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The Plumberry School of Comfort Food

Written by Cathy Bramley

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the
Plumberry
School
of
Comfort
Food

Cathy Bramley



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To my best friends, Lisa and Alison xx

Food, Glorious Food

Chapter 1

My stomach rumbled as I pulled the pan out from under the grill. I'd been slaving over my laptop at the kitchen table since first thing and now it was four o'clock. I'd only had two chocolate Pop Tarts to keep me going all day.

Even by my standards, that was a bit meagre.

There was more to making the ultimate fish finger sandwich than met the eye, I mused, prodding the fish to make sure it was cooked. To be proper comfort food, it had to meet my very stringent criteria. The bread had to be soft and white. I'd bought a new loaf from the corner shop this morning specially. The fish fingers must be good ones; life is simply too short for anything less. I keep a box of Captain Birds Eye's best in the freezer at all times, alongside my stash of cottage pie, lasagne and tikka masala ready-meals.

I spaced the four golden strips of breadcrumb cod evenly across the bottom slice of bread, taking care to leave a gap in the centre for easy slicing. Next the ketchup – Heinz, of course. I gave the bottle a firm shake and added a neat stripe to each of the fish fingers.

Rosie, my part-time housemate, steamed into the kitchen wearing a sports bra and shorts and turned the tap on full blast before fetching a glass.

'Just in time to witness my *pièce de résistance*,' I announced, sliding the plate away from the spray of water.

‘Please tell me that’s not your Sunday lunch?’ She waggled her eyebrows sternly. ‘Wait till I tell Nonna.’

Rosie’s Italian grandmother believes lunch on the Lord’s Day should consist of at least four courses, take the entire morning to prepare and the entire afternoon to clear up.

I sliced through the sandwich and sat down at the table.

‘Yep. Protein, carbs, vegetables . . . a perfectly balanced meal,’ I said. OK, *vegetables* was stretching it a bit, but the bottle did claim to be full of sun-ripened tomatoes . . . ‘And more importantly, it only took me twelve minutes. Sorry, Nonna.’

‘You should treat your body as if it belongs to someone you love,’ she said with a tut. She twisted the cap off a tub of seaweed extract and shook two tablets into her hand.

I watched her knock them straight back with a gulp of water. ‘Who do you love – Nemo?’

Rosie choked mid-swallow and spluttered with laughter. ‘Touché, Princess Prick and Ping, touché.’

I pretended to give her a dirty look.

She referred to me as that because of my over-reliance on the microwave, although she didn’t spend much time in the kitchen either. Nor anywhere else. Rosie was too busy to spend long doing anything. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her relax. Not completely. Even when she watched TV she had her phone in her hand, her iPad balanced on her knee and her laptop on the coffee table in front of her, each device tracking different social media campaigns for her clients. She was totally dedicated to her job and she’d been promoted twice since I’d known her.

She moved in when I realized that I needed a lodger to help pay the mortgage after splitting up with my fiancé. Not that she didn’t have a property of her own; she’d had several over the years. In her spare time she bought and renovated run-down houses, selling them on for a profit, which she squirrelled away. Her plan was to buy a big house

for herself and be mortgage-free by the age of forty. I had no doubt that she'd do it.

'I'm detoxing,' she explained, rattling the bottle of vitamins under my nose, 'because I love myself.'

'And I,' I said with my mouth full of sandwich, 'love fish fingers.'

Actually, I agreed with her: food is about love. To cook for someone is to show them how much you care. My problem was that I'd lost that loving feeling. Or, more accurately, that loving *someone*.

'How's the project going?' She sat down and read the document open on my laptop. 'Need any help?'

Spending all day working might not be everyone's ideal Sunday but it had provided the perfect distraction from the sadness of today's date, which I wasn't ready to tackle yet. Besides, tomorrow's meeting was unusually important.

'I think I'm there,' I said proudly, removing the elastic band from my wavy brown hair. I ruffled my fingers through it, wishing for the umpteenth time it was as dark and glossy as hers. 'I've got an amazing idea for improving customer loyalty: the *One, Two, Three Plan*. Instead of incentivizing purely new customers, this is about giving existing customers reasons to stay with us for a minimum of three years. I've come up with loads of benefits.'

