

La Cocina (Book #1)

Chris Spackman

Spring 2026

Contents

| | |
|---------------------------|----|
| Chapter 1 Sunday Dinner | 4 |
| Chapter 2 The Listing | 11 |
| Chapter 3 The Truck Lot | 16 |
| Chapter 4 The Envelope | 22 |
| Chapter 5 Long Days | 27 |
| Chapter 6 Paperwork | 33 |
| Chapter 7 After School | 40 |
| Chapter 8 Test Run | 48 |
| Chapter 9 Mateo's Class | 56 |
| Chapter 10 The Name | 62 |
| Chapter 11 City Office | 67 |
| Chapter 12 The New Fryer | 71 |
| Chapter 13 The Argument | 80 |
| Chapter 14 The Inspection | 89 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| <i>CONTENTS</i> | 3 |
| Chapter 15 The Big Shopping Trip | 93 |
| Chapter 16 The Long Night | 96 |
| Chapter 17 Festival Morning | 100 |
| Chapter 18 The Breakdown | 104 |
| Chapter 19 Working Together | 108 |
| Chapter 20 Sold Out | 120 |
| Chapter 21 Counting the Money | 126 |
| Chapter 22 Quiet Future | 131 |

Chapter 1 Sunday Dinner

The kitchen was warm, even though it was early spring and the evening air outside was still cool. The windows were closed, and the smell of garlic, lime, and roasted chicken filled the small room.

Ana stood at the stove while steam rose in slow waves from the pot in front of her. She lifted the lid, tasted the sauce, and paused. She was thinking about balance. Too much salt could ruin it. Too little would make it flat.

She poured a little sauce into a small dish and handed it to her husband.

“More salt?” she asked.

Miguel stood from the table and took the dish carefully. He tasted it and closed his eyes for a moment.

“It’s good,” he said at last. “Maybe a little more lime.”

Ana smiled. “You always say that.”

She squeezed half a lime into the pot anyway.

From the living room, Mateo shouted, “Mamá, Sofía won’t let me use the blue marker!”

“It’s mine!” Sofía shouted back. “You always lose them!”

Camila walked into the kitchen with her phone in her hand. She had come straight from her shift at the market. The smell of bread and cleaning spray still clung to her jacket. She moved slowly, like she had too much on her mind. Her backpack slid from her shoulder and dropped near the door.

“What happened?” Ana asked.

“Nothing,” Camila said. She opened the fridge and took out a bottle of water, unscrewing the cap slowly.

Miguel opened one eye. “How was school?”

Camila shrugged. “Fine.”

“And how was work?”

“Busy,” she said without looking at her father.

Miguel knew that meant it was not fine. But he did not ask more questions. He had worked twelve hours at the warehouse. His back hurt, and his hands were dry and rough from lifting heavy boxes. Even now, while he sat at the table, he could still hear the sound of machines in his head.

He did not want the children to see how tired he felt.

Ana turned off the stove. “Dinner is ready.”

The children came into the kitchen.

Mateo climbed into his chair. “I’m starving.”

“You’re always starving,” Sofia said.

“That’s because I’m growing,” he answered proudly.

They passed the rice and beans around the table. The chicken was soft and hot and covered in delicious sauce. For a few minutes, no one spoke. The only sounds were the soft scrape of forks and the quiet hum of the refrigerator.

Miguel looked at his family.

Camila’s long hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail. A faint orange color remained from when she dyed it last year. She looked older than fifteen tonight. Or maybe, Miguel thought, she was simply carrying more than a fifteen-year-old should.

Sofía had ink on her fingers again. She was always drawing something — animals, faces, buildings, ideas. She was good at it, too. Miguel wondered if they should get her drawing software for the family computer. Or for her phone? Ana would know.

Mateo swung his legs under the table. They did not quite reach the floor yet, but they would soon. He was right when he said he was growing. Children always seemed to grow faster when money was tight.

Ana watched him carefully.

“You didn’t sleep enough,” she said quietly.

“I’m fine,” he answered.

She did not believe him, but she let it go.

Miguel felt something heavy in his chest. He was proud of his family. He and Ana had worked hard to give them a safe life here. But pride did not make him less tired.

After a moment, Ana cleared her throat.

“Pastor Elena called today,” she said.

Miguel looked up. “¿Por qué?”

“She wants me to cook for the church festival next month.”

Sofía’s eyes grew wide. “The big one? With the music and the games?”

The festival was one of the largest events of the year. Families from all over the neighborhood came for music, games, and food. It was loud and joyful and exhausting.

Ana nodded. “Yes. She said people still talk about the food from last year.”

Miguel smiled. “They liked your mole.”

Ana waved her hand. “It was just food.”

“It was not just food,” Mateo said with his mouth full. “It was the best food.”

They laughed, and for a moment the room felt lighter.

Ana sat down and folded her hands on the table.

“She asked if I would sell the food this year,” she said.

The room grew quiet.

“Sell it?” Camila asked.

“Yes,” Ana replied. “Not just cook it. Sell it to help raise funds for the church.”

Miguel leaned forward. He understood what she was not saying. Selling food meant planning. It meant permits. It meant money.

“That’s interesting,” he said slowly.

Ana chose her next words carefully. “Raúl says there is a used food truck for sale. He saw it at that industrial lot near the market.”

Camila looked from her father to her mother. Her expression changed, but only for a second.

“How much does a truck cost?” she asked.

Miguel did not answer right away.

Mateo gasped. “A food truck? Like the taco truck near school? We could call it Mateo’s Tacos!”

Sofía's face lit up. "Can we paint it?"

Miguel pushed his plate away.

"Ana," he said, "Camila's right. That costs money."

"I know."

"And time."

"I know."

They looked at each other across the table. This was no longer just an idea. It was a decision.

Ana reached for his hand under the table.

"We don't have to decide now," she said softly. "We can just look."

Miguel stared at the wall. A small photo from Mexico hung there, slightly crooked. In the picture, he stood in front of his old auto shop. His name was painted above the door in bold blue letters.

For years, that photo had felt like a reminder of what he had lost.

Tonight, it felt like a possibility.

"Maybe we should look at it," Miguel said quietly. He looked around the table, pausing for a moment when his eyes met Camila's before turning to Ana.

Ana squeezed Miguel's hand.

"Solo mirar," she said gently. Just look.

Miguel nodded.

But even as he said nothing more, he knew something had already begun.

Chapter 2 The Listing

Miguel could not sleep. He lay on his side and stared at the wall while the room stayed dark and still.

Ana's breathing beside him was slow and steady. The children were asleep. Outside, a car passed and its headlights moved across the ceiling like a slow hand.

He turned onto his back. His body was tired. But his mind would not stop. He kept thinking about the truck.

He had not asked for more details about the truck earlier. He did not want to seem too interested. But now, alone in the dark, he let himself think about it. A used food truck. A permit. A festival. Just one week-end of work.

He sat up slowly and reached for his phone on the nightstand. He turned the brightness down and opened the browser.

Used food trucks for sale.

There were many listings. Most were too expensive. Some were far away. He scrolled past the ones with the big prices and stopped when he

found one that looked like Raúl's description. It was parked in a lot near the mercado. The photo showed a white truck with rust along the bottom edge of the side panel. The equipment inside looked old but complete.

The price was listed at four thousand eight hundred dollars. Or best offer.

Miguel set the phone face-down on his chest.

Four thousand eight hundred dollars. He did not need to check the account to know what that would mean. He knew the number by heart. He and Ana had been building their savings for three years. Since she started at the market, Camila had added some of her pay each month, too.

Slowly, carefully, they had all added to it — the way you fill a jar with coins. They did not talk about the number often. Talking about it too much felt like bad luck.

The bedroom door was open a few inches. From down the hall he could hear Mateo breathing through his mouth. The boy always slept that way when the seasons changed.

Miguel picked up the phone again and looked at the photo of the truck.

He was not looking at the rust. He was looking at the serving window. It was wide and clean and faced the street. He could see, without meaning to, exactly how it would work. Ana at the stove inside. The smell of

her food moving out into the open air. A line of people. Familiar faces from church. Neighbors. Strangers who became regulars.

He had run a business before. He knew what it felt like to open a door in the morning and know it was yours. He had not felt that in years. He wanted to feel that again. He wanted his family to feel that.

He put the phone down again.

Ana shifted beside him.

“You’re awake,” she said. It was not a question.

“I’m fine.”

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, “You looked at the truck.”

He paused. “How did you know?”

“The light from your phone.” She turned toward him. “What did you find?”

He hesitated. Then he told her about the listing. The price. The rust on the panel. The serving window. She listened without interrupting.

When he finished, she was quiet for a long moment.

“Four thousand eight hundred,” she said.

“Or best offer.”

She exhaled slowly. “That’s a lot.”

“Yes.”

“But not impossible.”

Miguel did not answer right away. That was the thing about Ana. She did not panic. She measured. He had always admired that about her, even when it frustrated him.

“There would be other costs,” he said. “Permits. Insurance. Supplies. Maybe repairs.”

“I know.”

“And I don’t know the condition of the engine.”

“Could you find out?”

He almost smiled. “Yes. I could find out.”

Ana pulled the blanket up around her shoulders. “Raúl said the lot is open on Saturdays.”

“Did he.”

“He mentioned it.”

Miguel stared at the ceiling. A small crack ran from the light fixture toward the window. He had meant to fix it for months. There was always something else.

“If the engine is bad,” he said, “we stop. We don’t spend money on something that won’t run.”

“Agreed.”

“And if the permit costs are too high—”

“We stop,” Ana said.

“We stop,” he repeated.

They lay in the quiet for a moment.

“It would just be for the festival,” Ana said. “That’s all we’re deciding. One event.”

“One event,” Miguel agreed.

But they both knew that was not entirely true. One event was how everything started.

“Go to sleep,” Ana said softly.

Miguel closed his eyes. He did not sleep for a while. But the feeling in his chest was different now. It was not lighter exactly. But it had a shape. Something he could hold and examine and carry.

That was better than nothing.

Outside, another car passed. The headlights moved across the ceiling and were gone.

Chapter 3 The Truck Lot

The lot was smaller than Miguel expected.

It sat behind a chain-link fence on a street of warehouses and loading docks. A hand-painted sign near the entrance said **VEHICLES FOR SALE – INDUSTRIAL AND COMMERCIAL**. Three trucks were parked in a row near the back. One was a flatbed. Another had no wheels. The third was white with rust along the bottom edge of the side panel.

Miguel recognized it from the photo.

He parked the car along the street and they all got out. The air smelled like oil and cold concrete. Mateo was already moving toward the fence.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“Don’t touch anything yet,” Miguel said.

A man came out of a small office near the entrance. He was heavysset, with a gray mustache and a clipboard under his arm.

“You here about the food truck?” he asked.

“Yes,” Miguel said.

The man nodded and led them through the gate.

Up close, the truck was larger than it looked in the photo. Ana walked slowly around the outside, her arms crossed, her eyes moving carefully over everything. Sofía stayed close to her. Mateo pressed his face against the serving window glass.

“Can we go inside?” Mateo asked.

The man unlocked the side door. It opened with a heavy sound.

Miguel stepped in first.

The inside was narrow but organized. There was a flat-top grill, a two-burner stove, a deep fryer, a small refrigerator, and a stainless steel counter that ran along one wall. Everything was worn but intact. Miguel opened a cabinet under the counter. The hinges were stiff. He closed it again.

Ana stepped in behind him. She stood still for a moment, looking at the stove.

Then she opened the oven door, looked inside, and closed it.

“The grill works?” she asked the man.

“Everything works,” he said from outside. “Propane. Tank’s empty now but the lines are clean.”

Ana nodded slowly. She reached out and touched the stainless steel counter. It was cold. She tried to imagine cooking there while people waited outside.

Miguel crouched near the floor and looked at the base of the refrigerator. There was some discoloration on the wall behind it. He touched it with two fingers.

“Water damage?” he asked.

The man leaned in from the doorway. “Little bit. Old leak. It’s dry now. Wasn’t the refrigerator, was a seal on the roof vent. We replaced it.”

Miguel stood and looked at the ceiling. The vent was there. It looked new compared to everything else.

“I want to look at the engine,” Miguel said.

“Go ahead.”

They climbed out. The man walked Miguel to the front of the truck and lifted the hood. Miguel stood there for a long moment without speaking. He leaned in and checked the oil. He looked at the belts. He put his hand on the battery cable and checked the connection.

Ana and the children waited near the side of the truck.

Sofía had taken out a small notebook. She was sketching the shape of the truck, the curve of the serving window, the way the side panel met the roof.

“What are you drawing?” Mateo asked.

“The truck,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because I want to remember what it looks like.”

Mateo looked at the truck and then back at her. “We could just take a picture.”

“I know,” Sofia said. She kept drawing.

