

# ***The Sweet Life***

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***By***

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***In Italy, the best attractions are always off the beaten path . . .***

*Mamie Weber doesn't know why she survived that terrible car accident five years ago. Physically, she has only a slight reminder—but emotionally, the pain is still fresh. Deep down she knows her husband would have wanted her to embrace life again. Now she has an opportunity to do just that, spending two weeks in Tuscany reviewing a tour company for her employer's popular travel guide series. The warmth of the sun, the centuries-old art, a villa on the Umbrian border—it could be just the adventure she needs.*

*But with adventure comes the unexpected . . . like discovering that her entire tour group is made up of aging ex-hippies reminiscing about their Woodstock days. Or finding herself drawn to the guide, Julian, who is secretly haunted by a tragedy of his own, and seems to disapprove any time she tries something remotely risky—like an impromptu scooter ride with a local man.*

*As they explore the hilltop towns of Tuscany, Mamie knows that when this blissful excursion is over, she'll have to return to reality. But when you let yourself wander, life can take some interesting detours . . .*

# Chapter 1

Mamie Weber's hands trembled as she shoved aside piles of neatly stacked clothes inside her luggage. Beneath her underwear, she found the well-worn Yankees cap, tossed it on to cover her unwashed hair, and tugged her ponytail through the back opening. She left her luggage on the bed and hurried to the hotel room door, officially fifteen minutes late. She inhaled a deep breath to steady her nerves and hoped the bus hadn't left without her.

One step into the hallway, she stopped. A room key. She propped the door open with her hip and slipped off her backpack. Halfway through her search of the pockets, she remembered seeing it on the nightstand after waking from the nap that now made her late.

She hurried inside, swiped the plastic key card off the nightstand and ran back to the door. As her hand fell on the knob, the shrill ring of the phone made her pause.

For half a second, urgency made her ignore the call and she turned the knob. Her boss had said she might call, but so soon? What if it was an emergency at home, like her parents?

She let the knob go and hurried to phone. "Hello?"

After seconds of silence, a man with a deep voice and American accent said, "Uh, hello. Wanderlust Excursions here. I'm looking for Felix Carrol, room 324?"

"Felix is..." Crap. Hadn't anybody called the tour company to tell them she'd be taking Felix's place?

"This is Julian Gregory. Tour director for a group who is expecting him." He paused, as if he expected her to say something. She debated between lying about the change in plans until she got downstairs or telling him the truth now. "Is this Mr. Carrol's room?" He sounded annoyed now. "We have a bus full of people waiting to leave and he's the only one missing. So—"

“He’ll be right down.” She hung up and hurried out to the hallway. Explanations like this were better face-to-face and she was determined to get on that bus.

At the elevator, she caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror on the nearby wall. Wrinkled peasant blouse and the same yoga pants she’d worn on the plane. Not exactly the Italian high fashion she’d seen in photos. An outfit that screamed to the world she didn’t care enough to even tidy up her appearance. Exactly how she’d felt since that damn car accident.

She slapped the elevator button again, afraid she’d slip into the despair that almost stopped her from accepting this assignment in the first place. As she glanced around the elevator alcove, she saw a sign for the staircase and headed for it.

Each quick step aggravated her sore hip, but she worked hard to concentrate on the bigger problem of getting on this bus, not the accident.

Like how should she deal with the tour director. He expected Felix. Even though she’d packed all his documents, including a faxed note transferring the ticketing paperwork ownership to her, Mamie assumed Felix had called to confirm the change.

Felix Carrol, a.k.a. The Covert Critic, was Mamie’s favorite author to edit for in her job at Atlas Publishing. He traveled the globe incognito while reviewing tours for his bestselling series with the same pseudonym. One month he’d be on a safari in Kenya, the next swimming with the sharks in Bora Bora, another mingling with the rich in St. Tropez. And now Mamie had agreed to stand in for him when he canceled last minute.

She entered the marble-floored lobby, glancing around for someone from the tour. Outside the glass doors was a gold mini-bus parked with the words Wanderlust Excursions emblazoned on the side. As she pushed through the doors, the hot July air blasted like a slap across the face. She stood on the sidewalk staring at the full bus, prepared to make a case worthy of Clarence Darrow if the paperwork she carried wasn’t good enough.

This trip was for work, but it also would test the waters of the life she’d been wasting. Inhaling a breath, Mamie slipped the long strap of her purse across her chest and rushed to the open bus door.

In the driver’s seat sat a square-faced man with a full Romanesque nose and short, dark hair. He greeted her with a wide smile. “Ciao, bella.”

