

WITH THE FIRE ON HIGH



ALSO BY ELIZABETH ACEVEDO

The Poet X

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ACEVEDO

HARPER **TEEN**

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First Edition

*For the women in my family,
who have gathered me when I needed gathering
and given me a launchpad when I needed to dream.*



EMONI'S

*"When Life Gives You Lemons,
Make Lemon Verbena Tembleque"*

RECIPE



Serves: Your heart when you are missing someone you love.

Ingredients:

Two cans of coconut milk
Handful of white sugar
Four shakes of cornstarch
Pinch of salt
Bunch of lemon verbena leaves
Bunch of vanilla beans
Cinnamon, enough to garnish

Directions:

1. In a saucepan, heat coconut milk until it comes to a boil.
Muddle a bunch of lemon verbena leaves and vanilla

- beans and add to the heated coconut milk. Let steep.
2. After fifteen minutes, mix the infused coconut milk, salt, sugar, and cornstarch. Stir the mixture until the cornstarch is completely dissolved. Let the combined ingredients come to a boil and keep stirring until the mixture begins getting pudding thick.
 3. Pour into a big cereal bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Place in the refrigerator for five hours.
 4. After removing the mixture from the cereal bowl mold, sprinkle with cinnamon.

*Best eaten cold while daydreaming about palm trees and listening to an Héctor Lavoe classic.



Day One

Babygirl doesn't even cry when I suck my teeth and undo her braid for the fourth time. If anything, I'm the one on the verge of tears, since at this rate we're both going to be late.

"Babygirl, I'm sorry. I know it hurts. Mommy just doesn't want you looking a hot mess."

She seems unfazed by my apology, probably because thing (1) I'm not braiding tight enough to actually hurt her (which is why her hair is all loosey-lopsided!), and thing (2) Babygirl is watching *Moana*. And she loves *Moana*. So long as I let her watch *Moana* she'll let me play with her hair till kingdom come. Thank goodness Angelica lets me use her Netflix account. I lean a little closer to the edge of the sofa so I can snatch up the baby hairs at the front of her head. This is the hardest part, and I have to start the

braid tight and small to get it right.

“Emoni, vete. It’s time for you to head out. I’ll fix her hair.”

I don’t even look over at ’Buela standing by the staircase that leads to the two bedrooms upstairs. “I got it, ’Buela. I’m almost done.”

“You’re going to be late for school.”

“I know, but . . .” I trail off and it turns out I don’t have to say it, because in her way ’Buela always understands.

She walks over and picks up the comb from where I set it on the couch. “You wish you could be the one taking her.”

I nod and bite my bottom lip. I worked so hard to get Babygirl into a good daycare, and despite a long wait list I kept calling and stopping by Mamá Clara’s, the woman who runs the childcare, until she snuck us into an opening. Now that Babygirl is actually going I’m freaking out. In her entire two years on earth, Babygirl has never not been with family. I braid to the very tip of her hair. The design is simple, some straight backs with a pink hair tie at the end that matches Babygirl’s outfit: little white collared shirt and pink pullover. She looks adorable. I wasn’t able to buy her more than three new outfits for daycare, but I’m glad I splurged on this one.

I pull Babygirl’s chair around so we are face-to-face, but I catch her trying to sneak a peek at *Moana* from the corner of her eye. Even though my chest is tight, I giggle. Babygirl might still be young, but she’s also learning to be real slick.

“Babygirl, Mommy needs to go to school. You make sure you’re nice to the other kids and that you pay attention to Mamá Clara so you learn a lot, okay?” Babygirl nods as if I just gave her the most serious Jada Pinkett Smith success speech. I hug her to my stomach, making sure not to nuzzle her too tight and fuzz up the braids I spent an hour doing. With a final kiss on her forehead, I take a deep breath and grab my book bag off the sofa, making sure to wipe down the plastic cover so ’Buela doesn’t get annoyed with me.

“’Buela, don’t forget her snacks. Mamá Clara said we need to supply them every day. Oh, and her juice! You know she gets fussy.” As I walk past ’Buela, I lean in real hush-hush. “And I also packed a little bottle of water. I know she doesn’t like it as much, but I don’t want her only drinking sugary stuff, you know?”

’Buela looks like she’s trying to swallow a smile as she puts a soft hand on my back and guides me toward the front door.

“Look at you trying to give me lessons on parenting. Nena, please! Like I didn’t raise you! And your father.” ’Buela gives my back a squeeze, smooths the hair bunned up high on my head. “She’s going to be fine, Emoni. You make sure that *you* have a good first day of school. Be nice to the other kids. Learn a lot.”