Ana watched Miguel at the front of the truck. His face was calm and focused. She recognized that expression. It was the same one he wore when he was solving a problem. Not worried. Working.

Miguel lowered the hood.

“It needs a new battery,” he said to the man. “And the left belt is worn. It will need replacing soon.”

The man shrugged. “Price reflects the condition.”

“Four thousand eight hundred,” Miguel said.

“That’s the asking price.”

Miguel looked at Ana. She gave him a small nod.

“We need to think about it,” Miguel said.

The man handed him a card. “Take your time. It’s been here three weeks. Might be here three more.”

They walked back through the gate to the car.

Mateo looked over his shoulder at the truck. “Are we going to buy it?”

“We don’t know yet,” Ana said.

“But maybe?”

“Maybe,” she said.

Sofía was still looking at her sketch. She had added a small detail to the serving window — a name, written in letters she had invented, that no one could read yet.

Miguel started the car. He did not speak for a moment.

“The engine is okay,” he said finally. “Old, but okay. With the battery and the belt, maybe another three hundred dollars in parts.”

Ana was doing the math. “So closer to five thousand total. Before permits. Before supplies.”

“Yes.”

The car was quiet.

Camila sat in the back between Sofía and Mateo. She had not said much at the lot. She had looked at everything carefully, the same way her father had. But she had not touched anything.

“If something breaks during the festival,” she said quietly, “what happens?”

Miguel looked at her in the rearview mirror. It was a good question. A mechanic's question.

"We fix it," he said.

Camila looked out the window.

"Okay," she said.

It was not quite agreement. But it was not refusal either.

Miguel pulled onto the street. Behind them, the lot grew small in the mirror.

No one said anything for a while. But the truck was already with them in the car, taking up space, the way a decision does before it is made.

Chapter 4 The Envelope

They did not talk much during dinner that night.

The truck sat between them like an extra chair at the table.

Mateo talked enough for everyone. He described where the fryer could go. He explained that they would need a sign with lights. He suggested free churros for children on opening day.

Sofía had her notebook open beside her plate. She was sketching again, this time drawing the truck in color. She had added red stripes along the side and small yellow lights around the serving window.

Camila ate slowly. She listened more than she spoke.

Miguel watched Ana.

Ana watched the calendar on the wall.

The festival was five weeks away.

After the dishes were washed and Mateo was sent to brush his teeth, Ana walked into the bedroom and came back with a plain white envelope.

She set it on the table.

No one needed to ask what it was.

Miguel sat down across from her.

Camila stopped in the hallway and leaned against the wall where she could still hear.

Ana opened the envelope and spread the money across the table. Not bills — numbers written neatly on paper. Savings account totals. The small emergency fund. The money they had set aside each month after rent and groceries and gas.

Miguel already knew the numbers. But seeing them written down made them feel more fragile.

“This is everything,” Ana said quietly.

“Not everything,” Miguel replied. “We still have the car.”

Ana did not smile.

They went through the numbers together.

Four thousand eight hundred for the truck. Three hundred for parts. Permit fees. Food safety training. Insurance. Supplies for the festival.

Ana wrote each one down.

When she finished, she underlined the total.

Miguel leaned back in his chair.

“It would leave us with very little,” she said.

“Yes.”

“For a while.”

“Yes.”

Silence filled the kitchen.

Camila stepped into the room.

“Is that the college fund?” she asked.

Ana looked up at her.

“It’s part of it,” she said carefully.

Miguel felt something tighten in his chest.

“We are not spending your future,” he said.

Camila crossed her arms.

“It’s still our money,” she said. “All of it.”

“That’s true,” Ana said softly.

Miguel looked at his daughter. He saw the same careful thinking he had seen at the truck lot.

“We would build it back,” he said. “Slowly. Like before.”

“With what?” Camila asked. “What if it doesn’t work?”

Mateo’s voice floated down the hall. “Did you say churros?”

No one answered him.

Miguel leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table.

“If we don’t try,” he said, “nothing changes.”

Camila met his eyes.

“Maybe nothing changing is safer,” she said.

The words hung in the air.

Ana looked from one to the other.

“This is not just about money,” she said.

They were quiet again.

Miguel thought about the warehouse. The long rows of boxes. The sound of machines. The way time moved there — slow and heavy and the same every day.

He thought about the serving window. About opening it to the street.

“It’s about opportunity,” he said finally. “About not always waiting.”

Camila’s face softened for a moment.

“And what if the opportunity costs too much?” she asked.

Miguel did not answer right away.

Ana folded the paper and slid it back into the envelope.

“We don’t have to decide tonight,” she said. “We can look again tomorrow. We can ask more questions.”

Miguel nodded.

Camila stayed where she was for a moment longer. Then she turned and walked back down the hall.

Miguel listened to her door close.

He looked at Ana.

“She’s not wrong,” he said.

“I know.”

He tapped the envelope with his finger.

“But neither are we.”

Ana reached across the table and took his hand.

Outside, a train horn sounded in the distance. It was low and steady, moving somewhere else.

Miguel stared at the envelope.

For years, the money inside it had meant safety.

Now it meant choice.

And choice, he knew, was heavier.

Chapter 5 Long Days

They bought the truck the following Saturday.

Miguel offered four thousand five hundred dollars. The man shook his head at first, then sighed and agreed.

By the time Miguel drove it home, the sun was already low in the sky. Mateo stood on the sidewalk and clapped as if a parade had arrived.

“It’s ours!” he shouted.

Miguel smiled, but his hands were tight on the steering wheel. He listened to the engine the entire drive home. Every sound mattered now.

They parked the truck along the curb in front of the house. It looked larger there than it had in the lot. The white paint was dull. The rust along the bottom edge was more visible in the afternoon light.

Ana stood with her arms crossed.

“We’ll clean it tomorrow,” she said.

Camila stared at the truck for a long moment.

“How long until the festival?” she asked.

“Four weeks,” Ana said.

Camila nodded once.

Miguel did not rest on Sunday.

He replaced the battery and the worn belt. He checked the oil again. He ran the engine and listened carefully. When the truck idled smoothly, he allowed himself a small breath of relief.

On Monday, he went back to the warehouse.

The days began to blur together.

Warehouse in the morning. Truck in the evening.

Miguel came home smelling like dust and metal. He changed his shirt and stepped back outside with a flashlight. Sometimes Ana stood in the doorway and watched him. Sometimes Camila did.

The neighbors began to notice.

Mrs. Jenkins from next door brought over a plate of cookies on Tuesday.

“You starting something new?” she asked.

“Maybe,” Ana said.

Mrs. Jenkins looked at the truck and smiled. “Well, I like tacos.”

Ana smiled back.

Inside the house, the kitchen changed too.

Ana wrote lists and taped them to the refrigerator.

- Permits
- Insurance
- Food safety course
- Menu ideas
- Cost of supplies

She called the city office twice. She filled out forms online. She asked Camila to check her spelling before she pressed submit.

“Liability insurance,” Camila said, reading from the screen. “That’s important.”

“I know it’s important,” Ana said gently. “I just don’t know how much it costs yet.”

Mateo asked if he could help. Ana handed him a rag and told him to wipe down the outside of the truck.

Sofía began sketching logos more seriously now. She tried different names. Some in English. Some in Spanish. Some in both.

Camila worked her shifts at the market and came home late. The smell of bread followed her through the door. She changed clothes and sometimes stepped outside to sit on the curb near the truck.

One night Miguel noticed her there.

“You okay?” he asked.

She shrugged.

“It’s going to be busy for a while,” he said.

“It already is,” she replied.

He did not argue.

By the second week, everyone felt it.

Miguel’s hands were sore from tools. Ana’s voice was tight from phone calls. Sofía’s homework sat unfinished longer than usual. Mateo fell asleep at the table one night while Ana was explaining food safety rules.

Sofía watched her father come in from the truck that night. He sat at the table and put his hands flat on the surface, the way he did when his back hurt but he did not want to say so.

She noticed things like that. She noticed when her mother’s smile was real and when it was the one she used to keep the room calm. She noticed when Camila’s silence was tired silence and when it was angry silence.

She did not say anything about these things. She just drew.

Tonight she drew her father’s hands. Large and rough, resting on the table. She got the knuckles right. The small cut on his thumb from the wrench.

She did not show it to anyone.

Camila stared at the calendar on the wall.

She had a history test in two weeks. She had already missed one study group because of her shift at the market. She did not want to miss another. And, she had to help here, too.

“Maybe I shouldn’t work next weekend,” she said quietly.

Miguel looked up from the sink where he was washing his hands.

“The market?” he asked.

“Yes. The market.”

Ana turned from the stove.

“You need your job,” she said carefully.

Camila nodded.

“I know.”

Silence settled into the room again.

Ana looked at the calendar. The festival was circled in red. It was on a Saturday. Camila always worked Saturdays.

“The festival,” Ana said. “That’s a Saturday too.”

Camila looked at the calendar. Her jaw tightened.

“So I miss that shift,” she said.

No one answered for a moment.

“That’s a whole day’s pay,” Ana said. Not to anyone in particular. Just to the room.

“I know what it is,” Camila said.

Miguel dried his hands on a towel.

“We will figure it out,” he said.

It was what he always said.

Later that night, Miguel stood alone inside the truck.

He flipped on the interior light. The narrow space felt different now.

Less like a purchase. More like a responsibility.

He ran his hand along the stainless steel counter.

Four weeks.

It did not feel like much time.

Outside, he could hear Sofía laughing at something Mateo had said.

He could hear Ana’s voice reminding them to lower it. He could hear

Camila’s bedroom door close.

Miguel turned off the light.

The truck sat quiet on the street.

Waiting.

Chapter 6 Paperwork

The city office was on the second floor of a gray building downtown.

There was no sign outside, only a number on the door.

Ana found the right room after asking twice. The hallway smelled like floor cleaner and old carpet. A woman at the front desk pointed to a row of plastic chairs along the wall.

“Take a number,” she said without looking up.

Ana took a small paper ticket from the machine. Number forty-seven. The screen on the wall said thirty-one.

She sat down.

Camila sat beside her with a folder on her lap. Inside the folder were printed forms, a copy of Ana’s ID, the truck’s title, and a list of questions Ana had written the night before.

The room was full. A man in a work jacket sat across from them, turning his hat in his hands. A young woman with a baby on her hip stood near the window, reading a notice on the wall. An older couple spoke quietly in a language Ana did not recognize.

Everyone was waiting.

Camila opened the folder and looked at the first form again.

“Temporary Food Vendor Permit,” she read. “This one asks for the vehicle identification number.”

“I have it,” Ana said. She pulled a small piece of paper from her purse. Miguel had copied the number from the truck that morning before he left for the warehouse.

Camila wrote it on the form in neat block letters.

“It also asks for proof of insurance,” Camila said.

Ana’s stomach tightened. “We don’t have that yet.”

“I know. But we need to know how much it costs before we can get it.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Ana said.

They waited.

The number on the screen changed slowly. Thirty-four. Thirty-five. A man walked out of the back office shaking his head. Another woman was called and disappeared through a door.

Camila took out her phone and searched for the insurance information. She found a website for food truck insurance in their state.

“It says liability insurance starts at about forty dollars a month,” she said.

Ana did the math in her head. That was almost five hundred dollars a year. For one type of insurance.

“What else do we need?” she asked.

Camila scrolled down. “Vehicle insurance. That’s separate. And something called a commissary agreement.”

“What is that?”

Camila read for a moment. “It says food trucks have to be connected to a licensed kitchen. For storage and cleaning. You can’t just cook from the truck.”

Ana stared at her.

“A licensed kitchen,” she repeated.

“Yes.”

Ana sat back in her chair. She had not known about this. She wondered if Miguel knew. She wondered if Raúl knew.

“Maybe the church kitchen counts,” Camila said.

Ana looked at her daughter. Camila’s face was calm, but her eyes moved quickly across the screen the way they did when she was solving a problem.

“Maybe,” Ana said. “I can ask Pastor Elena.”

The number changed again. Forty-one.

A child ran past them toward the water fountain. His mother followed, speaking softly in Spanish. Ana watched them and thought about Mateo. He was at school right now, probably talking about the truck again.

“Mamá,” Camila said.

“Yes?”

“This form asks about the menu.”

“The menu?”

“What food you plan to sell. They want to know for the health inspection.”

Ana opened her purse and took out a small notebook. She had been writing menu ideas for days. Tacos. Quesadillas. Rice and beans. Agua fresca. Churros.

She showed the list to Camila.

Camila looked at it and nodded. “We should keep it simple for the first time.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Ana said.

“Tacos, quesadillas, and drinks,” Camila said. “Maybe churros if we have time.”

Ana smiled. “Mateo will be disappointed if there are no churros.”

“Mateo will survive,” Camila said. But she smiled too.

