



It had been a murky November day, six months before, when Lucy had first joined the queue at Love Bites, the sandwich bar around the corner from Able & Lawson, the City law firm where she worked as a marketing assistant. She'd offered to get Letitia, the senior partner, a hummus pitta because Letitia was not only very nice but also very pregnant.

As soon as she walked into Love Bites that day, Lucy noticed that it had a new attraction beyond its collection of home-baked muffins, *tarte aux fraises* and sticky brownies. There was a new guy behind the counter who was busy creating a tower bagel for the girl who worked in the travel agents on the floor below. It was a beautiful bagel, oozing relish and overflowing with red salami and creamy mozzarella. Lucy eyed the bagel with envy, and then checked out its maker: a mouthwatering proposition himself.

He was tall and broad-shouldered with a definite touch of the Mediterranean about him. Everything from his olive-green apron to his caramel skin was edible. His hands were tanned and strong, yet the way they handled that bagel, he might have been a sculptor. Not that she'd

ever known any sculptors but that was how she imagined the hands of an artist might be: long, slender and very gifted. His badge said, 'Hi, I'm Nick and I'm ready to serve you', which, she had to admit, was less romantic.

'And what can I do you for, lovely laydee?' she half expected him to say, but of course he hadn't. What he actually said was, 'Next, please.'

'A hummus and salad on wholemeal pitta, no cucumber,' she replied, snapping out of her fantasy and trying to act cool. Nick stood by patiently, his hands poised over the chopping board as she scanned the menu behind the counter. 'And a chicken salad on granary, please, no butter or mayonnaise,' she added.

'You don't need to diet.' OK, he hadn't said that either, but nodded, smiled and murmured: 'Coming up, madam' without a trace of irony.

The next time she'd wanted a sandwich, she'd been strangely drawn to Love Bites, even though, to be honest, the prices were cheaper and the choice wider at the usual office haunt. And so, she found herself queuing again, as Nick 'Ready to Serve Her' chopped and spread and filled and stuffed.

'How can I 'elp you, babe?' said Marvin, the shop owner, as Lucy stood dreamily by the counter. Nick seemed to have disappeared into the kitchen. Perhaps he's fetching some more baguettes, she thought, trying to hide her disappointment.

'Philadelphia and grapes on granary, please,' she muttered, her cheeks reddening. Minutes later, clutching her lunch, she rushed out of the shop, not even bothering to take her fifty-pence change.

She *really* wouldn't have gone into Love Bites again, but Letitia had begged her to fetch a slice of carrot cake with frosting that 'simply couldn't be had anywhere else in London'.

'I do hope you don't mind, Lucy,' Letitia had said, rubbing her back as she hovered by the water cooler in the office. 'I know it's my hormones and I really should *not* be eating for two, but the thought of anything else makes me want to throw up.'

'It's fine,' said Lucy, crossing her fingers behind her back. 'I was going in there anyway. Their tower bagels are irresistible.'

She managed to stroll out of the office, before reaching the pavement and almost skipping down the street and around the corner. It was Friday and there was already a queue snaking out of the door and in front of the window. Lucy joined it, hoping to catch a glimpse of Nick. There, through the clear spots left by the 'o' and 'v' of the etched logo, she thought she could see him, assembling a sub roll. What seemed like hours later, she was inside the shop, mentally tossing a coin to see whether it would be Nick or Marvin who made up her lunch.

'Next!' called Marvin as she got to the front of the queue.

'Um . . . er . . .'

'Difficult decision?' offered Nick, already splitting a bap for the customer behind her.

'Yes, I'm dithering a bit, aren't I?'

'Yeah. You are,' grunted a bloke in the queue.

'You have my turn,' she said, in what she considered

to be a flash of spontaneous genius. The man tutted in exasperation and stepped in front as she hung out by the chiller cabinet, pretending to study the menu. When Nick had finished the bap, he smiled and invited her to take her turn.

‘Carrot cake, please,’ she said, feeling strangely shy. ‘And a tower bagel.’

‘Large or extra large?’

‘Do you do medium?’ she asked daringly.

He winked. ‘For you, yes.’

A few minutes later, she’d paid her money and hurried out of the shop, already wondering what on earth had possessed a sane, intelligent woman to hang around a bagel bar specifically in the hope of having her lunch made up by a complete stranger. She’d almost reached the office when she heard a shout behind her.

‘Hey!’

She knew better than to turn round when people shouted in the street. You always felt such a plonker when you realised it wasn’t you.

‘Hey you! Bagel Girl!’

*Bagel Girl?* Still she kept her eyes forward. It was lunchtime, lots of girls must have bagels right now and she didn’t want to draw attention to herself.

‘Oi! Tower bagel and carrot cake fan. Stop this minute!’

She had no choice. Not after he’d been so specific. If she didn’t turn round and answer, he’d be telling everyone she didn’t want mayo or butter and then the whole street would know she was watching her weight. Well, they could have spotted that anyway but—

‘You . . . forgot . . . your . . . bagel . . .’ panted Nick, stopping a few feet away and holding out a paper bag.

Her face was glowing like a beefsteak tomato. ‘Have I dragged you away from your work?’