She climbed the steps and smiled back. "Hello. I mean, Ciao. Sorry I'm late."

Before the nice man in the driver's seat could respond, a man standing about halfway down the aisle said, "I'm sorry, miss. You've got the wrong bus."

Whoever he was, his cargo shorts and faded Led Zeppelin T-shirt didn't carry any authority. But he held a clipboard, and his tone suggested he meant business. His Gaelic-looking face carried a slight boyish quality, hardened into a manly appearance due to his trimly cut mustache and beard. Wavy hair the color of cognac peeked out from beneath a gold cap with orange and blue lettering reading Wanderlust Excursions.

"I'm sure the hotel front desk can help you find the right tour." He gave her a now-hurry-along smile and turned back to the man he'd been talking to.

"Did I just talk to you on the phone?"

He lifted his chin and raised a brow. "We're waiting for Felix." His gaze traveled her from top to bottom then he looked her in the eyes. "I'm pretty sure you're not Felix?"

"No, but..." Mamie became aware of the silence and scanned the passengers.

Everyone in the full bus stared back. Quiet. Curious. She squirmed and her gaze drifted back to the man who seemed to be in charge.

"No. I'm not Felix, but if this is Wanderlust Excursions, it's where I'm supposed to be."

He squinted. "Wait. Are you the woman who answered Felix's phone?"

"Yes. I'm taking his place on the tour."

He snorted. A short, patronizing laugh. "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because you're clearly not Felix."

"But he transferred his vouchers to me."

"Nobody told me. Our company rules state that purchased seats are not transferrable without prior home office approval." He frowned and studied her again. "Besides, this is a specialized tour and you're not a member of this group. Felix is."

"How do you know I'm not?"

His lip curled into a little smirk. "Did you attend Woodstock?"

"The concert?"

"Is there another one?"

“Well, no, but...” Mamie scanned the other passengers more carefully. Other than the guide—everyone else was probably over fifty-five. Maybe even over sixty. “What group are they part of?”

“They are...” The guide, whose company sponsored tag read “Julian,” glanced at his clipboard. “...the Woodstock Wanderers.”

“Felix may not have been part of it either.” Mamie never heard him mention them before.

“Are you kidding? Felix was one of our founder members.” A man with thinning white hair, dark-rimmed glasses, and a full white beard sitting in the front seat winked at Mamie. “Bernie” in capital letters sat square in the center of a nametag with a tie-dyed background. Beneath his name it said, “Favorite Woodstock Song: ‘Let’s Go Get Stoned,’ Joe Cocker.”

Mamie would’ve never put Bernie together with that song, but... The bus’s silence and everyone watching her jarred her back to the problem at hand. “Felix never mentioned your group to me.”

Guess she *knew* Felix but didn’t *know* him. The truth about how she and Felix knew each other, though, wasn’t something she could share.

So she did the only thing she could do. Staring Julian square in the eye, she said, “Uncle Felix wanted me to take this trip. I’m his niece. He insisted I go in his place.”

“His niece, huh?” The tour director rubbed the back of his neck and considered her again. He shook his head. “I’m sorry he’s decided not to come, but on the transfer, I can’t budge. Rules are rules.”

A thin gentleman sitting a couple rows behind Bernie, with salt-and-pepper patches of hair above his ears piped in. “Julian. Dude. Can’t you just go with the flow? She looks harmless. Let her come.”

Mamie squinted. His tag read “Bob,” but before she could read more, the others joined in with choruses of “yeahs,” and she looked away.

“You know what they say, Julian.” A woman with curly brown hair, peace sign earrings, and a pretty smile said, “Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

Mamie noted her nametag read “Martha” and her favorite Woodstock song was “Suite Judy Blue Eyes” by Crosby, Still, and Nash.

Julian pursed his lips. “All due respect Martha, me losing my job isn’t exactly small stuff.”

Martha grinned slyly and winked. “We promise to keep it a secret from the boss.” She glanced around. “Right everybody?”

Another chorus of loud “yeahs” filled the bus.

One slim man with thinning hair who sat in the last row fist bumped the air. “We aren’t afraid of the man.”

The passengers murmured and nodded, complete agreement on that one. Mamie loved this solidarity. Though she’d never considered herself a hippie—more like a loner—she had an incredible urge to be part of this group.

Julian watched them, frowning. He refocused his attention on Mamie. “Sorry. I’m going to have to ask you to step out so we can start. We’re already running late.”

Normally, Mamie respected timeliness, schedules, and rules. But she had a job to do. A mission to accomplish.

