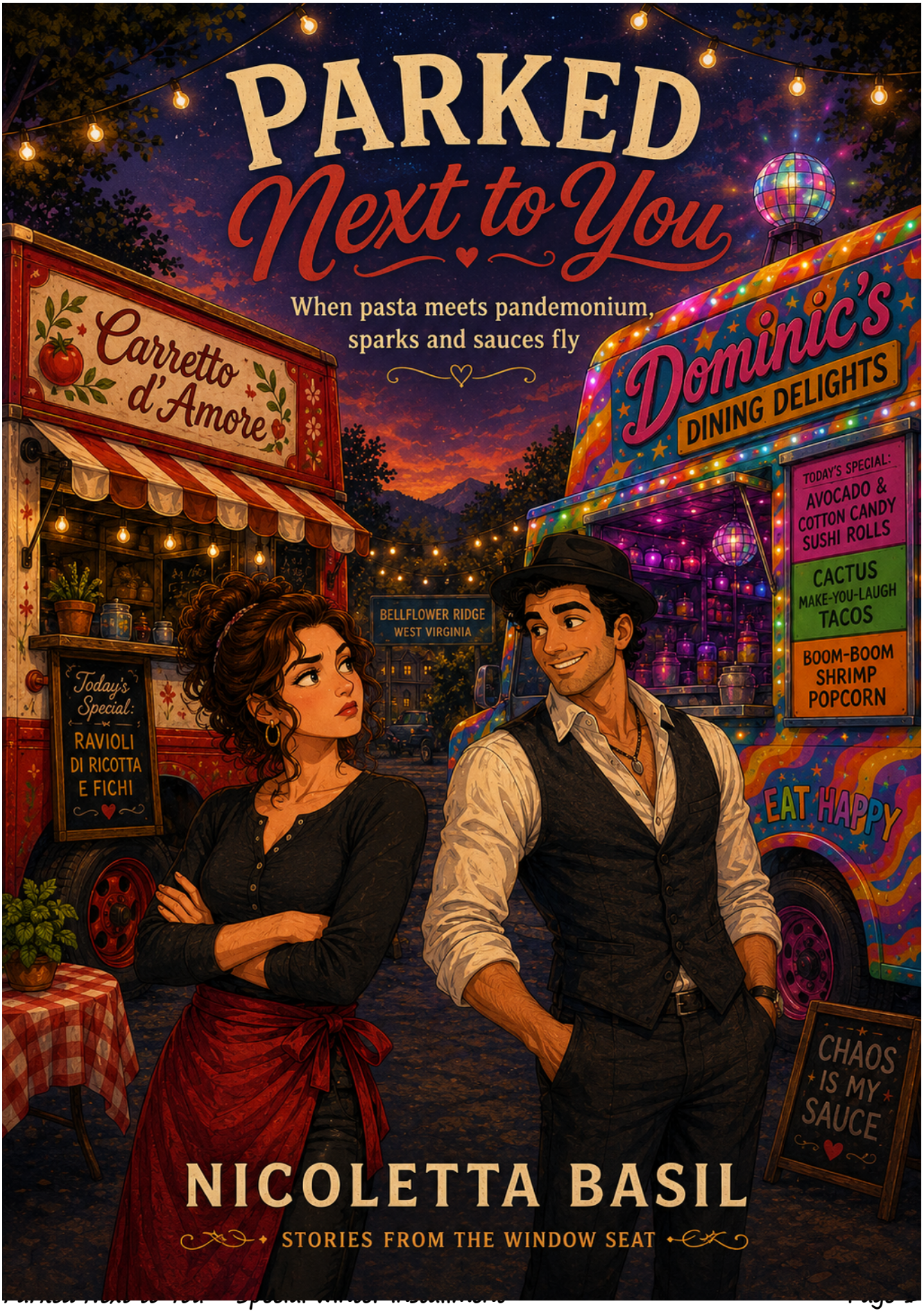

PARKED
Next to You
When pasta meets pandemonium, sparks and sauces fly
Carretto d'Amore
Today's Special:
RAVIOLI DI RICOTTA E FICHI
Dominic's
DINING DELIGHTS
TODAY'S SPECIAL:
AVOCADO & COTTON CANDY SUSHI ROLLS
CACTUS MAKE-YOU-LAUGH TACOS
BOOM-BOOM SHRIMP POPCORN
EAT HAPPY
BELLFLOWER RIDGE
WEST VIRGINIA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

