

A GREEDY BONUS SCENE

Closing Time

Nick's side of the bar

KIM LAYNE · THE GREEDY SERIES

A closing shift is math. You count backward from one a.m. and work the list: rail bottles forward, garnish trays emptied, mats up, floor mopped, register counted, lights killed in order. There's a sequence. I like the sequence. Some people need the rush, the nine-to-eleven crush where you're moving on instinct, reaching past someone before they've asked. I like that too. But the close is mine. The close is where the room stops performing.

Nora was restocking the garnish cooler. She'd already restocked it twenty minutes ago, after the last of the Thursday regulars settled up. Something was under her skin. Last week it was the speed rail, every bottle label-forward, military precision. I'd stood there cutting limes and not saying a word, because pointing out what she does instead of feeling what she's feeling is a good way to lose the rest of the night.

"You already did that," I said.

"I'm doing it better."

"Okay."

She glanced over. Quick, then away. "You're doing the lemon thing."

“What lemon thing.”

“Where you cut fruit you don’t need because you’ve been thinking.”

I looked down at the board. Four lemons. No plan for them. I set the knife down.

“Maybe I just like lemons.”

“Nobody likes lemons that much, Nick.”

“Bartenders do. It’s in the manual.”

“There’s no manual.”

“There’s definitely a manual. You’d have read it.”

That got the corner of her mouth. I looked away before she caught me watching for it. Getting caught would make it a conversation. A conversation would make it a negotiation. I don’t negotiate with her. Other people push. I’ve watched them push, the men who come through her life and look at everything and understand nothing. They push because she looks like she’s waiting for someone to push. She’s not. She’s waiting for someone who won’t, and figuring that out took me about ten minutes. Holding to it has taken two years.

I know what she looks like at midnight when the writing's going well and at two a.m. when it isn't. I know she sends money home on the fifteenth and lies about what she spent. I know she ties her apron in a square knot pulled tight enough to leave a mark when she's been caught caring, and I've thought about that knot more than a person should think about a knot. I know her deflections. She's got about a hundred loaded at any given time, and I rate them on a ten-point scale, which started as a joke in my own head and became a diagnostic. A nine means she barely felt it. A four means I should go cut lemons and give her the room.

Tonight the cooler was a three.

Renata left at twelve-fifteen, which is late for her. Usually she wraps her wine by eleven and delivers her verdict on the evening to nobody in particular on her way up the stairs. Tonight she lingered. She watched us the way she watches us, chin on her hand, the whole production. On her way out she stopped at my end and said, quietly, "You're a patient man, Nicholas."

"I'm a bartender."

“Same thing, in this case.” She pulled on her coat.
“Don’t wait so long it becomes the story.”

“Good night, Renata.”

“It’s your bar,” she said, which it isn’t, but I knew what she meant.

The door closed. The room got smaller. It does at this hour, the ceiling coming down, the walls pulling in, until Mercer’s is exactly the size of whoever’s left. Tonight that was us and the dripping tap.

She moved to the register to count her drawer. The one good lamp threw gold down on her hands and I stood at the sink washing glasses and not looking away from her. She counts the way she does everything, precise and fast. Her lips move with no sound. She tucks her hair behind her ear with her ring finger, always the ring finger, and she doesn’t know she does it.

I know she does it. I know too many things about her, every one of them learned by not asking, by standing in the room and paying attention. I would stop the second she told me to. She has never told me to.

I dried the last glass. Walked down to log the pours, which meant standing next to her. The register is narrow. Hank's whole bar is narrow, built for people who didn't mind being close.

"Twelve short," she said.

"Check the comp tab. I poured Doc a second."

She checked. "There it is." She wrote it down. Her hand stopped. "You always comp Doc the second one."

"He's eighty and he does the crossword in pen."

"You say that like it's a policy."

"Hank started the policy."

I reached past her for the pour log on the shelf above the register. My arm went over her shoulder. Bar smoke and the cheap green shampoo from the bodega on Amsterdam and, under that, just her. My hand found the log and I didn't step back. A half-second where the distance wasn't a distance anymore, the heat off her shoulder through my forearm, and I could feel her breathing change. She went still. Not stiff. Still.

I took the log down. Stepped back. Opened it on the bar.

“You keep the log on the top shelf on purpose,” she said.

“It’s where the log goes.”

“Everything important ends up on the top shelf in this bar.”

“That’s Hank’s system.”

“Is it.” She looked at me, and it wasn’t the deflection look or the listening face or any of the ones I’ve cataloged. It was the one I don’t have a name for. It shows up maybe twice a season, late, after the room has emptied, when she forgets to perform and just looks. Every time it happens I have to decide what to do with it. Every time I decide the same thing.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s Hank’s system.”

She went back to the drawer. I went back to the log. The lamp hummed its low electrical complaint, a bulb that should’ve been replaced six years ago. It won’t be. It works.

We moved through the rest of the close the way we always do, the choreography we built without

discussing it, her on the front, me on the back, passing each other in the narrow space behind the rail. The not-touching has its own language by now. I'm fluent.

Mats up. Floor mopped. She took the left side, I took the right. We met in the middle and I took the mop from her.

"I'm reapplying," she said. Not to me exactly. To the room.

"I know."

"You know because Hank told you or you know because you know."

"Both." I wrung the mop. "You're going to get it."

"You don't know that."

"I know you." Flat as I could make it. I put it on the bar the way I put everything on the bar, hers to pick up or leave. She picked it up. Held it. Didn't say anything, which is the most she's ever given me back, and she doesn't know that either.

She untied her apron. Hung it on the hook. I killed the front neons, then the back ones, and the room went down to just the register lamp, throwing its

small gold circle over the bar and the bottle on the top shelf and the two of us in the last of it.

“Walk you out?” I said.

“I’m fine.”

“I know you’re fine.”

She looked at me. “Then why do you always ask.”

Because I want three more minutes. Because the walk to the corner is forty-five seconds and you talk different in the cold. Because once, in November, you told me something real between the door and the crosswalk and I’ve been chasing that intersection ever since.

“Habit,” I said.

“Okay.” She shouldered her bag. Stopped at the stairs.

“Nick.”

“Yeah.”

I watched her load the deflection. Whatever joke she’d built to fill the space where the real sentence was supposed to go. I watched her choose it, and set it down, and stand there without it for one second,

unarmed. On Nora that's the bravest thing I've ever seen anyone do.

"The fries," she said.

"What about them."

"I never say thank you."

"I never ask you to."

She nodded. She went up the stairs, and I listened to her boots on the sidewalk above the half-windows until I couldn't, and then I stood in the empty bar under the one good lamp and let myself have it for a minute. The whole weight of it. The thing I won't call by name.

The bottle sat on the top shelf. The lamp hummed. I killed it, locked the door, walked home the long way.

Someday I'll say the sentence. Not tonight.

*Nora and Nick's story continues in **The Tell** — Greedy, Book Two.*

If Top Shelf made you feel something, a quick review on Amazon or Goodreads means the world.

More at kimlayne.com