



Restored
IN
TUSCANY

A TRUE STORY of FACING LOSS,
FINDING BEAUTY, AND LIVING
FORWARD *in* HOPE

ANGELA CORRELL

“What begins as a love letter to Italy transforms ever so gently into a beautifully calibrated story of change, a seemingly simple journey—the awakening of the body, the mind, and the human spirit.

“Woven into this tender tale is a love story of two people who are so different and yet are perfectly fit for one another, each striving to transform the ordinary into something that is deeply meaningful. In the wise, capable hands of Angela Correll, every page delivers another lesson through a slice of idyllic Tuscan life.”

—Linda Bruckheimer, novelist, philanthropist, and preservationist

“This is a terrific book. Angela Correll has given us an insightful, funny, and meaningful look at what it *really* takes to rebuild an ancient abode in a hilltop town in Italy: a very big heart. Whether buying mattresses, navigating the 42 steps it takes to gain a building permit, or just leaning out a bathroom window to take in the very best view of the Tuscan valley below, her observations on place, people, faith, and family make this book a treasure.”

—Bret Lott, *New York Times* bestselling author

“*Restored in Tuscany* is a delightful and meaningful read. As I was caught up in the story of the restoration of an ancient building, I was also challenged by the possibilities of restoration in my own heart. May those who read this book find the flourishing life God has designed for every one of us.”

—Todd Harper, cofounder of Generous Giving

“Angela breathes life into the journey from a small town in rural Kentucky to an even smaller hilltop town in rural Italy. Her gentle reveal is that although the tastes, smells, architecture, and landscape may be different, people are people, nature is nature, God is God, and marriage is a blessed gift as we navigate life. Her invitation is to join her and then make an unexpected journey of your own, to restore your soul and, in doing so, be an unexpected blessing to others.”

—Mark Rodgers, principal of Clapham Group and founder of Wedgwood Institute

“Upon purchasing their home in Tuscany, Angela and her husband, Jess, pray, ‘May God be honored, may it be a blessing to others, may we steward it well.’ This wisdom applies equally to renovating a centuries-old villa and to anyone contemplating a course

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correction in the second half of life. Angela Correll's *Restored in Tuscany* is a refreshingly honest companion for those approaching a significant birthday ending in zero—or dreaming of buying a home in a foreign country. Italy viewed through a born-and-bred Kentuckian's lens, this is Correll's best writing yet!"

—Matthew Sleeth, MD, author of *Reforesting Faith*

"After polishing off the epilogue, which tasted like a perfectly paired after-dinner drink and dessert, I flipped back through page after page, longing for more. Such is the appetizing experience of Angela's new book, *Restored in Tuscany*. I was inspired to look for beauty in all of life as Angela's words painted images I could taste, see, smell, and feel. Her life's ups and downs and her celebrations and sorrows became gifts of healing for my pain and gratitude for my peace. Her mom was my mom. Her fears my fears. Her joys my joys."

—Boyd Bailey, author, founder of Wisdom Hunters

"This book is an invitation to dream and hope amid adversity. Infused with truth, vulnerability, and wisdom, Angela's words invite readers to take courage for our lives as we look over her shoulder and through her heart. We all have longed to have an adventure that changes us forever. I'm so thankful Angela wrote this book to give me the courage to dream again! *Restored in Tuscany* has completely engulfed me. I left encouraged to relish the moments of now and to never quit on my dreams for the future."

—Ashley Marsh, hospitality designer and cofounder of Marsh Collective

"I've been privileged to know Angela Correll and her husband, Jess, for more than two decades. Authentic, relational, committed, intentional, talented, and accountable—these words all describe this amazing couple. In *Restored in Tuscany*, Angela skillfully invites you into her life as she navigates painful losses. It is captivating! I couldn't put it down."

—Howard Dayton, author, founder of Compass

"*Restored in Tuscany* invites us into one woman's personal journey of restoring an ancient Italian home—but more importantly, it invites us into God's restoration of our hearts when we let him into the process. L. Mies van der Rohe said, 'God is in the details,' and Ms. Correll beautifully draws upon God's details in her well-designed abundance juxtaposed against the inevitable loss we all experience outside of Eden. This renovation story will leave you yearning to remake your own home, no matter where you are."

