

NORTH *of* HAPPY



ADI ALSAID

Author of LET'S GET LOST and NEVER ALWAYS SOMETIMES

Adi Alsaid

North Of Happy

«HarperCollins»

Alsaid A.

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His whole life has been mapped out for him... Carlos Portillo has always led a privileged and sheltered life. A dual citizen of Mexico and the United States, he lives in Mexico City with his wealthy family, where he attends an elite international school. Always a rule follower and a parent pleaser, Carlos is more than happy to tread the well-worn path in front of him. He has always loved food and cooking, but his parents see it as just a hobby. When his older brother, Felix—who has dropped out of college to live a life of travel—is tragically killed, Carlos begins hearing his brother's voice, giving him advice and pushing him to rebel against his father's plan for him. Worrying about his mental health but knowing the voice is right, Carlos runs away to the United States and manages to secure a job with his favourite celebrity chef. As he works to improve his skills in the kitchen and pursue his dream, he begins to fall for his boss's daughter—a fact that could end his career before it begins. Finally living for himself, Carlos must decide what's most important to him and where his true path really lies.

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[Praise for North of Happy](#)

"There is a kernel of truth in every cliché, and Alsaid cracks the teen-lit trope of friends becoming lovers wide open, exposing a beautiful truth inside.... A good romance is hard to come by. This is a great one."

—Kirkus Reviews, starred review

"With all the fun of a classic teen movie, this one should fly off the shelves."

—Booklist

"This fun romp will appeal to students looking to push beyond the edges of their own comfort zones."

—School Library Journal

"Explor[es] universal feelings of friendship and love."

—Publishers Weekly

"A refreshing novel about friendship and romance that defies cliché, *Never Always Sometimes* will win readers over with its hilarious musings and universal truths."

—Adam Silvera, author of *More Happy Than Not*

Praise for *Let's Get Lost*

"An achingly beautiful story... Reminiscent of John Green's *Paper Towns*, Alsaid's debut is a gem among contemporary YA novels."

—School Library Journal

"Emotional and exciting. Alsaid's unique narrating style invites the reader to join in on the ride."

—VOYA

"With equal parts heartache and hope, this debut is a fresh interpretation of the premise that 'home is who you're with.'"

—Horn Book

"Told from five different POVs—a tough trick that Alsaid pulls off well—*Lost* balances both the quirky fun and the harsh realities of adolescence."

—Entertainment Weekly

ADI ALSAID was born and raised in Mexico City, where he now lives after spending time in Israel, Las Vegas and California. His debut, Let's Get Lost, was nominated for YALSA's 2015 Best Fiction for Young Adults list. Visit Adi online at www.somewhereoverthesun.com, or follow him on Twitter, [@adialsaid](https://twitter.com/adialsaid).

To Laura. There's no one I'd rather share a meal with.

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[PROLOGUE](#)

THE PERFECT TACO

2 ounces pork al pastor
1 teaspoon lime juice
1 slice pineapple
1 pinch chopped onion
1 pinch chopped cilantro
1 warm corn tortilla

Salsa, to taste

METHOD:

The day before Felix died, he'd flown in from Asia craving tacos.

As usual, the two of us and Mom went to our favorite taco joint, a chain in a neighborhood near our house. It was one of those places that offered English menus and had TVs in overhead corners. We gorged on every kind of taco on the menu, made hungrier by Felix's cravings.

But when the waiter cleared our plates, Felix wasn't satisfied. The tacos, he said, were overpriced and bland, the atmosphere too sterile. "You love food so much, I'm shocked you still come to this place," Felix told me casually. I knew he didn't mean anything by it, but I also knew I'd never be able to enjoy the restaurant again.

"Meet me outside of school tomorrow. I'll find us some real tacos."

And the next day, there he was, wearing that threadbare once-white shirt that seemed on the brink of disintegration. Even now that he's dead, that same shirt stained red with his blood, I always think of it as it was then: colored not by the violence of Felix's death, but by the shape of his life. He claimed to wash it in the shower himself, which grossly explained the yellowish hue of old sweat and cheap soap. In that one color I can still see my brother in all his exuberance.

"So, where we going?" I asked. I'd been antsy all day, eager to spend time with him before he ran off again to wherever the hell he was going next.

Felix just smirked and led us toward the hospital down the street, where there's a "secure" taxi stand everyone from school uses. Instead of asking for the price to a certain destination, though, he took us past the huddled taxi drivers and around the corner, into unexplored territory. The neighborhood around the campus was not particularly safe. Rumored to be gangland, even. The bodyguards who hung out outside my international school were a constant presence, though Felix always insisted it was rich-people paranoia.

"Uh, where we going?" I instinctively reached for my phone. I'd heard teachers got mugged here on the way to the subway. One of the houses on the walk was rumored to be a drug dealer's, painted bright blue to stand out against the drab gray buildings around it.

"There's a taco place I saw on the way up here. I bet it's way better than that shit we ate last night."

I readjusted my backpack. "I thought you used to like Farolito."

"Sure, when I was in the bubble." Felix slung an arm around my shoulder, slight pang of body odor coming off him. "The world is a much bigger place than you realize," he said with a smile. "We're going to explore it."

We sat down at one of three plastic-tablecloth-covered tables, and a small, smiling man walked over with two menus. Felix waved him away, calling out our order: two tacos al pastor, everything on them (pineapple, onion, cilantro, salsa; I'm sure the words strung together could make a poem).

Then he asked me for a pen, and took a napkin from the metal holder in the middle of the table. He drew three imperfect columns, labeling them Restaurant/Stand, Location, Reaction. "One taco each per spot. We don't stop until we find the perfect one."

I could almost see the day ahead as if it were shot by the Food Network, some Anthony Bourdain-narrated exploration of the city. I tried to contain my glee.

The tacos arrived and Felix clapped his hands, smiling warmly at the waiter/owner. The man smiled back and asked what else he could bring us. I was about to stammer some apology for only

getting one taco, maybe cave in and get something else, but Felix spoke up. “Nothing today, thanks. We are on a quest, un tacotón.”

We paid the miniscule bill, recorded our reaction (meh), followed the curving street down to a massive set of stairs and then to a subway stop. It marked the first time I had ever been on the metro, I was embarrassed to realize. To my surprise, the metro was not the dangerous hellscape I’d envisioned. It was actually kind of soothing—to move around the city without the ubiquitous traffic, the manic chorus of horns employed at the slightest annoyance or whim, to disappear into a station and reemerge in a part of the city I barely even recognized.

Toward the southern end of the city, in a neighborhood called Coyoacán, we sat at a small place with red plastic tablecloths and a taco named the Chupacabra. “We should get that,” I said. “It’s their specialty.”

Felix waved the little columned napkin in my face. “Important research going on here, man.” He turned to the server, again asked for two al pastor, everything on them.

I rolled my eyes and asked for a beer, since I was with him and it seemed to fit the mood.

“No,” Felix interrupted, changing the order to a bottle of water instead. “Beer’s gonna fill you up. We have a lot of eating to do today.”

Two minutes later the tacos were served, and we ate the same way: an extra dabble of salsa, a squeeze from a lime wedge, heads tilted, the first bite taking out nearly half the taco. Felix chewed slowly, not talking, taking the task of assessment seriously.

“What do you think?” I asked, wiping at some salsa on the corner of my mouth.

He held up a finger as he finished chewing. Every time he came back from his travels his hands were rougher, his skin cracked and worn by a foreign sun. “Solid, but lacking something.”

“Like, maybe the ingredients in their specialty taco?”

Felix widened his eyes comically. “Who said you’re allowed to be funny now? I’m the funny one.”

A surge of joy flowed through me, because after all those years of being abandoned in favor of exciting adventures, I was still the little brother. Reflexively, I checked my phone to see whether I should be letting Mom and Dad know where I was. The habit was so ingrained that it even felt rebellious to not call and at least lie to them.

“Put it away,” Felix grumbled. “They don’t need to know your every move.”

The night wore on. The metro got unbearably crowded, people pushing in, literally packing each other into the carts. The trains slowed, and getting on and off became a struggle, each “excuse me” bolstered by force as we pushed others out of the way. We escaped at the Salto de Agua station. An indoor market was half a block away.

Our list of tacos sampled had grown to nearly ten, and a couple had come close to perfection, at least in my opinion. But each time I’d thought we’d found it (crispy, juicy meat, warm doughy tortilla, perfect spice and zing to the salsa, the grilled pineapple sealing it all with its sweetness), Felix would shoot it down.

“We’re not looking for *great*, man. We are striving for perfection! Nothing short of it will do.”

“And what makes a taco perfect?”

“Beautiful question,” Felix said. “It’s a taco that tastes as good as the idea of a taco itself. A taco that’ll hold steadfast through memory’s attempt to erase it, a taco that’ll be worthy of the nostalgia that it will cause. A taco that won’t just satisfy or fill but will satiate your hunger. Not just for tonight but for tacos in general, for food, for life it-fucking-self, brother. You will feel full to your soul.

“But!” he added, a callused index finger pointed straight up at the sky. “It’s also a taco that will make you hunger for more tacos like it, for more tacos at all, for food, the joy of it, the beauty of it. A taco that makes you hungry for life and that makes you feel like you have never been more alive. Nothing short of that will do.”

I walked in awe beside my brother. I was starting to feel the discomforts of so much food, a tiredness in my feet. I still had school tomorrow. Mom had already called a handful of times; lately she'd been trying every twenty minutes. It was so hard to break the momentum of the night, though. Maybe one or two more stops, just until traffic died down. Then I'd tell Felix we had to turn back around. Fun could still be enveloped by responsibility. Maybe that feeling Felix had described did exist, was to be found in one of these unassuming stands, joy encapsulated in three bites. A shame not to try a little longer to find it.

Most of the stands were starting to shut down. The fruit and vegetable vendors packed their produce into wooden crates. Butchers hosed down their chopping blocks. Only the taco and birria and ceviche stands still had customers crowded around on stools or on foot, two guys in aprons working the grill, one more at the big slab of pastor. No real sinks in sight, one pump bottle of hand sanitizer for customer use.

Mom would weep if she saw us here, if she knew how many similar spots we'd visited throughout the day. She'd run to get us typhoid shots, never let us leave home again. I was proud of this, for some reason.

"Dos con todo, por favor!" Felix called out as we elbowed for room at the counter.

"This might be the spot," I said.

"Oh yeah? How can you tell?"

