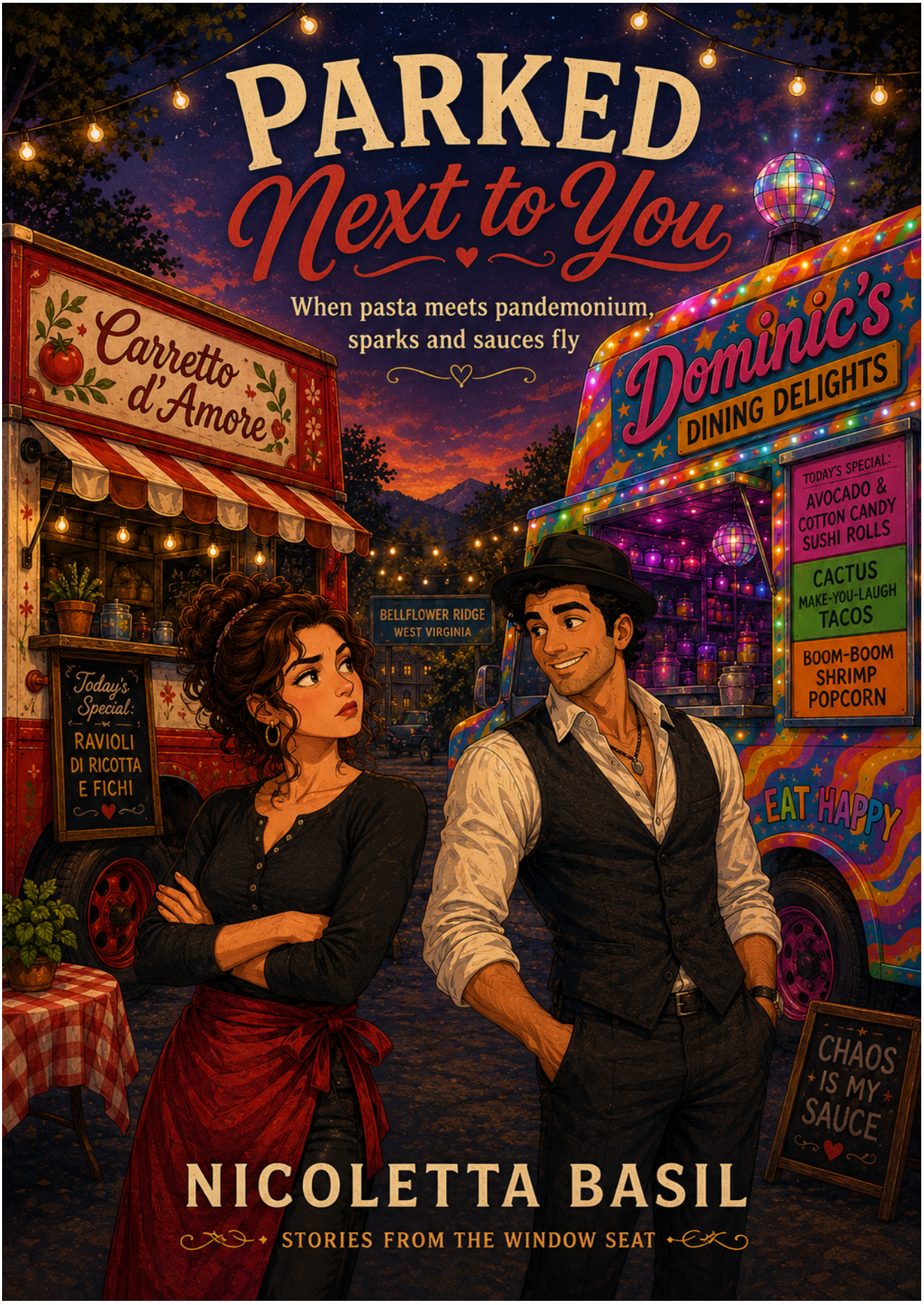

PARKED
Next to You
When pasta meets pandemonium, sparks and sauces fly
Carretto d'Amore
Today's Special:
RAVIOLI DI RICOTTA E FICHI
Dominic's
DINING DELIGHTS
TODAY'S SPECIAL:
AVOCADO & COTTON CANDY SUSHI ROLLS
CACTUS MAKE-YOU-LAUGH TACOS
BOOM-BOOM SHRIMP POPCORN
EAT HAPPY
BELLFLOWER RIDGE
WEST VIRGINIA
CHAOS IS MY SAUCE
NICOLETTA BASIL
STORIES FROM THE WINDOW SEAT

Dear Food Lovers and Fellow Truck Enthusiasts,

Even queens of rigatoni need a day off.

Which is how Willa Rossetti found herself at Birch & Barley, Bellflower Ridge's answer to rustic-chic dining with overpriced olives, minimalist menus, and a brunch cocktail list that required a thesaurus. It was a Sunday a day she typically reserved for restocking ingredients, sharpening knives, and cleaning out the fryer with the zeal of someone who believed in both cleanliness and the culinary afterlife. But Gina had insisted. Loudly. Repeatedly. With threats.



So, Willa was out. In public! Wearing low pumps that weren't stained with marinara. Seated at a high-top table near the open-concept bar, surrounded by a trio of girlfriends and a smoked grapefruit mezcal fizz that arrived in a seashell-shaped glass, rimmed with hibiscus salt, and annoyingly tasted like a mermaid's vacation and three therapy sessions in a sip.

"Tell me again why I'm drinking something that looks like it was brewed in a sea witch's cauldron," Willa muttered, taking another sip, "because unfortunately... I think I love it."

"Because we're brunching, not brooding," said Jenny, her college roommate turned local art teacher, who wore hoop earrings large enough to double as focaccia rings. "And because we're helping you have a life."

"A life without pasta," Willa sighed. "How will I go on?"

They laughed. Willa tried. She really did. The company was good. The vibe was crisp. The bread came in a basket lined with burlap and irony. But just as she was beginning to settle into her seat, the restaurant door swung open.

