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the recipe



a story of loss, love, and
the ingredients of greatness

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chef charles carroll
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AUSTIN DAVID BOOKS

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For Torill and Ana

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the diner

The wind whipped at Owen's jacket as he trudged up the long slate steps. When he reached the old diner's front entrance he stopped and turned, putting his back to the door and facing into the bitter February blast.

He tried not to look, but he couldn't help himself.

There it stood, across the street, dark and deserted, its brickwork looming four stories, long rows of windows glaring back at him. He shivered. One of the big warehouse windows was sealed over with cardboard and duct tape.

Vandalism.

The night before, he'd overheard his mom talking quietly on the phone in the next room. He knew it was about him, but all he'd caught was the word "reparation." He'd had to look it up. *The making of amends for a wrongdoing by paying money or other compensation.* That had sent him off to sleep feeling even worse.

He heaved a big breath and the shivers stopped.

"This is stupid," he muttered.

He turned back and pushed the door open. Snowflakes spiraled around his feet, following him in as he stepped inside and shut the diner door behind him.

The place was simple, brightly lit, gleaming clean.

“Hello?” he called out as he looked around. Six booths lined the windows on his left, facing the side street; to his right, a long counter lined with a dozen old-fashioned pedestal stools. Three small tables punctuated the center aisle. Owen tried to picture how many people would fill this space. Forty, fifty maybe? Right now, at four thirty on a Friday afternoon, there was not a soul in the place.

Chopchopchopchopchop. . .

The sound startled him. Glancing off to his right, he found its source: a grizzled old guy, just visible through a pass-through in the wall behind the counter, focused on his chopping block.

“Hello?” Owen repeated, as he took a few steps toward the pass-through. The man stopped what he was doing and looked up. “I . . . I need to speak with the owner?”

The man set his knife down, wiped his hands on a small towel hanging at his waist, and peered through the opening at the boy. Owen couldn’t read the expression on his face.

“You the boy here about some work.” More a statement than a question.

Owen nodded.

“Right,” said the man. He disappeared for a moment, then emerged through a set of swinging doors at the end of the counter and walked up the aisle toward Owen. “Let’s see what you can do.”

“Excuse me?”

“You like to cook?” the man said.

Owen shrugged. “I guess.”

The truth was, Owen *loved* to cook. In his fourteen years on earth, some of his happiest times had been cooking and eating with his parents, and he was drawn to the kitchen almost as much as he was to the baseball diamond.

At least, he used to be. These days he wasn't really drawn to much of anything. Getting into fights, maybe.

"Have a seat," said the man, nodding at the nearest stool. "Let's see what you can do."

"Wait. This is a test?" Owen felt his cheeks burn. "Like an audition?"

The man said nothing, just looked at Owen.

"The thing is," said Owen, "they told me I *had* to come work here. On weekends, to pay for . . ." Owen paused, and his cheeks burned hotter.

"The thing is," he repeated, "your boss, the guy who owns this place? I owe him some money. So they said I could maybe work here, on weekends. To pay him back, basically. Didn't they tell you all this?"

The man nodded. "That they did. Doesn't mean I have to agree. If you're gonna cook at my grill I need to know who I'm dealing with here."

Owen felt like punching something. Coming here to face the owner was hard enough in the first place. And now he was haggling with the *cook*?

"Um, shouldn't I talk with the owner? They told me to come talk with the owner."

The cook shrugged. "I'm who's here right now. You can talk to me."

Owen heaved a sigh. "Okay," he said. "What's the test?"

"Two parts," said the cook. "First comes eating."

"I don't understand. You want to know if I know how to *eat*?"

"Sit." The cook gestured again at the stool and headed back through the swinging doors into the kitchen. Owen heard the hiss of something hitting hot steel. An instant later his nostrils confirmed the sound of something savory on the grill—and an instant

after that his stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten since that morning. It had been a long day.

It felt like the last six months had been one long day.

No, he corrected himself, *not six months*. In fact it was exactly four months, three weeks, and two days since that terrible moment . . . sitting in class on a perfectly ordinary September day, when someone from the main office had come to the classroom door right in the middle of third-period History, knocked quietly, and—

Owen stopped himself from following the thread of that memory any further, and instead forced his attention onto the cook, who was just then emerging through those swinging doors again.