"The size of the pastor. They know they're going to sell a lot. Line of people is always a good sign. The limes are fresh. More than three salsas, which means they take some pride in what they provide. The girl making the tortillas back there from scratch." I pointed out the little details I'd started noticing, clues as to whether or not the place might be worthy. "That cook just spotted a bad piece of meat and threw it out right away, so they care about quality. They have some sort of special mix of seasoning they use on their arrachera, not just Worcestershire and Maggi sauces like lots of the other places."

I knew I was rambling, but Felix rambled too. I continued. "Look at how good that guy is at catching the slices of pineapple inside the taco. He's looking away while he does it. He must have served a shitload of these every day for years."

Felix smiled, surveyed the scene. "You want me to talk to one of these guys? Get you a job?"

"Shut the fuck up."

"Why? All you watch is those cooking shows."

"Sure, yeah. Except, what would I tell Mom and Dad? 'Oh hey, remember my SAT prep courses? My internship with Dad? College next year? Yeah, never mind. I got a job at a taco stand!'"

"Why not?" Felix asked. He was serious too. "You think they'd love you less?"

"Probably," I joked and then said, "Last stop?" just to get off the subject.

"Are you kidding? The best spots only start setting up now. I guarantee that the perfect taco doesn't go to bed until four a.m."

The napkin list was running out of room, heavy with ink and pockmarked by holes from the pen on uneven surfaces. "Dude, this has been great. But I really have to get back home."

"No, you don't," Felix said.

I shoved my hands into my pockets, staring resolutely at my brother, trying to come up with something to convince him otherwise. Felix led us somewhere near the historic downtown area, where homeless men lined the streets in thick blankets, surrounded by empty bottles.

Another taco stand, who-knows-where in the city. Extra dab of salsa, squeeze of lime wedge, head tilt. My worry had drifted away, especially after Mom stopped calling. I'd stopped looking at the time, stopped thinking about the homework I didn't do. I listened to Felix's stories, gave myself up to those little cheesy diatribes about living life as you wanted to, to laugh loudly and love often. Felix could sound like a Hallmark card, like boxed inspiration, but he was earnest enough to make

you fall for it. One in the morning on a school night, and clearly the perfect taco was not necessary for perfection. “What a world,” he kept saying.

We were both full to the brim, laughing about not being able to stomach another bite and yet forcing ourselves to keep eating when a nearby argument turned to shouting. My heart began to race. Then, pops like pinecones in a fire, a stray bullet knocking Felix to the ground. Soda from his glass bottle, intact but spilling bright orange liquid behind his head. The thought, even then, of life’s sudden change of course. The terrible words: *nothing will ever be the same*.

CHAPTER 1

THAI BRUSCHETTA

1 French baguette
½ pound deveined shrimp
½ cup coconut milk
2 teaspoons minced ginger
2 Thai chilies, seeded and deveined
2 stalks lemongrass
2 tablespoons red Thai curry paste
1 mango, sliced thin
1 tablespoon Thai basil, chiffonade

METHOD:

On a rooftop in the ritziest part of Mexico City, while my graduation party rages on—music and drinks and waiters delivering canapés to the two hundred people in attendance—I am trying to act like I have my shit together.

There’s a pigeon perched next to me, its head tilted, eyes meeting mine, cooing suggestively. I know before it even opens its beak that it’s Felix, and that he’s going to tell me to escape. It’s just what he does now.

The air is fresh after this afternoon’s rain. Mexico City doesn’t have that nice post-rain smell that other places do, like Mom’s hometown in Illinois, when the storms sweep in from Lake Michigan and leave in their wake an almost herb-like scent. I wonder if anyone’s ever replicated that post-rain smell in a dish.

This party is Dad’s consolation to me for not letting me travel this summer, for fearing that I’d be like Felix and stay gone. It’s also Mom worrying that I’ve been Unusually Quiet Since It Happened; it’s her desperate to see me acting like myself again.

Waiters are running around delivering rum and cokes to my classmates, glasses of wine to the parents in attendance. Trays of assorted hors d’oeuvres make their way around the rooftop (ceviche in a spoon, yakitori skewers, chilaquiles sliders—getting to choose what to serve might be the highlight of the party for me). Music thumps out into the night. Neighboring buildings with their own rooftop terraces have similar soirees happening, but none are quite as loud as this one. I keep imagining that I’m not really here, that I’m floating above the party or something, watching it all from some far-off vantage point.

Poncho, Nico and Danny hold their shot glasses out in front, waiting for me to clink. The burn passes quickly. None of us really have to scowl to get the stuff down any more, though I think my friends are really over the burn and I’m just good at suppressing it.

“Ya no te hagas güey,” Nico says, putting his glass down on a nearby table. “Tell your dad you’re coming with us. This internship thing is stupid. You could get out of it if you just asked.”

I shrug. The conversation is predictable. But why wouldn’t it be? All our lives are basically mapped out for us, all the days ahead bleeding in with all those to come: internship, college in the States, and then back to Mexico, Dad’s company, marriage, kids, success, everything Felix walked away from. My friends may get a Eurotrip first but then their futures will look just like mine.

“Tell him you’ve received an offer for another internship. One that involves partying and sexy Europeans,” Nico says, raising a hand up for a high five.

I ignore him and my eyes meet Isa’s across the party. She gives me a slight wave and a smile that tells me maybe I’ll get to fall asleep next to her tonight. It’s better than tossing in bed trying to fight off memories and nameless weights.

The DJ puts on something with a beat, and the dance floor fills up, though mostly with parents. Nico and Poncho head over toward our classmates. Danny hangs back, hands in his pockets. “Nico always turns into such a bro when he drinks.”

I laugh. “Yeah, have fun with that this summer.”

Danny groans. “You should be there with us, if only so you have to suffer through him too.” After a quiet moment, he adds, “Everything okay with you?”

“Yeah, of course,” I say, eyeing the pigeon on the railing. It’s grinning. “Why?”

“I dunno. Sometimes you get quiet, and I think it’s gotta be about Felix. Meanwhile we’re talking about stupid shit like mixed dorms in hostels or beach parties or something.”

“Nah.” He doesn’t notice I’ve been making eye contact with a bird. He doesn’t notice that I’m almost see-through, that I’m barely here. “Just trying to figure out what the qualifications would be for the internship that Nico described.”

Danny gives a chuckle, runs a hand through his hair. “And how the hell Nico qualifies for it.”

The pigeon’s returning my gaze, mouthing the words *get out of here*. He always loved having mantras. This is his in death. He shows up like it’s no big deal, tells me to go. Except I don’t know where he wants me to go, and I’m pretty sure this feeling would follow me there anyway, so what’s the point.

I turn my attention to Isa. She’s on her phone at the edge of the party, smiling as she talks. Nothing much stirs within me.

Danny seems to be content with ending the conversation there, so I make my way toward Isa. I walk slowly, around the party, not through it. I take a few more hors d’oeuvres, trying to guess all their ingredients, the techniques used. I feel better when I’m in the kitchen. I can remember Felix when I’m there. I can see the way he’d hang out in the kitchen with me, teaching me how to hold a knife, how to tell when a sauce was done. I can remember our food adventures, all those that came before the Night of the Perfect Taco. Flashes from childhood: how we’d pretend to be asleep and then sneak out of bed to play video games, our family trip to Greece where we took the last photograph of the four of us together. They hurt like hell, these memories, but at least that’s all they are: memories. They’re grief as grief is meant to be, comforting and hard but comprehensible.

That’s one plus to the summer, at least. No one will be around. Plenty of time to cook. Maybe it’ll keep Felix away, make me feel less crazy.

When I get to the other side of the roof, I stand by Isa as she finishes her call. I’m glad the bird doesn’t follow me. Isa hangs up and we cheek-to-cheek kiss hello. “You look great,” I say.

“Gracias,” she says, and we continue on in Spanish. I’ve always felt weird switching back and forth between English and Spanish with one person. Whatever language my first interaction with someone is, I stick to it, usually. I’m smoother in English. Funnier, I think. But with Isa it’s always been Spanish, and maybe that explains the lack of stirring; maybe it’s something else.

“This is amazing,” she gushes. “I can’t believe your parents organized it. The view is gorgeous.”

Obligingly, I look at the city stretching out below, twinkling lights of street lamps and far-off neighborhoods.

“Vete de aqui, hermano,” the pigeon shouts across the party. Felix always preferred Spanish too.

“My dad’s into parties,” I say lamely. I don’t want to listen to Felix right now or fall into another predictable conversation about summer, about the future, about anything. I put my hand on Isa’s shoulder and lean in for a kiss.

She accepts it but keeps her lips tight and ends it in a second or two. “I don’t think I want that tonight.”

“Okay,” I say, stepping back. “Yeah, of course.”

We stand quietly for a minute or so, at least as quietly as two people can at a party. “When do you leave for Argentina?”

“Monday,” Isa says. The word barely means a thing to me. After this party, the days will bleed together, and Monday may as well be any other day. “How long’s it been?” she asks.

“Since what?”

She gets that cartoonishly concerned look she sometimes gets, all eyebrows. The purple scarf she’s wearing catches the breeze, unraveling itself. It looks like it’s trying to escape. “I don’t think you talk about your brother enough,” Isa says.

The pigeon tilts its head.

“I know we were never *together*, but we spent enough time together that I should have heard his name a few times, maybe some stories about him.” Isa uncurls the wayward scarf from her neck and holds it in her hand. I wish I could uncurl myself from this conversation. “I understand why it might not be with me,” Isa says, her hand going up so casually to her eye that I almost miss that she’s on the verge of tears. “But I hope you do talk about him with someone. Just, you know...for yourself.”

“I do,” I lie.

We look out at the city a little longer, elbows brushing against each other. I’ve always loved the expanse of the city at night, its lack of a typical skyline, its refusal to be contained to one stretch of buildings.

Then she exhales and steps away from the railing. “Okay, time for me to take advantage of your parents’ partying. Any food I absolutely have to try?”

I think for a sec, happy to have the conversation turn to food. Food, I can always talk about. “The Thai bruschetta is pretty amazing.”

As soon as she steps away, the pigeon flits over to me. “She’s cute.”

I don’t respond.

He ruffles his feathers, picks at something in his wing. “Look at these people, man,” Felix says, unperturbed by how I’m ignoring him. If he were still a person, I could picture him crossing his hands behind his head and leaning back. Maybe he’d click his tongue a few times in disapproval.

He’s looking with his little pigeon head in the direction of the bar, where Dad and a few of the other parents are standing in a circle, holding drinks. Next to them a group of my classmates do the exact same thing. The adults sip their tequila and the kids shoot it. Add a few gray hairs, adjust their tastes so that they’re from the seventies or whatever and it’s basically a mirror image.