The number on the screen changed. Forty-seven.

Ana stood and smoothed her jacket. Camila gathered the folder and stood beside her.

They walked to the window together.

The woman behind the counter was younger than Ana expected. She had short hair and glasses and a name tag that said Diane.

“How can I help you?” she asked.

Ana opened her mouth, then paused. The words were there, but they felt stiff in English. She knew what she wanted to say. She had practiced in the car.

“We want to apply for a temporary food vendor permit,” she said carefully.

Diane nodded. “Do you have the application?”

Camila slid the folder across the counter.

Diane opened it and looked through the pages. She checked each one, turning them slowly.

“You’re missing the commissary letter,” she said.

“We are working on that,” Ana said.

“And the insurance certificate.”

“We will get that this week.”

Diane looked at her. Her expression was not unkind.

“You’ll need both before we can process this,” she said. “And the health department has to inspect the vehicle. You can schedule that on-line or by phone.”

She handed Ana a printed sheet with a list of steps. There were twelve items on it. Ana had completed four.

“Is there a deadline?” Ana asked.

“For the festival permit, you need everything submitted at least ten business days before the event.”

Ana counted in her head. That was two weeks from now. Maybe less.

“Thank you,” she said.

They walked back down the hallway. The floor cleaner smell was stronger now. Camila held the folder against her chest.

Outside, the air was cool and bright. Ana stood on the sidewalk for a moment and looked at the list Diane had given her.

Twelve steps. Four done. Eight to go.

“It’s a lot,” Camila said.

“Yes,” Ana said.

“But you got through the hard part,” Camila added. “You asked.”

Ana looked at her daughter. Camila was not smiling, but her voice was softer than it had been in days.

“Thank you for coming with me,” Ana said.

Camila shrugged. “You needed a translator.”

“I needed my daughter,” Ana said.

Camila looked away, but Ana could see the corner of her mouth move.

They walked to the car together. Ana folded the list carefully and put it in her purse beside the notebook with the menu ideas.

Eight more steps.

She started the car.

One at a time.

Chapter 7 After School

The bell rang at 3:10.

Students pushed into the hallway all at once. Lockers slammed. Voices bounced off the walls.

Camila stood at her locker, moving slowly while the crowd flowed around her. She took out her history book and placed it carefully in her backpack.

“Are you coming today?” someone asked behind her.

Camila turned. It was Lila from her history class.

“The study group,” Lila said. “We’re meeting in the library at four.”

Camila hesitated.

The test was on Monday. The study group had already met twice this week.

“I have work,” Camila said.

Lila nodded, but her face fell a little. “Right. The market.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s okay,” Lila said quickly. “We’ll send the notes.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you signing up for the SAT practice day?” Lila asked.

“I already signed up,” Camila said. “It’s in a few weeks.”

“Me too. My mom says it matters even though it’s just practice.”

“It matters,” Camila said.

“Are you using the extra time?” Lila asked.

Camila looked at her.

Lila shrugged. “You said you get time and a half. Because of the bilingual thing. So instead of finishing at twelve, you can go until two.”

Camila knew this already. She had signed the form in the counselor’s office. Two extra hours to read each question carefully. Two extra hours to check her work. Two extra hours to make sure the English did not trip her up in places where she already knew the answer.

“I don’t know yet,” Camila said.

“You should use it,” Lila said. “That’s what it’s for.”

“Yeah,” Camila said. “Maybe.”

They walked toward the front doors together.

Outside, the afternoon air was cool and bright. The parking lot was full of students talking, laughing, and waiting for rides.

Lila stopped near the curb.

“You’re working a lot lately,” she said.

Camila adjusted the strap of her backpack.

“Just for a while.”

“For the truck thing?”

Camila looked at her.

“You heard about that?”

“My cousin goes to your church,” Lila said. “He said your family bought a food truck.”

Camila shrugged.

“We’re thinking about it.”

“That’s cool,” Lila said. “Free tacos for friends?”

Camila smiled a little.

“Maybe.”

But she was already thinking about the time.

Her shift started at four.

The market was only six blocks from the school.

Camila walked quickly. The sidewalks were crowded with people leaving work and students heading home. She reached the market at 3:45 and tied her hair back before stepping inside.

The smell of bread and coffee filled the air.

Mr. Lee was stocking oranges near the front display.

“You’re early,” he said.

“I got out of school a little faster today.”

“That’s good.”

Camila tied on her apron and went behind the register.

The afternoon shift was always busy.

Customers came in waves. Some bought only a drink. Others filled baskets with vegetables and noodles and bread. Camila scanned items and packed bags while the line moved slowly forward.

“Paper or plastic?” she asked.

“Plastic.”

“Do you have your rewards card?”

“No.”

“Your total is twelve eighty-three.”

The rhythm of the register was steady and predictable.

It was different from the truck.

At the market, everything already worked.

Around five, Mr. Lee came to the register.

“How is your family business?” he asked.

Camila paused for half a second before answering.

“It’s not a business yet.”

“But it will be?”

“Maybe.”

Mr. Lee nodded.

“My family started small too,” he said. “First one store. Then another.”

Camila smiled politely.

“Did you work here when you were in high school?” she asked.

Mr. Lee laughed.

“No. I worked in my parents’ store after school every day.”

“That sounds familiar.”

Mr. Lee smiled.

“Working young teaches you things,” he said. “But it is also tiring.”

Camila scanned another item.

“Yes,” she said.

When her shift ended at seven, the sky outside was already dark.

Camila stepped onto the sidewalk and pulled her jacket tighter around her shoulders.

Her phone buzzed.

A message from Lila.

We finished the review sheet. I'll send pictures.

Camila typed back: Thanks.

She started walking home.

The streetlights flickered on one by one.

She thought about the history test.

She thought about the commissary kitchen.

She thought about the envelope of savings in her parents' bedroom drawer.

She reached her street; the food truck was parked under the same streetlight as always.

Her father was inside. The door was open and the interior light was glowing.

She stopped for a moment and watched him from the sidewalk.

He was bent over the counter, tightening something with a wrench.

For a moment she felt the same thing she had felt at the market register — the sense that everything was moving forward whether she was ready or not.

Miguel looked up and saw her.

“How was work?” he asked.

Camila adjusted her backpack.

“Busy,” she said.

This time she looked directly at him.

Miguel nodded.

“Come look at this,” he said.

She climbed the small step into the truck.

The space smelled like metal and soap.

Miguel pointed to the stove.

“Gas line is working now,” he said. “That was the last big problem.”

Camila ran her hand lightly along the stainless steel counter.

The truck felt smaller than she remembered.

“Good,” she said.

Miguel watched her for a moment.

“You should study tonight,” he said. “Your test is Monday.”

Camila raised an eyebrow.

“How do you know that?”

“You told your mother,” he said.

Camila nodded.

“Yeah.”

Miguel stepped back toward the door.

“Go inside,” he said. “We’re done here tonight.”

Camila stepped back onto the sidewalk.

Behind her, the truck light clicked off.

Inside the house, Ana was already setting plates on the table.

Another long day.

And another one tomorrow.

Chapter 8 Test Run

The church parking lot on Saturday morning was quiet.

A few cars were parked near the side entrance. Someone had set up folding tables near the door. A man with a leaf blower was clearing the far corner of the lot.

Miguel backed the truck in carefully.

He got out and looked at the position. Then he got back in and adjusted it two feet to the left.

Ana watched from the sidewalk.

“It’s fine,” she said.

“I want the serving window facing the tables,” he said.

He got out again and looked.

“Now it’s fine,” he said.

Ana smiled.

They had arrived an hour before anyone else. That was intentional. There were things to check before the serving window opened.

Miguel connected the propane. He checked the connection twice and then turned the valve slowly. He lit the burner and watched the flame. It was blue and steady.

Ana tied on her apron and opened the cooler they had brought from home. She had been cooking since six that morning. Rice. Beans. Chicken in the red sauce. Enough for forty people, she estimated. Maybe fifty if she was careful with the portions.

Sofía arrived with Mateo twenty minutes later. Ana had asked them to come early to help set up.

Mateo looked at the truck and then at the folding tables.

“Where do people stand?” he asked.

“In a line,” Ana said. “Over there.”

“How will they know to make a line?”

“They will know,” Ana said.

Sofía helped her mother arrange the serving containers inside the truck. She handed things up through the side door while Ana organized the counter.

“Where do you want the napkins?” Sofía asked.

“Near the window,” Ana said. “So people can reach them.”

Sofía placed them carefully.

“Should I make a sign?” she asked.

Ana paused.

“What kind of sign?”

“A menu. So people know what we have.”

Ana looked at Miguel.

Miguel shrugged. “We didn’t bring anything to write on.”

Sofía reached into her bag and pulled out a piece of cardboard she had folded in half. On the front she had already written the menu in two columns. Spanish on the left. English on the right. The letters were clean and even.

Ana stared at it for a moment.

“You already made one,” she said.

Sofía smiled.

“I made it last night. Just in case.”

Ana took it and propped it against the serving window.

It looked like it belonged there.

The first customers arrived just after ten.

They were mostly church members. Older couples. Families with young children. People who already knew Ana’s cooking from the potluck dinners and the holiday meals.

“Ana! Is this your truck?” a woman asked.

“We’re trying it out,” Ana said from inside the window.

“It smells wonderful already.”

The first hour went smoothly.

Ana moved with the rhythm she had always had in the kitchen. Her hands were efficient and sure. She portioned the rice without measuring. She knew by eye how much sauce each plate needed.

Miguel stood near the back of the truck and watched for problems.

There were small ones.

The serving window latch stuck twice. Miguel fixed it with a flathead screwdriver he kept in his back pocket.

A paper plate got wet from steam and collapsed. Camila, who had arrived late after her morning shift at the market, suggested they double the plates.

“Use two,” she said. “One inside the other.”

“That uses twice as many plates,” Ana said.

“Yes,” Camila said. “But food on the ground uses more.”

Ana doubled the plates after that.

The line grew through the late morning.

Mateo stationed himself near the front of the line and greeted people with more enthusiasm than was probably necessary.

“Welcome to our truck!” he said to every person who approached.

“Everything is very delicious and also not too expensive!”

An older man laughed.

“How much is it?” he asked.

Mateo looked over his shoulder at the window.

“Mamá, how much is it?”

Ana called out the prices.

Mateo turned back to the man.

“That much,” he said.

The problem came just before noon.

Ana had run low on rice faster than expected. She had enough chicken and sauce for twenty more plates. But the rice was nearly gone.

She told Miguel quietly through the back door.

He looked at the line.

There were still fifteen people waiting.

“Tortillas,” Ana said. “I have tortillas. I can serve it that way.”

“Some people ordered rice,” Miguel said.

“I know.”

“We tell them,” Camila said from behind him. She had been listening.

“We just tell them. We explain the rice is gone and ask if tortillas are okay.”

Miguel looked at her.

“And if they say no?”

“Then we give them their money back.”

It was a simple answer. Direct and fair.

Miguel nodded.

Ana leaned out the window and spoke to the next customer.

“I have to tell you something,” she said. “We have run out of rice. I can serve this with tortillas instead. Is that okay?”

The woman at the window paused.

“Honestly,” she said, “I prefer tortillas.”

Ana smiled.

Most people said the same thing.

Two people took refunds. They were polite about it.

By one o'clock the truck was empty.

Ana sat on the back step with a cup of water.

Sofía helped Mateo collect the folding chairs they had borrowed from the church.

Camila tallied the cash on her phone.

“How much?” Miguel asked.

She showed him the number.

It was not much. This had been a practice run, not a real event. Some people had paid. Some had donated. Some were guests of the church and had not paid at all.

But the number was not zero.

Miguel sat down beside Ana on the back step.

“So,” he said.

“So,” she said.

He looked at the empty serving containers.

“What did we learn?” he asked.

Ana held up one finger. “Make more rice.”

Camila held up a second finger. “Bring better plates.”

Sofía held up a third. “Make the sign bigger.”

Mateo held up a fourth.

“Hire me to talk to people,” he said. “I was very good at that.”

They laughed.

Even Camila.

Miguel looked at each of them.

“Okay,” he said quietly.

He stood and dusted off his pants.

“Next time we do better.”

He opened the truck door and began cleaning the inside.

One by one, the others followed.

Chapter 9 Mateo's Class

Mateo forgot his library book on Wednesday.

He remembered it at lunch. He looked in his backpack and knew immediately that the book was not in it. It was on his desk in his room, next to the lamp, where he had left it after reading three pages and falling asleep.

Mateo went to the school office to call home. His mom answered after a few rings.

“Mamá,” he said. “I forgot my book.”

“The library book?”

“It's due today.”

Ana looked at the clock on the microwave. Still a few hours left in the school day.

“I'll bring it,” she said.

