although maybe that means there’s a chance for Kent? You know, I saw the way he looked at you yesterday, and he stayed later to help you out. Any gossip I should know? Have you warmed to him at all yet?”

Gemma shifted her line of sight to the kitchen door. Should she tell Sophie about the night before? About what Kent had said to Angus to rescue her from the disastrous date? No, Sophie would read way too much into that. That was something she would keep to herself.

“I’m sure he has his good sides,” she said, opting for an answer that was noncommittal. “Now, come on. I suspect yesterday’s rain means we’re going to be twice as busy today.”

They weren’t exactly twice as busy, but it was a steady stream of people all day, and the queue barely let up. As such, Gemma didn’t have any opportunity to pop into the kitchen and offer Kent a proper word of thanks for his help. She had hoped to say something before he left at three, after all, working together all day and not even thanking him wasn’t good manners, but when he appeared at just gone two-twenty, Sophie was talking Gemma’s ear off about Graham’s birthday, and there was no chance Gemma was going to say something with her there.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Kent said, flashing them both a smile, although it seemed to linger longer on Gemma than Sophie. Her stomach clenched with nerves.

“Bye Kent, have a great evening,” Sophie said.

“See you tomorrow,” Gemma added.

She had thought the comment was as innocuous as it could be, and yet Sophie grinned.

“Well, that was very civil,” she said, as Kent disappeared.

“We can do civil,” Gemma replied. Besides, now that Tuesday was done, they were down to fifty-four days.

Who knew, maybe she wouldn’t need the countdown after all.

CHAPTER 34

Forty-eight days remained.

Forty-eight.

Gemma was over ten per cent of the way through the eight-week trial, and the first week had gone so well that she had almost forgotten Kent was in the kitchen. He was certainly efficient, and there were zero complaints about the food. In fact, she got so fed up with hearing the line “Compliments to the chef” that she stopped telling him. She was starting to think that the arrangement would work. After all, his only current initiatives as executive manager had been minor menu alterations, like the pesto and balsamic options and changing the cheese blends in their toasties. But she was forced to do a double take when she walked into the cafe early Tuesday morning.

“Kent,” she said, pushing open the door to the kitchen. “Why are there blackboards that say ‘Reserved’ on four of the tables? We don’t take reservations.”

A slight smile corkscrewed at the corner of Kent’s mouth.

“I know. It’s a technique to stop people lingering too long.”

“Sorry? I don’t understand.”

“Did you look at the times?” he said. “I put times on all the reservations.”

Gemma frowned. “I think I saw one was at 12:45 and another at 11:30.”

His smile widened as he dried his hands on a tea towel and walked across to her.

“Exactly. They’re all in the afternoon or late morning. When people sit down, they think they’ve got a limited time at the table. That makes them move on a little faster, get a few more covers in and hopefully it should put off some of those all-day lingerers. I’d been considering it for a while, but after yesterday, when that woman with the long grey hair spent almost two hours nursing one Americano, I thought it was time to put it in place. At least four more customers would have had a seat if she’d just spent a reasonable time here.”

An uncomfortable pressure started building behind Gemma’s ribs.

“Margaret’s mother is very ill in the hospital. It doesn’t look good at all.”

“That’s all very sad, I get it. But even so, she could have ordered more than one drink, right?”

The pressure of a moment ago was reaching boiling point. Was he actually serious?

Did he truly want to push grieving people into drinking their Americanos faster?
What kind of monster was he?

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Pushing past him, she reached into the cupboard where the black bags were stored. A cafe that put time limits on their customers wasn't the type of place she was running. Not now, not ever.

"What are you doing?" Kent asked as she tore off a bag and marched out of the kitchen.

"Putting those blackboards where they belong."

She could feel Kent on her heels as she went around the tables, sweeping up the blackboards and dropping them straight into the bin bag. When they were all in there, she turned around and handed it to him.

"Now that you've wasted the first part of my morning. I need to get on with the rest of my work," she said. "And if I see those things out here again, I won't just bin them. I'll burn them."

CHAPTER 35

"You can't just not speak to him," Sophie said. "It's not efficient."

"I disagree," Gemma replied.

Placing and collecting orders did not require her to speak at all, and it didn't matter how much Sophie tried to ameliorate the situation. Gemma wasn't having it.

"I agree. He should have mentioned it to you first, but what if he takes the money for

the blackboards out of our tips? You know I'm saving up to buy Graham those Lego kits he wants for his birthday. Lego is seriously expensive. I need those tips."

"He's not taking any money out of the tips," Gemma said, half wishing that Kent would try just so she could give him another earful.

More than once, she considered picking up the phone to Oscar and telling him that the new set up wouldn't work. She didn't need an eight-week trial to know that. But somehow, she'd restrained herself. It helped that Kent seemed to realise she needed a wide berth. Or at least, she thought he realised, until Wednesday morning, when he appeared out of the kitchen the moment she arrived.

"Gemma, I was hoping we could have a word?" he said.

She hated that phrase. What was she going to say? No? That was what she wanted to answer, but she knew she couldn't. So what he really meant was that they were going to talk, whether she wanted to or not.

"I've got a lot to set up this morning."

"I'm aware, which is why I'll make this quick. I've been here nearly two weeks now?—"

"I know exactly how long you've been here," Gemma said, though she chose not to add that she had a countdown on her bathroom mirror written with a whiteboard marker.

Kent's smile tightened.

"Right, so nearly two weeks, but we haven't yet had any staff meetings."

“Staff meetings?” Gemma walked over to the counter to start setting up the coffee machine. “What do we need staff meetings for? There are only three of us here most of the time. We can just tell one another anything we need to.”

“Oh yes, and talking has been working so well for us so far,” Kent said, arching one of his eyebrows.

Gemma ignored the gesture. After all, he was the one who had said nothing to her about those bloody blackboards. Communication was a two-way street, and he had put just as many roadblocks up as she did.

“Sorry, that was rude.”

“When would we even have time for a meeting?” Gemma said, ignoring his apology too.

“I thought that we could just come in earlier, one day a week. Maybe when most people are at work. Choose a day when the part-timers come in too.”

“If Dawn or Heather are in, it means Sophie or I aren’t. Unless you don’t think I need to be there, in which case, go ahead without me. This sounds like an executive manager’s decision, after all.”

A flicker of tension tightened in his jaw and caused a spark of satisfaction to rise within her.

“We need a way to disseminate information,” he continued. Clearly, it was now his turn to ignore her comments. “What about staff emails?”

“Staff emails?”

“I could set them up and send around any important notices in a bullet point format. That way, everyone could look at them at a time that’s convenient for them. Would that work better?”

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Gemma had already set two of the coffee filters on to steam and what she needed now was for Kent to get out of the way so she could fill the cabinet. If agreeing to his idea of emails meant she could do that and get on with her job, then it seemed like an easy decision to make.

“Yes, sure. That sounds fine.”

A smile rose on his face. An irritatingly perfect smile.

“Great, I’ll set those up this evening. See, working together can work.”

She said nothing.

CHAPTER 36

“Kent’s given me this piece of paper,” Sophie said to Gemma the following morning. “Apparently, it’s the login information for my staff email. I didn’t know we had staff email, though. Am I meant to do something?”

Gemma scrunched up her nose as she looked at the small slip.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “He’s given one to me, too. He seems to have forgotten that we have an account for orders already, and I barely have time to check that. Or that we don’t work in an office. Keep it if you want, but I can’t imagine what he’d put in an email that couldn’t be said to us in person. It just lets him feel like he’s in charge, that’s all.”

Several frown lines creased Sophie's normally smooth forehead. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure. Really, don't worry about it."

The door opened, and Gemma moved swiftly across to the counter, only to stop. It was Margaret. Gemma had thought she'd looked pale and unwell the last time she had come in—when Kent had complained about her spending too long nursing her drink. But today, she looked even worse.

Her skin was a sallow grey, her eyes dull, and she looked at least a decade older than the woman who used to come in and have coffee with her mother. Gemma's stomach tightened.

"How's she doing?" she asked.

The slightest hint of a smile flickered on Margaret's lips, though it faded before it could fully form.

"She's hanging on, but how or why? I'm not even sure anymore. The doctors say she's not in any pain. Not with all the things they're pumping into her, but you can't know for sure, can you? She'd hate it, you know. Being like that. Not even knowing what's going on. Is it wrong that part of me just wishes... Oh... I don't know... No, I can't say that. I just hate it all."

Gemma felt no judgement towards Margaret for the words she hadn't wanted to say. No one wanted to see a loved one suffer. It only caused the pain to spread to those who couldn't help. That was how Gemma felt at that moment, pained that there was nothing she could do to ease Margaret's situation.

"Go take a seat. I'll bring your drink over," she said.

“Thank you.”

As she turned around to head back to the counter, Gemma found herself facing Kent. She was about to ask him what he was doing out of the kitchen when she saw his gaze shift to Margaret. Her pulse spiked.

“She can sit there as long as she wants,” she said. “We don’t put our customers on a timer here.”

CHAPTER 37

“So it’s really not getting any better?” Flick asked at book club that Thursday. “You know, Sophie still seems to think he’s a nice guy.”

Flick and Gemma were alone in the kitchen at Flick’s house while the others were sitting in the living room, discussing the romcom they had all just finished reading. Usually, Gemma was at the centre of any discussions, but she hadn’t been feeling the book this week, although she thought that was more her fault than the book’s. She had struggled to get her mind to focus. Usually, it would have been her type of read. It was a massive social media hit with a story based around two colleagues who didn’t get on. Of course, it was clear from the beginning that they were going to resolve all their issues, fall madly in love, and become the perfect couple. And she usually would have enjoyed a predictable read like that, but no matter how much she tried, she couldn’t relax and get into the story. Perhaps it was because the thought of falling for the arse you worked with was just too far-fetched, given her current situation. No, there was no way she could ever imagine that.

“I just feel like I’m always second-guessing myself around him,” she said to Flick. “And that he’s sneaking around behind my back. It’s crap. You know, I’ve always found the job so much fun. Sure, it’s hard work and everything, but it’s always been a laugh. You know, a place where we could have a giggle. In fact, when things went

down the pan with Robert, I preferred being at work to at home.”

“I don’t think I know much about you and your ex,” Flick replied.

“You don’t want to,” Gemma answered succinctly. “Let’s just say it was messy. But the point is, I could always count on the cafe as being somewhere I could switch off. I felt comfortable, completely at ease, even when we got the occasional shitty customer, because I knew what I was doing. But I don’t feel like that now. I feel like Kent’s judging me.”

Flick didn’t respond immediately. Instead, she pressed her lips tightly together. As the pair stood there in silence, Gemma noticed something.

“Is that a Coffee-X cup,” she said gesturing over to Flick’s sink, where the takeaway cup was sitting on the countertop. “Don’t tell me you’re buying from them too? You know they’re buying out so many small businesses.”

Flick rolled her eyes. “I was on my way back from London. It wasn’t like I could get one from you. And we’re not talking about Coffee-X. We’re talking about you and the coffee shop. Now, can I say something without you getting mad at me?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:37 am

Gemma raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know. What is it you want to say?”

“From the way you’ve been talking, it feels to me like you’re taking every comment he makes about the café as a personal insult to you.”

“Well, it is. I’m the one who’s run it. I’ve run it for eight years.”

“I know that, and you’ve done a great job, but from what I hear, so has he. He’s just run very different types of places, that’s all. I think maybe you’re too close to the café to be able to see anything objectively.”

Gemma could feel her defensive muscles twitching as she went to defend herself, only Flick wasn’t done yet.

“I think it might be like me and Nate.”

“Nate?” Nate was Flick’s ex-husband, who was now engaged to book club member Jules. Gemma couldn’t possibly see how their situation had anything to do with hers and Kent’s.

“You are the coffee shop. You’ve been together so long, it’s practically a marriage.”

“I take pride in my business,” Gemma said, only to hear the anger in her tone. She swallowed it back down and tried again. “Sorry. I guess that’s a bit of a nerve. Robert always said I was married to the job. It’s one of the reasons he gave for the things he did.”

Flick nodded. “I get it. I understand. You love it. But when you’re in a marriage, you don’t see things clearly. Trust me, I’ve been there. And everyone’s different. Some people focus only on the parts that aren’t working and don’t realise what a great thing they have, others ignore all the crappy bits. Gloss over all the crap because they don’t want to admit things might not be as perfect as they’d hoped. It can be like that with a job too, and the café is just a job, Gemma. You give it your everything but...”

She stopped as if she had realised she was going to go a step too far.

“But?” Gemma pressed. Considering everything Flick had already said to her, she struggled to wonder what she was going to keep back.

Flick took a deep breath in.

“It’s not your business,” she said. “It’s someone else’s. You’re putting all this energy, building your life around something that belongs to someone else. Something that could be taken from you at any time and without any warning. Perhaps that energy would be best spent building something for yourself. Perhaps even a relationship.”

CHAPTER 38

Flick’s words rolled around and around in Gemma’s mind. Considering the chat had just been a quick exchange in the kitchen while they topped up the drinks, there was a lot for her to unpack, although she was fairly sure she wanted to keep it zipped up, sealed tight, and with no possibility of spilling out.

No, the business wasn’t technically hers, but it was as good as. And as for the possibility of her losing it without any warning, that just wouldn’t happen. Oscar wouldn’t do that to her. Then again, she’d never thought Oscar would employ someone else as an executive manager and would not even bother to tell her. He was

undoubtedly getting old, and perhaps that could change things a little, but the cafe wasn't the reason she was still single. Was it? No. Absolutely not. Flick knew nothing about Gemma's past relationships. The reason she was still single was because she understood her worth now, and she wouldn't let some man try to take that from her. The blind date had been all the reassurance she needed; she was better off on her own. And she was happy that way. She didn't need a man to complete her. Not when she had her friends and her job.

Still, as much as she wanted to push the thoughts away, Gemma was still thinking about Flick's comments as she opened up the shop a week later. They kept doing that, jumping into her head at unsuspecting moments, but she was trying her hardest not to pay attention to them.

Especially today.

To most people, it was likely nothing more than a normal Wednesday. That mid-week hump that so many nine-to-fivers were desperate to get over. But for Gemma, it was more than that. Today her countdown had reached day forty. That was it. Forty days to go, and she would inform Oscar that the working relationship was over and Kent would need to find a new place to stride into each morning. It might not have been going down as quickly as she'd hoped, but it was going down, and that was what counted.

Gone were the days when she would pop into the kitchen for a ten-minute chat with George while he made her breakfast. She had taken to having a croissant instead, and when they came out of the oven, she stacked them in trays. That limited the time she had to spend with Kent. Although they weren't nearly as filling as a sausage sandwich and sometimes she had two. As a lovely morning bonus, Kent had already baked the croissants and other pastries and put them out front for her, meaning she didn't even need to see him to set up.

Less than two minutes after turning the sign on the door from closed to open, the first customers of the day walked in, although unusually, it wasn't any of their locals. Instead, it was a family of four.

"Just take a seat, and I'll bring the menus over to you," Gemma said, moving to the end of the bench where they kept the stack of menus, only to stop. They were gone.

Sophie had locked up the day before, Gemma realised. She had wanted to run to the bank before it closed, and Sophie had been happy to stay and tidy up, particularly since Graham was there with her. Perhaps he was the one who had put the menus somewhere strange.

Gemma scoured behind the counter, where they kept the coffee cups and plates. Even in the boxes where they kept the napkins.

"Where are you?" she said, looking around her.

Five minutes in, and it was getting ridiculous. Adding to the issue, Mr Jordan had already taken his seat, too, and wanted his drink any minute.

Deciding that honesty was the best policy, Gemma headed over to the family

"Sorry, I'm having an issue locating the menus at the moment. I'm sure they'll be in the kitchen. I'll go find them now, but before I do, can I take any drink orders for you?"

The mother tilted her head to the side slightly.

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“Sorry, I don’t understand. We’ve already ordered our drinks.”

“Gemma?”

Across the cafe, Mr Jordan waved at Gemma, trying to get her attention.

“Sorry?” Gemma said.

She was utterly confused. She had been behind the counter the entire time and definitely hadn’t taken their orders. Sophie wasn’t due in for another half an hour. Unless Kent had come out of the kitchen to take their order, she didn’t see how that could be possible without her noticing. Then again, maybe she had had her head in a box looking for the menus.

“You’ve already ordered your drinks?” she said.

“Yes, and our food.”

“Gemma?” Mr Jordan’s voice came again. “Sorry, when you get two minutes, could you help me, please, love?”

“Yes, coffee, of course,” Gemma said automatically, with a slight wave at Mr Jordan while still focusing on the new customers.

“I’m sorry, who took your order?” she said.

The woman’s frown deepened.

“Well, no one,” she said.

“No one?” Gemma was lost. They were batty. They had to be. Nothing they were saying made any sense at all.

“No,” the man said before tapping the table and a black and white square that appeared to be stuck to it. “We ordered on the app. The way it says to do here.”

CHAPTER 39

Gemma turned in a circle. Every single table in the café had a thin piece of paper taped to the surface. A piece of paper she hadn’t noticed before. And yet, as she read it, she felt her jaw dropping open.

We are now using an online ordering platform, she read. Please scan the QR card and make your order and payment online. There is no need to leave your seat. Thank you. The Waterfront Café.

“Gemma?” Mr Jordan’s voice came again. “I’m not sure I’m doing this right. It keeps asking me to put a number in to pay. Can’t I just pay you the way I normally do?”

“Yes, you can,” Gemma said, although she was marching away from Mr Jordan and the other customers and heading straight towards the kitchen. Even as she pushed open the door, her stride didn’t break and her pace didn’t falter. This was not happening.

“What the hell have you done?” she said.

Kent was standing over the hob, cooking what appeared to be a full English, even though she hadn’t taken the order for one. There, next to him, was a new black machine she had never seen before.

“So, first order went without any issue,” he said. “That’s good to know. How’s the new till? Did you get your drinks orders through too?”

“What? What do you mean ‘new till’?”

“To work with the upgraded system? I assume you thought it was all self-explanatory.”

She hadn’t thought it was possible to be any more furious, and yet her pulse was pounding so hard she was sure something was going to burst.

“You bought a completely new till and implemented an entirely new system of ordering without even mentioning it to me?”

His face didn’t show so much as a flicker of remorse. If anything, he looked smug.

“It was in the email I sent around a week ago. I said the date that we were changing the system over and offered you the option of doing training on it last night. I assumed the fact that you hadn’t commented meant you didn’t have a problem.”

So that was where the smugness came from. Her back teeth ground together as she stepped towards him.

“I haven’t even seen the damn email, which you knew. There is no way I would have let you do this otherwise. Online ordering? Half our customers don’t even have smartphones.”

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“I doubt that’s true,” Kent said, his smugness climbing up another notch. “Honestly, I don’t see what the problem is. I’ve found a way to make the job more efficient without having to alter the menu or prices or anything else you’ve objected to so greatly. I thought you might be pleased.”

Gemma couldn’t respond. Her entire body was trembling with such fury she was struggling to draw breath.

“You might have got your uncle to agree to you staying for a little while, but don’t get comfy. There are only forty days left in this trial, and then you are out of here. You can mark my words.”

She didn’t care that she had shouted at him. That her voice was probably so loud that Mr Jordan and the other customers likely heard. The people who mattered knew what she was really like. They wouldn’t judge her for standing up for herself and this business. In fact, they’d likely thank her.

She turned around, ready to stride out, when he let out a dark chuckle.

“The eight-week trial isn’t for me, Gemma. It’s for you.”

CHAPTER 40

The minute the words left his lips, Kent regretted them. It had been a stupid thing to say, churlish and spiteful and utterly unnecessary, but he was tired of the attacks. Tired of being treated like he was doing something wrong for trying to make the place more money, and tired of the way she didn’t even acknowledge him anymore.

Yes, that part definitely got to him more than he liked to admit.

