

Gelato at the Villa



ROBIN JONES GUNN

SUITCASE SISTERS #2

*Gelato
at the Villa*
A SUITCASE
SISTERS NOVEL

ROBIN JONES GUNN



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For Paula,
my Suitcase Sister and favorite Pilgrim.

Prologue

Chi trova un amico, trova un tesoro.
Whoever finds a friend finds a treasure.

Italian saying

We didn't expect to love her. Admire her beauty? Of course. Enjoy her traditional recipes? Absolutely. Appreciate the accomplishments of her many children? No question.

But fall in love with Italy? Become irresistibly smitten with her voice, fragrance, and unforgettable personality so much that we cried when we left her?

No, Claire and I didn't anticipate that. Nor did we expect that the stories of our lives would be forever altered under the ancient Tuscan night sky. Beauty and chaos, truth and understanding melded in ways I don't think would have happened for us back home in Redlands, California.

We had to go to Italy.

The possibility of our adventure began as a daydream eight months before we boarded the plane. Claire got the

bug while watching a travel show about Italy and proposed the idea of a trip the next time we met for coffee.

“Did you know that we can take a cooking class and stay in a real Italian villa?” she asked. “I did some research and there’s one just outside of Florence that looks amazing. Can you imagine making our own pasta?”

“That sounds like your best dream come true,” I said. “Are you and Jared thinking of going?”

“No, I was thinking you and I should go,” Claire said. “I know you’re not obsessed with cooking the way I am, but don’t you think it would be fun to go to Florence? And maybe Venice?”

“Ooh. Venice.” I let the possibility settle on me and answered in a faraway voice, “I always wanted to go to Venice.”

“Then let’s do it,” Claire said decisively. “Let’s go to Florence and Venice. But not Rome.”

“What’s wrong with Rome?”

“I went there in high school for a school choir trip and . . .” Claire’s chin dipped.

“I didn’t know you went to Rome.”

“Bad memories,” she said.

“What happened?”

“There was this guy . . .”

“In Rome?”

“No. From my school. He was in the choir, and he told me a week before the trip that he liked me. I was so excited and thought he was going to be my first boyfriend. I really liked him too. Then on the plane he ignored me and avoided me the whole trip.”

“That’s brutal.”

“I know. It’s hard to get excited about the Colosseum or the Vatican when you’re sixteen and walking around with a broken heart.”

I reached across the table at the coffee shop and gave her arm a comforting squeeze. “Rome is off our list,” I said with the tone of a solidarity sister. “And that’s fine with me because my memories of Rome aren’t that great either. I was twelve when my family went. It was our first trip on my dad’s airline passes, and my mom was determined to see everything. All I remember is that my brother and my dad got into an argument in a nice restaurant and my mom was mortified.”

“With all the trips you took with your family, why didn’t you ever go to Venice?”

“I don’t know. Maybe my mom had bad memories of Rome too. The only other place my mom and dad went to in Italy was Bellagio. They loved it. I think they went there twice.”

Claire leaned forward and brushed her bangs back so she could look me in the eye. “I need to do this, Grace. We need to do this. Venice and Florence and let’s add Bellagio. Perfect. Done.”

I knew she was worn out emotionally after losing both her parents in the last year. The weeks she’d spent closing up their home and settling their affairs in another state had sparked a restlessness, and my best friend seemed to be on the hunt for an unnamed piece of her life that had gone missing.

“I’m not the only one who needs to get into an escape pod right now,” Claire said, giving me a stern look. “Your stress levels at work have been too high for too long. What’s that saying about how you need to come apart before you come apart?”

In the same way that I knew about Claire’s emotional exhaustion after the passing of her parents, she knew about my boss, a high-strung ophthalmologist in his late seventies. His

health was declining, and every week at random intervals, he would walk past my receptionist desk without a word and leave the office with no indication of when he'd return. Dealing with irritated patients for months and trying to reschedule them and provide an adequate apology is more draining than it sounds.

