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In the Kitchen

Written by Monica Ali

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IN THE KITCHEN

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CHAPTER ONE



WHEN HE LOOKED BACK, HE FELT THAT THE DEATH OF THE Ukrainian was the point at which things began to fall apart. He could not say that it was the cause, could not say, even, that it was a cause, because the events which followed seemed to be both inevitable and entirely random, and although he could piece together a narrative sequence and take a kind of comfort in that, he had changed sufficiently by then to realize that it was only a story he could tell, and that stories were not, on the whole, to be trusted. Nevertheless, he fixed the beginning at the day of the Ukrainian's death, when it was the following day on which, if a life can be said to have a turning point, his own began to spin.

On that morning in late October, Gleeson, the restaurant manager, sat down with Gabriel for their regular meeting. He had mislaid, so it seemed, his oily professional charm.

'You do realize it's on your patch,' said Gleeson. 'You realize that, yes?'

It was the first time that Gabe had seen him slip out of character. And the night porter certainly was on

Gabe's 'patch'. What, in that case, was worrying Gleeson? In this business, until you could see all the angles, it was better to keep your mouth shut. Gabe tapped the neck of the crystal vase that sat on the table between them. 'Plastic flowers,' he said, 'are for Happy Eaters and funeral parlours.'

Gleeson scratched his scalp and fleetingly examined his fingernails. 'Yes or no, Chef? Yes or no?' His eyes were pale blue and disreputably alert. His hair, by contrast, he wore with a sharp side parting and a fervid rectitude, as if all his phoney honour depended on it.

Gabe looked across the empty restaurant, over the pink-tinged table linen and leather-backed chairs, the silver that here and there glinted in the shreds of autumn sun, the chandelier, ugly as a bejewelled dowager, the polished oak bar that, without a single elbow propped upon it, was too dark and infected with loneliness to look at for very long. In the circumstances, he decided, it was unwise to concede anything at all. 'The food and beverage meeting, three months ago at least. You agreed, no more plastic flowers.'

'They're silk,' said Gleeson smartly. 'Silk, please. I have never had plastic in my restaurant.'

'Now I think about it,' said Gabe, 'there were some other things . . .'

'Chef.' Gleeson laced his fingers together. 'You are a straight talker. I am a straight talker. Let's not beat about the bush.' He tilted his head and sieved the words through a smile. It was how he greeted diners, gliding in with hands clasped and head cocked. 'A dead body *on the premises*. This is hardly the time to be discussing pepper pots.' His tone was both ingratiating and contemptuous, the one reserved for the pre-theatre crowd, tourists and anyone – easily identified by the way

they kept looking around – who had been saving up.

‘For God’s sake, Stanley. They took him away.’

‘Really?’ said Gleeson. ‘Really? They took him away? Well. That settles everything. How stupid of me to waste your time.’ He got up. ‘I’m telling you, Chef . . . listen . . .’ He stared at Gabe and then shook his head. ‘Shit.’ He adjusted his cufflinks and stalked off, muttering, quivering like a cat’s tail.

Gabe went back to his office and pulled out the banqueting file. He shuffled the papers, and found the sheet he wanted. Sirovsky Product Launch. Under the ‘Menu’ heading, Oona had written ‘Canapés: spring rolls, smoked salmon, quiche squares, guacamole, vol-au-vents (prawn), mini choc mousses.’ Her handwriting was maddeningly childish. To look at it made you think of her sucking the end of her pencil. He put a thick black line through the list. He checked the per-head budget, staff resource and comments sections. ‘Let’s put out all the flags on this one.’ Mr Maddox was taking a special interest. Put out all the flags. What did that mean? Caviar and truffle oil? Stuff the profit and loss? Gabe sighed. Whatever it meant, it wasn’t quiche squares and prawn vol-au-vents.

The office was a white stud-walled cubicle in the corner of the kitchen, with a surfeit of air-conditioning ducts and a window over the battlefield. Apart from Gabe’s desk and chair, the filing cabinet and a stand for the printer, there was room for one other plastic seat, squeezed in between desk and door. Sometimes, if he was busy completing order forms or logging timesheets, Gabe let his phone ring until it beeped and played the message. *You have reached the office of Gabriel Lightfoot, executive chef of the Imperial Hotel, London. Please leave*

your name and number after the tone and he will call you back as soon as possible. To listen to it you'd think the office was something else, that he was someone else, altogether.