Since the incident with the blackboard, there had been no conversations over morning butties. No, ‘Have a nice evening,’ when he left in the afternoon. She didn’t even look at him when she picked up the food from the kitchen and took it to the tables. It irked him more than was rational. He knew that. He and Sophie got on perfectly well. What did it matter if one colleague didn’t like him? He’d been hated by plenty of employees and employers before and never given a damn about it. But with Gemma, it was different. And if she hadn’t hated him before today, she definitely did now.

“Look, you’ve been thinking with a small business mindset for too long,” he said, trying to make his outburst seem reasonable. “There is a reason that so many small businesses gobust. This place is already earning a fraction of what it should, given its location.”

“Wow.”

She stood there staring at him. Her hands were by her side, and her lips parted as Kent braced himself for the tirade he probably deserved, but nothing more came. Seconds ticked by. One after another and yet she remained silent. ‘Wow?’ What did that mean? Was she commenting on what he just said about the cafe’s earnings or his comment about the eight-week trial? It was impossible to know.

“I assumed you knew...” he started, but his words faded into nothing.

A sheen of tears glinted in Gemma’s eyes.

He needed to apologise. He had to, yet as he went to speak, she finally spoke again.

“You have an order to cook,” she said. “Don’t keep the customers waiting.”

A moment later, she turned around and strode out of the kitchen. Kent stood there with his baked beans burning on the hob and poached eggs boiling over. What the hell had he just done?

CHAPTER 41

Gemma used the walk from Kent to the kitchen door to blink away the tears blurring her sight. She didn't have time to think about what Kent had just said to her. She had orders to take and customers to help and no one, especially not Kent, was going to see her cry.

It wasn't what he'd said that hurt her as much as her naivety. Flick had seen the writing on the wall. She had even tried to warn her about it, so why hadn't Gemma listened? She had been so confident that as long as she was doing a good job, there would be no need for anything to change. But now it had happened. The rug had been pulled out from under her feet, and the knowledge that she hadn't seen it coming was even worse than Kent pulling the rug. Conceited, arrogant, Kent. God, she could just imagine the way he was laughing to himself in the kitchen as he put pesto on his damn poached eggs.

"Sorry, Gemma dear, did you say I could order normally?"

Gemma's thoughts snapped back to reality as Mr Jordan spoke. Plastering a smile on her face, she walked over to him.

"Of course you can. You just tell me what you want."

It was when she headed over to fix him his cappuccino that Gemma saw the paper receipt that had printed out on a little black machine next to the till. The family's drinks orders.

Gritting her teeth, she picked it up and got to work.

“Are you okay?” Sophie asked when she appeared at ten. “Did something happen? You don’t look great. And why are there all these little bits of paper everywhere?”

Gemma didn’t see any point in beating around the bush. “Did you know about the new tills and ordering QR codes Kent had arranged?”

Sophie frowned. “Is that the thing he wrote about in the email? I only read it last night; I was going to talk to you about it today.”

“Well, it’s already in place,” Gemma said, gesturing to the tables. “The customers are having a nightmare. I’ve managed to print out some of the old menus, but this new till isn’t exactly user-friendly, so you’re just going to have to put everything down manually and take the money, and we’ll try to work it out later.”

“So the QR codes don’t work?”

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It wasn't the first question Gemma had expected, and she found herself needing to swallow before she replied. "Well, yes, for those customers that are happy to use them. But not all of them are, so we need to take their orders normally, too."

"Okay," Sophie said, matter-of-factly.

"Okay?"

"Okay. That's okay. I can do that. Orders through the code if they can. On paper, if they can't. Sounds fine."

The way Sophie was being so casual about this new disruption to their way of doing things took Gemma by surprise.

"Is there anything else? You still don't look great."

Gemma opened her mouth. There were more things she wanted to say. More things she probably needed to say, but how could she? How could she tell Sophie that she likely had less than two months working at a place she adored? That all her hard work over the years had amounted to nothing. She could feel her throat swelling shut, clogged with tears. It had been a long time since she had cried in the café. So long, she doubted Sophie had ever seen it. And that was how she wanted to keep it.

"Gemma, are you okay? Do you want to sit down?"

Gemma shook her head. "I'm fine. I'm fine. Honestly, I just need a bit of fresh air, that's all. I'm just going to step outside. You'll be all right on your own for a minute,

won't you?"

CHAPTER 42

There had been a time, many years before Gemma moved to Maldon, when the duck pond had actually been used for swimming. Lots of her older customers loved to tell her about the summer of '76, when the heatwave had been so sweltering that everyone came down to the water to cool off. Many people, including Margaret and Mr Jordan, actually learned to swim in it. But that had been a long time ago. Now, a large iron fence separated the visitors from the tall rushes that provided homes for the ducks and swans before stretching out into a great expanse of water where now, only wildfowl were allowed to swim.

This was Gemma's favourite spot in Maldon. She could sit there for hours, staring at the pairs of moorhens as they glided lazily around or watching children as they fed scraps of bread and bird seed to the ducks who would follow them around greedily. There was always something to hold her attention. To pull her thoughts away from whatever worries may have been pestering her. But at that moment, even the duck pond couldn't distract her from the deep knot at the base of her stomach.

"Gemma?"

She snapped her head around, hastily brushing the tears from her eyes.

"What the hell do you want?" she said. The last thing she needed was Kent taking this place from her, too. "I heard you perfectly clearly. I'm out. You're in. You win. Congratulations."

She didn't care how she sounded. He deserved a lot worse. Unfortunately, Kent didn't take the hint and leave the way she'd assumed he would.

“I came to apologise. I was unprofessional earlier.” He paused. “Actually, I was horrible. Really horrible. I don’t know what got into me.”

Gemma scoffed. What did he expect her to say? That it was okay. That she forgave him. Well, there was no chance of that happening. None at all. She folded her arms across her chest, hoping that now he had said his piece, he would leave. Instead, he carried on talking.

“I think there are a few things you and I need to clear up,” he said, dropping onto the bench beside her. He was so close that it made Gemma’s skin prickle, and all she wanted to do was push him away or stand up and run back to the cafe. She found it incredibly difficult to move. “I think it’s fair to say I haven’t been completely honest with you. There were things... things I thought my uncle had told you, but he obviously hasn’t. And I guess I was just hoping that the right time would suddenly present itself to tell you, but that’s not going to happen.”

He took a deep breath. Something about his nervousness put Gemma on edge. This entire time, he had been so confident. Cocky. What on earth could he have to say that was even worse than what he had already told her? She was about to say as much when he carried on speaking.

“Uncle Oscar didn’t put me in charge of The Waterfront Café,” he said.

“What?” Gemma could feel her jaw hanging open. What the hell did he mean by that? If Oscar hadn’t put him in charge, then what kind of power trip had he been on for this last fortnight? She was about to ask him as much when he opened his mouth again.

“He didn’t make me executive manager,” he said. “He sold it to me instead.”

CHAPTER 43

In some ways, it was a relief. Since that very first lie to Gemma, Kent had known this moment would come, and the anxiety of predicting her reaction had grown with every passing day. Only now, she knew, and she wasn't reacting. She was just sitting there.

“Gemma?”

He lifted his hand, struck with a sudden urge to reach out and touch her arm, only he thought better of it. Instead, he waited.

“Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't Oscar tell me?” Gemma said, eventually.

“I thought he had. I really did, but then you and I spoke, and then I realised...”

His words faltered as he shook his head. There was no way he could dig himself out of this. He'd had dozens of opportunities to tell her the truth, but he'd been too much of a coward. Her lack of forgiveness was the least he deserved.

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“Don’t blame Oscar for this. He’s been in and out of hospital lately; it’s been a tough time for him.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” Gemma said. “I hope he’s doing okay?”

Kent felt his chest hitch. He had just come in and thrown her life upside-down, and there she was, checking on how his uncle was. She really was a remarkable woman. With an unexpected heat filling him, Kent was struck with the sudden urge to tell her as much, only he swallowed back his words. This wasn’t the time.

“So, the eight-week trial,” Gemma said. “That was your idea?”

Kent nodded. “I knew you would ring Oscar after our drink the other week, but I got to him first and persuaded him to lie for me. I know that sounds terrible, but honestly, I thought I was being kind. I hoped that by that point, we would have sorted out a decent working relationship. And then, at some point, I’d make out like I’d just decided to buy the place from Oscar, and we’d carry on like that.”

“Were you?” Gemma replied. “Or were you hoping that I’d quit?”

“What?” It was Kent’s turn to be surprised. “No, not once was I thinking that. You’re brilliant at the front of house, Gemma. You have a way with people that’s perfect for the job. I’d be an idiot to force out one of the best members of staff I’ve ever worked with.”

She raised her eyebrows as if, once again, she didn’t believe him.

“Okay,” he admitted. “Maybe not the best for me to work with personally, but definitely the best with the customers.”

He let out another sigh, allowing his eyes to drift away from Gemma and across the water. It was beautiful there, and had it been another time or situation, he could easily imagine coming for a romantic walk, sitting and feeding the ducks. Perhaps some people even thought that was what they were doing. Perhaps they thought they were a couple, just enjoying their timetogether. But they weren’t, and now the truth was out in the open there was no point beating around the bush.

“Gemma, my bills are big. It took everything I had to get this place. I don’t have any flexibility. If I don’t make it work, then I’m not sure what will happen, but I need to be turning a bigger profit, and I know that this place is perfectly capable of doing it. I also know it would be a lot easier if I had you onside, working with me rather than against me. What do you say, any chance?”

CHAPTER 44

This definitely wasn’t the way Gemma had imagined her day going. Never could she have dreamt that the executive manager she actively hated was, in fact, her boss. The owner of the Waterfront Café. Although, now she knew, a twinge of guilt settled in her stomach for how she had treated Kent. Would she have been like that, throwing away his blackboards and yelling at him in front of customers, if she’d known he was responsible for her livelihood? Probably not. Unfortunately, guilt wasn’t her only pain, and the other was far more acute.

“I always thought that someday, when Oscar was ready to sell, I would buy the place,” she said truthfully.

“Really?” A look of something like sympathy flashed across Kent’s face. “Did he know that?”

She shrugged. "I always thought he did, but... maybe not. It's not like I'm in a position to buy it anyway, not after..." She stopped herself.

She had already shown far more of herself to Kent than she wanted to. The last thing she would do was disclose all the sordid details of her past relationships.

"I'm sorry. Now you have even more reason to hate me," he said.

"You're not wrong there."

She let out a light chuckle that caused a stray tear to escape down her cheek. With a swipe of her hand, she wiped it away.

"It's just life, I guess. You know the other day, my friend said that I give too much to the cafe. That I was letting it take priority in my life and missing out on relationships because I was too busy working all the time. I'd been so convinced she was wrong, but I guess that's not the case."

For a moment she simply sat, before she let out a long sigh.

"I get that," Kent replied. "There's a chance that I've been accused of the same thing once or twice."

Gemma lifted her gaze to look directly at him. A sad smile wavered on his lips, tugging at her guilt even more. God, she had been so horrible. Not that Kent had been particularly nice, and she definitely didn't agree with several of his decisions. However, having her block everything he tried to do couldn't have been the way he'd wanted to start his business takeover. And he could have just sacked her at any point. Looking at it like that, it was a miracle she still had a job at all.

"What do we do now?" she said before shaking her head. "Sorry, you don't have to

tell me what you've planned. I need to learn to keep my nose out. Don't I?"

"No, I don't want you to feel like that," he said. "I want us to work together, but we need to make changes. Maybe after work today, we could grab a drink and talk through some ideas."

Gemma drew in a breath and looked him square in the eyes. A series of frown lines creased his forehead, and he appeared to be feeling almost as much guilt over the situation as she did. Still, part of her wanted to walk away. It was his business, after all. Did anything she said really matter? Probably not, but she owed him at least one conversation.

"Okay, a drink sounds like a good idea," she said. "But there's one condition."

Kent's eyes brightened. "Sure. No problem. What is it?"

"We are not drinking Bordeaux."

CHAPTER 45

On Kent's suggestion, they met at The Yard. Given how she wanted to make up for quite a few things, Gemma arrived five minutes before they were due to meet and was planning on getting the drinks in. It was, therefore, a surprise to find Kent already there and a pint of cider waiting in her place.

"Don't worry, it's still cold," he said. "I saw you coming down the road. Although if I've got it wrong, I'll drink it, and you can get something else."

"This is perfect, thank you," Gemma said before removing her coat, sitting down, and taking a longer-than-average sip. She was hoping the drink would ease some of her nerves, but short of downing the entire pint, she doubted it was possible. The entire walk there, her mind had been skipping over every conversation she and Kent had had and how they would have gone differently if she'd known he was officially her boss. It was a futile exercise that left her regretting everything she'd said and desperate for a cigarette, though she'd kicked the habit over five years ago and had no intention of going back to it. Strangely, though, actually seeing Kent there, with a pint in his hand, made her feel notably calmer.

"Okay then, boss, I guess we should start talking," she said.

Kent grimaced.

"I don't want to be the boss. I want us to be a team, but yes, we have things to talk about."

“Well, for starters, if we are going to keep those new tills, we need to get rid of all the random things on there.”

“Random things?”

“Caramel frappes? Pepperoni hot pockets. Things we really don’t and aren’t ever going to sell. I was looking at it all this afternoon when I was trying to get to grips with it. Why are they all on there?”

“Oh. Yes.” Kent took a sip of his drink, and it felt like he was avoiding looking Gemma in the eye, but a second later, he was smiling at her. “It’s just a second-hand till, that’s all. I suspect that’s why they’re still on there.”

“Wow, I can’t believe they ever used it. It looks brand new.”

“You’re right,” Kent said. “It does, but moving on from the till, I know it’s hard to hear this because I know how hard you work, but given its location and size, the café should be bringing in, conservatively, double what it is.”

“Double?” Gemma said.

There was no way she believed that. Sure, their prices were lower, but they were always busy. How did he expect them to handle any more without increasing the number of staff, and surely that would cut into the profits even more?

“That’s conservative,” Kent said. “And there are a few things we can look at straight away to turn that around. To start with, we could fit far more tables into the space. There’s room for at least thirty per cent more inside and outside needs to become strictly for customers. Loads of people just like to sit down and have a look at the view. They don’t even buy a takeaway coffee. That’s what public benches are for. It’ll be a bit awkward at first, telling people they need to buy things if they want to sit

at our tables, but let's be honest, they already know that. That would be one way of upping how many covers we can do without needing any major changes."

Gemma agreed with the outdoor issue. In the summer, it often became a meeting point for people, and while they sometimes came in for drinks or food, they didn't always. But adding more tables inside? That was a different matter.

"People like the fact that we have more room," she said. "They bring their dogs in, especially in the winter. It gives them space to lie down with a bowl of water. We could lose a lot of regulars if we don't have the room for them."

"Which is all very lovely, but dogs don't buy coffee and meals."

Gemma hummed lightly. "They could."

"Sorry?"

She nodded to herself as the thought took on a more solid form in her mind.

"There's a restaurant out near Burnham that's got a dog menu. Things aren't that expensive or anything, but I bet the ingredients are cheap as chips. With the number of dog walkers we get in the summer, I bet that could be a way of bringing in some extra revenue without changing anything, really."

When she finished talking, she found Kent staring at her intently, a peculiar glint in his eyes that caused her pulse to flicker.

"You see, I told you we'd make a good team. Now, I know you don't want to hear it, but we need to put the drink prices up so that they're in line with the rest of Maldon... so let's see if we can agree on what they're going to be."

CHAPTER 46

Kent had come prepared, with the prices of every drink from every coffee shop in Maldon on his tablet. Looking at the numbers like that, en masse in front of her, meant there was no denying it. They were missing out on some serious money.

“I just feel bad,” Gemma said honestly. “Some of the elderly people that come in can’t afford to pay much more, and a cup of tea in the cafe is often the highlight of their day. I really don’t want to take that away from them.”

Kent rested his chin on his knuckles as he stared at the prices.

“Okay, so why don’t we do a smaller size special? And we can do a loyalty card, so every twelve drinks, they get a free one.”

“Twelve? Five,” Gemma suggested.

“How about we meet in the middle—they buy nine and get the tenth free?”

She wasn’t exactly sure that was meeting in the middle, but it could work. It wouldn’t offset the hike in prices exactly, but it would make a difference.

“And we’ll tell people it’s coming. We can put a little leaflet on the table, saying that the price rise will be happening in one month due to the hike in the cost of living. Most places have already done it. I’m willing to bet the customers will be completely understanding.”

Gemma nodded thoughtfully. It was hard to ignore reality. She knew prices had gone up everywhere, but that was why she’d tried to avoid it at the cafe. Even with the loyalty card, there would be people affected by this. People who wouldn’t be able to afford their own drinks. She could subsidise them now and then, the way she did with Mr Jordan, but that wasn’t something she could do long term. Not with Kent, the owner and her boss, permanently on-site. She was still pondering that point when a thought struck her.

“Have you seen those sticky note things?” she said.

“Sticky notes?”

“Yes, not normal ones. They have them in restaurants and places in big cities mainly, so when people pay for their drink, they can also buy one in advance for someone who can’t afford it. You put them up on a pin board, and if someone is struggling,

they just pay with one of the vouchers. You won't be losing any money because the drinks have already been paid for. I can purchase the first dozen or so, so people understand how the system works—if you agree to that, of course. I know it's usually used for the homeless, but a lot of elderly people are far closer to the breadline than you'd realise. Especially in winter. They come to the coffee shop because they can't afford to keep the heating on in their own homes. I hate to think of them freezing in their houses, with no company, and nothing to look forward to because they can't afford to come and get a cup of coffee anymore. I'd really like to do this. If that's okay?"

Gemma wasn't sure what response she expected Kent to give. She hoped he'd say it was a great idea and that they could start immediately, though she suspected he might say he wanted to look into it further before he agreed to anything. But as the silence spread between them, she was almost certain he was about to reject the idea, and a frisson of anger took hold. She drew in a sharp breath, ready to give all the reasons why this was a wonderful idea for the community and why he was just being an arrogant ass if he didn't agree, when he let out a short chuckle that caught her by surprise.

"You're remarkable," he said as his eyes locked on hers. "You know that, don't you? You're a truly remarkable person."

CHAPTER 47

It was the second time that day that his mouth and brain had a sudden communication lapse. Something about Gemma just did that to him; it made him speak without thinking or perhaps stopped him thinking at all. His immediate response was to apologise. After all, it was hardly the most professional thing to say, and despite being in a pub, they were having a meeting.

In truth, she'd disarmed him from the beginning. He'd expected her to put up so

much of a fight against everything, but she hadn't. She might not have fully agreed with his ideas but was willing to meet him halfway, and at the end of the day, all her resistance came down to one issue. She cared deeply about her customers. About people. That was her priority, and in a world where more and more people were only out for themselves, he really did find it remarkable. Unfortunately, from the way Gemma's cheeks turned fluorescent red, he had clearly overstepped the mark. He coughed, trying to clear the frog that had unexpectedly jumped into his throat.

"I'm sorry. I just mean that's a remarkable idea. Yes, absolutely. We can look at implementing it straight away. And don't worry about buying the first few; I'll do that. And I'm sure we'll get plenty of people who want to be involved. I think it's brilliant."

She smiled back at him and, for what felt like the first time, he knew it was genuine. It was soft and warming and though her lips barely twisted, it had an unexpected effect on his pulse. Not to mention the damn frog that had once again lodged itself into his larynx. After clearing his throat for a second time, Kent picked up his drink, took a sip, and looked at his agenda. He had an agenda to follow. That was what he needed to do. But somehow, it was getting harder and harder to focus on that.

"So, yes, that's good. I'll put that down next to the loyalty cards. Now, there's another thing I want to run past you, and I'm not sure how you'll feel about it."

"That sounds ominous." Gemma's smile twisted harder, and Kent forced his mind to stay on business. It was easier now he knew that he would have something she would almost certainly disagree with.

"Maybe. I wanted to talk about opening in the evenings."

"In the evenings? Like a full-on restaurant?"

“Not exactly. That would involve getting far more staff in, creating new menus, etc. What I was thinking was that we could do guest chef nights.”

“Guest chef nights?” Gemma repeated.