"This is stupid," he repeated under his breath as he took his seat at the counter.

The cook walked up behind the counter to where Owen sat and set a plate in front of him, then followed it with a glass filled with dark liquid shot through with bubbles fizzing up to the surface.

Owen looked at it in disbelief.

"A hot dog and a Coke? That's the big culinary test?" This was bogus. Owen was tempted to get up and walk back out the door.

Except that he couldn't, and he knew it. This had been the deal. Come to work at the diner, or be expelled—and even if he didn't especially care one way or the other, he couldn't do that to Mom. Not on top of everything else.

Okay, he'd humor the short-order cook. At least until the owner showed up.

The cook pushed over a second plate and glass, then came out from behind the counter, walked around behind Owen, and sat down at the next stool.

“A hot dog and a Coke,” repeated Owen. “Very high class.”

“Eat,” said the cook.

Owen took a bite of his hot dog. The cook took a bite of his. They sat in silence for a minute, munching, Owen thinking, *A hot dog and a Coke. He wants to know if I know how to eat a hot dog and a Coke.*

“So,” the cook broke the silence, “what do you think?”

“What do I think?” said Owen. “It’s a hot dog.” He didn’t mean that to come out as rude as it sounded. But what was he supposed to say?

The cook nodded, then said, “How does it taste?”

Owen had been too wrapped up in his thoughts to notice how the thing tasted, but now that the man mentioned it . . . “It’s pretty good,” he admitted.

“Pretty good, how?” said the cook.

Owen stopped chewing and thought.

Pretty good . . . *how?*

He swallowed the bite and took another, trying to pay more attention to what he was eating. “It’s . . . juicy. But not, I don’t know, soggy?”

The cook said nothing, just waited.

Owen took another bite, tasting as he ate. “And meaty. Like it’s . . . is there bacon in there?”

Owen saw something shift slightly in the cook’s face, a change so faint he almost missed it. Was that a smile in his eyes? No, it must have been a trick of the light. This guy’s face was flat as the winter sky.

“Not bacon,” the cook was saying. “What you’re tasting is an effect of the grill. Some places keep their hot dogs sitting in a tub of hot water so they’ll be ready to go anytime. A lot of places do that. Not here. This one,” he nodded at Owen’s plate, “was sliced

and cooked on the hot grill, hot enough and just long enough to slightly caramelize the surface. Which brings out its meatiness and gives it that savory edge—what you thought might be bacon. And also seals in the moisture. That’s why it’s not, as you put it, *soggy*.

“What else?”

Owen took another bite, trying to sharpen his sense of taste but not knowing exactly how to go about doing that. “Spicy, too, I guess.” He thought some more. “But not *too* spicy.”

“Spicy, how?”

Owen stopped chewing. Spicy, *how*? He tried as hard as he could to sort through what he was tasting and pick out the threads of flavor. He could sense them, but couldn’t quite separate or identify them.

He looked at the cook. “I don’t know. Pepper? Mustard?”

The cook was working on his own hot dog, and for a moment he didn’t say anything, just kept chewing. Then he said, “Salt and pepper, ’course. White pepper, in this case. What else?”

Owen took another bite, frowning hard with concentration.

“Don’t *think*,” said the cook. “Don’t try to guess what’s in it. Tell me what it *tastes* like. How it feels on your tongue. How it makes you feel when you eat it.”

“I guess,” said Owen, “I guess I’d say it tastes . . . *really good*.” He struggled to put it into words, but the best he could come up with was: “Like home.”

The cook put his hot dog down, looked sideways at Owen, and nodded thoughtfully, as if the boy had made a deep observation.

“Garlic powder, just a little. Coriander. But my favorite? The celery seed. That’s what you’re tasting. That grassy, earthy taste. Makes it feel *like home*.

“And here’s the other reason you thought of bacon—that

smoky taste? Hickory's what folks most often use. Mesquite's a big thing these days. Some swear by the fruit woods—apple, cherry, pear, like that. But this?" He closed his eyes and inhaled, as if he were tasting the hot dog all over again, then opened his eyes again. "Maple. Not so much smoke as you'd taste it, like the house next door burned down. A little smoky, a little sweet. Yeah," he nodded, as if cautiously agreeing with what he'd just said. "There's no taste more New England than maple."

