



S.T. Underdahl

Remember This

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## one

*Remember this: I love you.* It was the special saying my Nana Lucy and I had for each other, ever since I was tiny. And it was the way Nana closed all the postcards and letters she sent to me on her travels over the years. But we never anticipated the significance those words would take on the summer after I turned sixteen—when Nana Lucy unexpectedly came to live with us.

As that summer began, I wasn't thinking about any of these kinds of things. I was busy with my best friend Sukie and our plans for the future. It was Sukie who came up with the "Sukie Hollister and Lucy Kellogg Self-Improvement Project," but I agreed to enlist immediately. It wasn't that we were unpopular or anything; we had plenty of acquaintances from school, and I don't think either of our names would have made an appearance on anyone's most-hated list. And yet, after two years of languishing in the land of quasi-nobodies at Williston High School, Sukie, at least, wanted more. And once I thought about it, I did too.

"I think we should try out for cheerleading," Sukie proposed on a Sunday afternoon in March. We were lying on the floor in her room, studying for the next day's chemistry test. "It'd be a great way to get our faces out there and meet a bunch of new people."

I looked up doubtfully from the equation I was trying to solve. "Yeah, but ... *cheerleading*? Not everyone likes cheerleaders." Personally, I'd been thinking more along the lines of signing up for the school newspaper staff, or maybe trying out for the golf team. Cheerleading wasn't the kind of popularity I'd necessarily had in mind. Of the two of us, I was more the behind-the-scenes one,

the executive assistant to Sukie's CEO. It was hard to imagine myself standing before a frenzied crowd, leading everyone in cheers.

Sukie was having none of it, however. "Come *on*, Lucy," she wheedled, drawing herself up to a sitting position. "When we talked about the Self-Improvement Program, we said we'd try to step outside our comfort zones, right? Try new things? Push the *envelope*?"

"I guess." Still lying on my stomach, I felt defenseless to argue with her. "All right ... let's try out then."

And so it was decided. The next morning I signed my name beneath Sukie's on the WHS Cheer Team Tryouts list, and we began practicing. Within a few weeks, we became well-acquainted with terms like *pike* and *herkie punch*, and I often woke up in the morning to painful complaints from muscles that had never before been asked to perform in such extreme ways.

Most of our practice sessions took place at the Hollisters'; we'd discovered that the living room was ideal for working on our form, since one entire wall was covered with mirrors. By mid-May, however, two weeks before tryouts, Sukie's mom had grown tired of all the jumping around. "Girls, I swear you're going to shake the light fixture right out of the ceiling," she admonished, looking upwards worriedly to where the shiny brass fixture was, indeed, swaying gently. "I hate to rain on your parade, but you're going to have to find somewhere else to practice."

"But Mo-om," Sukie protested, twisting her dark brown ponytail around one finger the way she always does when she's frustrated, "tryouts are a week from Wednesday; how are we supposed to work on our jumps if we can't watch ourselves?"

"You can watch each other," Mrs. Hollister told her firmly. "The living room is not a place for all this wild leaping around. How about the basement, or maybe the back yard?"

"Oh, fine," sighed Sukie, picking up her homemade practice pom-poms with a swish of annoyance. "But just so you know, the basement ceiling is too low. What if Lucy hits her head and her parents sue us?"

I nodded supportively, although I'd never known my parents to sue anyone.

Mrs. Hollister didn't look too concerned. "Hmm, well, try the back yard then,"

she advised.

Sukie sighed dramatically at this suggestion. “Have you ever tried jumping in grass?” she grumbled at her mother. “I guess we’re stuck with the garage.”

“Yep, sounds good,” Mrs. Hollister agreed. If the image of us whacking our shins on stray bicycles and lawn mowers, or slipping in spilled motor oil worried her, she didn’t show it. “Oh, and Sukie,” she added, heading out of the room, “I just finished the Sanibel Island piece, if you wouldn’t mind proofing it for me after Lucy leaves.” Mrs. Hollister is a freelance travel writer, and ever since we were in middle school she’s been paying Sukie to edit her stuff. She says Sukie has a better eye than any professional editor she knows, and Sukie likes making the money, no matter how much she complains. Plus, I know it makes her feel good that her mother trusts her feedback on her writing.