—Margaret Philbrick, author of *A Minor*

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To the Montanini

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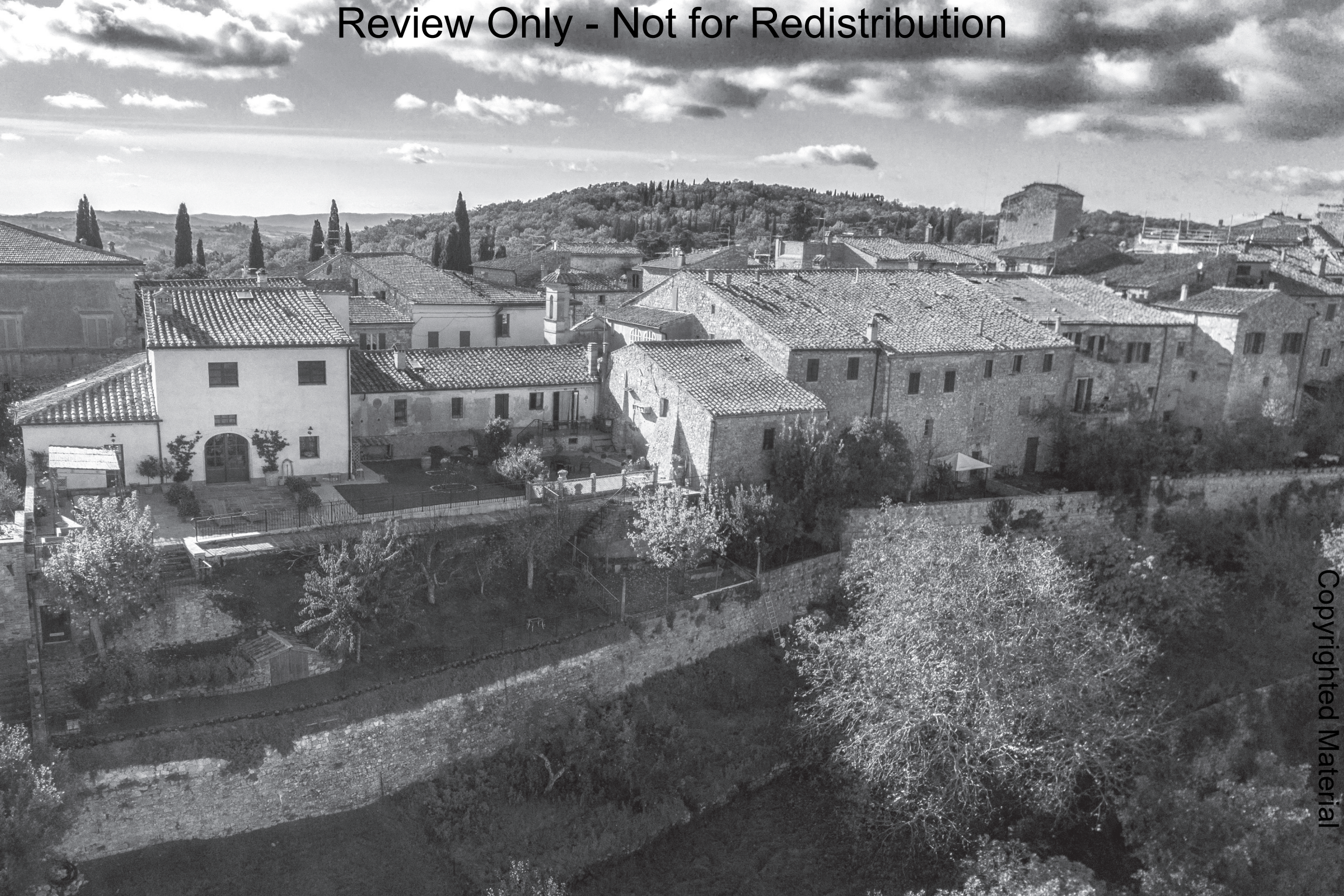
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CHAPTER

No 1

I look around as if I am seeing the inside of an airplane for the first time. That I am even on this plane is almost a miracle. I blink away the sensation of tears and, after a few minutes, realize my hand is still clutching our passports and boarding passes. I slide the documents into a side pocket of my carry-on bag, next to the bundle of Jess's paintbrushes, grabbed at the last minute. He didn't want to bring them or the paints and boards I stuffed into my suitcase; there will be no excuses now.

Time to relax, I tell myself. Nothing else can be done on this eight-hour flight, but I doubt my body or my mind will completely let go. We've been on guard way too long.