Now that he mentioned it, Owen *could* taste that maple smoke, or at least he thought he could. But it would feel lame to say so now, after the cook had already explained it.

"Go ahead," said the cook, and he nodded at Owen's plate, which still had a scrap of hot dog left. "You don't want to leave any of that behind, do ya?"

"I don't," admitted Owen, as he dug in. "It's really good," he repeated. "*Better* than really good." In fact, he thought this might have been the best hot dog he'd ever had.

Or at least, that he'd had in a long time.

He closed his eyes and inhaled, like the cook had done, to better savor that last bite—and as he did, a vivid memory came over him:

the tangy scent of a summer evening in a stadium packed with people . . . the smell of hot dogs grilling and popcorn popping and peanuts roasting in their shells . . . the crack! of a bat and sudden swell of the crowd's roar around him as they all leapt to their feet, and him with them . . . the wonderfully comfortable weight of his father's big hand on his back . . .

His father's hand.

He stopped chewing. Opened his eyes. This wasn't summer, it

was February, and it was bitter cold outside.

“Yup,” said the cook quietly, as if he’d been reading Owen’s thoughts. “Good food calls up good memories. Reminds you of good times you’ve had, people you love.”

Owen struggled to get his feelings under control. He listened to his own breathing, the way his father had taught him to do on the pitcher’s mound to steady himself.

The cook wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, folded it into thirds, dropped it on the plate, and got up off the stool before continuing.

“Owen,” he said, “I could sit you down to a five-course, two-hundred-dollar spread, serve myself a hot dog and a Coke, and you know which one of us would end up having the better meal?”

Owen figured that had to be a trick question, though he didn’t really get how. “You would?”

“I would,” the cook agreed. “You know why?”

Owen shook his head. “No idea.”

Wait—had the cook just called Owen by name? Had he *told* him his name? He didn’t think so.

“Because I’ve taught myself to *taste*,” said the cook. “To put aside my thoughts, expectations, and judgments. To get myself out of the way, and experience what I’m experiencing.

“Great cooking is first in the eater. *Then* in the cook.”

All at once Owen felt angry and confused. Why was this guy standing here talking to him about *great cooking*? Wasn’t he just supposed to be here for a job? A job he didn’t even want in the first place, but that he was being forced to take to get himself out of trouble and pay back the guy who owned this place?

Oh.

Owen looked up at the cook. “*You’re* the owner. The chef.”

The short-order cook nodded gravely. “That I am, Owen. That I am.”

Now Owen felt even more confused. “So all those spices, the maple smoke and everything, was I supposed to taste all that? Did I just flunk?”

A pair of customers walked in the front door and stamped snow off their boots. The cook—no, the *Chef* glanced up at the wall clock over the door.

“Bernie’ll be with you in a sec,” the Chef called over to the two as they hung their coats on hooks by the door, and he started back toward the kitchen.

“Hang on, though,” said Owen. “Didn’t you say there were two parts? ‘First comes eating.’ What’s the second part of the test?”

The Chef paused at the swinging doors and looked back at the boy. “Tell you what,” he said. “Come back tomorrow morning. Oh eight hundred.

“Tomorrow you cook.”



When Owen arrived home the house was dark. Mom wasn’t home yet. He went into the kitchen, flipped on the lights, and started pulling things from the fridge. Tired as he was, he knew she’d be even more so. No problem. Sausages, scrambled eggs, toast: one-two-three.

Once he had the beaten eggs in a bowl and sausages sizzling on the stove, he put out two cloth napkins and set up two candles in holders. He brought out a single flower he’d picked up at the convenience store on his way home—a rose—and placed it in the center of the table in a one-stem vase.

When he heard his mom’s car in the drive, he pushed down

the toast, then lit the candles, the sulfur smell of the match greeting her as she came through the front door in a blast of cold air.

"Tell me *everything*," she said, as she shucked off her parka and peeled out of her boots. "Did you go?"

Owen could hear how carefully she was keeping her voice neutral, and it made his chest hurt. She'd been worried he would back out, and not even show up at the diner.

"I did," he said. "I talked with the guy who cooks there. Turns out he's the owner."

"Ah, *ha*," she said. She gave Owen a long hug and planted a kiss on the top of his head. "And how was that?"

