

## A Ray of Hope

Lucy sat in the car park staring at the square grey factory, the one with the tall chimney that could be seen for miles. They had passed it often, and used it as a landmark to get their bearings when she and her husband first moved to Wales.

She was nervous and beginning to feel a bit clammy, negative thoughts filled her head. I don't want to go in there, I want to go home. How had it come to this? Living in the back of beyond with no husband and two daughters to support? And how could I even consider going to work in a god-dam awful soup factory?

Wiping a tear from her eyes, she checked her face in the mirror. She was still attractive, for a woman approaching her thirty fifth birthday. Her long curly natural blonde hair and big blue eyes were her best assets. If her neck had been longer and her nose a bit straighter, she could have been a top model.

"Pull yourself together girl" she said to herself, "get a grip, we may be down but we ain't finished yet." She was good at the self-bravado act, it had helped her through some low moments and there had been plenty of them recently.

She swung her long legs out of the car and caught a glimpse of her shoes, she knew she should be wearing something flat and comfortable but vanity had won the day. The red stilettos may have looked good but they did not help with the walk across to the factory, her legs felt wobbly and liable to collapse at any time. Taking a deep breath, and with her head held high, she tried look confident even if she was falling apart inside.

She was met at the door by the supervisor, a severe looking woman of slight build, her overall just concealing a bag-o-bones figure. A gentleman's hair haircut sat on top of a deeply tanned face it looked like old leather that had been creased by the sun.

"Toilets are over there," she said, pointing with out stretched arm. "No smoking, no drinking, and no eating on the factory floor. This is Josie," she continued, but was now pointing at a rotund woman who was rolling towards them. "She'll show you the ropes." The supervisor then strutted off down the aisle leaving Lucy in the hands of the plump stranger with the rosy red cheeks and cabbage patch smile.

"Blimey, she's a bit abrupt isn't she?" Said Lucy.

"Yeah, I suppose she is," Josie replied, "but don't worry, we don't see much of her. As long as things are running smoothly, she spends most of her time in her office or out the back smoking."

Every inch of the factory floor had been taken up with machines and conveyors that were involved in the soup making process. It had all the noise of a fun-fair, the conveyors sounding similar to a roller coaster, the only thing that was missing was the joyful screams and the smell of candy-floss. Here the odour was unpleasantly pungent. Lucy recognised the stringent smell of onions mixed with the sweetness of carrots and peas. It was a strangemix, and made her wonder if she would be able to face having soup again?

While Lucy was being fixed-up with an overall and hairnet Josie took the opportunity to ask her some questions.

"Have you worked in a factory before Lucy?"

"No"

"Are you married?"

“Was”

“You don’t come from Wales do you?”

“No, Lucy snapped.”

“I’m sorry,” said Josie, “I didn’t meant to offend.”

“It’s alright” said Lucy, it’s my fault. When I’m nervous I get a bit touchy. There’s really not that much to tell. I lived in London where I worked as a clerk in a bank. Then ten years ago I moved to Wales with my husband who wanted to start a fishing business. We had two children, then about six months ago he just sailed off into the sunset and never came back. I thought of packing up and going back to London, but I have fallen in love with Wales. It is a great place to bring up the kids; they are settled in their schools and there is less noise and traffic. I’m not looking forward to working in this factory, but if I am to stay in Wales I need to give it my best shot.

Josie gave her a sympathetic look and took her out on to the line where she gave instructions to Lucy as thousands of tomatoes went past on the conveyor belt. “Make sure that they are all the right way up, take out any bad ones and make sure that there are no stalks attached.” It sounded simple but the speed at which they were passing meant that she would have to concentrate. The end of the shift couldn’t come fast enough for Lucy. This was hard work but she knew she would just have to get used to it.

At 1 o’clock a whistle blew and the conveyor finally ground to halt for a half-hour lunch break. Josie took the opportunity to introduced Lucy to the other girls while they ate their food in a small refreshment area that was cordoned off from the shop floor by a row of lockers. The banter was friendly and she was made to feel welcome. They talked about going to the cinema and invited her to come along and play bingo with them at the club on Wednesday night.

Josie also introduced her to the handsome labourer who had a bit of a reputation with the women, “Watch out for this one, thinks he’s Tom Jones, don’t you boyo.”

Lucy returned his smile and was sure that he winked at her, an emotion stirred somewhere deep inside that raised the hairs on the nape of her neck. Perhaps life in the soup factory wouldn’t be so bad after all.