“You’ll forget about cooking,” Felix says, loud enough that for a moment I worry someone will hear him. “You keep going down this road, that’s where you’ll end up. Just like them.” He bobs his head in Dad’s direction. Dad, who’s holding a shot of tequila, and looking like he’s about to shoot it. Dad, who went to the same school as me and Felix, got a nice safe business degree—Dad, who was irate when Felix refused to follow that same path.

Dad, who hasn’t even talked about Felix in months.

Felix coos and flaps his wings. If he just left me alone for a moment, it might be easier to pretend like I have my shit together.

Then Dad smiles and heads toward the DJ stand. He motions for a microphone, gestures impatiently as the DJ cuts the music and hits a few switches. His shirt is unbuttoned way farther down than any middle-aged man’s shirt should be. I think he’s swaying a little. Sometimes I can’t stand looking at him.

“Shit,” Felix the pigeon says. “He still loves his fucking speeches.”

“Bienvenidos,” Dad says through the speakers. He looks around for a drink, and then snaps his fingers at a passing waiter and asks for another shot of tequila. He thanks everyone for coming,

cracks a joke about how this isn't a party for my graduation but a party for him not having to pay for tuition anymore. The crowd responds with alcohol-boosted laughter.

"He made the same joke when I graduated," the pigeon grumbles. Then he offers one last coo and takes off, disappearing unceremoniously into the night. For a second I feel relief. Maybe he'll stay gone.

"Hijo, I want you to look forward now," Dad goes on. "Forget about the past, about what we've lost." He pauses and looks down at the floor for a moment. He bites his lip, like he's struggling to keep back tears. "I know you miss your brother, and I miss him every day too. Life isn't fair."

The performance is impressive, but it makes me want to throw something at the stage. Dad basically wiped his hands clean of Felix long ago, and not even death has undone the forgetting. To him, Felix has been dead for years. Only for appearances will he pretend to be broken. He wants all these people to just go quiet for a moment or two, to think that he's trying to move past tragedy, instead of completely unaffected by it, like I know he is. It's what I see every day: Dad talking about work, Dad talking about my future, Dad going on like nothing's happened.

Then, after all these months, something within me clicks. An understanding. Felix has it right. Escape. Yeah, I know it's probably not a great sign that I'm thinking a pigeon is my dead brother, and I know that everything I heard Felix say was maybe not real, just my grief doing strange things to my head.

But he had that part right all along. I shouldn't be here.

As Dad keeps up the charade, talking about my future and my prospects while he's got a son in the grave, I step away from the edge of the party, cut through the crowd. Most people probably think I'm going to grab myself another drink. They don't see my hands shaking at my sides; they haven't noticed that my shadow disappeared when Felix did, that I'm not whole anymore. No one tries to stop me. Maybe they don't even see me.

It's only when I exit that I hear the murmurs start to build, and Dad's speech get derailed.

I smile the whole elevator ride down.

CHAPTER 2

MEDITERRANEAN OMELET

3 eggs

2 tablespoons butter

2 tablespoons sundried tomatoes

2 tablespoons fresh basil

1 tablespoon goat cheese

Sea salt, to taste

METHOD:

When I get home, I don't know where I'm going, but I know I'm leaving.

Mom and Dad are probably on their way home too, but they'll have to make a few explanations, give some instructions to the caterers or whatever. I have some time, but as soon as I'm in my room, I pull the suitcase from the top shelf in the closet, toss it open onto my bed. Out of habit, or maybe to distract myself from what I'm doing, I turn on the TV.

A commercial pops up: Tupperware, and then cars, cleaning products. I throw all my underwear into the suitcase, along with some socks, two pairs of jeans. I'm actually doing this? On the screen, out of the corner of my eye, I recognize the show. It's called *Today's Specials*. They profile different restaurants across the world, spend an episode with each one.

The show starts with a female chef in the kitchen at dawn, a single burner lit. The camera pans to a quiet morning in the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington State, golden sunrise over the water, a hummingbird gorging on sugary water from a feeder. "How this is cheap real estate is beyond me," the female chef says on voice-over. They show the name of the restaurant: Provecho.

Then the name of the executive chef and owner: Elise St. Croix. Something feels familiar about that, so I keep watching.

A shot of what she's making: perfectly golden omelet. Sundried tomatoes, fresh-picked basil, goat cheese. I want to step through the screen and watch her every move, so I can make it for myself. Felix and I have been watching this show for years, drooling on the couch and then scurrying to the kitchen as soon as the credits roll so we can try to recreate the dishes.

Since he died I haven't been able to watch the show at all. Especially when he shows up on the couch next to me and begs me to change the channel to it, or hijacks whatever it is I'm watching by putting himself in the screen.

They cut away, show the thirty-table restaurant. Chef Elise sits at one of the six patio tables and eats calmly, looking out at the scenery. She's in her late forties, light brown hair in a ponytail. The green of the surrounding islands pops on the screen, the morning ferry from Seattle discernible in the distance. They probably booked the restaurant solid for a month on the strength of that one image.

Then, my favorite part of the show. The kitchen comes alive. Knives coming down like they're machine-driven, flames licking at liquids in saucepans like they're trying to get a taste. The kitchen jargon that sounds like an exotic language. Onions are diced in seconds, herbs chopped and thrown into small plastic containers. A cook cracks a joke, and another one looks up from the meat he's butchering, laughing without even stopping his work.

The staff gathers around as Chef goes over the menu, like soldiers at the ready. Her white chef coat is spotless, a tasting spoon tucked into that tiny pocket in the upper sleeve. She speaks like a general in peacetime, calm but commanding. The guests arrive. Attractive servers bring out black leather menus, smiling widely, the day's specials on the tips of their tongues. Cooks begin poaching shrimp, flipping steaks with tongs.

I'm holding a stack of T-shirts in my hands, transfixed. Then I remember Felix's stack of notebooks.

He kept track of every day of his travels and would send me each filled-out journal for safekeeping. I drag my nightstand over so I can reach the top of my closet, where I've been storing them in a cardboard box. I think I know why this restaurant feels familiar to me.

The notebooks are mostly in Spanish, the rare English word marked by stray accents, as if Felix wanted to bend it to his preferred tongue. It takes all my effort not to thumb through each notebook, to not get lost in Felix's adventures. He never bothered to date them, but I always marked down what day I received them. I know the entry I'm looking for, can recall the words as if I was there too. It was about a year ago, when Felix was in Israel. He'd saved a bunch of money while living on a kibbutz for a while and had treated himself to a nice meal, at a fancy restaurant called Mul Yam.

I usually believe the best meals are to be found in home kitchens, Felix wrote. *This time, I was wrong*. Below, he'd listed restaurants he wanted to eat at in his lifetime. A few of them had been crossed out with blue or black or red ink. I don't allow myself to think of all the ones he didn't get to, but my suspicion was right. At the top of the list is Provecho.

The show comes back on. I've been watching scenes like these so often the last couple of years. Chef Elise walks down rows of planted herbs and vegetables, rallies her troops, the kitchen comes alive, mise en place, the guests arrive, twinkling lights on the patio.

It might be a simple coincidence. There are constantly reruns of this show, and there's a good chance Felix watched this same episode years ago. But it feels like so much of a sign that I look for Felix in the screen, some acknowledgment that this is his doing.

I pull my rain jacket from the closet, though I don't really know what the hell the weather will be like, just that the island is near Seattle and Seattle is rainy. I fold the jacket neatly on top of the other clothes. My heart is pounding.

I've never acted impulsively in my life. Felix got all those genes. It feels like I'm borrowing his disobedience, like I'm stealing something, acting Unlike Myself. But that doesn't keep me from putting a knee on the suitcase to force it closed.

In my parents' room, a safe is hidden behind a shoddy fortress of clothes. The combination is easy to remember; every time Mom and Dad are on the same flight, Dad sits me down with a list of instructions on what to do *just in case*. I grab a few hundred dollars, both my passports, the emergency credit card that's in my name. I use my cell phone to buy a plane ticket and then call a cab, ignoring the slew of missed notifications on the screen.

My hands are shaking and sweaty. I can't believe how easy it is to feel like I'm in control.

I use the bathroom before I go. It's when I'm washing my hands that I hear the awful sound of the front door opening. Mom's voice rings out first, fraught with worry, "Carlos?" I look at my reflection in the mirror and can almost see the back wall. All my edges are blurred. I take a deep breath, open the door.

Mom looks instantly relieved that I'm home. Dad, not so much. "What happened? Is everything okay?" She gets close, like she's inspecting me for bodily harm.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dad asks, noticing the suitcase propped up by the door. He shakes his head, and then calmly removes his suit jacket and folds it onto the little table at the entrance. "Before we get into that," he says, pointing at the luggage, "you're going to apologize for leaving like you did. That was embarrassing."

I know that this, at least, is not an unreasonable request. But I can't find the words to acknowledge it. These talks with Dad always feel like trickery, like everything he says is a trap waiting to snag me.

Mom puts a hand on Dad's forearm. She tries to whisper something, but he interrupts: "He can speak for himself. Just apologize, Carlos, and then we can talk about whatever it is you think you're doing."

I think: *I can't do this anymore*. I think: *I'm barely even here*. I say: "I have to go, Dad."

The words come out like a whimper. So, I'm not stealing all of Felix's personality traits, then. Felix never whimpered.

At least the words are out there. I wait an eternal moment for Dad to respond.

Dad sighs and, almost under his breath, says, "Great, another son who doesn't know how to apologize." Then, louder, he says, "Fine, I'll bite. Go where?"

Mom's already tearing up a little, like she knows exactly where this is heading, like she's getting déjà vu and knows already how this ends. Dad slams the wall with his open hand, repeats himself: "Where, exactly, are you going, Carlos?"

I stare Dad down, trying not to whimper again. "I have to get away from this. It's not what I want," I say. "The internship. Everything."

Dad leans back against the door, crosses his arms over his chest. "No me digas." You don't say.

For a wild moment I consider confessing, telling them about Felix, how I still see him but I feel like I'm the one who's gone. His death made ghosts of both of us and I just want it to stop. I search for more words but end up looking at the floor.

"So you're running away," Dad says. He's got a bit of a smirk on his face, like this is some argument that can be won. "Just like your brother did." He full-on smiles now, uncrosses his arms, un-leans from the door, moves out of the way. He picks up his jacket, walks past me and toward the bedrooms. "A lot of good it did him," he says.