Mateo's class was doing silent reading when the knock came at the classroom door.

His teacher, Mrs. Okafor, opened it.

Ana stood in the hallway with the book in her hand. She smiled when she saw Mrs. Okafor.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said. “Mateo forgot this.”

Her accent was soft but present.

Mrs. Okafor smiled back. “Thank you for bringing it. Mateo, come get your book.”

Mateo walked to the door. Around him he could feel his classmates looking up from their books.

He took the book from his mother.

“Gracias, Mamá,” he said quietly, without thinking.

Ana touched his shoulder lightly.

“Que te vaya bien,” she said. Have a good day.

She was gone before the door fully closed.

Mateo walked back to his seat.

He opened his book and stared at the page without reading.

From across the aisle, his classmate Dylan leaned over.

“Was that your mom?” Dylan whispered.

“Yeah,” Mateo said.

Dylan nodded slowly.

“She speaks Spanish?”

“Yeah.”

Dylan’s face brightened a little.

“I know some Spanish,” he whispered. He straightened up slightly, the way people do when they are about to show something.

“María — that’s the lady who comes to our house — she taught me some words.” He paused. “Um. *Agua*. That means water. And *gracias*. And *casa*.”

Mateo looked at him.

Dylan smiled, clearly pleased with himself.

“Cool, right?”

Mateo turned back to his book.

“Yeah,” he said. “Cool.”

Mrs. Okafor looked up from her desk.

Both boys went quiet.

Mateo stared at the words on the page. They did not make any sense to him right now.

He thought about his mother standing in the doorway with the book in her hand. Her accent. The way Dylan’s face had looked when he made the connection.

He was not sure what he felt exactly.

It was not quite anger.

It was something smaller and harder to name.

At lunch Mateo sat with Dylan and two other boys from his class. They talked about a video game and then about a movie that was coming out on Friday. Mateo laughed at the right moments. He ate his sandwich.

By the end of lunch he almost felt normal again.

Almost.

On the walk back to class Dylan fell into step beside him.

“Hey,” Dylan said. “Does your family make Mexican food?”

Mateo looked at him.

“My mom cooks a lot of things,” he said.

“Like tacos?”

“Yeah. And other stuff.”

Dylan nodded.

“María makes these things called *tamales*,” he said. “They’re really good. Do you eat those?”

Mateo thought about his mother’s tamales at Christmas. The way the whole kitchen smelled. The way she and his aunts laughed while they worked.

"Yeah," he said. "We eat those."

"They're so good," Dylan said.

He said it like it was a compliment.

Mateo knew it was meant as one.

"My family has a food truck," Mateo said.

Dylan stopped walking.

"Wait, seriously?"

"Yeah. We're doing the church festival next month."

Dylan's eyes went wide.

"That's awesome. Will you have tamales?"

"I don't know yet," Mateo said. "My mom decides the menu."

"You should tell her tamales," Dylan said. "I would come for tamales."

They walked into the classroom.

Mateo sat down.

He thought about what Dylan had said. *I would come for tamales.*

The feeling from that morning was still there. Small and quiet. But something else was there too now.

Dylan didn't know what he had said. He didn't know what any of it meant. He was just a kid who learned a few words from someone and thought that made a connection.

Maybe it did. Maybe it didn't.

Mateo wasn't sure yet.

But he thought about the festival. About the line of people outside the serving window. About his job greeting customers.

If Dylan came, Mateo decided, he would say hello like he said hello to everyone else.

That felt like the right answer.

Even if he couldn't explain why.

Chapter 10 The Name

Sofía spread six pieces of paper across the kitchen table after dinner.

Each one had a different design. She had drawn them during lunch and study hall over the past week. Some were simple. Some were more detailed. All of them were for the truck.

“Okay,” she said. “I need everyone to look.”

Mateo leaned over the table immediately. “I like that one,” he said, pointing to the first drawing. It showed a large red taco with wings.

“That’s a flying taco,” Sofía said.

“Exactly,” Mateo said. “It’s cool.”

“It’s not what I’m going for,” Sofía said.

Miguel pulled his chair closer. Ana stood behind Sofía with her hand on the back of the chair.

Sofía pointed to each design one at a time.

The first was the flying taco. The second was a drawing of the truck itself, with the family standing in front. The third had bold block letters that said RIVERA KITCHEN. The fourth said the same thing but

in Spanish: COCINA RIVERA. The fifth combined both: COCINA RIVERA — RIVERA KITCHEN, in a circle around a small drawing of a lime and a chili pepper.

The sixth was different from the others.

It said LA COCINA on top, in large hand-drawn letters that looked warm and round. Below it, in smaller letters, it said HOME COOKING. Between the two lines, Sofía had drawn a simple open window with steam rising from it.

No one spoke for a moment.

“That one,” Ana said quietly. She was looking at the sixth design.

Miguel tilted his head. “La Cocina,” he said. “The Kitchen.”

“It’s simple,” Sofía said. “But I think simple is better.”

“What about Rivera or Rivera García?” Camila asked from the doorway. She had been watching but had not sat down. “Don’t you want the family name on it?”

Sofía shook her head. “The name is too long for a truck. And everyone will know it’s us.”

“What if someone doesn’t know us?” Camila said.

“Then they will know the food,” Ana said.

Miguel picked up the sixth drawing and held it in front of him. The open window with the steam. He thought about the serving window on the truck. The design fit.

“What language should the big letters be?” he asked.

No one answered right away.

It was a simple question. But it was not really about letters.

“Spanish,” Ana said. “La Cocina. That is who we are.”

“But the neighborhood is mixed,” Camila said. “Some people won’t know what it means.”

“They will learn,” Ana said.

Mateo looked confused. “Why can’t it be both?”

“It is both,” Sofía said. She pointed to the smaller text below. “See? Home Cooking. That’s the English part.”

Mateo studied it for a moment.

“Oh,” he said. “That’s smart.”

But something about the conversation stayed with him. Both. He thought about Dylan at school, saying *agua* and *gracias* like he had found a secret. He thought about the way it had made him feel. He did not have a word for it yet.

Sofía tried not to smile, but she did anyway.

Miguel set the drawing down on the table.

“Can you make it bigger?” he asked. “Big enough for the side of the truck?”

Sofía’s eyes went wide.

“You mean paint it? On the truck?”

“I mean paint it on the truck,” Miguel said.

Sofía looked at her mother. Ana nodded.

“I’ll need paint,” Sofía said. “And tape. And someone to hold the ladder.”

“I’ll hold the ladder,” Mateo said quickly. “I’m very strong.”

“You’re eight,” Camila said.

“A strong eight,” Mateo said.

They laughed.

Sofía gathered her drawings carefully and stacked them into a neat pile. She kept the sixth one on top.

Later that night, she sat on her bed and looked at it again. She traced the letters with her finger. La Cocina. The kitchen.

It was the first thing she had ever made that would go out into the world.

She set the drawing on her nightstand and turned off the light.

In the dark, she could still see the shape of the letters. Warm and round. Like the smell of her mother's cooking moving through an open window.

Chapter 11 City Office

Ana went back to the city office on a Tuesday morning.

This time she went alone.

She carried the folder Camila had organized. Inside it were the completed forms, the insurance certificate she had bought the week before, and a letter from Pastor Elena confirming that the church kitchen was available as their commissary.

Pastor Elena had written the letter by hand on church stationery. At the bottom she had added: “Ana García is an excellent cook and a trusted member of our congregation.” Ana had not asked her to write that part.

The waiting room was just as full as before. The same plastic chairs. The same small screen on the wall with the numbers.

Ana took a ticket. Fifty-three. The screen said forty.

She sat down and opened the folder one more time. She checked each page. She had already checked them three times at home. But once more could not hurt.

Insurance certificate. Signed. Commissary agreement. Signed. Vehicle title. Copy attached. Menu description. Typed by Camila. Food safety course completion. Printed from the website.

Ana turned to the last page. The list Diane had given her on the first visit. Twelve steps. She had checked off ten.

The two remaining were the health inspection and the fire inspection. Those would come later, after the permit was approved.

She sat back and waited.

The room was quiet except for the hum of the air system and the soft sound of people shifting in their seats. A man near the window was reading a newspaper. A woman with two children was filling out a form on her lap. The younger child kept reaching for the pen.

Ana watched the number on the screen change. Forty-four. Forty-five.

She thought about the insurance payment. Forty-two dollars a month for liability. Sixty-eight dollars a month for vehicle coverage. She had paid the first month of both with the debit card. The numbers had made her stomach tight.

But the papers were signed. The box was checked. One more thing behind them.

Fifty-three.

Ana stood and walked to the window.

Diane was there again. She looked up and seemed to recognize Ana.

“Back again,” she said.

“Yes,” Ana said. She slid the folder across the counter. “I have everything this time.”

Diane opened the folder and went through the pages slowly. She checked each one against a printed list on her desk.

Ana stood very still.

Diane stopped on the commissary letter.

“This is from a church?” she asked.

“Yes,” Ana said. “They have a licensed kitchen. We will store food there and clean our equipment there.”

Diane read the letter again. Then she nodded.

“Okay,” she said. She stamped the front page of the application. The stamp said RECEIVED — PENDING REVIEW.

“This is not approval yet,” Diane said. “Someone will review the application within five business days. If everything is in order, you’ll get a conditional approval by mail. That means you can operate once you pass the health and fire inspections.”

“How long do the inspections take?” Ana asked.

“You can schedule them online. Usually a week or two.”

Ana nodded. “Thank you.”

Diane looked at her for a moment.

“You have a good file,” she said. “Very organized.”

Ana felt something warm in her chest.

“My daughter helped,” she said.

She walked out of the building and stood on the sidewalk. The air was warm. The sky was clear.

She took out her phone and called Miguel.

He answered on the second ring. She could hear machines in the background.

“They took the application,” she said. “Conditional approval in five days.”

Miguel was quiet for a moment.

“Good,” he said. “That’s good.”

“One more thing behind us,” Ana said.

She drove home with the windows down. The folder sat on the passenger seat, lighter now by one worry.

Chapter 12 The New Fryer

The problem appeared on a Wednesday evening.

Miguel was inside the truck, testing the equipment one piece at a time. He turned on the flat-top grill. It heated evenly. He ran the stove burners. Both worked. He checked the small refrigerator. Cold and steady.

Then he turned on the deep fryer.

Nothing happened.

He checked the gas line. It was connected. He checked the igniter. It clicked but did not light. He pulled the fryer away from the wall and looked at the back.

The gas valve was cracked. A thin line ran along the metal where the valve met the pipe.

Miguel turned off the gas and sat down on the floor of the truck.

A cracked valve was not something you could fix with tape or a wrench. It needed a new part. And the fryer was old — old enough that the part might not be easy to find.

He climbed out of the truck and went inside.

Ana was at the kitchen table with her notebook open. She was working on the supply list for the festival.

“The fryer is broken,” Miguel said.

Ana looked up. “How broken?”

“The gas valve is cracked. It won’t light.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Not with a cracked valve. I need a new one. Or a new fryer.”

Ana set her pen down.

“How much?” she asked. It was the question she always asked now. Everything came back to that question.

Miguel sat across from her. “A new valve, if I can find one, maybe forty dollars. A used fryer — two, maybe three hundred. A new one. . .” He shook his head. “More than we have.”

“Do we need the fryer?” Ana asked.

Miguel looked at her.

“For churros,” he said. “And anything else you want to fry. Empanadas. Taquitos.”

Ana was quiet. She looked at her notebook. The menu she had planned included churros. People expected churros. At the test run, three people had asked about them.

“What about the valve?” she said. “Can you find the part?”

“I can try. But the fryer is thirty years old. The model number is worn off.”

Ana rubbed her forehead.

“How much is in the envelope?” Miguel asked.

They both knew. But saying it out loud made it real.

“After the insurance and the supplies we already bought,” Ana said, “about six hundred dollars.”

Six hundred dollars. That was their cushion. The money between them and nothing.

“A used fryer would leave us with three hundred,” Miguel said.

“And we still need to buy the food for the festival.”

They sat with that.

From the living room, Mateo’s voice carried through the wall. He was explaining something to Sofia about a cartoon. The sound was bright and careless in a way that made the kitchen feel heavier.

“I’ll look for the valve first,” Miguel said. “If I can find it, we save money.”

“And if you can’t?”

“Then we buy a used fryer. But a good one. I’ll check it before we pay.”

Ana picked up her pen again. She added a new line to the bottom of her supply list.

Fryer — \$300 (maybe)

She stared at the number.

“Every time we solve one problem,” she said, “another one is behind it.”

Miguel reached across the table and touched her hand.

“That’s what a business is,” he said. “One problem behind another. But you keep going.”

Ana looked at him. She saw the tiredness in his face. She saw something else too. Not excitement. Not confidence. Something quieter. Stubbornness, maybe. The refusal to stop.