This trip can't possibly solve years of ingrained habits, but it might be the antidote for the weight of the last year, even for the busy weeks leading up to this moment. Or at least I can hope.

I rest my head against the seat and close my eyes, but my mind is spinning with thoughts and memories. For some reason, I need to go back to the beginning of this journey, not when we left the house this morning but earlier this summer, when the seed of an idea sprouted and tender roots curled into dry soil and changed the course of my parched summer.



“Thank you, yes, I’ll be there.” I listen to the details on the phone and write them down.

My laptop is open on the kitchen island while I add yet another event to an already overloaded calendar. I should be making supper, but there is always something else that needs doing.

My husband, Jess, glances over the top of our local weekly newspaper. “Did you say Mayfield? Long drive.”

“Only an hour and a half. I can do the book club in half a day.”

He puts down the paper. “You’re thinking of Maysville.”

“Yes, Maysville. Wait, no, Mayfield. Where is Mayfield?”

“Western Kentucky, near Paducah.” He folds up the paper. “Do you want me to make supper?”

“That’s almost five hours one way!”

He pulls pasta from the cabinet and opens the freezer door to hunt for our homemade pesto. “Not quite that far, but pretty close. You can call them back and say no.”

“I accepted weeks ago. I can’t back out now.”

“Take Kristen with you,” he suggests. “You’ll like having company on the long drive.”

“You don’t have to make dinner. I can do it in just a few more minutes.”

“It’s okay. You finish up and I’ll boil the pasta.”



As the book club event approaches, I am torn. On one hand, I could use some time alone in the car after the frenetic activity of my first book launch layered over a full schedule of growing a soapmaking business and retail shop, along with the restoration of multiple guesthouses in Stanford, our little hometown in central Kentucky. Quiet time to sort out my straying thoughts.

On the other hand, Kristen is my intern, and I have spent very little time

with her. I had reservations about taking on the responsibility, but she pressed for the opportunity to help with our hospitality businesses and the revitalization of our Main Street. It was hard to say no to cheap labor when we are all stretched so thin. My schedule is too erratic and unstructured for the consistency and shepherding an intern needs, so I assigned her to the store manager for the day-to-day operations, with me checking in from time to time. She is nearing the end of her summer internship, and I feel guilty about how little time I have invested with her. I invite her to go with me.

The conversation does make the trip to Mayfield go quickly as we catch up on her work with the shop and guesthouses and her many suggestions for improvement. We finally arrive and unload books at the public library. I am pleased to watch as a few dozen ladies and two men wander in and seat themselves around a U-shaped table. Their faces are eager and expectant, and they seem ready with questions and comments about the book.

Book clubs are some of my greatest joys. Writing is a solitary life, and to interact with readers who both enjoy and ask meaningful questions must be akin to a musician playing to an intimate and responsive crowd. The discussion time flies, and then we wrap up and say our goodbyes. Kristen and I find a place to eat a late lunch, with a strong coffee to go for the sleepy afternoon drive home.

Maybe it’s our blood sugar dropping as the miles slip by, or perhaps the four-hour drive that seems to elongate like a race with no finish line, but soon a more negative tone takes the place of previous chatty conversation.

“What would you change or do differently?”

“To be honest, I’m disappointed in the internship,” she says. “I wanted to work directly with you, not your managers. That’s what I thought I was signing up for—to work with you.”

I feel myself lean toward the steering wheel as if I’ve been punched in the gut. Why didn’t I explain to her in the beginning that my time would

be limited? While I am deeply involved in the operations of two of the businesses, I am also doing promotional events for my first book and trying to write a sequel.

Now that I'm thinking about it, why didn't I listen to my gut and tell her the timing is not good because I'm knee-deep in a renovation project to create an eight-room hotel? That venture alone has demanded much of my time.

Why didn't I consider saying no because I'm still grieving after the sudden, shocking loss of our son-in-law last year? Or because I want to be available to give extra attention to my widowed daughter and two grandchildren? Or because I have an aging mother who is becoming needier by the day?

Why didn't I pause and think about my summer garden that needs to be harvested and preserved? About how frequently we host people in our home in the summer?

Why didn't I consider how little I have seen my friends recently, how much I would like to have a day to myself for wandering antique shops or even puttering around the house in my pajamas?

And finally, why didn't I think about how little downtime I spend with my husband when we're not talking about the businesses? He always gets home from work before me these days. Just one night, I would like to be home first, to have the lights on, something delicious sizzling on the stove, and a candle lit.