Then the intercom buzzes; the taxi's here.

"Sorry, Mom," I say, pulling up the suitcase's handle and rolling it out the door. I don't want to acknowledge what Dad just said.

She follows behind, stepping into the elevator with me. I keep my eyes on the floor counter above, watching the numbers light up like a countdown. 15...14...13...

“He’ll cut you off, like he did with Felix,” Mom says. Being American, she’s a little more direct than Dad. “He may not show how much he was upset by your brother leaving, but believe me, he was. You leaving too? It’ll kill him.”

7...6...5...

I can smell her perfume, something floral she’s worn forever.

“Just tell me where you’re going.”

It’s not Mom’s fault, but I can’t bring myself to say anything. I don’t want to lose my nerve.

The doors ding open. Mom doesn’t follow me out, but she holds her hand out and keeps the doors from closing. “I won’t tell your dad. I promise.”

Our doorman comes over, all smiles, to grab my suitcase. I want to just rush to the taxi, but leaving Mom is harder than storming away from Dad. “Just tell me you’re coming back,” she says. There’s a tear in the corner of her eye, just waiting there on the precipice, and it’s what I say next that will determine if it tumbles down the edge.

I look from her to the car, and I know that it’s not too late to stop this and turn around. Tell them what’s going on with me, open myself up to their help. “I just need to do one thing,” I say, finally. “For Felix.”

“One week,” she says. I’m not sure if it’s a plea or a question or a command. The tear, thankfully, doesn’t fall. I might have stayed put if she cried.

I nod and then rush to greet the taxi at the door.

Slam the trunk, slam the door, if only the taxi driver would peel out and leave rubber trails on the asphalt.

I break free.

CHAPTER 3

AIRPLANE SANDWICH

1 pseudo-croissant roll

2 slices highly processed ham

2 slices maybe cheese

1 mustard packet

1 mayo packet

METHOD:

I have a quick layover in LA, then a red-eye to Seattle. The plane is half-empty, and I have a row to myself. But instead of laying out and getting some sleep, I stare out the window. Stars, and the moon reflected on puffy white clouds.

It’s like I can feel every mile that I’m farther away from home, from Dad, from the haunted life that had set itself in stone before me. I try to think about what my parents are going through, what my friends will say, but, with my forehead against the window, it’s hard to think of anything but that restaurant, waiting out there in the dark. The plane hums insistently; the screen in front of me shows a little cartoon depiction of us escaping from Mexico.

By the time we land in Seattle I’m exhausted and it hits me that I don’t know where I’m staying tonight, that I have no concrete plan. I just had this destination and now I’m here. I’ve officially been spontaneous. It makes me feel like Felix.

I’d thought he might get left behind in Mexico with the rest of my family. I thought that was why he kept wanting me to go, to get away from him. So when he shows up at baggage claim, sitting on top of the carousel among the luggage, I’m disappointed that I’m not so easily cured.

I’ll eat once at the restaurant, I think to myself, heart pounding. Eat once, honor Felix’s memory. Maybe spend the whole meal just crying or something. Get it all out. Come back normal, or whole, or as close to whole as possible.

I turn my phone on finally, but I keep it on airplane mode. I'm not ready to hear from anyone in Mexico. As the sun rises, I take a cab to the Seattle piers, where the morning rays light up Puget Sound.

I buy a cup of coffee at a nearby stand, though I don't even like it. I just know that's what Felix would be doing. The heat and bitterness feel surprisingly nice, even if I'm wincing at every sip. A few minutes later the ferry boards. The trip is lovely, sun warming my face. I have to fight off sleep so that I don't miss any of the scenery. White birds fly alongside us, emerald islands all around, the Seattle skyline fading in the distance, swallowed up by the haze of the ocean.

Needle Eye Island is smaller than I'd realized. There are no taxis around, just a slew of people waiting to board the ferry bound back to Seattle. I approach the empty information booth and grab a map of the island, looking up at the greenery and then back down to get a sense of what it all looks like. Fog creeps in from the ocean, filtering the sunlight. What the hell am I doing here?

Provecho is marked on the map as a tourist destination. It seems to be within walking distance, so I set out in the direction of the restaurant. Soon I reach Main Street, a couple of blocks' worth of quaint old-school America that I'd always thought movies exaggerated, until now.

The restaurant's façade is simple: a large window facing the street, a black sign with white lettering. It's on the corner of the block, and I can see the edge of the picket fence that borders the patio.

I finger-comb my hair, wipe away some of the sweat from walking around. A car rolls by slowly, gravel pebbles bouncing behind it and rearranging themselves into the word *enjoy*, in Felix's handwriting. I wish he'd stop reminding me he's around, but I find myself grinning all big and stupid, and I realize I'm excited for the first time in months.

I walk up to the front door, salivating already at the prospect of the meal. But the door is locked, because of course it's locked. It's not even eight in the morning yet. The schedule etched on the glass says they don't open for a few hours. Well, then.

I peer into the door, cupping my hands to remove the glare. There's no one in there. I step back to my suitcase, look both ways down the street. There's hardly anyone out here with me. It almost feels like the entire island is abandoned, like I've flown directly into isolation. As if to confirm that, I look down at my feet. Still no shadow.

I take the bend around the street, wanting to see the patio I saw on TV just yesterday. The view makes me feel better immediately. Water, green islands, sailboats, puffy cartoon-like white clouds. It's a dream. I keep staring at the ocean, partially because it's impossible to look away, partially because I want to stall, give myself time to think of what the hell I'm supposed to do now.

Then I hear a door creak open, and to my left a guy in a chef coat and checkered pants appears. He moves a nearby rock over to keep the door open. His arms are tattooed to the wrist, and he's pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He doesn't notice me right away while he lights his smoke and checks his phone. It almost feels like an apparition, like he walked off the set of a cooking show.

I cough, and then the cook looks up. He's got bags under his eyes, a couple days' worth of scruff. Surprisingly young, maybe a year or two older than me, if that. Americans always look older to me, so it's hard to tell. "Not open," he says, cigarette in his mouth.

"No, I know."

The cook eyes me, the suitcase at my side. "Then what the hell do you want from me, dude?" He takes a long drag, and when I don't say anything he looks back down at his phone, exhaling a puff of smoke that dissipates quickly in the breeze coming in from the water. From the cracked door, I can hear the vague clattering of people moving about the kitchen. I want the smell of Chef Elise's food to waft out, but all I get is the cigarette.

"Sorry," I say, feeling like at least one of us is an asshole. I turn around, go back to the front entrance, where I see a girl slip a key into the door and push it open. She's wearing earphones, a baggy brown sweater, a bag slung over her shoulder. I know this is stupid and weird, but I don't have

anywhere to go and can't stand the thought of wandering around the island with no place to go and no one to talk to, so I roll my suitcase over to the door. I knock on the glass.

A few seconds later the door swings open. The girl standing in front of me is pretty—late teens, dark hair, large sixties-style glasses—and for a moment I forget what the hell I'm doing here. Then, over her shoulder, I see the restaurant, exactly like it was shot in the TV show. Thirty tables, a mirror along one of the side walls to make the space feel bigger, a bar adjacent to the hostess stand for people waiting. The back wall is floor-to-ceiling windows looking out at the patio and the ensuing view.

"Sorry," I say, realizing how long it's been without me saying a word. "I wasn't staring at you. I know it probably looked like that. I was just..." I point over her shoulder, stammer, feel my mouth start to go dry. "I want to make a reservation?"

The girl chuckles. "You might officially be the earliest person to ever show up for a reservation." She holds the door open to let me in and then heads to her hostess stand. "What's with the suitcase?"

"Um. I just got here," I say.

"That's cool. From where?" She opens up a large leather-bound agenda and runs her finger down that page.

"Mexico City."

She looks up at me over the rims of her glasses, takes me in for a moment. "You came straight from Mexico City to this restaurant before dropping off your bags?"

I fiddle with my luggage tag. "When you put it that way it sounds kind of insane."

She laughs, eyebrows raised. "No, not insane. Just eager."

I wonder how I could possibly explain my arrival without sounding nuts. Revealing a single detail could unravel my whole story, and my whole story begins and ends with Felix bleeding onto the sidewalk. "I guess I couldn't wait."

She looks back down at the scheduler, biting her bottom lip as she flips a few pages back and forth. We fall into silence, and I look around as if it might all disappear at any moment. I can hear faint music coming from the kitchen. It's hard to believe that I'm standing in a place Felix never got to.

"Looks like you're going to have to wait," she says. "Earliest I have is Tuesday."

"Oh."

"Yeah, summer's busy for us. All these tourists."

A wave of disappointment washes over me, made worse by the fact that I recognize it as disappointment. This is nothing. Any sane person wouldn't bat an eye at this. So why do I feel like my whole journey has been thwarted, like I have to find a bed immediately and disappear beneath its covers?

"I mean, you could always come back and check for cancellations?" the girl says. "Those happen sometimes."

It takes me way too long to say, "Oh, okay. Sure." She takes my name for the Tuesday reservation and then I stand there for a while, not wanting to go back outside but realizing there's nothing left for us to say to each other. "Bye," I say. The girl holds a hand up as she puts her earphones back in.

"Nice meeting you!" she calls out when I'm halfway out the door.

Outside, the world looks empty again. The sun's bright and hot, and everything looks white, drained of color. I'm on an island with no place to stay, no one to go to if I need something. It sounds comically childish, but I want to call my mom. I told her I'd be gone a week; it hasn't even been twelve hours, but I don't know what else to do.

"Si sabes," a voice says.

"No, I don't," I say out loud, though I have to remember that just because I'm here on my own doesn't mean I can start talking to myself. I grab my phone and hold it to my ear.

"You know that Winston Churchill quote, right?"

"Felix, you know damn well I don't."

“If you’re going through hell, keep going,” he says through my phone. “Not that I think you’re going through hell. Far from it. This place is nice.”

Yeah, okay, I think. Still kind of having a conversation with my dead brother via a cell phone that doesn’t actually work. “What do I do until Tuesday?”

“Keep going,” he says. “Find a place to stay. Wait for a cancellation. Explore.”

It seems like a typical Felix oversimplification, but at least it’s an idea. A set of instructions to follow. So that’s what I do. I wander the streets until I find myself on a stretch of hotels and motels set up along the beachfront boardwalk.

I check the first few hotels (big-name chains, families of four wading in the pool, lit with joy) but there’s no vacancy. Eventually, I find a room on the far end of the boardwalk, at a motel that definitely wouldn’t meet my parents’ approval. I unpack my suitcase, take a quick shower, emerge into this strange and sad little motel room.