Looking up, he saw Suleiman working steadily at his mise-en-place, chopping shallots and, with a clean sweep of the broad knife blade, loading them into a plastic box. Victor came round from the larder section carrying a baguette. He stood behind Suleiman, clamped the bread between his thighs and, holding on to Suleiman's shoulders, aimed the baguette at his buttocks. In every kitchen there had to be one. There had to be a clown. Suleiman put down his knife. He grabbed the baguette and tried to stuff it down Victor's throat.

Even yesterday, after Benny had gone down to the catacombs to look for rat poison and returned with the news; after Gabe had seen Yuri for himself, after the police had arrived, after Mr Maddox had come down personally to announce that the restaurant would be closed and to speak to everyone about their responsibilities for the day; even after all that, Victor had to be the clown. He sidled up to Gabe, smiling and winking, a red flush to his schoolboy cheeks, as if a death were a small and welcome distraction like catching an eyeful of cleavage or the flash of a stocking top. 'So, he was naked, old Yuri.' Victor tittered and then made the sign of the cross. 'I think he was waiting for his girlfriend. You think so, Chef, eh, do you think?'

Naturally, the first thing Gabe had done was call the general manager, but he got through to Maddox's deputy instead. Mr James insisted on seeing for himself, arriving with a clipboard shielding his chest. He disappeared into the basement and Gabe thought, this

could go on for ever. How many sightings of a dead body were required before it became an established fact? No one said it was the Loch Ness monster down there. He smiled to himself. The next moment he was swept by a watery surge of panic. What if Yuri was not dead? Benny had told him with a calm and unquestionable certainty that Yuri was dead. But what if he was still alive? There was a pool of blood around his head and he didn't look like a living thing because his legs, his chest, were blue, but who wouldn't be cold, stretched out naked and bleeding on the icy catacomb floor? Gabe should have checked for a pulse, he should have put something soft beneath Yuri's head, at the very least he should have called for an ambulance. *I should have sent you a doctor, Yuri, not Mr James with his bloody Montblanc fountain pen and his executive leather pad.*

The deputy manager was taking his time. Gabe stood in the kitchen with his chefs. The trainees, gathered round an open dustbin brimming with peelings, chewed their tongues, scratched their noses or fiddled with their pimples. Damian, the youngest, a straggly seventeen, trailed his hand in the bin as though contemplating diving in and hiding his sorry carcass under the rotting mound. Stand up straight, thought Gabriel. At another time he might have said it out loud. It occurred to him that Damian was the only other English person who worked in the kitchen. *Don't let the side down, lad.* It was a ridiculous thought. The kind of thing his father might say. Gabriel looked at Damian until Damian could not help looking back at him. Gabe smiled and nodded, as though to provide some kind of stiffening for those rubbery seventeen-year-old bones. The boy began flapping his hand inside the bin and the tic in his right eye started up.

Jesus Christ, thought Gabe, and walked round to the sauce section to get the boy out of his sight.

The chefs de partie, Benny, Suleiman and Victor, lined up against the worktop with their arms folded across their chests, as if staging a wild-cat strike. Beyond them, Ivan was still working, cooking off lamb shanks that would later be braised. Ivan was the grill man. His station, at the front of the kitchen, close to the pass, encompassed a huge salamander, a triple-burner char grill, four-ring hob and double griddle. He kept them at full blaze. Around his forehead he wore a bandanna that soaked up some, though by no means all, of the sweat. He took pride in the amount of blood he managed to wipe from his fingers on to his apron. He worked split shifts, lunch and dinner six days a week, and apart from the crew who came in at five in the morning to grill sausages and fry eggs for the buffet breakfast, no one was allowed to venture into Ivan's domain. Gabriel liked to rotate his chefs between the sections, Benny on cold starters and desserts one month, Suleiman the next, but Ivan was implacable. 'Nobody else knowing about steaks like me, Chef. Don't put me chopping rabbit leaves.' He had a cauliflower ear, sharp Slavic cheekbones and an even sharper accent, the consonants jangling together like loose change. Gabe had decided straight away to move him but he had not done it yet.