Claire's proposal of a trip to Italy felt like an open window. I longed to fly out that window and go far away, where I would not have to deal with another incomplete insurance form or misplaced patient file. It would be wonderful to spend a whole week without having another patient take out their frustration on me.

I told my husband, Nathan, about Claire's idea, and to my surprise, he agreed we should go. His exact words were "Claire's right. You need to do this."

He reminded me that his mom had gone to Venice with her sister-in-law about twenty years ago. I called her for advice, and Sue had only praise for her adventure.

"Grace," she said, "you and Claire will be so glad you went. I might be able to arrange a place for you to stay in Venice. Would you like me to reach out to the people I know?"

When Claire and I met again for coffee a few days later, I felt like I was twenty and not almost forty. Dreaming of the possibility of the trip was cathartic. Even if we weren't able to pull it off, just having something else to think about and dream about did my heart a world of good.

I presented Claire with possible dates, a tentative confirmation from my mother-in-law for a place to stay in Venice, and the promise of flight vouchers from my dad, a retired airline pilot. I also had lots of advice from my mom on what to see and do in the Lake District of Northern Italy around the chic town of Bellagio.

"Looks like all we need are new suitcases!" A sparkle lit

up Claire's pale blue eyes. I could always tell her mood by her eyes. Over the last few years, she had grown her bangs out and they'd become like curtains she could pull down and hide behind on her worst days. That day, I had an unobstructed view of her expression, and it was clear that something important was happening. We were about to turn the page and start a new chapter in the book of "us."

One of the things I loved about our decade-long friendship was that it began because of a book. Claire had been nestled on the cushioned bench by the door of the coffee shop I frequently stopped at on my way to work. One morning, as I was leaving with my latte, I noticed the cover of the novel she was reading. The book wasn't a new release, nor had it been a bestseller or the top pick of some famous person. The surprise was that I had just finished reading the same book the night before.

Claire glanced up. I introduced myself politely and nodded at the book. Five minutes later we were friends. It was that easy.

Now, is that odd? Or is that God? I'll tell you the answer. It's God. It's always God when the coincidence is too much of a . . . well, coincidence.

It's poetic, really, that God used a book to connect us, because Claire once said that some books made her feel as if she belonged at the same table with her favorite imaginary friends. I love that thought because I've felt the same way with certain books too. But until Claire said it, I didn't know how to name the sense of being invited into the story.

When I was young, my mom read Bible stories to me every night. My tender little heart embraced Jesus when I was eight, and I never doubted that I had been invited into God's story and belonged at the table along with the many real people He wrote about.

Claire, however, had walked away from that table, so to speak. When you hear why, it will make sense. But what I witnessed in Italy was that the Author and Finisher of her faith was about to add an astonishing twist to her story. I'm so glad I got to share that chapter with her.

It's been only a few months since our trip, and just the other day I was thinking about how different we would be if we hadn't made the trek, or, as we learned to call it, the pilgrimage. We discovered that a tourist travels to seek something new and curiosity-satisfying in a faraway place. A pilgrim travels to seek a sense of belonging and something soul-satisfying in a faraway place.

Claire and I planned our trip as tourists. We returned home as pilgrims.

Yes, we needed to go to Italy. We needed to gaze at works of art that are without equal anywhere in the world. We needed to meet some remarkable people who elevated our limited concepts of hospitality, kindness, and love. We needed to indulge in every variety of pasta we could find.

Most of all, Claire and I needed the luxury of long, uninterrupted conversations. We needed to sit under a trellis dripping with wisteria and talk about things we'd never shared with each other. We needed to laugh hard and give way to a river of tears.

And yes, we needed to close our eyes and dream new dreams as we savored fresh strawberry gelato at the villa.



It is not down on any map; true places never are.

Herman Melville

Even though Claire and I spent months researching, planning, and organizing every detail for our trip to Italy, from the moment we arrived in Venice, I wondered if we'd made a big mistake.

