

Ponder This...



KIMBERLY M. MILLER



*Whatever is
Excellent*

*Lucy in
Love*

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Kimberly M. Miller

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Lucy in Love
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Dedication

For my precious high school friends.
I am forever grateful for you all.

Titles in the Ponder This Series

Lucy in Love by Kimberly M. Miller

Charlotte's Dilemma by Susan Karsten

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A Field of Forget-me-nots by Rachel A. James

To Complicate Matters by Linda Widrick

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1

“It’s wonderful to see you again, Lucy. Everyone’s grateful for your help with the desserts,” Mr. Winters said as he shuffled a stack of papers on the table in front of him.

Lucy scanned the information regarding her donation to a benefit to support her former high school’s music program. She smiled at the man who’d once been her favorite teacher, happy to help him because he made such a difference in her teenage years. Although nearly ten years passed since then, Lucy’s memories of show choir would stay with her always.

“I’m happy to do whatever I can, Mr. Winters,” Lucy said.

He flinched, making her chuckle. “You can call me Dave.”

“That might always be hard for me—no matter how old I am,” she said sheepishly.

Mr. Winters waved her off with a smile as he’d done so many times before. It was rare—and maybe even impossible—for him to get upset for any reason. His good nature meant students loved and respected him.

“I’ve asked a few show choir alums to sing one or two of the old standards,” he said. “Any chance you’d

join us?"

"Oh, my." Lucy thought for a moment. "It's been a while since I've sung at all, let alone in front of anyone," she said, pausing only briefly as she recalled how much singing once meant to her. It was the perfect escape from her silent, but often painful, struggles in high school.

"Aww, why not?" she asked. "Sure!"

Mr. Winters smiled with relief. "Excellent!" He shuffled the papers into a stack and slipped them into a folder. "I'm glad my part of this is done. Now I can get back to the rest of my job."

"Who's helping you pull everything together?" Lucy asked.

"Oh, my wife is working on the donation baskets for the raffle. Mr. Jenkins is handling entertainment. I guess he got a band," Mr. Winters shook his head. "The less I know the better. I don't want to deal with more than I already have."

Lucy laughed. "Understood. Well, I'm sure the night will go off without a hitch."

Mr. Winters winked. "Let's hope so," he said. He glanced around the bakery. "This is a great place. You've done really well." He motioned toward the remains of the cream puff on his plate. "I think I'd be in trouble if I lived closer, because I'd have to visit every day to see what was on the menu."

"Thanks," Lucy said with a smile. She took pride in her business, Slices of Heaven, and appreciated his praise.

"I'm excited to finally be settled—or at least working on it. Building a business is as hard as it sounds."

Mr. Winters sipped his coffee before speaking. "It

sure is," he said. "Oh, I forgot to mention that I talked to Ashley Harris. Are you two still in touch?"

Lucy hoped her face didn't register the shock that hit her. She'd managed to finally forget her old 'friend,' and she didn't want her teacher to be embarrassed he brought it up. It would be impossible for him to know that she was delighted to escape high school and its pressure so she could be herself.

"I'm afraid we lost touch over the years," Lucy said. "What's she been up to?"

"She's the editor-in-chief of the newspaper now. Surprised she hasn't sent someone over here to do a review of your place." He shrugged. "Might be nice free advertising for you."

Lucy's stomach clenched, thinking that such an article would probably hold little interest for Ashley. Her father ran the newspaper in Fairview Falls, which was only a half hour away from Pittsburgh where Lucy settled and now maintained her business. But the benefit of being in a city was that no one noticed you unless—or until—you wanted them to because they were all busy with their own lives. And Lucy wasn't anxious to rekindle her "friendship" with the queen of Fairview Falls High—a queen who'd ruled like a dictator, expecting her friends to fall in line or suffer the consequences.

Lucy still hated that she'd fallen into the trap of surviving at all costs.

"Oh." Lucy scrambled to think of something positive to say. "Well, I'm sure we'll catch up. Will she be attending the benefit?"

Mr. Winters beamed. "Of course! We need all the publicity we can get, and if she can get the information out to the city, we might even get more donations and

support.”

Lucy didn't doubt that more support would be great. She simply didn't want to try building up her life to impress her old “friend.”

Besides, her ex-fiancé, new business, and small apartment, showed little toward Lucy rebuilding the life she thought she'd have after college. It sure didn't offer much to brag about.

She forced a smile anyway. “That will be great.”

“So, if she contacts you, don't be afraid to talk up your bakery, and all the good things we're going to do for the music program.” He pointed to the information. “But in the meantime, forward the menu to me when it's ready, if you don't mind, so we can make some posters to advertise goodies and prices. I'll get the day's schedule and music to you so you can review everything.” He winked as he stood. “In case you forgot any of the words or melodies.”

