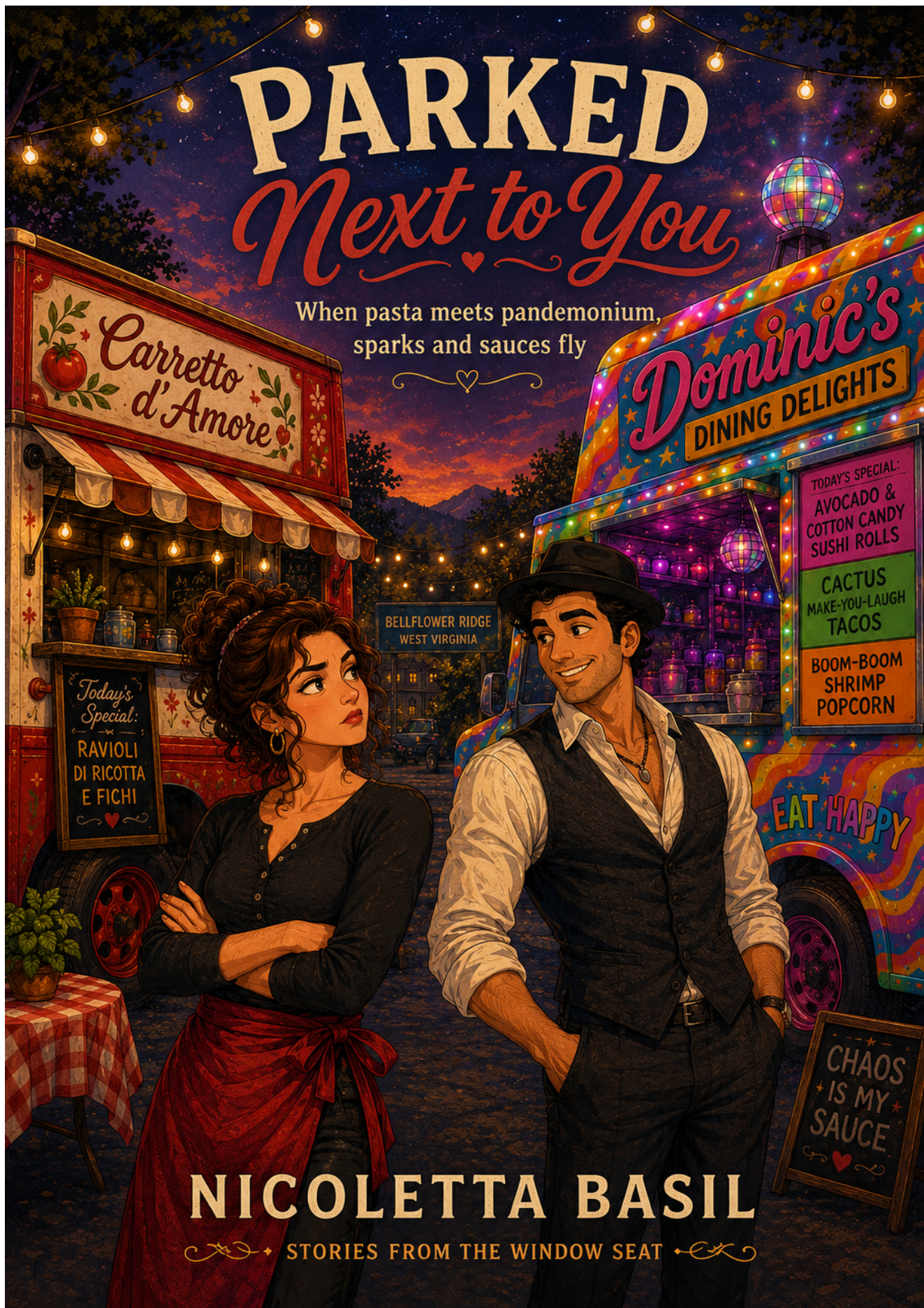




PARKED

Next to You

When pasta meets pandemonium,
sparks and sauces fly



NICOLETTA BASIL

✦ STORIES FROM THE WINDOW SEAT ✦

Dear Food Lovers and Fellow Truck Enthusiasts,

Sleep has never been particularly useful when one is losing an argument with oneself. Willa Rossetti had spent most of the night lying awake in her charming little house, watching the moonlight drift across the ceiling. Normally, home was where the world made sense. The hardwood floors creaked in familiar places, the grandfather clock in the hallway faithfully announced every hour, and the kitchen always carried the



comforting scent of basil, coffee, and whatever sauce she'd simmered that day. It was peaceful. Predictable. Safe. Tonight, none of it quieted her thoughts.

