To Eryn and Willow

First published in the UK in 2017 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. www.usborne.com

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Author photo © L. Bourne, 2017

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

JFMAMJJ SOND/17

ISBN 9781474921329 04085/1

Printed in the UK.

“Romance films are money-spinning cathedrals of love, wobbling on the foundations of unbelievable and damaging stereotypes.”

Audrey Winters’s Media Studies project

Prologue

I wasn't expecting candles.

They lit the whole cinema – tea lights, the stout white candles you get in churches, thin ones stuffed into candlesticks. My skin itched in their heat.

I blinked and shook my head. "What the hell?"

Then I saw Harry.

He looked so damn proud of himself. His hair sticking up at every angle, his hands sheepishly in his pockets, head cocked, his teeth bared in his trademark smile. The flickering light made him look like a hologram.

Harry…

My body declared instant war on itself. My heart thudded against my ribcage, like it was using the force to try and pull me closer. But everything else fought against it. My intestines cramped, my stomach curdled, bile rose up in my throat.

"Audrey." He stepped through the candlelight, and I took

a step back. His face sagged, teeth disappeared. "Audrey, please. Hear me out. I did all this for you."

That much was obvious but it didn't change anything.

"Harry, you can't just light a few candles and…"

He stepped forward again, reaching me this time. He touched my face, smoothed away a tear with his thumb. A tear I hadn't even known was there.

And I'm thinking… *If this was in a movie, what would you be doing, Audrey?*

Would you be yelling at the girl on the screen? Chucking popcorn or cushions and screaming "DON'T DO IT, YOU MORON"?

…Or would you be sighing – willing her to hear him out?

1

THE GREAT CLASS DIVIDE

A rich girl meets a poor boy.

They come from different worlds.

She's heading towards amazing things but feels suffocated by them.

He's from the wrong side of the tracks. He was in a gang once. He's not any more.

But he looks rough enough around the edges for her parents to disapprove once the two of them fall madly in love, despite having literally no life experiences in common.



"Here's where we keep the pulled pork."

Marianna – "*everyone just calls me Ma*" – pulled up a metal hatch, blasting my face with the stench of dead pig.

"The what?"

"The pulled pork," she repeated. "For the pulled pork hot dogs."

"Cinemas serve pulled pork hot dogs?"

I jumped as Ma slammed the hatch closed. "Flicker is not just any cinema. We're not like CineUniverse. At Flicker, we pride ourselves on a unique, artisan cinema experience." She smoothed down her black silk shirt. "Now, if you just follow me into the kitchen, I'll train you on how to make the fresh guacamole."

Two hours later and I hadn't learned any of the skills I'd thought I would at my first day working in a small independent cinema. Ma had not once mentioned films, or shown me where a projector was. Instead, I learned how to work the till, smush guacamole, shred pulled pork, pour the exact amount of balsamic vinegar into virgin olive oil to make a dipping pot for the "sourdough fingers", oh, and mix "cinnamon dust" for the popcorn. It took an hour for Ma to admit that, yes, they did still have popcorn.

"When do you train me in taking ticket stubs and showing people to their seats?" I asked Ma, midway through washing the avocado out from under my fingernails. The cinema opened in less than thirty minutes, and I hadn't even seen inside the screening rooms.

Ma smiled. "Oh, we don't want you to run before you can walk."

The smile made parts of my tummy hurt, like someone was about to jump out in a horror film. She didn't look older than thirty but she behaved like an android. Her hair was pulled back into a stiff bun and she clopped around in ridiculous heels. "You can just be in charge of food tonight. That's all I've put you down for on the rota."

I'd seen the colour-coded rota in the tiny staffroom upstairs. It had every hour split into ten-minute intervals.

"Great," I tried to chirp.

"Harry will be here in a second to do tickets. The new Dick Curtisfield is out, so it's going to be busy."

Dick Curtisfield. I used to adore his fuzzy, love-y films…

"Is that okay?" Ma gave me a look like I'd be murdered if I dared say anything other than yes. But busy was good. Busy was why I'd taken the job. I didn't care what lies people were happy to watch as long as I was busy enough to not think about the message that had landed on my phone on my walk in.

Mum: Your father wants to sell the house.

He wants us to sell the house. Our house. Our home.

I smiled back at Ma because smiling is sometimes the only way to stop yourself crying. "Sounds good to me. Now, can you explain cinnamon dust one more time?"

Busy was an understatement. The cinema only had two

screens, separated by a purple velvet carpeted area with a ticket booth and a teeny bar. By high tide, it was so packed you couldn't see all the intricate black and white paintings of Hollywood stars on the wall.

Harry turned up two minutes before we opened, stinking of cigarettes and bringing the cold autumn air in on his clothes.

"I know, I know," he said, as Ma tapped her watch. Then, before she could tell him off, he pulled her into a hug and lifted her up.

"Oi, Harry, put me down!"

When he did, she was bright red and smiling.

"There's a queue outside," he told her.