Lucy laughed as she rose to her feet. “Oh, I doubt that,” she said. “Thanks for stopping by. I'm excited for the benefit.”

“Me too. It's great to catch up, Lucy.”

Lucy watched her former teacher leave the bakery. The bell on the door gave a cheerful *ding* behind him.

In a flash, she wondered what happened to her only real friend in high school. With a nostalgic smile, she prayed he'd gotten as far away from Fairview Falls as possible.

~*~

“Hey, baby.” Alicia's whiny voice broke through Henry's concentration even as he tried to continue ignoring her.

He sighed heavily, forcing his attention back to the lyrics he was struggling to write.

It wasn't lost on him that for years he'd been consumed with trying to get even one woman to acknowledge him. He'd never been picky. Tall, short, blonde, redhead, or brunette—body type, personality, or even education...none of it mattered. The old Henry couldn't interest a woman at all. But now, with his reputation as a lady's man, suddenly they crawled out of the woodwork and begged for dates.

All because he lost the better part of one hundred and fifty pounds and discovered a competent dermatologist.

Henry raised his head from his notebook and glanced at his latest girlfriend. Alicia was tall, thin, beautiful, and clearly only interested in Henry because he sat on the edge of fame—at least locally. As the guitarist for the band Milligan, who now boasted a popular single that was being played on local radio stations, Henry was a darling of the local media. With an upcoming CD release in a few weeks, the band members were frequently interviewed on radio stations or featured on various web sites. Women like Alicia loved this. It meant they got to be in the front row, the envy of the other fangirls, and more importantly, a breath away from fame themselves.

Apparently, even local papers and small web sites were enough to satisfy her need for attention.

It was like high school all over again, with popularity being the ultimate measure of success. Since he'd gotten wrapped up in it, Henry couldn't get away.

The more he thought about the situation, the more Henry realized he was thrilled with what it was doing for his business, No Sour Notes, a music store that also

provided lessons on numerous instruments. But his rivaling the band's namesake and drummer, Otis Milligan, in the relationship department wasn't at all what Henry expected. While serial dating was entertaining, he wasn't remotely fulfilled.

Because this went against so much of what he kept hearing he should be doing, the lack of any satisfaction at all confused and disappointed him. Only he wasn't sure what to do about it.

Henry sighed as his thoughts trailed from the song he was trying to write. Frustrated, he dropped his notebook on the floor and said, "I told you. I'm working." He waved his hand at her. "Go...do something, anything, until I'm done."

"You're always working." Alicia pouted, clearly hoping to woo him with her baby talk. "You didn't even look at this! We got our picture on the website I told you about. When we were at dinner last week."

Henry held tight to his guitar and his patience as she grated further on his nerves. He tried desperately to remember what he'd liked about her.

Same as the others, probably. She was pretty and she liked him. Or at least how handsome he was—rarely had the woman ever said much else.

He shuddered at his short list of qualifications for a girlfriend.

"I need to work," Henry muttered. "Isn't there someplace else you should be? I can pick you up later."

Without warning, Alicia stood and threw a pillow that narrowly missed Henry's head when he ducked.

"That's it!" she shrieked. "I'm done!"

Henry calmly turned his attention back to his guitar as Alicia stormed over to him. "Do you think that for one second, Henry Lee, you could pay

attention to anything besides that stupid guitar?"

"Nope."

Alicia screamed in frustration and gave him a good whack on the shoulder. "Why don't you look at me? I've been sitting here waiting for you for over an hour!"

Henry pursed his lips as he set his guitar beside him. He stood, took Alicia by the elbow and led her to the door of his rehearsal room.

"Good-bye," he said.

Alicia gaped at him. "Good-bye?" she sputtered.

Henry nodded, guessing she'd never been blown off before. Well, there was a first time for everything.

"But...but...what about dinner? I thought we were going out?"

Henry shook his head as he opened the door, nudged her through it, and yanked it shut, finishing his statement by locking it.

"Henry! Henry!" Alicia pounded on the door. "I didn't mean it! Please! What about the show at Jimmy's?"

"Buy a ticket," he said.

After a few minutes of wailing, Alicia left, and Henry was—once again—alone. Exactly as he liked it.

~*~

Lucy slowly stacked the dishes from her snack with Mr. Winters as her friend and employee, Fallon Walsh, shoved open the door that separated the kitchen from the front of the bakery.

"Finished the pastries," she said as she slid the tray into the display case. She glanced around, adjusting the baseball cap she wore over her choppy

pink hair. "Your teacher left?" she asked. "How did it go?"