Now, however, Sukie made her “save-me-*please*” face at me. I’ve always envied my best friend her light gray eyes; their color is almost ghostly, and everyone is always commenting on how unusual they are. My own eyes are boring blue—which my mom says is a perfect complement to my curly, reddish-brown hair and fair complexion. Even so, I wouldn’t mind if there was something “unusual” about me, as long as it wasn’t something strange like an extra toe or a streak of hair that grew in completely white. It’s not like I want to stand out that much, but next to Sukie, I sometimes feel awfully *un*-remarkable.

“I think I’m ready for a break, anyway,” I told Sukie now. The idea of continuing our practice in the humid space of the garage didn’t sound especially appealing. “What’ve you got to drink?”

“Yeah, let’s check it out,” Sukie agreed. We headed towards the kitchen to see what it had to offer.

Despite all the time I’ve spent at Sukie’s house over the years, the kitchen still comes as a surprise. The Hollisters’ house is always in a comfortable state of disarray (something my own mother would never tolerate), but the kitchen crosses over into the realm of disaster area. Sukie’s mom uses one of the spare bedrooms as her official office, but her drafts and writing materials tend to spill out onto the kitchen table and countertops, where they join the general chaos of old mail, newspapers, unfolded laundry, and other miscellaneous items that end up piled on every available surface. Today, Sukie had to clear away a stack of

reference books, a messily refolded map, a tower of clean bowls someone had unloaded from the dishwasher, and the family cat, Herman Muenster, from the kitchen table before we could find a place to sit and enjoy the bottled Starbucks Frappuccinos we found in the fridge.

“So, you think we’ll make it?” Sukie asked, setting her bottle back down into the wet ring of condensation it had made on the oak kitchen table. I looked around, wondering where the Hollisters kept their coasters, or whether they even had any.

“What, the cheer team?” I asked rhetorically. Of course, I knew exactly what she meant. “I don’t know ... I’m not feeling too confident for myself, that’s for sure.” The question of whether or not we’d make one of the cheerleading squads was our favorite topic of conversation these days, and a debate we never tired of having. “Your jumps are a lot better than mine, so I’m sure *you’ll* make it. Mine pretty much suck.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sukie scoffed. After two months, this script was sounding a bit worn, even to us. “I’m always forgetting the words, and besides, your arm motions are way tighter than mine. Your bones must be straighter or something. And as far as jumps go ... your toe touch is amazing, and we both know it.”

“Yeah, but your split jump is way better. And besides, you’ve got a voice like a foghorn.”

“Well you’ve got the face of an angel ... a *Hell’s Angel*,” Sukie retorted, and we both busted up laughing. That’s one of the great things about Sukie; no one can think of a snappy comeback like she can.

“What are you two chickadees guffawing about now?” asked Mr. Hollister, coming into the kitchen. Sukie’s dad is a pilot for Delta, so he’s away for long stretches, then home in between. When he’s around, he likes to putter in the kitchen or the yard; he’s always showing us seedlings he’s starting under a sunlamp in the basement, or cooking up some exotic new dish he ate on his last jaunt to Rome or Paris.

“Nothing, Dad,” Sukie told him, still grinning. “Just goofing around.”

“Uh-huh.” Mr. Hollister seemed to be searching for something. He lifted the cover of the breadbox, then peered inside the fridge. “Do you know where your

mother keeps the garlic?” he asked Sukie finally.

“Regular garlic or vampire garlic?” she asked. “If you’re looking for vampire garlic, it’s in the hall closet next to the wooden stakes.”

Mr. Hollister smiled at Sukie fondly. “Silly girl,” he said, winking at me, “everyone knows that vampire season is in the fall. Why, the werewolf kittens are barely stumbling out of their dens this time of year ...”

“Werewolf *puppies*,” Sukie corrected him. “And perhaps you’ve forgotten that I’m the one who handled that awful unicorn infestation while you were gone?”

“Ah ...” Mr. Hollister nodded. “That’s *right* ... I guess that explains why the lawn looks so unusually well-fertilized this spring.”

I smiled patiently and took another sip of my Frappuccino. Sukie and her dad are always joking around like this; they’re a regular Abbott and Costello. My dad and I get along fine, too, but it’s not like I have a buddy-buddy relationship with him like Sukie and her dad have.