"That's why it's unacceptable for you to be late. Again. The rota says you should've been here thirty minutes ago."

"I'm always late, Ma. Can't you just accept that and schedule it into the rota?"

And she giggled. She actually *giggled*.

I stood behind the bar, nervously polishing the counter over and over. Harry noticed me, waved and walked over.

"Hello, new person."

"This is Audrey." Ma spoke for me, clopping behind him on her heels. "She's a sixth-form student, so she's only doing one school night a week and weekends."

Harry scooched behind the bar and came up right in my face, like personal space wasn't an issue. "I know you." He had dark hair that all stood on end and every part of him was a bit too long and thin, liked he'd been wrung out too harshly when wet.

I shook my head. "I don't think you do."

"No, I do…" He was about to say something else when Ma hissed, "Harry? The queue?" and he leaped back over the counter and opened the door to let the stampede in. Well, stampede is something Bridgely-upon-Thames doesn't do, thank you kindly. It does Chanel No. 5 and Radley purses and detached houses and the *Daily Mail* and oboe lessons until you reach Grade Eight with distinction. The line descended on the bar like a really posh zombie apocalypse, and I dropped my washcloth, stuttering as I asked the first couple what they wanted.

"Can we get two Chilean Merlots, two popcorns with cinnamon dust, the garlic olives…oh…shall we just get a bottle? A bottle of Merlot…"

And I was too busy to think again. Which was fine by me.

2

The films began and there was a slight break in the madness. I nervously asked Ma if I could use the bathroom, and she looked at her watch before mumbling, "Yes, I suppose you need a quick break. Take ten minutes."

I spent the whole break just sitting on the staff loo with my head between my legs. My phone kept vibrating in my pocket. I ignored it.

When I emerged, Harry was in the foyer, collecting the empty glasses people had left strewn on the counter.

"You were in there a while," he stated. His instant familiarity felt strange and warm at the same time. "Are you okay?"

I flicked my eyes upstairs in the direction of Ma's office. "Is she always like that?"

"Who, Ma?" He grinned, revealing a big set of teeth. There was essentially no room for gum. "Oh yeah. She is most certainly always like that. You'll get used to her…

I mean, people got used to Stalin."

I scratched my arm. "Why does she ask to be called Ma? She only looks about thirty."

Harry picked up four glasses with his fingers and shoved them into the dishwasher.

"Oh, Audrey – you've only seen the tip of the *Ma-is-nuts* iceberg."

As if on cue… "Audrey?" Ma's voice echoed down from her office, sharper than a sharpened sharpie. "Your break was up two minutes ago. I hope you're replenishing the black-cherry cordial."

"Audrey, heel," Harry whispered, and I giggled in a short, guilty burst.

…Just like Ma, I realized.

We ran out of guacamole during the second big rush and Ma acted like it was my fault.

"Why didn't you tell me we were out of avocados?" she asked me through thin lips.

"I didn't know I had to."

Ma pushed a stray strand of hair off her high forehead, and I saw her roll her eyes at the disappointed customer. "Sorry, she's new. How about some lemongrass hummus on the house? Hmm?"

It got so nuts that Harry came over to help out, arming himself with popcorn boxes and scooping it out of the machine.

It was immediately obvious that Harry had hints of fuckboy about him. Ma giggled whenever he spoke, as did all the female customers. He dazzled them with compliments on their coats, noticed their haircuts, said "*Good choice*" whenever anyone ordered any combination of food and wine.

"You keeping up, Audrey?" He winked as he handed over some sourdough fingers and I smiled back knowingly.

Trouble trouble trouble.

I'd been there with trouble. Been there, done that, bought the *I-lost-my-virginity-to-an-attractive-but-morally-bankrupt-arsehole* T-shirt.

Eventually, everyone trickled into the screens, the doors slamming shut behind them. With both films playing, we were left in an unnerving quiet in the foyer.

I leaned back on the counter with exhaustion. "Now what?"

Ma shook her head. "Did you not even look at my rota, Audrey? Now we clean up again."

So I anti-bacced all the surfaces, put all the new empties in the dishwasher, and I was just about to sit and rest my aching feet, when a burly man emerged from Screen One. I looked around but Ma and Harry had both vanished.

"Hey, you," the customer called.

I straightened as he walked towards the counter. "Can I help you?"

"I want a gourmet hot dog, with extra farmhouse relish."

No please.

"Okay."

I took his money and turned to the till, trying to remember how the hell to work it. He coughed.

"Is there a problem?" I called over my shoulder.

"I'm missing the film."

"They take a few minutes to make…" I stumbled over my words, flustered by his aggression, just as Ma swooped back downstairs.

"What seems to be the problem here?"

"I've ordered a hot dog," he said.

"Of course, of course." Ma clapped her hands once. "What seat are you in? We'll bring it straight in when it's ready. Sorry" – she rolled her eyes for the second time – "she's new."

The man strode back into the film and I turned to the pulled pork warmer so Ma couldn't see my face.