“Okay,” she said. “Find the valve.”

Miguel squeezed her hand once. Then he stood and went back outside to the truck.

Ana listened to the side door open and close.

She looked at the calendar on the wall. The festival was circled in red. Two and a half weeks away.

She turned back to her notebook and kept writing.

Raúl came by on Thursday evening.

He stood next to Miguel inside the truck and looked at the fryer with his arms crossed.

“That valve is finished,” he said.

“I know,” Miguel said.

“My cousin had a truck in Riverside. He sold it last year. Maybe he still has parts.”

Miguel looked at him. “You think he’d have this valve?”

Raúl shrugged. “I think he has a garage full of things his wife wants him to throw away. I’ll call him tonight.”

He clapped Miguel on the shoulder.

“You’re doing this the right way,” he said. “Slow. Careful.”

Miguel shook his head. “It doesn’t feel slow.”

“It never does,” Raúl said. “But you’re still here. That’s the part that matters.”

Raúl called on Saturday morning.

His cousin had a valve. Miguel drove to Riverside after his shift. It took an hour each way. When he got home, he went straight to the truck with the part in a paper bag.

He held it next to the cracked one.

It was the wrong size.

The threads were different. The opening was a quarter inch too wide. Close, but not close enough. In plumbing, close meant nothing.

Miguel sat on the floor of the truck and stared at the two valves side by side.

He called Raúl.

“It doesn’t fit,” he said.

Raúl was quiet for a moment. “I’m sorry, hermano.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“What now?”

“A used fryer,” Miguel said. “That’s the only option.”

Raúl knew someone who sold restaurant equipment out of a warehouse near the freeway. He said he would go with Miguel on Monday.

On Monday evening, they stood in a narrow aisle between rows of steel shelving. The warehouse smelled like grease and dust. A man in a gray apron showed them three fryers. Two were too large for the truck. The third was the right size. It was scratched and dented but the gas valve was solid and the igniter lit on the first try.

“How much?” Miguel asked.

“Three hundred,” the man said.

Miguel looked at Raúl. Raúl looked at the fryer. He opened the drain valve and checked the inside of the oil tank.

“It’s clean,” Raúl said quietly. “It’ll work.”

Three hundred dollars.

Miguel paid with cash from the envelope.

They loaded the fryer into the back of Raúl’s truck and drove it home. Miguel installed it that night. It fit into the space where the old one had been, though he had to adjust the gas line by two inches.

When he turned it on, the flame was blue and steady.

He stood in the truck alone and listened to the hiss of the gas.

Three hundred dollars lighter. Three hundred dollars closer to nothing.

That night, Mateo knocked on Camila’s door.

She was sitting on her bed with her history book open. She looked up.

“What,” she said.

Mateo stood in the doorway. He was wearing his pajamas. His hair was still wet from the bath.

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

Camila closed the book halfway, keeping her finger on the page.

“Okay.”

Mateo came in and sat on the edge of the bed. He picked at a thread on the blanket.

“There’s a kid at school,” he said. “Dylan. He said he knows Spanish. But he only knows like three words. And he learned them from—” Mateo paused. “From the lady who comes to his house.”

Camila was quiet. She watched his face.

“He said *agua* and *gracias* and he was really proud of it,” Mateo said. “And then he asked if we eat tamales. Like that’s all we are.”

“Did he mean it that way?” Camila asked.

Mateo shrugged. “I don’t know. He was being nice. I think he was being nice. But it felt weird.”

Camila set the book down.

“Yeah,” she said. “It does feel weird.”

Mateo looked at her. “Does it happen to you too?”

Camila almost smiled. “All the time.”

“What do you do?”

She thought about it. She thought about school. About the counselor’s office where she signed the form for extra time on the SAT. About the way some teachers spoke to her slowly even though she did not need them to.

“You figure out who means well and who doesn’t,” she said. “And for the ones who mean well, you decide how much you want to teach them.”

Mateo frowned. “Teach them what?”

“That you’re more than the three words they know.”

Mateo was quiet for a while. He pulled the thread on the blanket until it came loose.

“He wants to come to the festival,” Mateo said. “For tacos.”

“Is that okay with you?” Camila asked.

Mateo thought about it.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think so.”

“Then let him come,” Camila said. “And if he says something weird, you can talk to me after.”

Mateo nodded. He slid off the bed.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Close the door,” Camila said.

He did. But gently.

Camila opened her book again. She stared at the page for a long moment before she started reading.

Chapter 13 The Argument

It started over the calendar.

Camila was standing in the kitchen doorway with her backpack on one shoulder. She had gotten her history test back that morning. Eighty-nine. Not bad for someone who had studied between onion bags and market shifts. She had not told anyone yet.

She was looking at the wall where Ana kept the family schedule.

Saturday was circled twice. Once in red for the festival. Once in blue for Camila's SAT practice test at school.

No one had noticed the overlap until now.

"Mamá," Camila said.

Ana turned from the sink.

Camila pointed at the calendar.

Ana looked. Her face changed.

"Oh," she said quietly.

“The SAT practice is from eight to twelve,” Camila said. “But I get extra time. Until two.”

Ana was quiet for a moment. “The festival starts at noon.”

“I know.”

“So if you use all your time—”

“I don’t get there until two-thirty,” Camila said. “Maybe later.”

Ana dried her hands on a towel.

“Can you finish early?” she asked. “With the regular students?”

Camila stared at her.

“That’s four hours instead of six,” she said. “The whole point of extra time is to use it. I’m not rushing through the SAT so I can serve tacos.”

The words came out sharper than she meant. Or maybe exactly as sharp as she meant.

Ana held up her hands. “I’m asking. I’m not telling you.”

“And I’m already missing my shift at the market that day,” Camila said. “You know that, right? That’s money we don’t have coming in. Mr. Lee gave me the day off, but he didn’t have to.”

Miguel came in from outside. His hands were dark with grease. He had been adjusting the gas line on the new fryer.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“The SAT practice test is the same day as the festival,” Ana said.

“And Camila has extra time until two o’clock.”

Miguel looked at the calendar. Then he looked at Camila.

“Take the test,” he said. “Use all your time. We can manage.”

Camila shook her head.

“That’s not the point.”

Miguel turned on the faucet and began scrubbing his hands.

“Then what is the point?”

Camila set her backpack on the floor.

“The point is that no one asked me,” she said. “No one asked me if this weekend worked. No one asked me about the test run. No one asked me about the insurance paperwork. I just — do it. Because someone has to.”

The kitchen was quiet except for the water running.

Miguel did not turn around.

“We’re doing this for the family,” he said. “All of us. That includes you.”

“I know it includes me,” Camila said. “That’s what I’m saying. It includes me, but no one asked me.”

Miguel turned off the faucet. He dried his hands slowly.

“What do you want me to say, Camila? That I should stop? That I should park the truck and go back to the warehouse and forget about it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Because I can do that,” he said. His voice was tight now. “I can go back to lifting boxes twelve hours a day. I can come home with my back hurting and my hands raw and I can do that for another ten years. Is that what you want?”

Camila’s face went still.

“That’s not fair,” she said.

“None of this is fair,” Miguel said. He turned to face her. “I didn’t come here to stay in a warehouse forever. Your mother didn’t learn to cook for other people so she could fill out forms at a kitchen table every night. We are trying to build something.”

“I know you are,” Camila said. Her voice was quieter now, but it did not bend. “But you’re building it with my time too. And my job. And my savings.”

Miguel opened his mouth. Then he closed it.

Camila crossed her arms. She was standing the way she stood when she was trying not to cry. Straight and still, with her jaw tight.

“I work at the market four days a week,” she said. “I study every night. I translate your forms. I check your spelling. I add up the receipts. I do everything you ask and I don’t complain because I know it matters.”

She paused.

“But my things matter too.”

Miguel leaned against the counter. He looked at the floor.

“We all make sacrifices,” he said. But even as the words left his mouth, he heard how they sounded. Like a door closing.

Ana put the towel down. She did not speak. She watched them the way she watched the stove — carefully, waiting to see if the heat would settle or rise.

“You said this was for one event,” Camila continued. “One weekend. That’s what you told me in the kitchen when you showed me the envelope. One event, and then we see.”

She looked at her father.

“But it’s not one event anymore. It’s every night in the truck. It’s every dollar in the envelope. It’s the fryer and the permits and the insurance.” Her voice was steady but thin. “It’s everything. And I didn’t get to vote.”

Miguel did not answer. He stared at the wall above her head. The photo from Mexico hung there. His old shop. His name painted above the door.

He had looked at that photo a thousand times. Tonight, for the first time, he wondered what his daughter saw when she looked at it.

“Sit down,” he said.

“I don’t want to sit down.”

“Then stand,” he said. “But I’m going to talk.”

Camila stayed where she was.

Miguel sat at the table. He put his hands flat on the surface.

“I hear you,” he said. He said it slowly, like each word cost him something. “I don’t know if I agree with everything you’re saying. But I hear you.”

Camila stared at him. That was not what she wanted. She wanted him to say she was right.

“That’s not enough,” she said.

“It’s what I have right now,” Miguel said.

The room was very quiet.

Ana looked from one to the other. She reached for Camila’s hand. Camila let her take it, but she did not look away from her father.

“I’m not trying to stop you,” she said quietly. “I just want you to see me.”

The words landed in the room like something fragile set down on a hard surface.

Miguel rubbed his face with both hands. He was tired. He was so tired that the tiredness had become a part of him, like the grease under his fingernails.

“After the festival,” he said. “We sit down. All of us. And we decide together what happens next.”

“And until then?” Camila asked.

“Until then, I’ll try,” he said. “That’s what I can promise. I’ll try.”

It was not the answer Camila wanted. But it was an honest one. She could hear the difference.

She picked up her backpack from the floor.

“I’m going to study,” she said.

She walked down the hall. Her door closed. Not a slam. Just a close.

Miguel and Ana sat in the kitchen. The calendar looked different now. The red circle and the blue circle pressed against each other, two lives that did not quite fit on the same square.

Ana did not tell him he was wrong. She did not tell him he was right. She sat with him.

After a long time, Miguel spoke.

“I sounded like my father,” he said.

Ana looked at him.

“We all make sacrifices,” he repeated. “That’s what he used to say. When I was her age.”

He stared at the table.

“I hated it when he said that.”

Ana reached across the table and took his hand.

“Then don’t say it again,” she said.

Miguel nodded slowly. He looked at the hallway where Camila had disappeared. Her light was on under the door.

He thought about going to her. But he did not know what he would say that would be different from what he had already said.

So he sat in the kitchen with his wife, and he let the quiet do the work that words could not.

The festival was twelve days away.

Sofía was in the living room when the voices in the kitchen got quiet. Not loud quiet — the other kind. The kind that meant something real was being said.

She did not go to the doorway. She stayed on the couch with her sketchbook open and her pencil still.

She could not hear all the words. But she heard Camila say, “I just want you to see me.”

Sofía looked down at her drawing. It was the truck again. She had drawn it so many times now that she could do it without looking at the real one.

She added a small figure in the serving window. Then another near the door. Then a third standing off to the side, watching.

She did not label them. She did not need to.

Chapter 14 The Inspection

The silver car parked behind the truck at ten in the morning.

A man got out. He wore a blue shirt with a name tag that said Health Department. He carried a black clipboard and a small bag.

Miguel stood on the sidewalk. He had spent two hours cleaning the stainless steel counters. He had scrubbed the floor until his back ached.

“Is that him?” Ana whispered from the serving window.

“Yes,” Miguel said. “Check the water one more time.”

The man walked toward them. He did not smile, but he did not look angry. He looked like a man who had seen many trucks today.

“Mr. Rivera García?” he asked, looking at his clipboard.

“I am Miguel,” Miguel said. He held out his hand.

The man shook it. “I’m Mr. Henderson. I’m here for the pre-operational inspection.”

He stepped up into the truck. Miguel and Ana moved to the side to give him room.

Mr. Henderson did not speak for several minutes. He started at the back and moved toward the front.

He turned on the sink. He pulled a thermometer from his pocket and held it under the water.

“How long does it take to get hot?” he asked.

“Ten seconds,” Miguel said.

Mr. Henderson watched the numbers on the thermometer. “One hundred and ten degrees. Good.”

He moved to the refrigerator. He checked the seal on the door. He looked at the thermometer inside.

“Thirty-eight degrees,” he noted. He wrote something on his clipboard.

Ana held her breath. She looked at the small dark spot on the wall behind the fridge—the one the man at the lot said was dry.

Mr. Henderson leaned down. He shined a flashlight into the corner.

“You had a leak here?”

“Yes,” Miguel said. “The roof vent was old. We replaced it. It is dry now.”