And in walked trouble on two very well-tailored legs.

Dominic Winslow strolled in like a man who absolutely knew where to find the lighting, the exits, and the nearest mirror. He wore a dark navy shirt, unbuttoned just enough to qualify as conversational—and gray slacks that managed to be both tailored and morally suspect. His hair was artfully tousled, and when he smiled at the hostess, it was with the quiet charisma of someone who had definitely seen a romantic comedy and thought, "Yes, that's me."



He didn't see Willa right away. Thank heaven.

Willa, however, saw everything. Including the way Dominic leaned casually against the bar, chatting up the bartender—a petite woman with a buzzcut, sleeve tattoos, and a laugh that made half the room look over in admiration. He said something. She laughed. He touched the counter lightly with two fingers, then offered her a taste of something from a tiny jar he pulled from his jacket. She dipped her finger, tasted, and promptly fanned herself with a cocktail menu.

"Oh no," Willa said.

"Oh yes," Monica replied, taking a slow sip of her Bloody Mary. "That man is saucing the bartender."

"He's networking," Jenny offered. "Probably sharing spice blends. Or marketing tips."

"He's flirting," Willa said flatly.



"You sound offended," Monica teased. "Is it the flirting or the fact that she's fanning herself like a Southern belle in August?"

Willa didn't answer. She was too busy watching Dominic hand over the tiny jar with a wink and a low bow. A bow. Who even bows anymore?

"He brought condiments to brunch," she said, blinking. "What kind of culinary peacock shows up armed with artisanal seasonings?"

"Apparently the kind who owns a fog machine and a glitter cannon," Monica murmured.

The bartender disappeared briefly and returned with a small plate. Dominic leaned in, took a bite, closed his eyes dramatically, and grinned.