Now Mr. Hollister was rummaging around in one of the cupboards. “Aha!” he exclaimed, catching several spice jars as they came tumbling out. After returning them to the cupboard, he reached for something in the back and produced a small, square box containing a papery bulb of garlic. “There you are, my fragrant little friend!”

He turned to me and Sukie. “Actually,” he told us, “I’m transplanting some rose bushes. Garlic is a great companion plant; keeps the bugs away.”

Sukie raised her eyebrows. “Mom’s not going to like it if the whole yard starts smelling like Mama Rosa’s Italian Bistro.”

“Look, Lady,” Mr. Hollister told her in his gangster voice, “you just let me deal with the Feds.” He closed the cupboard door, humming. “And how are you today, Lucy?”

“Um, I’m fine,” I mumbled. Sukie’s dad is tall and gray-haired. I’d never say this to Sukie, but he’s actually pretty hot-looking for a dad. In fact, I always get a little tongue-tied when he talks to me directly. Even if Mr. Hollister weren’t so good looking in that I-Fly-747s kind of way, it would still make me nervous when Sukie and her dad get to joking around with each other. Basically, I think I worry that they’ll expect me to jump in and I won’t be able to think of anything interesting to say.

“Sukie tells me that cheerleading tryouts are coming up soon,” he said.

“Mm-hm,” I nodded. *Note to self: Work on improving conversational skills.*

“Well, I’m sure you’ll both do fine,” Mr. Hollister predicted, tossing the garlic bulb into the air with one hand and snatching it back with the other. “You’ll probably make the A-team or whatever it’s called.”

“It’s called a *squad*, Dad,” Sukie informed him. “*The A-Team* is that cheesy 1980s TV show.” She drained the last of her drink and set the empty bottle down on the table. “Speaking of which,” she said, turning to me, “we’d better head to the garage to finish practicing.”

“Maybe we should call it a day,” I suggested. The idea of jumping around with a belly full of sloshing Frappuccino didn’t sound so great all of a sudden. “I probably ought to head home anyway; I’m supposed to work the dinner shift at the AO. And your mom wants you to read that article she wrote ...”

Sukie looked like she was going to protest, but changed her mind. “I guess we can pick it up tomorrow,” she agreed. We walked outside to the driveway, where I’d left my bike. “I could give you a ride home in Olive,” she offered, “except I don’t know how we’d do with your bike.”

I shrugged. “That’s okay. I don’t mind riding. Besides, how would I get to work without it?”

We’d both gotten our licenses in February, but since my mom was a stay-at-home mom, my parents weren’t in the financial position to buy any of us kids a car. But even before I took my driver’s test, I’d started saving up, and I was hoping to have enough for a decent used car by the time school started again in the fall. Along with the money Nana Lucy had sent for my birthday, I was counting on money from my hostess job at the Adobe Oven (aka the AO) to put me over the top.

The idea of driving myself to school next fall, battling for a parking place like most of the other kids my age, was truly sweet. My future car didn’t have to be anything fancy; all I was hoping for was something with four wheels, a steering column, and most importantly, a motor. And something that allowed me to hook up my iPod, of course ... okay, maybe I did want a decent car.

Sukie’s parents, on the other hand, had driven her straight to Stockman Motors car lot after she got her license. She’d picked out her new car, a pea-green

Volkswagen Beetle she named Olive. Sukie often complained about being an only child, but it seemed to me that there were quite a few advantages.

As I pedaled up the driveway to my house on Chess Drive, a warm May breeze whispered that summer weather was just around the corner. It stirred feelings of both sadness and anticipation; the school year was ending, but the long, open days of summer lay ahead. Of course, I'd be putting in a lot of hours at the AO, but there'd still be plenty of time for bumming around with Sukie, working on our Self-Improvement Program, and—if everything worked out as expected—*cheerleading practice*.

Bikes, sporting gear, and lawn equipment littered our driveway, and inside the garage I could see my younger brother, Michael, moving dead leaves and other debris slowly across the garage floor with a heavy push broom. “Uh-oh,” I said sympathetically. “What did you do?”

“Nothing.” Michael shook his head, but looked miffed. “Dad said he'd pay me ten bucks if I ‘helped’ him clean out the garage. Then he conveniently got a long distance phone call and left me to do the whole thing myself.”

“That sucks.”