The envelope from the Nevada Food Truck Showdown rested unopened on the kitchen table, exactly where she'd left it before going to bed. She'd walked past it at least a dozen times during the night. Once she'd even picked it up. Then she'd put it right back down. She wasn't entering. She refused to turn cooking into a spectator sport. She certainly wasn't about to spend an entire weekend competing against Dominic Winslow while television cameras captured every ridiculous moment. That would be absurd. Completely absurd.

Which explained why she'd spent the better part of the night mentally planning three competition dishes she absolutely wasn't going to cook.

By six-thirty the next morning, espresso was brewing, sunlight spilled across the butcher-block island, and Willa was chopping fresh parsley with the kind of precision normally reserved for surgeons and bomb technicians.

Chop.

Chop.

Chop.

Every slice landed exactly the same.

Order.

Control.

The way life was supposed to be.

Her eyes drifted toward the envelope. Just for a second. She frowned. "I'm not doing it." The empty kitchen, wisely, offered no opinion. Only the coffee maker gurgled in response. Somehow, it sounded unconvinced.



She carried her coffee to the kitchen table and sat down with a sigh.

The envelope hadn't moved. Flame red with gold trim. Heavy. It looked far too dramatic to be innocent.

She frowned at it. "I don't care if Chef Lorenzo Bellini is judging." The envelope remained unimpressed. "I don't care if there's television." Still nothing. "I certainly don't care if Dominic Winslow enters."

That sentence lingered in the quiet kitchen a little longer than she'd intended. She narrowed her eyes at the envelope.

"Well..." She sighed. "I care a little."

She groaned "No. He will be insufferable."

He'd probably arrive in Reno riding a Vespa wearing a sequined chef's coat while releasing doves and serving espresso from a smoke cannon. She could already hear him.

"Ladies and gentlemen... welcome to the greatest culinary experience west of the Mississippi!"



She groaned and leaned back in her chair and stared toward the window over the sink. The early morning sun filtered through the lace curtains, casting soft patterns across the hardwood floor. Outside, the herb garden shimmered with dew. Rosemary, basil, thyme, and oregano swayed gently in the cool breeze, waiting for another day in the kitchen.

Normally, mornings like this settled her. Today, they only gave her more time to think. Her eyes wandered to the framed photograph resting on the corner of the table. Without thinking, she reached for it. The cherry wood frame had become silky smooth from years of polishing.

The photograph always made her smile. It had been taken almost ten years ago in this very kitchen. Aunt Marissa stood beside her, both of them dusted head to toe with flour, proudly holding a tray of freshly made ravioli. Nearly every piece was a different shape. Willa remembered insisting they all looked terrible. Aunt Marissa had laughed so hard she'd nearly dropped the tray. "You'd still tell me they were lopsided," Willa murmured. She traced a finger lightly across the glass. Aunt Marissa's smile seemed frozen somewhere between laughter and another one of her gentle life lessons.

"Stop worrying about how they look," she'd always say. "Nobody remembers perfect ravioli. They remember who they shared them with."

Willa smiled. "You always took everyone else's side."

Another memory quietly drifted in. She couldn't have been more than eleven. She had spent nearly an hour making her very first batch of ravioli completely on her own. Every fold had been measured. Every edge carefully sealed. Then she'd bumped the tray. Every single ravioli landed on the floor. She remembered bursting into tears. "I ruined everything!" Aunt Marissa hadn't rushed to save the



pasta. She hadn't even looked at it. Instead, she'd wrapped Willa in one enormous flour-covered hug.

"Did you ruin the flour?"

"No."

"Did you ruin the eggs?"

"No."

"Did you ruin your hands?"

A snuffle.

"No."

"Then we make another batch."

"It took forever."

"Good things usually do."

"I'll never get them right."

Aunt Marissa had gently brushed flour from Willa's cheek.

"Recipes can be learned."

Then she'd tapped Willa lightly over her heart.

"This cannot."

Willa closed her eyes. How many times had she heard those words? When she'd burned garlic. When she'd forgotten the salt. When she'd overcooked the pasta at her very first catering job and cried all the way home.

"Feed people with this first." Her aunt would always tap her heart. "Everything else is just ingredients."

The smile slowly faded from Willa's face. The photograph had been taken before everything changed. Before forgotten conversations. Before doctors. Before days when Aunt Marissa searched for words that never seemed to arrive. Before the afternoon she looked at Willa with gentle, apologetic eyes and asked, "Have we met before?"