Then—because the universe was feeling especially dramatic—he turned, Looked straight at Willa. Their eyes locked. She froze mid-sip. He raised his glass, a Blue Majik gin fizz that arrived smoking, sparkling, and entirely too confident on its own, and gave her the kind of slow, knowing smile that felt like it should come with a warning label.

Jenny whispered, "Brace for impact. He's coming over!"

"I just can't get a single day of peace from the circus showman," Willa muttered.

Dominic crossed the restaurant like a man who owned the building, the rights to the background music, and possibly the patent for his own swagger.

Willa had barely recovered from choking on her cocktail (which now tasted less like a mermaid's vacation and more like betrayal in a seashell) when he reached their table.

"Ladies," he greeted smoothly, placing one palm on the back of Willa's chair with just enough casual possession to make her eyebrows twitch. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Dominic Winslow," Monica said with a delighted grin. "Well, look who brunch dragged in."

"We were just admiring your... spice-forward entrance," Jenny chimed in.

Willa said nothing. Her smile was frozen in that polite, panic-laced expression reserved for small talk with exes and encounters with old high school nemeses in the gluten-free aisle.

Dominic tipped his head in mock modesty. "It's nice to be noticed."



Before Willa could formulate a retort involving a fire code violation and a jar of fermented saffron, Monica—traitor that she was—pulled out the empty chair beside Willa.

"Sit with us."

He hesitated just long enough to let the offer feel chivalrous. "If you insist," he said, sliding in gracefully.

Willa glanced heavenward.

"Didn't peg you as the brunch type," Dominic said, turning slightly toward her. "Though I suppose even culinary royalty needs a day off the throne."

"Some of us use brunch to relax," Willa replied. "Not to seduce the staff with smug spice samples."

He grinned. "That wasn't seduction. That was diplomacy."

"Fanning herself with a cocktail menu," Monica added helpfully.

"International relations can get heated," Dominic deadpanned, then turned to the group. "So. What's good here? Other than the company?"

Jenny passed him the menu, still eyeing him like an anthropologist studying a rare bird. "They do a miso-avocado toast topped with pickled shallots and edible flowers, which sounds like a dare but somehow works. And the churro-latte pancakes are borderline illegal in three states."



"I'd offer to share mine," Willa said sweetly, "but I assume you brought your own flambé torch. You know—for dramatic garnish. Or in case your eggs need a firework finale."

Dominic chuckled, utterly unfazed. "Guilty. Nothing says brunch like a tableside caramelization and light pyrotechnics."

The table burst into laughter—except for Willa, who took a long, deliberate sip of cocktail.

"Tell us," Monica said, leaning in, "what is the secret behind those glitter fries?"

Dominic glanced at Willa before answering. "Trade secret. But I'll say this—flavor's only half the experience. People remember joy. Drama. A little... spectacle."

"Like a crème brûlée in a masquerade mask," Jenny muttered under her breath.

Willa set her glass down with enough force to make the ice clink.

"I've always preferred substance over show," she said, fixing him with a look that could curdle cream.

Dominic smiled back with unbearable calm. "And yet," he said quietly, "your food has always had a way of stealing the show."

For one brief, treacherous moment, her heart stuttered a ridiculous little.

Then she blinked, gathered her wits, and replied, "Don't think flattery will get you a spot in my ravioli rotation."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said. "Though if it ever opens up..."

"So," Jenny said, spearing a forkful of beet salad, "where exactly did you come from, Dominic? You just kind of... appeared. Like glitter during flu season."

Willa snorted into her cocktail.

Dominic smiled, unbothered. "I've been told my entrance was a bit theatrical."

Monica leaned in, ever the investigative type. "Seriously though—what's your deal? You're clearly not local. Nobody local wears that much linen on purpose."

"I moved here six months ago," he said. "Originally from Seattle. I was looking for sunshine, cheaper permits, and a little culinary chaos."

"Mission accomplished," Willa muttered.

He turned to her with a glimmer in his eye. "You know, most cities don't offer this level of... spirited competition."

Jenny raised an eyebrow. "You came from Seattle and chose Bellflower Ridge?"