Dear Food Lovers and Fellow Truck Enthusiasts,

Winter does not announce itself in Bellflower Ridge. It arrives quietly, slipping into the food truck lot across from the Kingdom Hall like a held breath. The cracked asphalt cools. The air sharpens. Steam rising from pots and griddles suddenly feels essential, less indulgence, more survival. Gloves appear. Scarves double-wrap. People move with purpose. Unless something gives them a reason to stop. Willa Rossetti senses the shift before she sees it.



Not because the sauce is off. Not because the pasta water isn't salted properly. Those things do not happen. She knows because Gina freezes mid-wipe, one hand gripping a rag, eyes fixed straight ahead with the focus usually reserved for slow-motion disasters or small children wobbling near fountains.

"Willa," Gina says carefully, "Dominic is up to something, again."

Willa steps to the service window and immediately understands.

Dominic Winslow's truck is glowing.

Not neon, something worse. Aggressively neutral white lights blink at slightly different rhythms, creating enthusiasm without coordination. They refuse to commit to a pattern, as if even the lights are uncertain about the decisions that led them here.

A banner hangs crookedly above his window:

SEASONAL REFRESHMENTS
NO PROOF • NO PROBLEMS

A second sign has been duct-taped underneath:

YES, IT'S NON-ALCOHOLIC. PLEASE STOP ASKING.



On the roof sits a giant inflatable snowman in a chef's hat. Every thirty seconds it leans forward, deflates halfway with a long, exhausted hiss, then reinflates suddenly, like it has remembered an obligation it cannot abandon. Zip-tied to its side is a smaller snowman, smiling bravely while contributing nothing structurally.

Gina squints. "Why," she whispers, "does it look like it's breathing?"

"I don't like that it's breathing," Willa replies.

They watch in silence as the snowman sags again.

"And yet," Gina adds, "it's committed."

Then Willa sees the line. Not Dominic's usual scatter of teenagers, chaos tourists, and people who enjoy glitter on principle. This line is different. Orderly. Purposeful. Sensible shoes. Zipped coats. Tote bags held with intention.

"The Kingdom Hall ladies," Gina murmurs. "That's... serious."

"At least they queue properly," Willa says.

At the front stands Deloris Franklin, clipboard tucked under her arm, expression alert and appraising.

Dominic leans out of his window wearing a sweater, rolled sleeves, hair infuriatingly cooperative. That alone is suspicious.

"Good afternoon," he announces, calm and respectful. "Today's beverage is seasonal, non-alcoholic, and suitable for daytime responsibility."



Gina snorts quietly. "Daytime responsibility. Does he even know what that means?"

He lifts a clear cup. Pale green liquid. Frosted edges. A cucumber ribbon. A cotton-candy–flavored ice sickle melting slowly, streaking the cup pink like it is reconsidering its life choices.

Deloris accepts it. She sips. Pauses. Sips again. The lot collectively holds its breath.

"This," Deloris says finally, "is... unexpected."

Dominic nods solemnly. "That was the goal."

"What gives it warmth?" Deloris asks.

"Balance," he replies.

"And the lingering flavor?"

Dominic smiles. "Winter."

Deloris narrows her eyes. "You're avoiding the question."

"Yes, ma'am."

Behind her, the line murmurs approvingly.

Willa leans closer to her window, breathing in deeply. She knows exactly what she's smelling, but she says nothing.

Gina glances at her. "You know."

"I have a theory," Willa says evenly.

"You always do."

Deloris studies Dominic. "You could tell us."

"I could," he agrees. "But then I would have to give up the magic of this emotionally balanced refreshment."

She considers this longer than expected.

"Restraint," Deloris says at last. "That's rare for you."