Kent nodded, although the way she was looking at him so intently was making it hard to concentrate.

“We’d have them perhaps once a month—go full out, get a liquor licence for the night so we could do tasting menus. Pair with some of the local vineyards. We’d keep the numbers low and the prices high-ish. It would be the type of event where people needed to book in advance to get a table. And when once a month starts selling out immediately, we could move it to fortnightly or even weekly. So?”

It was an idea Kent had been ruminating over since he took over the place, and he had several well-known names who he was sure he could persuade to come out once the cafe had made a bit of a name for themselves. If they got the liquor licence and the vineyard connections, he knew the nights could be a big earner. Exactly what they needed to push up the profits. But he could tell from the look on Gemma’s face that she didn’t get the idea.

“So we just take bookings for once a month?” she said, clarifying his thoughts that she needed something more concrete to understand his vision.

“There’s a place in Burnham that does them,” he said. “A yacht club that opens its doors to non-members once every couple of months, and they’re doing one next Friday. They’re probably already booked out, but I’ve got a friend who works there. I can see if she can get us a couple of tickets if you’d like to go and see what I’m on about?”

It was a business proposition. That was why he was asking her for dinner. It was a

business proposition to get Gemma onside with the idea, and yet, his stomach fluttered with nerves as he awaited her answer. He knew from Sophie that she didn't have a boyfriend. Not that it mattered—it would be an entirely platonic date. Business meeting, he reminded himself. Business meeting.

“So?” he said, hoping she couldn't hear the way his heart had suddenly started drumming. “Do you fancy it?”

The pause was agonising. Did she think he was coming on to her? No, she had to know he was more professional than that. Even though he had just called her remarkable and this, drinking cider with her at a microbrewery, talking numbers, was the closest thing he'd had to a fun night out in over a year. Finally, she nodded.

“Sounds good,” she said, finally. “I'll check my diary and make sure I'm free.”

CHAPTER 48

Gemma didn't need to check her diary. She knew she was free. Other than book club, book club birthdays, or occasional nights out to the cinema, she was free most evenings. And yet, saying she needed to check her diary felt like an appropriate response. The last thing she wanted was for Kent to think she would be there at his beck and call. She wasn't. She was just going for a business dinner with him, that was all.

"You're going on a date with Kent!" Sophie squealed at the book club the following Thursday. "How come I didn't know this? How come you didn't tell me? When did you arrange it?"

She was talking so fast that Gemma thought she might hyperventilate.

"You didn't know because it's not a date," Gemma replied. "I wouldn't have told you at all had you not suggested we all go to the cinema tomorrow."

"It is a big deal," Sophie said, bouncing on the spot as she turned to the rest of the group. "They've been getting on really well this week. They even hugged."

"You hugged?"

"You hugged?" Nina and Graham responded simultaneously.

Gemma was struck with the sudden urge to pick up one of the cushions she was sitting on and throw it at Sophie, but they were in Dee's house, and everything was so

elegant and expensive. She could just imagine how much trouble she'd be in if she missed and hit one of the vases.

"It was a work hug," she said. "He got this board I was after for gifting coffees to people who can't afford them. And I was happy about that. Hence, we hugged."

"That sounds like a lovely thing to do," Fleur said.

"Yes, it is." Gemma was grateful to be talking about work. That was a topic she could handle. "Hopefully, it will help people deal with the rising prices. And Kent was sweet. He purchased twenty drinks to get the ball rolling. Several customers were there, and so it spurred them into purchasing some, too. Now, we just need people to know there's no shame in using them. We all go through tight spots now and then."

"Sorry, did you just say Kent's sweet?" Sophie said, arching an eyebrow as her lips struggled to suppress a grin.

"No," Gemma responded forcefully. "I said he did something sweet."

"No," Marie joined in the conversation. "You definitely said Kent was sweet."

"That is what you said."

Sophie's smirk had taken over her entire face and Gemma was thinking she might have to deal with the fallout from a broken vase, when Jules walked into the room.

"What's going on?" she said. "Why's everyone so excited?"

"Gemma's got a date tomorrow with our boss!" Sophie said, practically jumping out of her seat.

“I have not got a date! We work in a restaurant. We are seeing how another restaurant works.” She paused to glower at Sophie. “This is a good thing, surely? You were the one who was worried about the work environment.”

“Well, you’ll have to let us know what the environment is like at tomorrow’s dinner,” Sophie teased. “And make sure you wear nice underwear.”

This time, Gemma didn’t care about the vases. She picked up the cushion and threw it straight at her friend.

CHAPTER 49

She and Kent had decided to drive to Burnham separately. It was only twenty-five minutes away, and Gemma usually hated driving. But the last thing she wanted was to find herself stuck in a situation she couldn’t get out of. Still, as she turned out of Maldon and began down the first of the narrow country lanes, she was already regretting her choice. Perhaps going with Kent would have been preferable. Or even taking a taxi. Gripping the wheel tightly, she focused on the road ahead, carefully trying to avoid the potholes, hedgerows, and large lorries coming down the other side as if it were a motorway, which it most certainly was not. As a passenger, it would have been lovely to stare out the window at the wonderful views over the River Crouch, which glimmered as the evening light reflected off the water. But as a nervous driver, it was far from an ideal situation.

It had taken Gemma far more time to pick an outfit for the night than she would have liked. The problem was the setting. It was a fancy place, which meant she probably needed to wear a dress, but she didn’t really feel comfortable in dresses. Had it been a plain old work meeting or just a restaurant in Maldon, she would have opted for jeans, a nice top, and heels, but that didn’t feel appropriate, so she settled on a jumpsuit she’d bought for a book club Christmas party a few years back, with long sleeves and a plunging neckline. Hopefully, she wasn’t too overdressed.

When she stepped out of the car at the yacht club, she found Kent already there, standing by the doors, waiting for her.

“You look beautiful,” he said, kissing her on the cheeks.

“Thank you,” she said as the compliment caused her stomach to flutter. “And you... wow, you scrub up well.”

She had known how objectively good-looking Kent was from the first time she had seen him. His square jawline and deep eyes had been one of the first things to catch her attention. But that was before she had taken to hating him. It didn’t matter what his face looked like when she’d considered him the most despicable human to have walked the earth.

Now, though, she was reminded of the man she had seen all those weeks ago—the one she’d immediately noticed. Although, there was something different about him. A slight bashfulness, perhaps. That definitely hadn’t been there before.

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“Well, shall we go in?” he said, offering her his arm. She hesitated for a moment before taking it. It was clearly the type of thing you did in a place like this.

Feeling more than just a light fluttering of nerves, they walked together up the stairs, past a bar with a view out over the water.

“Wow, this is stunning,” she said.

“I know, gorgeous, isn’t it? Now, my friend Magdalen got us the table, but she had to squeeze us in, so it’ll just be the two of us, out here by the piano. You don’t mind that, do you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Oh look, speak of the devil. There she is.” Dropping her arm, Kent walked over to an elegant woman dressed in black trousers and a matching top. The way she was adorned, she was the epitome of elegance; several diamond necklaces glinted around her neck, along with a tennis bracelet that hung effortlessly on her wrist.

“Thank you so much,” Kent said, as he greeted Magdalen almost identically to the way he had greeted Gemma, with two lingering kisses on the cheek.

“Don’t be silly. You know I would do anything for you.”

As they grinned at each other broadly, Gemma felt an unexpected jarring of jealousy. Immediately, she admonished herself for the sensation. She just didn’t want to be left on her own. That was it. It wasn’t unusual. It was annoyance, that was all. But before

it could settle, Kent was speaking again.

“Gemma, this is Magdalen. She and I go a long way back. She’s the one who got us a table.”

“Thank you so much. The space is absolutely beautiful,” Gemma said.

“You’re most welcome. Tell me, what can I get you guys to drink? Are you going to do the tasting menu for the evening, or do you want a bottle of something else?”

“Oh, I’m driving,” Gemma said. “So, just soft drinks for me.”

“Me too,” Kent added.

Magdalen pouted. “Don’t be silly. You need to try the wines with the dishes. Otherwise, you only get half the experience. You know that, Kent.”

The way she spoke made it sound like they’d really be missing out if at least one of them didn’t try the full menu, and as Kent was the food expert, Gemma reasoned it should be him.

“You do the wine tasting, and I can drive you home afterwards,” she suggested, trying to forget how much she’d hated the drive there and how much worse it would probably be with a passenger.

“No, that’s not fair at all,” Kent replied.

“You know, the yacht club has rooms here?” Magdalen interrupted. “I’m sure I can clear that. Then you can both get the full experience.”

Kent looked at Gemma, clearly leaving the decision to her. She’d driven so she could

escape early if needed, but now that she was there, she couldn't help but think how nice it would be to sip on a cold glass of something.

"I don't mind, as long as you're sure about the rooms?" she said to Magdalen.

"Oh, absolutely, yes! So the full wine-tasting menu, then?"

Gemma thought about the question for a moment, looking at Kent.

"Actually," she said, "I'm not a great fan of reds. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not. I want you to have an evening you'll enjoy. That won't be a problem, will it Magdalen?"

"Of course not. I shall see to it and the room now. And how about I get you both a glass of bubbly to start?" she suggested. "On the house, of course."

CHAPTER 50

Rather than two glasses, a bottle of bubbly appeared at the table only a minute or two later.

"Typical Magdalen," Kent said as he filled their glasses. "Honestly, she's the most generous person I've ever known. She doesn't have a bad bone in her body."

"This is very lovely of her," Gemma said before she took a sip of the drink. A question burned on her tongue. One she wasn't sure if she should ask. After all, it wasn't any of her business. Yet before she could talk herself out of it, the words were tumbling from her lips. "So, you and Magdalen, are you... Did you and her?" She didn't even manage a full sentence, though it was clear Kent understood what she was trying to say.

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“Good grief, no,” Kent said with a laugh. “She’s like a little sister to me. Actually, she was great friends with my little sister growing up.”

“You don’t talk much about your family,” Gemma said, trying to ignore the peculiar sense of relief she felt at his answer.

“Well, to be fair, there’s not been much of a chance for us to have that kind of conversation,” he replied.

“I suppose not.”

A pause expanded between them. So there was nothing going on with him and Magdalen. Why did that make her feel so much better? It was probably just because she didn’t want to feel like a third wheel all night. Even though she and Kent were the ones sharing a table. Yes, that was probably why her body felt so much lighter now. There couldn’t possibly be another reason, could there? As the silence swelled, Kent lifted his glass and tipped it towards Gemma.

“To a fun night and future business prospects.”

An unexpected torrent of butterflies rippled through her.

“To a fun night, and maybe future business prospects,” Gemma said, and clinked her glass against his before taking another, longer sip of her drink.

“This is definitely better than the Bordeaux,” she said.

A smile curled Kent's lips.

"You know, you still didn't tell me what was so terrible about that date. I can't imagine what the poor guy could've done that made you bolt like that."

Gemma scoffed. "Trust me, there was no poor guy involved in that incident. It was poor me. Thank goodness you turned up."

"That's me, just a regular knight in shining armour," he said. "But seriously, you're going to have to tell me what the guy did. The last thing I want to do is make the same mistakes he did, and have you bolting off on me."

Gemma knew that the heat that flushed her cheeks couldn't have come from the glass of champagne. After all, she had only had a couple of sips. Still, she put it back down and looked Kent straight in the eye.

"Well, first, I won't bolt out of here, because the lovely Magdalen has arranged a room for me, remember? And second, this is not a date."

"Of course it isn't," Kent said. "I'm just drinking champagne and anticipating a wonderful dinner with a woman I find incredibly attractive. That's not a date."

"No," Gemma said firmly, trying to quash the butterflies which were insisting on sticking around. "In fact, I think if that person is an employee of yours, then saying something like that is probably closer to harassment than a date."

Kent's face suddenly paled.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry. Crap. Gemma I?—"

"I'm joking with you," Gemma said, having not realised he would take her seriously.

If she was honest with herself, this was a darn sight nicer than any of the dates she had been on in a very long time. But that was just because of the location, rather than the company, wasn't it? Still, Kent continued to look horrified, and, wanting to put her mind to rest, she reached out her hand and placed it on his arm. A static shock met her fingertips and rippled up through her body. Her pulse rocketed and when her eyes instinctively locked on his, she knew he had felt the same.

Grabbing her glass, she swallowed several mouthfuls, hoping it would stop the heat that was rolling through her body.

"How about we just see if this setup could work at the café?" she said, hoping he couldn't hear the way her heart was pounding. "That's what we've come for, right?"

CHAPTER 51

It was after the soup course that Gemma excused herself to go to the bathroom, taking her handbag with her. Once there, she placed her hands on the marble sink, looked at her reflection, and shook her head in disbelief.

"What are you doing?" she said to herself.

Kent was the owner of the Waterfront Café. If he wanted to put something like this on as a monthly event, she couldn't stop him. So why did he want to bring her there for the evening, and why, every time she met his eyes did she feel that fluttering just beneath her rib cage, a fluttering she sensed that he felt it too? They had been there for less than an hour, but her cheeks already ached from the smiling, and she had lost count of the number of times she'd laughed. It was sending her head into a spiral. She didn't laugh with Kent. Not normally. But she couldn't remember the last time she felt so relaxed around a man. Maybe it was just because it had been such a long time since she'd been on a decent date with one. Not that this was a date. She had told him as much, and he'd agreed. It was for work and work only. As that thought settled, so

did a sense of disappointment. Did she want this to be a date with Kent? Surely not. How could she like him in that way after everything they had been through? She couldn't, could she?

No sooner was she asking herself the question than she had picked up her phone, desperate to talk to someone. Her first instinct was to call Sophie. After all, Sophie knew them both and was aware of everything that had gone on between them. But Sophie couldn't keep secrets. If Gemma had read the situation wrong, and Kent wasn't feeling the same way she was, and Sophie knew how she felt, work would quickly become very awkward. And so instead, she hit dial on Nina's name.

"Hey, I thought you were out with Kent tonight," Nina said when she answered.

Gemma didn't bother with pleasantries. She had already spent too long in the bathroom as it was.

"Hypothetical question. If I find myself attracted to my boss, what should I do?"

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“This is on the business-only meeting, right?” Nina said, sarcasm dripping from her voice.

Gemma let out a long groan in response. “This is wrong, right? It’s just because I haven’t dated anybody in so long, right? That’s all it is.”

“If you say so,” Nina said. “I mean, from what Sophie says, he is incredibly into you, but what would I know?”

“Sophie said that?” Gemma’s stomach did a double somersault before landing substantially lower than it had been. “What did she say?”

“Just that he talks about you a lot and she thinks he has a crush on you.”

Gemma groaned again. “Sophie thinks everybody has a crush on everybody else,” she said. “Ignore me. It’s just the champagne. I need to get back to the meal.”

“You’re drinking champagne?” Nina said, “I thought you were driving?”

Gemma didn’t want to get into the gorgeous Magdalen and her rooms at the yacht club. Not when Nina would undoubtedly have more questions she didn’t want to answer. Besides, she needed to get back to the table before Kent sent out a search party.

“I’ll explain when I get home tomorrow. Speak soon and wish me luck.”

“Good luck, though I’m not sure why you need it.”

A moment later, Gemma hung up the phone. Whatever was going on with her and Kent, it was almost certainly in her head. A reflex reaction to having been given some attention for the first time in years. But it was work-based attention, and she needed to remember that. Drawing a deep breath in, she looked at her reflection and pushed her shoulders back. She was going to go back up to the restaurant and be as professional as possible. That was what she was there to do. What they were both there to do.

CHAPTER 52

“You did not say that to him,” Gemma said as she collapsed into giggles.

Kent had been talking about his work abroad, specifically some mishaps that had happened whilst he was learning French.

“Honestly, I thought I was doing so well, ‘beaucoup’ and ‘beau cul.’ They’re so similar. I thought I was saying ‘thank you very much,’ not complimenting his arse.”

“What did he do?” Gemma asked, still giggling as she went for another sip of her drink.

“Well, thankfully, he spoke English, so he corrected my error and suggested a language school that I could go to in the evenings.”

“Did you?”

“Of course, I just told my boss he had a nice arse,” Kent replied.

Once again, they descended into giggles. The bottle of champagne had gone down incredibly easily, and even though they had three small tasting glasses of white wine with the meal, Kent had purchased another for them to share after they finished

dessert.

“I thought you were on an extreme budget,” Gemma said. “Let me split it with you.”

“It’s fine, honestly, the prices are reasonable here. And I’d pay triple for this company again. You know, I don’t remember the last time I laughed this much on a... night out.”

The pause between his last words was as obvious as it was endearing.

“You were going to say date, weren’t you?” Gemma said.

“No, maybe. It has kind of felt like that, hasn’t it? I mean, I’m pretty sure I’ve got you convinced that these kinds of nights would work well at the café.”

“I don’t know. I think I might be a bit sad to be on the other side of the counter, rather than sitting, enjoying the food.”

“Well, I’ll still be there with you; that’s got to make up for something.”

“You think?”

“Maybe...”

He paused, and it was only then that Gemma noticed that his hand was on hers. She wasn’t exactly sure how long it had been there, and her first instinct was to move it, but it felt so natural. Before she could work out whether it was okay to leave it there a little longer, another thought struck.

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“I don’t know where you live,” she said suddenly. “Do you live in Maldon? You’re not from Maldon, are you?”

“No, I’m from all around, really, but my housing situation is a little... tricky at the minute. I’m not sure that’s the right word. Eclectic, maybe.”

“Eclectic housing?” Gemma’s interest piqued. “What does that mean? Are you part of a commune? Are you a cult leader? I could see you as the dashing autocrat. All these people following your every word.”

“I’m not sure that’s a compliment,” Kent laughed. “And I’m not sure anyone would follow me. No, I’m not part of a commune. Not exactly. Money’s been a bit tight since I bought the restaurant, so I’ve been staying in a caravan on a friend’s farm.”

“What?” Gemma’s hand flew to her mouth. “You’re not serious?”

He shrugged lightly.

“It makes sense. No real bills mean I don’t have to pay myself a proper salary. I can eat at the cafe so I save there too, and it’s not like it’s going to be long term. Just until the cafe—” he paused and tightened his smile. “Just until the cafe makes a bit more.”

“Wow,” Gemma didn’t have any other response. “Okay, now I am definitely splitting the champagne with you.”

“No, you’re not,” Kent said. “If there’s one thing I’m happy to spend my money on, it’s this.”

His hand was on hers again, and she had no idea how it had got there. It was like her fingers had a will of their own, and all they wanted was to be entwined with his.

“I think I’d like to do this again,” Kent said quietly. “This type of...night out. With you. In case that part wasn’t clear. I’d like to have dinner with you again. And not call it work.”

Gemma wasn’t sure what to reply. A lump filled her throat and while the butterflies that had invaded her insides knew exactly what they wanted her to say, she couldn’t do it. It would be rash and silly and wasn’t the type of decision you made after more than a bottle of wine. As she avoided answering, she glanced around the room.

“Did you realise everybody else has gone?” she said, pulling her hand away from Kent in surprise.

“What?”

“We are the only people in here.”

“That can’t be right, it’s only—” Kent glanced at his watch. “It’s 11:30. How did that happen?”

“I don’t know, but I’m at work tomorrow. That horrible boss will make my life a living hell if I’m not in a fit state for working.”

They giggled again, but it didn’t last for long. “I guess we ought to find Magdalen and grab the keys to our rooms,” he said, making no attempt to hide the disappointment in his voice.

Five minutes later, he had tracked her down and paid the bill.

“I’m glad you had a good night,” Magdalen said as she hugged them both, before stepping back and looking at Gemma. “And I’m glad this one’s finally found someone to meet his ridiculously high standards. You two are very cute together.”

“Oh, we’re not together,” Gemma said, shaking her head unnaturally quickly. “We are just work friends. Colleagues. He’s actually my boss.”

“Sort of,” Kent interjected. “I bought a café?—”

“Only he didn’t tell me he bought the café; he told me he was just running it,” Gemma interrupted.