The doubts crept in as thick as the heavy fog that enshrouded us when we boarded the water bus outside the Santa Lucia train station. The inside cabin of our vaporetto was full, so Claire and I had to stand in the open space at the front of the large craft. We braced ourselves, shoulder to shoulder, leaning on the railing, and could barely see ten feet in any direction as we floated down the Grand Canal.

“This is not what I expected.” My voice quickly dispersed into the mist.

Claire pulled up the hood of her jacket. “It’s creepy, isn’t it? All the buildings seem to have vanished.”

“I pictured us arriving just in time to see a blistering orange sunset like the ones we saw in all those pictures.”

“I didn’t expect it to be this cold.”

A horn sounded.

We couldn’t tell which direction it was coming from. Claire and I turned toward the captain at the helm inside the crowded vessel. He quickly looked right then left and did not appear confident at all.

Another horn sounded.

“Hey!” Claire pointed straight ahead and waved her arms.

The nose of a sleek wooden boat emerged from the haze, heading directly toward us. Our captain veered to the right. Claire and I gripped the cold metal railing and steadied ourselves as the smaller craft passed with only a few feet separating our hulls. I looked down into the cabin of the passing boat, where the passengers looked up at us with wide eyes and unmoving lips.

Our craft bobbed and tilted. Claire grabbed her suitcase and tucked it between her legs to keep it from rolling away. She looked like a nervous hen who had just laid a big rectangular egg. I gripped the handle of my suitcase and tried to keep my posture straight and steady.

“Claire,” I said, “I think we should have spent the money to have a private boat pick us up.”

“Too late now. Besides, don’t you think it would be more dangerous to be in a small boat right now, like the one that just passed us?”

“You’re right.” I drew in a deep draft of the moist air. “We should be fine.”

I tried to appear confident because I was the one who had worked out the details for this part of our trip. I had every reason to trust my mother-in-law, who had set up the accommodation for our three nights in Venice. She even surprised us and paid for our room.

However, when Claire and I tried to look up the lodgings

online, the place didn't seem to exist. We had only a few details about the room from the confirmation email and hadn't seen any pictures. All I had was an address that I'd marked on my phone app before we left California. That didn't seem like enough now that we were here on the other side of the world and adrift in an eerie, blinding fog.

"Two more stops before we get off, right?" Claire asked.

I nodded and checked my phone to be certain.

Claire remained uncomfortably quiet as our vaporetto pulled up at the next dock. I tried to think of how we could go about finding a different place to stay if our plan A turned out horribly wrong. The good thing about Claire was that she was efficient and resourceful. She'd planned the details for the rest of our trip, and I was confident that if my contribution to our journey was a disaster, she would be able to come up with a plan B.

I didn't want my plans to fail, though. This was Venice! We wanted to love Venice. We had placed so many hopes in this being a fun and restful getaway.

Our large vaporetto motored on until it made a bumpy arrival at the dock where we needed to get off. A dozen other passengers exited along with us, but nearly all of them went in the opposite direction from where the map indicated we should go. We pulled our suitcases behind us on the uneven path as if they were belligerent old dogs that didn't want to go for a walk. At the moment, I kind of didn't blame their reluctance.

I checked my map again and followed the arrow. Within a hundred yards of the dock, we were alone, headed down a shadowy, narrow passageway.

"Grace?" Claire didn't have to finish her sentence. I knew what she was thinking. I was thinking the same thing.

I charged ahead, walking at a quick pace. The passageway

soon opened to a plaza area labeled on my app as a campo. We crossed the broad space that was void of any other humans and headed for a narrow bridge over one of the many small waterways. The old buildings on every side of us were easier to see now that we were away from the thick fog over the water. They looked menacing with their darkened windows.

Once we were over the bridge, I told Claire, “Look for a sign over a door that says ‘Trattoria da Tommaso.’ It will be on the left side.”

We went about a hundred feet before Claire said, “Is that it? It looks like a restaurant.”

I double-checked my phone. “The confirmation email said this is where we pick up our key.”