“Please. My uncle, he *really* wanted me to go and—”

Julian took several swift steps to the front of the bus and stopped close to her. He dropped his voice. “Listen, this isn’t personal. The last thing I need is to lose this job. Do me a solid and go see if you can get any of your money back.”

She quietly replied. “You don’t understand. I *need* to go on this tour.”

He narrowed his hard green eyes, but before he could say a thing, a chant filled the air.

“Let her stay. Let her stay. Let her stay.”

A blond-haired woman with a cherub face who sat at Bernie’s side spoke up over the chant. “Doesn’t she remind you of Tracy, Bern?” Her nametag read “Sandra” and her favorite Woodstock song was “Amazing Grace” by Arlo Guthrie. She patted Julian’s arm in a very maternal way. “Tracy’s our daughter. We’d love having some young energy around. Tracy’s just too busy working to spend any time with us.”

Julian’s lower lip dropped. He drew in a deep breath, looked at Mamie, and motioned to the door. “Let’s talk outside.”

She turned and headed off the bus. Little did he know, she wasn’t about to back down. Nothing would stop her from getting on this bus or making the most of this

adventure. Two very good reasons existed for fighting the good fight.

The memory of her husband and daughter.

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Julian grabbed his satchel off his seat and stopped near Beppe. “Keep the bus running.”

“Don’t be hasty,” The driver said, his smile almost a leer. “There’s no ring on her finger, *sì amico?*”

The passengers up front laughed, adding to Julian’s annoyance. For a man with a wife and two kids, Beppe never missed a chance to ogle a nice-looking woman. “Head in the game, Beppe. We’re working.”

He lifted his dark brows, clearly surprised. Julian’s childhood friend, who’d found him this job, knew him better than most. Normally a cute, single female would’ve captured Julian’s attention. Not today.

He hurried down the steps. Holding it together since this morning hadn’t been easy. An old friend from the show had called him at breakfast with a warning. Seemed Gary Simon was considering asking him back to the show. The shrewd producer was getting pounded by audiences who wanted more of *Exploring the World with Eddie*, not the replacement host they’d found.

But Eddie was dead—at least in Julian’s mind.

Julian’s television alter ego, Eddie Morrison, was the thrill-seeking adventurer and former star of *Exploring the World with Eddie*. Nobody knew Julian Gregory, but a wide audience around the globe knew his fake persona.

Eddie feared nothing, lived dangerously, and mocked the word risk. Julian hated Eddie. Perhaps even more than he hated himself these days.

He stepped onto the sidewalk, stopping at a bench. The woman waited near the hotel doors and searched through her purse, a very determined gleam in her eyes. Over the years, he’d handled bigger problems than a stubborn female. A black caiman alligator in the rainforest. A run-in with Hezbollah militants in Lebanon. One persistent passenger would be easy.

He placed his satchel onto the bench and looked inside for his employee handbook. Other directors for Wanderlust Excursions, including his roommate, had told

him the tour company owner had no sympathy for employees who didn't follow her rules. Julian kept this with him at all times. He located the book and opened to the page listing five simple rules Claudia expected her staff to follow.

*No deviating from the predefined tour schedule or route.*

*Only previously authorized passengers can board our buses. Transfers of tickets on site are not allowed.*

*All stories guides share with our travelers must be true. We encourage passing along appropriate stories of your own travels.*

*No kickbacks from local merchants, who will often bribe you in order to lure your guests into their stores.*

*No fraternizing with the passengers off tour.*

Before Julian had watched Carlos Lopez die in a wing suit jumping accident, he'd have scoffed at those rules. Anybody's rules.

Now, he desperately needed to live within the constraints of them.

Fear and guilt trapped him daily for the last twelve months. He could've stopped the jump that day. But he hadn't. What had Carlos called the winds? Questionable? Self-hatred pounded at Julian's head. What an idiot. A self-absorbed idiot.

Bravado that once led him to take on the show's challenges disappeared after that moment, the reason he was fired. This tour company provided the perfect hideaway to his shameful existence. Its strict policies helped him regain control of the life he'd forfeited when he'd encouraged Carlos to jump.

Footsteps nearby drew him back to the problem at hand. The woman clutched an envelope and lifted her chin as she neared, her legs long and frame lithe. She had a slight limp, a fact he hadn't picked up on until now. Yet it didn't undercut the bull-like determination in her gaze.

"Now listen," he said before she could speak. Best to keep an unpredictable bull grounded. "I'm not an unreasonable guy."