I lean against her for a quick second and inhale her signature vanilla scent. “Bendición, ’Buela.”

“Que Dios te bendiga, nena.” She swats me on the booty and opens the front door. The sounds of West Allegheny Avenue rush

in to greet me: cars honking, buses screeching to a stop, rapid Spanglish yelled from the corners as people greet one another, and mothers calling out last-minute instructions to their kids from open windows. The door closes behind me and for a second my breath catches in sync with the lock. Every simple love in my life is behind this one wooden door. I press my ear against it and hear a clap of hands, then 'Buela says in a high, cheery voice, "Okay, Baby Emma! Today you're going to be a big girl!"

I pull the straps of my backpack tighter. Give myself that same pep talk as I race down the stairs: Okay, Emoni. Today? Time to be a big girl.



Emma

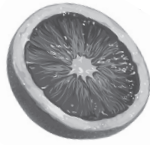
I wanted to give Babygirl a nice name. The kind of name that doesn't tell you too much before you meet her, the way mine does. Because nobody ever met a white girl named Emoni, and as soon as they see my name on a résumé or college application they think they know exactly what kind of girl they getting. They know way more about me than they need to know, and shit—I mean, *shoot*—information ain't free, so my daughter's name isn't going to tell anybody any information they didn't earn. That's why I fought Tyrone tooth and nail to name her Emma.

"You just want her name to have the same letters as yours."
Tyrone is a whiner.

"No. I want her name to sound less like either of ours," I said, and I don't remember if I kissed Babygirl's infant check or not.

But I know in that moment I felt this huge emotion; I wanted to do whatever I could to give my daughter the best opportunity in the world. And although our names do have similar letters, mine is full of silverware-sharp sounds: *E-Mah-Nee*. Hers is soft, rolls off the tongue like a half-dreamed murmur.

Anyhow, Tyrone was late on the day I filled out the birth certificate, so Emma it was. I know a name alone can't guarantee new opportunities, but at the very least it'll give her a chance to get in the room, to let other people realize she's someone they want to learn more about.



Sister Friends

Angelica waits on the corner for me the way she has since elementary school. Her long dark hair has streaks the same bright red as her lipstick. She shuffles from foot to foot in the tightest leggings I have ever seen on a body.

I stop halfway to her and pretend to do a double take. “Girl, you about to give these boys a show! And it’s only the first day,” I say as she swoops her arm through mine and we walk in the direction of the bus stop.

“Girl, you know I ain’t concerned with those boys. The ladies, on the other hand? I was social-media creeping and the summer did wonders for a lot of these jawns!”

I laugh and shake my head. “Does Laura know what she’s gotten herself into?”

Angelica smiles and for a second she looks like the angel she's named after. "Aww, my boo knows I only look and don't touch. I just want her to know I can leave if I want to. I got options!"

Angelica officially came out last year and once she'd dusted the closet lint off her Air Maxes, she never looked back. A couple of months after coming out at home and at school, she met Laura at a graphic design workshop held for teens at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Her girl Laura is built like the Vikings she says she's descended from: tall, thick-shouldered, and with an artist's gentle hands that I knew would take care of my best friend's heart.

"Man, whatever. I see all your posts about Laura. If you and that girl take another cutesy kissy picture, I'm going to delete my account. Actually, I'm going to hack in and delete yours!"

"Don't hate, Emoni. Is Tyrone still being a dick?"

I swat her on the arm. "This is why I don't let you around Babygirl; you have such a potty mouth."

"And you don't?" She gives me one of her pursed-lips looks.

"Yes, but I picked it up from *you*. And I've been working on it." I accidentally slipped in front of Babygirl a few weeks ago and almost died when I heard her saying "sh-sh-sh" as if practicing the word. I've cut out my cursing since.

"How is my niece? I haven't seen her since . . . when? Saturday?" We laugh. Despite her potty mouth, Angelica is great with Babygirl and always comes in clutch when either 'Buela or I can't watch her. Now that Babygirl's two, 'Buela insists that I have to take

on more responsibility in raising her. Which I don't mind, since Babygirl is the coolest kid on the block. It's just hard juggling work, her, and now the new school year, without 'Buela taking on the big role she took the first two years of her life. And although I don't say it, I don't have to; Tyrone *is* still being a dick—an ass—a *prick*. Who uses the word *prick*?

"Hello! Emoni, are you listening?" Angelica snaps her fingers in my face.

"Sorry . . . I spaced out for a second. What'd you say?"

Angelica sighs dramatically. Anytime Angelica sighs, it's dramatically. "You never listen to me anymore."

I unhook my arm from hers. "Get out of here with that mess. All I do is listen to you."

"I was asking about the dinner you left for me and Babygirl when I babysat. What'd you call it?"