Mr. Henderson touched the wall. He moved his flashlight slowly.

“It’s sealed well,” he said. “But keep an eye on it.”

He stood up and looked at the stove. He checked the gas lines. Then he looked at the hand-washing sink.

“Where is your soap?”

Ana pointed to the dispenser on the wall.

“And the paper towels?”

“Right here,” she said, tapping the metal box.

Mr. Henderson nodded. Then he stopped. He pointed to the wall above the sink.

“You are missing the sign,” he said.

Miguel felt his heart sink. “The sign?”

“The law says you must have a sign that tells employees to wash their hands. It must be in English. It can be in Spanish too, but it needs English.”

“I can write one now,” Miguel said. He reached for a marker.

“No,” Mr. Henderson said. “It has to be a permanent sign. Plastic or metal.”

He looked at Miguel’s face. For the first time, the man smiled a little.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I have an extra one in the car. It’s a common mistake.”

He walked to his car and came back with a small blue and white sign. It said: EMPLOYEES MUST WASH HANDS.

He peeled the back off and stuck it to the wall above the sink.

“There,” he said.

He took a large stamp from his bag. He pressed it onto the bottom of the application.

APPROVED.

He handed the paper to Miguel.

“Keep this in the truck at all times,” he said. “The fire inspector will come on Friday to check your propane tanks. If he signs off, you are ready for the festival.”

“Thank you,” Miguel said.

Mr. Henderson stepped down from the truck. “Good luck. Your equipment looks very clean. That makes my job easy.”

He got into his silver car and drove away.

Ana sat down on the bench. She let out a long breath.

“We passed,” she said.

Miguel looked at the blue and white sign above the sink. It looked official. It made the truck feel like a real kitchen.

“One more step,” Miguel said.

He took the approved paper and placed it in the folder Camila had made.

“Let’s go buy some rice,” he said. “A lot of rice.”

Chapter 15 The Big Shopping Trip

The warehouse store was the biggest building Mateo had ever seen.

It was a sea of concrete and tall metal shelves. People pushed giant metal carts that looked like small beds. The air was cold and smelled like cardboard and frozen pizza.

Miguel pushed the cart. Ana walked beside him with a long list. Camila held her phone to add up the prices.

“We need fifty pounds of rice,” Ana said.

They found the rice in the back. The bags were huge. They were stacked on wooden pallets.

Miguel lifted a fifty-pound bag. He grunted and dropped it into the cart.

“Twenty-two dollars,” Camila said. She typed it into her phone.

“Next is the oil,” Ana said. “Two large containers.”

As they walked, Mateo pointed to a box of giant chocolate bars.

“Can we get these for the truck?” he asked.

“No,” Miguel said. “Only what is on the list.”

“But they are a good deal!” Mateo said.

“A good deal is only a good deal if you need it,” Ana said.

They moved to the meat section. The cold was even stronger here. Miguel and Ana looked at the large boxes of chicken. They checked the dates. They checked the price per pound.

“This one is cheaper,” Miguel said, pointing to a ten-pound bag.

Camila looked at the tag on the shelf.

“Actually, Dad,” she said. “The twenty-pound box is cheaper per pound. Look at the small numbers on the tag.”

Miguel looked closely. She was right. The big box cost more total, but each pound of chicken cost less.

“Good catch,” Miguel said. He put the twenty-pound box in the cart.

By the time they reached the front of the store, the cart was heavy. It held rice, beans, chicken, oil, onions, and three large boxes of paper plates—the strong ones Camila wanted.

They stood in the long line at the register.

Ana looked at the cart. Then she looked at the screen as the cashier scanned the items.

Forty-two dollars.

Eighty-six dollars.

One hundred and ten dollars.

The numbers went up fast. Ana's hand went to her purse. She thought about the envelope in the bedroom drawer. It was getting thinner.

"Two hundred and fourteen dollars," the cashier said.

Miguel swiped the card. He didn't look at the screen.

They pushed the heavy cart to the car. The sun was setting, and the parking lot was busy.

"That is a lot of food," Mateo said, looking at the bags in the trunk. "Are we going to cook all of it tonight?"

"Most of it," Ana said. "The festival starts tomorrow at noon. We have a long night ahead of us."

Camila looked at her phone.

"We are ten dollars over the budget," she said.

Miguel started the engine.

"Then we will have to sell ten dollars more," he said.

He pulled out of the parking lot. The car felt heavy with the weight of the supplies.

It was no longer just a list on a piece of paper. It was real food. And tomorrow, it had to become real money.

Chapter 16 The Long Night

The Rivera García kitchen did not feel like a home tonight. It felt like a factory.

The clock on the wall said 10:30 PM.

Ana stood at the counter. Her eyes were red from peeling twenty pounds of onions. Her hands were orange from the spices in the red sauce.

“Next bag,” she said.

Camila reached for another bag of onions. She was sitting at the small table with her history book open. She chopped an onion. Then she read a paragraph about the Civil War. Then she chopped another onion.

“You should go to bed,” Ana said. “You have school tomorrow.”

“I’m almost done with this chapter,” Camila said. “And you still have ten pounds of chicken to cut.”

Miguel came in from the backyard. He was carrying the large plastic bins for the truck. He looked at the mountain of food.

“The fridge is full,” he said. “I had to move the milk and the eggs to the small cooler.”

Miguel began to move the prepped food. This was a slow process. He had to make sure the containers were sealed tight. He had to make sure the meat stayed cold. If the food got warm, the health inspector would not let them sell it.

“Is the thermometer in the cooler?” Ana asked.

“Yes,” Miguel said. “It is forty degrees. It is safe.”

Camila looked up from her onion. “I thought we had to prep at the church kitchen. The commissary thing.”

“Pastor Elena said we can cook here,” Ana said. “We store and clean at the church. That is what the agreement covers.”

Camila shrugged and went back to chopping. Rules were rules, even when they did not entirely make sense.

In the living room, Sofía and Mateo were sitting on the floor. They were surrounded by white napkins. Their job was to fold each napkin and put it into a stack.

“I’ve folded a million,” Mateo groaned. He held up a napkin. His fingers were tired.

“You’ve folded fifty,” Sofía said. “Keep going. We need a thousand for the weekend.”

Mateo looked at the stack. It looked like a small white tower. He thought about the festival. He thought about the music and the people.

“Do you think Dylan will come?” he asked Sofía.

Sofía didn’t look up from her folding. “Who is Dylan?”

“A kid from my class,” Mateo said. “He says he likes tamales.”

“We aren’t making tamales,” Sofía said. “We are making tacos. Tell him to buy a taco.”

Mateo nodded. He liked that answer. He folded another napkin.

The house smelled like garlic, vinegar, and raw meat. It was a heavy smell. It moved into the bedrooms and the closets. It was the smell of hard work.

At midnight, Miguel turned off the big light in the kitchen.

Ana sat down at the table. She rubbed her sore shoulders.

“Is it enough?” she asked.

“It’s more than enough,” Miguel said.

“What if no one comes?”

Miguel sat beside her. He took her hand. Her skin felt rough from the salt and the water.

“We did the work,” he said. “Now we see.”

They sat in the quiet for a moment. They were too tired to talk, but they were too nervous to sleep.

Outside, the neighborhood was silent. The food truck sat under the streetlight, waiting. Its white paint looked silver in the dark.

“Five hours until the sun comes up,” Miguel said.

“Wake me at five,” Ana said.

They walked down the hall to bed. Camila’s light was still on under her door. The smell of the festival followed them into their dreams.

Chapter 17 Festival Morning

The alarm went off at five.

Ana was already awake. She had been staring at the ceiling for twenty minutes, running through the list in her head. Rice. Chicken. Sauce. Churro batter. Limes. Plates. Napkins. Change for the cash box. The propane tank.

She got up and walked to the kitchen.

Miguel was at the table with a cup of coffee. He looked like he had not slept much. His eyes were red and his shoulders were stiff.

“Good morning,” she said.

He nodded.

At six-thirty, Camila came into the kitchen dressed for the test. She wore a clean shirt and her hair was pulled back. She had a pencil case and her ID in her hand.

No one mentioned the argument from two weeks ago. But it was still in the room, the way a crack in a wall is still there even after you stop looking at it.

Camila stood near the door with her bag on her shoulder.

“The test starts at eight,” she said. “Regular time ends at twelve. My extra time goes until two.”

She said it like she was reading from a form. Facts, not feelings.

Ana nodded. “So we’ll see you when we see you.”

“I haven’t decided yet,” Camila said. “About the time.”

Miguel looked up from his coffee.

“Use your time,” he said. “All of it.”

Camila looked at him. She had expected him to say the opposite.

“The festival—” she began.

“The festival will still be there at two-thirty,” Miguel said. “The test won’t.”

Camila stood very still for a moment.

“Okay,” she said. But her voice was not sure.

She picked up her bag and walked out the front door. The morning was cool and gray. The truck sat at the curb with Sofia’s letters on the side. LA COCINA. The paint was bright against the dull white.

Camila looked at it for a moment. She thought about the line of people who would be there by noon. She thought about her mother working the window without her. She thought about the reading comprehension section, where the extra time mattered most — where a word she knew in

Spanish but not in English could cost her a question she deserved to get right.

Then she turned and walked toward the bus stop.

Inside, Miguel finished his coffee and stood.

“Let’s load the truck,” he said.

They moved the food in plastic bins. Ana checked the temperature of each container with the thermometer. Miguel carried the heavy ones. Sofía organized the serving station inside the truck. Mateo carried napkins in a paper bag that was almost as big as he was.

“Careful,” Ana said.

“I’m being careful,” Mateo said. The bag wobbled.

By eight o’clock the truck was loaded. The morning air smelled like dew and exhaust. Neighbors were starting to leave for work. Mrs. Jenkins waved from her porch.

“Good luck today!” she called.

“Thank you,” Ana called back.

Miguel climbed into the driver’s seat. He put the key in the ignition.

He turned it.

The engine made a short grinding sound. Then nothing.

Miguel tried again. The same sound. A rough, dry scrape, like metal dragging against metal.

He sat very still.

Ana was standing at the passenger door. She saw his face through the window.

“What happened?” she asked.

Miguel did not answer. He turned the key a third time. The engine groaned and stopped.

He got out of the truck. His hands were shaking, but only a little. He walked to the front and lifted the hood.

The battery was fine. He had replaced it himself. The cables were tight. He checked the oil. He checked the belts.

Everything looked right.

But the truck would not start.

Miguel put both hands on the edge of the engine compartment and leaned forward. He closed his eyes.

The festival started in four hours.

All the food was in the truck.

And the truck was not moving.

Chapter 18 The Breakdown

Miguel stood in front of the open hood and did not speak.

Ana watched him from the sidewalk. She knew this silence. It was not the silence of thinking. It was the silence of a man trying not to break.

Sofía and Mateo stood near the front steps. Mateo held the bag of napkins against his chest.

“Is it the battery?” Sofía asked.

“No,” Miguel said. His voice was flat.

He leaned into the engine compartment again. He touched the starter motor. He followed the wires with his fingers, one at a time, the way a doctor checks for a pulse.

Minutes passed.

Ana looked at the clock on her phone. 8:20.

She thought about calling Raúl. She thought about calling Pastor Elena. She thought about the rice and the chicken sitting in plastic bins inside a truck that could not move.

“Miguel,” she said.

He held up one hand. Not yet.

He crouched down and looked underneath the truck. He stood back up. He wiped his hands on his jeans and leaned into the engine again.

Then he stopped.

“There,” he said quietly.

He reached deep into the engine compartment. His arm disappeared past the elbow.

“What is it?” Ana asked.

“The wire on the solenoid,” he said. “It came loose. The starter motor is not getting power.”

“Can you fix it?”

Miguel pulled his hand back out. His fingers were black with grease.

“I need a wrench,” he said. “The small one. It’s in the toolbox inside the truck.”

“I’ll get it,” Sofía said. She was already moving.

She climbed into the truck and opened the metal toolbox Miguel kept under the counter. She found the small wrench and brought it back.

Miguel took it without looking. He leaned back into the engine.

For a long moment there was only the sound of metal turning against metal. Ana held her breath. Mateo held the napkins tighter.

Miguel stepped back.

“Try it,” he said.

Ana looked at him.

“Someone needs to turn the key,” he said.

Mateo dropped the napkins and ran to the driver’s side. He climbed up into the seat. His feet did not reach the pedals, but he did not need the pedals. He just needed the key.

“Ready?” he called.

“Turn it,” Miguel said.

Mateo turned the key.

The engine coughed once. Then it caught. The sound was rough at first, then steady, then smooth.

Mateo’s face broke into a grin so wide it pushed his cheeks up into his eyes.

“It works!” he shouted.

Miguel leaned against the front of the truck. He put his greasy hands on his knees and exhaled. The breath shook on the way out.