'Sounds great,' Rosie said, stretching her face, a gesture I recognized as stifling a yawn.

'It is, honestly,' I protested. 'Even Liam thought it was good. Better than his will be, he reckons.'

'You've shown Liam?' Her mouth gaped. 'Have I taught you nothing about office tactics?'

I gave her my oh-ye-of-little-faith look. 'Of course I have; I wanted his opinion.'

My boyfriend of six months, Liam, was also my colleague in the marketing department of Solomon Insurance in Nottingham. We shared an office, which had worked out

just fine so far: not only did we manage to indulge in the occasional illicit snog at the far end of the office, but we helped each other out with problems and pooled our best ideas for the good of the company. Admittedly most of the ideas came from me, but he was good at other things like persuasion and flattery. And if you'd ever tried getting extra printer paper from our office manager you'd know just how important those skills are.

Rosie lowered her head to the table and groaned. 'Oh, Verity.'

'Look, I know you want me to fight tooth and nail for this job, but that's just not me,' I said with a laugh, laying my hand over hers.

A few weeks ago Solomon's had been bought out by an American company which had sent in a man with a hatchet to trim the fat from our friendly little firm. His name was Rod Newman. He didn't talk, he yelled. He didn't listen, he yelled. And he had the attention span of a goldfish. So far three people from accounts, five from sales and two from personnel had been deemed to be 'fat' and had disappeared the very same day.

Tomorrow it was marketing's turn to display our leanness. Liam and I had each been asked to present a plan to improve profits and we'd been warned that Ruthless Rod would give one of us the heave-ho based on our performance. And the other would be promoted.

I'd questioned Liam about his plan, but he'd scratched his head and said he was still working on it. He always did fly by the seat of his pants. I didn't dare tell Rosie I'd offered to help him pull his pitch together. If I got the job, fine; if he got it, also fine. These days I just couldn't get worked up about things; *que sera, sera*, as Doris Day would say.

She lifted her head and gazed at me fiercely. 'You are the better candidate, Verity Bloom. Make it happen. Make that job yours.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

She sighed and strode into the living room and seconds later I heard her boinging about to her celebrity fitness DVD. I cleared away my plate and closed the laptop.

It was time for the bluebell walk with Gabe and Noah.

Five minutes later, I'd twisted my hair into a messy bun, added a smudge of eyeliner to my green eyes and shoved gifts of a bottle of real ale and a chocolate dinosaur in my bag. I said goodbye to a puffing and sweaty Rosie and was about to slam the front door when I remembered something I'd almost certainly need . . .

'Tissues, tissues, tissues,' I muttered under my breath as I bent down to rummage through my half of the bathroom cupboard, pushing aside bottles of conditioner and body lotion. 'Oh gosh!'

I dropped to my knees and stared at a new, untouched box of tampons on the bottom shelf. I did a quick calculation and my mouth went dry. No doubt about it: my monthly visitor was well overdue.

My heart thumped and a hand flew to my stomach automatically.

I couldn't believe it hadn't occurred to me before now; it was so unlike me not to be on top of this sort of thing. I gave myself a shake and told myself not to jump to conclusions; sure, the time of the month had been and gone, but more than likely it was just a bit late. Perhaps deep down, I was more bothered about the threat of redundancy than I realized? That would be it – stress. Very common. A baby, though . . . A thrill shivered through me and my mind whirled with the implications.

I focused on taking deep breaths as I let myself out of my little townhouse and into the golden sunshine. I jumped into my car, started the engine and set off in the direction of the Trent Canal.

The thirty-minute journey was the perfect length to examine my potential pregnancy from every angle. My

conclusion was this: practically speaking, I probably wasn't having a baby, but if I was, I'd cope. Like always. This wasn't the first time something unexpectedly life-changing had happened to me and I doubted it would be the last. As to how I actually felt about becoming a mother of my own baby . . . I wasn't ready to let those thoughts in quite yet.