Her large brown eyes softened. "Did I say you were? It's just that the others don't seem to care if I'm on this bus or not. Bernie and Sandra, they'd even feel like they have their daughter along. It obviously means a lot to them. Wouldn't my presence make them happier travelers?"

“I told you. Rules are big in this outfit. Look.” He offered her the handbook, opened to the rule page. While she scanned them, he said, “If it was my company, I might let you stay. But as you can see, miss—”

“Mamie.” She looked up from the book. “Mamie Weber.”

Julian found himself drawn to the innocence in her eyes, hiding behind her tough facade. “My problem is that you’ve come out of nowhere and want a seat on my bus. I don’t have one piece of paper telling me I shouldn’t still be waiting for this Felix Carroll.”

She opened the envelope in her hands, pulled out some papers, and thrust them in Julian’s hands. “I have the entire trip itinerary, with Felix’s name on it. And a faxed note from Felix saying he’s transferring the trip to me. The hotel gave me the room.”

He flipped past the itinerary to the faxed note. “Anybody could’ve written that letter. If the passenger who booked the trip didn’t take the time to call it in, well...” He worked hard to think of an excuse as a bead of sweat dribbled past his ear. Julian batted away the moisture, not sure when it got so hot outside.

“Excuse me?”

He glanced up to find her staring at him.

“Do I look dishonest?”

Of course she didn’t. He reread the note from the original passenger. The package contained the full itinerary. Everything seemed legit. He removed his phone to call Claudia.

“Who are you calling?”

“The boss.”

She frowned. “But if she says no, then I can’t go.”

“She probably will.”

As he dialed the phone, he could see her lips pressed tight and she started to pace. Finally, Nicola, Claudia’s assistant, answered. Julian explained his problem.

After a minute of searching the office, Nicola returned to the phone. “Nein. Nobody contacted us regarding a transfer on that passenger.”

Damn. “Nothing, huh?” He glanced up at Mamie and caught her eyes watering. “Okay. Thanks.”

A sadness Julian hadn't expected took him by surprise, overpowering him with the idea this trip of hers was about something more. "Why are you really so eager to go on this trip?"

"I told you. My uncle wanted me to..." She stopped. "Why are you shaking your head?"

"The truth. It'll go a long way with me."

She wouldn't meet his gaze for a long moment, but then she glanced up. Dark circles that he hadn't noticed before hung beneath her eyes. "This trip is a chance of a lifetime. I may never get here again." She drew in a breath and, he swore, she trembled. "It took everything for me to board the plane and fly here." She rested her soft hand on his forearm, the effect cracking a piece of him that always stayed tough. Or maybe that strong facade had been broken this year and made vulnerable to more damage.

"Please don't ask me to explain why, but doing this means *everything* to me." She dropped her hand from his arm, adding, "Everything."

The rules flashed like a warning, but his softened resistance buckled at the knees. He could only think of one reason this trip meant so much to her.

There was a chance she was sick, especially considering the limp. What if she was so sick this was her last chance to travel the Tuscan countryside?

She lifted a hand to wipe away a tear, drawing him to her high cheekbones and ivory skin, with a few faded freckles near her nose. Simple and pretty. But tired. He wanted to ask if it was her health, but to do so seemed invasive.

He glanced in the bus's direction. Inside, the passengers watched from the windows with expectant expressions. He didn't want to face their disappointment.

Julian rubbed the back of his neck and dragged his gaze away only to have it collide with Mamie's doleful eyes. Damn it! Every ounce of common sense said to end this now. Only he couldn't. Each time he glanced her way, a pain in the far recesses of her eyes mirrored his own sadness...or was he imagining it?

"Do you have a passport?" he asked.

She tipped her head. "How do you think I got into the country?"

"Can I see it?"

She dug into the bag and pulled out a navy blue US passport and handed it over.

It had been issued eight years ago. In the photo, her face looked fuller and eyes brighter. From her birthdate, he worked the figures. Thirty-nine. Further snooping showed she was born in New York. He flipped through the pages used for immigration stamps. “You haven’t used this once.”

She shrugged. “Like I said, taking this trip—it’s a big deal for me.”

Guilt sucker punched him. Damn rules! No wonder he’d ignored them most of his life. A quick risk calculation on a visit from Claudia was low. During his employment here, the home office only got good feedback on Julian’s tours—so he’d been told.

If he did this one little thing, how would she know?

He looked again at the bus. Several occupants gave him eager nods. When he looked to Mamie, she watched him.

He kicked a stray stone gently off the curb. “If I say yes, will you promise to be low key?”

“Low key. Of course.”