What the hell am I doing here?

In the months since the Night of the Perfect Taco, solitary rooms have been the hardest to inhabit. I find myself sitting down, standing up, opening the cupboards, feeling the strangeness of having a body. I’m moments away from that now, or from seeing Felix, or burying myself under the covers for the rest of the day.

So instead, I bolt. I leave my phone behind, grab the single key for the room, exit the motel. Head out on a mission. The motel room’s half kitchen has a couple of shitty saucepans, one medium-sized pot, a casserole dish, a stained wooden spoon, an ancient blender. It’s a sad little space, but at least cooking will give me something to fill the days with.

“Fuck,” I say when I enter the grocery store. I forget how incredible US supermarkets are, how the smell of herbs lingers in the air like a perfume. I head straight for the produce, pick up a bunch of basil, the leaves impossibly big. I take a lap around the store, taking in the ingredients. I remember going on trips to the store with Mom and Felix when I was twelve. Felix would insist on pushing the cart, running and taking his feet off the ground, letting the cart carry him down the aisles. I’d wander behind, dragging my feet to prolong the trip. I didn’t know a thing about cooking back then, but I was drawn to the ingredients in a way I didn’t understand yet.

I’m not sure why, but my instinct today is to go with the taste of home. Some chicken thighs, some poblano peppers, a bag of rice, Mexican crema (I’m surprised to find the real stuff, not that whipped-cream-looking shit they serve in Tex-Mex restaurants). Tortillas and Oaxaca cheese. I lose myself in the aisles, fingers trailing over heirloom tomatoes, herbs and produce and packets of exotic spices I can never find at home.

Back at my motel, I wash the vegetables, set water to boil for the sauce, roast the poblanos the way I’ve seen our maid Rosalba do time and time again, on the open flame of the burner. But I didn’t buy tongs, so I’m doing it by hand, turning the pepper to char the skin, trying to keep my fingertips as far away from the heat as possible.

Put those aside, boil the tomatillos, clean the chicken, preheat the oven. I keep the workspace tidy, not just because the counter can hold little more than my cutting board, but because it feels good to work without clutter; it makes things easier. Felix taught me that. He taught me how to hold a knife, how to trim the fat off a thigh, how to pursue knowledge of this thing I love. I take a look around the kitchen, waiting for him to show himself, make some stupid joke. It’s just the memories, though. I’ll take them over worrying about Dad, and Mexico, and what my life will look like after this trip, if I’ll ever feel like myself again.

I serve myself a plate, sprinkle some chopped cilantro on top. There’s enough left over for at least four more people. Not wanting to eat in my sad little room, I take my plate and a chair out onto the breezeway overlooking the parking lot. It’s almost two in the afternoon, the sun hot in the sky, making the emerald trees practically shimmer.

I thought maybe this would feel triumphant, a real fuck-you to Dad, to the thing in me grief has erased. But it's not quite that.

Despite his relentless presence, I miss Felix. I wish he were around to see this moment. Not hallucinatory/ghost/whatever Felix, but the real version. My brother. He would have appreciated the cheesiness of a beautiful view and a traditional Mexican dish to celebrate my escape from home. He would have been proud of me.

A young couple squeezes past me in the corridor, beach towels slung over their shoulders. "Smells good," the guy says, and for a crazy moment I want to tell them that I made way too much and that they can join me. Then of course they pass by, hand in hand, leaving me alone before I can say anything.

CHAPTER 4

PEACH CARDAMOM ROLLS

1 cup butter

1½ cups sugar

1¾ cups boiling water

1 tablespoon salt

2 teaspoons ground cardamom

.75 ounces active dry yeast

2 large eggs

1 can of peaches, drained and diced

7 cups flour

1 teaspoon vegetable oil

1 handful slightly cracked cardamom pods

½ cup powdered sugar

METHOD:

I wake up in the breezeway, more than a little disoriented. The scenery around me is jarring. The plate is by my feet, half the food spilled onto the floor. Families returning from the beach walking through the parking lot. I remember the hostess's suggestion to check back for a cancellation, so I go inside to clean up and then walk the half hour back to the heart of the town. It's all hills and trees, gently humid air alive with bugs and scents and color. I like breathing it in, this different world.

When I enter the restaurant, I'm surprised to see the same girl working at the hostess stand. It's hours later, and though it's early for dinner—even for Americans—the dining room is packed with people. Eager middle-aged couples crowd by the hostess stand, standing like people waiting to board their flights. The girl makes eye contact with me, and to my surprise she smiles with recognition.

"You're back," she says, so quickly that I wonder if we had a longer conversation than I remember. I do that classic look-behind-to-make-sure-it's-me-she's-talking-to thing. "Hoping for a cancellation?"

"Yeah," I say. "Didn't have anything better to do."

She gives me a long look, and I wonder if what I said came across weird in some way. Her glasses are perched on her head, loose strands of hair coming out from her ponytail. Something about her feels familiar, but that's a stupid thought because how could it? I'm in a different world.

"Why don't you take a seat?" she asks, eyebrows raised. For the second time today, I've been staring at her, because clearly I'm not a fully functioning human. I sit down at a nearby chair, wondering if this is just how it's going to be for me from now on. This is who I am now, the dude who stares and doesn't know how to interact with strangers.

Her phone rings, and as she picks up the receiver she tucks a pen behind her ear.

I raise my eyes up to take a look around the restaurant. Servers in black shirts carrying plates of artfully arranged food of all shapes and colors, food in all its limitless forms. Everyone in the dining room is the picture of happiness. A table of hip-looking twenty-somethings laughing as they

listen to their friend's story, a woman with orange hair closing her eyes as she savors a dish's last bite. Felix seats himself next to a couple on the patio, clinks wineglasses with them. Golden light washes over everyone.

I wait. I try to settle in. It's Sunday evening. My phone is still on airplane mode, so who knows how many calls and texts have come my way over the last twelve hours or so. Right now Mexico City is a world away, an entire life away.

Every now and then, my eyes flit toward the hostess. She greets customers with a brilliant smile, leads them to their tables, rolls her eyes at the jerks when she thinks no one is watching. She answers her phone and chats with another hostess, every now and then looking at me and offering a smile.

It makes me feel a little less see-through, even though I've been sitting for nearly an hour like a weirdo, and Felix keeps running around trying to make me laugh or talk.

After a long stretch without a phone call, the hostess comes back from seating a couple and says, "You want some coffee?"

I smile, rise to my feet, though I'm not sure if I should so I kind of end up squatting. "Sure. But aren't you working?"

She laughs. "Yeah, dude. Just gonna grab some from the back. I figured since you're sticking around you might want some."

"Oh. Yeah, thanks." I'm still standing up, not sure if I should offer to help or what. "I'm Carlos," I say, holding out my hand, thanking god that I remembered no one does the whole cheek-to-cheek kiss thing here.

She shakes it. "I'm Emma. Now sit," she says. "If the phone rings, just pick it up and shriek into it, will you?"

I sit down. "You want one continuous shriek or multiple bursts of shrieking?"

"Either way, they'll complain," Emma says, maybe a little too loudly for how many customers are standing around waiting for tables. I watch her head to the back of the restaurant, and before the double doors that lead to the kitchen swing shut I can see the cook with the tattooed arms walk past, carrying a slab of meat. I think I even see Felix back there, a frying pan in hand, flames licking out at him. God, what it would be like to inhabit that world, food surrounding you.

Emma comes back out, two coffees in paper cups in hand. "One's black, one's sweetened and creamy. I don't care which I get." I grab the sweetened one, thank her, stand and then sit and then stand again.

She takes the lid off her coffee, sets it next to the phone that's been ringing so constantly that I'm pretty sure this place is booked for the next year. She blows away the steam from her cup. "So, have you always lived in Mexico?"

"Yup. Born and raised."

"Your English is really good."

"Only when I'm speaking. You should have heard me screeching at your customers a second ago. My accent's embarrassing." Whoa. Was that my second joke already? I don't think I've cracked so much as a pun since the Night of the Perfect Taco.

"You screeched?!? I said *shriek*. Shit." She takes her glasses off, rubs them clean on the hem of her sweatshirt. "If we go out of business, I'm telling the chef it's your fault."

"That probably lowers my chances of sneaking in on a cancellation, right?"

"I'd say so." Emma sips again from her coffee and then gives a chuckle. The phone rings again, and now, while she's on it, I'm not looking around the restaurant but rather opening my mouth like I'm shrieking and trying to make her laugh. I'm not sure why I am so at ease all of a sudden. Joking around in the last few months has felt like pretending, even if I'm doing it with my friends. But her laughter makes me want to try for more.

When she hangs up, she throws her coffee lid at me. A woman wrapped in a silk shawl glares at her, but Emma ignores the look. “So, is that really why you’re here? You decided to take an international flight for one meal?”

For a moment I consider just telling her everything. Felix is dead and this is a link to him. We loved food together and he wrote the name of this place in a notebook once, so now I’m here. To eat on my dead brother’s behalf. There’s an icebreaker for you.

I do think about how good it would feel to finally tell someone that I can see him. Maybe that’s all it would take to get him to leave. Instead I shrug and say yes, and Emma gives me another long look before she turns to help some customer.

I end up staying at the restaurant far longer than I planned to. I thought maybe I’d stick around an hour or two and then go exploring like Felix suggested. But the wider world doesn’t call out to me. I just want to wait, watch the food go by, sit in this little corner of the world and not worry about anything else.

“You are the most patient person I’ve ever met,” Emma says at one point. The sun’s set over the horizon; the restaurant is aglow with soft lighting from scentless candles and the twinkling bulbs in the patio. “You know you have a reservation for Tuesday, right?”

“I’m kind of enjoying myself, though,” I say.

“That’s a little weird.”

I sink into my chair, blood rushing to my cheeks. I go the next hour without saying a word. A dozen different Felixes show up. He’s a server carrying one plate in each hand, thumbs off the edges, a customer checking in for a reservation. Some versions of him make a little less sense: a miniature version swimming in my coffee, telling me to relax.

Emma greets a party of six and as she walks them over to their table, I think I see her glance over her shoulder at me as she goes. She’s probably noticed me staring at people, trying to suppress the urge to talk back to Felix.

At ten o’clock, the restaurant is seating its last reservations. Emma’s wiping off menus with a napkin, and she jokes that I’ve been here so long I should have gotten paid. I try to act normal as a thought bubble sprouts out of my head and Felix shows me a flashback of the Night of the Perfect Taco: us at the stand in that one market, Felix teasing me that I should work with food.