The wine had clearly loosened her tongue, and she prepared to tell the entire story. Only something about Magdalen’s expression stopped her.

“What is it?” Kent asked, apparently noticing the same change. “Mags? Is something wrong?”

“I’m so sorry,” Magdalen said. “You two came in together. I just assumed... I’m afraid I may have made a slight error of judgement.”

CHAPTER 53

The three of them stood in the doorway to the beautifully decorated guest room. The walls were painted a powder blue, while a watercolour painting of the street hung on the wall. To the right of them was the ensuite. While in the centre of the room, the bed was decked out in pristine white linen—one double bed.

“It didn’t even cross my mind that you weren’t together,” Magdalen said, having apologised at least a dozen times already. “You’ve been so cosy and giggling together all night.”

“No, it was a work meeting,” Kent said, although he cleared his throat several times during the sentence, which made it sound terribly unbelievable, even to Gemma, who knew he was telling the truth.

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“Is there any chance you’ve got a twin room available?” Gemma said. “Or maybe a double with a sofa? I don’t mind sleeping on that.”

“Don’t be silly. If there’s a sofa, I’ll be the one to sleep on it,” Kent replied.

“We don’t have anything else at all,” Magdalen said. “I’m so sorry, I really am. All our other rooms are booked up for thenight. We’ve got guests coming for the weekend sailing event. Why don’t I book you a taxi, get you home that way?”

Gemma mulled the comment over.

“If we go home, we’ve got to come back here to pick up our cars tomorrow. That’s hardly the most productive use of time.”

Kent nodded in agreement.

“It’s fine. There are plenty of cushions. We can put them down the middle or something. Actually, there might be room for me to sleep on the floor?”

“Oh, I feel terrible,” Magdalen said.

Gemma shook her head. “Don’t be silly. You did a really nice thing. We’ll work it out. This is fine, honestly. It will just be like a work sleepover.”

“A work sleepover,” Kent said, raising his eyebrow as a smirk twisted on his lips. It took all Gemma’s strength to suppress her giggle. After all, Magdalen was clearly upset over the misunderstanding and Gemma didn’t want to appear rude.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it,” Magdalen said. “And I’m sorry again.”

She went to leave, only to step back into the room and look at the pair.

“You swear you’re not a couple, and you’re not just winding me up?” she said.

“Definitely not.”

“Absolutely not.”

Kent and Gemma spoke simultaneously, at which point Magdalen gave a short shrug before turning back to the door for a second time.

A moment later, she shut the door behind her, leaving Kent and Gemma alone in the bedroom.

“Well, this was unexpected,” Kent said.

“That’s one way of putting it.”

CHAPTER 54

Gemma stood and stared at the space. It really was stunningly decorated, but it wasn’t the largest of rooms. There was a small tub chair under the dressing table, but it didn’t look big enough to sleep in, and it wasn’t like one of them could even sleep in the bath, given that the ensuite only had a shower. Added to that, she didn’t have any night clothes to get dressed in, and her jumpsuit wasn’t exactly the comfiest to go to bed in.

“So, how do you want to do this?” Kent said. “Do you want to get undressed and under the covers while I close my eyes, and I’ll do the same?”

“I’m sure I don’t need to close my eyes to see a man strip down to his boxer shorts,” Gemma replied, only for a surge of fear to rocket through her. “You were only going to strip down to your boxer shorts, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” he said, with a look of shock. “Of course I was.”

“Okay,” she said, her pulse going back to normal. “And which side of the bed do you want?”

“I don’t mind, whichever one you don’t want, I guess.”

“Well, I normally sleep in the middle of the bed,” Gemma admitted. “But I’m not sure that’s going to work right now.”

“Possibly not,” Kent agreed.

They were still staring at the bed, pondering what to do, when there was a knock on the door.

“Maybe Magdalen has found us another room, after all,” Gemma said before moving and opening it.

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“Apologies from Magdalen.” Despite being nearly midnight, it was a barman from the restaurant, standing there with another bottle of wine in his hand.

“We really don’t need this,” Gemma said. “Tell her thank you, but it’s unnecessary. You can take it back.”

“Do you know Magdalen?” the barman said. “There is no way I’m saying no to her. Just take it and take it home if you want to.”

Sensing that he wouldn’t take no for an answer, Gemma took the bottle, along with the two glasses, and placed it on the dressing table in the room.

“There is no way I need any more to drink,” she said.

“Me neither,” Kent replied. “Maybe we should do as he said and take it home. That way, we can enjoy it together on our next date.”

“Our next date.”

Gemma raised her eyebrows. Her pulse was speeding up again, but it was a different type of nervousness. An expectant one. Like at any moment, something magical could happen. At least she knew she hadn’t been imagining things. Kent was definitely feeling this same attraction that she was. Yet as he stepped towards her, the thought of the two bottles of wine and how he was her boss struck her head. This wasn’t the way something like this should happen. If something like this should happen at all. She edged back, lowering herself onto the bed.

“Can I ask you something?” Kent said.

She nodded. “Of course. You’ve already asked me a lot of questions tonight.”

It was true. Unlike the disastrous date with Angus, where he had spoken only about himself, Kent seemed keen to learn all he could about Gemma. Though there was something about how he looked at her that made her sense this was a little more serious than the conversations they’d had over dinner.

“What happened in your last relationship?” he said.

“My last relationship?”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, it’s just... You’ve got these walls up. I know we didn’t start on a great footing, but I get the feeling that you don’t trust people easily ever, and I thought that might be the reason. But you don’t have to tell me anything. It’s none of my business.”

Gemma let out a long breath of air.

Talking about Robert wasn’t something she liked to do. Robert was in her past, as was the humiliation she had suffered because of him. And that was where she wanted him to stay, but for the first time in years, possibly ever, she felt the urge to tell Kent exactly what had happened.

“Can we get into bed first?” she said. “I think I’d rather be lying down when I talk about him.”

CHAPTER 55

Kent was the epitome of an absolute gentleman as Gemma got ready for bed. A

vanity set in the bathroom meant she could clean her teeth before she stripped down to her underwear. Then, before coming out of the bathroom, she told Kent to avert his eyes as she slipped under the cover. He then stripped.

As wrong as she knew it was, Gemma couldn't help but glance at his back as his shirt dropped to the ground. He was far more toned than she would've imagined and the light curves of muscles flowed gently over his shoulders. No, that definitely wasn't the type of body she had expected, and when she found her mind wondering what his chest and stomach looked like, she quickly caught herself. This was not the place or time to ogle her boss.

They had made a barricade of pillows, which Kent ensured was securely in place as he slipped into the bed. The cool, crisp covers barely shifted as he took his place next to her, unlike Gemma's pulse, which was getting steadily faster.

"So, do you want to tell me about the story of your ex now?" he said. "It's okay if you've changed your mind, though. I probably shouldn't be so nosy."

The thought of discussing Robert was enough to quash any other feelings Gemma had been having.

"No, it's fine. It really is. I mean, there's not too much to tell. I met him when I moved to Maldon. He was a cab driver. That's how I met him. He took me on one of my first journeys when I got here. He was one of those guys who could make you laugh without even trying, you know. We had some good times together."

"So what happened?" Kent asked.

Gemma drew in a long breath. A lot. That was the quick answer, but she already knew that wasn't what Kent wanted.

“Well, we were living together, although in his words, he barely ever saw me. It’s true, I spent a lot of time at the cafe. It was before Oscar lost his wife, your aunt I guess, but she was sick, so he wasn’t at the cafe that much and I was struggling to get good staff back then. Sophie wasn’t working for me, so there were a fair few weeks when I worked seven days straight and that was tough on the relationship. But I still thought he was the perfect boyfriend. He would treat me to lovely dinners out whenever we got a chance. He showered me with gifts, that kind of thing. And just upgraded his taxi to a big people carrier, so I thought everything was heading in the right direction. Well, it turned out he’d taken a load of credit cards out in my name. He’d done it all online. Of course, he’d got all my details, copies of my passport, everything he needed to pretend it was me. By the time I realised what was going on, there was over £30,000 of debt in my name.”

Even now, talking about the money aloud was enough to cause her entire body to clench. When she’d finally found out what he’d done, it was like the world was crumbling beneath her feet and it had taken a very long time to put it back together.

“Oh my God, what did you do? Did you go to the police?” Kent asked.

Gemma let out a sad chuckle as she stared at the ceiling. Of course, the knowledge of the debt in her name was horrifying, but the lies hurt so much more. He had broken her trust in a way she hadn’t known was possible.

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“I couldn’t go to the police,” she said, answering Kent’s question. “Why would they believe me? I could have easily got into that debt myself. Besides, this was the man I loved, you know? I just felt like such an idiot. It wasn’t like he could pay me back, either. He was swimming in his own debt, too. So I kicked him out and worked on paying it back little by little.”

“Seriously, all of it?”

Gemma shrugged. “I’ll be honest, it hasn’t been the most fun few years, but that’s okay. It’s surprising how much you can save when you get a shock like that. I’ve got less than three grand to go now. Ten per cent.”

The mattress dipped slightly as Kent rolled onto his side.

“And this guy, Robert, he just got away with it?”

“He did.”

Silence swelled between them, and even though she was still staring at the ceiling, Gemma could tell that Kent was looking at her with that familiar pitying gaze. That was another reason she didn’t tell people about what happened with Robert, because she knew how people would view her. An idiot who needed to be pitied. An idiot who didn’t see what was going on right under her nose. In some ways, she thought it was worse than being cheated on. At least in that case, there was another human, another person they were attracted to. But with Robert, it hadn’t even been that. It had been lie after lie, and there had been no point in any of it. It wasn’t like she had fallen for his money. She would’ve been happy, broke, but content forever. She could feel

herself drifting back. All those feelings of despair and hopelessness that had followed her around like a shadow for years were somehow creeping back out of the woodwork, and she wouldn't have it. She wouldn't. And so she blinked the feeling away and turned to the cushions beside her.

"That's enough about me," she said. "Now I want to know why you're still single."

"Me?" Kent said. "Well, that's an excellent question, and my parents are definitely to blame."

CHAPTER 56

Kent was desperate to move the pillows. At the very least, he wanted to get rid of the one between their faces. He wanted to look Gemma in the eye as they spoke. Particularly as he was about to tell her something he'd only ever told one girlfriend before. A girlfriend who had laughed in response. Kent realised then that she probably wasn't the person for him, but he didn't think Gemma would laugh. He was almost sure she wouldn't.

"Are you all right if I move this one?" he said, tapping the top pillow in the bed-barrier. He half-expected her to say no, and that she wanted to leave it in place, but instead her voice came across from the other side.

"Sure," she said. "If you want to."

Sitting up, Kent took the pillow and threw it across the room, where it landed softly in the tub chair. Seeing her face there, next to him, caused a wash of calm to roll through him. A smile rose on his lips and he could have stayed there, just looking at her, until she fell asleep. Only that would be creepy, Kent realised. Besides, she had asked him a question, and he wanted to answer.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?” he said, lying back down.

“Honestly?” Gemma asked. “I don’t know. Probably not. I think it’s a bit far-fetched.”

It was the response he expected. After all, it was the answer most people gave and the one they all assumed he would give to. Only he never did.

“Well. I do,” he said. “I believe in love at first sight, and I know it’s real. My parents, they genuinely fell in love the first time they laid eyes on one another.”

He watched the surprise light up Gemma’s face. Surprise, but not disbelief.

“Really? Where were they?”

Kent propped himself up onto his elbows.

“They were both travelling and had been for months. And they’d visited lots of the same places, but they were in Borneo when they actually met. It’s where all the orangutans are. I don’t know if you’ve heard of it.”

“It’s in Asia, isn’t it?” Gemma replied.

“Right, there are loads of jungle there, and a big mountain. I mean, unfortunately, a lot of that jungle’s been lost to deforestation now, palm oil plantations, that kind of thing.”

“Wow, this really is a romantic story,” Gemma said, adding a quick grin to show she was only joking. Still, she was right. Talking about deforestation hadn’t been the aim of Kent’s conversation.

“Well, they were both there on the same day, taking a river safari. There’s so much wildlife on the island. It’s not just orangutans. There are crocodiles, flying foxes, pygmy elephants?—”

“Pygmy elephants, they’re not actually a thing?” she said, sitting up.

“They are, and, surprisingly enough, they’re found in Borneo.”

“All right, smartarse.” She grinned. “Get on with the story. They were on the same boat, I take it?”

“No. They weren’t. There are these tiny boats that only fit five or six people on. That’s it. They were travelling in opposite directions when their boats passed each other on the river. The moment my father saw her, he said he knew his whole world had changed. He had to find out where she was staying.”

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“And I’m assuming he did,” Gemma said, “or we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“He did. It took him two days to track her down, and it turns out she had been looking for him too. A week later, when they were back on mainland Malaysia, he proposed to her. But they both knew how their families were going to react, after all, he was only 20, she was 19, and they knew they would think it was ridiculous that they had made such a commitment without even knowing each other properly.”

“So what did they do?” Gemma asked.

“They got married. In Gretna Green, before they even went home.”

“Wow, how did their parents respond to that?”

“Surprisingly, it was actually my father’s parents who were most angry with them. He’s always been a bit of a mummy’s boy, and I think his parents were annoyed that he’d do something like that without telling them. But my mother’s family, they got it. As soon as they saw them together, they knew it was the real deal. They’ve been together for over 40 years now, and I feel like there are fewer and fewer couples that you can say that about.”

Kent was struck with a sudden urge to ring his mother and tell her the news she had been waiting years to hear, but of course, that was just the drink talking. There was no way he could actually do that.

“So that’s them, but that doesn’t explain why you’re single,” Gemma said.

“Oh, it completely does,” Kent replied. “I mean, that’s what I’ve been waiting for. The fireworks, the heart racing, the feeling like you could say ‘I do’ that instant and know that your whole life together would be incredible.”

“And you haven’t found that yet?” Gemma said, her voice a whisper.

“I hadn’t,” Kent said. “But then, a couple of weeks ago, that changed.”

CHAPTER 57

Gemma knew exactly what Kent was saying, and she couldn’t breathe because of it. It was ridiculous, of course, it was. He couldn’t possibly be saying what she thought. He had hated her when they first met, just like she had hated him. Hadn’t he? But then she didn’t hate him now, did she? The way he had lied to her about being the owner of the cafe was absolutely ludicrous, but it didn’t make her hate him. If anything, how he tried to protect her from the truth was endearing. Her mind drifted back to dinner. To the way their hands felt so natural on one another. How being close to him just felt natural.

“This would be messy,” she said, wishing that her voice didn’t sound quite so breathless when she spoke.

“Why?” Kent replied. Somehow, his arm had breached the boundary of the cushion and was resting on her lap. Its weight felt like a piece of armour, there solely to keep her safe. “It doesn’t have to be. It won’t be. We both want to do a good job. This won’t change that.”

“But what if you end up regretting it?” she said.

His hand moved from her lap to her cheek, and the pressure of his touch caused her eyes to close.

“I assure you I won’t,” he said. “But if you’re worried you will, then I will roll over and go straight to sleep now. I don’t want to push you, Gemma. I’ll wait as long as it takes for you to be ready for this.”

Gemma’s body and mind grappled incessantly, and she struggled to pull any sense from her thoughts. Of course, she was worried about regretting it. She was worried that because of one silly night, after far too much wine, she was going to mess up the job that she loved so much. But then, whatever happened tonight, she knew that her relationship with Kent had changed forever. And what was that old saying? It was better to regret the things you did than the things you didn’t do. Yes, that was it. She’d never known it to make as much sense as it did in that moment. Still aware that she might be making a terrible decision, Gemma leaned forward, so close that she could feel his breath on her skin.

“I still think this is a bad idea,” she said before pressing her lips against Kent’s and kissing him.

CHAPTER 58

Gemma stretched out in the bed, yawning widely as she twisted her neck from side to side, trying to ease the cricks in her neck. Kent was still asleep in bed, soft snores rising from his lips. It had been one kiss, that was all, and yet it had left its mark on her. Even as she woke, she could feel the echoes of it buzzing through her skin, like a static shock that had struck every part of her body. One kiss was all they had shared, and then she broke away and lay back on the bed while their fingertips remained intertwined.

After rolling onto her side, Gemma grabbed her phone from the nightstand. She still had enough time to get home, get showered, and get to work as if nothing had happened. That way, she could leave all the cards in his hand. It was up to Kent to decide what would happen next. As she stood in the doorway, ready to leave, a flicker

of guilt struck her. She would have felt devastated if she'd woken up and found he was gone, but he knew she was working. He'd understand, wouldn't he?

On the drive back, she contemplated sending a message, only to change her mind. She had drunk a fair bit, and while she didn't blame alcohol for her action, Kent might. It was a far wiser decision to pretend nothing had happened until she knew where she stood.

"That's your second coffee this morning," Dawn said, as Gemma stood by the machine, trying to breathe in as many coffee fumes as she could. "I take it you had a good night?"

Gemma was grateful it was Dawn and not Sophie working with her. Both Sophie and Nina had sent several messages, to which Gemma had only replied that the yacht club was lovely. She knew they'd want more at some point, but that was all they were getting for now.

"It was nice," Gemma replied to Dawn.

"And from how you're constantly looking at your phone, can I assume a man was involved?"

Gemma shook her head.

"Just book club gossip," she lied, though it was hard not to keep checking for messages. It was all very well, leaving the ball in Kent's court, but she wanted him to do something with it.

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It was just gone nine when Gemma finally got the ping on her phone that she'd been waiting for. Her stomach fluttered with nerves as she opened it up.

Wow. Gone in the morning before we even confirmed a proper date. That's harsh.

A smile curled at the corner of her lips.

Some of us have jobs to go to.

She replied.

We can't spend all morning lying in bed. Even if we want to.

There was enough there for him to get that she was interested, but she could also brush it off like he was referring to general lie-ins if he wasn't.

It was only for a few seconds, which is not that fun, but it's someone to share it with you. Why don't you call in sick? I'm sure your boss won't mind.

She couldn't help but let out a little chuckle.

He definitely will, he's a complete arse.

Really? Then maybe I should have words with him. I can be quite intimidating, you know.

Once again, Gemma couldn't help but let the laughter out, although this time, it

attracted Dawn's attention, who was busy making a cappuccino for one of the customers.

"Who are you flirting with?" she asked.

"What?" She was trying to feign innocence. "What are you on about? I'm just messaging one of the book club girls, that's all," Gemma said.

Jessica raised an eyebrow. "That is a flirty laugh if ever I heard one. Trust me, it's been a long time since I was given the opportunity to flirt. I would know that sound anywhere. So, tell me who he is."

"Seriously, there's nothing to tell," Gemma pressed again, yet she could see that Dawn wasn't buying it.

"It's nothing, really, it's not. Just a bit of silliness, that's all. I'm sure it will fade into nothing soon enough."

"All I hope for your sake is that it doesn't. It'll be nice to see you happy with a nice guy. You deserve it."

"Well, I'm not thinking too much about it," Gemma said. "I'm sure he's not that into me."

CHAPTER 59

There was no way around it. He was smitten. If Kent had thought he was into Gemma before, it was nothing compared to how he felt now they had kissed. Who knew kisses could be like that? It was like thousands of fireworks going off simultaneously inside him, and even though she'd broken away, her hand had stayed in his all night, their fingers fitting perfectly together.

Never could he remember feeling such a complete sense of excitement. His cheeks were already aching from smiling through their text conversation and he couldn't wait to kiss her sober, too. For her to know the attraction wasn't because of the drink. It wasn't just physical, though. He honestly couldn't remember the last time he had laughed so much talking to someone. Although he had told her one lie that evening.

Despite what he had said to Gemma, Kent had been fully aware that the yacht club had slowly emptied of all its patrons, but he just hadn't been willing to let the night end. He could have stayed there until dawn, listening to her talk, watching her laugh, as he regaled her with stories of embarrassment from his youth. It had felt like a punch to the gut to wake up and find her gone without so much as a quick peck on the lips, but then he knew how seriously she took her job.