My goodness, I am disappointed with how little time I get to spend with *me*, now that I think about it. My skin crawls with frustration, but getting defensive with this young woman is not the answer. I created this world in which I live—and willingly brought her into it without attempting to understand her expectations. The fault is mine. The truth is that I did have reservations about saying yes, but I plowed ahead, figuring it could be done, as if I have something to prove to somebody.

She is disappointed in me. I am disappointed in me. Who else am I letting down that I haven't heard from yet? And what the heck *am* I trying to prove?



“Can I get you something to drink?” The flight attendant leans over Jess and lists the offerings, interrupting my reverie.

“Sparkling water or club soda, please?” My throat is tight, but I manage to mouth the words over the steady hum of the jet engines.

She nods, and Jess confirms he wants the same. In a few small but focused motions, she creates our drinks and hands them to us.

“Thank you.” I take a sip and glance at Jess. He is wide awake, engrossed in a high-body-count movie, his hand gripping the tray table, the drink ignored for the moment.

I turn away from him and look out the window. We are flying headlong into the night, leaving the sunset behind us. As the light dims, I fade back into memory, needing to parse out the steps that brought me here, now that there is time to think.



I stare at my laptop and rub my temples. My agent wants a draft of this second book soon, but headaches latch on with more frequency these days and sometimes stay for three days, like a rude houseguest. It's hard to think with a throbbing headache inside your brain, much less to write.

Research is done, I have a basic idea of the character arc and plot, and I have a fun idea for the setting. What I need is the time and space to work on it: to clear away the cobwebs of emails, requests, meetings, and decisions; to immerse myself in the place where part of the story will be set; and to have time to process my grief without having to be somebody or something for someone else.

Jess and I were in Italy only the year before when tragic news came to us. We had just arrived in Rome when we heard our son-in-law, Drew, was in the ICU. A precaution, our daughter Adrienne was told by the doctors, due to the chronic leukemia that had lain dormant in his body. So we drove

tentatively on to the Tuscan countryside with the two couples traveling with us. We were in a van and bumped off the main road onto a gravel lane that wound into the Tuscan hills near Chianti. It was early afternoon when we pulled into the gravel courtyard of a charming boutique hotel made of stone mixed with stucco. Flowering plants softened the rock and the gravel, creating a cinematic scene that I captured in my mind and hold still. We had stumbled into some kind of paradise.

After a lengthy flight and then a four-hour van ride, we were ready to breathe in fresh air and take long walks around the countryside outside this quaint hotel. But luggage was barely unzipped when our son called.

“You need to come home.”

We flew home as soon as flights allowed and drove straight to the hospital to be with our family. Praying, sitting, hoping, and waiting for days, and then our son-in-law died. I cannot change what happened in those surreal and shocking days, but maybe a return trip to Tuscany can have a different ending this time.

A thought slowly blossoms in my mind like a frail and delicate flower, petals tender and craving the sun. I push back my laptop and tap my fingers over my lips.

That’s the answer. I need a small Tuscan village where time stands still, where creativity can unfurl and my own soul can breathe. It will be good for us, and I can have space to write. A place where my character will live as part of a community.

Not the place where we heard about Drew’s grave illness. No, this needs to be a new place, one not marred by death and bad news. The idea of a trip to Italy grows like a climbing vine, twining around my thoughts and unleashing a desire, maybe even a hunger, for time in a Tuscan village. Yes, I am convinced this is the answer, not only for progress on the book but for my own deep-seated need of rest. But there is another who must also be persuaded.



My husband is an entrepreneur gifted with a bright mind, artistic sensibilities, and a love for people. He has the ability to put together complicated deals like the puzzles he works in the wintertime. Along with these gifts is a natural curiosity to see what is around the next corner, especially when we travel, curiosity that can turn to restlessness when forced to stay in one place.

We have taken several trips to Italy over the years, but always as eager travelers, pedal to the metal from one end of the country to the other. Jess might be persuaded to stay in one spot for a week . . . but two? That sounds extravagantly slow. Yet two weeks in one place might be the antidote to the frequent tightness I feel in my chest, among a host of other symptoms.

I pick up my phone and google “heart attack symptoms.”

Jess pushes open the screen door with his foot, balancing a tray with two glasses of wine and a plate of cheese. I drop the phone and look up.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.” My left hand is still on my chest.