“Yup, I’m for sure qualified to work here,” I tell Emma. “I watch the Food Network.”

“Don’t tell anyone in the kitchen that. They keep special knives to stab people with just for that occasion.”

I laugh, she laughs and we fall into a silence that lasts until I finally say good-night. “See you Tuesday,” she says.

CHAPTER 5

CHERRY MOON PIES

6 ounces unsalted butter

1 cup sugar

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

1 cup flour

¼ cup graham cracker crumbs

2 teaspoons baking powder

2 teaspoons baking soda

2 teaspoons cherry extract

1 teaspoon cinnamon

¼ cup whole milk

1 pound bittersweet chocolate

2 tablespoons coconut oil

METHOD:

The next day is Monday and the restaurant is closed, so I spend the whole day roaming the aisles of the grocery store and cooking, kept company only by Felix. Every time he shows up, he undoes a little bit of the joy I'd built up yesterday.

Every now and then, I think about calling my parents. I think about Isa on her way to Buenos Aires, Danny and the rest on the way to Europe. Mostly, I just hole up inside my room and wonder whether Dad's already washed his hands of me.

On Tuesday, I wake up late, without enough energy to do anything but lie in bed. When I emerge from my room, it's practically evening, and there's a fog creeping in from the beach, more white than gray. It stretches itself across the motel parking lot and slips in between the trees across the road. The sun, well on its way to the horizon, doesn't do much to heat the day, and I have to warm my hands with my breath on my walk downtown.

Joggers rule the island at this hour, it seems. Brightly colored spandex and arm-strapped phones greet me at nearly every turn, sometimes emerging from the fog like ghosts. I walk past Provecho once or twice, knowing that it's too early for me to show for my dinner reservation. Felix shows up at my side in jogging gear, comically fluorescent. "Let's go exploring, man. You've been sitting around for almost two days. It's not healthy," he says, his fractured English making the *h* sound like a loogie being hocked up.

He leads me to the beach, which is frankly a little lame. Everyone brought their own towels and coolers and stuff, and there are no restaurants with lounge chairs and palapas set up along the beach, a staple of every Mexican beach I've been to. There should be unfettered beers and music, not the surreptitious pulls from Solo Cups I see here, the Bluetooth speakers.

"I just want to go to the restaurant," I say, watching people brush sand off their belongings, parents trying to corral their sunburnt children.

"You came all the way here. I'm excited about the meal too, but there's more to this place, don't you think?"

I don't say anything.

Eventually we head back to the restaurant. I regret it a little when I see that Emma's not at the hostess stand because I liked how it felt to talk to her the other day. But I don't regret it enough to go back out into the world. The new girl at the hostess stand gives me a strange look when I say I'll wait three hours for my reserved table, which I guess is a reasonable reaction. I watch the servers go up to the kitchen window, watch the looks on people's faces when they get their food, when they take their first bite.

Suddenly, I'm thinking about all I didn't know about Felix's life. What he ate at the Israeli restaurant, for example, the meal that made him want to come here.

"Endive salad with creamy yuzu dressing, followed by three-chili shrimp scampi," Felix cuts in. "For dessert: white chocolate gelato with fresh pomegranate and a passionfruit drizzle."

I sigh loudly, which is another tactic I've had to develop to stifle the urge to respond to him in public. Hallucination or ghost, I'm not sure whether I should strictly believe anything he says since he's died. If they're somehow his memories or just what I think his memories would sound like. Easier just to sigh.

The hours go by, surprisingly easy. I don't have to talk to anyone, don't have to interact with Dad's business partners, don't have to force jokes so that Mom and everyone else will believe I'm okay. I can just look at food, and people, and a world unlike the one I'll eventually go back to. My normal life will consume me soon enough, so for now I want to dive into this. I will honor Felix and then cast him away. Then I'll be okay.

Finally, the hostess calls my name and leads me to a table in the back, near a window looking out at the patio. If I tried, I could easily eavesdrop on half a dozen conversations around me. The hostess places a black leather menu on the table, says someone will be around shortly to take my order. I'm shocked I hadn't thought to open a menu up until this point. It reads like a dream.

When I put the menu down, Felix is sitting in front of me in a tuxedo.

He conjures up tears to his eyes. “I can’t believe you brought me here. You’re such a good brother.”

“Shut up,” I mumble, pretending to take a sip of water so no one sees my lips move.

Felix holds his hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay, we won’t get emotional.” He opens a menu, though there’s only one on the table and it’s under my elbow. “Please tell me you got the sweetbreads for us.”

I look out at the patio. A full moon’s reflected in the water, and the other islands in the distance are impossibly easy to see through the darkness. “I got the sweetbreads,” I say, hating him for making me say it out loud, for knowing damn well that the sweetbreads are not for *us*.

He starts off on some story about his travels, and I just stare out the window until my food arrives, listening. It’s easy to forget myself. Andouille-spiced sweetbreads, pork belly ceviche as appetizers, something called Duck in a Jar for my entrée, a side order of squash poutine. The descriptions alone were a fantasy, and I was sure that there’d be no way the dishes could match up to my expectations. I was wrong.

Felix eats too. Twin plates show up when the server sets mine in front of me. Felix lays out his napkin across his lap and rubs his hands together like a cartoon villain planning his takeover.

He takes a bite of the duck breast and dips it in the sriracha au jus. “Que jalada,” he moans with pleasure, scoops out some more. Except I know there’s nothing there across the table from me. It’s just me eating. One meal, not two.

These bites are what I’m here for, I remind myself. I try to savor them instead of diluting them with my thoughts.

For dessert: dulce de leche fondant cake with banana-cardamom gelato and orange-zest white-chocolate chips. My brother eats a spoonful as slowly as he always did when he was alive. He used to eat desserts so glacially that he could never get ice cream in cones. They’d drip down his arm, half the scoop wasted on the sidewalk.

The gelato on his plate is pooling right now, but it’s a fucking lie. There is no gelato. This has been one of the best meals of my life, but it’s been a solitary one. My brother isn’t sitting in front of me. I’m alone in this restaurant, on this island. I came here to honor some unrealized dream of his based on a journal entry. A stupid journal entry, as if it could have told me what Felix would have done with one more day. As if he’d be here if he really could. As if this undoes anything, fixes anything.

“Hey,” I hear him say. Soft clink of his spoon hitting the plate. “I would be. I am.”

But I can’t bear the sight of him/not him. I never wanted him to come back. I never wanted him gone.

My breath starts to come quick and shallow. I can see Felix in the reflection of the window but somehow can’t see myself. The background noise of the restaurant, so manageable when I sat down, is suddenly building to a roar.

“How was everything?” My chipper server has the bill in her hand. If I hand her my credit card, sign my receipt, my little mission here is over.

I try to smile at her, but it’s just not happening. To keep from revealing myself as completely out of my mind, I manage to stammer out: “Bathroom?”

She points the way, and I speed-walk to the privacy of a stall as if I’m about to be sick. Inside, I take a seat, doubling over, trying to take deep breaths but failing to. It feels like the opposite is happening, like air is being squeezed out of my lungs. My hands are gripping at my knees, but I can’t even see my fingers doing it, just the little indents in the fabric where I know my fingers should be.

Without Felix, I am not myself.

Shaken, I walk over to the sink, splash some water on my face. I avoid looking at my reflection, just keep my eyes down and try to convince myself that it’s all okay. When I manage to take a deep breath without it hurting, I leave the bathroom.

Right by the exit, in the little corridor between the bathrooms, I see Emma leaning against the wall. She's in her work shirt, her hair in a bun. "Hey," she says when she sees me. "You okay? I saw you rushing in there looking like you were about to pass out. Wanted to make sure we hadn't poisoned you or something." She looks over her shoulder toward the kitchen. "I probably shouldn't say that so loud."

I somehow manage a laugh. "Yeah, I'm okay." Not sure I even believe that, but what the hell else should I say?

I'm expecting her to nod, lead me back to my table, say good-bye.

Instead, she pulls her phone out of her pocket and checks the time. Then she says, "Are you done eating?" I nod. "Can you give me, like, five minutes? Then wait for me outside?"

"Um," I say. "Why?"

"I have this weird thing where if I only see someone in one location I can't ever be sure that they're a real person." She readjusts her glasses so that they're not on the bridge of her nose but out of the way, up above her forehead. Two tiny indents mark the spot where they've rested all day. "Plus, you're new to town. I like showing people around. You're free, right?"

I manage a smile. "Yeah," I say.

"Five minutes," she says. "Don't bail on me." She turns the corner. Outside, tourists walk by holding dripping ice-cream cones, changed out of their beachwear into pleated shorts and sundresses. I'm constantly on the lookout for that rising feeling of dread in my chest again, but everything seems calm within me.

Emma appears in front of me, her work shirt unbuttoned to the tank top beneath it, her bag slung over her shoulder, glasses still resting on her head.

"So, am I a real person now?" I ask, getting up.

"Yet to be determined," she says. "We're still too close to the restaurant. Ghosts have *some* range."

"Ah, of course. I knew that." I smirk at the irony.

Emma asks if I've seen the lake yet, and I admit that I haven't even really thought about visiting it. "I saw the beach," I offer.

"Ugh to the beach." She looks at her phone for a second and then drops it into her bag. "Do you have any shattered dreams?"

"What does that mean?"

"Any huge disappointments? Life stomping down on you? Hope fluttering away from you like sand spilling from the cracks between your fingers?"

I blink at her.

"Good," she says. "This lake can unshatter dreams. Guaranteed. Dip a single toe in and your hopes are restored."

She leads us away from downtown, up a street that turns into a hill. It's a full moon, and I'm amazed by how much light it provides. There's no real sidewalk, just the side of the road, grassy banks next to the shoulder. Few cars pass by us, and I'm constantly shocked by how quiet things are here.

"How does it do that?"

She gives me this excited look, eyebrows cartoonishly raised, goofy smile. "I want to keep it a secret but suck at keeping secrets, so we have to change the subject while we walk or I'm gonna ruin it."

"Okay," I say. "What about...um..." I ransack my thoughts for anything funny to say, anything that'll make her want to keep this walk going. I look around for clues, see that it's all moonlit shadows and trees. I finally land, somehow, on: "My brother died."

Emma meets my eyes, and I realize what a colossally poor conversation subject this is. Emma doesn't say anything, because I just held a pillow over this conversation's face and watched the breath drain out of it.