As they ate, Owen told her about his brief visit to the diner, about the hot dog and Coke, and about how the Chef had said, *Great cooking is first in the eater.*

"Sounds deep," she said. She puckered her lips and opened her eyes wide—what Owen's father always called "Beth's guppy stare" and always made them both crack up. Owen gave back a grin.

Beth got up from her chair, came around the table, and put her arms around her boy, resting her cheek on the top of his head.

"We'll get through this, honey," she murmured. "You're doing so great."

Was he? He didn't see how.

Later that night, after a fruitless hour or two of trying to engage his brain on homework, Owen lay awake in his bed, staring at his bedroom ceiling, thinking.

Tomorrow you cook, the cook had said.

No, he corrected himself, *not the cook. The Chef.*

Whatever test he might be walking into the next morning, he was determined not just to pass it, but to pass it with flying colors.

He owed it to Mom. For that matter, he wanted to show those people from school that he wasn't a total failure. Maybe he wanted to prove that to himself, too.

He closed his eyes.

Mostly, he just wanted to stop hurting.

the test

When he stepped into the diner the following morning at eight o'clock sharp, Owen almost didn't recognize the place. In the empty quiet of late afternoon the day before he'd thought they could seat forty or fifty, tops. Now it felt like there were eighty bodies jammed in there. Maybe a hundred. This place was buzzing like Times Square at rush hour.

Not that Owen had ever seen Times Square, or ever been out of Mapletown, for that matter. *I wish*, he thought.

A woman with RUTH stitched on her blouse pocket stood at the counter chatting with customers as she cleared their plates.

Owen took a seat at the counter's only open stool, the one closest to the door.

"Morning, Sunshine!" The woman was instantly there in front of him, placing a glass of water and handing him a menu.

"Uh, just some toast, ma'am. And maybe a hot chocolate?" He sure didn't feel like *morning sunshine*.

The day had not started out well. Owen was supposed to join his friends for ice hockey practice that morning. When they

found out he wasn't coming because he had to go see a cook, they laughed at him. "Not just a cook, a *Chef*," Owen had protested, but that only made them laugh harder.

The truth was, he was nervous. Owen hated tests.

"Here ya go!" Ruth set his toast and hot chocolate down and disappeared again. Owen nibbled at the edge of his toast, waiting.

A moment later the Chef poked his head through the pass-through and called out, "Owen?" *Show time*. Owen got up from his stool, walked to the back of the diner, pushed through the swinging doors . . .

And stepped onto another planet.

The place was tiny and cramped, packed with so much equipment that Owen could barely take it all in. A broiler, fryers, griddle, and bank of eight burners ran down one side of the long aisle, refrigeration units and prep stations along the other side. At the end of the corridor there stood a walk-in cooler and cold station, which he figured was where they made salads and sandwiches. Heavy stockpots hung by hooks over by the dishwasher and triple sink off to his left, and on the back corner of the stove he saw a stack of sauté pans that looked like they could be antiques—all bent and dinged up, none of them laying flat.

The place made Owen think of the galley on a pirate ship.

As he stood staring, a tall, rangy-looking guy (in his late twenties, Owen guessed) rushed around the place, his flame-red hair tied back in a bandana, hands and arms flying everywhere, tending what must have been six or seven different dishes at once. Standing at the burners he pivoted on one foot, yanked something out of the fridge, pivoted back with the fluid grace of a pro infielder and tossed it into the broiler with his right hand while snatching a hot sauté pan from the stack with his left.

And the noise! The screech and clang of oven doors opening

and closing, the sizzle of butter in the pans and bacon on the griddle, the *hissss!* of the spray hose hitting pots in the sink, that chugging of the massive industrial dishwasher that opened and closed like a guillotine, the *whoosh!* of steam when its door opened, and the constant din of dishes being picked up and put down, the metal plate covers clanging down to cover them, and the calls back and forth—“Need those waffles ay-sap!” “Order up!”—was enough to make Owen dizzy. And all this time that crazy breakfast cook kept mumbling to himself out loud.

The whole scene reminded Owen of the mad tea party in *Alice in Wonderland*.

The Chef, who seemed oblivious to the insanity going on around him, beckoned Owen over with a nod of his head and spoke a single word:

“*Station!*”

Owen wasn’t sure what *Station!* meant, but he stepped over to the griddle, took the white apron the Chef handed him, and put it on.