I went first, cautiously entering the softly lit café. The tables were empty, but the scent of the food cooking prompted us to exchange slightly hopeful looks. At least we could eat well before having to venture out in the fog to find a real hotel that would take us in.

As per the instructions, I went over to the bar and politely cleared my throat, waiting for the bartender to notice us. Claire pushed the hood of her jacket off her wispy blond hair and suddenly looked like a dandelion.

The bartender came over with a towel over his shoulder and an unruffled expression.

“Hello. Good evening. I’m Grace. We have a reservation. We were told to come here for the key.”

He gave a single nod, his posture making it clear that he had done this so many times he had stopped trying to be charming about it. After reaching into a drawer behind him, he pulled out a fob with the number 4 on it. He handed it to me and walked away, saying, “Benvenuta.”

“Excuse me,” I said. “Can you tell us which direction we should go?”

He nodded toward the back of the restaurant. Claire gave me a wary look, but I did my best to ignore it. After all, we had a key. A modern key. A fob. We had a room number. The check-in guy knew we were coming. It all seemed legit.

Trying once again to appear more self-assured than I felt, I led the way past the tables covered with white cloths and folded cloth napkins. The local time was a little after seven o'clock. Apparently, Venetians ate later than seven. At least I hoped that was why the tables were vacant and the eating area felt strangely quiet.

We entered a narrow hall with a bathroom on the left. The opening to the kitchen was on the right. Delicious scents wafted from the slightly open door, causing us to slow down and breathe in deeply.

“Now that is how onions sautéing in olive oil are supposed to smell,” Claire said in a mellow voice.

I started dreaming of lasagna. A big, fat serving of true Italian lasagna with sauce made of fresh herbs and vine-ripened tomatoes. My taste buds made a silent promise to the dinner that would inevitably find its way to my empty belly. *I'll be back. Wait for me.*

We continued past stacked boxes to the open door at the end of the hall. Claire reached for my arm and we stopped at the same moment, frozen in place.

Before us was an enchanting courtyard. Lanterns hung from curved shepherds' hooks placed at intervals along the stone path. Raised garden boxes symmetrically radiated from the center like sunbeams. At the heart was a fountain welcoming us with the gentle sound of the water flowing over the top.

The fog that enshrouded Venice was barely a whisper in this enclosed space. Only a thin, slightly hazy touch of the vaporous clouds settled here. They only added to the dreamlike

feeling. In the far corner, a large tree sheltered two chairs, and from the tree's limbs hung softly glowing lanterns, flickering like chubby fireflies.

We entered the hidden garden slowly, as if we'd been transported to another world. A fairy-tale kingdom. The meeting place of Romeo and Juliet.

I loved gardens and kept a small one at home. It thrilled me to find a garden in the middle of the dense jungle of Venetian structures that had dominated this small island for centuries.

"Did your mother-in-law tell you it was like this?" Claire asked.

"No. I don't think Sue came here. She stayed someplace else, and she never said anything about a garden. I would have remembered the garden."

I trailed my fingers across the edge of the fountain and slid them under the gentle cascade of cool water. It was difficult to tell what was growing in the raised garden beds under the fairy lights. I'd take a closer look in the morning.

"I think that's our room." Claire pointed to a door by the tree and led the way across the stone walkway. "Number four, right?"

The wooden door looked old, and the metal door knocker in the shape of a lion's face looked even older. What an unconventional thing it was to then press the fob against the installed box by the metal door latch and hear it click.

We pushed the door open together, and as soon as the lights came on, Claire and I halted once again.

"It's like a storybook," Claire said as she ventured inside. "Look at the details on the woodwork. This room is so big."

My gaze had fixed on an exquisite chandelier that hung from a main exposed wooden beam in the ceiling. The chandelier had five curved arms from which blue and amber glass dripped like large frozen raindrops. The colors blended with

the rich brocade upholstery on the sofa and the matching roll pillows at the arms. Next to the sofa was an ornate writing desk with built-in boxes just begging to be opened.