As I parked in the lane by the canal I made a deal with myself. I'd buy a pregnancy test on the way home so that I could stop all this speculation. But in the meantime, I was putting this new development on hold and concentrating on what really counted, today, this minute, which was being here on this special day with the Green men. (That's Gabe and Noah's surname, by the way, not their skin tone.)

I crossed the grassy bank and started along the towpath. It was bliss to be outside in the warm early-evening air and I felt the tension in my shoulders melting away with every step. A row of pretty barges decorated with hand-painted signs and cheerful flowerpots stretched along the water's edge and as I got closer, I spotted *The Neptune*.

'Daddy, she's here, she's here!' I heard Noah squeal.

My three-year-old godson, dwarfed by a bright yellow life-jacket, was bouncing up and down on the deck of their blue and silver boat. Gabe scooped him up into his arms and the two of them waved like mad.

I felt my heart swell with love for them both. Gabe with his tousled curls, baggy jumper and shorts and Noah, a miniature replica of his father. And all I could think was how incredibly sad it was that Mimi was missing from the picture. Suddenly, the feelings of grief that I'd been holding back all day rushed to the surface and my eyes began to burn.

Today was the anniversary of the death of my best friend, Mimi.

Two years ago Gabe had found his wife dead on the bathroom floor. Sudden Death Syndrome at only thirty years old. Gabe lost his childhood sweetheart, Baby Noah

would never remember his mum and the sunshine had disappeared from my life in a flash. No warning, no explanation and no time for goodbyes . . .

I blinked furiously, plastered on a smile and raised my hand high.

‘Hello!’ I sped up to meet them.

Gabe lowered Noah to the deck and held out a hand to help me climb on to the boat and I sent a mental message to my lovely girl.

Oh Mimi, I miss you so much. I’m here with your family and you’re gone and that makes me feel terribly guilty. The irony is that you’d love this: all of us getting together for a walk in the woods . . .

‘Welcome aboard *The Neptune*, landlubber,’ Gabe said with a lopsided smile. He stooped to wrap his arms round me.

‘Thank you, Captain.’ I hugged him, feeling the rough wool of his jumper against my cheek.

‘How’re you doing?’ I murmured, looking into his soft grey eyes.

He shrugged and laughed softly. ‘Noah gets me through. As ever.’

Noah tugged on my jacket. ‘Auntie Vetty, did you know chocolate is in your bag?’

‘Noah Green,’ I said, holding his hands and standing back to examine him, ‘I think you’ve grown even taller since I last saw you. And yes, I do know that.’

His eyes grew wide when I gave him his chocolate dinosaur.

‘You’re not too big for a cuddle, are you?’

He launched himself at me and I picked him up, squeezed him as tightly as I dared and buried my face in his baby curls. He was such a precious boy.

‘I do love you, little man. You know that, don’t you?’ I laughed as he wriggled free.

Tears threatened again as I remembered how much Mimi had longed for a baby, and how devastated she’d been when

she'd discovered she was infertile. I'd been there every step of the way with her, determined to help her get her wish, whatever the cost. Gabe, too, of course. Team Baby Green we'd called ourselves. We'd stuck together through the disappointments and the tests and the drugs. Our collective joy knew no bounds when Noah was born and Mimi had so loved being a mum to the tiny bundle of boyhood. Only to have her life wrenched away from her a year later. Tragic didn't begin to cover it . . .

And now I had to love her son especially hard to make up for the loss that he didn't yet fully understand.

I met Gabe's gaze and we shared a sad smile. Life could be very cruel sometimes.

'I hadn't even had the chance to say I loved her that day,' Gabe murmured, rubbing a hand across his face.

'But she knew,' I whispered, squeezing his hand. 'We all knew that.'

'Next time I'm in a relationship, I'll tell her I love her every day.'

My ears pricked up; this was new.

'So there'll be a next time, then?' I asked.

He shrugged casually enough but I noticed a flush to his face. 'One day, yeah. I hope so.'

'Well . . . good,' I said brightly, looking down at my shoes.

Gabe had never been able to contemplate another woman in his life. It looked like he might be ready to move on and, truthfully, I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

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