“When you said ‘change the subject,’ you meant to the most depressing thing I could think of, right?”

I’m not sure if I’m digging myself into a deeper hole, but Emma laughs and says, “Yeah, that was rough. But at least now I know taking you to the lake is a good call.” We walk quietly for a while. “Is that why you had that little moment in the restaurant? Because he’s dead?”

I turn to look at her, taken aback. “Basically,” I say.

“I never had any siblings,” Emma says. “I always wanted them, though. I usually pretended friends were sisters or just made them up inside my head. They’d only show up at night, when I was waiting for my parents to get home and relieve the babysitter. I’d pretend they were taking care of me instead of whichever neighbor’s teen daughter was watching me.

“My parents are both chefs so they were always working a lot,” she says, grabbing at a long stalk of grass and twisting it in her hands. “This was back when they were still together and we lived in New York. But they could barely handle being parents and cooks at the same time, and they sure as shit couldn’t handle a marriage on top of it. Anyway, it’s probably why I always have a book on me now. I need something to keep me company.”

In the silence that follows, I glance over at Emma, seeing her face in the moonlight. “That’s also why I’m constantly inviting people to do things with me,” she jokes, not meeting my eye.

“Including near-strangers-slash-possible-ghosts that hang around your place of work.”

“Exactly.” Emma finds another nearly invisible break in the woods, leads us back out to the street. I can see the lights from downtown, and I’m surprised to see how high we’ve gone up the hill. “Wait for it,” Emma says, reading my expression. “It gets so much better.”

Near the top of the hill there’s a scenic overlook on the side of the road, but Emma leads me across the street and into the woods again. We have to fight through brambles to reach the peak, me and this girl I don’t really know.

On one side, the moon reflects off the crystalline lake that’s at the near end of the island and gives the place its name. It really does look like a needle’s eye. The moon looks like some fantastical orb that lives in the lake, only visible from this one spot. It’s as if we’re witnessing something in another dimension. To the other side there’s the town, a spattering of lights that would pale in comparison to any neighborhood in Mexico City, even its most remote suburbs.

All around us, the ocean does a weak impersonation of the lake’s reflection of the moon, the waves too disruptive for the water to be a mirror but still stained beautifully by the silver glow. And to the east, just beyond the silhouette of another island, the lights of Seattle are a haze on the horizon.

“How do you know about all these amazing spots?” I ask.

“My mom and I moved here right after the divorce. I had a lot of alone time,” Emma says. “Gave me time to explore.”

I take in the view, unable to decide in which direction I want to look. Hands on hips, still a little winded from the climb, or maybe actually struck breathless, I say, “This place is magical.”

“Yeah,” Emma responds. “I’m glad you think so.”

She’s standing only a few steps away, arms still folded across her chest, looking in the direction of Seattle. A breeze picks up, and I can see goose bumps appear on her arms.

“Look at all this, man,” Felix says, appearing at my side, putting an arm over my shoulder. “I wish I could have seen this for real.”

Go away, I think. Emma and I are having a nice moment here. We’re quiet for long enough that my words have a chance to echo in my head. Tears come to my eyes, and I have to pretend the wind is to blame.

Emma catches on to some extent, and she reaches out and gives me a reassuring forearm touch that lasts only a second but still does what it’s meant to. Then she pulls away, grabs her sweatshirt from out of her bag and slips it on as I compose myself.

Felix stands by, hands in his pockets, his gaze going from me to Emma and then out at the expanse of the island. His shirt wrinkles in the breeze, and I remember how Mom would always say the shirt was one strong gust of wind away from disintegrating. Two red bursts of blood start spreading across his chest, and though I want to look away I force myself to keep my eyes on him. I think for a second that this is it, this is when Felix leaves me. Then Felix looks down at the blood and groans. “Every time,” he says, taking out one of those stain-remover pens and starting to dab furiously and futilely at the still-growing splotches.

Felix doesn’t disappear; I’m still half-here.

CHAPTER 6

SEAWEED SALAD

50 grams rehydrated wakame

1 cucumber, julienned

1 stick surimi, shredded

¼ cup scallions

1 tablespoon mirin

1 tablespoon soy sauce

1 tablespoon sesame oil

1 teaspoon rice vinegar

1 teaspoon wasabi paste

METHOD:

Emma glances down at her phone. She looks indecisive for a moment and then types something. A little sound effect swoosh tells me she just sent a message. “We’re gonna meet up with my friends at the lake, if that’s okay?”

“Sure,” I say. We stand up, brush away the loose strands of dried grass. I hope Felix stays gone, but I hope it a little more gently this time. “That’s so quaintly small-town American, hanging out at the lake. What do you guys do there?”

“The usual. Bonfire, drinks if we can get them, or someone brings weed, or we play charades. Why? What do you do for fun in Mexico City?”

Sit on the couch alone watching cooking shows, have my friends drag me out to parties because they don’t know how else to deal with me. “Umm, I don’t know,” I say. “We have these things called comidas, where everyone from school gathers at a house for tacos and a shit-show amount of drinks. It’s supposed to be a lunch, but it’s really just an afternoon party.”

We fight through the bramble again, start to descend the hill. I still can’t believe how much I can see of the woods. Each branch and leaf is lit up as if it’s beneath a spotlight. This place feels like a fantasy, like any minute now we’ll cross paths with a group of fairies, and Emma will simply wave hello at them, used to the sight. “Parents are just cool with that?” Emma asks.

“Whoever’s hosting usually has parents out of town or something. I haven’t been to one in a while.” I think out loud. “That might just be a thing that’s specific to my school, though. My school is kind of its own world: lots of rich kids, embassy kids, people who move every two years and have lived all over the world. I’m never really sure if my experiences are typically Mexican or not.”

“Sounds like maybe not,” Emma says. “But what the hell do I know?”

We break through into another clearing, with another insane view.

“So, what else do you do?” Emma says. “Like, for fun?”

“I mostly just go to movies, I guess,” I say, with a chuckle wrought mostly from nerves. Then I add, “I like cooking.”

“Really? How come?”

I’ve answered this question in my own head for years now, as if waiting to defend myself from someone’s accusations. Maybe the way Dad treated Felix’s love of travel helped prompt the

preparation. “I love food and the joys it brings people. Cooking, to me, is an easy way to provide joy to myself and to others.”

Emma cocks her eyebrow. “Good answer,” she says.

“My brother may have helped me phrase it. He was much better with words than I am.” I duck away from some low-hanging branches. “What about you?” I ask, thankful but not wanting to just keep coming back to my dead brother. “What do you do for fun?”

“I walk with ghosts through the woods,” she says with a smile, and I laugh more than I probably should.

* * *

When we get to the lake, Emma’s friends have started a bonfire. Embers float up into the night sky, and I swear to god they just keep going up and up until they stick to the night sky. There’s about ten people huddled around the pit, most holding beers. I recognize a couple from the restaurant, servers and bussers who have shed their black shirts and now look younger than I would have guessed. The cook with the tattooed sleeves is here too, his perpetual cigarette tucked between two knuckles. Emma calls out a hello as they approach and then introduces me to the group.

Someone asks where I’m from, and the usual onslaught of follow-up questions ensues. The tattooed cook, Matt, brings up one of those questions I’m shocked I’ve been asked more than once in my life: “Did you ride a donkey to school every day?” He laughs, proud of himself, until I say that, sure, all twenty-five million Mexico City residents ride around on donkeys. The city built a second-story highway just to deal with all the donkey traffic. The group laughs, someone calls Matt a dumbass.

Emma and I both accept beers and then take a seat on a blanket. We rest our backs against the cooler, which is heavy with ice and bottles. Emma gets pulled into a conversation pretty quickly, and I want to just sit back and listen to her, watch the embers float and wait for the island to keep doing impossible things. But a girl sitting to my left ropes me into a conversation. Her name’s Brandy and she very quickly tells me that she’s looking forward to leaving to go to college, all the new experiences that await her. I feel like a dick for not really caring about what she’s saying, for just wanting to be alone with Emma again.

“But this place is great,” I say, struggling to engage.

“For a while. You left Mexico, though. So you were probably kind of sick of it, right? But if I went I’d probably be amazed by everything there.” Brandy narrows her eyes, maybe a little drunk, maybe just a little like Felix, able to slip into earnestness without being self-conscious about it. “It’s beautiful here. I know that. But I’m kind of blind to it now. I can’t wait to get out.”

I don’t get the chance to think too long about what she said, because a few of Emma’s other friends join in on the conversation. They’re curious just because I’m not from here.

They want to know about drug lords, whether Mexicans eat burritos or if that’s just Americans, all the differences between here and there, but only weird surface questions that won’t actually tell them anything. In between their questions, or when Emma moves to throw another log on the fire, tosses someone else a beer, I look at her. I look at this strange place I’m in, the strangers around me, how it feels like I’ve been plopped in the middle of all of it. I find myself thinking: *What a world.*

Someone asks me what brought me to the island, and I feel a tightness in my chest. I look down at the beer in my hand, peel at the label. Matt barks a laugh at my awkwardness until someone smacks him and tells him to shut up again. Sound gets sucked out of the evening, and all of a sudden it’s just me, feeling like a moron in front of some strangers. I’m afraid I’m about to freak out like in the restaurant again.

Emma breaks the silence with a sigh and then stands up, patting me on the shoulder as she does, rescuing me. “Wanna take a walk?”

I try to contain my smile, nod. I expect Brandy or a few others to follow along, but it’s just me and her walking away from the bonfire. When we’re only a few steps away, the stars, which have been

hiding behind the glare of the flames, reemerge overhead. It feels like Emma's just flicking switches around me, making things beautiful.

"Sorry about my friends," Emma says. "You were getting pounced."

We walk along the edge of the lake, tiny waves lapping at our feet, though the lake as a whole seems perfectly still. "I don't mind. It's just weird being the center of attention."

"Usually when people pay attention to me," Emma says, "I'm certain they're after something. Like they're going to ask me for a donation or to sign a petition at any moment."

"Oh, that reminds me," I say, pretending to reach into my pocket for a pen. "I have this petition I need six thousand signatures for..."

"Shut up," Emma says, smacking my arm. We fall quiet, and I can make out the sounds of wildlife in the surrounding trees. Bugs, an owl, the scattering feet of critters in the leaves. "I mean it, though. I can't meet new people without giving a little side-eye to their intentions." I don't ask if I'm an exception. Emma goes on. "It's gonna sound like such a whiny thing to say, but I'm sure it's my parents' fault. You can't leave a kid so alone that she makes up imaginary friends for herself and not cause some long-lasting trust issues." She says this jokingly, but I can tell there's something tugging at her voice.