That memory still found her on quiet mornings. Some days were wonderful. There were visits when Aunt Marissa remembered every recipe they'd ever made together. She'd complain about boxed pasta. Insist tomatoes tasted better when they were sung to. Correct Willa's technique for chopping basil as though no time had passed at all. Those were precious days.

Then there were the others. The days when she thanked Willa for visiting... As though she were simply another kind volunteer stopping by. Willa swallowed the ache rising in her throat.

"I miss you." The words escaped before she could stop them.



She looked down at the photograph, tracing the edge of the frame with her thumb. "I wish I could fix this." Silence settled gently around the kitchen. If there had been a recipe for memories... A sauce for forgetting... A perfect combination of herbs and spices that could somehow stitch

together the pieces of a fading mind... Willa would have spent every waking hour making it. But there wasn't. There were only good days. And hard days. And the quiet hope that tomorrow might be one of the good ones.

She carefully set the photograph back on the table. Her eyes wandered toward the calendar hanging beside the pantry. Three dates had been circled in neat red ink. Care Payment Due. The next one was only two weeks away. The knot in her stomach returned. For three months she'd quietly been pulling from the emergency savings she'd spent years building. Three months of telling herself business would pick up. Three months of convincing herself she'd figure something out.

She hadn't told anyone. She hadn't even Gina. But she figured it out anyway. Rossetti women handled things. That was simply what they did. They didn't complain. They adapted. They found another way.

Ten thousand dollars. She hated that her thoughts kept returning to that number. Not because she wanted the prize. Because ten thousand dollars meant time. More mornings where Aunt Marissa remembered the words to an old Italian lullaby. More afternoons baking cookies in the activity room when the memories came back just long enough to laugh together. More chances to hear...

"Recipes can be learned." "This cannot."

She closed her eyes. "I don't want to lose any more time."

She looked back at the photograph. "I don't want to do this." Silence answered. Then another memory drifted forward. The day Aunt Marissa moved into the care home. She'd squeezed Willa's hands far tighter than anyone expected.

"Promise me something."

"Anything."

"Don't stop living because you're taking care of me."

"I won't."

"Promise."

"I promise."

"Don't let your world become so small that you're afraid to leave it."

At the time, Willa had laughed.

"I'm not afraid." Aunt Marissa smiled that knowing smile. "Not today."

The kitchen suddenly felt much quieter. Was that what had happened? Not fear exactly. Comfort. Routine. The same truck. The same customers. The same parking space she'd occupied for six years. She loved every bit of it. But somewhere along the way... Without realizing it... Her little corner of Bellflower Ridge had become her entire world. She hadn't dreamed beyond it in years. Hadn't challenged herself. Hadn't taken a real risk since opening Carretto d'Amore.

Her eyes drifted back toward the competition envelope. Maybe this wasn't about winning. Maybe it wasn't about television. It certainly wasn't about Dominic. Well... Not entirely. She smiled despite herself.



Dominic would undoubtedly arrive in Reno with fireworks, a brass band, and at least one menu item that violated the Geneva Convention. The thought made her shake her head. "He'll probably try to flambé something that isn't even food." She laughed quietly. Then sighed. "But he wouldn't hesitate. He was

probably already booking his flight to Reno" That was the difference. Dominic leaped first and figured things out on the way down. She measured every step before taking it. Neither way was wrong. But lately... She wondered if she'd been standing still for too long.

She reached across the table and picked up the envelope. This time... She didn't set it back down. She carefully broke the seal and unfolded the packet. Competition rules. Schedule. Judging criteria. Then she scanned the competition packet again. Almost instantly, ideas began appearing before she could stop them.

Reinvented Childhood Classic.

She paused a moment in thought then concluded No. Too obvious.

Local Ingredient Showcase.

Better. Local wasn't just about geography. It was about memory. About finding something ordinary and treating it with respect. Her mind immediately started building flavors.

Tangy... Sweet... Earthy... Something crisp. Something creamy. Something that would surprise people without shouting at them.

She frowned. "I am absolutely not planning this." A moment later she reached for her recipe notebook anyway.

Outside, the first rays of morning sunlight spilled across the herb garden.

For the first time since opening the envelope... Willa smiled. Just a little. She still hadn't decided. But for the first time... She had stopped looking for reasons not to.



The drive into Bellflower Ridge passed in comfortable silence. The competition packet rested on the passenger seat. She refused to look at it. It refused to stop existing.

By the third stoplight she caught herself wondering whether goat cheese would hold better in humid air. "I'm not recipe testing," she muttered. She was absolutely recipe testing.

By the time Willa reached Carretto d'Amore later that morning, she had convinced herself that opening the envelope had meant nothing. Writing down some ideas

had meant even less. She had not entered the competition. She had simply gathered information in an organized and entirely reasonable manner.