“Ready?” said the Chef. “Two eggs, over easy. No meat, no toast, just spuds.”

“Right,” said Owen. As the only child in a hard-working two-income household, he’d done his share of breakfast duty, and eggs were his specialty. He could pull this one off with one hand tied behind his back. So this was the big test? *Bring it on.*

He grabbed a sauté pan from the stack with his left hand, spinning it one-handed by the handle (the way he’d watched chefs do it on TV) as he switched on the gas with his right hand and placed the pan on the burner. As the pan heated he quickly wrapped the apron strings around his waist and tied them in front.

Then he executed a perfectly coordinated two-hand maneuver: grabbing a sandwich-spreader with his right hand he scooped

up a pat of butter and tossed it into the pan to sizzle, while he picked up an egg from the dozens sitting on the sideboard with his left, cracked it one-handed into the pan, tossed the shells, then grabbed a second egg and one-handed it in there to join its brother. While they cooked he stole a sideways glance to see if the Chef was watching.

He wasn't. He was out in front, chatting with a customer. Owen felt the knot tighten in his stomach and his cheeks burn.

Grabbing a spatula, he flipped first one egg, then the other. Moments later he had the two over easies on a plate, nestled up to a hot hillock of hash browns like a pair of puppies nuzzling their mother.

He tried not to let the grin of triumph show.

In the next instant the Chef was at Owen's side. He picked up Owen's plate with barely a glance, quietly set it aside on the back of the chopping-block counter, remade the order himself, and handed it off to Ruth without a word, then pulled the next ticket—a breakfast hash with two poached—and continued cooking.

Owen's plate sat.

Owen stood there, not knowing what to do. Was there something wrong with the plate he'd made? Was he dismissed?

As the Chef cooked he began talking. "Let me tell you the most important thing I ever learned from my teacher. *Everything you cook reveals everything you are.* If you're not focused, your food is going to be unfocused. If you're sloppy, your food will be sloppy. If you're in a hurry, the person who eats your food is eating a hurried up mess."

He looked over briefly, meeting Owen's eyes, as he said this next:

"If you're angry, you're going to cook angry."

While his eggs poached he pulled the next ticket. “Order French, pigs, no spuds!” he called over to the crazy mumbling cook.

“What’s in here,” he continued, thumping his chest with one hand as he pulled the next ticket with the other, “is what ends up on the plate.”

He glanced at the ticket and started whisking eggs for an omelet.

“I don’t understand,” Owen began. “So . . . you didn’t serve my eggs because you thought I was in a bad mood?”

The Chef glanced over at Owen. “I didn’t serve them because they weren’t any good.” He saw the look on the boy’s face and put his bowl of eggs down for a moment.

“It’s a delicate thing, an over easy egg. You start with a decent sauté pan, ideally a non-stick pan. You heat the pan first, then put in the butter so it melts, and get the egg into the pan before the butter burns.

“The secret is how you manage the heat.

“Too little, and the egg sticks. Too much, and you start to denature the protein. It gets rubbery. If you start getting that crispy lip around the edge? You’re losing the egg. Now you have to fight it to flip it, because it’s not cooperating anymore, so now you have to use a spatula.”

Owen winced. He’d used a spatula to get his eggs out of the pan. He’d gotten that crispy edge. He’d had the flame too high.

He’d been careless.

“If you’ve got it all in balance,” the Chef was saying, “the egg will turn itself. All you have to do is give the pan a gentle flip with your wrist. You can practice that flip by putting a handful of dried peas in a cold sauté pan and flipping them until you can do it without any of them spilling out. Or beads. But it’s not hard—not if you and the egg have gotten along up to that point.”

Owen felt too mad to say anything. Mad at his hockey friends for being such jerks. At the Chef for giving him this stupid test. At himself for messing up again.

At the world.

The Chef spoke again as he slipped his finished omelet onto a plate.

“You may have had a bad morning, Owen. That’s not your fault. You can’t help that. But you can’t serve your bad morning to someone else. Okay?”

Owen looked over at his eggs, sitting sullen at the back of the sideboard. They looked how he felt.

The Chef nodded over toward the pass-through, in the direction of Owen’s abandoned plate of toast.