"Pollo guisado—stewed chicken. Was it good?" Angelica's been eating at my house since we were little girls, but since I always tweak what I cook, it's never the same thing twice. "I thought I might have messed up when I added in the collards at the end. They weren't in the original recipe."

"It was *so* good. I was wondering if you could make it for Laura and me. Six-month anniversary coming up in a month! I was thinking we could do a romantic dinner at my house since my moms is going to be out of town."

"Dinner at home is never romantic, Gelly," I say. The bus pulls

up and we climb on with the rest of the people who, like us, are going to school and work near Yorktown and Fairmount and even farther south into Center City.

“Dinner at home will be romantic if it’s catered by you!” We find a place to stand and hold on to the straps above us as the bus begins the jerky ten-minute ride.

“Now I’m a caterer? You’re lucky I love you.”

“No. I’m lucky you love to cook, and you never turn down an opportunity to practice on your friends. Chef Emoni Santiago, next *Chopped* champion!”

I laugh and pull my phone out to take notes for Gelly’s dinner.



Magic

If you ask her to tell it, 'Buela starts with the same story.

I was a little older than Babygirl is now and always following 'Buela into the kitchen. I would sit at the kitchen table eating bootleg Cheerios or rice or something I could pick up with my fingers and shove into my mouth while she played El Gran Combo or Celia Cruz or La Lupe loud on her old-school radio, shimmying her hips while stirring a pot. She can't remember what made that day different—if my pops, Julio, had been late in arriving on one of his yearly visits from San Juan, or if it'd been a time she'd gotten reprimanded at work for taking too long on someone's measurements—but this particular day she didn't turn the radio on and she wasn't her usual self at the stove. At one point, she must have forgotten I was there because she threw the kitchen

rag down on the floor and left. She just walked straight out of the kitchen, crossed the living room, opened the front door, and was gone.

We can't agree on what it was she'd started cooking. She says it was a stew and nothing that would burn quick, but although my own memory is childhood-fuzzy, I remember it being a pot of moro—the rice and beans definitely something that would soak up water. 'Buela says she just stepped out onto the stoop to clear her head, and when she came back ten minutes later I had pulled the step stool to the stove, had a bunch of spices on the counter, and had my small arm halfway into the pot, stirring.

It goes without saying: She. Had A. Fit. Thought I had been about to burn myself, dinner, or worse, the house. ('Buela would argue that's not the right order of things, and I know she would have definitely been upset if I hurt myself, but if I burned the house? Girl, there's no coming back from that.) All that to say, nothing charred. In fact, when 'Buela tasted it (whatever "it" was) she says it was the best thing she'd ever eaten. How it made her whole day better, sweeter. Says a memory of Puerto Rico she hadn't thought about in years reached out like an island hammock and cradled her close. When she tells the story, it's always a different simile, but still sweet like that. All I know is she cried into her plate that night. And so at the age of four, I learned someone could cry from a happy memory.

Ever since then 'Buela is convinced I have magical hands when

it comes to cooking. And I don't know if I really have something special, or if her telling me I got something special has brain-washed me into believing it, but I do know I'm happier in the kitchen than anywhere else in the world. It's the one place I let go and only need to focus on the basics: taste, smell, texture, fusion, beauty.

And something special *does* happen when I'm cooking. It's like I can imagine a dish in my head and I just know that if I tweak this or mess with that, if I give it my special brand of sazón, I'll have made a dish that never existed before. Angelica thinks it's because we live in the hood, so we never have exactly the right ingredients—we gotta innovate, baby. My aunt Sarah says it's in our blood, an innate need to tell a story through food. 'Buela says it's definitely a blessing, magic. That my food doesn't just taste good, it *is* good—straight up bottled goodness that warms you and makes you feel better about your life. I think I just know that this herb with that veggie with that meat plus a dash of eso ahí will work.

And that if everything else goes wrong, a little squeeze of lime and a bottle of hot sauce ain't never hurt nobody.



The Authors

“All right, girlie, see you at lunch?” Angelica says as we stop outside my advisory. Advisory is Schomburg’s fancy name for homeroom.

“Yeah, save me a seat by the windows if you get there first. Oh, and grab me—”

“Some applesauce if they look like they’re running out. I know, Emoni.” Angelica smirks and walks away. And she does know me. I *love* the school applesauce—extra cinnamony.

