

Minestrone

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"Alicia, we need a chef's salad," yelled Doreen, a plump woman with curly hair and blue eyes, ripping down the green ticket. She threw the ticket on top of the silver metal shelves full of stacked dishes, which separated the cooks from the kitchen, and went back to making her omelet.

The kitchen always smelled like a combination of foods mixed with an overcast of grease. Next to the dishes sat a steam table that kept the soup and gravies warm. Silver ladle ends poked through the holes in the lids.

"Alright," I replies, taking my right hand off the water sprayer and laying down the white oblong dinner plate in my left hand. I didn't mind going into the walk-in because the cool room was refreshing compared to the hot kitchen. I pulled open the door to the chilly haven and gathered my supplies.

The walk-in was fairly organized with brown crates of eggs stacked on top of one another, wax-lined cardboard boxes full of vegetables, tubs of dressings and condiments, and half-way thawed meats. Different sized pieces of food products had fallen to the floor and mixed with light condiment spills, and raw meat drips, giving the floor a slight stickiness. The walk-in was not part of the everyday cleaning. It was a forgotten area that got the works once a month.

With my arms full I headed out the walk-in door to the long, pale, wood counter to make my chef salad. Making the salads was more rewarding to me than scraping the little chewed-up pieces of meat, left-over sandwich ends, and half-eaten sunny-side eggs off the plates. This was the one part of my job I enjoyed; I tried

to be creative with each salad.

"Hurry up. We need to get the soup switched. We are running low," yelled the coarse-voiced, red-haired chef. She was a lady with a rough face and a tough demeanor, not my favorite of the cooks. She had no time for games. It was all business to Sue.

"Alright, alright," I replied humbly. I never talked back to Sue. She scared me. I was a dishwasher and only fourteen and the youngest of the crew. I was thought to be young and able and I worked hard to earn my \$3.25 an hour.

Placing the green ticket under the perfect salad sitting on a perfectly round salad plate, I gathered the stuff I had not used and headed into the walk-in for the soup. I put away the cheese and meats and left-over veggies and bent down to pick up a tall, silver, cylinder-shaped metal container with a curved bottom. It was filled to the rim with freshly made minestrone soup. I clenched my fingers around the edges of the silver container and in an instant my right-hand's fingers slipped and my life flashed before my eyes. The brand new vat of soup spilled out all over the walk-in floor. As fast as I could I grabbed it back up, but the damage had been done.

"Shit, what did I just do?" I asked myself out loud.

Half of the brownish-red, small bits of chunky soup had spilled from the container and it was oozing in every direction. I could feel my blood pressure rise. My body started to heat up. The buzz of the walk-in air conditioner was no longer cooling me. My haven had become a hell.

The owners of the Chez Paris were not kind people. They were fat, thrifty, loud mouth Italians. They owned both the Chez Paris and Cavallario's steak house next door. I never saw Mrs. Cavallario's face. Too scared to look in her eyes, I would only see her plump body and dark hair blow through the place every now

and again to complain about something and then leave. Mr. Cavallario was a short, gray-haired man who wore glasses on the tip of his large nose. He spoke to me only once, while I was peeling potatoes. "You're wasting too much of the potato. Potatoes cost money," he had grumbled at me.

My manager, the Cavallario's daughter, Christine, looked exactly like the wicked witch of the west, only missing the green. She was only as friendly as she had to be to keep people from quitting.

I stood looking at the mess thinking about the monsters called the Cavallarios and I was deathly afraid to tell the cooks what I had done. The soup was made next door and it was to last for a couple of days. It was made fresh and there was no back-up soup. My stomach was tight and my nerves were so activated that I felt numb. My eyes went side to side and my heart pumped and my breathing sped up. *How can I get out of this? I should just quit. I am going to get fired for sure if I tell them.*

I looked at the walk-in floor, than back at the minestrone, and did the only thing I thought could save me from the apocalypse of my life. I made scoops with my hands and started scooping. Faster and faster I slopped and scooped the minestrone back into the tin, scraping the excess off on the rim. I was scooping the soup off the cardboard boxes, scooping the soup from around the metal shelf poles. I worked as fast as I could, with not a thought in my head, only a mission to get rid of any remains of soup.

Standing up with the blood of the soup on both my hands, I looked around and wondered if I had done the right thing. *Had I made a rash decision?* I knew there was no turning back now. I had contaminated the clean soup with the floor soup.

No time for regrets, I thought, and checked my

surroundings for evidence.

I wiped the side of the tin off with my shirt. *No one will notice if my shirt was dirty. It is always a mess from the dishes.* Taking a deep breath, I opened the walk-in door. The place was swamped. I knew I could clean up the remainder of the walk-in mess, and it would not be noticed if I moved quickly. Giving the tin a quick once-over with a dry towel, I headed back to the walk-in.

I moved quickly with cunning and began cleaning up the scene of the crime, working as fast as a person possibly could. I wiped down the floor and the boxes, praying hard in those few moments no one would enter the cold walk-in. Tucking the towel under my shirt, I felt the wet soup smooch into my side and walked out the door.

After quickly throwing the evidence towel into a hot soapy pot and pan sink, I placed the soup in its spot in the warmer and went back to work. The tension in my body remained all day, knowing that every time the ladle was dipped into the walk-in-floor soup I was in danger. I knew that anything could be in that soup, an old piece of shriveled lettuce, an egg-shell sliver, or even a crumb of dirt. I watched all day from the corner of my eye waiting for my demise waiting till someone choked on or complained about a piece of foreign material in their walk-in-floor soup.

The clock struck 3:30pm. I was safe. Gathering my things, I quickly headed out the door. My mother was waiting to drive me home. Sitting back in the seat and sighing with relief, I knew I had made it. Giggling, I thought, *who the hell knows what's in minestrone anyway?*