Lucy followed Fallon back to the kitchen where Amelia Moore measured the ingredients for a small sheet cake.

"It went well, I think," Lucy said. She set the dishes in the sink and started to wash them. "You guys stay in touch with anyone from high school?"

Fallon started laughing. "No way. I was such a dork. Doubt they'd even recognize me now." Lucy regarded her friend's rock star hair, staple black tee shirt, and ripped jeans. The women met in college as freshmen, although while Lucy became more diligent and reserved, her friend went in the opposite direction and even dropped out of college after freshman year, finishing with a two-year degree at a local community college instead.

Amelia sifted the cake flour as she shook her head. "Not really. I mean there are one or two people I follow on social media, but for the most part, we moved so much since I was an Army brat that getting close to anyone was tough."

Not much had changed for Amelia. Now married to a soldier, she worked at the bakery while her husband Jason was deployed. She said she hated being home alone, and the bakery made a great distraction, especially since they were so busy.

"Yeah. I lost touch with everyone too," Lucy said. That was a fair way to put it, wasn't it? Even if a more accurate way to say it was that she avoided keeping in touch with anyone from high school.

Lucy finished washing the dishes and dried her hands. "But helping with the benefit means I'm going to run into people I haven't thought about for a long

time," she said. "I wonder if" –her voice trailed off as she glanced around the kitchen— "if I shouldn't be worried. I mean, I'm not exactly impressive. I could really embarrass myself."

Fallon snorted. "To a bunch of losers you went to high school with? Who cares?"

Easy for her to say. Fallon rarely cared what anyone thought about anything. Lucy, on the other hand, had been a people-pleaser since birth, a nice girl that everyone wanted to be friends with. She still wanted to be considered successful by her old friends, even if, in reality, she hadn't liked them much.

"I guess I care," Lucy said. "But I'm not sure why." She shook her head. "My friends weren't very nice in high school. They were rich and popular and would barely toss a crumb of attention to anyone who wasn't popular and rich too." She shuddered.

"Why were you friends with them again?" Amelia asked with a grin.

Lucy wondered the same thing. She said the only answer she'd ever come up with. "My parents were friends with their parents. My dad's a doctor, so we were well-off compared to most. My older brothers played every sport." Lucy rolled her eyes. "I was grandfathered into that crowd, whether I wanted to be with them or not."

"Yuck," Fallon muttered. "Sounds like torture."

Lucy smiled. "It wasn't all bad. I liked a lot of it, and I loved show choir. That's why I'm doing the benefit. Mr. Winters was so good to all of us. No matter where we were from or how we dressed, he treated us all the same." She sighed. "I'd do anything to make sure that program grows, even if I'm not really into music anymore."

Suddenly, the sound of a saxophone being tuned came through the wall and into the kitchen from the music shop next door.

Fallon giggled. "Obviously our friends are in agreement," she said.

"Either of you gone over there yet?" Amelia asked. "Ugh, if only I was still single," she said with a wicked smile. "There are some ridiculously attractive men working there."

Fallon's eyes bulged at the comment as Lucy tried to bite back her grin. Her friend could earn Olympic gold for her dating record.

"What? Why didn't you tell us?" Fallon demanded. "Time for a visit!"

Amelia exchanged a glance with Lucy who could already predict what her friend was about to do. She shook her head, but Amelia smiled, egging Fallon on. "Mmm, the drum instructor is definitely your type, Fallon."

"Drummers?" Fallon squeaked. "I love drummers!"

Lucy giggled as she watched her friend playfully shake Amelia, who laughed as she said, "Oh, come on. Like you need more boyfriends."

Fallon pouted. "OK, maybe not...but,"— she gestured at Lucy— "She needs help. Maybe I'll swing over there and say hello, in the interest of helping our sad, lonely boss."

Lucy laughed. "I don't need any help." She paused, thinking. "But I wouldn't mind being friendly, so if you do go over, take a mixed dozen of the gourmet cupcakes. Be sure to write up a slip and put it in the register."

"Will do," Fallon said. "But seriously, you do so

need help. You haven't been on a date in months."

"So?" The discussion of Lucy's nonexistent social life was old. She refused to defend her choice to remain single since her engagement ended almost two years earlier.

It wasn't so much that she was still hurt by Marshall's infidelity; it was more that she couldn't put herself through anything close to that again.

The loneliness that often found her when she wasn't busy with work didn't make her resolve waver. Well, most of the time.

"So. What are Friday's plans, Lucy?" Amelia asked. "A hot date with your television?"

