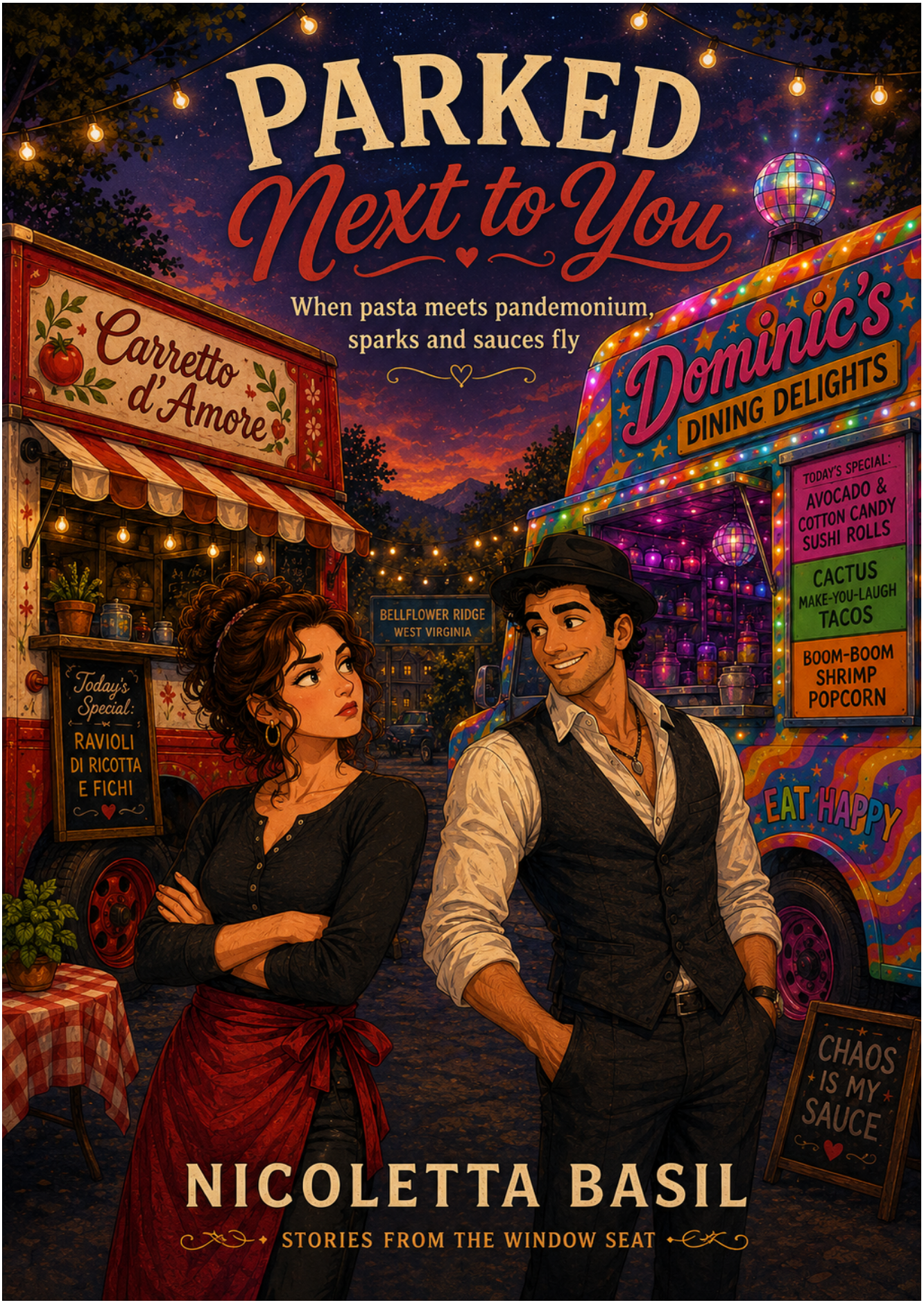

PARKED
Next to You
When pasta meets pandemonium, sparks and sauces fly
Carretto d'Amore
Today's Special:
RAVIOLI DI RICOTTA E FICHI
Dominic's
DINING DELIGHTS
TODAY'S SPECIAL:
AVOCADO & COTTON CANDY SUSHI ROLLS
CACTUS MAKE-YOU-LAUGH TACOS
BOOM-BOOM SHRIMP POPCORN
EAT HAPPY
BELLFLOWER RIDGE
WEST VIRGINIA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

Dear Food Lovers and Fellow Truck Enthusiasts,

The glitter had mostly stopped clinging to Dominic's sleeves.

Mostly.