She kicks at a pebble, and we both watch it bounce toward the lake and then skip across the surface. Like, the entire surface. Hundreds of skips, the ripples visible in the moonlight. I'd say I'm losing my mind but, well, that ship's probably sailed. At least this insanity is aesthetically pleasing.

"You think parents know?" I ask. "When they've messed their kids up in certain ways?"

"Oh, I've written several manifestos to my parents about All the Ways They Messed Up."

I chuckle. I don't know where she's taking me, but I don't want this walk to stop. I want to circle the lake all night. "What's number one on the list?"

Emma thinks for a second. "Well, my mom never taught me her secret to make the perfect grilled cheese."

I gasp. "You poor thing."

"That's not even a joke. I'm exaggerating a little about her messing me up, of course. I think I turned out okay, mostly." We've made it far enough away from the bonfire so that the voices don't carry over, and it feels like it's just the two of us again. Emma's face is lit up by the moon, tiny replicas in her glasses at certain angles. "But she seriously makes the greatest grilled cheese of all time, and she's never told me her secret. I can just picture myself in college, during the prime grilled cheese days of my life, each one a slight disappointment."

"That's the saddest thing I've ever heard."

The lake has a little bay that dips into the woods, out of sight from the bonfire, and we follow the grassy shore until we're completely isolated.

"So, have you been planning to come here for a while?" Emma says, stopping at a boulder near the lake. She leans against it, starts to untie her shoes.

"No," I say, continuing my surprising trend of truth telling in her presence. "I kind of ran away. Bolted from my own high school graduation party." I look around at where we are, the little nook of lake that has us hidden from the rest of the world. "What are we doing here?"

"I'm showing you more cool island things," she says, peeling off her socks now. "This is a great night for it too. When the moon's out, it looks even better."

"What does?" I ask, following her lead and stepping out of my shoes.

"Plankton." Emma leans down and rolls up her pant legs until they're halfway up her calves. Her toenails have traces of purple polish on them, long ago chipped. She tip-toes her way to the edge of the lake, avoiding rocks and twigs. I expect her to dive right in, but she stops before she reaches the water, looks back at me.

It's really tempting to get caught in that look, so instead I tuck my socks inside my shoes, roll up my pant legs, step up to Emma's side. It's a little chilly out, and I expect the lake is colder, but there's no way I'm not doing whatever the hell Emma has in mind.

"Okay, when I say so, we're gonna take three superlong strides into the lake. Stomp as much as you can. You'll get a little wet, but, trust me, it's worth it." She moves her glasses again so that they rest atop her head. "Don't look up, don't look ahead, don't look at me, okay? You can only look down at your feet. And really stomp down. Splash as much as possible."

Emma counts down to three, and as soon as we splash into the water, it comes alive. Millions of white lights sparkle. They radiate out like a shockwave, tiny brilliant explosions like nothing I've ever seen. Emma is stomping onward, a path of light in her wake. I follow along, but I go slower, not wanting to take the next step until the last one has subsided, afraid that the magic will run out. It's like lightning underwater, like microscopic fireflies raging in sync. When the water calms back to darkness, I lean over, run my hand through the water. The lights follow suit, like it's my skin that's charged and not the water.

I hear Emma's stomping and near-maniacal laughter get closer. "What is this?" I ask, my face only a few inches away from the water. I hadn't even noticed how warm the lake is, how soaked through my jeans are. I swirl my fingers across the surface, enchanted.

"This is nature being ridiculous," Emma says. "Bioluminescent plankton. Like swimming in fireworks."

We step back to shore, sit on the muddy banks with our toes dipped into the water. Every now and then one of us will kick out to bring the lake back to life. I think back to how I lost it at the restaurant and it doesn't feel like something that really happened to me. A dream, maybe, or a story I heard someone else tell.

"Thanks for bringing me here. I needed this," I say. I raise my foot up from the water, watch electric white droplets cling to my heel. "You were right. This unshatters dreams."

"I could tell you'd appreciate it." Emma scoots closer to the lake so she can bend her knees up and still touch the water. She folds her arms around her legs, looking out at the water, a beatific smile on her face. Then she turns her head a little, rests her cheek on her knee to glance at me.

In that one glance, I know I've never been here before. I've never been in a moment like this one, never wanted a night to stretch out the way I want tonight to stretch out. If this island is as magical as it feels, it'll stop the flow of hours into a trickle. If I'm here for a reason, it's not the meal I had at Provecho.

I smile at her and she smiles back, and then I stomp my heel down in the water so that the air around us is lit up by bright droplets. Emma stomps too, hard enough that the splashes soak us both.

When we stop, I look at that spot in the lake where our feet are touching underwater. The particles of white light in the water rearrange. Felix again. Quick urge to kick him away before I think: *How many nights like this did he have? How many was he robbed of?*

"Hey, you okay?" Emma asks.

I takes my eyes off the lake, not sure how I managed to get pulled away from this. "Yeah," I say, smiling. "Really don't want tonight to end." She lays her hand on mine, and as soon as she does I really do feel okay. Like my time here isn't going to be all panic attacks and solitary cooking.

For the first time in a long time, I am okay.

CHAPTER 7

SALMON WITH ANGEL HAIR PASTA

¾ bottle dry white wine

5 lemons (and zest)

½ cup fresh dill, roughly chopped

1 pint heavy whipping cream

4 8-ounce salmon filets

500 grams angel hair pasta
¼ cup sun-dried tomatoes, julienned
1 4-ounce jar capers

METHOD:

The next morning, I leave the motel at sunrise. When I said good-bye to Emma yesterday, she told me to come by the restaurant early. I'm not sure why, but I didn't really bother asking.

Fog encroaches again, but it's tinted pink by the dawn. The whole island looks like cotton candy. I linger in the parking lot awhile, see that couple who walked past me the other day packing up their car. Maybe I should be booking my flight home, but for some reason I don't want to think about it. Not after last night. Felix didn't show up again the rest of the night, and though I didn't sleep long, I slept deeply.

Before I can knock on the front door of the restaurant, Emma pokes her head from around the corner. "Come this way," she calls.

I follow behind. She's standing by the back door, keeping it propped open. "I have a surprise for you," she says with a smile.

"Me too." I hold out the coffee I bought for her on the way here.

I want a little moment reliving yesterday, some eye contact or a forearm squeeze or something. Emma takes the coffee unceremoniously and urges me inside. The short hallway we walk down is much colder than the temperature outside. It's quiet, though I can tell there's someone else here.

"Are you giving me a tour?" I ask, a little giddy at the thought. I've never been inside a professional kitchen before, and though I've had some exposure on TV, in books I've read, it's a little different than what I'd imagined.

"There'll be time for that."

I don't really know what Emma's talking about, but I'm distracted by the sights of the kitchen. We pass two huge steel doors that I imagine are home to all the ingredients from my meal yesterday. I strain to see the line, the row of cooks prepping for the day. Felix would have loved to see this. We turn a corner and come upon a door, which Emma immediately knocks on.

"Come in!"

Emma pushes the door open. Inside, at a desk facing the door, is a woman who looks surprisingly like Emma herself. She's wearing a white chef's coat, her brown hair up in a bun, bags under her eyes. Golden script on the pocket over her heart reads: Chef Elise. She looks up from a clipboard in front of her, barely taking in my presence before she starts scribbling something. "What are you doing here so early?" she asks, which feels to me like a weird way to talk to your employees.

"Meet our new dishwasher," Emma says.

Chef stops her scribbling and gives Emma a hard look. I turn to her for an explanation too, but she's busy staring Chef Elise down. I'm guessing this is some sort of joke. I'm just trying to figure out if it's at my expense or not.

Chef tosses her clipboard down onto the desk and sighs, looks at me. "Any restaurant experience?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure what's going on here." I turn to Emma. "You want me to work here?"

"Goddamnit, Emma, what are you bringing this kid in here for?"

Emma rolls her eyes. "You need a dishwasher, don't you?"

"That's not the point."

"Of course it is," Emma says, throwing her hands up. "You need a dishwasher, Mom. It's not the world's—" There's a loud crash, and when I turn to it Chef Elise's clipboard is on the floor and I swear I can see her nostrils flaring.

"In here, I'm your boss. You call me Chef like everyone else."

Jesus. The air in the room feels exactly the way it did when I left home. At least now I know why Emma seemed a little familiar. I'd seen Chef before, on that show. "Whatever," Emma says.

“Dishwashing isn’t the hardest job to learn. You need a dishwasher. He wants a job in restaurants. I’m just helping you out.”

Wait, what? Where the hell did Emma get that notion? I’m so confused, which must show on my expression because when Emma sees it she gives me a little smirk. “The way you talk about cooking. You don’t want to go back home, do you?”

Emma raises her eyebrows, questioning. Chef Elise has a similar look in her eyes, just a little more on the exasperated side. As I’m caught in their stares, wondering what I’m supposed to say to that, I sense another presence in the room. Of course. Felix. I try to subtly look around for him, find him in the dust swirling around in a beam of light.

“I think the girl has a point,” Felix says. Only my brother could find a way to smirk when he’s dust. “Why go back to the same thing? What’s waiting at home for you?” At least he’s in wisdom-nugget mode and not stupid-joke mode.

I think about what I said to Mom before I left. One week. It feels like a joke now. How could I have thought a week would be enough? It’s enough for a meal, maybe.

My thoughts are interrupted by the squeak of Chef’s chair as she rolls over to pick up her clipboard. “Fuck, Emma, look at him. He doesn’t even know where he is.” Great, I’ve been staring at a beam of light and probably moving my lips while I think up a response. Chef’s about to tell me to go away and I don’t know what I’d do with the rest of my day. Go back to my room, try to hold myself together by cooking things Felix and I used to. Go home. Face Dad again.

“Elias!” Chef yells out.

A Latino dude shows up at the door. “Yes, Chef.” He’s in a chef coat too, a towel slung over his shoulder, sweat already on his forehead. He’s right around Felix’s age, maybe in his midtwenties.

“Have we heard from Richie yet?”

“No, Chef. That’s three days.”

Chef looks back at me and then at Emma. The other cook, Elias, goes back to whatever he was doing in the kitchen. Chef leans back in her chair and then goes over to the computer on her desk and clicks a few times. Emma gives me a reassuring smile, or at least that’s what I assume it’s supposed to be. It’s six in the morning and I think I’m in the middle of asking for a job, which was not at all in my morning plans.

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