"Your point?" Lucy went to work cleaning the mixer. "Working here, running my own business is hard stuff." She smiled, appreciating her friends' concern. "I'm good, you guys. I'm almost thirty years old. Partying on Friday night isn't my thing." She laughed. "Actually, it never was my thing."

Fallon put one arm around her friend's shoulders. "We aren't going clubbing. Go out with us. It will be fun!"

Lucy laughed and shook her head. Her employees *were* a lot of fun, but they could go all night, and Lucy could barely stay up past ten.

"No way," she said. "I need to get up at five," she said. "The cake for that engagement party won't bake itself, and neither will the muffins for the baby shower."

"For heaven's sake! You can do that on more or less sleep." Fallon shrugged with a wicked grin. "Less sleep means you found some fun the night before. More sleep is boring. No fun."

Lucy sighed. "I'll think about it."

Fallon groaned as she glanced at Amelia. "We got work to do, my friend."

Amelia giggled. "Don't worry. We'll come up with something amazing, and you'll thank us, Lucy.

"We promise."

Now it was Lucy's turn to groan.

2

“OK...wait a second. You dumped her by pushing her out of the studio?” Otis Milligan watched his friend in disbelief. “Man. I thought I needed to give you lessons on dating, but all of a sudden you’re like—” The drummer shook his head and bowed down as if in deference— “I’m not worthy to be in your presence, dude.”

Henry sighed heavily. He hated the way he treated women. He hated it more that they loved it and came back again. What was wrong with them? Why didn’t they think better of themselves than to still come after him when he treated them like that?

And worse, why did he keep doing it?

“I don’t think it’s anything to be proud of,” Henry muttered as he went behind the counter in search of his appointment book.

Otis whacked him hard on the shoulder. “Dude. You dis a babe and every single time she runs right back and asks for more. Your black book must be insane.” He paused. “Besides, Dave is going to love this. They already talk about you on the radio all the time when they play our stuff.”

Dave Shaffer was the band’s agent. Since Henry’s transformation into a dating machine, the manager encouraged any and all antics that would keep the

women coming, and the band's popularity rising. Henry preferred to be in the background, but for now, he was in the spotlight whether he liked it or not.

"Shouldn't it make me happy? Or make them happy?" he asked as he yanked the appointment book out and flipped it open on the counter. "I mean, if it's the right way to treat a woman?"

Otis howled. "The right way to treat a woman?" He shook his head. "We finally get you to stop being all soft and full of emotion, and you're going right back in that direction again, man."

"Maybe that's who I am."

Otis shook his head. "Stop listening to Drew—that's why he's always in the 'friend zone.'" He lifted himself to sit on the counter near where Henry worked. "Your status as a total dude is on the line. Knock it off!"

"Knock what off?"

Henry cringed at the sound of his future brother-in-law's deep voice.

"Teddy!" Otis slapped hands with the ex-football player turned gym owner who quickly focused his attention on Henry.

"What's up, guys?" Teddy asked, squeezing his huge body between two racks of music, nearly knocking one over in the process. Otis righted it behind his back, winking at Henry who smiled, wondering how Teddy's size didn't seem to be at all intimidating to his sister, Denise, who—at only five foot five—was nearly a foot shorter than her fiancé.

"Romeo lost another girlfriend," Otis said with a chuckle.

"I wouldn't say I 'lost' her," Henry muttered as he made a note in the appointment book. "It's not the

same as dumping her.”

Teddy squeezed his eyes shut. “Alicia? For real? I never even met this one.”

“That’s not saying much,” Otis muttered. “They aren’t around long enough to bother.”

“We went out for two weeks,” Henry said. It nettled him that his friends and co-workers were all so interested in his love life.

Otis snorted, ignoring Henry. “Same as the rest, Teddy. Gorgeous, hung all over our man Henry, barely a brain cell in her head. Perfect groupie.”

Teddy shook his head in disappointment and flipped the appointment book closed. “Let’s go.”

“Go?” Henry raised his head.

“Yep.” Teddy glanced at Otis. “Tell Dora to take care of the shop for a few hours. I need to talk to Henry.” He gestured toward the store owner again. “Come on, dude. I gotta get back to work.”

Henry sighed. Despite only being two years older, Teddy often treated him like a much younger brother, giving advice whether Henry wanted it or not.

But since his arm was as big as Henry’s head, he wasn’t about to argue. He’d follow the former linebacker wherever he wanted to go.

~*~

Henry sat quietly as Teddy zipped through the streets of the city, landing at the gym and parking the car in the ‘reserved-for-owner’ spot.

“I’m not running laps,” Henry said, crossing his arms over his chest like a child pouting.

Teddy laughed. He’d enacted such punishment before when he didn’t like Henry’s attitude during