Dominic chuckled. She steps aside, and the line advances. People return for seconds "purely to confirm consistency." Someone asks if the ice sickle is necessary. Dominic explains it is "emotionally structural." The snowman wheezes again. A woman gave it a sympathetic look and moved out of the way, wondering if it just might topple and fall down.

Before the crowd dissipates, Deloris steps away from Dominic's window and crosses the lot toward Carretto d'Amore.



"I did not abandon your food," she says firmly to Willa. "This was new. Controlled. Surprising without excess."

Willa nods. "I didn't think you had."

Deloris's gaze sharpens. "Do you know what was in it."

"I had an idea, but I am not going to ruin Dominics success." Willa replies.

"That's why I trust your judgment," Deloris says. "You respect boundaries."

She pauses, then adds, "He does too. When it matters."

After Deloris leaves, Gina exhales fully.

"Well," she says, "that was a community review."

"I think we passed," Willa replies.

"You absolutely did," Gina says. Glancing Dominics way she adds "He might have, too."

Willa watches Dominic across the lot, moving methodically now that the rush has thinned. Wiping counters. Adjusting cups. Resetting the chaos.

"I don't like surprises," Willa says.

"No," Gina agrees. "You like intention."

Later, when the lot finally empties and the snowman slumps for good, Willa crosses the asphalt toward Dominic's truck.

"You created a situation," she says.

"I offered a beverage," he replies with a huge grin.

"I have an idea of what's in the drink," she says.

"I don't doubt that you do. You are after all the master of flavors," he says.

"You let it speak for itself," Willa continues. "That's why it worked."

"I won't confirm," Dominic says.



"I wouldn't expect you to."

She hesitates, then nods toward the counter.

"One cup," she says. "For context."

His eyebrows lift. "Really?"

"Professional curiosity," she replies.

He pours carefully. Hands steady. No theatrics.

Willa takes a sip. She doesn't smile. But she doesn't frown either.

"It's balanced," she says finally.

Dominic exhales like he's been holding it all day. She hands the cup back.

"You showed restraint today," Willa says. "Don't ruin that." She turns to leave, then pauses. "And Dominic?"

"Yes?"

"...Good instinct."

Dominic watches her walk away beneath blinking lights and a deflated snowman, knowing, for once, he got it exactly right. Smiling to himself because he did what he never thought possible and impressed Willa.

That is until the next day when Dominics usual chaos was back.



The lot was snowing. That was the first thing Willa Rossetti noticed when she stepped out of her car the next morning.

Not real snow, foam snow, falling in thick, enthusiastic flakes, clinging briefly to jackets, eyelashes, and the tops of coffee cups before dissolving into the asphalt. The machine producing it hummed with confidence, as if it had been promised validation.

Music drifted across the lot. Winter music. Strings. Bells. Something that suggested fireplaces, wool blankets, and feelings that wanted to be addressed immediately.

Willa stopped walking. She didn't sigh. She didn't swear. She just stared.

Dominic Winslow's truck had disappeared beneath an environment.

Someone had tried to make a forest. Someone had succeeded.

And then there were the snowmen. The original snowman still sat on the roof, wheezing loyally, leaning slightly to the left like a survivor of previous decisions. But now he had company.

Two inflatable snowmen flanked the service window, arms raised in relentless cheer. Another guarded the chalkboard menu. A smaller one—unsettlingly optimistic—had been wedged beside a trash can, smiling directly at anyone trying to pass.



None of them deflated.

That felt important.

Gina came up beside Willa and stopped short.

"...Is he building a village?"

Willa counted snowmen. Counted trees. Counted the feet of clearance between décor and reality.

"He's building a feeling," she said. "And ignoring physics."

Dominic burst into view wearing a knit beanie, a scarf looped twice, and an apron that read CHALET MODE. He was animated—too animated—moving between customers, gesturing broadly, clearly in love with his own momentum.

"Welcome to the Winter Chalet!" he called. "Please watch your step—the snow is part of the experience."

A woman laughed nervously. "Is there anywhere to sit?"

Dominic paused. "Emotionally? Yes."

Physically, there was not.

Every available surface was occupied by décor. Pine trees crowded the edges. Snowmen blocked corners. A short, decorative sled track, no more than six feet long, had been installed near the front, where Dominic enthusiastically demonstrated a "symbolic ride downhill."

