There is only one Olive Garden, but it has a thousand doors. Deborah had first found out by accident, when she was seventeen and trying to slip away from a date that had slowly gone scary. It had taken her a while to realize that the strip mall she had come out of wasn't the same as the one she had gone in through. The off-brand furniture store was oriented differently. The motel looked the same, but had a different sign out front. Only the road signs pointing to the highway gave it away that she was in Ohio now instead of Illinois.

She found her way back, eventually. It took a few tries. She didn't know where those doors opened to, not yet, and by the time she found the door she had first gone through it was dark. Her date had already left. Deborah drove home in a daze, lied to her parents, and didn't go back to an Olive Garden for a long time.

When she did go back, it felt like a wild adventure, another bad decision, like the other bad decisions she had made in the week since being laid off. She was in Los Angeles then, and the restaurant was nestled in one of the parts of the city that felt like a suburb but wasn't actually. The decor looked the same as she remembered. The wait staff looked prettier. The bread sticks had barely arrived before Deborah was up, walking past the restrooms, looking for another room, another door, not sure what she was hoping to find. All she found was a parking lot, drenched in unmistakeable Southern California light.

"You have to eat something."

"Excuse me?" Deborah spun around, flustered and closing the door behind her.

"You have to eat something first," the man repeated. He was older, with the ballcap and windbreaker over a tucked-in shirt that could have made him sixty or ninety. "Then you'll find what you're looking for."

Deborah looked away, the way she always did when she didn't want to engage, and walked back to her table. She ate a breadstick, and drank a glass of red wine that tasted tangy on her tongue as she picked at the chicken alfredo she ordered. But afterwards, once she had paid the bill, she couldn't help herself and went to look one more time. And that time, she took another turn into a second dining room she had missed before, and when she opened the door she saw the unmistakeable, flat vastness of a midwestern strip mall.

She got to know some of the regulars eventually. The old man was Charlie, who got a kick out of eating while looking out the window at all different states but always went back home afterwards. Bob and Jeanette were retired too, and stopped at the Olive Garden as they visited their grandchildren across the country. Britta was the youngest, younger than Deborah. She joked about having boyfriends in different cities, how they all thought she was weird for only wanting to eat at Olive Garden, but Deborah never followed her to see if it was true. None of them ever talked much. A nod of recognition, a few words of small talk before leaving through different doors.

It was a fun secret, for a while. Deborah loved the possibility of stepping through a door, eating a comfortable meal, and stepping out somewhere new. It meant she could visit her mother more easily. See old friends she had all but lost touch with. “I’m in town! Want to get dinner? How about Olive Garden? I know, I know, but I like it. Is that weird?”

But she never did it as often as she meant to. She could go any time, and there was always something else to do. She had a new job by then, and local friends who enjoyed exploring new restaurants with more interesting menus. Other times Deborah just didn’t have the energy for the large meal and little lies that always accompanied every one of her trips. A quiet evening at home offered more comfort than even the Olive Garden did.

She hadn’t been in over a year, when did finally did go back. Lena had taken a job in London and Brent and Yelena had a baby, and the quiet evenings at home had grown longer and less comfortable. She’d called Laura, from college. “Hey, I’m in town! Yep, Olive Garden -- you still know me so well,” she added with a laugh. They had set a time.

When she’d last been, they had already started redecorating. A glass of wine at the bar had been enough to open the other doors, so that’s what she had before dinner. But this time, for the first time in years, she couldn’t find her way through the maze of the dining room. The only door she found led to the alley out back.

“Hey, stranger!” she heard behind her. Bob and Jeanette waved at her, from behind the twin magazines they sat and read.

“Hey,” Deborah greeted them with a smile. “Do you know where the doors are?”

They exchanged a look.

“Didn’t you hear?” Jeanette asked.

“No, what?”

“The new management company decided it was too expensive, just leaving all the doors open,” Bob said. “Gotta cut those costs!”

“You need one of these now,” Jeanette added, reaching into her wallet and pulling out a small green-and-brown card. ‘Never Ending Pasta Pass,’ it said.