He leaned against the side of Willa's truck, both of them sipping the last of their cappuccinos in the strange calm that follows a bureaucratic storm. The lot was still and quiet, unusually so. No customers yet, no music playing. Just the faint sound of Gina inside reorganizing the spice rack like it had personally offended her.

Dominic tilted his cup. "I think he actually smiled."

"He also threatened to revoke your syrup privileges."

"Yeah," Dominic said. "But fondly."

Willa snorted and took another sip.

"You really keep vibe logs?" she asked after a beat.

Dominic looked mock-offended. "Absolutely. You want to see the one I made after your ravioli? It's mostly emotional words and one doodle of a fig wearing sunglasses."



"What? I am not sure what to think right now."

"I was going through something."

Willa opened her mouth to respond but was interrupted by the sound of footsteps on pavement.

A man in a black polo, khakis, and the confident gait of someone who regularly used phrases like brand synergy strolled into the lot. Clipboard in one hand, tote bag in the other.

"Dominic Winslow?" he asked. "And Carretto d'Amore?"

Willa and Dominic exchanged a glance.

"I'm Dominic," Dominic said slowly.

"Carretto's mine," Willa added, setting her cup down.

The man beamed. "Fantastic. I'm with the Nevada Food Truck Showdown, a national competition, sponsored by the Western Culinary Coalition. Your trucks have been selected to compete in this year's event."

Dominic blinked. "We're the only food trucks in this lot."

"Exactly!" the man chirped. "They're doing a Rivals Edition this year, focused on one-on-one head-to-heads. Intimate, high-drama, high-flavor. Like a cooking duel but with real propane."

Willa squinted. "We never applied."



"You were nominated anonymously," he said, pulling two glossy envelopes from his tote. They were flame-red with gold trim and a logo shaped like a spatula crossed with a cleaver. "The preliminary round is this fall. Three challenges over two days. $10,000 prize and a feature on the West Coast Cravings channel."

Dominic accepted his envelope like it might bite him. "Who would nominate us for something like this?"

"Probably someone who watches you two," the man said with a wink. "The application said: 'They're electric. One's fig and fire. One's chaos and cinnamon. You decide who's who."

Willa's face didn't move. Dominic's ears turned slightly pink. The man gave them a finger-gun salute. "See you in Reno." And then he was gone. Dominic stared at his envelope. Then at Willa. She was already holding hers like it was a jury summons.

"Nope," she said, turning toward her truck. "Absolutely not."

Dominic blinked. "Wait! what? You're just... out?"

"I don't do food circus. I don't cook for cameras. I cook for people."

He followed a step behind as she pulled open the side door and disappeared into the truck.



"Willa, this isn't brunch roulette. It's a legit competition."

"That's worse."

"You'd wipe the floor with me. You realize that, right?"

She ignored him, heading straight to the fridge like cold vegetables could protect her from discussion.

"I'm serious," he said. "You're the best chef I know."

Willa paused.

"That ravioli?" he went on. "Fig and brown butter? That wasn't food. That was church. You don't just not enter a contest when you're making miracles out of lemon zest."

"I don't have time for this," she said, sharper than she meant.



Dominic raised both hands. "Okay. But don't tell me it's about pride, because we both know you can go toe-to-toe with anyone!"

Willa looked away. Her jaw worked. She didn't say it's about the money. She didn't say Aunt Marissa's care is increasing every month, or they raised her facility rate again, or she's been pulling from my emergency fund for three months and pretending it's fine.

She just said, "I don't do spectacle."

Dominic's voice softened. "This doesn't have to be spectacle. It's food. Your food."

Willa buried herself by reorganizing the herb shelf.

"You don't have to decide right now," he said. "But at least open the envelope. See what they're asking."

"I already know what they're asking."

"Do you?"

She turned, annoyed. "They're asking me to turn myself into entertainment."

"They're asking you to let people see what you do," he said. "And maybe win something in the process. Everyone could use a little extra money. Right?"

Willa didn't answer. But her grip on the prep counter tightened just slightly. Dominic didn't notice. He just set his unopened envelope on the edge of her prep table.

"I'm entering," he said. "Because I've seen what you can do. And honestly? I want to see if I can keep up."

Then he smiled, one of the real ones, quiet and lopsided, and left her standing there in the herb-scented silence. She didn't move for a long time. When she finally

did, she ducked into the back storage nook, pulled out her phone, and called the care facility. After a brief, quiet exchange, she hung up and stepped back into the kitchen—only to find Gina waiting, holding two tiny cups of espresso. Willa froze.

Gina handed her one. "You need it more than I do."

"I said I was fine."

"You said it like a liar."

