

HAZELNUT POWDER FOR GIORGIO

The timer had been ringing for a couple of minutes now, everything was under control. He finished mincing the lobster tails and seasoned them with pepper, oil and herbs. Added a slice of grated lime peel and began to form the burgers with the ramekins he had used earlier for the lobsters.

He looked up at the clock, eight o'clock, half an hour until Giorgio's arrival.

Finely chopped the celery with a mandoline, dipped it in iced water and went on to whip up the carrot puree for the broth, adding a sprinkling of chopped hazelnuts.

No use trying to call Alice: she must have been in the theater with Carla by then. The show was starting at 8:30, audience was strongly urged to take seats well in advance: studio theater has its own liturgies.

Giorgio and him had pulled out and decided on a boys' dinner instead.

He whipped the crescenza with cream, placed it in a piping bag and began to cook the mackerel on the skin. Giorgio would arrive on time, as always, with wine and dessert. Always been punctual, ever since high school. Punctual to school, to soccer, to the pizzeria with friends, to dates with girls.

He whipped the homemade bread with black olives and hazelnuts. Focused on the chickpea and thyme ricciarello, peeled the shallots and sautéed them in a pan with oil and carrots. When the mackerel had become crispy, he drained pasta and placed the carrot broth on the plate, adding a pinch of hazelnut powder.

They had been friends since high school, and for 28 years now he had shared a lifetime of experiences, achievements, and joys with Giorgio. Not all, of course, but a large part of them, an important, memorable part.

He had lost track of his other high school classmates after a few years, Giorgio remained. University together in Milan, a master's year in Valencia and back to Parma, always together. Job hunting easy for both of them, soccer and tennis in their spare time. Few, very few had been major quarrels.

The clock read 8:20. He put the carrot broth on the plate, laid the ricciarello rolled on itself, and placed the roasted mackerel on top. He seasoned with ground grapefruit pepper, extra virgin olive oil and an extra sprinkling of hazelnut powder.

Voilà, the chickpea ricciarello in carrot broth and roasted mackerel was ready. He moved on to the lobster burger with traminer jelly.

Not only pleasures, of course, they had also shared dramatic moments. When suddenly George, then twenty-seven, had suffered a very severe allergic reaction, an anaphylactic shock that had forced him into the hospital for two weeks.

Unable to breathe, his heart barely beating. He had been by his side in hospital during those moments, and also in the months that followed, when Giorgio had come home

more dead than alive.

He finished searing the hamburgers, laid them on the plate, the egg yolk on top of the crumbled bread, and the finely chopped jelly on top. Added the whole lobster claw, garnished with fig lettuce and again a final sprinkle of hazelnut powder. All finished and all set.

For what fucking reason had Giorgio decided that he could screw Alice?

Why had he chosen to took the piss out of him ... to jerk him around in such a gross way?

It had only happened once, ten years before. But why he had to find out from Alice, only now? Why only now? And why only from her?

Why not confess it openly to him sooner or later, maybe try some kind of too late apology? Anger, anger was building in him once again.

Eight-thirty, the clock said. The doorbell rang.

He glanced around the kitchen, everything in perfect order. One last thing to do.

He carefully hid the jar of hazelnuts at the bottom of the cupboard, behind the sugar and jams. Then took off his apron and went to the video intercom by the door.

On the small screen Giorgio's smiling face.

- Look who's here at last. My best friend has arrived. About time!