Ana walked to him and put her hand on his back.

“You found it,” she said.

“It was just a wire,” he said.

“It’s never just a wire,” Ana said.

Miguel straightened up. He looked at the engine one more time. Then he closed the hood.

His hands were still shaking. But his face was different now.

“Let’s go,” he said.

They pulled away from the curb at 8:45. Sofía sat in the back with the napkins. Mateo buckled his seatbelt and bounced in his seat.

The truck moved slowly through the neighborhood streets. The engine ran steady. La Cocina, painted in warm round letters on the side, caught the morning light.

Chapter 19 Working Together

The church parking lot was already busy when they arrived.

Volunteers were hanging streamers from the fence. A man was testing the speakers on a small stage near the back. Children ran between the folding tables.

Pastor Elena met them at the entrance.

She was a small woman with short gray hair and steady eyes. She wore a purple scarf over her shoulders.

“You made it,” she said.

“Almost didn’t,” Miguel said.

Pastor Elena smiled. “But you did. That’s what counts. Your spot is over there, near the big tree. I saved you the best one.”

Miguel backed the truck in. This time he did not adjust it twice. There was no time.

Ana opened the serving window. The air outside was warming up. She could smell the chicken and the rice and the sauce. She could smell the morning.

They set up fast.

Miguel connected the propane and lit the burners. Ana arranged the serving station. Sofía taped her large painted sign — the final version of La Cocina, with the open window and the steam — to the front of the truck below the serving window.

Mateo stationed himself at the end of what would become the line.

“I’m ready,” he announced.

“The festival doesn’t start for two hours,” Ana said.

“I’m ready early,” Mateo said.

The first hour was setup. The second hour was waiting.

Miguel checked the equipment three times. Ana reheated the rice and tasted the sauce. She added a little more lime. She always added a little more lime.

At 11:45, people began to gather.

The line formed slowly at first. Church members who recognized Ana from the test run. Neighbors who had followed the smell. A woman with a stroller who stopped and read the sign.

“La Cocina,” she said to her friend. “That means the kitchen.”

“I know what it means,” her friend said. “I took Spanish in high school.”

“Did you pass?”

“No. But I know cocina.”

By noon the line stretched past the folding tables.

Ana worked the window. Her hands moved with the rhythm she had always had. Rice, chicken, sauce, tortilla. Plate after plate. She did not need to measure. She did not need to think. Her hands knew.

Miguel managed the back of the truck. He refilled the rice. He watched the propane gauge. He pulled churros from the fryer and set them on a tray near the window. He kept the line moving.

Sofía collected money at the window. She made change quickly, the way she had practiced at home with coins from the jar.

Mateo greeted every single person.

“Welcome to La Cocina!” he said. “Everything is delicious and also very reasonably priced!”

An older woman laughed. “How old are you?”

“Eight,” Mateo said. “But I have a lot of experience.”

The first hour went well. Ana and Miguel found a rhythm. She called out what she needed. He had it ready. Plate, rice, chicken, sauce. Plate, rice, chicken, sauce. The line moved.

But by one o’clock, the line was not shrinking. It was growing.

People came from the stage area. People came from the street. A family with six children. A group of teenagers. Two men who had seen the

line from the sidewalk and crossed the parking lot to see what the food smelled like.

Raúl arrived with his wife just after one. He looked at the line and whistled.

“Mira eso,” he said. Look at that.

He did not get in line. He walked to the back of the truck and asked Miguel what needed doing. Miguel handed him a bin of dirty serving spoons.

“Wash these,” he said.

Raúl washed them without complaint.

Inside the truck, the rhythm began to slip.

Ana was taking orders and cooking at the same time. A woman at the window asked for three quesadillas. A man behind her wanted four tacos with no sauce. A third person changed their order after Ana had already started making it.

“Wait,” Ana said. “Which plate is this?”

Miguel held up a plate. “Burritos. No — this was the quesadilla.”

“The quesadilla was for the woman in the blue shirt,” Ana said.

“She already left the window.”

Ana looked out. The woman in the blue shirt was standing ten feet away, waiting. Next to her, a man with a beard was also waiting. He had been waiting for fifteen minutes.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I ordered before she did.”

Ana’s face flushed. Not from the heat this time.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I will get yours next.”

“You said that five minutes ago,” the man said. He was not yelling. But his voice was flat and tired, and that was almost worse.

Sofía looked up from the cash box. She could see the line stretching out. She could see faces that had been patient turning into faces that were not. She counted the people waiting. There were at least thirty.

She made change for the next customer. Her hands were steady, but her chest felt tight.

Mateo was at the front of the line. He had been greeting people all morning.

A woman near the middle of the line called out, “How much longer?”

Mateo looked at her. He opened his mouth.

“It won’t be long,” he said.

“You said that twenty minutes ago,” the woman said. She was not angry at Mateo. But she was not smiling at him either.

Mateo closed his mouth. He stepped back. He did not greet the next person in line.

Inside the truck, Ana called to Miguel.

“I need more tortillas.”

Miguel opened the cooler. He moved the containers. He looked in the second bin.

“Ana,” he said.

She turned from the window.

“We’re out,” he said.

Ana stared at him.

“Out of tortillas?”

“The quesadillas,” Miguel said. “They used more than we planned. People kept ordering quesadillas.”

Ana looked at the stack of orders she had been trying to keep in her head. At least six of them were quesadillas.

She put both hands on the counter. The truck felt very small.

“What do we do?” she asked.

Miguel did not answer. He was looking at the empty bin the way he had looked at the truck engine that morning. Like a man searching for a part that was not there.

Mrs. Jenkins arrived with her husband and two friends.

“I told you,” she said to them. “Best food in the neighborhood.”

“We haven’t tried it yet,” her husband said.

“Trust me,” Mrs. Jenkins said.

They got in line. The line was now past the folding tables and halfway to the stage.

Mr. Lee came at two. He was wearing a clean shirt and carrying a small bag.

He waited in line like everyone else. When he reached the window, Ana recognized him.

“Mr. Lee,” she said. “From the market.”

“I heard about this from Camila,” he said. “She is a good worker. I wanted to taste the food.”

Ana served him a plate. She tried to smile, but it came out tired.

Mr. Lee looked at her carefully. He had run a store for twenty years. He knew what a person looked like when they were past their limit.

“The chicken is very good,” he said. “The sauce especially.”

He sat at a folding table and ate slowly.

Inside the truck, Miguel and Ana were not speaking much now. They moved around each other in the narrow space, reaching over and under, trying to keep up. But the orders were mixed. Ana had three plates she

was not sure about. A man came back to the window and said he had gotten the wrong food. He was polite, but his children were hungry and they had been waiting.

“I’m sorry,” Ana said again. She took the plate back and started over.

Miguel watched her face. He saw the tightness around her eyes. He saw her hands pause over the stove, just for a second, as if she had forgotten what she was making.

He wanted to help. But he did not know which plate came next either.

At 2:20, Camila appeared at the edge of the parking lot.

She was carrying her pencil case and her bag. Her face looked tired. She had used every minute. Six hours in a plastic chair, reading passages twice, checking her answers, making sure the English did not steal points from what she knew.

She stood for a moment and looked at the line. It was not orderly. People were clustered near the window. Some were holding money. Some were waiting for food they had already paid for. Others had just arrived and did not know where to stand.

Her mother was at the serving window, moving fast but making mistakes. Her father was behind her, trying to keep up. Sofía was at the cash box, overwhelmed. Mateo was sitting on a folding chair near the front of the line, quiet and small.

This was not what she had expected.

A thought moved through her, quick and sharp: *If I had been here.*

She did not finish it. She did not need to. She could see exactly where she would have been standing, exactly what she would have been doing. The line would have moved. The orders would not have piled up. Her mother's eyes would not look like that.

She had made the right choice. She knew that. The test mattered. The extra time mattered.

But right choices could still leave a mark.

She set her bag down near the truck's back step and climbed inside.

"What do you need?" she asked.

Ana looked at her. Her face was red from the heat, and her eyes were bright with something close to tears.

"I don't know what order I'm on," Ana said.

Camila looked at the counter. There were five plates in various states. Two looked finished. Three did not.

She looked out the window. People were waiting. Some had paid. Some had not.

"Okay," Camila said. She said it the way she said it at the market register when the line backed up on a Saturday afternoon. Calm. Clear.

She leaned out the serving window.

“Excuse me,” she called. Her voice was louder than Ana expected. “If you have already ordered and paid, please stand to the left of the window. If you have not ordered yet, please form a line to the right. We will get to everyone.”

People looked at her. Then they looked at each other. Then they moved.

It was not instant. But it was a start.

Camila turned back to Ana.

“Tell me what’s on each plate,” she said.

Ana pointed. “This one is four tacos, no sauce. This one is two quesadillas. This one — I don’t remember.”

“We’ll ask,” Camila said. She leaned out again. “Who ordered two quesadillas?”

A hand went up.

“Coming right now,” Camila said. She handed the plate to the woman.

She worked through the backlog one plate at a time. She asked who was next. She repeated each order back. She wrote the orders on napkins with a pen from her bag and lined them up on the counter so Ana could work through them in order.

“Just like the register,” she said to herself. But she said it loud enough for her mother to hear.

Ana looked at the row of napkins. Each one had an order written in Camila's neat block letters. The tightness in her face loosened, just slightly.

Miguel glanced at Camila. She glanced back.

"You used your time," he said quietly. It was not a question.

Camila nodded.

Something passed between them. Small and quiet, like a wire reconnected.

Then Sofía appeared at the back door of the truck.

"We have a problem," she said.

"What now?" Miguel asked.

"We're out of tortillas. But people keep ordering quesadillas."

"I know," Ana said. "We ran out thirty minutes ago. I've been telling people."

"But we have taco shells," Sofía said. "Two full boxes. Nobody's been ordering tacos because quesadillas are cheaper."

Everyone looked at her.

"So we change the sign," Sofía said. She said it like it was obvious. Because to her, it was.

Ana looked at Miguel. Miguel looked at Camila.

“Special on tacos,” Camila said. “Half price. Move what we have.”

“Will people want that?” Ana asked.

“They’re hungry,” Camila said. “They’ll want it.”

Sofía was already outside. She took the menu sign down from the window and flipped it over. On the blank side, she wrote in large letters with a marker from her bag:

SPECIAL — TACOS \$3 CHICKEN + RICE + ANA’S FAMOUS
SAUCE

She taped it to the window.

The next person in line read it.

“What happened to quesadillas?” he asked.

“Sold out,” Camila said. “But the tacos are the same chicken, same sauce. And they’re half price.”

The man shrugged. “I’ll take three.”

The line moved again.

Chapter 20 Sold Out

The last two hours were not smooth. But they were better.

Camila worked the window. She took orders, called them back, and lined up napkins on the counter. Ana cooked. Miguel kept the supplies moving. Sofia handled the money and watched the line.

Mateo was still sitting in the folding chair.

Camila noticed him during a gap between customers. He was not greeting anyone. He was sitting with his hands in his lap, looking at the ground.

She leaned out the window.

“Mateo,” she said. “Come here.”

He walked over slowly.

“What happened?” she asked.

He shrugged. “A lady got mad about waiting. She wasn’t mad at me. But she wasn’t nice.”

Camila looked at him.

“You know what you’re good at?” she said.

He didn’t answer.

“You’re good at making people feel welcome. That’s a real thing. Not everyone can do it.”

Mateo looked up at her.

“But some people are just in a bad mood,” Camila said. “And that’s not about you.”

Mateo thought about this.

“Can I go back?” he asked.

“Yes,” Camila said. “Go.”

Mateo walked to the front of the line. He stood up straight.

The next person approached. An older man with a cane.

“Welcome to La Cocina,” Mateo said. His voice was quieter than before. But it was steady.

The man smiled. “Thank you, young man.”

Mateo smiled back.

Around three o’clock, Dylan appeared at the edge of the parking lot. He was with a woman who might have been his mother. They were looking at the line.

Mateo saw him. He walked over.

“Hey,” he said.

Dylan looked at him. “Hey. Is this your family’s truck?”

“Yeah,” Mateo said.

“I wanted tamales,” Dylan said.

“We don’t have tamales,” Mateo said. “But we have tacos. They’re on special. And churros.”

Dylan looked at his mother. She nodded.

They got in line.

When they reached the window, Mateo did not point Dylan toward his mother. Ana was deep inside the truck, working the stove. Instead, he pointed to Camila.

“This is my sister,” he said.

Camila looked at Dylan. Then she looked at Mateo. She understood.

“Hey,” she said to Dylan. “What can I get you?”

“Two tacos, please,” Dylan said.

Camila called the order back to Ana. She handed Dylan his plate when it was ready.

Dylan took a bite. His eyes went wide.

“These are really good,” he said.