“Look. We have everything we need to make coffee.” Claire pointed to the mini nook next to the door. The space was too compact to be called a kitchenette, but it looked well equipped for some simple hot beverage prep.

“I love this little round table.” I lowered into one of the plush chairs by the small table, where two crystal drinking glasses and a matching carafe filled with water awaited us. I carefully removed the crystal stopper and poured the water, and we raised our glasses. Neither of us came up with words for a toast, so we drank the welcome gift in silence and a sense of relief.

Claire strode across the tile floor, checking out the two twin beds with matching ornate headboards and the tall dresser with a large, gold-frame mirror above it. On the edge of the dresser sat a vase filled with red roses. Claire picked up the card at the base of the flowers. Instead of reading it aloud, she came over and sat in the other chair and handed me the card.

*Benvenuta, Grace and Claire.
May you know Peace.
Rest well, Pilgrims.
Paulina*

“Who is Paulina?” Claire asked.

“I’m not sure. Sue’s friend, maybe?”

“This is all just . . .” Claire looked up at the chandelier.
“Wow.”

“I know. Big wow. I did not expect this.”

“It makes sense why they don’t post pictures or list this as a vacation rental. It’s too special.”

“This space has been well loved,” I said. “I feel privileged to be able to stay here.”

“Do you think that’s a closet or a bathroom?” Claire popped up and turned the door handle. “You won’t believe this. It’s a bathroom and it’s marble. All marble. The floor, walls, shower.”

“I would believe anything right now.”

She turned to me. “Grace, I’m sorry I was skeptical about this place. I should have trusted you.”

“You have no reason to apologize. I didn’t know what we were getting into either. I was more nervous than you about all the unknowns.”

Claire stepped into the bathroom and laughed. “Grace, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what? That I was nervous?”

“No. Tell me what my hair looked like! The moisture here is going to be my nemesis.” She trotted over to her suitcase and began playfully singing, “Oh, where is my hairbrush?”

I smiled and decided to stay settled in the chair, sipping the refreshing water. I wasn’t ready to look in the mirror. I was pretty sure that my attempt at the end of our flight to pull my long, dark brown hair up into a smooth twist had been pointless. The twist had unraveled into a loose cluster, and I knew the dense moisture had enticed oodles of wayward strands to curl and come out in every direction in a free-for-all. I was just glad we were here and that the room far exceeded our expectations.

I pushed up the sleeves of the merino wool sweater my mom had purchased for me in preparation for this trip. She insisted that layering would be essential since the weather in May would vary. I was already thankful for the warmth and the quality of the finely knit sweater. I liked being comfortable, and at the moment, I was quite comfortable.

While Claire was in the bathroom, I glanced around at the touches of elegance in our room and thought about the trips I'd taken with my mom during high school and college. If she were here, she would have diplomatically suggested that I shower, fix my hair properly, and change into a crisp white blouse with fresh "slacks" before going out for dinner. Her wealthy upbringing, etiquette, and expectations had governed my life until I met Nathan.

He and I were a case of "opposites attract," and I loved the way we still balanced each other. We started married life with china dinner service for sixteen from my side of the family and camping gear from his side. I hoped that traveling with Claire would be more like camping with Nathan and our daughter, Emma, than the elaborate trips I'd taken with my mom.

"What do you think?" Claire asked, exiting the bathroom. "Do you want to rest a little, or should we go find something to eat?"

"Food, please."

"Good. Because I just happen to know a place that looks pretty good," Claire said. "Or at least it smells good."

I grinned. "Is it within walking distance?"

"Yes, just a tiptoe through the garden."

"Sounds good to me."

"I should warn you that the bartender isn't especially friendly," she said with a grin. "But if we ignore him and focus on the pasta options, we should be fine."

I thought of how I had told her on the vaporetto that "we should be fine," and here we were—more than fine. I caught her eye and said, "Claire?"

"Grace?"

"Guess what?"

"What?"

"We're in Italy."

2



As soon as I saw you, I knew an adventure was about to happen.