Willa unlocked Carretto d'Amore and stepped inside. The familiar scent of roasted garlic, basil, and fresh bread greeted her like an old friend. She exhaled.

Whatever happened in Reno... This was still home. She hung her apron. Set her knife roll in its usual spot. Straightened a stack of napkins that didn't actually need straightening. Checked the refrigerator temperatures. Watered the basil sitting in the service window.

Routine.

Comfort.

Control.

Then... She noticed the clipboard.

Unfortunately, an official entry clipboard was already waiting on her prep counter. It sat there with the quiet confidence of something that knew it was going to win. Willa refused to look at it. She had a tray of crostini to prep and a moral high ground to defend.



Dominic leaned against the service window like a smug Gargoyle in a very flattering apron. He sipped something aggressively herbal and made a thoughtful noise. “So,” he said, all innocence and menace, “still holding out?”

“Not interested,” Willa said, slicing tomatoes with enough force to legally qualify as dueling.

“They called it a culinary duel, you know. Just the two of us. Very intimate. Very high stakes. Just missing the, you know—duel part.”

"I'm not doing this," she said. "I don't perform."

"They said we were electric." He pulled out the glossy flyer and flipped it dramatically. "One's fig and fire, one's chaos and cinnamon. You decide who's who."

"Who says stuff like that?" Willa muttered.

Dominic smiled. "People who understand drama."

Gina popped her head out from the kitchen, apron askew. "Please tell me they used the photo where you're holding the microplane like a weapon."

"They did," Dominic said. "It's terrifying. It's art."

Willa snatched the flyer, scanned it, and immediately tried to hand it back like it had insulted her ancestry.

"Nope. This is a trap. There's branding. There's a drone. I'm out."

Dominic studied her for a second. "Can I tell you what I think?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

"I think you've already decided."

"I have not."

"You're just waiting for somebody to give you permission."

Willa's eyes snapped up. "Excuse me?"

He held up both hands in surrender.



"Not because you're afraid. Because you don't do things halfway. If you enter, you're all in. And once you're all in..." He smiled. "...there's no going back."

For just a heartbeat, Willa didn't answer. Because he wasn't entirely wrong. She hated that. Almost as much as she hated that he'd noticed. Dominic grinned. "That whole 'perfection in a pasta shell' thing you've got going? I get it."

Gina let out a low whistle and ducked back into the truck like she was avoiding debris.

Willa crossed her arms. "I'm not scared."

"No?"

"No."

"You've already planned half the competition in your head."

"I most certainly have not."

"You alphabetize your spices."

"That's called being organized."

"You iron your aprons."

"They wrinkle."

"You color-code your grocery lists."

"They're easier to read."

He smiled. "My point exactly."

She narrowed her eyes. "I don't want to dance for kombucha sponsors on livestream."

Dominic laughed. "Now that I believe."

Then he leaned in just enough to lower his voice. "But don't pretend this is about cameras."

She held his gaze.

"It isn't?"

"No."

He smiled. "It's because you care."

Silence. Then, mercifully, Dominic ruined the moment. "Which is adorable, by the way."

She stared at him.

"And yet..." He grinned. "...I'm still going to beat you and look dazzling doing it."

She stared at him. "You're impossible."

"And you're predictable. That's why I already entered."

That stopped her cold. "YOU WHAT?"

Dominic casually pulled out the envelope. "Sent it in yesterday. The Showdown folks were thrilled. But they said it's only official if you enter too."

Willa stared.



"You entered a two-person competition without the other person?"

He shrugged. "Manifesting. Also, I included my menu sketch. It's incredible."

“Do I want to know?”

He leaned in. “It involves duck fat and a story arc.”

Willa turned to Gina, utterly betrayed. “How are you letting this happen?”

Gina was already holding the clipboard. “I’m morally neutral. But I am dying to see you flambé his smug face off.”

Dominic leaned a little closer, voice low and teasing. “Good luck catching up,” he said. “I’m already planning my menu.”

Gina dropped the tongs. “Oh snap.”

Willa stared at the clipboard. Dominic probably thought she was deciding whether to prove him wrong. The truth was that she wasn't thinking about Dominic at all.

Aunt Marirssa's words came back as clearly as if she were standing beside her. Don't let your world become so small that you're afraid to leave it.



Willa snatched the clipboard and stared at it like it might explode. “You are insufferable,” she muttered, signing with the fury of a thousand flour-dusted ancestors.

Dominic grinned. “And now we’re rivals. Officially.”