“Are you having another heart attack?”

“No!” I drop my hand and manage to sound offended. “That one wasn’t a heart attack. It was a pulmonary embolism.”

“It was pizza.”

“Same symptoms.” I reach for the tray and place it on the mosaic coffee table between us. Maybe it’s time to test the waters. “I’ve been thinking about the next book.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah. It’s been too hard for me to make space to focus on it here with all we’ve got going on. What about going to Tuscany this summer?”

“This summer?” The wheels are turning in his mind; he’s thinking of the expense, of the two weeks away from business, time away from the farm.

“I need to finish the first draft by fall.”

“Huh.” He takes a sip of wine.

“I’d like to stay in a small village. A place where we can walk to the market

and to restaurants, so I can get a feeling for life there. I think two weeks would be enough time.”

“You don’t want to travel around?” He picks up a square of cheese and turns it over and over.

“I can’t do that and write. I need to wake up in the same place every morning.”

“How far along in your book does the trip to Italy happen?”

“About halfway through.”

“Are you there yet?”

“You know I’ve only started.” I try not to sound defensive.

“If you can write up to the point where you need the village, then we’ll go.” He pops the cheese into his mouth.

“We should go ahead and book the trip. Otherwise nothing will be available.”

“We’ll find something,” says the non-planner in the family. “Do the work first, then we’ll book two weeks.”

I know he’s trying to motivate me, but I already feel like the pressure cooker I use to can my green beans. A little pressure creates something good. Too much and the whole thing will blow.

Despite my misgivings, the next morning I’m pouring strong coffee at 5:06 a.m. I slide into my favorite club chair and prop my legs on an ottoman. I stare at the laptop for a few minutes, check the weather on my phone, then a news app to make sure no overnight disasters happened. Finally I open up the Word document and read again the notes I’ve written from my research.

By this time, my coffee mug is empty, so I get up and pour a refill. My little dog scratches at the mudroom door, wanting out. I let her outside, put food in her bowl, then let her back in. I hear Jess move around upstairs, so I scurry back to the chair so I can at least look like I’m writing when he comes downstairs.

“How’s it going?” He looks at me with anticipation, as if I have morphed into Jan Karon overnight.

“It’s hard.”

“You’re doing great,” he says, and gives me an exaggerated toothy smile and a thumbs-up.

I’m not doing great, but I am in the chair with an open laptop. Like exercise, the first few days of a writing habit are painful until the muscle grows used to the work. I force myself to write one scene, then two, not having a clue if they’re any good. The next morning, I only check the weather. This time I write a few more scenes. The following day, I write a chapter. After a week, I now look forward to putting myself in the chair and seeing what the characters will do. A migraine interrupts the start of week two, but I am back at it the next day, willing my fingers to type, even if I feel a bit wobbly. By week three, to my own amazement, the story is flowing.

The emails and to-do lists pile up, yet I am up early every morning, writing furiously, putting everything else on hold until later in the morning. In the afternoons, I harvest the summer garden, and as soon as the supper dishes are whisked away from our farmhouse table, I can tomatoes and green beans in glass jars for the winter with Jess’s help.

There are meetings that must be done for the shop and guesthouses in the midst of this, shadowed by the gnawing guilt over not spending enough time with my elderly mother. One morning when I finish my daily writing quotient early, I invite her to help me with the mass of vegetables on my kitchen counter. She readily agrees, to my great relief.

My little dog is happy to see my mother and welcomes her with high-spirited barks, despite being wary of her colorful painted Mexican cane. My mother’s grand entrance is made with a red blouse, black leather pants, a cheetah print vest, and a hat that has more bling than a Vegas sign. All this for breaking beans.

I give her a hug and get her settled at the kitchen table. “Give me a pillow for the chair,” she says. “I don’t have any padding anymore.” She eyes my backside as she says this, but before she can comment on my padding, I interrupt.

“Can I fix you a cup of coffee?”

“Black, two spoons of sugar.” She says this every time, as if I don’t know how she takes her coffee after approaching a half century of being her daughter. My mother introduced me to coffee as a child, mixed with a heavy dose of cream and sugar, and somehow it feels like our shared beverage.

Not only did Mom introduce me to caffeine at an early age, she also did not breastfeed, and she smoked during her entire pregnancy with me. It was a different time, but she was also a different kind of mom.