Part of him thought about waiting until the end of the day to message, but he didn't want to pressure her. Especially not if she regretted what had happened. Still, the idea of waiting to contact her was more than he could bear. It took him over half an hour to write a text he was happy with and hit send, but it had been worth it. Her replies had told Kent everything he needed to know. Gemma liked him as more than just a boss or a friend. She didn't regret the kiss, date, or anything that had happened between them. Which meant there was a real chance she could fall for him like he'd fallen for her. Now, he just had to do everything he could to avoid messing it up.

CHAPTER 60

"If this is an emergency book club meeting, shouldn't Sophie and Graham be here?" Fleur asked. "Do you want me to text them? See if they're running late?"

"No!" Gemma's response had been a little more visceral than she'd expected, but she couldn't have Sophie there. That was the last thing she needed.

They had met in the Blue Boar's pub garden, where they, along with several others,

were enjoying the warm weather.

She had sent the message out on a whim, expecting that only two or three people would be able to make it. Instead, almost all the book club was there. Nina, Jules, Flick, Marie, Fleur, and even Eunice had come to her SOS meeting, which made Sophie's absence even more noticeable.

"Sophie can't know about this," she said. "I need you guys to promise you won't say anything to her."

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“Well, this sounds like juicy gossip,” Eunice said, the old woman’s eyes glinting.

“No. It’s not,” Gemma said, only to correct herself. “Okay, maybe it is. I need advice. That’s why I asked you all here. I need to know what to do. I kissed Kent.”

She wasn’t sure what response she expected the group to have. Shock probably. Yes, she expected them to be shocked by this announcement, but instead, Marie held her hand palm upwards towards Nina and Fleur.

“I told you that was what it was. Come on, pay up,” she said.

Gemma watched in disbelief as her friends reached into their wallets. Each of them pulled out a five-pound note, which they placed grudgingly in Marie’s hands.

“Sorry, did you take bets that this was why I’d called a meeting?” Gemma said, not sure if she should be furious or impressed at her friends’ astuteness.

“Of course we did,” Marie said. “The only time anyone ever calls an emergency meeting is when it’s something to do with a man.”

“That’s not technically true,” Eunice cut in. “There was that bit in *One Day*. We had to call an emergency meeting after we read that.”

“That’s true,” Nina said, “but if we exclude the incident where David Nicholls shattered our hearts, every other emergency book club has been to do with a guy.”

“Hence, I decided to place a bet,” Marie said, a grin spreading across her face. “So, I

take it the business dinner went well?”

Gemma let out a long sigh. She had planned on keeping the details to herself. Mention the one kiss and leave it at that. But now she was there, and it seemed silly not to put some context to the situation.

“The dinner was amazing. And just so you know, we didn’t kiss all evening. It was only because we had to share a bed.”

“You had to share a bed?”

“What the hell?”

This time, they looked shocked.

“So, are we talking about more than a kiss here?” Flick asked.

“No, we’re not,” Gemma said sternly. “It was one kiss, and then I rolled over and went to sleep.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” Eunice muttered. “I like a bit of gossip.”

With a loud groan, Gemma dropped her head into her hands before lifting it up again and looking at them.

“I assume you were both completely complicit in this kiss?” Fleur said.

“Of course. Tipsy but completely complicit.”

“And today, how was that?” Jules asked. “Were things awkward between the pair of you?”

“Well, I left before he woke up, but we’ve texted already, and it’s been sweet, fun.”

“So, what’s the problem? You like him. He clearly likes you too?—”

“But what if he changes his mind?” Gemma cut in. “What if it was just the drink? What if he doesn’t like me, and I’ve fallen for a guy who’s technically my boss? Then I’m going to get my heart broken and screw up my job all at once. So it’s better I just leave things, right? That’s the sensible thing to do in this situation.”

She looked around at her friends, one by one, meeting their gazes, wanting them to tell her she was right, she should put that one kiss down to drunken foolishness, act like the night had never happened, and go back to her normal life. That was what she wanted them to say, but as she sat there, several smiles broke out amongst the group.

“Oh, honey,” Eunice said, finally breaking the silence. “You’re already in way too deep for that.”

Gemma was staring at her drink, wondering what the hell she was meant to do and whether asking the book club girls had been any use at all, when her phone buzzed in front of her.

Her body tensed as she saw who it was from.

“It’s him, right?” Jules said, with a carefree excitement she rarely showed amongst the group. “What is it? What does it say?”

Gemma drew in a deep breath, picked up the phone, and opened the message.

“Fancy meeting for a drink?” she read aloud.

CHAPTER 61

Kent had said he would be in the beer garden at the Muddy Duck pub, so that was where Gemma was going. Her heart rate was on overdrive, but she was certain that going to see him was a good idea. They needed to see each other before they worked together again. That way, they’d be able to get rid of any awkwardness they felt. It was the sensible, grownup thing to do. Although it didn’t make her any less nervous. With every step she took down the hill, her pulse ticked a little higher. He probably wanted to meet just so he could tell her it was a mistake if she didn’t get in there first. Yes, that was the most sensible thing to do. Feelings were irrelevant and almost certainly temporary. She would tell him it had been a mistake, and they would move on like nothing had happened. That was what she thought until she saw him.

It was definitely an involuntary action—the way her heart leapt in her chest when she caught his eye. He was standing before she got there. His nervous smile made her stomach surge with a thousand types of butterflies. With her thoughts muddled by the memory of the night before and the rush of their lips meeting, her instinct took over. She moved to repeat the action and kiss him again, though just as she realised what she was about to do, she jerked her body back and turned the greeting into a strange, awkward hug with a kiss on the cheek.

“How was your head at work this morning?” Kent asked when he moved back and sat down on the bench. Gemma took a seat opposite, though what she actually wanted to

do was to shrink away into nothing. He was probably horrified by the fact she had considered kissing him again. Wishing she could replay her entrance, she swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to make the best of the situation.

“Okay, considering,” she said. “Although, I may have let Dawn deal with the most annoying customers.”

Kent laughed.

“Can I get you a drink?” he said. “I didn’t order you anything. I wasn’t a hundred per cent sure you were going to show.”

“Really, why?”

“Why? Because I suspect you’ve spent the entire day wondering whether you’ve made a terrible mistake, ruining your job and all that nonsense.”

“It’s hardly nonsense,” Gemma said, not sure if she should be surprised that he’d got such a good read on her.

“It is because the ball is in your court right now. If you want to say that it was all a drunken mistake, then I will pretend that I have no idea what you’re talking about because I was far too inebriated on the free bottle of champagne to remember anything after the first course.” He flashed her a smile before changing it to a look of bemusement. “What was the mistake exactly? No, forget I asked. Forget I said anything. I didn’t even know there was a mistake.”

Gemma laughed. There was something about the way he was putting her at ease that made her feel ridiculous for being so nervous. He was giving her a get-out, the same way she had done by leaving that morning without waking him. They had both offered one another a way of moving on as if nothing had happened. The only issue

was that she didn't know if that was what she wanted.

"But what if I do remember what happened?" she said. "And I actually liked it?"

"Well, in that case," he said, reaching his hands across the table and fixing his eyes on hers, "I would tell you that I also remembered it and that it was the single most magical kiss of my life, and it's all I've been able to think about all day. That, and what the second kiss would be like. I would probably also admit that I don't think it would be possible for me to forget it even if I wanted to, although I definitely didn't. But only if you're sure, right? I don't want this to cause you stress."

Gemma bit down on her bottom lip. Would it cause her stress, starting a relationship with her boss? Absolutely, but at the same time, as she sat there opposite him, all she could think about was that kiss. About how she was desperate to relive it, in a clear-headed state. After all, how would she know if the fireworks were real if she didn't kiss him sober?

"Any chance I can have a bit of time to make that decision?" she said, aware that her body was leaning forward across the table, as if it was being drawn to him.

"Of course, that's absolutely fine. And do you have any suggestions for what you'd like to do while you're considering it?" Kent said, his body following the same trajectory as hers. Any minute now, they were about to collide, and she wouldn't be able to do anything to stop it.

"I've got one or two ideas," she said.

A second later, they were kissing.

CHAPTER 62

By the time they broke away, Gemma was breathless. If she had thought a drunken kiss had been fireworks, then this sober one had been atomic. It was as if touching Kent's lips against hers set every one of her cells on fire. It had never been like this with Robert or with any of the men she had dated sporadically since then. In fact, when kisses like that existed, it was hard not to believe what Kent and his parents said about love at first sight. Or at least love at first sober kiss. The minute the thought rose, Gemma quashed it. She wasn't in love. Not even close. She didn't know what she was. All she knew was that it made her feel happier than she had in a long time.

"So, I guess you're staying for a drink, then?" Kent said with a grin.

"I guess I can manage one." Gemma grinned back. "Although I think I need to stay off the alcohol. A lemonade would be perfect."

Two lemonades and an orange juice later, Gemma didn't have any desire to leave. The evening had taken on a chill, and though they could have gone inside, she didn't want to move. She didn't want to change anything about the way things were. Thankfully, Kent had given her his jacket to wear.

"If you could visit anywhere, where would you go?" Kent asked.

It had been a constant back and forth of questions and not once had they struggled for things to talk about.

"Hay-on-Wye," Gemma replied, not needing any time to think about the question.

Kent's gaze narrowed. "Hay-on-Wye? In Wales?"

“That’s the one.”

“So I asked you where in the world you wanted to visit, and you said Wales?”

“I didn’t say Wales,” Gemma protested. “I said Hay-on-Wye. You know, there are over twenty bookshops in that one little town. And it really is small. It’s got a population of two thousand. Maldon is over sixty thousand. By their calculations, we should have hundreds of bookshops. Besides, what’s the point of travelling anywhere in the world if you haven’t seen the best bits on your doorstep?” she replied.

She was about to carry on talking about all the other places in the world she wanted to see when she noticed the way Kent was staring at her in disbelief.

“What? What is it?” she said.

Was he disappointed? Had he wanted her to say somewhere exotic? After all, his parents had met on a river cruise in the jungle. That was probably the type of person he was interested in being with, too. Someone adventurous.

“You’re never going to believe this,” he said, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

“You’ve been there, I take it?”

“Hold on, one second.”

A minute later, he handed the phone to her. On the screen was the picture of the cutest little house she had ever seen, with a thatched roof and wisteria vines climbing

up the outside wall—it was the epitome of a chocolate box cottage.

“What is this? Where is this?” she asked, confused about the sudden detour the conversation appeared to have taken.

“It’s a cottage in Hay-on-Wye,” Kent said. “And it’s mine. I own it.”

CHAPTER 63

Gemma was sure Kent had to be winding her up, but his face was completely serious.

“How? Do you live there? Have you ever lived there?”

“It belonged to my grandmother. Grandma Lulu.”

“That’s such a lovely name.”

“She was a lovely woman,” Kent said factually. “When she died two years ago, she left it to me.”

“I’m sorry,” Gemma said. “Not about the cottage. About your grandmother. Were you close?”

“We were. And we had a lot of good memories in that house. That’s where I first learned to cook. My parents would drop me off for the weekend, and we’d spend the entire time cooking together. She was the person who taught me to fillet a fish and to debone a chicken. She was an amazing woman. A chef, an artist. She had these vintage cars, too. That’s what she left my sister. Paintings and cars.” He paused, as if he’d somehow said too much, and for a second, Gemma assumed he was going to stop talking, but he didn’t. Instead, he carried on, a soft smile on his face. “I always envisioned moving up there with my own family. Teaching them to cook and bake.

Keeping her memory alive. Does that sound ridiculous? It's my big dream. It is ridiculous. The place needs so much work."

"No, it's not. Not in the slightest," Gemma said, grateful for this glimpse of a man she had yet to learn about. "But why haven't you moved up there straight away if that's what you want to do?"

"The house is a state. A real mess. It's barely liveable, and every year it's getting worse. Basically, it needs a big influx of cash to restore it to its former state."

At this, Gemma frowned in confusion. "If that's the state of it, why didn't you put the money you used to buy the café into it? Surely that would have made sense."

For the first time, she noticed the way Kent's hands were grasping one another so hard that his knuckles were turning white.

"It's a bit complicated—tax and things," he said. "Not to mention family politics. And what I paid Oscar for the cafe would have barely made a dent in what needs to be done there."

"Hence, the cafe has to do better?" Gemma said.

She could tell from the way his eyes had lowered to the table that it wasn't something he wanted to talk about at length, and so she reached her hand over and took his.

"Thank you for telling me."

The smile that had previously vanished from his face returned.

"I like telling you things. And who knows, perhaps when we get a weekend off together, we can head there. I can teach you to debone a chicken."

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Gemma let out a small scoff. “I think I can cope without learning that skill. Besides, a weekend off together? We’ll be lucky to get a day.”

Suddenly, the optimism that had filled her since they had kissed faded a little. It was all very well saying that they wanted to make a go of things, but he’d be getting up extra early and probably want to go to sleep earlier than her because of his hours in the kitchen, and they would rarely get the same days off. The only real time they’d be able to see each other was when they were working together, and that was hardly quality time.

“Don’t do that,” Kent said, his voice breaking through to Gemma.

“Do what?”

“Think about all the reasons this won’t work. How about we just take one day at a time and see how that goes?”

It was hard to ignore the weight pressing down on her chest, but something about the certainty in Kent’s eyes made Gemma feel as though he was right. Like as long as they approached this together, it would all work out fine. It had to, didn’t it? She was too far in now for it to go wrong.

CHAPTER 64

Gemma couldn’t remember the last time she was nervous for work, but she was. It was Monday morning, and she, Kent, and Sophie would all be working alongside one another.

She and Kent had spent all day Sunday together. Judging from the rota, it would be the last time for two weeks that they'd have the same day off, and she had wanted to make the most of it. So she'd taken him on a tour of the local area—starting with a walk at Danbury Lakes before driving across to Paper Mill Lock and having a drink at the café there. The entire time, as they walked around, looking at the ducks and occasionally stopping to kiss, their hands remained clasped together. It had felt so natural that she couldn't believe she had ever thought there was anything wrong with it. Even when he'd driven her home, and they'd needed to say goodbye at least a dozen times because they kept kissing, it had all felt incredibly normal. As if he'd always been part of her life, or at least was meant to have been. Now, however, as she had to face the reality of him being her boss, her nerves had returned in torrents. It didn't help that she wasn't yet ready for Sophie to find out about them either. It was her workplace too, and the last thing Gemma wanted was for her to feel like it had changed.

“Did you hear anything I just said?” Sophie's questioning tone made Gemma realise she should have been listening. She wiped the milk frother clean while reminiscing about the sneaky kiss Kent had given her when she deliberately arrived early that morning.

“Sorry, what were you saying?”

“I was asking whether you think flowers are too generic a present to send Graham's mother for her birthday. Honestly, what's going on with you? You keep looking at the kitchen. Did something happen between you and Kent again?”

A flood of heat rushed to Gemma's cheeks.

“What do you mean? Who did you speak to? What did they say?”

“Nobody said anything,” Sophie replied. “I was just asking if you and Kent had

another argument. I thought you two were getting on well now. Really well.”

“Oh, yes—I mean, no. I mean, we’re fine.” Gemma was trying to act natural, but she knew she was doing a terrible job at it. “I’ve just got a lot of stuff on my mind, that’s all.”

“About him being the owner? I get it, but honestly, I think it’s all going to work out really well. I’ve just got this feeling, you know.”

“Yes, right. Sorry, Sophie. I’ve just got to go check something with Kent. He was going to order these... these things. I need to check to see if he’s done it. You’re okay with holding down the fort here, right?”

“Yes, of course,” Sophie said, taking Gemma’s jug of hot milk and using it to make a latte. “But I’m still going for my lunch in five, right?”

“Sure, I just need a minute...” Gemma said though she was only half listening to what Sophie was saying.

She needed to see Kent.

CHAPTER 65

The way she was behaving made Gemma feel like she was an irresponsible teenager again and not a fully grown adult. Yet, unlike her teenage years, she was loving every minute. Sneaking kisses between orders, hurrying to leave so they could meet again in the evening. It was fun and carefree, and somehow, they made it to the following Thursday without Sophie suspecting a thing.

“I’m sure we have a larger-sized teapot than this,” Gemma had said on Tuesday morning when she’d wanted an excuse to go and talk to Kent. “I’m just going to see

if it's in the kitchen.”

“I think the dishwasher must be out of salt because these glasses aren't as clean as they should be,” she said on Wednesday while holding a perfectly clean glass. “I'm going to check.”

“I think we're out of clean dishcloths for wiping down the tables.”

“We're out of hand soap.”

“I'm just going to see how long those orders are taking.”

“I'm going to top up the salt cellars. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me.”

As unnatural as it had been to start with, Gemma quickly discovered she was better at lying than she'd ever expected. She'd spent more time in the kitchen in one day than she usually did in a week, but Sophie didn't seem to notice, and each time Kent's face lit up when he saw her as if it had been days since they'd last been together.

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“Did I mention that I’m trying to manage an extremely professional establishment here?” she teased on Thursday afternoon.

Kent had finished his shift and was going to head home, and while they’d already arranged to meet up when she finished work, those three hours felt like a lifetime away.

“I’d blame the owner if I were you,” he said, breaking away to kiss her again. “He clearly needs to employ better staff.”

“Absolutely,” Gemma said.

She was about to lean in and kiss him again when she heard the kitchen door swing open and she jumped back.

“There’s a bit of a queue forming here, Gem,” Sophie called out. “Any chance you can look for those napkins later? I’m sure we’ve got plenty out here for now.”

As much as she didn’t want to, Gemma’s eyes caught Kent’s. It took all her willpower to suppress her smirk.

“Of course, I’m sure they must be in the cupboard somewhere,” she said.

A moment later, she was following Sophie back onto the café floor while Kent blew her a kiss.

“See you later,” he mouthed.

CHAPTER 66

So far, she and Kent had only met out and about, and while he had dropped her at her house a couple of times, she had never invited him in, and he had never asked to come inside. They had somehow found an unspoken rule that neither of them would push things. But when they finished their drinks at the Queen's Head, something told her it was the night she was going to ask him if he wanted to stay.

Of course, it wasn't like they'd been dating that long—not in the grand scheme of things. It had only been a week, but it had been a week in which they'd spent every spare moment together. Dates she'd been on before had lasted a couple of hours at most and if she was really into the guy, she might see him twice in one week, though that had only happened once since the breakup with Robert.

With Kent, they had been staying together until the bars and pubs kicked them out, and that night wasn't any different. Seven days with a minimum of five hours a day together was essentially the same as seeing a guy for two months. And that was what it felt like to her. Like they had been together for months.

Once again, Gemma was wearing his jacket, and as they walked down towards her house, she considered how she would ask him in. She would have to ask him. She knew that. There was no way he would ask. Yet when they reached her front door, Kent's phone started ringing. When he pulled it out of his pocket, a deep shadow clouded his expression.

"I'm sorry," he said to Gemma. "I'm going to have to get this. I'll see you at work tomorrow."

"Oh, okay, yes, sure," Gemma said.

She reached up to kiss him goodbye, but he had already turned his head and was

walking the other way with his phone pressed against his ear. It was a strange reaction for sure, Gemma thought, as he walked away without a backward glance. The disappointment was like a pain in her gut. For a split second she considered calling out to him, just so she got the goodbye kiss she had grown used to, but then that felt childish. It wasn't like he had known she was planning on inviting him inside, after all. And it wasn't as if they had to rush things. They had plenty of time to get to know each other.

As Gemma walked into her kitchen, she switched on the kettle and let out a long sigh. The more time they spent together, the harder she was finding it to deny the way she felt. Despite all the boundaries she had put up with Robert, she was falling in love. And it felt easy. It felt right because she was sure he felt the same. This was the real thing. Tonight with the phone call was just a little blip, wasn't it?