“Take five. The breakfast rush is almost over. We’ll talk in a few minutes.”

Owen pushed through the swinging doors, slunk back to his counter seat by the front door, and settled onto his stool. Next to his cold nibbled toast a fresh cup of hot chocolate sat sending up tendrils of steam. He caught a whiff of it—it smelled amazing, not like any hot chocolate he’d ever had before. *Spicy*.

“Just made,” said Ruth.

“Thanks,” mumbled Owen.

“He tell you, ‘It’s okay to make a mistake, just not okay to *serve* your mistake’?”

“Something like that,” Owen admitted.

Ruth laughed as she collected her next round of used dishes with her right hand and stacked them all impossibly into her left arm. “I hope he’s not keeping track, because when I started working for him—which was long before *you* were born—I served so many mistakes in my first week I started keeping a squeeze bottle of whiteout under the counter.”

Owen could tell she was trying to buoy his mood, and even though it wasn't working, he appreciated it.

Ruth paused, her tower of dishes momentarily forgotten, and peered into his face. "You're Coach Devon's boy." More a statement than a question.

Owen nodded. "You knew my father?"

She looked at him for another moment, then gave him a smile that didn't hide its sadness. "A lot of people knew your father." She put out her right hand, the precarious stack of dishes at her left rattling slightly, yet remaining miraculously suspended in place. "I'm Ruth. And you must be—"

"*Owen!*" the Chef called out as he walked up the aisle toward them.

Owen looked up as the Chef took the stool next to him.

"You were good in there," said the Chef. "How you handled yourself. You knew your way around. That was clear."

Hub, thought Owen. So he *was* watching.

"And that spinning the pan thing? And the one-handed egg thing? Very impressive."

Owen blushed. He couldn't tell if the Chef was poking fun at him or really meant it.

"Here's the thing," said the Chef. "Cooking is about harnessing heat. Heat can burn, or it can build. You get to choose which. But it takes care, and attention.

"A chunk of life—an egg, for instance—can withstand even high heat for a time, use it to its advantage, help it transform into something else, a better version of itself. But heat is like a wild animal. If you don't temper it, wrangle it, it'll just wreak havoc, and that chunk of life ends up burnt, denatured, bitter.

"How you harness that heat. That's the important thing.

"You understand?"

Owen nodded uncertainly. *A chunk of life*. He'd never heard any food called *that* before. But he wasn't sure they were still talking only about food. *Burnt, denatured, bitter*. That about summed it up. That's pretty much how Owen felt these days.

Why couldn't things just go back to the way they were? He wanted his old life back. He wanted to be a happy kid again, a kid who didn't know anything about all this pain and confusion.

He wanted his father back.

Owen realized that the Chef was on his feet again, heading back to the kitchen.

"Wait," Owen called out. "So, did I pass?"

"Pass?"

"The test."

The Chef looked at Owen.

"The *test*. You said the test had two parts. 'First comes eating,' you said. 'Tomorrow you cook.' So, I cooked. Did I pass?"

The Chef's face was unreadable as a chopping block. "*You* said it was a test, Owen," he replied. "Not me. All I said was, I wanted to see what you could do."

Silence stretched out for a few moments as Owen thought back over their conversation the previous day. Was that true? Had Owen really gotten himself all worked up for nothing?

"But since you saw it that way," the Chef added, "let me ask you: Did you pass?"

Owen's shoulders slumped. "I don't know. I don't think so."

The Chef nodded. "Good. That's good, Owen."

"Let me tell you a secret. What inspires me most, every day, isn't what I already know how to do. A lot of people settle for that. But you can't become your best that way. Being impressed with what you already know won't get you to greatness. Not even in the ballpark."

“What inspires me most is what I *don't* know. What I can't do yet. There's not a lot of juice in being good. You know where there's a lot of juice? Finding ways to get better.”

He paused, then added, “Tell you what else. If you'd said you thought you passed? That would've meant you flunked.”

Owen started to laugh—but stopped abruptly when he realized the Chef didn't look like he'd meant it as a joke. “Wait. *Seriously?* But . . . you said it *wasn't* a test!”

“No,” said the Chef. “What I said was, I never *said* it was a test. But then, I never said it wasn't, either.”