I stir the steaming coffee and get her settled at the kitchen table with a pillow for her chair. I spread newspaper on the farmhouse table and dump two bushels of Roma green beans onto it. The pile is a foot high in the center, but my mother is a farm girl from way back, and she is not put off.

I dip bands and lids into boiling water to sterilize them while she snaps away at the beans and we talk.

“Nobody tells me anything anymore,” she complains. “I have to check the Facebook if I want to know what my own family is doing.”

“It’s what people do now.”

“Sarah’s pregnant, did you see that? She better watch herself. Some girls take pregnancy as a green light to stuff their face. It’s easy coming on, but it’s hard to get off.”

I know the pregnancy comment is not directed at me. I’ve never been pregnant; my three children were all teenagers when they came to me as gifts on the wedding altar. Still, this is dangerous territory. My mother has only come into her thinness in recent years as she has aged, yet she thinks she invented weight loss. Her diet plan involves coffee (two spoonsful of sugar) for breakfast, a decent-sized lunch of her choosing, cottage cheese for supper, and a bubbling finish with a Pepsi and two chocolate kisses for dessert.

I switch subjects and tell her about my writing progress, and that we are hoping to go to Italy for two weeks at the end of the summer.

“Humph.” She grunts and then addresses my dog. “Maddie, Mama’s gonna go off and leave you. What do you think about her?”

My desire to travel has caused tension with my mother since elementary

school. I asked to go to Africa in third grade, to Copenhagen in fifth grade, and to Europe on a student trip in high school. The answer was always no.

Money was the main problem, but there was also the strangeness of it. If there was a little extra cash and a little extra time, we drove south to the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee or the beaches in South Carolina. We didn’t go north or west. We especially didn’t get on airplanes, and we most certainly never hurtled over the ocean in a metal tube.



“Chicken or beef?” The flight attendant is back, ready to hand me a culinary delight, freshly reheated in the galley.

“Beef, please.” I scramble to unfold the tray table before she lands the cow.

I peel back the foil covering, and steam rises from the concoction underneath. As hard as it was to get everything caught up so we could go, and despite my mother’s reservations, we are once again hurtling over the Atlantic Ocean toward a boot-shaped peninsula chock-full of history and art, with a cultural lifestyle I can only envy.

I take a bite of the beef and think back on how Jess was right after all. We did find a place to stay when I finally got half the book written.

“Are you sure?” the rental agent asked only a few weeks before. “It’s a very sleepy village, only four hundred people, off the tourist trail.”

I swirl mashed potatoes between the fork tines and add another bit of beef. *Are we sure?* At this point, it doesn’t matter. We are on our way to an apartment we have never seen, in a village whose name we can’t pronounce, in an area we don’t know, for two weeks. There’s not a thing to do now but give myself over to it and try to enjoy every minute.



CHAPTER

No 2

We need coffee. Thirty minutes outside of Rome on our way to Tuscany, Jess steers the rental car into the parking lot of a roadside Autogrill. Inside the door, richly brewed coffee hangs heavy in the air. This is not American gas station cappuccino, with gushing powdered milk and weak coffee. The machines behind the counter could power a Lamborghini.

“Due cappuccini, per favore.” Two cappuccinos, please. The cashier nods and hands me a receipt in exchange for euros. I lay it on the coffee bar and wait to be noticed. A barista takes my paper, reads it, and weaves between the other baristas in a choreographed dance to and from the gleaming machines. The air is filled with sounds of whirring, grinding, thumping, hissing, and the clatter of spoons on ceramic. It is the sound of hope, of new mornings and second chances. The cappuccinos slide in front of us, warm and foamy milk swirled on top and masking a stiff shot of espresso below. We stand at the counter and sip the hot liquid.

The coffee braces Jess for the drive and me for the ride. He grips the steering wheel like a professional Italian race car driver, but our Ford Focus is no match for the flying Mercedes,

Maseratis, and Lancias that whiz in and out of the narrow lanes. I release my white-knuckled grip on the armrest when we finally exit the autostrada, and Jess slows down to navigate curvy back roads. The landscape morphs from a green and blue blur into vineyards and olive groves.

A glimpse of stone and terra-cotta rooftops on a hilltop appears—and then, like a tempting mirage, it's gone. We meander another few kilometers, around more curves, and up the side of a small mountain. A tiny brown directional sign points the way to Montefollonico, and I feel a tingling of nerves race through my body. I've committed to staying in an unknown place to accomplish a lofty writing goal of half a book draft in two weeks. I hope this place is a fraction of how nice the photos online made it look, because there is no backup plan.