Willa didn't respond. She just opened the envelope. Inside: a foldout brochure, competition schedule, and a list of three preliminary challenge categories:

1. Reinvented Childhood Classic
2. Local Ingredient Showcase
3. Crowd-Pleaser Blind Taste Test



She stared at it.

Gina sipped her espresso. "Ten thousand dollars."

"It's a spectacle," Willa muttered.

"It's also a check. And she's your family and we both know you have been struggling to keep up with the payments."

Willa didn't meet her eyes.

Gina set her cup down. "You don't have to do it for the cameras. But you could do it for her."

Willa stared at the brochure again. "This is a crap shoot," she muttered.

Gina looked up. "The competition?"



"Competing against Dominic." Willa dropped the brochure on the counter like it had insulted her. "People love him. He's charming. He gives out glitter like it's seasoning. And somehow, I don't know how, but he makes stuff work that shouldn't even be legal."

"You mean the pancake tacos filled with candied bacon and emotional confusion?"

Willa threw up a hand. "What even is emotional confusion when it comes to food? Why do people eat that and then cry a little and tip extra?"

Gina shrugged. "Because it tastes like their childhood, but also their breakup. It's nostalgic chaos."

Willa pressed her lips together. "Exactly. That's why I can't compete against him."

"Okay. First of all, dramatic!"

Willa shot her a look.

"Second, you're assuming this is a popularity contest. It's not."

"Oh no?" Willa said. "Because so far, every customer who's ever ordered from him has either left with a selfie or emotional baggage in a biodegradable box."

"Yeah, but that's his thing," Gina said. "He's chaos. You're clarity. He serves brunch glitter with a side of whimsy. You serve elegance with a backbone. People don't cry over your food because they're surprised—they cry because it's really good, soul-shattering food."

Willa blinked. "That is... extremely dramatic."

Gina shrugged. "So is roasted fig in brown butter."

They were quiet for a second.

fThen Willa whispered, "What if I do all of it right... and still lose?"

Gina didn't answer right away.

Then: "Then you'll lose with perfect seasoning, zero glitter residue, and your dignity intact. Which is more than I can say for him."



That earned the smallest smirk from Willa.

Just a flicker. But it was something.

He shouldn't be good. But he is. He's like brunch jazz. Loud. Erratic. Technically complex, but it only makes sense when you stop trying to understand it."

Gina raised an eyebrow. "Wow. You've got it bad."

"I do not have it bad."

"You just described his cooking style with the emotional nuance of a food memoir."

Willa shot her a look. "Focus."

"Fine." Gina folded her arms. "He's good. So what? So are you. He throws things together and hopes they stick. You build flavors like you're writing a novel in five chapters and a surprise epilogue. You're not the same league—you're not even the same genre."

Willa didn't respond. But she didn't argue either.

She looked at the brochure again. Her thumb rested on the words Local Ingredient Showcase, tapping slowly.

Gina watched her. Then said, gently, "So what if people like him? You don't have to be liked. You just have to win."



The sun had slipped behind the rooftops by the time Willa had stepped out of the truck. The lot had cooled, the pavement no longer radiating heat but holding the faint memory of it. Dominic's lights were still on across the way, casting warm yellow squares across the asphalt. She could hear him inside—music low, maybe washing dishes. Maybe thinking.

She walked slowly toward the herb planters lining the front of her truck and crouched to check the basil. It didn't need watering. But she needed the motion.

In her apron pocket, the competition brochure folded and refolded like a secret note from middle school. She pulled it out again.

Reinvented Childhood Classic.

Local Ingredient Showcase.

Crowd-Pleaser Blind Taste Test.

Willa tapped the second one with her thumb. Slowly. Rhythmically. She could already picture what she'd do. The ingredients. The plating. The balance of acid and warmth. She knew how it would taste. She just didn't know if she wanted anyone watching her make it.

Behind her, a small breeze lifted a piece of parchment from the prep counter and sent it fluttering toward her feet. She picked it up without thinking. It was the fig ravioli recipe. The one she'd scribbled down after testing it with Gina. The one she hadn't shown anyone. Except Dominic. Sort of. She stared at it for a long time. Then folded it in half, tucked it behind the brochure, and stood.



Across the lot, the light inside Dominic's truck switched off. A moment later, he stepped out, stretching, then placing his hands on his hips. He saw her standing there. He didn't say anything at first.

Then, casually: "You really should consider it."

Willa turned slightly toward him.

Dominic gave a little shrug. "Could help you evolve your brand."

Willa huffed. "My BRAND?"

He grinned. "Exactly."

She shook her head and turned back toward her truck, but not before he saw the corner of her mouth twitch.

She didn't say yes. But she didn't say no.



Stay tuned.
Nicoletta Basil,
From the Window Seat