Filling suddenly with impatience, Gabe walked towards the basement door. He slowed and finally halted by the chill cabinet of soft drinks and dairy desserts. If Yuri wasn't really dead then the deputy manager would be giving first aid and questioning him closely, doing all the things that Gabriel should have done, before going upstairs to report to Mr Maddox about all the things that Gabriel had failed to do. Gabe

was aghast at the enormity of his managerial lapse. He was here not because he wanted to be, but only to prove himself. Show us, said the would-be backers for his own restaurant, manage a kitchen on that scale and we'll put up the money; work there for a year and turn that place around. They'd get word, of course. Everyone in this whole stinking business would know. And what would he say to Mr Maddox? How would he explain? To report, say, a side of salmon as missing, suspected stolen, only to have it turn up in the wrong storeroom, that would be bad enough, but to report the death of an employee and to have the employee turn up alive if not exactly well, that was ineptitude of an altogether different order. Damn that Benny and his idiotic certainty. What made him an expert on death? Gabe touched the crown of his head where a little wormhole of baldness had recently appeared. Damn that Yuri as well. He leaned against the chill cabinet, grimacing and swallowing, as if worry were something that had to be kept low down, somewhere in the intestinal tract.

When the deputy manager came through the door, Gabe scanned him quickly for signs. Mr James's fingers trembled as he punched numbers into his mobile phone and his face was unnaturally white, as if he too had bled out on the concrete floor. Thank God, thought Gabriel, preparing to act with authority. He tried to feel sorry for cursing Yuri but all he could feel was relief.

The ambulance and two policemen, a local foot patrol, arrived simultaneously. The paramedics pronounced the porter dead, but for a while all else was confusion. The foot patrol radioed a sergeant who in turn called in the Homicide Assessment Team. By the time Maddox

got in from his meeting there were half a dozen coppers in his kitchen.

'What the hell is going on?' he said, as if he held Gabriel personally responsible.

'Get that back door locked,' said the sergeant. 'The fire exit too. I've just found someone trying to slip off.'

One of the plain-clothes guys – Gabriel had quickly lost track of who was who – rapped a work surface with a slotted spoon. 'Everyone needs to stay put. We'll be talking to you all individually. And I'm not interested in your papers. I'm not here for that.'

Mr James did his best to look authoritative, drawing himself up to full height. 'Every one of our employees has a national insurance number. I can vouch for it personally. That is a fact.'

The policeman ignored him. 'How you got here is no concern of mine. We're here to do a job. Those of you worrying about your papers can stop right now. Because *we* are not worried about *you*. Clear? We just want to know what you know. Everyone clear on that?'

'What the bloody hell is going on?' said Maddox.

There was no chatter in the kitchen now, only a row of watchful faces. One of the policemen emerged from the basement and asked Maddox and Gabriel to step into Gabe's office. 'Parks,' he said. 'I'm the senior investigating officer on this case.'

'Case?' said Maddox. 'What case?'

Parks smiled thinly. 'Duty officer – that's the sergeant there – didn't like the look of it. Soon as someone calls it sus, you're dealing with a crime scene, incident log's up and running.'

'Did he fall or was he pushed?' said Maddox, simmering. 'Do me a favour.'

'Matter of fact,' said Parks, 'I agree with you. Looks

like your chap fell. Tell you what's caused the confusion. There's cast-off on the floor and a spot on the wall as well.'

'Meaning?' said Gabe.

Parks yawned. 'Apart from the blood pooled by the head there's some splashes around the place – like you might get if someone had been hit on the back of the head, for instance.'

'You're not saying . . .' began Maddox.

'I'm not. The CSM's taken a sample. Crime scene manager. We do like our acronyms.'

'And the splashes?' said Gabe.

'Bit of a boozer, was he? Few empties down there. Probably what's happened is he slipped over, cut his head, got up and staggered around a bit, and fell back down. I don't blame the duty officer for calling it, but when I can get a BPA expert down there – should be someone on his way now . . .' He checked his watch. 'Blood pattern analysis. When I get my BPA guy down there, hundred to one that's what he'll say.'

'So all this is a formality,' said Maddox.

'No sign of robbery or anything like that. His things don't seem to have been disturbed. Of course we'll be thorough. Once you set the ball rolling, you see, you've got to work it through to the end.'

'Can we open again tomorrow?' said Maddox.

The detective stuck his hands in his trouser pockets. He looked, Gabriel thought, somehow disappointing in his brown chinos and oatmeal sports jacket. 'Don't see why not,' said Parks. 'Should have the body out of there soon. The CSM's got to bag the head and hands and then it can go for the post mortem. That area will stay cordoned off for the time being.'