As we drive up a hillside, we pass a smattering of newer houses, a small school, and then the road seems to dead-end at an imposing stone entrance gate. Jess maneuvers the car next to a stone wall that borders a small park, while I crane my neck to take in all the surroundings. The shady park has slides and swings, meandering paths, a war memorial, and a bocce court.

Next to the city gate, old men sit like crows on a stone bench and stare at us with open mouths. Jess nods a greeting to them, and one gives an amused smile back, as if we are somehow on stage and he is surprised that we can see our audience.

Across from the city gate, *Bar Sport* is written in blue letters on a white plastic sign over the entrance to a coffee bar. Patrons gather in the garden outside for cards and coffee.

Just before the imposing arched stone entrance, but inside the great medieval wall that seems to circle the entire village, we glimpse an iron fence and a formal garden beyond. The overgrown garden has the look of a once-beautiful woman, now aging and dressed in faded clothes, but there is a story here, and I can't wait to discover it.

The entrance to the village is marked with a high stone and red brick gate, a section beyond where guards once stood watch, and connected to another

arched gate made with only stone. This double fortification now only holds planters of peaceful geraniums, instead of soldiers with weapons. Tufts of green plants growing out of the wall in random places remind me of a man who rushed his morning shave.

Inside the village, the homes all have brown shutters—some open, some closed—and the houses are all connected to each other, roof to roof. Pots of all shapes and sizes, overflowing with brightly colored flowers, sit around the steps to front doors, and iron lamps hang from the sides of buildings.

There is a restaurant in the tiny piazza, tables and chairs under massive umbrellas, but it is quiet now, since we have arrived during the post-lunch afternoon rest. A small branch of the Monte dei Paschi bank, founded in 1472 in Siena and the oldest bank in the world, sits stately in the center, also closed. We stop for a moment and look at the documents the rental agency provided. While Jess studies the papers, I hear the clinking of dishes being cleared from a table. A gray tabby cat jumps off a windowsill to greet us. I have a sense we are being watched behind some of the closed shutters.

"This way." Jess charges toward a narrow side street. We pass another restaurant on the left with a quick glimpse of a jaw-dropping view off the back side of the mountain. On the right side, there is an art studio in an old chapel, the wooden doors latched shut. The street slopes down the hill and ends at another city gate, smaller and no longer used, with an iron pylon in the center to keep cars out. The gate serves as a frame for a stunning view of a hilltop village off in the distance, much bigger than Montefollonico. A small parking lot offers grace for those who mistakenly think this street will lead out of the village. Right before the parking lot, we find the address we are looking for. Climbing vines rise up from terra-cotta pots to wind around a string, placed just so, creating a glorious arch of greenery over the entrance, as if offering a glimpse of the care taken on the inside of the apartment as well.

We knock on the door and then ring the doorbell, but no one answers.

"Did she leave a number?" Jess turns to me, impatient. We have not slept in a bed nor had a shower for twenty-eight hours.

I dig in the papers the rental agency sent, worried that maybe I got the time wrong or, much worse, booked the wrong weeks. Still flipping through papers, we hear a door click from the neighboring house. A woman appears and looks toward us with a smile. No words pass in that instant, but I know she is coming for us and let out a breath of relief.

Wispy strands of dark hair have escaped to dance around her head, even though most of her hair is pulled back into a loose bun. Her pale blue skirt flows with the breeze as she walks, and her white cotton top flounces with movement as well. She appears to be in her forties, with soft folds of middle-age curves.

“I am Francesca.” We introduce ourselves and shake hands. “How was the trip? Did you arrive in Italy today?”

We tell her about our travels and follow her inside and up the smooth terra-cotta tile stairs, worn from centuries of footfalls. At the top, another door opens into the apartment, where the tile floors continue. The ceiling, also terra-cotta, is held up by ancient wood beams. Papers are laid out on the dining room table, and I know we must conduct some business, but I can hardly keep my eyes from wandering around the room.

The dining room is dwarfed by a great fireplace large enough to sit inside—there are actually built-in seats with cushions to encourage it. As a teenager, I used to avoid my bone-chilling bedroom by taking Sunday afternoon naps stretched out in front of the fireplace. Even now in our drafty farmhouse, I often sit on a stool right next to the fire on cold winter nights. But *inside* the fireplace?