CHAPTER 67

When Gemma came into work the next morning, she still hadn't fully erased the niggling sensation that came from the way Kent had said goodbye the night before. He had sent her a message apologising for the abrupt departure, but when she'd sent a follow-up asking if he wanted to chat on the phone, he'd said he needed to get a proper night's sleep. She'd tried not to take the comment to heart—after all, they'd spent a crazy amount of time together over the last week, especially considering they hadn't officially put a label on what they were doing. In her mind, they were a couple, but perhaps he saw things differently. Perhaps he was the type of guy who dated more than one woman before taking the American approach of 'going steady'. No, she thought, dismissing the idea as soon as it formed. She knew how he felt about relationships—he'd told her that night in the yacht club. He was committed to her. She was sure. But perhaps she needed to hear him say it to stop feeling so insecure.

Knowing that the uncertainty would pester her until she spoke to him, Gemma left for work fifteen minutes earlier than usual, wanting to give herself time to have a proper

conversation with Kent before the café opened. But when she arrived, she was surprised to find a customer already sitting outside the door.

“Margaret?”

“I’m sorry, Gemma,” Margaret said. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her hands trembling. “I know you’re not open yet. It’s just... I didn’t know where else to go. The family has all these questions, and there are forms and certificates, and I don’t want to deal with it. I don’t want to deal with any of it.”

“Oh Margaret, I’m so sorry,” Gemma said, knowing without doubt the reason her customer was there so early. Still, with tears in her eyes, Margaret confirmed what Gemma already knew.

“She’s gone, Gemma. My mother—she passed away last night.”

Hugs weren’t something they did with customers, excluding Graham, of course, and even so, Gemma got the feeling that wasn’t what Margaret wanted. She wanted a chance to block out the rest of the world. A chance to feel normal. And so, grabbing her keys from her bag, Gemma hurriedly opened the door before beckoning Margaret inside.

“Take a seat,” she said. “I’ll get you a cup of coffee.”

“I don’t want to put you to any trouble. You haven’t even opened up yet. I just thought maybe I could talk to you about her. You know, for old time’s sake. But it’s silly. I’m sorry. I’m putting you out.”

“You are absolutely not putting me out,” Gemma lied as she tried to figure out how to get everything done and still have time to talk to Margaret.

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“It’s fine. Can you bear with me for two minutes so I can get the machine running?”

“Of course. Thank you, Gemma. I really appreciate it.”

“Honestly, it’s nothing. You take a seat. I’ll be over in a minute.”

Her conversation with Kent was going to have to wait, Gemma thought, though as she reached the coffee machine, the door from the kitchen swung open.

The first smile of the day from Kent was usually enough to make Gemma’s heart perform some serious acrobatics, though she didn’t even turn to look at him as she hurried to switch the water filters on. She needed to get Margaret her coffee ASAP.

“Great, you’re here. I was wondering if I could talk to you about something,” Kent said.

Gemma threw a glance towards the corner of the room, where Margaret was currently sitting with her hands buried in her head.

“Sorry,” she said. “She’s just lost her mum. I said she could come in. I’m going to grab her a drink and have a chat about things. It’s nothing important, is it?”

Kent coughed a little, then smiled and shook his head.

“I’ll talk to you later. There’s a guy coming in, though. He’s going to measure a few things,” Kent said.

“Okay,” Gemma replied, only half listening as she grabbed a coffee cup, before turning back to look at him. “Oh, can you grab me a fresh scone too, please? I know we said no freebies, but it can be from my lunch. I think she needs it.”

Kent lingered for a moment longer as if he was going to say something, but instead a smile curled up the corners of his lips.

“Sure. I’ll get that for you now.”

CHAPTER 68

Gemma spent the entire fifteen minutes that she had gained by turning up at work early to talk to Kent, listening to Margaret—not that she begrudged it in any way. The customer needed someone to talk to.

“My sisters are here now, and I know it’s wrong, but I just needed to get out of the house,” Margaret told her. “They’ve been here all week, and I know they mean well, but they don’t seem to get it. They’ve left everything to me for years, and they don’t seem to understand that it’s taken a toll on me. On my marriage, my life. My finances, too. Now they’re making all these suggestions, or demands, really, like we’re all going through the same thing, and we’re not. I don’t want to have to deal with them on top of everything else, and I don’t see why I should have to. Is it being selfish that I just want to step back for a bit?”

“No, it’s not being selfish at all,” Gemma said. “You’ve looked after her for a long time, and if you spell it out to them like you’ve just spelled it out to me, I’m sure they’ll listen.”

Margaret nodded knowingly, though her eyes flickered out the window. A moment later, the door opened, and Sophie walked into the cafe.

“Sorry, Margaret,” Gemma said, confused by the sight of her colleague on what she was sure was her day off. “I just need to go speak to Sophie for a second. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Of course. I’ve taken up too much of your time already.”

“Don’t be silly,” Gemma said, before standing up and walking over to Sophie.

“What are you doing here? You’re not meant to be working today.”

Sophie rolled her eyes.

“No, but Dawn messaged me. Apparently, one of her kids was ill, so she asked if I could swap with her.”

“You know, whenever Dawn asks you to swap, you end up just doing extra shifts,” Gemma said.

Sophie shrugged. “It’s fine. Graham’s got work to do, so he wasn’t free to do anything, anyway. I don’t mind.”

“Well, I’m going to have to speak to her about it,” Gemma said, feeling a sudden flicker of gratitude that Kent was there, too. They could work out as a team the best way to approach the situation. Reprimands were never something Gemma felt comfortable doing, no matter how deserved they were.

“Okay, well, thank you,” she said. “I haven’t managed to get anything besides the coffee machine sorted yet. It’s been a bit of a tough morning.”

Tipping her head, Gemma gestured towards the back table, only to find that it was empty. Margaret had gone. The scone was half-eaten, the coffee drunk.

“I guess she just needed a little time by herself,” Gemma said. “Come on, it looks like it’s going to be a busy day.”

CHAPTER 69

Kent was a coward. Out in the cafe, Gemma was going about her job, greeting all the customers in that wonderful manner of hers, and he was in there, hiding. He had planned on telling her the truth when she first came in, but her turning up early had thrown him, and then there was the issue with the customer. Now he had been inundated with orders, and she had obviously been run off her feet, judging by the fact she hadn't even come in to give him a quick kiss or say hi. As soon as she did, he would explain things. He just needed her to listen to his thought process because it wasn't like he had actually done anything yet. He was just weighing up options, and she needed to know that.

He glanced at his phone, knowing the minutes were ticking by when the doors opened.

"Hey you, are you all right? You look distracted," Gemma said. "Something's troubling you."

How had she done that, Kent wondered? Somehow, a single glance was all she needed to read him. He knew she was the one for him. He had known, possibly even from the first time she had yelled at him, but they would have to get over this hurdle first. A hurdle created by his own cowardice. After all, it wasn't like he hadn't had the opportunity to tell her before now. But he hadn't expected things to move so quickly. Not on the business side of things and not on the relationship side. He hadn't anticipated feeling so strongly after only a week together, and he hadn't wanted to upset all that by telling her what he'd done. And now she was looking at him with those perfect wide eyes of hers and he was struggling to know where to start.

“Actually, I’m not feeling so great,” he said.

“No?” Her face narrowed with concern. “What’s wrong? You’re not feeling under the weather, are you? If you’ve got something, I’m bound to have caught it, and there’s no way this place would run with both of us ill.”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” he said. Knowing he couldn’t avoid it any longer, he let out a sigh, then drew in a long breath, hoping that it would steady his thoughts. But when he looked up, he found Gemma was standing just in front of him.

“Anything I can do to make it better for you?” she said, a smile tilting on her lips. How did she do it to him? How did just looking at her make his whole body turn to jelly?

“Have I told you I think you’re incredible?” he said.

“Not today, no,” she said with a grin.

“Well, I do. I think you’re absolutely amazing. And I’m so grateful that I bought this place. Whatever happens.”

“Whatever happens? That sounds very serious.”

He closed his eyes momentarily, only to feel her fingers curl around the back of his neck. When he opened his eyes again, she was staring right at him.

“You know, I’m sure whatever the issue is, you and I will be able to figure it out somehow. It’s a work thing. Money problems?”

This was it. This was where he had to tell her the truth. He opened his mouth, hoping the words would come, but before he’d got a single one out, the door to the kitchen

opened.

“Kent there’s—Oh my god.”

At the sound of Sophie’s voice, Gemma jumped away from him and whipped her hands down to her side.

“Sophie?!”

“Sorry, guys, I didn’t—oh my god, I’m interrupting. I’ll go. I didn’t see anything at all.”

She looked between the pair of them, then twisted towards the door, only to turn back again.

“Kent. There’s someone here to see you,” she said.

A second later, she was gone and Gemma was looking like she’d just seen a ghost.

CHAPTER 70

Gemma felt all the blood drain from her face. Her hand was still around the back of Kent’s neck, frozen there, as her head turned to face Sophie in the door. A heartbeat passed, and she suddenly realised what it looked like. She dropped her hand to the side, inching away from Kent as if that would be enough to convince Sophie that she had not been in an uncompromising position with the owner of the cafe and her boss.

“Kent—,” Sophie started. “Oh my god. Sorry, guys, I didn’t—oh my god, I’m interrupting. I’ll go, I didn’t see anything at all.”

Her eyes met Gemma’s with a look of disbelief, or was that disgust on her face?

Gemma couldn't read it. A second later, Sophie had turned around, leaving the kitchen door swinging as she headed back into the cafe.

"Do you think she could tell?" Gemma said, only to shake her head. Of course, she could tell. They hadn't been kissing, that was a small relief, but really, having her hands around Kent's neck was hardly an appropriate workplace action. She needed to explain things, explain that it wasn't going to affect how they were working or what was best for the business. She moved to follow after Sophie, only for Kent to grab her hand.

"What are you doing? I need to go speak to Sophie, I need to explain. God, I should have told her when I told the others. She's going to be so hurt that she didn't know," Gemma said.

"Please, I just want to talk to you first," Kent said.

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The ticket machine that Kent had implemented as part of his new ordering system beeped. There were still plenty of customers who didn't like that way of ordering, but occasionally there was someone who chose that method.

“You need to get to that and to whoever this person is that wants to see you. We’ll speak later, whatever it is, we’ll chat about it later,” she said.

A moment later, she was walking out of the kitchen, to find Sophie staring straight at her, although, unlike her immediate fears, she wasn’t looking angry the way Gemma had feared.

“I bloody knew it,” she said.

CHAPTER 71

“Can I get a latte to go?” The customer blocked Gemma’s route as he demanded his order. “I don’t have very much time.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Gemma said, her eyes shifting away from his to look at Sophie, yet all she could see was her back as she worked at the coffee machine. With her legs unusually wobbly, she approached her friend.

“Sophie, I just—” Sophie turned around.

A flood of relief rushed through Gemma as she saw the wide grin on her face.

“I’ve just got three hot chocolates, two cappuccinos, and a mocha for that table. Give

me two minutes, and then I want to know everything. I can't believe I didn't realise. How long has it been going on?"

"Well, I guess?—"

"Sorry, do you have any idea how long a takeaway latte takes to make? I'm really short on time."

"I will make it for you as soon as the machine is free sir," Gemma said with her best managerial voice. "However, there are other customers who had orders in first."

The man groaned, and Gemma was about to say that he was perfectly welcome to go elsewhere if he thought they would be quicker when she spotted Kent out of the kitchen. With all the panic over Sophie catching her, she'd completely forgotten what he'd said about someone visiting to measure things up, and yet they'd clearly arrived. The man was dressed in a thin grey suit, with thinning hair and a flashy watch, and was nodding at Kent intently as they spoke. Something about Kent's expression made her think he was on edge. He was smiling politely enough, but his hands were plunged deep into his pockets, and he was repeatedly shifting his feet as if nervous.

"The machine is free," the customer said, bringing Gemma back into the moment.

He was right. While she'd been watching Kent, Sophie had finished her order and was taking the drinks to the table.

Filling a milk jug, Gemma moved into Sophie's spot and began to make the latte.

"That will be three pounds," she said as she handed the customer his latte. He tapped his card against the card machine, muttering something about service going downhill, but Gemma was barely listening. She was finding it impossible to draw her attention from Kent and the man who had now taken out a measuring tape. She had never seen

him show nervousness before, and it was endearing.

“I need to get back to the kitchen,” he said as he came back to the counter at the same time Sophie returned from taking her order.

“Yes,” Sophie replied curtly. “I think you do.”

The moment he was gone, she turned back to Gemma, grinning. “Tell me everything, now.”

It felt weird talking to Sophie about her relationship with Kent, while Kent was only a few feet away in the kitchen, but Gemma knew well enough that Sophie wouldn’t stop pestering until she had some answers.

“I guess we just got to know each other a bit better,” Gemma said, wishing that would be enough to satiate Sophie’s need for gossip but knowing it wouldn’t be.

“And I assume this is when you went for dinner together? So, what happened? More than once? I saw you kissing. Have you been to his house? Has he been to your house? Are you actually a thing? Oh my God, we can double date! Graham and I with you and Kent. Triple date with Fleur. Oh my God, we could go on mass book club multi-dates with all the couples.”

“I’m not sure how Nina and Marie would feel about that,” Gemma said, reminding Sophie that they weren’t the only ones—there were still members of the Lonely Hearts Club who still hadn’t found anybody.

“And it’s still very new,” she said, “very, very new.”

“But he’s crazy about you, anybody can see that,” Sophie replied. “I mean, he must be, to think about doing something with a person who works for him. The same with

you. Wow, this is amazing. I can't wait to tell Graham. Oh my God, I can't wait until the other book club girls hear. They're going to be so excited."

Gemma felt an awkward silence fill the air, and she knew she had to be honest.

"Yes, about that... I may have held an emergency book club meeting."

Sophie tilted her head a little.

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“Do you mean—no, you didn’t?”

“I didn’t want you to know about anything, not until I knew what was going on with us.”

Gemma watched as slow realisation dawned on Sophie’s expression.

“You mean the book club already knows? You already told them.”

“Well, not everybody knows, not everyone was there. Graham wasn’t,” she said, only to realise how ridiculous that comment was.

“Oh my God, I can’t believe you kept this from me,” Sophie said.

For a minute, Gemma thought Sophie was joking and was just being dramatic the way she could be, but then she saw the real hurt in her eyes.

“Sophie, it’s just with work, and everything?—”

“Forget it,” Sophie said, lifting her hand as if to stop Gemma from talking. “I’m going on my lunch break. I’m sure you and Kent will be fine whilst I’m away.”

CHAPTER 72

Gemma couldn’t remember a time when she had felt like a more terrible friend. The last thing she’d wanted to do in all of this mess was upset Sophie, and yet the way she had stormed out of the café, as if she couldn’t even look at her, had near enough

broken her heart. And she couldn't even speak to Kent about it.

He had orders to do in the kitchen, and there were too many people in the café that needed her. The man with the tape measure had been left to his own devices and was currently approaching the counter.

"Sorry, love, do you mind if I just get behind here a minute?" he said, gesturing to where Gemma stood.

"I thought you just needed to be out—" Gemma shook her head and stopped herself from talking. If Kent wanted to do a re-fit, he would probably do the whole area, although where the money would come from would be a mystery.

"Just try to be as quick as possible, please," she said.

"I have done quite a few of these, love," he said with a laugh that was unbelievably patronising. "And don't worry, I won't trouble you for a coffee while I'm here. My tastes are quite particular, as I'm sure you can appreciate."

Gemma's dislike for the man was growing with every word he spoke, and though she could have offered him a different drink from the chiller or even a glass of water, she didn't. Thankfully, ten minutes later, he slipped his measuring tape back into his pocket.

"Looks good," he said as he tapped the countertop in front of her. "Definitely potential. Tell the boss I'll be in touch."

"I can get him from the kitchen for you," Gemma replied. "I'll just be a minute."

The man shook his head. "No worries. I'll make my decision soon enough and let him know."

Make a decision? It was a strange choice of wording. Gemma rolled the phrase around in her mind with a growing sense of unease. Was the man so busy that he could pick and choose which establishments he refitted? Maybe. Maybe he was so in demand that Kent was sure his work would be worth the investment. Only Kent didn't have any more to invest, did he? She would have to ask him. That was the only way she would find out what was going on. But no sooner had the thought entered her head than Sophie marched back into the coffee shop.

"Sophie," Gemma began, but once again, Sophie raised her hand, and Gemma fell silent.

"No, I've practised this, so I'm going to say it. And I would be very grateful if you didn't interrupt me."

Gemma knew several regulars were sitting in the café, likely listening and ready to pick up on any titbits of gossip, and Gemma wanted to ask Sophie if they could at least move to the side so they weren't directly behind the counter. But as bizarre as it was, she felt a strange sense of pride in her friend. Before Graham, Sophie had let people, particularly men, railroad her. No matter how much she disliked or disagreed with a decision, she would hardly ever say anything. Even to Gemma. She had been so insecure that she'd thought other people had more of a right to a voice than she did, and she might have stayed that way forever had Graham not put his heart on the line for her.

Though, while Graham's declaration of love may have ignited the change, Sophie was the one who saw it through. She had taken some time out, gone travelling and discovered what kind of person she wanted to be. Only then, when she returned home, had she and Graham started their relationship together.

Despite this transformation, there were large parts of Sophie's personality that had remained exactly the same, like her willingness to see the best in absolutely

everybody, and her extreme excitement at the thought of love and romance. Still, she had found a new inner strength, and just like Graham, Gemma loved to see it shine, even though it was being directed at her at that moment.

“I do understand,” Sophie said. “Of course, it’s different between the other book club girls and us because we work together, which I had always assumed meant our relationship was closer, and I would be the first to know about things like this?—”

“Sophie—”

“I’m not done, nowhere near. I assumed I would be the first to know something like this in a normal circumstance, which this was clearly not. I understand why you would have wanted to seek advice from friends who are not in such close proximity to Kent and the event. And, as hurt as I may be, I think that was a sensible decision to make.”

A flood of relief washed over Gemma.

“Thank you, I am?—”

“Will you please stop interrupting? You will know when I am done, but I am not done yet,” Sophie stressed.

Gemma shrank back. She was definitely impressed with this new version of Sophie, but she was also surprisingly scared of her too.

“Sorry.”

“Thank you. Now, while I accept you needed impartial advice at the beginning, I would’ve thought that if you two had reached a stage in your relationship where you were canoodling in the kitchen?—”

“I don’t think that was canoodling, I was just...”

This time, Gemma silenced herself before Sophie could.

“If you were canoodling in the kitchen, with the possibility of me catching you, then you should have had the decency to tell me first. That hurts. That, I am cross about.” Sophie let out a long exhale, as if she had said her entire speech in one breath. “There, now I’m done. Now you can speak if you want to.”

The bubble of pride that Gemma had felt at seeing her best friend stand up for herself swelled to a whole new level. After all, her argument was elegant, well-reasoned, and above all, right.

“I’m sorry. Everything you said is spot on. We shouldn’t have been behaving like that without you knowing what was going on. I really am sorry, Sophie.”

“Me too.”

Gemma looked past Sophie to see Kent standing there. She hadn’t even seen him come out of the kitchen.

“It wasn’t exactly very managerial of us to be carrying on like that. Sophie, I apologise and it won’t happen again. Would you like me to write a no-canoodling clause into the contract?”

Sophie’s smile was small, but genuine.

“At least I know where Gemma’s clean cloth obsession suddenly came from.”

Her eyes met Gemma’s as she let out a brief chuckle, and Gemma felt her heart lift a little. A moment later, Sophie had turned and was facing Kent.

“I think you need to go get back into the kitchen now, though.”

“Do I?” he frowned. “I thought there weren’t any orders at the moment.”

“Who said anything about orders?” Sophie replied. “I need to gossip about you. Now, off you go. Quick, quick.”

CHAPTER 73

By the end of the day, Sophie had heard about every single date and dinner that Gemma and Kent had shared. She told her about the walks they went on, the conversations they had, and everything she knew of Kent outside the business, from

his house in Hay On Wye, to his belief in love at first sight and his parents' relationship.

"Wow, things are moving fast then," Sophie said.

"Maybe," Gemma agreed. "But it doesn't feel like that. It all feels really natural."