Gina whooped and slapped a post-it on the spice rack: OPERATION: END HIM
Willa handed the clipboard back and turned back to her prep. “If you use edible glitter, I will call the fire department.”

Dominic was already walking away, whistling. “I make no promises.”



Later that night, the lot was quiet again. The crowd had thinned, the air smelled like cooling fryer oil and basil, and Dominic's music had finally stopped playing whatever chaos mix he used to season his food. Inside Carretto d'Amore, Gina was cleaning up, humming some off-brand

version of "Eye of the Tiger" and re-labeling the spice rack with stickers that said things like WAR HERBS and SALTY VENGEANCE. Willa sat at the prep counter, elbows on the surface, staring at the now-empty clipboard. Gina glanced over. "You okay?"

Willa didn't answer right away. Then, softly: "I didn't want to do this."
"You mean the cooking duel? With flair boy?"

"With cameras. With judges. With branding language like 'Rivals Edition' and theme music composed entirely of trap remixes."

"So why did you?"

Willa hesitated. "Aunt Marissa's care just went up again." Gina stopped moving. "They raised her rate last month. And the month before that. I've been pulling from my emergency fund and telling myself it's fine, but... it's not."

"Oh, Willa."

Willa looked down at her hands. "Aunt Marissa used to say pasta is therapy. Which is a lovely sentiment until you're calculating the cost of therapy against long-term memory care."

Gina came around the counter and leaned her hip against it. “You should’ve told me.”

“I didn’t want it to be the reason I said yes,” Willa admitted. “I wanted to win because I’m good. Not because I’m desperate.”

“Wanting to take care of someone you love isn’t desperation. It’s loyalty. With seasoning.” Then Gina reached over, grabbed a sticky note from her growing wall of motivational sabotage, and stuck it in front of Willa. It read: WIN FOR MARISSA — underlined three times, with a tiny basil leaf doodle.

Inside Dominic’s Dining Delights, things were... not calm. Dominic had converted the back half of his truck into what could only be described as a “culinary war zone.” Sticky notes covered the fridge, oven, cabinets, and at least one mixing bowl. On them: handwritten ideas like DUCK CONFIT BUT FUNKY?? and What if gnocchi... but FLAT? He stood in the middle of it all, wearing mismatched socks, a backwards apron, and a headband he definitely didn’t own yesterday.



“Oh my god,” he whispered, arms out like he was about to ascend. “She said yes.” He spun in a circle. “She entered. She’s in. This is not a drill; this is a showdown.”

The next morning, Gina returned from the dumpster with a trash bag in one hand and intel in the other. “Okay,” she announced. “You’re going to want to sit down.” Willa, stirring a pot of fig jam, didn’t look up. “Unless the stoves on fire or Dominic finally choked on his own arrogance, I’m not interested.”

“He has a whiteboard,” Gina said solemnly. “He wrote ‘Dominate Willa’ on it. And then added ‘Respectfully.’”

Willa pressed the spoon to the side of the pot, very calmly. “Gina.”

“Yes?”

“I want to win this competition. Not because I cheated. Not because I had advanced intel. Not because he spiral-designed a duck dish based on a dream journal.”

The kitchen was quiet. Just the hum of the fridge, the soft scrape of a spoon, and Willa, deep in her zone. She stood at the counter like a general reviewing a battle plan—except her “weapons” were brown butter, brioche, and an absolutely unholy level of focus.

Gina entered, holding a clipboard and a look of caffeinated curiosity. “Okay. Is it pudding? Is it cake? Is it legal?”

“Bread pudding,” Willa said. “But reverse-engineered. Inside out. Caramelized crust. Fig jam swirled through a mascarpone core. Brioche soaked in chai custard. Finished with brown butter glaze.”

Gina took the offered forkful. Her eyes widened. “This tastes like therapy. And closure.”

“It’s called Figgy Stardust,” Willa said. “Because I deserve one pun.”

“Is this for Reno?” Gina inquired.

“No, this is just for us.”

“Dominic is going to die,” Gina whispered.

“Good.”

Across the lot, Dominic was almost certainly inventing something with duck fat, dramatic lighting, and an unnecessary emotional arc. Willa returned to her bread pudding with renewed focus. The showdown had not even begun, and already neither of them knew how to do anything halfway.

She looked at the signed entry form lying on the counter. There was no going back now. Somewhere in Reno... A kitchen was waiting. A challenge was waiting. Maybe even a new version of herself was waiting. Willa picked up her notebook. She smiled. "Alright, Aunt Marissa..." "Let's cook."



Stay tuned.
Nicoletta Basil,
From the Window Seat