“Tell me about it.”

I suppose I could have offered to help, but I was worn out from all the practicing at Sukie's. Parking my bike outside with the others, I went into the house.

My parents were sitting at the kitchen table, their usual coffee mugs sitting in front of each of them. “Hey, the garage looks good,” I commented, thinking that maybe Dad had forgotten his promise to help Michael.

“Oh, Lucy, you're back.” Mom smiled distractedly at me. “How was practice?” Dad only sat, staring at his coffee and looking upset.

“Uh, it was fine,” I told Mom, suddenly uneasy. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen my parents both looking so grim. “What's going on? Is something ... wrong?”

## two

Mom shook her head, but the little worried line between her eyes did nothing to reassure me. “Everything’s fine, dear,” she told me. “It’s just that ... well, Daddy just got off the phone with Aunt Carol, and she’s a little worried about Nana Lucy.”

Nana Lucy is my dad’s mother, who we only get to see a few times a year. While we live on the western edge of North Dakota, she lives hundreds of miles away in Minneapolis. She’s my favorite grandmother—and the reason I’m named Lucy. Kellogg legend has it that when I was born, Dad took one look at my blue eyes and wavy hair already tinged with red and knew I would grow up to be the spitting image of Nana Lucy. He insisted that I be named after her, and nothing Mom said could change his mind. So, as a compromise, I was named Lucy Margaret Kellogg, since Margaret was the name of my mom’s mother. I never got to meet Grandma Margaret; she passed away before I was born. Even Serena barely remembers her.

Nana Lucy is one of my favorite people in the world, and I’m hers, of course. She lives in a little apartment in Minneapolis that looks out over Lake Calhoun. It’s filled with all sorts of interesting things from her travels. After my grandfather, Sam Kellogg, passed away, Nana Lucy decided it was time that she see some things, and so she began signing up for “Senior Tours,” the sort that take old people all over the United States, and even to other countries.

On one of her trips, she visited Europe with a group from her alma mater, Carleton College, and sent me a delicate snow globe from Paris that had a tiny

replica of the Eiffel Tower inside. I keep it on my nightstand, and every time I look at it I picture a tiny Nana Lucy waving to me from the observation deck, a glass of elegant French champagne in her other hand.

Since I'm her namesake, Nana Lucy is always available by phone if I need advice, and she always sends me a special "From Lucy to Lucy" gift at Christmas. For years, it was beautiful porcelain dolls in elegant hand-stitched dresses. Even though they're not really my thing anymore, they still stand in a silent row across the top of my bookcase, posed like contestants in a beauty pageant.

Last year, thankfully, Nana Lucy finally broke with tradition and sent me two special presents: a necklace made of delicate milky pearls, and a tiny porcelain box in the shape of a cherry.

"No fair, you got two gifts," my little sister, Rachel, protested. She didn't look too upset, however. She'd just torn open her gift from Nana Lucy, which was a magic set, something she'd been wanting for months. I suspected, in fact, that Mom might have suggested the gift to Nana Lucy.

"You'll have to take special care of these, Lucy," Mom warned me as she examined the pearls. "I think this is the necklace that Grandpa Sam gave her for their fortieth wedding anniversary. It's an awfully expensive gift to give a teenage girl," she added, a faint note of disapproval in her voice.

"I know," I told her, slightly annoyed. Honestly. It's not like I'm six or anything. I've always taken good care of my "Lucy to Lucy" gifts. I was already planning to put the fragile porcelain box high up on a shelf in my room, and keep the pearls in Dad's fireproof office safe. Teenage girls don't wear a lot of pearls these days, but I felt good that Nana Lucy trusted me enough to give me some of her nice jewelry. It always seemed as if Mom felt a little funny about my special relationship with Nana Lucy, but maybe I was only imagining it. But now, in the kitchen, my mother's face was serious for a different reason.

"What do you mean, 'Aunt Carol is worried about Nana Lucy'?" I asked. "Why would she be worried?"

It had been a while since Nana had come to visit or sent any of her famous postcards, but I could easily bring to mind the luxurious scent of her Dior perfume and the scratchy feeling of her wool jacket against my cheek as she

hugged me hello. When my grandfather was alive, they'd owned an upscale ladies' clothing store; even after they'd sold it and retired, Nana had continued to dress stylishly. She was a small woman, and sometimes she reminded me of one of the immaculately dressed dolls that stood atop my bookcase.