Francesca needs to show me *alcune cose*, or “a few things” about the apartment, so I focus on her as she demonstrates how to run the washing machine, the bedroom air-conditioning unit, and the dishwasher. Jess leaves us with the domestic details and fetches the luggage from the car.

When we are finished with the apartment tour, she turns to me and says, “If you need anything, I will be in my studio, next door.”

Jess arrives and heaves our bags onto the top steps as Francesca bids us *arrivederci*. The door clicks shut and we are jolted with excitement.

There are three bedrooms, and we pick the one with the largest wardrobe I have ever seen, one that might lead to Narnia. I open it just in case it does, but I am already in some type of wonderland and there is no need to step through.

The apartment features an inviting living area with bookshelves and lamps and a small kitchen equipped with a gas stove, oven, sink, dishwasher, and a refrigerator shorter than me. Hand-painted tiles cover the counter and the stove vent, adding charming detail. From the kitchen window, a mountain is framed on the horizon, looking as if it might have been an active volcano at some point in history.

Jess pushes open French doors, and we step onto a covered patio with a bistro table, chairs, and a small settee. Beyond is another terrace with a larger table and chairs, and beyond that, a grassy garden with bushes, lemon trees in large pots, red geraniums, and a majestic palm tree.

For the moment, I am eager to empty our suitcases and hide them away for two weeks. Usually when we travel, our suitcases lie open with clothes stuffed and rumpled while we stumble over furniture in the night, hunting for the bathroom, which keeps moving on us. A tranquility floods me with the thought of staying in one place for two weeks. No hotels to book, no routes to plan, no packing and unpacking.

I lay the painting boards, brushes, and paints out on the dining room table. “Look what jumped into my suitcase!” I say, with a great show of surprise.

“No excuses, now,” he replies, laughing.



After unpacking, we visit the local market and fill our tiny kitchen with cheeses, salamis, fruit, tomatoes, garlic, onions, and bread. The delicate musky scent of peach is too much. I cut one and share half with Jess. Ripe peaches

will forever remind me of our honeymoon, when we drove up and down Italy in a mad dash to see all the sites, gathering fresh peaches, cheese, and bread for our roadside picnics on the way from one city to another. I savor the sweet and tart flavor in my mouth and imagine it holds the promise of a second honeymoon.

I finish the peach, drunk on hope and anticipation, when a sobering thought crashes through my reverie. This may be paradise, but I am here to work. Half a book needs to be written in two weeks. I must prepare so nothing is left to chance. If my laptop isn't charged, I'll have to charge it in the morning. While I'm waiting, I'll get hungry and eat breakfast, which will make me sluggish, so I'll need a walk. Which will make me sweaty, so I'll need a shower. Time for lunch, then a nap, and before I know it, the day will be gone, and I'll sink into a miry pit of guilt and self-doubt as I realize I have lost one of only fourteen days.

I set my alarm for an early hour, charge the laptop with an Italian adaptor, and prepare the moka pot. The moka pot is a brilliant Italian invention from the 1930s that makes espresso coffee on the stovetop, much like our old-fashioned percolators but smaller. Despite its petite size and cuteness, it bubbles an espresso-style coffee that packs a wallop. I don't pack the coffee basket quite as dense as the Italians, which makes it a little less potent. That most important task done, I try out the terrace settee, add some cushions, position the ottoman, and bring a table around to the side for my coffee. I put my hands on my hips and study the space. It is good.

Jess is in the tiny shower upstairs, so I run water in the bathtub for myself in the other bathroom, flinging open the window to the street below as I wait for the tub to fill. The golden afternoon light floods the room, which features the bathtub as a centerpiece, and the open window affords a fine view outside. I ease into the hot water and feel the travel tension melt away as if the bath is a final welcome, a cocoon of anticipation.

While this washing is nothing to a sacred baptism, when I rise from the water, cleansed and renewed, my spirit senses something beyond the physical.

Writing may be the reason Jess agreed to this trip in general and to staying in one place for two weeks in particular, but if I am honest, I am here for a reason much deeper than writing. I can hardly identify this desire—or is it hunger?—for something I sense this place has for me. Is it simply two weeks of resting my body and mind among the ancient stones and the beauty of the landscape? Or is it a much deeper soul-filling restoration that I crave, the kind only God can provide?

My hands and heart are open.