A man stepped aside to let someone pass and bumped into a tree.

"Sorry," he muttered. "It's... cozy."

"It feels crowded," someone else whispered.

"I can't tell where the line starts," another said.

Willa crossed her arms. She didn't sigh. She didn't swear. She just said, very calmly,

"He had one good day and now he's working too hard to make sure it doesn't disappear."

Gina watched Dominic rearrange a snowman, then straighten a garland that was already straight.

"...That's kind of sad," she said. "Also wildly unnecessary."

Willa nodded. "Both things can be true."

The chalkboard menu had tripled. At the top sat the cucumber wasabi cooler—unchanged, dignified, steady. Below it, written with unearned confidence:

CHALET COCO (LIMITED)
Dark cocoa • smoked cinnamon • black pepper • citrus peel • olive oil foam • sea salt • orange blossom



Gina read it slowly. "Why," she asked quietly, "does the hot chocolate have a résumé?"

Dominic overheard. "Depth!" he called. "Winter drinks should have layers."

A woman took a sip. Paused. Smiled politely. "It's... complex."

Another frowned. "Why does it finish spicy?"

A third whispered, "Is the oil necessary?"

Dominic blinked. "Integral."



The line hesitated. Deloris Franklin appeared at the edge of the lot and stopped completely. She took in the pine trees. The snowmen. The foam. The sled. "This," she said calmly, "is excessive."

Dominic turned, still smiling. "I wanted people to feel held."

"Held? By what exactly?" Deloris said flatly.

"Winter and feelings" Dominic replied. "Emotionally held."

She gestured toward the crowd squeezed between décor. "And where, precisely, are they meant to stand?" No one answered. Phones lowered. Someone stepped out of line. Another glanced toward Willa's truck like it had suddenly remembered it existed. By noon, the problem wasn't the snow. It was the people.

"I just wanted the drink," someone said.

"There's nowhere to stand."

"I feel boxed in."

At the window, a woman accepted a cup of Chalet Coco and hesitated.

"I liked it better yesterday," she said gently.

That landed. Dominic laughed too quickly. "Yesterday was simpler. Today is immersive."

"I don't feel immersed," someone replied. "I feel... trapped in a forest."

Silence followed. The snow machine hummed on, cheerfully unaware.

"This," Deloris said finally, "is no longer welcoming."

The words did not shout. They didn't need to. Across the lot, Willa closed her window.

Gina leaned closer. "This is the part where it tips."

"Yes," Willa said. "Now he has no choice but to realize his mistake."



Dominic reached up. The snow machine shut off. Foam drifted once more, then stopped.

The music lowered. A pine tree was pulled back. One snowman was unplugged, slumping gently to the ground like it was relieved.

The lot exhaled. People drifted away, not angry, just done. Half-finished cocoa cups sat abandoned. The cooler still sold, without all the overwhelming decor.

Later, Dominic walked over, scarf loosened, eyes tired.

"I think," he said carefully, "I confused comfort with crowding."

Willa met his gaze. "You tried to build reassurance instead of trusting it."

"I panicked," he admitted.

"Yes," she said gently. "That's what it looked like."

They talked quietly then. About good days. About fear. About not trying to trap moments just because they finally feel right.

"You don't have to earn the good days," Willa told him. "You just have to let them count."



When she finally turned to walk back, Gina was waiting.

"Well," Gina said, watching Dominic sit on the edge of his truck, staring thoughtfully at the asphalt, "he didn't cry, he didn't add another snowman, and he actually listened. That's growth."

Willa didn't look back. "He'll forget again."

"Oh, absolutely," Gina replied. "But next time he'll only add one unnecessary thing instead of an entire emotional village. It is Dominic we are talking about!"

Willa snorted despite herself.

Gina smiled. "Very calm of you to offer advice. Very wise. Very not invested, hmm."

Willa shot her a look. Gina raised her hands; "ok we can pretend that didn't happen."

Willa didn't comment, just gave Dominic a final glance before locking up.



Stay tuned to see what chaos Dominic creates next.
Nicoletta Basil,
From the Window Seat