"I didn't know we took food into the cinema for them," I said, on the defensive. "Won't that disrupt the film for everyone else?"

"We do what the customer wants." She was watching over my shoulder to check I was adding the right amount of meat. "He's sitting in B12, that's on the aisle, on the left. Can I trust you to take it into him when it's ready?"

I just nodded. Feeling about eight years old.

"Good, right. Now I need to check on Harry."

She tip-tapped off and I got to work assembling the hot dog, scooping up organic relish and smearing it onto the artisan bun.

I mimicked her voice under my breath. "*Oooh, don't forget, Audrey, the customer is always right, even if he's a rude bell-end who can't wait the whole half-hour until the film is finished for his overpriced ludicrous hot dog, we do what he wants…*"

"It sounds like Ma has broken you already."

I jumped at Harry's voice and dropped the tongs. They clattered to the floor along with the bun.

"Dammit," I said, staring in dismay at the hot dog.

"Whoops, five-second rule." Harry bent down to pick it up. The air on his clothes was cold again. He blew on the bread and dusted it off before holding it out to me, smiling. "The floor gives it a more delicate texture," he explained.

I found myself giggling stupidly again and took the bun, our hands grazing.

"Ma's looking for you."

"Ah, bollocks." Though his huge toothy grin suggested he was unbothered. "I thought she'd be too entrenched in her rota to notice me sneaking out for a smoke." He ran up the stairs to her office two at a time.

I dusted off a bit of grit he'd missed. "Thanks for saving the artisan bread," I called after him.

But Harry had already reached the top, leaving just a hint of freezing air behind him.

It took a second for my eyes to adjust to the gloom of the cinema when I pushed through the doors. A few heads turned in annoyance as I tiptoed down the aisle.

I glanced up at the screen, using its light to guide my way to B12.

Dick Curtisfield's gorgeous heroine was running through the snow towards some guy, dragging a tiny sausage dog behind her.

"Stop," she called after him. "Wait."

The guy in the snow stopped and I felt the audience take a collective breath. I spotted the outline of the man and crouched down beside him.

"Here's your hot dog," I whispered.

He reached out and took it roughly, his eyes on the screen. He didn't even say thank you.

I crept back up the aisle and, just as I was about to leave, the actor on screen said, "I've tried to stop loving you, Katie, but I can't."

I found myself turning around. I'd always admired this actress. I'd watched her best scenes over and over to try and pick up extra tips. Last year, I would've been desperate to watch this film. The leading male had her face cradled in his hands, pushing her beautiful cheeks together. The sausage dog barked at her feet.

"You have?" she whispered. One tear delicately dripped onto her cheek without ruining her make-up.

He nodded. "I've tried to hate you. I've tried to feel numb about you. I've tried to not even think about you at all. But I'm exhausted, Katie. I can't not love you, even after everything. I can't not feel anything for you. Every feeling I have, every inch of my heart – it's yours. It always has been…"

I blinked hard, my hand on the door, a lump jumping into my throat. I pushed my way out just as the orchestral music signalled the big kiss. I strode past the bar, ignoring Ma as she barked instructions at me and let myself into the staff toilet. And then, with my knickers around my ankles, I put my head between my legs and sobbed – stuffing my fist into my mouth in case Ma came in and heard me cry.

3

The hard work didn't finish once the screens emptied of people, dabbing their eyes and saying it was Dick's best yet. It was almost midnight when Ma handed me a bin bag and sent me in to clean the screens up.

I instantly felt guilty for every time I'd dropped popcorn on a cinema floor. The place was a mess – like feral pigs on acid had just held a house party. I checked my phone.

Two missed calls and three messages.

Mum: What time will you be back?
Mum: Did you see my message?
Mum: I can't believe he's doing this to us.

I put it back into my jeans pocket and dropped to my knees to scrape popcorn from under the seats.

Harry burst through the double doors wielding a giant

roaring Hoover. "You're doing it wrong, Audrey," he yelled over the noise. "You need this."

I stood up, brushing eight trillion kernels off my shirt. "No one told me there was a Hoover."

"We call him Magic Mike. You collect up all the empties, I'll do the carpet."

"Thanks."

I started plucking stray wine glasses out from the nooks and crannies, trying not to yawn. I'd been on my feet for hours and I was still nowhere near my bed. Harry, however, fizzed with energy, like his aura was made of popping candy. He hummed as he sucked up the debris, smiling the whole time. When he shut off the Hoover, the silence engulfed us. I grinned goofily, hating that he was the sort of guy that made you instantly goofy.

He gathered up the lead as I picked up all the boxes previously containing seventy-per-cent-cocoa chocolate buttons.

"This is the most middle class cinema in the world," I found myself saying.

Harry burst out laughing. "And that offends you?"

I shoved another box into the plastic liner. "I just think this place is taking it a bit far. I feel like I'm in a parody."

He perched on the arm of one of the purple seats, his arms crossed, his mouth twitching. "And it's not like *you're* middle class or anything."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He looked me up and down. "Well, no offence, but I