Owen didn't know whether to feel offended or amused. His confusion made him feel embarrassed, and the embarrassment made him feel mad. Which made him think back on his angry breakfast—and that made him only more embarrassed, which made him feel madder . . .

And then, to Owen's great surprise, the Chef reached over and put a hand on his shoulder. And to his even greater surprise, he didn't pull away. Somehow, the weight of the Chef's hand felt solid and reassuring.

The Chef gave the boy's shoulder one brief squeeze, and then he stepped away toward the swinging doors again.

“You got a lot going on in there, Owen,” he said over his shoulder. “A lot for a kid to carry. I'd say you're doing fine.”



Owen lay on his bed that night staring at the ceiling, thinking back to another Saturday, years ago. *That's a lot for a kid to carry.* Those had been his father's exact words.

It had been early in the morning, not a sound in the house, when Owen slipped out of his bed and crept downstairs, still in his

PJs. Nobody could be up *this* early. But sure enough, when Owen reached the kitchen, there he was, standing at the island, apron on, his big hands resting on the island counter as he surveyed the display of ingredients and utensils.

“Hey, buddy,” Owen’s father said in a conspiratorial whisper, and he patted the empty stool next to him. Owen trotted over and wriggled up onto the stool to watch.

It was time to make The Recipe.

This was their Saturday morning routine; they’d been doing it for years, but it was still always exciting. They would make Owen’s father’s Famous Oat Blueberry Pancakes (Owen didn’t know if they were *really* famous, but they were in this house, at least), and when they were finished, they would bring them upstairs on a tray, with hot coffee, to his parents’ bedroom, where they would serve them to Mom in bed. Mom was always surprised when they walked in with the tray—and she always loved it.

As Owen grew older he eventually realized that she was only feigning the surprise. But there was nothing feigned about how much she loved the breakfast. Owen’s father made the best pancakes in the world. Owen had always known this. But on this particular Saturday, sitting on his stool and watching The Recipe unfold, he had suddenly wondered why.

“What makes your pancakes so good?” he asked as his father dropped the batter onto the griddle in a series of calibrated spoonfuls. “Is it the oat flour?”

Owen knew they *always* used oat flour—not wheat, not pastry, not corn meal, not buckwheat, just 100 percent pure oat flour, milled fresh at the store.

His father smiled. He had the warmest smile of anyone Owen knew; whenever he smiled it made Owen’s back feel warm, like the sun had just come out. “True,” he said, “the oat flour does make

them taste sweet and rich. . . .”

“And nutty?” Owen chimed in.

His father laughed. “And nutty. But that’s not the secret.”

“Is it the blueberries?” His father always brought home the most amazing, the sweetest, the juiciest blueberries from the farm stand near the high school where he coached. When blueberries were out of season, they might use cranberries instead, or sliced bananas, or even walnuts, and those were always good, but not *blueberry* good.

His father frowned and shook his head sternly. “*No*. That’s *not* the secret.”

Owen giggled. “Is it the honey? the oil? the maple syrup?”

“*No*,” his father frowned harder as he slid each finished pancake off the griddle onto a plate and dropped on more batter spoonfuls. “No, no, no!” Every time he said “no” it made Owen giggle more.

His father dropped the mock seriousness and let out that sunshine smile again, as he lifted Owen up off the stool with both hands and set him on the ground.

“The secret ingredient, Owen, isn’t anything *in* the pancakes.

“The secret ingredient is who you’re making them *for*.”

“Now go get us a clean coffee cup, and we’ll go serve the lady.”

Now, lying on his back and staring at the bedroom ceiling, Owen tried to calculate how old he’d been that day. Seven? eight? He remembered wishing he was big enough to carry the tray up-stairs himself and asking his father if he could try.

His father had looked at the tray: plate with stack of hot pancakes and sizzling sausages on the side; butter dish; hot maple syrup in gravy boat; napkin and silverware; coffee mug with thermal carafe. “Hmm.” He looked over at Owen. “That’s a lot for a kid to carry. Tell you what—”

He plucked a one-stem vase off the counter and handed it carefully to Owen with its lone occupant, a peach-colored rose.

“I’ll carry the tray, you carry the flower. Deal?”

“Deal!” And Owen had led the way upstairs, tiny vase in hand with its single rose, as they did every Saturday.