A. A. Milne

Nearly every table was taken when we returned to the restaurant. True, the place was small, but the transformation in less than an hour from our first introduction was surprising.

We entered through the back door and waited in the hallway until two waiters had passed in and out of the kitchen before making a quick dash into the now-vibrant hub of conversations and laughter. I found it hard to remember how peaceful the space felt when we first entered. The added high notes of silverware tapping against plates and clinking of glassware in toasts accompanied by the words “cin cin” invited us to be part of the liveliness.

Claire navigated her way through the maze of tables and held up two fingers to the nicely dressed man by the front door. He returned the peace sign as if it were a joke.

“Due,” I said, attempting to use the limited Italian Claire

and I had quizzed each other on during our long flight. “Two. Table for two.”

The man gave a courteous tuck of his chin and escorted us to what was now the last open table in the restaurant. It was also the smallest table and was wedged in between two other parties gathered around tables that should have hosted four people but were accommodating five. The bartender we’d interacted with earlier was now taking orders, and a younger man was pouring wine behind the bar. A third waiter delivered plates of pasta to the table beside us and then turned and spoke to us in Italian. We hesitated.

“Do you speak English?” Claire asked.

“Of course. What would you like?”

“Menus?” Claire ventured.

He studied us for a moment. “Are you Paulina’s friends?”

“Yes,” Claire said.

“We’re staying here,” I added with a nod to the back of the restaurant. “My mother-in-law made the reservation for us, but we don’t actually know Paulina.”

He nodded. A pleasant smile lifted the corners of his mouth. “No menus. I will bring you the best.” He turned and was gone.

I hoped his idea of the “best” was the lasagna my palate longed for. I let my shoulders relax and tried to adjust to the proximity of our dinner companions at the other tables.

Claire leaned across our small table. Her hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, and the sleek style made her eyes look especially large and expectant. “Don’t look so worried. I have a feeling that whatever they bring us will be delicious.” She drew in a slow breath and closed her eyes.

I did the same and noticed that the air was laced with a variety of fragrances now. Aromatic food was only one of the scents. I also detected smoke and fish.

Two glasses of red wine were placed in front of us, followed by two plates with a modest serving of tiny fish popping out of a mound of sautéed onions and topped with pine nuts and raisins.

“Would it be terrible to say that I was hoping for lasagna?” I whispered.

“This is only the starter. The antipasti.” Claire took a bite and nodded her approval. “Sardines. This is nice. A little olive oil, onions, and maybe a dash of vinegar.”

“It amazes me the way you can deconstruct food like that,” I said. “All my palate tells me is if I think it tastes good or not.”

I didn’t tell Claire, but my taste buds weren’t excited about the antipasti. The flavors launched my appetite, though, and I wondered if that was the intention.

Claire reached for her glass of wine, then drew in a slow breath like a connoisseur before taking a sip and swallowing slowly. She looked at me without blinking. “I think I’m in love.”

I followed her actions of lifting my glass to my nose and then my lips. I didn’t have wine very often, so my first taste fell into the same category as the sardines. The sensation on my taste buds was a bit startling, but then the aftertaste of the wine blended with the sardines seemed to be satisfying.

“What do you think?” Claire asked. “Nice, isn’t it?”

I nodded and confessed, “You know how my parents are adamantly against drinking, so wine with meals was not one of the charm school courses I received from my mom.”

Claire took another sip.

“Nathan and I don’t know the first thing about how to select wine or how to pair it with a meal.”

“I don’t know much either,” Claire said. “But I decided that if I was given the opportunity on this trip to drink wine

that was ordered by someone who knew about such things, I was going to enjoy it all.” She raised her glass, and I did the same before letting another taste linger on my tongue.

The next dish was a plate of rice and peas in a creamy sauce. The delicious and satisfying flavors had the effect of comfort food, and I finally felt I could lean back and stop being hesitant about everything.

“You know what feels strange?” I said. “No one is staring at us.”

“Why should they?”

