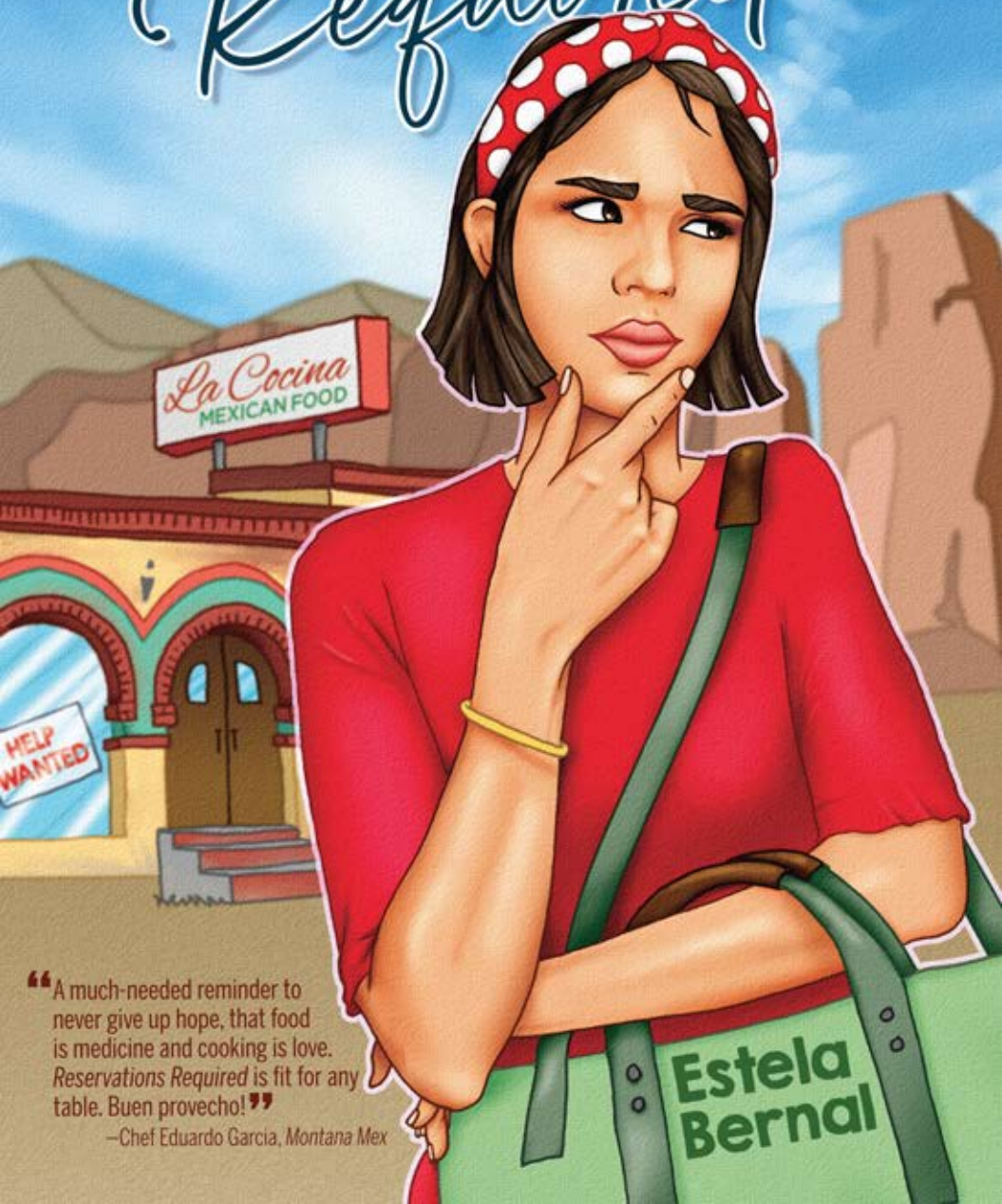


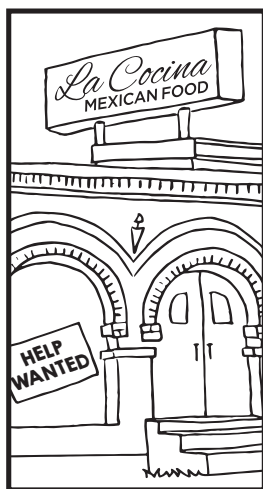
Reservations Required



“A much-needed reminder to never give up hope, that food is medicine and cooking is love. *Reservations Required* is fit for any table. Buen provecho!”