Mateo smiled. “I know.”

Dylan looked at Camila. “Your family’s food is awesome.”

“Thank you,” Camila said. Then she looked at Mateo. “He’s the one who invited you. Thank him.”

Dylan turned to Mateo. “Thanks, man.”

“You’re welcome,” Mateo said.

He walked Dylan and his mother to a folding table. Then he came back to the line.

By three-thirty, the rice was gone. Then the chicken. Then the sauce. Then the last of the churros.

Ana leaned out the window.

“That’s it,” she said to the last few people in line. “We are sold out. I’m sorry.”

A man at the back of the line groaned. “Already?”

“Come back next time,” Mateo said from his position near the front. His voice was strong again.

The man laughed. “Next time? When is next time?”

Mateo looked at Camila. Not his mother. Camila.

Camila looked at Ana.

Ana paused.

“We’ll let you know,” she said.

Miguel turned off the burners. The truck went quiet for the first time in hours. He stood in the narrow space and looked at the empty containers. Every one of them was scraped clean. The row of order napkins on the counter — Camila’s system — was crumpled and stained with sauce. He gathered them into a pile and set them aside.

Ana sat down on the back step. Her apron was covered in sauce. Her hair had come loose from its tie.

Camila sat beside her.

They did not speak for a moment. They just sat.

“I’m sorry about the orders,” Ana said quietly. “It got away from me.”

“It got away from everyone,” Camila said. “There were too many people.”

“That’s a good problem,” Ana said.

“It’s still a problem,” Camila said. But she leaned her shoulder against her mother’s, just for a second.

The festival music played from the stage across the parking lot. Children ran between the tables. The afternoon sun was warm.

Pastor Elena walked over with a cup of water and handed it to Ana.

“You fed the whole festival,” she said.

“Not the whole festival,” Ana said.

“Close enough,” Pastor Elena said. She squeezed Ana’s shoulder and walked back toward the stage.

Sofía came around the side of the truck. She had her sketchbook in her hand.

“I drew the line,” she said. “While people were waiting. I drew the line of people.”

She showed them. The drawing was simple but alive. Faces and hats and children on shoulders. A woman with a stroller. A man with a cane. At the center of the drawing was the truck, with its serving window open and steam rising from inside. And in the window, two figures — one tall, one shorter — working side by side.

Miguel looked at it for a long time.

“That’s good,” he said. “That’s really good.”

Sofía held the drawing against her chest. She thought about the one she had drawn the night of the argument. Three figures. One in the window. One near the door. One standing off to the side, watching.

This drawing was different. No one was off to the side.

The parking lot was starting to empty. The streamers moved in the late afternoon breeze. The smell of food still hung in the air.

It had been a long day. Longer and harder and messier than any of them had imagined.

But it had been theirs.

Chapter 21 Counting the Money

They counted the money at the kitchen table that night.

No one had changed clothes. Ana still wore her apron. Miguel's shirt was stained with grease. Camila had sauce on her sneakers. Mateo had fallen asleep on the couch twenty minutes after they got home, his shoes still on.

Sofía was the one who woke him.

"Come on," she said. "We're counting."

Mateo stumbled to the table and sat with his head on his arms.

Ana placed the cash box in the center of the table. She opened it.

Inside were bills and coins. Ones and fives and tens. A few twenties. A handful of quarters.

Miguel watched while Ana sorted.

She made piles. Ones in one stack. Fives in another. Tens. Twenties. She counted each pile twice.

Camila counted the coins.

The room was quiet except for the soft sound of paper and metal.

Ana wrote the number on a piece of paper and pushed it to the center of the table.

Everyone looked.

Eight hundred and forty-two dollars.

Mateo sat up. "Is that a lot?"

No one answered right away.

Miguel picked up the paper.

Eight hundred and forty-two dollars. For one day. For the mixed-up orders and the tortilla crisis and the half-price tacos and the man who waited twenty minutes for the wrong plate.

It was real. It was less than it could have been if they had not lost control in the middle. But it was more than nothing.

And it was not a fortune.

Ana opened her notebook. She had the list of expenses written neatly on the first page. She went through them one at a time.

- The truck: four thousand five hundred dollars.
- The battery and belt: two hundred and eighty dollars.
- Insurance (first month): one hundred and ten dollars.
- Permit fees: one hundred and seventy-five dollars.

- Food safety course: forty-five dollars.
- The used fryer: three hundred dollars.
- Supplies for the festival: two hundred and fourteen dollars.
- Paper plates, napkins, and cups: sixty-one dollars.
- Propane refill: thirty-two dollars.

She underlined the total.

Five thousand seven hundred and seventeen dollars.

Miguel looked at the number. Then he looked at the eight hundred and forty-two.

“So we are still behind,” he said.

“Yes,” Ana said. “By a lot.”

Camila leaned forward. “But that’s with everything going wrong in the middle. We lost time on the mixed-up orders. The half-price tacos cut our margin. If we have a system next time—”

She stopped herself. She had said *next time* without meaning to.

Miguel looked at her. He did not say anything. But something in his face shifted.

“If we do two events a month,” Camila continued, more carefully now, “and we have a real ordering system, and we plan the menu so we don’t run out of the wrong thing—”

“We’d need more permits,” Ana said. “Weekly vendor permits are different from festival permits.”

“I know,” Camila said. “But it’s possible. If we do it right.”

Sofía looked at the piles of money on the table.

“People liked the food,” she said. “Three people asked for a business card.”

“We don’t have a business card,” Miguel said.

“I know,” Sofía said. “I told them to follow us on the internet. We don’t have that either. But we should.”

Mateo put his head back on his arms.

“I told fourteen people to come back next time,” he mumbled.

Ana smiled. She looked at the two numbers on the paper. The big one and the small one. The distance between them was real. But the small one existed. Yesterday it had been zero.

“It’s a start,” she said.

Miguel leaned back in his chair. He looked at the cash box. He looked at his family around the table.

A start. Not a success. Not yet.

But the food was gone. The people had come. The truck had broken and been fixed and lost its rhythm and found it again. And they were all still here at the table.

“We should sleep,” Ana said.

No one moved right away.

The kitchen was warm. The smell of the festival was still in their clothes. The money sat on the table between them, real and solid and not enough and more than nothing.

Miguel reached over and closed the cash box.

“Tomorrow we rest,” he said. “Monday we think.”

They went to bed. The house settled into quiet.

Outside, the truck sat under the streetlight. La Cocina. The letters glowed faintly in the dark. The serving window was closed. The counters were clean.

It looked like what it was: a beginning.

Chapter 22 Quiet Future

Miguel found Camila on the front steps on Sunday morning.

She was sitting with a cup of coffee. It surprised him. She did not usually drink coffee.

“Since when?” he asked, nodding at the cup.

“Since yesterday,” she said. “I think I earned it.”

He sat beside her.

The street was quiet. The truck was parked at the curb, right where it always was. The morning light was soft.

They sat without speaking for a while.

“How was the test?” Miguel asked.

“Hard,” Camila said. “But I used all my time. I checked everything twice.” She paused. “I think I did okay.”

“Good,” Miguel said. “I’m glad you stayed.”

She took a sip of coffee. She made a face. “This is bitter.”

“Add sugar.”

“I don’t want sugar. I want to like it without sugar.”

Miguel smiled a little. “That takes time.”

They were quiet again.

Miguel looked at the truck. The paint was still dull. The rust was still there. But Sofia’s letters on the side caught the light.

“I made you a promise,” he said.

Camila looked at him.

“I said we would sit down after the festival. All of us. And talk about what comes next.”

“I remember,” Camila said.

“I want to keep that promise.”

She nodded slowly.

“Okay,” she said.

That evening, they sat around the kitchen table. All five of them. Mateo had been told this was an important meeting, and he sat with his hands folded like he had seen adults do.

Ana placed the notebook in the center of the table. The numbers were inside. The expenses. The earnings. The distance between them.

“Here’s where we are,” she said. She went through the numbers simply. What they had spent. What they had earned. What was left.

“We are not out of money,” she said. “But we are close to it. If we want to do this again, we need to be careful.”

Miguel spoke next.

“I want to keep going,” he said. “But not the way we did it before. Not without talking. Not without listening.”

He looked at Camila.

“You said you didn’t get to vote,” he said. “So now we vote. Everyone.”

Camila sat up a little straighter.

“What are we voting on?” she asked.

“Whether we try again,” Ana said. “Another event. Maybe two. Small ones. And after each one, we sit down again and decide if we keep going.”

“What about the permits?” Camila asked.

“I’ll handle the permits,” Ana said. “I know the steps now.”

“What about my schedule?” Camila said. “I can’t miss work every weekend. And I have the real SAT in the fall.”

Miguel nodded. “We plan around your schedule. Not the other way around.”

Camila looked at him carefully.

“You mean that?” she said.

“I mean that,” he said.

Sofía raised her hand.

“We need a website,” she said. “And business cards. I can design them.”

“How much do business cards cost?” Ana asked.

“I don’t know,” Sofía said. “But I can find out.”

Mateo raised his hand too, though no one had asked him to.

“I think we should also get a tip jar,” he said. “People kept trying to give me extra money and I didn’t know where to put it.”

Ana looked at Miguel. Miguel looked at Ana.

“A tip jar,” Ana said. “That’s not a bad idea.”

“I’m full of good ideas,” Mateo said.

Camila leaned forward.

“I vote yes,” she said. “But with conditions.”

“What conditions?” Miguel asked.

“One: we don’t do an event on any weekend I have a test. Two: we keep a budget, and if we go over, we stop and talk before we spend more. Three: I get to manage the money.”

Ana raised an eyebrow. “You want to manage the money?”

“I’m already adding up the receipts,” Camila said. She looked at her mother, then her father. “Mamá makes the food. Papá makes sure we get there. I do the numbers. Let me do what I’m good at.”

Miguel felt something shift in his chest. It was not pride exactly. It was something closer to respect. The kind you feel when someone surprises you by becoming more than you expected.

“Deal,” he said.

They went around the table.

Sofía voted yes. She wanted to make business cards and maybe a small menu board with lights.

Mateo voted yes. He wanted to be in charge of greeting and also of testing all new menu items.

Ana voted yes. She had already started a new list on the back page of her notebook.

Miguel voted last.

He looked at the table. At the notebook. At the cash box on the counter. At the photo on the wall — the one from Mexico, the one of the old shop with his name above the door.

He thought about the serving window. About the line of people. About the sound of the engine catching that morning after the wire was fixed.

He thought about the warehouse. He would go back there tomorrow. The long rows of boxes. The heavy days. That had not changed.

But something else had.

“Yes,” he said.

Ana wrote it down. Five votes. Five yeses.

It was not a business plan. It was not a loan or a lease or a guarantee. It was a family sitting at a kitchen table, deciding to try again.

That was enough for now.

Camila stood and carried her coffee cup to the sink. She rinsed it out carefully.

“I need to study,” she said.

She walked down the hall. This time her door stayed open.

Miguel looked at Ana.

“One more event,” he said.

“One more,” she agreed.

But they both knew, the same way they had known the night they first talked about the truck, that one more was how everything continued.

Outside, the evening was settling in. The streetlight clicked on. The truck sat beneath it, still and quiet.

La Cocina.

The kitchen.

Not a restaurant. Not a shop. Not yet.

But a beginning that had earned its name.

Author's Note

This book was developed and written in “collaboration” with Anthropic’s Claude Large Language Model (LLM) AI chatbot. I brainstormed and tweaked ideas with assistance from Claude. Claude and I each wrote parts of the story, and I read and edited the entire book. I also gave the book to Google Gemini and OpenAI’s ChatGPT for feedback.

About the Author

Chris Spackman has worked in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) since 1995 when he went to Japan on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. While in Japan, Chris taught at high school, 50+ elementary schools, and did some work with adult *eikawa*. He has been teaching k-13 in Columbus, Ohio since 2010, and he added adult ESL classes at Columbus State Community College to his workweek in 2015. When he is not working or devouring his wonderful wife's cooking, Chris is probably in front of his computer, creating with the latest cool tech tools.

Chris also wrote *Every Teacher's Guide to Technology*, *Every Sentient Being's Guide to Password Security*, and several short stories. His works can be found at <https://www.chrisspackman.com>, <https://www.osugisakae.com>, and <https://spackman-chris.neocities.com>.

Copyright and Copyleft

In the United States of America, *La Cocina* is licensed under the Creative Commons 0 Public Domain license. In the U.S.A. this is required because this work was written with the assistance and input of non-human tools.

Outside of the U.S.A., *La Cocina* is © 2026 by Chris Spackman and is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

You are free to:

Share copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

Adapt remix, transform, and build upon the material

Under the following terms:

Attribution You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.

NonCommercial You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

ShareAlike If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license.

Full license text: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>