“We’re the outsiders. Tourists. When I traveled with my mom and dad, I could feel people staring at us.”

“Your mom tends to draw attention,” Claire said. “Not in a bad way. She just has an air about her.”

“I know. She does, doesn’t she?”

“I hope it didn’t sound like I was saying that your mom is aloof. She’s not. She’s classy. And kind and generous. I love your mom. Did I tell you she gave me some money last week so I’d have extra souvenir funds?” Claire asked.

I smiled. “She gave me some too.”

“You know what?” Claire leaned in closer and looked serious. “We decided that this trip was going to be a chance for us to try new things.”

“True.”

“So let’s be brave and try new things. If someone stares at us because we have no idea what we’re doing, so what? Everything is new to us.”

“You’re right.”

Our server placed a dish in front of us with layers of pasta stacked up. I hoped it was lasagna. Then I took a closer look. “Claire, why is the sauce black?”

“That must be the squid ink.”

“The what?”

Claire took a hearty first bite. “Oh, that’s good. I was hoping we’d have something tonight made from local scampi. Look at all the little curly shrimp in there. And the Parmesan cheese is amazing.” Claire dove in for a second bite.

When I hesitated, she grinned and said, “Bravery, remember? Try new things.”

I took a bite and was surprised. She was right. It was nice and tasted even nicer with a sip of wine. If squid ink had a distinct taste, I couldn’t detect it.

The final course was served, and we could see by the layers in the glass dessert bowls that it was tiramisu. However, this was unlike any tiramisu I’d ever had. I scraped the sides of the glass with my spoon, trying to nab every bit of it.

“What a great dinner,” Claire said after we paid the bill.

“I don’t think I would have ordered any of those dishes if I had seen a menu in English, but it was all good.”

“I loved it. Did you have a lot of meals like that when you traveled with your family?”

I thought for a moment. “I’ll never forget the drinking chocolate we had at Angelina’s on the Rue de Rivoli in Paris. Oh, and the orange blossom macarons at Ladurée on the Champs-Élysées. Those were so good.”

“Sounds decadent.”

“I also loved the fruit scones with clotted cream we had at afternoon tea at the Ritz in London. That was memorable. And we had some sort of cherry pastry in a village in Denmark that was so good I ordered a second one.” I smiled at the memory and added, “Funny how all my food memories are of desserts.”

“You know what always amazes me about you?” Claire said.

“My sweet tooth?”

“No. It’s how down-to-earth you are. I never knew you’d

traveled so much until we started planning for this trip. In all the years I've known you, you've never acted like a rich girl or bragged about all your first-class experiences."

"The rich girl days were back in my childhood. My life is nothing like that now."

"I know. But I love that you don't act like you're from money."

I thought about her comment when we returned to our room and while I took a shower. Once we were in our beds and about to go to sleep, I said, "You know what I realized? I've been married to Nathan longer than I lived under my parents' roof. My mom taught me the finer things in life, but Nathan has taught me the simple things and that's how I want to live. I mean, I'm grateful for all the experiences my parents gave me, but I don't miss that life. There were always so many expectations."

"Kind of like how things have been at work for you this past year?" Claire asked. "The way your boss keeps handing all the extra jobs over to you ever since his wife passed away?"

"It's not too bad," I said.

"Grace, he has you picking up his dry cleaning and scheduling his lawn maintenance. I've told you this before. I know he's paying you extra, but I think he's taking advantage of you and your kindness to him."

"I know. But I've been working for him since before Emma was born. How can I resign?"

"Like this. You say, 'I resign.'"

I didn't reply.

The sisterly-advice tone in Claire's voice lowered. "I am not trying to be insensitive. I know it's a complicated situation. But didn't you tell me that you and Nathan are the most stable you've ever been financially? Didn't he say that if you didn't work for a year you'd be okay?"

“Yes. That’s because of the inheritance from my grandfather.”

“Well, just think about that. And don’t worry about what your boss will think of you if you resign. You’ve been caught up in the whirlpool of his life and have gone above and beyond to make things easier and better for him.”

