young love

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To Max and Sophie

I'll be waiting on a table, chatting politely to a customer while they put their pin number into the card machine and decide how much they'd like to tip me. They'll say something funny, and I'll throw my head back – a little too dramatically, perhaps, but it's nice they're making my shift better by cracking jokes. I'll feel a tap on my shoulder and will turn round to find him standing there, that almost too large smile on his face. I'll be laughing because of the customer's joke, and then I'll be laughing at this – at how typical it is of him to show up in the middle of my shift without any warning. It's only once our eyes lock that my laughter will fade, as the significance of this takes hold.

"You came back," I'll say, once I've found my voice.

"I came back," he'll agree, before we kiss to applause from the diners around us.

Or I'll be outside the restaurant, and it'll start raining – an unexpected burst that falls on me like a shower. I won't be wearing a coat, having only come out for a breath of fresh air before returning to finish my shift. I'll point my face up to the droplets, letting the cool rain fall over my cheeks and down my neck.

"Would you like to come under?" he'll say, startling me.

I'll know the voice instantly, but I won't be able to look straight at him. Instead, I'll focus on the underside of the black golf umbrella that's now protecting us both. I'll find myself wondering what made him decide to make the upgrade from the putting-his-hood-up-and-legging-it technique of keeping dry he favoured when he was last here. He'll give me the moment before gently pressing his palm against my cheek, turning my face until I'm looking into his deep, hazel eyes.

"You came back," I'll say, the leftover rain on my face merging prettily with my tears.

"I came back," he'll agree, before leaning forwards and softly kissing my lips.

Or I'll be in the cramped staff room, polishing the cutlery ahead of a shift, and Tom will come in. He'll hold the door open because there will be someone with him who is waiting to be introduced.

"Kelsey," he'll say. "We've a new waiter starting today. As my most trusted waitress, I'd like you to train him up." There'll be a distinct note of mirth in Tom's voice, but I'll choose not to comment.

"No problem," I'll say, and stand to greet my new trainee. Tom will stand to the side, and I'll fall back into the chair as soon as I see him. Tom will wink at me before leaving us alone.

I'll want to rush to him but the shock of him in front of me won't let me move. Not caring how dusty the floor is, he'll come forward and kneel before me. I'll trace the contours of his face with my fingers, the face I've seen every night in my dreams since he left.

"You came back," I'll say.

He'll lean forwards, closing the inches between us, and he'll kiss me passionately, making up for the year since we last did that. When he finally stops, he'll breathlessly whisper, "I came back."

one

Kelsey

I OPEN MY EYES AND REACQUAINT MYSELF WITH REALITY. Toilet cubicle, the smell of recently poured pine-scented bleach, the blinking light that's never been fixed in the five months I've worked here, Dessie on the other side of the door getting ready for our shift to begin.

I look at my watch. Six forty. *Shit.*

"Jesus, Kelsey," Dessie says. "You planning on hiding in there all night?"

"Coming now."

Stop, I tell myself, the internal lecture my brief digression has earnt as familiar as the chorus of a pop song or a children's nursery rhyme. *Stop fantasising about him. Get on with the day and stop wasting it wishing for things that aren't going to happen.*

I breathe out slowly in the same way I see customers exhale when they've successfully ordered a Diet Coke instead of a glass of wine or have turned down an offer to go outside for a fag. Now my willpower's kicked in, I'm ready to step out and join Dessie in front of the mirror.

Under the excellent glaring lighting the ladies' toilets provides, I make sure my white shirt is tucked neatly into my black apron, that my make-up is still as flawless as it was when I put it on. Once I've checked my name badge is straight and on display, not hidden under the long extensions of black hair I curled before I left my bedroom, I'm ready.

Next to me, Dessie pulls her ponytail tighter, flattens a few loose strands around her hairline and puts a finger to her full lips to rub the clear lip gloss in a little more. It's the only make-up she ever wears, and she doesn't need it. It's hard to understand how she's here, working another Saturday shift with me at Ilk, a distinctly average mediterranean restaurant, albeit with a great setting by the water at Liverpool's Albert Docks. It's hard to understand how she is still struggling to earn enough from the odd extra job on TV instead of being a household name. A drama school graduate, she's talented *and* beautiful – and yet she is still here. Standing side by side, we're almost opposites: her tall and effortless, me petite and with the full face of make-up I always wear to work.

"Have you seen how busy it is outside?" she asks. "And Noah's just called in sick. We're going to be earning our tips tonight, ladies."

"If we get any tips," Joy says from inside the cubicle where I can hear her having a wee. "The state of most of them, we're going to struggle to get them to remember to pay the bill, let alone to tip us."

"Bloody heatwave," Dessie moans. "Brings out the knobhead in everyone."

Joy flushes the toilet and comes out, walking towards the

immaculately clean row of sinks. Joy never lingers in front of the mirror. She doesn't care what she looks like, doesn't worry one bit how straight her name tag is, how neat her uniform is. In a few short months, Joy will have finally finished her PhD in Medieval History and will be embarking on a career in academia. If an Oxbridge professor with an opening in their department happened to call in and start up a conversation about the socioeconomic consequences of the Black Death after ordering their garlic bread, I'm sure Joy would find it in her to be a wonderful waitress, but given that's not likely, a curt smile and an effort not to roll her eyes at the customers is the best she can offer. It's no secret that she's just here for a bit of money.

And for Dessie and me. She sticks it out because of us, too. As a trio of friends, we're an unlikely match but we've been together for months now. We work.