Ms. Fuentes has been my advisor since my first day at Schomburg Charter, and her classroom has never changed. Lady still has the same motivational sign above her door: *You’re the Author of Your Own Life Story*. That sign has stared at us twenty advisory students from the time when we walked in as little-bitty freshmen. And even though it doesn’t make me roll my eyes anymore, I still

think it's corny. Nonetheless, Advisory is my favorite class period of the day, even though it's also the shortest; it's where Ms. Fuentes takes attendance, makes announcements, and gives us college prep and "character-building" exercises. But most important, it's the only class that has had the same students in it since freshman year. So we can talk here the way we can't in any other class.

Ms. Fuentes looks up from the classroom window shades to see me staring at her inspirational sign. "Ms. Santiago, how was your summer?" she says as she adjusts the shades so they let in more light. She does that, the Mr. This and Ms. That. Has since we walked into her classroom at fourteen. I sit at my desk in the second row, closest to the door. It was clutch when I was pregnant and had to rush to the bathroom every five minutes, and I haven't switched seats since.

I shrug. "Good. Got a job. Yours?"

Ms. Fuentes stops mid-shade-fussing to side-eye me. "You're always so loquacious. It's refreshing to have a student who believes in something other than monosyllables." But she's smiling. She's never said it, but I know I'm one of her favorites. Other students begin trickling into the room.

I smile back at her. "Aw, Ms. Fuentes, I see you worked on your sarcasm this summer. It's gotten so much better."

She stops messing with the windows and walks closer to my desk. She says softly, "How's Emma? Where'd you get a job?"

"She's real good, Ms. Fuentes. And the job is at the Burger

Joint.” Which, although it’s spelled all official, I still pronounce “jawn.” They think just because the Temple area has changed some that they gotta be fancy, but a burger jawn is a burger jawn regardless of how you spell it. “You know the spot near the university? I work there after school two days during the week and four hours every weekend.”

Her pretty, manicured nails tap on my desk and I imagine she’s tracing her finger along a mental map of North Philly.

“Yes, I think I’ve passed it before. Are you going to be able to juggle everything while also working there?”

I drop my eyes to my desk. “I should be okay. It’s not that many hours.”

“I see. . . . I know senior year is already stressful; try not to take on too much.”

And I don’t know what to say. It’s *not* that many hours; in fact, I wish it were more. The cash I get from those little checks helps with groceries, Babygirl’s expenses, and whatever ’Buela’s disability money doesn’t cover.

My silence doesn’t faze Ms. Fuentes at all. “I have a surprise for you when the bell rings—a class I think you would love.”

She squeezes my shoulder before giving her attention to Amir Robinson from the Strawberry Mansion area. “Welcome back, Mr. Robinson! Jesus, but you grew over the summer!” Ms. Fuentes walks away, calling out, “Ms. Connor, I dusted off your favorite seat in the back row just for you. . . .”



That Girl

Yup. I was *that* girl your moms warns you about being friends with. And warns you about becoming. Not even done with freshman year of high school and already a belly that extended past my toes. It's a good thing Babygirl was born in August since I probably would have failed out if I had to go to school the last month of my pregnancy. And the thing with being pregnant as a teen is that your body isn't the only thing that changes. It wasn't just that I always had to pee, or that my back always hurt. It wasn't only that my feet ached and I cooked the *funkiest* meals (they were still so good they'd make you twerk something, but definitely off the wall: macaroni jalapeño burgers and Caribbean jerk lamb tacos).

The biggest changes weren't the ones that happened to my body at all.

It was that 'Buela had to scrounge up more sewing jobs to supplement the money she gets from disability, that the viejos playing dominoes on the corner shook their heads when I walked past, that dudes on the train smirked at my swollen boobs but wouldn't give up their seats; that I had to take a million make-up tests for the days I was at doctor appointments or too morning-sick to make it to school.

When they first learned I was pregnant, Principal Holderness and the guidance counselor called a special meeting in the main office. 'Buela had to come into school and they called in Ms. Fuentes, too. Principal Holderness and the counselor offered to transfer me to an alternative high school program specifically for pregnant teens. But Ms. Fuentes didn't play that. She said switching me midyear into a new school would be a hard adjustment, and that since the program had a decelerated curriculum it would affect my graduating on time. I know she called 'Buela beforehand to discuss it, and they must have come up with a plan, because 'Buela was quick to chime in, saying my staying at Schomburg Charter would be "pivotal for my retention and matriculation." The sentence sounded as if she'd rehearsed it, circling her mouth over those words in the mirror to make sure she got it right, and I know it was Ms. Fuentes who had explained to 'Buela what that meeting would be about. I didn't even know what those words meant at the time, but I know now Ms. Fuentes was fighting to help keep me a regular kid for as long as possible.

I've always been small: physically petite, which made people think I had a small personality, too. And then, all of a sudden, I was a walking PSA: a bloated teen warning, taking up too much space and calling too much attention.