Mom opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, Dad pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "I'd better get outside," he muttered. "I promised I'd help Michael with the garage."

As the door closed behind Dad, our dog, Scooby, wandered sleepily out from under the table. Stretching one leg behind him, he opened his mouth and yawned a yawn so big it ended in a little yelp.

"Did we wake you, Scooby-Woobie?" Mom cooed, reaching down to lift him into her lap. Dad calls Scooby a "purebred brown dog," because he's the kind of dog that's such a mixture of breeds it's impossible to tell where he started out. Scooby has big dark eyes like a Chihuahua, but his coat is a disorganized mixture of brown and white fur that's of all different lengths growing in various directions, like whoever made Scooby kept losing their place.

Now Scooby settled against Mom with a satisfied sigh, and resumed his nap. "What's wrong with Nana?" I asked again, frustrated that no one was telling me anything.

Mom stroked Scooby and motioned for me to sit down in Dad's chair. "Well," she said when I was settled, "Aunt Carol called because she visited Nana Lucy last week, and found that she hadn't been keeping her place up like she usually does. You know how Nana's always been so particular about those things."

I nodded. Whenever we'd visited Nana Lucy's apartment in Triumph Towers, there was never a speck of dust or an unwashed dish anywhere in sight. When it came to standards for housekeeping, she was more strict than Mom.

"It wasn't just that things weren't tidy," Mom continued. "Carol found spoiled food in the refrigerator, and when she went to make up the guest bed, she discovered that the entire linen closet was crammed with boxes of cereal and cookies."

I laughed in spite of myself. "Maybe Lunds had a sale." Nana always said that Lunds grocery store was the only place she'd ever buy her food. Still, it did seem a little strange that she'd buy so much cereal. As long as I'd known her, Nana

Lucy had enjoyed tea and toast every day for breakfast. And the cookies ... well, that was strange too.

Suddenly I felt agitated, like I was going to jump out of my skin. I wondered whether the Starbucks I'd had at Sukie's was having some kind of delayed effect.

Mom shook her head, still looking serious. "I'm afraid there's more, Lucy. Carol said that Nana's suitcases were still packed with dirty clothes from her last trip, and that the clothes she was wearing didn't seem very ... fresh. She helped her get everything in order again, and cleaned up, but she felt funny leaving Nana by herself. And the worst thing," Mom added, as if everything else hadn't been enough, "was that when Carol got back to Madison and called Nana to tell her she'd arrived safely, Nana started talking about their visit to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Nana said that she'd gone with 'a lovely young friend'; she didn't seem to remember that it had been Carol herself. Carol's wondering whether Nana Lucy even remembers much of her visit."

I was silent. There was no way to explain away all of that. "What does Dad think?" I asked.

"He's very worried, of course. It was hard for him to even talk about it. His grandmother, Nana's mother, had Alzheimer's disease."

"Alzheimer's disease?" I repeated. Nana Lucy couldn't have Alzheimer's disease; everyone was clearly overreacting. "But ... isn't that where people leave the stove on and forget how to dress themselves? So what if Nana let the housekeeping slide and forgot to check the expiration date on the milk? Everyone *knows* she always eats out, anyway. And you know her sense of humor. I'm sure she was only teasing Aunt Carol."

It was hard for me to believe that Nana Lucy could suddenly have something like Alzheimer's disease. Not the Nana Lucy whose shoes always matched her bag and who always had funny, gossipy stories about the ladies in her Bunco club. "Besides," I said firmly, "aren't there doctors for these things? Can't they do some sort of test?"

Mom nodded. "Yes," she said, "You're right on both counts. That's part of the reason Carol called. She wants your father to talk to Nana Lucy about having an evaluation."

I thought for a minute. The image I had of a person with Alzheimer's disease was a far cry from my lively, fun grandmother with the sparkling blue eyes full of *joie de vivre* (something we'd learned about in French class).

"When is Dad going to talk to her?"

"He's trying to decide," Mom told me. "It won't be an easy conversation." She sighed. "There's another part. Whatever the outcome of the evaluation, Carol doesn't think Nana Lucy should be living alone anymore, especially since she's so far away from everyone. Carol and Uncle Paul want her to come and live with them, but Paul's scheduled for back surgery in June and Carol doesn't think it's a great idea to have Nana Lucy moving in at the same time."