Dominic shrugged. "It felt... ripe. The food scene's just ready enough to be interesting but small enough to shake up. Plus," he added, reaching for the water pitcher, "I heard there was this legendary red food truck that served pasta so good it made grown men weep."

Willa narrowed her eyes. "And yet somehow you managed to park exactly across from her."

"What can I say? I'm drawn to talent."

Monica sipped her Bloody Mary. "Drawn to it... or trying to date it?"

Willa choked slightly.

Dominic just grinned. "Wouldn't dream of crossing professional lines. I'm far too respectful for that." "Sure," Willa said dryly. "That's why you fog-bombed the Kingdom Hall."



He held up a hand, as if swearing an oath. "That was an accident of atmospheric enthusiasm."

"You nearly caused a spiritual stampede."

"And yet," he said, eyes twinkling, "you still showed up at brunch."

"I was here first."

"Coincidence. Or fate?"

Monica gasped. "Oh no. He's one of those."

"What?" Willa asked.

"Men who believe in fate," she stage-whispered. "They always carry guitar picks in their wallets and own too many throw pillows."

"I don't own a guitar," Dominic said. "And I only have three pillows. One has a ravioli print."

Jenny groaned. "You would."

They all laughed. Even Willa. Though she tried to cover it with a sip of sparkling water and a look of practiced neutrality. But it was hard to maintain indifference when he looked at her like she was both a mystery and the answer. Like her irritation was just spice, he intended to fold into something unexpected and, maddeningly, delicious.



"So, what's with the fog machine?" Jenny asked, twirling her fork. "And the glitter? And that weird disco cone you served last week that looked like it came straight from Willy Wonka's after-hours menu?"

Dominic gave a sheepish grin, though it still somehow looked charming. "Honestly? I'm still figuring it out."

Willa tilted her head. "You're still figuring it out? You serve tiramisu in test tubes."

He shrugged. "Every chef has a journey. Mine just happens to involve temporary chaos and permanent sprinkles."

"That's not a business plan," Willa said. "That's a confetti accident."

"I'm not here to win awards," he said, more seriously now. "I'm here to figure out what makes people light up. To build something that sticks. I've opened a dozen concepts in a dozen cities, some did well, some fizzled. But none of them felt like... mine."

The table quieted a little, the brunch clatter around them suddenly sounding distant.

"I've been chasing a feeling," Dominic continued. "Something that makes people line up not just for food, but for fun. For something unexpected. I want to create the kind of place where people remember how they felt eating it. Not just what it tasted like."

Willa didn't speak. She just watched him, trying to reconcile the showboat with sincerity. The glitter cannon with quiet ambition. The man who served tiramisu in martini glasses... with the one now talking about belonging like it was an ingredient he hadn't quite managed to source.

It surprised her—how much it resonated.

Because she knew that feeling, too. Had chased it in her own way. The joy in watching someone's eyes light up when they tasted her pesto for the first time. The stillness when a regular sat quietly with a plate of ravioli that reminded them of something they couldn't name. The tiny, golden moments when food felt like more than food—like connection, comfort, a tether to something better.

She'd never thought of it as a performance. She didn't want fog or flair or flashbulbs. But maybe... maybe she was chasing that same emotional spark. Just with garlic and discipline instead of glitter and chaos. Which was possibly worse. Because now she couldn't quite write him off as a clown with a truck full of special effects. Now he was something else. Something more complicated. And Willa really didn't like complicated.

Especially not when it came with rolled sleeves, a smug smile, and cheekbones that had no business making her forget what she was about to say.

Just as Willa was starting to admit—silently, internally, and under extreme duress—that maybe Dominic Winslow wasn't the worst thing to happen to pasta since boxed Alfredo, he opened his mouth again.

"You know," he said casually, swirling the last of his sparkling water, "it's kind of wild that you don't do more with your brand."

Her eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"I just mean," he went on, clearly unaware of the danger, "your food is incredible. But your truck? It's all a bit... subdued. No signage, no lighting effects. You don't even have a slogan."

