

Ashes to Aroma

Most people inherit money or property. Me? I got a cookbook—and a legacy that feels too heavy to carry. Don't get me wrong, I love my Mamma. She was my last living family member. But what she left me wasn't just recipes—it was her soul, etched into splattered, tomato-stained pages. Every meal she made had a magic that brought people flocking to our kitchen.

In my tiny apartment, I stared at the worn cookbook sitting on the coffee table. Memories came flooding back—the clatter of spoons, her laughter as we rolled dough together. Even in those dark days, when her medical bills piled up and the doctors said *stage four lung cancer*, she baked pizza. When we found out, it was too late. She had weeks left to live. Baking pizza was her way of fighting back, of holding us together. She'd saved me so many times with a slice of her love. I only wish I could've saved her.

Two months ago:

"Mamma...let's bake pizza." We both knew she had days left, but instead of saying goodbye, I asked her to bake with me. The aroma of pizza—the smell of home—was the only thing that could still make her smile.

"Alright, piccolo," she said, tying her apron like she always did. "But first, I need to tell you something." Her voice was gentle but steady. "I signed you up for culinary school. You'll need to submit a dish, and I know you'll get in."

"Mamma, no! That's a lot of money. All your savings! I probably won't even get in!" She just laughed, shaking her head.

"Oh, piccolo, I didn't waste a cent. You just have to try your best."

Now:

The competition is tomorrow, and I know exactly what I'll make—pizza. I grab her cookbook, flipping through the pages she loved so much. The stains, the scribbled notes, the worn edges—they're all pieces of her. As I leaf through it, warmth fills me. For the first time in months, I smile. Maybe I have a chance. A chance as small as the dot on an "i," but still—a chance.

I head inside the kitchen. I get a tomato and a bag of flour, and get to work.

Today's the day. I put on my best shirt and pants, both from Target. Grabbing my mini pizza, packed in a plastic lunchbox, I take a deep breath and head to the bus stop. Nervousness creeps in, but I push it aside.

The venue is nothing like I expected. Mamma said it would feel warm and inviting, but it's pristine, almost clinical. No stains, no warmth—just tools that look like they belong in a science lab. Maybe one day, I'll use tools like these.

The judges take their seats, calling us to place our dishes on the table. There are around forty other competitors, most surrounded by parents in expensive suits, snapping photos and cheering. I try not to let the absence of my own family sting—Mamma's still here, in every step I take.

When my name is called. I walk up, clutching my lunchbox like it's my lifeline. Giggles ripple through the room, but I ignore them. The first judge takes a bite, nods, and jots something down. The second judge smiles after tasting it. The third judge, with ocean-blue hair, pauses. Her expression is unreadable—but is that a smile? My heart races, a flicker of hope catching flame.

We wait for the results. I pretend to tie my shoelace near the judges' door, hoping to catch a word or two, but all I hear are muffled voices. With nothing left to do, I head back to the waiting area, feeling the tension build.

The judges step out, and the stout one speaks. "Five of you got in. Everyone did a fantastic job, so don't be discouraged if you're not selected."

"Number one: Elizabeth Hayves." Cheers erupt to my right. "Number two: Jacks Collins." A boy rolls his eyes as his parents snap photos, his smile painfully fake. "Number three: Matteo Romano."

That's me. My breath catches, and laughter bubbles out as tears prick my eyes. No way. No way. No way.

Mamma's pizza saved me again.