"So ... what, then?" I asked. I couldn't imagine what Nana Lucy was going to say about everyone planning her life like this.

"Well, that's kind of a question right now," Mom said. "Your father and I are thinking that Nana Lucy could come to stay with us for a few months, just until Paul and Carol are ready for her. How bad could it be?" The last comment seemed directed more to herself than to me.

"Bad?" I repeated, surprised. "I think it's a *great* idea!" With Nana Lucy's fashion sense, she'd be an invaluable source of advice for the Self-Improvement Program. Besides, maybe after Nana Lucy spent some time with us she'd pull it together and whatever problems she was having would clear up. I smiled, thinking how nice it would be to have Nana Lucy in the house for the summer. "She can sleep with me," I volunteered.

Mom looked at me, but didn't say anything at first. Finally, she nodded. "We're taking things one step at a time," she murmured. "Once Nana gets here, we'll schedule her for the evaluation. Maybe there's some other explanation for all of this."

"There probably is," I agreed, trying to smile confidently, and wishing that my face could convince my heart that it was true.

...of course, news, ...  
...but, only news ...

BY AIR MAIL  
PAR AVION  
Royal Mail



Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede Dinner & Show.

June 9th.

Dearest Lucy,

Enjoying the musical offerings here in Brandon, Wisconsin. This afternoon we attended a performance by a nice young man named Kenny Chestnut (or something like that). He pulled me from the crowd and sang right to me... I think I'll marry him if he asks me! Remember this: I love you!

Mama Lucy  
(the future Mrs Chestnut)

QUEBEC CITY,  
View from Lévis

Lucy,  
For another card of the Dixie Stampede... a wonderful opportunity to see things like this in the heart of Quebec City. This is the best I've ever had a time to see you!

Lucy  
Dixie Stampede  
3847 1347154

...with ...  
...and we ...  
...who was older. ...  
...She laughed, but I ...  
...he appreciated it!  
...I love you!

## three

I'd agreed to work the dinner shift at the AO that night, so around 4:30 I tracked down my official AO uniform (a white peasant blouse that was too puffy for my taste, and a red cotton skirt with cheesy flowers embroidered around the hem) and hopped on my bike. Riding a bicycle across town in that sort of get-up generally invites pseudo-hilarious comments from people lucky enough to have cars, so I usually travel the back streets most of the way.

When I pulled up outside the Adobe Oven, I was greeted by the familiar strains of the mariachi CD that pretty much plays nonstop. Cherilyn and Donna, my two favorite waitresses, call it the *banda de sonido de mi vida*, the soundtrack of their lives. Even though I don't speak Spanish, in the two months since I'd started working at the AO I'd learned most of the songs through simple osmosis.

When I walked inside, both waitresses were standing by the hostess station, waiting for me. "Good news, *bonita*," Cherilyn said, her plump face gleaming. Of all the waitresses, Cherilyn is the only one who actually speaks Spanish.

"Frank found religion and decided to give me a raise?" I suggested hopefully. Frank was the manager, and while I knew a raise was unlikely, there was nothing wrong with optimism.

Donna rolled her eyes. "If anyone should be getting a raise, it's me," she snorted. "When I got home last night my feet were so tired I could barely push the vacuum." Donna and Cherilyn were always complaining about their feet, and I was sorry I'd unintentionally introduced the topic.

“Don’t even get me started, Dee,” Cherilyn commiserated. She opened her mouth to top Donna’s sore foot story, so I interrupted.

“Well, what’s up?”

It worked; Cherilyn seemed to remember where she’d started. She nudged Donna. “Do you want to tell her or should I?”

Donna forgot about her feet and grinned, the friendly creases around her eyes deepening. “Frank hired a new dishwasher,” she told me. “Looks like he’s about your age and *awfully* cute ... we thought maybe you should go back to the kitchen and say hello.”