"I have a name," Willa replied, her tone crisp. "And a line of loyal customers who show up rain or shine without needing a fog machine to guide them."



Dominic held up his hands in surrender. "I'm not knocking it. I'm just saying—you could own this town if you leaned in a little more. You know... gave it a tiny bit of sparkle."

Sparkle!? Willa's jaw ticked.

"Not everyone wants to turn dinner into a circus," she said tightly.

He grinned, the oblivious kind that often precedes disaster. "Sure. But even circuses sell out."

Monica and Jenny both let out soft oofs under their breath, sensing the weather shift. Willa pushed back her chair. Slowly. With great, terrifying calm.

"Well," she said, tossing her napkin onto the table, "as fun as this conversation has been, I think I'll leave before someone tries to staple a slogan to my tortellini."

Dominic blinked. "I didn't mean—"

"Enjoy your circus, Winslow," she said, already turning. "Just don't mistake applause for affection."

And with that, she walked away—heels sharp with purpose, pride polished to a shine, heart trailing a few stubborn beats behind.

The door to the restaurant swung shut behind Willa with the sort of authority only a woman in heels and full-blown indignation can summon.

Dominic blinked after her, still holding his mid-air. "Wait—what just happened?"

Monica sighed into her napkin. "You Dominic'd her."

"I what?"

Jenny leaned in, resting her chin on her palm. "You opened your charming, glitter-sprinkled mouth and managed to insult a woman's entire livelihood in under thirty seconds."

"I was complimenting her!" he said, bewildered. "I said her food was amazing!"

"Uh-huh," Monica said. "Right before you called her truck dull and accused her tortellini of lacking personality."

Dominic winced. "Okay, I didn't say that exactly."

"No," Jenny said, "but your tone said it. It practically handed her a branded apron and told her to get on TikTok."

He dropped his forehead into his hands. "I genuinely don't understand her."

"Oh sweetie," Monica said, patting his arm. "That's because she's not a brand. She's a basil-scented temple of tradition and righteous fury. And you walked in wearing neon."

"She makes pasta," Dominic muttered.



"She makes sanctified pasta," Jenny corrected. "And you suggested it needed a tagline."

Dominic sat back, watching the spot where Willa had vanished, frown lines creasing his forehead. "I really thought we were having a moment."

"You were," Monica said. "Right up until you tried to market it."

Willa stood just outside the restaurant; her arms folded tightly across her chest as she stared out at the nearly empty street. The late afternoon light bounced off the sidewalk like it, too, was in on the joke.

She wasn't fuming. Okay, she was a little fuming. She exhaled slowly, trying to will away the tight knot in her chest. The audacity. The nerve. The glitter-happy showman had waltzed into brunch, complimented her pasta, insulted her branding, and smirked like he was doing her a favor.

And the worst part? The absolute worst part? He wasn't entirely wrong. Her truck was a little understated. Not because she lacked vision, but because she'd built it brick by metaphorical brick, with discipline and purpose. She'd always believed her food should speak for itself. No theatrics. No gimmicks. Just flavor, tradition, and a handwritten chalkboard menu.

But still… sometimes she did wonder what it might feel like to lean in. To throw a little color on the walls. To let herself play, just a little. Not that she'd ever admit that to him. Or anyone. Willa Rossetti did not need validation from a man who thought edible glitter was a food group. Still. Her fingers drummed against her hip as she turned toward the parking lot. In the distance, she could almost imagine the hum of his truck, the glow of his absurd signage, the chorus of girls giggling through clouds of cinnamon-scented mist. She rolled her eyes so hard it nearly counted as cardio. "Sparkle," she muttered to herself. "Please." But she still smiled, just a little, as she walked back to her car.

Until next time… will she be drafting a new ravioli flavor that involves edible gold—or considering, heaven forbid, taking Dominic's branding advice?



Stay tuned.
Nicoletta Basil,
From the Window Seat