—Chef Eduardo Garcia, *Montana Mex*

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Estela Bernal



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Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending.

—Carl (Bard) Sandburg

Para mis amorcitos: DF, GH, Gris (y todos los demás).

Dedicated to the Lucys, Luckys and Bertas out there,
who, given the chance, will add their warmth,
love, and light to our world.

Acknowledgements

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I'm grateful to Chef Eduardo for his review of *Reservations Required*. His own story serves as an inspiration to us all. Be sure to check out his website and recipes:
www.montanamex.com

CHAPTER ONE

Home, Sweet Home

There were only four survivors left in Nana's garden—the rosemary, mint, a fig tree and me—all barely hanging on. I crushed a brittle rosemary sprig between my fingers and held it to my nose. The aroma brought back memories of Nana's roasted vegetables, generously seasoned with the herb. Tears clouded my eyes when I saw that, in the two weeks since her funeral, weeds had begun to choke the plants. It was here that my dream of becoming a chef was born, and I couldn't let anything choke that dream.

At the sound of Mrs. Lara's voice next door calling her dog to dinner, I dropped the watering can I was holding and ran the four blocks home, getting there just as Mom was setting a bubbling pan on the table.

I held my breath, my hands clutching an empty plate as Dad stabbed his fork into the lasagna. "What's this?"

Mom flinched and kept her eyes on her clasped hands. She usually served the frozen kind—pretty hard to ruin, even for her—but this time it looked like she'd started from scratch and forgotten to boil the noodles. Dad grabbed the spatula and started jabbing the dish again and again until

the half-cooked noodles broke, splattering hot sauce all over his hand and wrist.

A low rumble built to a loud roar as he grabbed the foil pan and flung it against the wall. The pan slid to the floor, leaving a trail of cheese, tomatoes and mushrooms behind.

“When are you going to learn to cook a decent meal?” He jumped up, knocking his chair to the floor, his face red and ugly.

Mom sat with her elbows on the table and her face in her hands, shoulders shaking. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. My brother Mario and I had learned to keep our mouths shut during these blowups. A single word in Mom’s defense or even a questioning look were enough to send Dad into a frothing rage.

We sat like statues until Dad turned on his heel and stomped out of the house. A minute later we heard the screech of tires as he sped off in his beat-up Explorer. Every time he raced away like that, I sent a telepathic warning to any kids who might be playing in the street: Out of the way! Run for your lives!

Mario rolled his eyes at me before he disappeared into the kitchen. I soon heard him scrounging around in the fridge.

I reached across the table and put my hand on Mom’s arm. “It’s okay, Mom. I’ll help with dinner from now on.”

She gave me a vacant look, her eyes red-rimmed. “You?”

“Sure. I learned a few things from Nana.”

Until Nana got sick, I’d mainly served as her assistant, helping pick fresh produce from her garden, chopping vegetables, measuring ingredients and watching her work her magic. Now it was time to start creating my own.

“Clean up the mess before he gets back.” Mom got up and stumbled out of the room.

I took the dustpan and a roll of paper towels from the kitchen and cleaned up as well as I could.

Home, sweet home. Living in our house was like living on a volcano. Whenever Dad was home, Mom, Mario and I did our best to stay out of his way. Even when he wasn't home, Mario and I had to be careful creeping around the shadows thrown by the candles Mom kept burning day and night on the hokey little altar she'd set up in the living room. Her voodoo dolls, different types of cards, incense and dried flower arrangements, along with a jumble of other odds and ends, made the room look like a dusty shrine to the Queen Witch. Witchcraft was her explanation for everything she didn't understand—and there was a lot she didn't understand.



I found Mom sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee the next morning as if nothing had happened the night before. I asked her if I could have twenty dollars to buy ingredients for enchiladas. She walked to the counter, took the money out of her purse and handed it to me—just like that. No questions. No lecture about spending Dad's hard-earned money. *Nada.*

"Thanks," I said. "See you after school."

I stuffed the money in my back pocket and walked the five blocks to Patti's house. I got there just in time to see her come prancing down the steps, swishing her curvy hips, holding her books against her chest with her left arm and swinging her right arm like a model.

"Hey, short stuff," she said.

She was only a couple of inches taller than me, but that morning, she looked like a giant. When she reached me, she

balanced on one leg and stuck out the other so I could see her new shoes.

“From Daddy. He sent me the money after I wrote to tell him I had to have them since all the other girls at school are wearing them.”

“I haven’t seen anybody wearing anything that looks even close,” I said.