Ever since I’d started at the AO, Donna and Cherilyn were always badgering me about my not having a boyfriend. It appeared that they’d finally hit upon a prospect right under our own fake-clay roof. I don’t know why either one of them was on such a mission to find me a boyfriend; to hear them tell it, neither of them has had great histories with men. Donna has a cap on the broken front tooth her ex-husband gave her and says she’ll never get married again, while Cherilyn has three kids from two different fathers; both fathers are currently serving time in the penitentiary. Apparently she hasn’t learned, however. Even though it’s supposed to be a big secret, everyone at the AO knows that she and Frank are hooking up. Donna and I always give each other a look when they disappear to the downstairs office for a “meeting.”

As I opened my mouth to ask a few questions about the hotness quotient of the new dishwasher, the front door jangled a warning. The dinner rush was about to begin, and the waitresses scattered. Frank doesn’t like them hanging around the cash register; he says it looks unprofessional. Frank’s a couple years younger than Cherilyn and a lot younger than Donna, which makes it seem strange that he’s in charge. Everyone goes along with it, even though some of his rules seem silly, even to me.

“Welcome to the Adobe Oven.” I smiled sweetly, greeting the two couples who had come in. “Will it be four today?” They seemed impressed with my counting abilities, and nodded as I pulled four menus from the menu rack. “Did you have a seating preference?”

I seated them at a table in Donna’s section, then walked back across the restaurant, trying not to be obvious about glancing through the serving window

into the kitchen. Unfortunately, Lupe, the head cook, and Julio, his assistant, were blocking my view of the new dishwasher.

“Hey there, beautiful,” Doug the bartender called from behind the bar, where he was busy refilling the condiment bins. “What’s new?”

I smiled at him. For an older guy, Doug was pretty cute, and always fun to flirt with. “Not much,” I called. “What’s up with you?”

“Still taking on oxygen,” he replied with a wink. “Catch.” He tossed me a green olive, which I caught in mid-air.

I popped it in my mouth. “*Gracias, amigo.*” He grinned. I like Doug a lot; when the restaurant is slow, he’ll sometimes surprise me with a colorful, fruity cocktail decorated with umbrellas. Alcohol-free, of course. He knows I’m only sixteen.

“Anytime, *mamacita.*”

When I arrived back at the hostess station, I tried to figure out how to take another shot at checking out the new dishwasher. There was no harm in looking, after all, especially since both Donna and Cherilyn seemed in agreement that he was worth seeing.

Aside from any self-serving reasons, I was glad for Lupe that Frank had finally hired someone to help out. The old dishwasher was a slacker named Charles, who had been fired after Lupe caught him swishing his arm around in the salsa barrel clear up to his hairy armpit. Under Lupe’s interrogation, Charles finally admitted that he’d been fishing for his lighter, which he’d accidentally dropped into the salsa. Frank had fired him on the spot and told Julio to pour the whole barrel of salsa down the disposal. Lupe was pretty ticked about it, since he’d just finished making the new batch of salsa that morning.

Charles’ departure meant that Julio was drafted into the role of dishwasher, leaving Lupe with no assistant to help him with food prep when things got busy, as they often did. Donna told me that Lupe had threatened to quit unless Frank found him a new dishwasher.

The front door swung open again and stayed open as the trickle of customers became the steady stream of a typical Saturday night dinner rush. I was so busy seating customers and ringing up tickets that for the next two hours I didn’t have any time to think about what was going on back in the kitchen, other than to ask,

“And how was everything?” when customers came up to pay their bills.

“Great!” or “Man, I’m stuffed!” were the usual responses. Being the hostess at a restaurant where the food was fantastic wasn’t too difficult. Although the AO was the only Mexican restaurant in Williston, it would have killed the competition had there been any. Lupe’s homemade tortillas were soft and fragrant, and he personally chose only the freshest produce from the local vendors. His *moles* were redolent with spices and people came from miles around to order his *cocina especial*.

I knew I was Lupe’s favorite; he often called me back to the kitchen to sample a new batch of salsa, and had even given me the recipe for it when I’d asked. “What?” Donna exclaimed indignantly when I told her. “He never gives anyone that recipe!” She looked so disgruntled that I didn’t dare tell her that lemon juice was the secret ingredient in Lupe’s *mariscos* tacos.

The flow of customers hit a momentary lull around eight thirty, leaving me with a few minutes to lean on the counter, catch my breath, and think about things that were lurking around the edges of my mind, muttering impatiently for attention.