"Then that's just perfect. I'm so happy for you. Graham is too. Obviously, I rang him after I caught you two together."

"Obviously."

Gemma grinned. She got it. She understood why people wanted their partners to be the first to know things. Even now, she wanted to let Kent know all about how the afternoon with Sophie had gone, even though he had only been a few feet away for most of it. Which was why, when he appeared at two o'clock to finish his shift, she looked at her friend.

"You don't mind if I pop outside for two minutes, do you?" she said, lowering her voice. "I just want to see what the plans are for tonight."

"No problem," Sophie grinned. "Ahh, look at you two lovebirds."

After Kent said his goodbye to Sophie, Gemma followed him outside.

"Did you want to meet for dinner tonight?" she asked when they were a small distance away from the cafe. "I don't mind driving if you want to check out somewhere a bit further afield. There are a couple of local vineyards that serve great food. Or... or we could get takeaway, and you could come to mine."

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She didn't know if he could hear the nervousness in her voice as she added the last part of her offer, but he almost looked as if he wasn't paying attention. There was something different about his smile. A tightness to it. It certainly wasn't what she expected, considering the unspoken suggestion she'd just made.

"You know what, actually, I think I need an early night on my own. You don't mind, do you? It's just I'm feeling a bit exhausted with things at the minute."

"With us?" Gemma said before she could stop herself. Kent quickly shook his head.

"No, no," he said, taking her hand. "God, no. I didn't mean that at all. I could never be tired of you. Just with business things and bank things, I've just got a lot to sort out at the minute. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Gemma said, trying not to feel a ping of sadness.

Kent was right, of course. They had been in each other's pockets constantly, and they needed a little time apart, but still, she couldn't help but feel that something wasn't quite right.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asked, trying to pick her words carefully. "You've seemed pretty distracted all day. And there was something you wanted to talk to me about earlier?"

Kent opened his mouth as if he was going to respond, then shook his head again.

"You know what, honestly, it doesn't matter. It's good, but I'll see you tomorrow at

work, right?”

Gemma shook her head. “I’m not working tomorrow. Remember, I’ve got the day off.”

“Of course, of course.” He shook his head as if to shake his thoughts straight. “Right, then, maybe I’ll see you in the evening. We don’t have to, though. We can wait until the weekend if that’s better for you? Or just play it by ear.”

“That sounds best,” Gemma said and kissed Kent lightly on the lips. There was the same distractedness to his kiss as to the entire conversation, and when she broke away, she locked her eyes on his. “If something is bothering you, you can tell me. You know that, right?”

Kent’s smile flickered and for a second, she thought he would say something, but instead, he kissed her again.

“Everything is good,” he said. “How could it not be when I’ve got the best girlfriend in the world?”

CHAPTER 74

She didn’t care how old she was or how silly it might be to other people. Gemma felt like she was six feet high as she bounced back into the coffee shop.

Without even checking on the customers, she rushed around the counter and grabbed hold of Sophie’s hands.

“He called me his girlfriend,” she said.

“What?”

“That’s what he just said. That he has the best girlfriend in the world. I mean, that’s as official as you need to get, right?”

“Absolutely!”

Gemma wasn’t sure why this felt like such a big deal. Possibly because it had been so long since someone had referred to her in that way, and usually, it was only because they had been hoping to take the relationship to the next physical stage. But Kent hadn’t even noticed that she had invited him over for the night. It had just tripped off his tongue as if it was the most natural thing in the world. She was his girlfriend. They were a couple. It was all so simple.

“You guys are so sweet together,” Sophie said. “I know we can definitely do the double dating, right?”

“We can, but maybe when he’s not so stressed with work. He’s got a lot on his plate at the minute. And maybe it would be best to invite one of the other couples too, otherwise we’ll just start talking about the cafe, and Graham will feel left out.”

“Really, Graham spends more time in here than most of the part-timers.”

“You’re right, he does.” Gemma chuckled lightly, though the sound faded as she once again drifted into her thoughts.

“That means you’ll be moving onto the next stage of the relationship soon,” Sophie said, apparently able to read Gemma’s mind. Even though she was a grown woman, speaking to one of her best friends, Gemma could still feel the heat rush to her cheeks. Probably because it wasn’t the type of conversation, they should be having at work, but Sophie clearly didn’t agree.

“When did you last have a wax? And when are you seeing him next? Are you seeing

him tonight?”

Gemma shook her head, deciding to skip over the waxing question. “We’re having a break today, but I’m seeing him tomorrow night.”

“That’s perfect!” Sophie clasped her hands together in delight. “Tomorrow’s your day off, right?”

“Yes...” Gemma said, unsure why she was feeling quite so nervous.

“Well, I think I know exactly how you have to spend it.”

CHAPTER 75

Sophie had written Gemma a list of places to go and things she needed to do in Chelmsford, the first of which was a bikini wax.

“I really don’t need to do that,” she had said when her friend proposed the notion.

“I’m sure something like that doesn’t matter.”

“When did you last have it done?” Sophie asked.

“Really, I don’t want to.”

“Exactly, years. It doesn’t have to be full-on, just a little tidy-up. You wouldn’t go years without getting your haircut and dyed, would you? So why is this any different? I’ve booked you into the place I like in Chelmsford. You’ve got an appointment at 10:30. Don’t miss it. It’s under my name.”

Gemma realised there was no getting out of it then, and that wasn’t the only plan Sophie had in mind. “It’s also only a two-minute walk away from the really fancy underwear shop. And don’t try telling me you already have something suitable because I know it’ll be a lie.”

This time, Gemma didn't argue. She couldn't remember the last time she had purchased any underwear, and it was safer to say what she had was for comfort and practicality, not for romantic evenings.

"Make sure you get remeasured," Sophie said. "I bet you haven't had that done in years. You'll have changed size, you know. They know what they're doing. Just let them."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, if you're struggling to decide which looks best, send me photos. I have excellent taste."

There was no way Gemma was going to be sending photos of her in a lingerie dressing room to anyone, even Sophie, but she would do the other suggestions her friend had made. Even if Kent wasn't in the picture, it wouldn't do her any harm to spend a day on self-care for once.

At eight-fifty, Gemma caught the bus to Chelmsford, intent on exposing parts of her body that had not seen daylight for years to complete strangers. She could have driven and had done so plenty of times in the past, but she always got stressed at the roundabouts, and she was already nervous enough without adding a disastrous drive to the situation. Taking the bus definitely seemed like the better option.

The shopping actually went better than expected. There was a stunning display of bras and camisoles in all different shapes and sizes, and other than a bit of readjusting, Gemma was left mostly to herself. The main shock to the system came when she needed to pay.

"A hundred and twenty for two bras and three pairs of knickers?" she said, a wave of nausea sweeping through her.

“Well, underwear like this is an investment,” the woman said. “You look after it properly and it will be good for years. And, judging by the specimens you are currently wearing, you need this,” she said.

Gemma tried to ignore the insult, paid her money, and then headed to the dreaded wax appointment.

“If you got this done more often, it wouldn’t be so painful,” the woman said.

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Gemma replied as she clenched her jaw and squeezed her hand so tightly that her nails dug into her palms. She would not be doing this regularly, she decided. In fact, there was a good chance she would never be doing it again. Kent liked her for her personality, her kindness, and who she was as a human, not for how little hair remained on her nether regions.

After what felt like an eternity, the woman looked up and smiled. “Right, all done,” she said, “unless you were after any more treatment?”

“No,” Gemma said, shaking her head. “No, I’m good. What I’m after right now is a drink.”

CHAPTER 76

As much as Gemma felt like she deserved an alcoholic beverage when she went to Chelmsford, there was only one place she ever went for lunch—a small café on one of the back roads. The owner, Melissa, bought the place around the same time as Gemma had started work in Maldon. Although it was smaller than the Waterfront Café, they served a similar range of food. The pair would often talk business—from suppliers to rising costs and everything else in between, though Gemma couldn’t recall the last time she had visited.

She walked up the stone steps, ready to fill Melissa in on all her developments, only to stop in her tracks. Through the window, she could see a man with a measuring tape wandering around inside. Exactly the same way as the man had done at her cafe the day before. In fact, it was the same man.

Gemma watched on as he appeared to finish up. When he'd packed away his measuring tape, he moved across to Melissa, shook her hand, and left, practically opening the door into Gemma as he went.

"Hi," she said, feeling the need to speak. "I didn't expect to find you here too."

The man looked at Gemma with a blank expression before he snorted and carried on past her. Annoyance roiled through her. She didn't care how fantastic his interior design was; she was not letting Kent employ someone that rude to do work at their cafe.

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Brushing aside her annoyance, Gemma stepped into the cafe. There was only one customer, who was nursing a cup of tea, while Melissa was staring off into the distance.

“Hey, Mel?”

At the sound of her voice, Melissa’s eyes snapped around to face Gemma, and a broad smile lifted her expression.

“Hey stranger, long time no see. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing good, actually,” Gemma said, thinking about the bag of underwear she was currently holding. “It’s a bit of a strange time for us at the café. But it’s good, I think.”

“Strange times, I get that,” Melissa said with a roll of her eyes. Gemma could recognise the signs of someone with a lot of work pressures on her mind.

“Is everything all right here?” she said. “I take it you’re looking at getting some renovations done?”

“Renovations?” Melissa’s expression pinched in what appeared to be confusion.

“That’s what the guy was just measuring up for, right? I assume you’re getting him in to do some work? Oddly enough, our new owner had him over yesterday. Random, right? Small world.”

A light chuckle escaped Gemma's lips as she considered what a small world it was. Of all the people in that area of Essex who could work on renovating a coffee shop, both she and Melissa had the same person working for them. Only, instead of smiling or agreeing that it was indeed a strange coincidence, Melissa continued to stare at Gemma with that same confused look.

"The man that just left, the bald one?"

"Right, the one who was measuring up all your walls. Less than friendly character, but I assume he's good at what he does."

"He's great," Melissa said. "But he wasn't measuring the place because he's helping me renovate it."

It was Gemma's turn to look confused. "I don't understand then. What was he doing?"

"He is the owner of Coffee-X," Melissa said.

Gemma's confusion grew. "Coffee-X? The chain that's been buying up every establishment recently?"

"Yes, that's him. He doesn't do renovations, Gemma. Well, unless you call ripping everything up to make it all on-brand renovating, which I guess it is."

"I'm sorry," Gemma said, still struggling to understand what she was hearing. "So what was he doing here then? Why was he measuring things?"

"Why do you think?" Melissa said. "Because he's buying the place. I've had to sell it. I've had to sell the cafe to Coffee-X."

CHAPTER 77

Gemma felt nauseous. Kent was going to sell the Waterfront Café, and not to some owner who would keep the business running the way it had been for years, but into a soulless, profit-driven fast-food establishment. It made sense. He had probably bought the place at a steal from his uncle and saw this as a quick way of turning around a profit and getting the money he needed for the house in Hay-On-Wye. It made perfect business sense for someone with no sentimentality. How the hell had she ever thought she could be falling in love with a man like that? He'd probably been dating her, just so that she'd be distracted and wouldn't see what was happening right beneath her nose. Well, she knew now, and she wasn't going to let him get away with it.

"Are you alright?" Melissa said, as she continued to look at Gemma. "Do you want a drink? I can bring you something to eat if you like."

"Sorry, you're going to sell it? That man is buying your café?"

"Fingers crossed," Melissa said. "At least that way I should be able to get some decent money from it."

Gemma could feel the way her forehead had lined as she rubbed her temples and looked around the space, only for her eyes to fall on the till in front of Melissa. It was jet black, brand new, and remarkably similar to the one Kent had recently purchased for the Waterfront Café.

"You can't be doing that badly?" Gemma said. "I mean, those things aren't cheap."

"The till," Melissa let out a slight chuckle. "That was a gift. A sign of goodwill for seeking a valuation with Coffee-X. Basically, if they buy a place, they keep it, so it's no loss to them."

“Right, of course. They’re already purchasing for their new property,” Gemma said, feeling herself moving backwards as she spoke.

“Did you want something to eat or drink?” Melissa asked again. This time, Gemma shook her head.

“No, no, thank you. Actually, I think I need to head home. Yes, there’s something I need to do. Sorry, I’ll catch you later, and sorry about the sale too. I hope it gives you enough to carry on doing whatever you want.”

Gemma knew Melissa said something else. She probably wished her well and perhaps even apologised for dropping the bombshell on her, but Gemma didn't hear. She was already marching out onto the street with her phone in her hand. For the second time in less than two weeks, she was sending an SOS message to the book club, and this time, everyone was included.

CHAPTER 78

Every member of the book club, including Sophie and Graham, met at Flick's house. Flick had her daughter Evie, after school, though she was currently upstairs with their golden retriever, leaving the adults to talk through the situation. Fleur had also brought Henry, at Gemma's request, hoping the lawyer might suggest some ways of helping her. Although given that his expertise was in divorce, she knew it wasn't likely. Still, it helped to have another person to talk through things with.

"There's nothing I can do, is there?" she said. "He's going to sell it to Coffee-X and everything about it is going to change."

"I can't believe he fooled me," Sophie said. She'd been red with rage since Gemma had told her the news. "I thought he was such a nice guy. I feel utterly betrayed," she added, before wincing at her own words. "Obviously not as betrayed as you feel."

"It's alright, I understand," Gemma said. "He fooled you, too. But that doesn't matter. Mine and Kent's relationship, whatever that was or wasn't, doesn't matter. What matters now is the coffee shop. I looked online at Coffee-X's prices. They're astronomical. There's no way half our regular customers will be able to afford them. And they don't even have low seating, just lots of bars and high stools. Our clients

with mobility issues won't be able to use those."

"But the sale hasn't gone through yet," Marie said. "That's what you're telling us."

"I don't think so," Gemma said. "The impression I got from Melissa was that the measuring up was the final stage before they made an offer."

She was annoyed at herself for not asking Melissa more, but had already been back on the bus when the thought had crossed her mind.

"They might not make an offer," Sophie said, her voice laden with forced optimism. "They might not want it."

"With that location they will," Jules's words echoed Gemma's own thoughts.

"I agree," Gemma said. "Which means I need to have a contingency plan."

"Well, could you buy the place?" Flick said.

Gemma shook her head. "I wish I could, but with my credit rating, there's no way I'd get a mortgage for it. There's not even any point in me going to the bank to ask."

"Graham's got loads of money," Sophie said nonchalantly. "Really. He has millions from his inheritance. But I'm not a gold digger, because I didn't know that before I fell in love with him," she added hurriedly. "I really didn't know. But I'm sure we could arrange something, right, Graham?"

Graham looked at Gemma. "I mean, we could look into contracts and things, business loans, that type of stuff."

Gemma smiled gratefully. It said something about her friends that they would come

together like this for her, but she hadn't come to them to beg for money; she'd come for practical solutions. It wasn't about her wanting the place. It was making sure Coffee-X or another soulless franchise didn't get hold of it.

"Is there any way we can look at local councillors?" she said. "Surely there must be something in place which limits the number of chain stores. Particularly somewhere like the waterfront. Isn't it of historical importance?"

"We could get a petition going," Nina said. "I could put one up in the library. People would support you."

Gemma nodded in agreement. "That's not a bad idea. I could put one in the coffee shop as well."

"But how many people would you need before the council took notice? I'm sure it's a lot, like ten thousand or something," Jules said.

That was a lot. It was over ten per cent of Maldon's population. But it was a place to start.

"I don't mean to be the one to state the obvious, but you know there's one thing you could do that would probably help more than us brainstorming ideas that might or might not work," Flick said.

"There is?" Gemma was open to any ideas.

"Yes. You could talk to Kent. You never know, it might just be a misunderstanding."

Gemma scoffed. "There's no misunderstanding," she said. "That man bought the coffee shop for one reason and one reason alone. He pretty much told me that, but don't worry, I'm going to talk to Kent. I am definitely going to talk to Kent."

CHAPTER 79

When Gemma arrived at work the next day, she marched straight into the kitchen. She had been up half the night, wondering how to confront Kent because she had to confront him. She couldn't just pretend she didn't know. That wasn't her style. But after rehearsing a thousand scenarios in her head, she considered the old saying, a picture is worth a thousand words, and as such, she held a piece of paper folded in her hand.

"Hey, morning you," Kent said when he saw her come in. Wordlessly, he walked across the kitchen, placed a hand on her hip, and kissed her. Gemma stood stoically, although Kent didn't seem to notice. "I'm glad you're in early. I was hoping you and I could have a conversation today."

A strained smile stretched her lips.

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“Oh, I wanted to talk to you, too. I’ve actually got something for you.”

She held out the piece of paper, but rather than taking it, a slight smile lifted the corner of Kent’s mouth.

“Well, that’s weird. I’ve got this for you.” He held out a small notelet. “I know it’s for you, but I was given permission to read it before I passed it on. You’re amazing, you know that, don’t you?”

Gemma didn’t know what could have been written in the letter that would have caused Kent to comment in such a manner, but she didn’t care. It was probably just part of his manipulation. Ignoring it entirely, she focused her attention on the bit of paper in her own hand.

“I think, perhaps you should read this one first, or actually, I can read it to you if you want me to?”

Kent arched an eyebrow.

“Okay, this sounds intriguing. What is it?”

Gemma unfolded the paper. At the top was a picture of a man. At the bottom, a summary of her research.

“Harrison Dean is the entrepreneur and owner of Coffee-X, the fastest-growing coffee chain in the southeast of England. So far to date, Harrison has?—”

“Gemma, please stop. I can explain,” Kent said.

He reached out for her arm, but she backed away.

“No, let me continue. This is where it gets good. So far, Harrison has purchased over forty premises, which he has entirely refitted and turned into his sleek coffee shops. With a simple minimalist design, they are easily recognisable. At the rate he’s going, Coffee-X looks like it will put every small business out of business in the next four years. Watch your backs, coffee shop owners.” Gemma lifted her gaze to lock eyes with Kent. His face had paled so rapidly he looked ill, and she didn’t care in the slightest. “That bit was from a newspaper article I found, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of irony. You know, about watching my back. Because it shouldn’t have been Harrison Dean I was watching my back for at all, should it? He was never on our radar until you came into our lives. It was you, Kent. You, I should have been watching out for all along.”

She shook her head before taking a moment to look up at the ceiling, determined not to let a single tear escape. Then, when she knew she was back in control, she flicked her wrist and threw the piece of paper across the floor. As she went to turn, Kent grabbed her by the arm.

“Please, please, Gemma, let me explain. I got in contact with him when I first purchased the place. Weeks ago. I knew it would turn me a quick profit. But I changed my mind. Please, you’ve got to believe me.”

Gemma shook her head. “You hid it from me. I trusted you. God, I actually thought I was falling in love with you!”

It was the first time she had said the words aloud to anyone, and it was like this. She could feel her heart shattering beneath her ribs. No wonder she had steered clear of love for so long.

Kent's eyes were glazed with tears, too.

"Gemma, I'm the same. You know that I am. You know the way I feel about you. Please, you have to believe?—"

"Believe you!"

She let out a bitter laugh before she looked down at his hand, which was still holding tight around her arm.

"Let go of me, Kent. Dawn and Sophie are working today. And you can officially count this as my resignation."

She had walked two steps when he called out again.

"Gemma, I can't lose you. I can't."

Gemma stopped mid-step. She bit down on her bottom lip, drew in a long breath, and turned slowly around, aware of the tears that were now rolling down her cheeks.

"How can you have ever had me, Kent?" she said. "When I don't even know who you are."

CHAPTER 80

How can you have ever had me, Kent? When I don't even know who you are.

But you do, Kent had tried to say. You know the real me. The me I want to be.

He should have screamed at her. Made her see he was telling the truth. But tears clogged his throat, and Gemma was already out of the kitchen, heading out of his life

for good.

Minutes passed as he stood there, waiting for her to return. Knowing she wouldn't. Finally, Kent sank to the ground. In one hand, he was holding the information Gemma had printed out about Harrison Dean and the rise of Coffee-X. In his other hand was the reason he knew he had made the biggest mistake of his life.