Before Joy moves off after washing her hands, we exchange a look which Dessie catches in the reflection.

"What?"

"Oh, come on," Joy says. "You might be right about the weather, but you're only jealous you have to serve customers all night instead of getting pissed with them."

"I am not," Dessie protests. Then she smiles. "OK, I am. Completely jealous. But it's all right, girls. Instead of sitting in the sun, we get to fetch their drinks and put up with six hours of bad flirting."

"Kelsey doesn't," Joy says. "You've got the dining room tonight, Kels. Hen party of twenty coming in at seven."

"Sorry," Dessie commiserates.

The dining room, a partitioned area at the back of Ilk available for private hire, with a back wall covered in fairy lights and champagne coloured velvet seats around a long black gloss table, is meant to be seen as a golden ticket for waiting staff due to the tips. The reality is hours of hard work with demanding customers, their cloying Prosecco breath all over us as they ask for way more than the extra tenner they throw in warrants. Unless we're in desperate need of more cash, Dessie, Joy and I try to avoid it.

"OK," I say, absently.

"OK? You'd normally be begging us to swap with you," Joy says. "What's up?"

"Nothing."

"I'd already prepared an excuse for why I couldn't trade places with you. Seriously, are you all right?"

I hover between insisting I'm fine and giving them the truth before the decision is taken out of my hands. A rush of words fills my mouth, desperate to be let out. "If you must know, today is exactly one year since Lewis left. I wouldn't mind the distraction of a night rushed off my feet."

"Oh, right. Sorry?" Dessie offers, and I understand the uncertainty in her voice. A year since my best friend left to go and work in New York is hardly an anniversary to be mourning.

"I know it's no big deal, it's just that Lewis is so obsessed with dates and symmetry, I can't help wondering if it might mean something to *him*. When we were teenagers, I struggled remembering my college timetable, but he would constantly be

like, 'Do you know it's been six months since we spent that day in Blackpool and you lost your flip-flop on The Big One?', or, 'It's coming up to the one year anniversary of us sneaking into The Forresters and getting pissed – shall we go back to mark it?' And . . . one *year*. It's a long time to be gone."

Dessie perches on the sink next to me. "Yeah, if you were girlfriend and boyfriend, I suppose it would be. But you're not. Or rather, not yet – but who knows in the future?" She backtracks when she sees her words have hit me like an accusation.

"I know," I sigh. "And I know it shouldn't matter how long he's stayed away. If he's happy, I'm happy and all that, but . . ." It's hard to tell them how upset I am that he's still not home, how the anniversary of him leaving has knocked me so much.

"But it does bother you," Joy finishes for me.

I shake my head at my reflection. "I'm trying really hard for it not to."

"I get it," Dessie says. "Before he left, it looked like you were becoming more, and it never happened. Even if you've managed to keep the friendship, that's tough."

"We already *were* more, and it already *had* happened, before him moving to a different continent forced us back to being friends," I correct her, images of the last time I saw Lewis pushing into my thoughts, his whole body pressed tightly against me as his lips explored mine. "And I've made my peace with that, for the most part." Dessie opens her mouth to object. "I have! It's just today. I can't help thinking about this time last year and how happy I thought we were."

Before Joy can pull me into one of her hugs, before Dessie can catch me with that pitying expression of hers, I leave them to finish getting ready. I've a sudden urge to go home and crawl into bed, the shift ahead stretching longer than it did a few minutes ago. I wish I hadn't brought any of this up. I've wasted months daydreaming about him coming back, instead of moving on like I should. I'm not meant to be doing this any more.

I take the steep stairs up to the restaurant floor, hoping that no one is going to fall down them this evening – especially any of my hen party. It was only two weeks ago I spent an hour bandaging up a woman's leg and waiting in the back with her for an ambulance. The paperwork those tumbles cause is the last thing I want tonight.

I try to push down the feeling that stepping into the private dining room is like getting into a cage and start arranging the table for twenty, laying out the A1-sized paper menus over neatly lined-up cutlery.

The next few hours go as expected. The bride-to-be is an accountant from Cheshire who admits to me in between courses that she was hoping her sister would organise a spa day rather than a drinking session. I feel sorry for her when she finds out that next on the agenda is a stripper in a function room at the back of Revolution. Still, it means that by just gone ten the dining room is tidied, and I'm free to step back into the main restaurant.

"Where do you want me, Tom?" I ask, but he's too busy in schmoozing mode with a table of six in the corner to give the matter any thought and dismisses me with a bat of his hand. The

restaurant is almost empty. Dessie and Joy are leaning against the bar, looking wistfully out of the glass front at the busy outdoor seating area overlooking the water.

"How's it been in here?" I ask them.

"Hot and dead. Tom said he didn't need us outside, but, of course, that's where everyone has wanted to be all night. We've hardly earnt any tips stuck in here. To think, I've missed out on one of Professor Drake's wine and cheese nights for this," Joy laments. "Damn needing to be able to afford food and rent."

"To think, *I* could have been two bottles of wine in by now with some of the cast of Hollyoaks," Dessie adds. "Damn not being rich and famous yet."

They both turn to me with expectant looks on their faces. If I wasn't here, I'd be home with my grandparents in front of the TV.

"Come on," I say instead. "Let's not worry about what we wish we could have been doing tonight, but what we still can," I say, offering up the advice I've been trying to get myself to listen to for the last year. "If we get this lot paid up quickly, we can still make it in time to sit out and have a drink. The night's not over yet!"