He smiled. ‘That’s OK. Anything to get out into the fresh air. Marvin told me to come after you. He can spot a potential regular when he sees one.’

‘Right. Of course.’ Her heart began to sink. So, Nick had been ordered by his boss to chase her down the street. Perhaps Marvin was thinking of launching a loyalty card scheme.

‘You work for Able & Lawson, the solicitors, don’t you?’ he asked.

‘Yes, but how do you know that?’

‘Marvin saw you when he dropped off some menus last week. He said you were watering a big plant in reception.’

‘Someone has to do it. No one else in our office seems to have an affinity with foliage.’

‘So you’re the plant-care consultant, are you? Very high-powered.’

Lucy saw the twinkle in his eyes and grinned. ‘Yes, that’s me. Also tea maker, sandwich jockey and, in my spare time, marketing assistant.’

He gave a low whistle. ‘Sounds important. Especially the sandwich jockey.’

‘Oh, it’s vital. Able & Lawson simply couldn’t manage without me.’ Even as she joked, she felt the irony of her words. She was sure that, come the next round of belt-tightening, Able & Lawson could manage without her.

No amount of late nights, watering plants or being helpful could stop that. Times were tough and marketing assistants, while very useful, did not bring in the massive contracts required to keep afloat a City solicitors'.

'I won't be working in a sandwich shop for ever, you know,' said Nick suddenly.

'But I may be working at Able & Lawson for ever,' she said. Then added, 'It doesn't matter if you do work in a sandwich shop. We all need to eat.'

'No, you don't understand. I want to run my own catering business. I used to be a biochemist but I hated it so I resigned my job and took this one to get hands-on experience of the trade. I've got some savings and when I get the opportunity, I'm going to be my own boss.'

She smiled at his earnestness and Nick must have caught her expression because he laughed awkwardly. 'Hey! Why am I telling you this? You must be bored sick. Look, I have to get back because Marvin doesn't deserve a backslider like me. But before I go, tell me you'll come round to mine for dinner? I can promise you something more interesting than a sandwich.'

'I'm not sure,' Lucy heard herself saying. But why was she even hesitating? The hunky Bagel Boy was asking her out, for goodness' sake. Then again, she didn't know the guy and her instinct kicked in. However gorgeous he was, maybe going round to his place on a first date wasn't such a great idea.

Nick looked downcast.

'OK. Why don't we go and see a film? Then perhaps we can grab a pizza afterwards. My treat,' said Lucy.

‘Well, I’m not sure. I invited you. I don’t want you paying.’

‘It’s fine. After all, I am a marketing assistant. I can run to a pizza and we can go Dutch on the film tickets.’

He chewed his lip for a moment before nodding and grinning. ‘Done. Pick you up here at seven tomorrow night?’

‘OK.’

They both hovered for a while in the middle of the pavement, causing shoppers to push past them and a skateboarder to weave dangerously close.

‘I’d better be getting back to work,’ said Lucy eventually.

‘Me too.’

‘Bye then, Nick.’

‘Bye, Bagel Girl and . . . what is your name, by the way?’

‘It’s Lucy. Lucy Gibson.’

He held out a hand. Lucy took it, even though she knew she’d get covered in flour.

‘Sorry,’ he said with that disarming grin. ‘It’s those farmhouse baps. I’m Nick Laurentis, by the way.’

‘Hello, Nick Laurentis, Bagel Boy.’

Nick laughed, then she thought she saw him hesitate as she lingered, still holding her hand. ‘Lucy, I have to confess. Marvin didn’t ask me to chase after you at all. That was all my own idea but I didn’t want you to know how mad I really am.’

Before she could reply, he was gone, melting into the crowd like carrot cake frosting on a hot day. When Lucy

got back to the office, she watched a grateful Letitia wolf down the cake, yet she was barely able to touch the bagel Nick had made for her. Worse, as she drove home from the station that night, the tiny flutters in her stomach told her that she was excited and a little scared. Nick had an air of danger about him, of risk, if that were possible for someone who was armed only with a butter knife.

Yet, he did have an *edge*. She'd seen the fire in his eyes when he'd told her he was going to make something of himself. She really believed he would have a great future. And what had she got to lose? What had either of them got to lose? He was gorgeous, he fancied her; they both wanted fun. He was just a slightly crazy guy who she was going to the movies with.

Or then again, maybe not, thought Lucy, as she stamped around on the steps of the Odeon the next evening. As the autumn rain rebounded off the pavements, she watched as laughing couples and groups of friends dashed into the cinema. Nick was now well over an hour late and her sense of humour was rapidly disappearing down the drain too. She could no longer deny it. It *had* been too good to be true and she ought to have known it. A gorgeous guy like Nick? Asking her out on the spur of the moment? He'd got cold feet, not that she was going to find out. Shaking her head, she ventured down the steps to have one last scan for Bagel Boy.

Spotting a Costa down the street, she headed for the door. She wondered if Nick really was a scumbag. There could be a perfectly reasonable explanation for his non-appearance. He might have had an accident, or maybe

his mobile battery was dead, or he had been urgently commandeered by MI5 to make their sandwiches. Wake up and smell the coffee, she told herself as she pushed open the door. He was never going to show anyway.