



Chapter 2



Mom was all dressed up when she walked into the living room. She fastened a bracelet around her wrist.

“Mom, you look nice,” Emilia said, looking up from where she sat on the floor with Alfie and Zia. They were huddled around the coffee table, working on a puzzle.

“*Grazie, amore.* Thank you, love,” Mom said. “So, Zia, did you say you’re going to cook dinner or you’re going out?”

Zia Donatella frowned at Mom.

“*Cucina,*” Mom said. “You’ll cook. Of course.”

“I have a plan for tonight that I think the kids are going to love,” Zia said. “Something *interessante*, a little interesting, to help them see how wonderful it is right

here in their own backyard. Ha! Found one,” she said, locking a puzzle piece into place.



Alfie propped his elbow on the table and rested his chin in his hand. He and Emilia never knew when one of Zia’s magical recipes might send them to a new place. They were always ready to meet new friends and taste amazing new foods. But it sounded like tonight wouldn’t be one of those nights.

Dad came into the living room wrestling with his tie. “Whatever you decide to do, have fun tonight,” he said.

“And you kids try to behave yourselves,” Mom added as she fixed Dad’s tie for him.

“We’ll find some kind of trouble to get into, don’t worry.” Zia smiled.

Mom and Dad kissed Alfie and Emilia on their heads and left for the party.

“Now then,” Zia said, getting up from the floor. “Time to start dinner.”

“Already?” Alfie looked at the clock. “It’s kind of early.”

“Some dishes take time,” Zia said. “Like the one I want us to make tonight.”

Emilia and Alfie followed Zia into the kitchen. “What can we do to help?” Emilia asked.

“We can start with the holy trinity,” Zia said.

“What’s that?”

“For this dish, it’s three things: onion, celery, and bell pepper. They all need to be diced.”

“I’m on it.” Emilia slid over to the fridge in her polka-dot socks. She carried the ingredients back to the cutting

board, where Zia watched her chop up the vegetables.

“Careful now,” Zia said. “Take your time, and keep those fingers out of the way.”

“I will,” Emilia said, concentrating.

“While she’s doing that, we can start on a key part of the dish,” Zia told Alfie. “The roux.”

“I’m ready,” Alfie said. He was happy to handle the important stuff and leave the dicing to Emilia.

“To make the roux we need equal parts butter and flour,” Zia said, pulling out a heavy stockpot and a stick of butter. “Alfredo, will you get the flour from the pantry?”

“Sure,” Alfie said.

“What’s *roo*, anyway?” Emilia asked, keeping her eyes on the cutting board.

“Roux, spelled *r-o-u-x*, is a special base sauce,” Zia said.

“Sounds French,” Emilia said, stopping to look at Alfie. He knew what that look meant. Maybe they were going back to Paris, or to somewhere else in France?

Zia nodded. “Very good.”

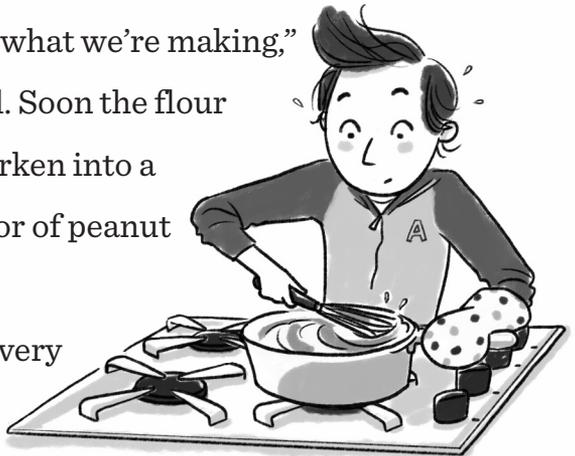
“What else?” Alfie asked, setting the flour on the counter.

“That’s it for now.” Zia waited until the pot was hot, then she added the butter and swirled it around. “Keep watching the butter until it’s melted. Then we’re ready to go.”

Once the melted butter had coated the bottom of the pot, Zia slowly began to sprinkle in the flour and whisked them together. “We do this until we get the color and thickness we want. Here you go, Alfredo,” she said, handing him the whisk and the rest of the flour.

“You haven’t told us what we’re making,” Alfie said as he whisked. Soon the flour and butter started to darken into a creamy mixture the color of peanut butter.

“We need one other very important ingredient,”



Zia said, walking over to the fridge. She brought a large sausage link over to Emilia's cutting board. "Slice this andouille sausage into coins, about this thick." She demonstrated the first slice.

"*An-dooey*," Alfie repeated. "But what is the dish?" He couldn't stand not knowing what they were cooking!

"We're making an authentic New Orleans, Louisiana-style gumbo," said Zia.

"New Orleans?" Alfie asked as he whisked and whisked. His right arm was getting tired so he switched to his left. "Then why does it sound French?"

"Because it was the French who originally founded the city," Zia said. "Then the Spanish took it over, then the French took it back, and then the Americans bought it during a thing called . . ."

"The Louisiana Purchase!" Emilia chimed in.

"That's right!" Zia said.