I was still digesting the news about Nana Lucy. I’d also been thinking, on the ride to work, that Sukie and I didn’t have much more time to practice for cheerleading tryouts. As much as we’d talked the subject to death, we had no idea how many girls were trying out this year. What we *did* know was that Sarah Kenwood and her friends were trying out. Everything about those girls was perfect; perfect clothes, perfect hair, perfect bodies ... no Self-Improvement Program needed. There were four girls in Sarah’s group: Lauren, Fiona, Peyton, and Sarah herself. If they were all trying out, it pretty much guaranteed that they’d be chosen for four of the eight available spots on the cheer team next fall. “That sucks,” I muttered, thinking out loud.

“What’s that, honey?” Donna asked. She’d appeared out of nowhere. Tucking her order pad into the pocket of her skirt, she leaned on the hostess desk, looking worn out. In the light from the lamp hanging overhead, I could see the fine film of perspiration that glistened on her forehead and dampened her blonde hair at the temples. “Whew, I’m getting too old for this,” she sighed, as she always did.

“Oh, Donna, you’re not old,” I assured her, as I always did when she said this.

Sometimes it seemed like life was just a series of scripts. The truth was, everyone at the AO seemed kind of old to me; it wasn't like a normal food service job at the Burger Barn or Dairy Queen, where most of the workers were kids and the only adults were management. On the other hand, I liked everyone I worked with at the AO, and being the hostess made me feel more mature.

“So, did you get a look at the new guy yet?” she asked, “He’s a cutie and a half.”

I shook my head. “It’s been so crazy in here that I forgot all about Mr. Right with the dishpan hands.”

“Nothing wrong with a man with dishpan hands,” Donna pointed out. “Far better than beer elbow.” She mimed bringing a bottle to her lips.

I nodded, figuring she should know. “All right,” I told her, “you’ve convinced me. If you watch for customers, I’ll go back to the kitchen and check out the new suds muffin.”

“*Suds muffin?*” Donna cracked up. “I can’t wait to tell Cherilyn that one! You’re funny, girl!”

I left her, still chuckling, at the hostess station and made my way towards the kitchen. Through the food service opening, I could see Lupe scraping away at the grill while Julio worked the set-up area. There was usually a final evening rush around ten, but now they had some down time to get everything reorganized.

Behind Lupe, I could see the new dishwasher toiling away at the sink, rinsing dishes. Even from a distance, I could see muscular shoulders under his gray T-shirt, the back of which was stained with a damp V of perspiration. His hair was dark, too, and curled damply against his neck in the back.

“Hey there, Chef,” I greeted Lupe as I came through the door into the kitchen. “So you lived to fight another day?”

A grin lit up Lupe’s heat-flushed face; the kitchen was hot as a steam bath. “Eh, eh, it’s the hostess with the most-est!” he called out fondly, as he always did when I dropped by the kitchen for a visit. “Are you hungry, *Lucita*? How about a nice *quesadilla* ...”

“Thanks, Lupe, but I just dropped by to say hello,” I told him. “I hear Frank finally found you a new dishwasher.”

Lupe scowled. “He is too young,” he told me gruffly, as if the dishwasher wasn’t standing right behind him, within earshot of every word.

Before I could find out what Lupe considered to be the minimum qualifying age to scrub pots and pans, the new dishwasher finished with rinsing out the sink and turned, stripping off his heavy rubber gloves. “Can I take a break?” he asked Lupe. “I really need to use the john.”

Lupe threw his hands up in the air hopelessly, as if this confirmed every doubt he’d had about the new dishwasher. “Go, go,” he ordered hopelessly.

The dishwasher started to leave, but stopped when he saw me. “Hey,” he said. “I know you ... you’re *Lucy*, right?”

I stared at him, my mouth open, but no available breath to assist in a response. “Uh, yeah,” I managed, finally. “Well, um, I’d better go back to ...” I was momentarily unable to think what to call my post at the front of the restaurant. Spinning on my heel, I turned and fled. I nearly knocked over Julio, who was on his way to the big fridge.

Donna was gone when I arrived back at the hostess station. I saw her across the room, seating an elderly couple that had come in for a late dinner. It was just as well; I needed some time to regroup. The dishwasher had been right—he looked familiar to me, too. In fact, I knew *exactly* who he was: Sukie’s arch enemy, aka He Who Shall Not Be Named.

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