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It was strange, really, he'd fallen for Gemma so fast. The meal at the yacht club was the moment he knew his life would never be the same. He was hooked. Then that first kiss, the one that followed the next day, and every one since had only confirmed it for him. She was the one he wanted to be with.

Every time they were together, he had wanted to tell her about the negotiations he'd been in with Coffee-X, but doing that would mean admitting the truth; he didn't deserve her. He was the type of man who would buy a piece of real estate from his old, unwell uncle well below market value, just to sell it on at a profit. What kind of person did that? Not the type of person Gemma deserved, that would be for sure. Of course, all that had been before he'd actually started working at the place. And now, well, now the letter in his hand was evidence of just how big a mistake he'd made.

"You're the new owner here, aren't you?" The lady had said when she'd knocked on the door early yesterday morning. So early, he was the only one there. "You're the one who bought the place from your uncle?"

"Yes, that's right, that's me," Kent had replied.

"Would you be able to pass this on to Gemma?" she gestured to an envelope in her hand.

"Of course."

He reached out to take it from her, but even when his fingers were on the paper, she didn't let go.

“You might want to read that too, just so you know how special your staff are.”

He nodded and muttered something about food in the oven, at which point she had smiled and finally released the envelope to him.

Back in the kitchen, Kent placed it on the side, and for the longest time, he resisted looking inside. After all, it was addressed to Gemma. But then, just after lunch, she had sent him a message saying something had come up, and she wouldn't be able to see him that evening. The disappointment had mingled with relief. After all, it meant another day without having to admit to her what he'd done. Or another day without having to lie to her. But after that, the envelope's call had been even greater and, as soon as there was a lull in orders, he picked it up and pulled out the card inside.

Dear Gemma,

As you know, these weeks have been some of the toughest I have had to endure. And part of me feels that there are tougher weeks yet to come, what with the funeral and the sorting of the house and such things. But that wasn't why I wanted to write this note. I wanted to say thank you for making me feel seen.

It probably feels like a small thing to somebody like you. You're youthful, beautiful, and surrounded by people who clearly adore you. I, on the other hand, well, I'm old. There's no way around it. I've spent the last eight years a widow, looking after my widowed mother while my children moved to the other side of the country to raise their own families. When Mum lived with me, it was okay. I knew I had a use, a purpose, but then she went into the home, and suddenly I was on my own. I always thought I was the type of person who didn't mind solitude. I could read books, go for walks, spend time by myself, but the fact is we need people. Without them, we become invisible. That's what it feels like some days. It feels like I'm invisible. That I could walk down the street, and no one would notice whether I was there or not. But you always notice. Every time I have walked in here, you've greeted me with a smile

or a worried frown when you could see that something was wrong. You've asked about how I am doing, and made me feel like I was a human who was worth talking to. I am so grateful for that. And I wanted to let you know, that what you do makes a difference. Thank you. Please don't ever change this wonderful place you have here.

Your dearest friend, Janice. (Also, there is £5 in here because I realised I didn't pay for my last coffee and cake, and I know you'll be too polite when I next come in.)

Kent's stomach twisted with knots. The truth was, he knew his uncle would have never sold the coffee shop to a company like Coffee-X, regardless of how many times Kent told him he was sitting on a gold mine. Oscar had insisted that profits weren't everything, and Kent had considered him an old fool. When he'd signed the papers, Kent had wondered if, deep down, his uncle had known what he'd planned. Or maybe he'd hoped Kent would realise he was the one who was the fool after all.

CHAPTER 81

It had been years since Gemma had cried over a man, and she desperately didn't want to now. But she couldn't help it. It was like all the emotions she had allowed herself to feel for Kent needed to escape her body, and tears were the only way that could happen. How had she been so foolish to fall for a man so quickly? And one she had worked with, no less. Now, he had taken so much from her in one fell swoop. Sure, her heart was broken, but hearts healed harder and more guarded than before. She had already learned that.

But the café—he had taken that from her too, and for that, she would never forgive herself. He had taken yacht clubs from her, not that she ever went to them normally, but he had also taken Hay-on-Wye, that one place she had always been desperate to visit. Now, she would never think of that tiny little village with all its quaint bookshops and half-crumbled castle without thinking about Kent, too, and she despised him for that. As she wiped the tears from her cheeks, she drew in a long

breath. This was a lesson she would learn from. A lesson that would make her stronger in the long run—she knew it would. But finding that strength would have to wait until tomorrow because, for now, she was just going to cry.

Gemma had sent Sophie a message straight after her conversation with Kent, saying what she had done. After that, she put her phone on silent, but that didn't stop the constant buzzing, which only increased as it reached evening. She was certain that Sophie would have told people the news, and everyone in the book club would know. That was most likely what the messages were. But she didn't even open them. She didn't have strength. At the back of her mind, the reality of money and bills and looking for a new job constantly whirled away, but for now, she was going to ignore it. It couldn't wait forever, of course, but a couple of days wouldn't make a difference.

The next morning, Gemma remained in bed, staring at the ceiling. Would Kent have already found someone to replace her or at least got someone to work out front? Dawn had agreed to cover for a couple of days, but Dawn was notoriously unreliable. Then again, who knew how long it would be until Coffee-X took over. Maybe her leaving would have just helped matters move more smoothly. Gemma's heart ached as she thought of the customers. How would they find out? She doubted Kent would tell them in person, but Sophie would, as long as she had enough warning.

It was just gone nine when Gemma's phone began ringing and Sophie's name flashed up on the screen. Groaning, she rolled over and ignored it, but it had barely stopped when it started again. This time Gemma cancelled the call, but that didn't stop Sophie. Gemma barely had time to flop back onto the bed when it started ringing again. Her first instinct was to turn her phone off entirely, but then there was a good chance Sophie would just turn up on her doorstep.

With a loud sigh, Gemma answered the call.

“Dawn’s coming in today,” she said, before Sophie could get a word in. Her head throbbed, and her throat was scratched dry from crying herself to sleep “I quit, remember.”

“Dawn’s here. That’s not the problem,” Sophie said.

“Well then, why are you ringing me?” Gemma’s voice sounded sharper than she’d expected. It wasn’t like Sophie was to blame in any of this, but she should have known that if Gemma was ready to talk about things, then she’d have let her know. Besides, anything to do with the cafe was no longer her concern.

“I’m ringing because there’s a strange man in our kitchen,” Sophie said.

“What do you mean, there’s a strange man?” Gemma didn’t want to get drawn into cafe talk, but it was difficult. Saying she had cut ties was one thing, making her emotions do the same was another.

“There’s a strange man. I don’t know who he is, but he’s cooking. He says Kent employed him.”

Just hearing his name was enough to make Gemma feel sick, but as she swallowed the feeling down, she found herself conflicted and suffering from a strange sense of nervousness. She may have told Kent she was resigning, but there were proper avenues that needed to be followed if she wanted any chance of getting a position elsewhere.

“Well, where is Kent?” Gemma asked, hating that she had to say his name.

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“I don’t know. He’s left a note for you, but it’s not very helpful.”

“Well, what does it say?” Gemma asked, wishing Sophie had started with that point.

“I think you should probably come and see for yourself.”

CHAPTER 82

Sophie was right. The note wasn’t exactly useful.

Gem,

I’ve got to put things right.

I’ll be back when they’re sorted.

I love you

K.

Gemma read through it multiple times.

The random man in the kitchen, as Sophie had called him, was Adam, the chef who had been cooking at the Yacht Club when Sophie and Kent went there for a meal.

“He asked me to cover for a week,” Adam said when Gemma asked him what Kent had told him.

“That’s it? So he’s coming back in a week?”

“That, or he’s hoping to find someone to take the job, I guess,” Adam replied with a shrug.

His words caused a knot to tighten in Gemma’s stomach. Was Kent’s plan to come back in a week and try to put things right or was a week all it would take until the sale was finalised with Harrison Dean and the cafe was halfway to becoming a Coffee-X? No, she decided. The note said he was going to put things right. And it said he was going to come back. But there was that one other line—the three words she couldn’t tear her eyes away from. The words that made her simultaneously laugh and cry. And that was why she took out her phone and dialled his number.

She was half-expecting him not to answer. Half-hoping he wouldn’t. But it was less than three rings before the phone stopped ringing. Her heart lurched as she realised he had picked up.

“Gem, I?—”

“Really? The first time you say you love me is in a note that you leave in the café? An apology note?”

Silence followed her question. Silence, which she was happy to fill. “That’s not an apology. That’s emotional blackmail. You know that. I’m not coming back to work. You think you can throw those words around, and I’ll just come running? They actually mean something to me.”

“Gem, that’s not what I intended. You know it’s not. And you know I mean them. From the bottom of my heart, I do. But you’re right. I should have said I love you before. I should have said I love you the first time I knew it was real, when we kissed in the Muddy Duck, and I should have said it every day since, but I didn’t. I’m

sorry.”

Tears clogged Gemma’s throat. She didn’t want to let him do this. She didn’t want him to have that power over her and yet she could hear the truth in his voice.

“Gem, I’m so sorry. I’m going to put things right. I promise. I really do love you, and you know what they say. Actions speak louder than words. I’ll be back soon. Please stay working at our cafe. It’s nothing without you there.”

And with that, he hung up.

CHAPTER 83

“Wow, well, at least you know how he feels about you,” Sophie said after Gemma told her what Kent had said on the phone. “He loved you since the Muddy Duck? Wasn’t that your second date?”

“First official,” Gemma said, but she didn’t want to talk about that. There were other parts of the conversation playing over in her mind. There was the way he had said our cafe, stressing the first word, like it genuinely belonged to them both, which it didn’t. And then the actions speak louder than words part too. “What actions is he talking about?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” Sophie said. “You made him sentimental. He’s not going to accept Harrison Dean’s offer. That’s what he means.”

“But he needs to,” Gemma replied. “He can’t afford to keep the place going and pay himself a living wage. He lives in a caravan on his friend’s farm, for crying out loud.”

“You didn’t tell me that?” Sophie said, but Gemma didn’t respond.

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Kent's living situation wasn't the type of information she thought he would want shared—especially not with his employees.

“So maybe he's found another investor?” Sophie suggested. “A way of finding the money. That's what it comes down to, right? Money.”

Something was niggling at Gemma. Something Sophie had said that didn't sit quite right with her, though it took her a moment longer to realise what it was. Sophie'd said that Gemma had made Kent sentimental, but she was wrong. He had always been sentimental. That was why he wanted to make a profit on the cafe as quickly as possible. That was why he needed money. Because his sentiment lay elsewhere.

Suddenly, she knew exactly what his action was going to be, and she couldn't let him do it.

“Sophie, you're in charge of the coffee shop until I get back,” she said, already running for the door.

“What? Why? Where are you going?”

“To put this right.”

“Well, how long are you going to be?”

“As long as it takes,” Gemma said.

It probably wasn't the most helpful answer, but it was the only one she could give. As

she raced out the door, she was already opening her phone and flicking up the map. She had a long drive ahead of her.

CHAPTER 84

According to the Sat Nav, the journey to Hay-on-Wye took just under five hours, but Gemma reasoned that was for normal drivers—drivers whose pulse didn't hit one hundred and twenty the moment a motorway was mentioned. Drivers who knew where they were going and didn't second guess themselves at every turn and with every signal and manoeuvre. And so, she figured, it was going to take her at least six hours to get there. The time was currently half-past nine, and factoring in a little break, she figured she could be there around four-thirty to start the hunt for Kent. Realistically, how long could it take to find one house in a village of two thousand people?

She took one mile at a time. First out of Maldon, then onto the M25 around London. After that, she was heading north towards Coventry before turning into mid-Wales. She drove up and down rolling hills, through quaint little villages, and past dozens of country pubs with gorgeous beer gardens that, on another occasion, would have been ideal spots to sit outside and have a drink. But she was on a mission. She was going to Hay-on-Wye to stop the man she loved from making a mistake he would regret forever.

The first time she saw “Hay-on-Wye” appear on a street sign, Gemma let out a squeal of delight. She had already rung Sophie from the service station to say that she was doing fine and would check in later. Then, after grabbing herself a cup of coffee, she kept going.

As she drove into the village, she followed the signs to a car park, which happened to be directly in front of the castle. Allowing herself a deep breath in, Gemma stared at the sight.

“Hay-on-Wye,” she whispered.

The building was magnificent. It was partly restored, and one corner looked as if it was barely standing. The slope of the weathered bricks sagged down towards the grass, and bright green ivy crawled upwards, claiming the windows and every other crack and crevice. On the other side of the castle, the windows were filled with leaded glass and there was not a scrap of ivy to be seen.

Gemma knew from her research that they had only opened the castle to the public a couple of years before, and if she'd had the time, she would have loved to wander around. But today was not the day for it. She needed to find where Kent was, and had very little to go on.

Several shops had already closed, but she could see one or two were open until five. Realising time was against her, Gemma picked up the pace and stepped inside her first bookshop in the town.

The style of the shop reminded Gemma of a library, with its wooden floor and bookshelves arranged in parallel on both sides, cutting into the centre of the room and leaving a small aisle down the middle. It was the kind of place where Gemma could easily imagine spending hours slipping into each corner to see what was on the shelves, but she didn't have time for that.

“Excuse me,” she said, approaching the counter. “I'm looking for a house.”

“Only sell books here, I'm afraid, love,” the man chuckled.

Gemma smiled politely. “Yes, sorry, I know. It's just—I'm looking for a house in Hay. I'm not sure where it is exactly, but I know it's got vines on it. Wisteria.”

“Not sure I can help. Plants aren't exactly my speciality, love.”

“Right, thank you,” she said.

“You could try Maureen at the bookshop a couple of doors down. She might know.”

“Thank you,” Gemma replied, promptly heading in search of her second bookseller.

There was a good chance Maureen knew where the house was, but unfortunately, there was no way Gemma could ask her, given that she was in the middle of a children’s storytelling session. Children sat on scattered cushions and beanbags, watching in rapt awe as Maureen recounted the tale from the pages in front of her. She was a magnificent storyteller, with lilting accents and animated gestures that had Gemma desperate to listen to more, but she knew she didn’t have time to wait for the story to finish. Not when there were plenty of other people who would want her attention, too.

Gemma’s third bookshop had a guest author in for the day, and a queue snaked its way out the door. Once again, Gemma left without speaking to a single person. She was starting to think she had made a terrible mistake when she stepped inside her fourth bookshop.

“Sorry, I wonder if you could help me,” she said.

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The man behind the counter was wearing a pair of reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. As she spoke, he lifted his head and looked at her. Something about his expression told Gemma she should just keep talking.

“I’m looking for a house. It’s got wisteria growing up the front and a little iron gate. I know it’s here somewhere, but I have no idea how I’m supposed to find it other than walking up and down every street, and I don’t think I have the energy to do that. So I’m really hoping you know where it might be, because if not, I might cry.”

For a moment, the man simply observed her. Then, in a slow and almost thoughtful movement, he sat up straight and pushed his glasses back up his nose.

“Wisteria and a little iron gate? That sounds a bit like Lucy’s old place.”

“Lucy? Yes! Grandma Lulu! That’s it!” Gemma wanted to jump up and hug the man. “Is there any chance you can tell me where it is?”

Rather than replying, the man glanced at his watch and then around the bookshop. Unlike the previous places Gemma had been, there were no big events going on here, and though the shelves were gleaming with books, the shop was thoroughly lacking in people.

“You know what? I can do one better than that,” the man said. “I’ll walk you there myself.”

Gemma wanted to ask the old man to walk faster. She wanted to ask him to run—or just tell her the name of the road so she could bolt there herself—but he was intent on doing a good deed, and she didn't want to rush him. No matter how frustrating she found his slow pace.

“Lovely woman she was,” Wilf said as they ambled along. “I went to school with her, you see. With her and her whole family. Three brothers, god, they got up to some mischief, they did. The youngest in particular. Oliver, I think it was. No, that's not right. Oscar. Oscar Parker.”

“I know Oscar,” Gemma said, trying to ignore that they were moving slower than a geriatric sloth.

“Is that right?”

“Yes, he was my boss. Owner of the coffee shop I run. I ran,” she corrected herself, uncertain of which tense to use because she didn't know what her future held.

“Oh, well, pass him my best if you speak to him,” Wilf said. “Say Wilf Winters. He'll remember me, I'm sure of it.”

“I'll make sure I do,” Gemma said.

She was about to ask him what he could remember about Lulu, or perhaps if he recalled anything about her grandchildren when Wilf spoke again.

“Well, that's you,” he said, pointing in the direction of a whitewashed house.

The paint had chipped off the front, and while the wisteria still clung to the walls, there were no flowers in bloom—just the dense, brown stalks of the plant. Even the metal fence had rusted. Slowly, Gemma stepped towards the building.

She knew she was staring at the right place, and not just because of the photo she'd seen or what Wilf had said, but because there, standing on the footpath and shaking hands with a woman in a smart suit, was Kent.

CHAPTER 86

"No, he's not selling it. It's not for sale. There's been a mistake."

Gemma ran towards the pair, leaving Wilf standing on the pavement.

"Gemma?" Kent's eyes widened as he turned to look at her. "What are you doing here?"

Gemma's heart was beating so fast it felt like she had run all the way from Maldon, not just up the path.

"I'm stopping you from making a terrible mistake," she said. "You can't sell it. You can't."

As Gemma stood there, hearing her pulse pounding against her ribs, Kent took a step towards her. The way his eyes were focused on hers made it feel as if they were the only two people in the entire world.

"Gem, you didn't need to come here," Kent said as he took her hands. "I told you I'll come back, and the coffee shop will be fine. I'm putting things right."

"No, no, you're not," Gemma said, her voice cracking with tears. "You can't do this. Bringing up a family here is your dream."

A smile lifted his lips. "It's hardly a dream if I don't have the person I want to be my family here with me, is it?"

His hand reached up to cup her cheeks, and at that moment, as Gemma's eyes fell closed, she wanted nothing more than to disappear alone with him and forget that the last two days had ever happened. But she couldn't.

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“I messed up, Gem,” Kent carried on. “I didn’t tell you about Harrison because I was searching for a way out of it. I was trying to see if there was some other way I could raise the money to do up the house and keep the coffee shop. But there isn’t. And that’s okay. This is just bricks and mortar.”

“So’s the coffee shop,” Gemma said, only for Kent to shake his head.

“No, it’s not. It’s not at all. The coffee shop has a heart. People need it. That’s what matters, Gem.”

She could feel tears dripping down her cheeks and she wasn’t sure why. Why was she crying?

“I don’t want you to give up your dream for me,” she whispered, but rather than replying, Kent leant forward and kissed her gently on the lips.

“You are my dream, you fool.”

EPILOGUE

The house sale went through in a couple of months, and though Gemma knew Kent wanted to wrap it up as quickly as possible, she was grateful that it meant they got to have two weekends away in Hay. Most of the time was spent cleaning cupboards and making the house presentable for when the estate agent brought prospective buyers around. Still, they managed to carve out a few hours to wander through the gift shops and bookstores.

“Are you sure you’re not going to regret this?” Gemma said when they got the telephone call that someone had offered the full asking price.

“I am positive,” Kent said. “You make memories with people, not things. And you, Gemma Holridge, are my person.”

There were also changes to the coffee shop, which included new furniture to fit more tables without feeling cramped, and outdoor heaters. There was also a change in Kent’s living situation.

“I’m sorry, but when people ask where my boyfriend lives, it just sounds plain weird to say, ‘a caravan on his friend’s farm’. Just move in with me—you practically live there, anyway.”

She knew that plenty of people would question her sanity for inviting him to live with her after knowing each other for such a short time, but Gemma hadn’t felt a shadow of doubt. Just like she hadn’t doubted that Kent would accept the offer, even though Kent had taken his time to reply as if he was genuinely considering saying no.

“Fine,” he’d said, “but I think we should keep the caravan. After all, what’s the point in travelling the world if you haven’t seen all the beautiful places on your doorstep?”

“Family caravan holidays,” Gemma grinned. “That sounds like it could be fun.”

“Anything that involves you, me, and a family sounds like good news to me.”