Patti giggled. “He doesn’t need to know that.”

With Patti’s new walk in the ridiculous shiny red shoes that made her stand four inches taller, it took us twice as long to get to the bus stop. As she boarded the bus, the guys started whistling while the girls oohed and aahed.

By mid-afternoon, I noticed she was wearing her gym shoes—good thing, since she’d offered to walk with me after I told her I needed to stop by the grocery store on the way home.

“Come in for a minute,” she said when we got close to her house. “I want to show you something.”

“I really need to get home and start dinner,” I said.

“Oh, come on. You’re not your parents’ slave.”

“One good thing about having them as guinea pigs is that cooking for them is good practice for when I have my own restaurant,” I said as I followed her inside.

“Lucy’s Gourmet Kitchen,” Patti said. “I’ll be your best customer.”

Everything in Patti’s room reflected her dream of studying fashion design and her obsession with clothes, shoes and make-up. She’d started making clothes for her dolls when she was about seven. The summer before our freshman year, she’d switched to making clothes for herself. Now, mirrors of all shapes and sizes were scattered throughout the room. A dress form on a stand stood next

to her sewing machine and her closet took up a whole wall on one side of the room.

“Be right back.” She threw her books on the bed and made her way to the kitchen.

While she was gone, my thoughts drifted back to the night, a month ago, when we’d celebrated our seventeenth birthdays. Mom hadn’t put up much of a fight since it was Patti’s mom who was taking us out to dinner. That night Patti had insisted on “coloring me up a bit.”

“Don’t waste your stuff on me,” I said when she sat me in front of her dressing table and started painting my face. “You know I can’t go home looking like this.”

“It’s not like you’ll be going home drunk or stoned out of your mind.”

“Whoa! There’s an idea. Then I wouldn’t care what Mom and Dad said, would I?”

“Now you’re talking, girl.” Patti snapped her fingers and, in her best Selena imitation, shimmied her shoulders and shook her hips. “Enough about them. Tonight we’re going to PARTY.”

Nana always told me I looked just like Mom. I’d never seen the resemblance . . . until then. As Patti transformed me with brushes, liners and cotton puffs, Mom’s large dark eyes and full lips appeared on my face. I didn’t mind looking like her, as long as I didn’t start acting like her.

My daydream evaporated when I saw Patti waving her hand in front of my face. “Yoo-hoo! Want a Jarritos?”

“Thanks, but I really don’t have much time. Dad’ll be home soon and . . .”

“You’ve got to have the worst parents on the planet. How can you stand it? I’d die if Mom didn’t let me date or talk on the phone.”

I bit my lip. Her boyfriend Fernando was my brother's best friend. Did he know how Dad treated Mario? If Patti got a whiff of how he treated all of us, she'd be on her cell calling the police and spilling all the secrets she knew about our home life.

"I can handle it for one more year." I sounded more confident than I felt.

"With your brains and your looks, you'll be going places as soon as you get away from those creeps."

How could she be so sure? I didn't talk much about my after-graduation plans. I'd be happy to still be in one piece. While Patti created sexy dress patterns, I dreamed of creating recipes that would make Nana proud.

Patti handed me a drawing of the outfit she was working on. "What do you think?"

"It's gorgeous!" The low-cut blouse and hip-hugging skirt she'd designed were perfect for her.

"I wish you didn't have to leave so soon," she said when she saw me looking at the clock on her nightstand.

"Me too." I picked up my backpack and the bag of groceries and walked out before she could find something else to show me. "See you in the morning."



Mom was nowhere in sight when I got home. She stayed in her room while I dipped tortillas in sauce from a can, stuffed them with store-bought roasted chicken and smothered them with shredded cheese. I cringed at the thought of Nana turning over in her grave if she could see that the only thing I'd made from scratch was the rice. Dad wouldn't even notice, though. With a layer of hot salsa and a dollop of sour cream, this meal would set his taste buds buzzing.

Mom appeared after I finished cooking and right before Dad pulled into the driveway. She set the enchiladas, rice and refried beans on the table while Dad was in the shower.

We ate in silence, as usual—at least Dad and Mario ate while Mom and I picked at our food. I breathed a sigh of relief when, after his second helping, Dad went to park himself in front of the TV.

Mom didn't thank me, although I could see she was glad when I offered to start planning a weekly menu. I started by making a list of everything I needed for her to get at the supermarket. From then on, dinner became my responsibility. Mom never offered to help and hardly ate anything. At least things were quieter. For a while.