

Cooking Up a Christmas Storm

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Also by Amelia Berry

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A Recipe for Love

Cooking Up a Christmas Storm

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Cooking
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For Paul. Still, and indeed, again.

Chapter One

Why had she answered the phone? Jodie never answered unknown numbers. Nobody in their right mind answered unknown numbers. They were always charlatans trying to tell you they were from your bank or that you needed new loft insulation. Either of those would be preferable to this.

'Jodie, love, I'm not unsympathetic, but your girl gave notice three months ago and she's long gone and you're not paying, are you?'

'I'm going to, Alan. I...' Jodie hated herself for this. She put a crack into her voice and sniffed theatrically. 'Since Gemma went I don't know what I'm doing. I just need a bit of time to get myself together.'

'That's what you said last time.' Her landlord's voice was impassive. 'It's gone on too long. I let you stay after Gemma moved out but your name was never on the agreement.'

'I'll sign an agreement,' she offered, more in desperation than hope.

'You've got to the end of the month.'

'That's this week!' Jodie protested.

'Right, so on Monday I'm coming round and changing the locks. And you'll still owe three months' rent.'

'I...' Jodie started to argue again but the line was already dead.

She stared at her phone. It was Wednesday. She had until Monday. How on earth did a person with no money, no car – bloody Gemma had taken that too on the slim grounds that it was registered in her name and she'd paid for it – move house in less than a week? At least she did still have a job. Not a great job, but if she talked nicely to Diane, maybe she'd give her an advance on the next couple of weeks' money and Jodie could offer that to Alan for the rent and then... Her phone pinged in her hand with an incoming message.

From Diane:

Where TF are you?

What? Jodie swiped and tapped into her calendar. She wasn't working today. She'd swapped with Geraldine so she was doing Tuesday, Thursday, Friday. Today was Wed... she stared at the calendar. Today was Tuesday. On the one hand she had a whole extra day before she was homeless. On the other hand, bollocks.

She typed fast.

Sorry. Had an emergency.

Her gaze settled on the wet patch where she'd knocked over her water glass an hour before.

Had a flood at the flat. Thought I'd messaged you but it didn't send. I'll be there in 30.

Jodie whirled around the flat grabbing keys, bag, finding shoes, pausing in front of the mirror by the door to wipe the worst of last night's mascara off onto her sleeve. Her phone pinged again.

Don't bother. I'm sorry, but I did say – one more screw-up and you're done. I need staff I can rely on.

Jodie hit the call button and waited one ring, two and then three before Diane picked up.

'I'm sorry, pet.'

'But I need this job. I got confused about the day...'

'I thought there was a flood.'

Damn. 'Well, yeah, but then I got confused about the day because I swapped shifts and...'

'I was supposed to be taking Lulu to a university open day this morning, but instead I'm here bollocking you and making Americanos for twats.' She heard Diane move away from the phone to talk to a customer for a second. 'Not you. I meant them other twats.'

'I know. I...'

'No, Jodie. I gave you a trial cos of your mum, but you've only been here a month and you've given me more grief than my own kids. I'm sorry. I'll send you your money up to last week.'

'But—'

'I've got a queue, love. Take care of yourself, won't you?'

Jodie stared at the dead phone in her hand. No job. Fine. That completed the set with no girlfriend, no car and no flat. It was a royal flush of failure. She weighed her phone in her hand and hit 2 on her speed dial.

Calling Gemma

It would go to voicemail. It had gone to voicemail every time Jodie had called since Gemma left. The first few times she'd left messages asking to talk. Then she'd explained how she'd do better in future. Then there'd been the times – regrettable times, late at night after she'd downed one bottle of wine and opened another – when she'd yelled and called Gemma some pretty unforgivable names. In her defence she'd followed all of those up with longer messages full of profuse apologies. And then there'd been the begging phase, imploring Gemma to come back. She wasn't proud of that. Now she was being cool. Friendly, chatty, casual. Not needy at all. Just cheerily trying to catch up with an old mate.

The beep sounded on the end of the line. The recorded voice started. 'The number you have called is not in service.'

She hung up and rang again.

'The number you have called is not in service.'

Gemma had changed her number. Jodie stared at her handset. It was her only link to her ex and it had been severed. No warning. No message to let her know. Nothing.

That meant there were only two choices left. There was the one she'd been mostly making ever since Gemma had gone. That involved staying in bed and ordering Deliveroo she couldn't afford on a dangerously close-to-maxed-out credit card.

The other option was unthinkable. And Jodie was thinking it.

The ringing phone startled her. And then confused her. She stared at her mobile, trying to marry it up with the repetitive trill she could hear. It wasn't her mobile ringing. It was the landline.

Jodie almost smiled, realising Gemma's apparently endless competence hadn't extended to terminating the landline contract she'd insisted on keeping up.

Jodie pulled herself to her feet and grabbed the handset from the breakfast bar that divided the living area in the flat. Nobody rang this number. Nobody she could think of, apart from Gemma's nan, even knew the number. Gemma did. Jodie pressed the answer button on a wave of hope. Maybe this would be her explaining that she'd lost her phone and that the last few weeks had been a horrible mistake and she was desperate to come back.

'Hello?'

'Gemma Bryant?'

'Yes!' What? Wait. No. The person on the other end of the line wasn't saying she was Gemma Bryant. She was asking if Jodie was. Too late.

'Hi. I'm so glad I got hold of you.'

'But...'

The woman on the other end of the line didn't even pause. 'I tried your mobile but I think I must have written the number down wrong.'

'Sorry. Who is this?'

‘Oh God. I’m sorry. This is Bella Smith at Lowbridge Castle. The cookery school. I should have said that to start with, shouldn’t I?’

Jodie was, obviously, none the wiser. And the last thing she needed today was to waste time talking to someone who thought she was somebody else entirely. She had enough to worry about with the no-home thing.

‘I’m sorry. I’ve never done this before.’

And the no-money thing.

‘You’re the first person we’ve officially hired.’

And the no-job thing. Finally, what the voice on the other end of the phone was saying filtered through. ‘What?’

‘Yeah. So I know it’s been a little while but if you’re still interested I’m ringing to offer you the job.’

‘The job?’

‘We were all blown away with your ideas, and we can’t wait to get started.’ The woman paused. ‘I mean if you’re still keen. It’s like we talked about on the phone. We know the money isn’t brilliant but accommodation’s included and you’re welcome to join us for meals if you want to, or not if you don’t, of course. So what do you say?’

A job. Accommodation included. It was like the universe had finally looked down on Jodie and given her a break. It wasn’t her break though. It was Gemma’s. She couldn’t just take it. Could she? ‘Just like you said on the phone?’

‘Oh, thank you again for doing the interview that way. The downside of living in the back of beyond – there’s no way our Wi-Fi will handle a video call!’

Jodie must be dreaming. A job offer with a place to live from someone who had no idea what Gemma Bryant looked like.

‘So it is a yes?’

What did she have left to lose? ‘Yes.’

‘That’s brilliant. When can you start?’

Well, given that Jodie was being evicted in six days...

‘As soon as you like?’

‘Seriously? Like Monday.’

‘Monday.’

‘Fantastic. Can’t wait to welcome you to the Highlands.’

Jodie froze. Welcome her to the where now?