“I know.”

“All I’m saying is that you’re not responsible for keeping his practice afloat.” Claire reached over and turned out the light. “Now, to change the subject and give us something to dream about, I need to tell you about the promise I made to Jared.”

“Okay. What did you promise?”

“Remember how you were saying your mom introduced you to the finer things in life? Well, my parents pinched every penny, and I tend to be more like them. As you also know, my husband likes to splurge every now and then, and he made me promise I would splurge on our trip.”

“I can help you with that,” I said. “We’ll start by ordering two tiramisus next time.”

“Actually, I was thinking gelato should be our first big splurge. Did I tell you I made a list of all the gelaterias in Venice?”

I laughed. “How many are there?”

“I don’t know. The list is long. One of them opens at nine tomorrow morning.”

“With that to look forward to, I believe we are going to have sweet dreams tonight.”

“Yes. Gelato dreams,” Claire said.

“Gelato dreams,” I echoed. “Love you, Claire.”

“Love you, Grace.”

Sleep came in two pieces. The first three hours were immediate and deep. Then I woke up and felt like I should check my phone. That was a mistake.

I soon fell into the trap of scrolling, even though I told myself I wasn't going to be phone dependent while we were traveling. I'd already let Nathan know we had arrived in Italy. He'd replied, and all was well at home. No messages were waiting for me from work. I didn't need to check anything else like the weather or how many steps I had taken that day. But I did.

Forcing myself to put my phone back on the nightstand, I tried to fall back asleep. My thoughts tumbled into a deep hole as I ruminated on Claire's comments about work. Even though it was financially feasible, resigning before our trip hadn't felt right. I hoped Mary, who was filling in, was keeping up with everything. I tried to let it all go and dozed off and on for a few more hours.

I finally gave up trying to sleep when I saw the morning light shyly slinking into the room through the edges of the front door, creating faint lines on the tile floor. I stood and tiptoed around our room, gathering my clothes. I felt like I had a weight on my head. Claire was having no problem staying in dreamland. She didn't even stir when I opened the bathroom door and it creaked loudly.

My eyes were puffy, so I pulled out all the aids in my makeup bag and began a futile effort to look fresh and friendly. I was surprised that my hair combed out nicely after washing it last night. I let it fall over my shoulders, and once I was dressed, I decided to go outside and visit the garden.

"Morning," Claire said in a groggy voice as I exited the bathroom. "How did you sleep?"

"Okay. Not great. How about you?"

"I slept deep. This bed is so comfy."

"Hope I didn't wake you."

"You didn't," she said with a yawn.

"I'm going to step outside and have a look at the garden."

I'll make some coffee when I come back." The cool morning air scurried into the room as I opened the door.

"I can make the coffee." Claire pulled the thick comforter up to her chin. "Just give me one more minute in this perfect cocoon."

I left her to her bliss and stepped into mine.

The pale morning sunlight illuminated the garden in the cool morning air. Two small birds flew to the edge of the fountain, where the water glistened like silver. I watched as they shimmied and dipped and then fluttered off to start their day with drip-dry wings.

Taking slow steps, I rounded each garden bed, admiring the healthy-looking tomato plants along with the eggplant, carrots, celery, onions, scallions, and zucchini. I spotted what looked like the start of a few pumpkins. In one of the beds, nasturtiums tumbled over the sides, brightening the corner of the wooden box with their orange and yellow flowers. The final box held stunning rosebushes. I smiled, thinking of how the bouquet in our room must have come from this well-tended garden.

The door of room number two opened, and a woman wearing a simple blue dress with a wide belt stepped out into the garden. Her white hair was carefully pulled up in an elegant chignon. I noticed her flat shoes because they were floral.

She smiled at me and said, "Buongiorno!"

I repeated the "good day" greeting and hoped she didn't say anything else in Italian that I might not understand. Blessedly, she tilted her head slightly and said a single word that I understood and welcomed.

"Cappuccino?"