'The post mortem's the end of it?' said the general manager.

'The coroner will give his initial findings – injuries consistent with a fall, that kind of thing, open an inquest and adjourn it awaiting the final police report.'

'And the post-mortem results you get back when?'

'Unless the BPA throws up any surprises it won't go through on a rush job. We can get it done in forty-eight hours if there's cause, otherwise it's more like five or six days. Ah, looks like my blood man's arrived. I take it you've called environmental health?'

'Oh yes,' said Mr Maddox grimly. 'We've called in the council. We've called in Health and Safety. We've not called in the navy yet, but we've called everyone else.'

Gabe checked the time. Nearly ten thirty. He had been sitting in his office over half an hour without getting a single thing done. He tried to remember the last time he'd spoken to the Ukrainian. A conversation about the grease on the extractor hoods, but that was about a month ago. 'Yes, Chef,' Yuri would have said. 'I'll see to it, Chef.' Something like that. There wasn't much call for an executive chef to speak to a night porter unless he was giving trouble and Yuri, until yesterday, had been no trouble at all.

Oona knocked and entered the office, all in one bustling move. She squashed her backside into the orange plastic seat. 'I been keepin' up the spirits out there with a little bitta prayer.' Her voice was invariably strangled, as though she was just about managing not to laugh or cry or shout. She leaned her elbows on the desk and rested her chin on her hands.

We're not here for tea and bloody buns, thought Gabe. There was something about Oona that infuriated

him. It wasn't the fact that she was so often late for work, it wasn't the inefficient manner in which she worked, it wasn't that her idea of fine dining was stew and dumplings *with a sprig of parsley on top*, and it wasn't even the fact that she couldn't cook so much as a fish finger without managing to cock it up. He had worked with lazier cooks, stupider cooks, cooks who would serve up a bowl of sick if they thought they could get away with it. What offended him about Oona was simply this: her domesticity. When she blew into his office and sat down it was as if she had just got home with the shopping, looking forward to a cuppa and a chat. The way she talked, the way she walked, the way she pressed her bosom when she was thinking, all of it, at core, was irreducibly and inescapably domestic. In Gabe's experience, women who worked in kitchens – and there were a few – worked the hardest, swore the loudest and told the dirtiest jokes. It wasn't about being one of the boys, not necessarily – they could flirt like hell too – but it showed that they knew the rules. The professional kitchen was not the same as the domestic kitchen. The two were worlds apart. Only Oona – who by staying on the spot for the best or worst part of two decades had risen to the rank of executive sous-chef – seemed unaware of the distinction.

He reached in his desk drawer for the staff rota, noticing yet again the way the Formica was beginning to split and the notches carved in the plywood base, put there it was said by the previous chef who was counting the days spent sober on the job (a total of nine), and when he turned back to Oona he sat very straight and correct as if that might dissuade her from melting all over his desk.

'There's a lot of different religions in here, Oona.

You want to watch out you don't offend someone.'

'Hoo-ee,' said Oona, showing her gold tooth. 'The good Lord don' mind 'bout the words. As long as he hear the prayer.'

'It wasn't him I was thinking about,' said Gabe, wondering, not for the first time, if he should get rid of her or if it would be more trouble than it was worth.

'Well, darlin',' said Oona, 'that is the problem right there.'

Give me strength, thought Gabe. 'Right,' he said briskly, 'difficult day today. Can you call the agency and get some cover for Yuri? For Benny too. He's at home, getting over the . . . the shock.' Benny, in fact, had not wanted to take a day off but Gabe had ordered it, knowing HR would otherwise look askance.

'Poor, poor ting,' said Oona. The words formed little explosions on her lips so it seemed they had been forced from her body by a series of blows to the chest. She rolled her eyes up to heaven.

'Yes,' said Gabe, though why Benny had been roaming the subterranean corridors – 'the catacombs' as they were known – way past the dry-goods and freezer rooms, way past where any stores were kept, had yet to be explained. It occurred to Gabriel that, but for Benny, Yuri might not have been found, not for a long time at least. Stupid, how stupid, he thought, without knowing quite what he meant.

'My day off,' said Oona. 'Of course it all happen on my day off.'

Gabe considered this for a moment. If she had not been off, Oona seemed to be saying, everything would have been OK. Or perhaps she was simply regretting missing out on the drama. 'We have to keep our minds on the job,' he said.