Alfie switched back to whisking with his right arm and shook out his left. He eyed Emilia's chopping station

enviously. “How do you know so much about New Orleans’s history?” he asked Zia.

“Well, I don’t just eat my way through cities,” she said. “It’s important to know a little history about the places you visit, too.”

“And before the French and Spanish lived in New Orleans, the Native Americans lived there,” Emilia said. “They didn’t call it New Orleans, though.”

“*Brava!*” said Zia. “Very good. And all those different cultures, along with a rich history of African American traditions, helped influence the food that’s eaten there today. How’s that roux coming along?” Zia looked in Alfie’s pot. The mixture was now the color of milk chocolate. “*Perfetto!* That’s perfect. Time to bring all the ingredients together. Emilia, put the holy trinity in the pot here. Alfie, keep stirring.”

Emilia brought the onion, celery, and pepper to Zia and pulled up a kitchen stool to watch. Zia handed Alfie a wooden spoon to replace his whisk. Alfie sighed and

switched arms again. *Since when did cooking become such hard work?*

Next Zia slid the sausage into the pot. “Some people add chicken and shrimp or other seafood to their gumbo, but I like mine simple with just sausage. It adds a perfect smoky flavor.”

“When were you in New Orleans, Zia?” Emilia asked.

“Yeah, and what was it like?” Alfie added.

“New Orleans is like no other place in the US *or* the world,” Zia said. “The food is so unique, it can’t be found anywhere else. And the music! Music is as important to the city as food. When I was there, goodness, it was ages ago now, I met a trumpet player who played jazz just like he made his gumbo—full of warmth and soulfulness. We met his friends and danced on a balcony overlooking Bourbon Street. I don’t think I’ve ever had so much energy in my life. We danced all night!”

“Sounds like one big party!” Alfie said.

“The city loves any reason to celebrate, that’s for

sure,” said Zia. “But they also love taking their time about things—like their gumbo. Almost time to add the spices. But keep stirring!”

Alfie switched arms yet again, not wanting to admit how tired he was.

Zia slowly added chicken broth to the mixture. “And now for the spices,” she said. “A little thyme, two bay leaves, a pinch of salt, some fresh garlic, a dash of cayenne pepper for kick. Stir it all together, Alfie.” Alfie hadn’t stopped stirring for what seemed like an hour! “And of course, the ingredient my trumpeter friend showed me: ground sassafras leaves. This is also called *filé* powder or gumbo *filé*. Just a little goes into the pot and *viola!*”

“Time to eat?” Alfie asked. All that stirring had made him hungry!

“Not yet,” Zia said. “The longer it simmers, the better the flavor. Oh—you can stop stirring now.”

Alfie happily stepped away from the stove.

While the gumbo simmered, Zia started cooking some

white rice. Then she put on some music.

“What kind of music is this?” Emilia asked.

“This is jazz. Jazz was born in New Orleans, just like this gumbo.”

Alfie picked up two wooden spoons and tapped the handles against the counter in rhythm to the music. He had just started learning to play the drums. Maybe he could be a jazz drummer!

Zia stirred the gumbo and let the steam drift over her face. “Mmmm,” she said. “I think it’s ready.” She took two bowls from the cupboard and added a scoop of rice to the bottom of each. Then she ladled a cup of gumbo over the top of the rice.

“Aren’t you eating, too, Zia?” Emilia asked.

She smiled. “I will in a minute. I want you two to try it first.”

Zia set the bowls in front of Alfie and Emilia and leaned on the counter. “We eat with our eyes first. See how hearty and comforting that looks, but festive, too,

with the bursts of pepper,” she said. “That’s what comes to mind when I think of New Orleans. Comfort food. And everyone is so friendly and laid-back—just like the food. Now, smell.”

Alfie put his nose close to the bowl. The gumbo smelled rich and spicy.

“One thing’s for sure,” said Zia. “You’ll never be hungry when you go to New Orleans! Just take one bite and you’ll understand.”

Alfie and Emilia lifted their spoons and blew on the hot gumbo. They took a bite at the same time. The sauce was soupy and coated Alfie’s mouth in an explosion of flavors and spices—hot but not too spicy. The onions, celery, and pepper had softened and gave extra flavor to everything. Alfie’s favorite part was the andouille



sausage. Zia was right—it had a smoky flavor and perfect chewiness all on its own.

“This is amazing,” Alfie said. He scooped up another big bite, this time making sure to get some rice on his spoon. “It’s spicy, but I like it.”

“Me too,” Emilia said. “And with this music, I feel like I’m there!”

“Oh, you should see the bands that play!” Zia said. “Leading wedding parties right down the middle of the street—everyone dancing, including people just passing by. New Orleans knows how to throw a party. And everything is a celebration, but especially the food. A city so diverse deserves to celebrate every day.”

Alfie was all for celebrating. He could see the dancing, hear the music, and even feel the heat of the city itself, all right there in his bowl of gumbo. Just when he decided that maybe New Orleans would be a great place to visit, he got that feeling in the pit of his stomach that told him to hold on—one of Zia’s adventures was coming up . . .