“I’d like to keep this letter from your uncle. For my records, in case my boss finds out your uncle transferred his paperwork to you.”

“So, I can go?”

“Yup.”

Twirling to face the bus, she flashed a thumb in the air. A loud cheer erupted from inside. She slowly turned back to him and smiled sweetly, the relief in her eyes a reward he wasn’t sure he deserved. “Thank you. You won’t regret this.”

He motioned to the bus before he changed his mind. “Get on. We’re behind schedule.”

As she took a seat toward the front, the other riders whooped loudly. With any luck, he’d skate by without Claudia finding out.

How much could go wrong with a bus full of people over sixty-five and a thirty-nine-year-old who’d never left the US?

## Chapter 2

From her seat in the bus's third row, Mamie admired the patchwork countryside. She wished the driver, who'd been introduced to the passengers as Beppe, would slow down and allow her to breathe it all in.

A minute later, she got her wish when he zipped off a highway exit ramp causing the bus to sway like a roller coaster ride. Mamie grabbed the seat back in front of her, where Bernie and Sandra leaned with the turn. Holding on for dear life was exactly like her cab ride from Pisa airport to the hotel in Siena. But Italian driving speeds were part of the adventure, and she made a mental note to write about it later.

Her mission here was top secret. Ten years ago, when she started editing for Felix, she signed an agreement stating she'd never tell another living soul the Covert Critic's true identity. Now, as she filled in for him in the field, Felix had suggested she use a fake cover story about her life. She planned on telling people she was recently divorced, worked for a bank, and her dream was to write a novel set in Tuscany. That way her taking notes and pictures wouldn't look so odd. The one truth in her story was that she was now alone in life.

The bus moved more slowly now along a country road, passing verdant fields stretched out side-by-side and linked with golden wheat-colored patches. The ground-level view practically painted her into every picture of Tuscany she'd ever seen. An excited flutter tickled her belly.

*I'm here. Really here.*

She reached to the floor for her backpack, removed a journal brought along for taking notes, and flipped to the last page. On the plane ride over, she'd started a Travel Bucket List. One she hoped would make up for how she'd squandered the life she'd been spared in the accident and would honor Ted and Zoe. At the moment, only one item was

listed: *Fly to Italy*. She put a check mark next to it, knowing more should be added to truly pay homage to them.

At last month's memorial service, to mark five years after losing them, she finally woke up to the way she'd tossed her own life aside like unwanted trash. The realization filled her with shame, so when this work opportunity came along, she took it as a sign. She wanted to believe they were both somewhere together in the spirit world, watching her fight her grief and rooting for her.

All the love she still possessed for her lost family surfaced, causing her chest to shiver with need. Some days, she could still feel her three-year-old snuggled in her lap, head resting on to Mamie's chest while Mamie stroked her soft cheek after she fell or had a nightmare. *Mommy is here. It'll be all right*. She missed the way Ted pulled her from her shell, at times still able to feel the power of his steady blue gaze watching her when he'd say, "Come on, Mame. Life is being on a wire, and everything else is just waiting." He'd loved the quote of Karl Wallenda's, which personified her husband's outlook on life.

The tour guide laughed and disrupted her memories. She looked across the aisle to the seat he occupied behind Beppe. Julian. He probably would hate her this whole tour after how they started off, with her late and unauthorized. He spoke on his cell phone in fluent Italian. A surprise because English sounded like his native language.

He hung up and stood in the aisle, holding onto a pole near the front of the bus that barely steadied him on the curvy road. "As I mentioned earlier, tonight we have a short excursion and dinner. I'll make sure we're not out too late. I'm sure you're all tired from traveling to get here."

"Tired?"

Mamie turned to a voice behind her. The man with a bald scalp and patches of hair above his ears—who'd been one of the first to convince their guide to let her stay—scratched his short, scraggly gray beard. He grinned at Julian. This time, she focused on his name tag which read "Bob Leon" and "Volunteers" by Jefferson Airplane was his favorite Woodstock song.

"I'm worried about you keeping up with us, Julian." His larger-than-life red Hawaiian shirt suggested this was a man who liked fun. "We all survived Woodstock,

you know?”

The other passengers laughed and so did Julian.

“I didn’t forget, Mr. Leon. “

“Please, call me Bob.”

“Well, Bob, *you* may not need rest, but I do.” Julian smiled, then ducked his head low to see outside the front window. “Ahead is our destination. We’re still in the province of Siena heading toward Colle Val d’Elsa. Tonight’s stop is in Monteriggioni, one of the most important walled castles in the territory.”

Mamie looked outside the window and almost gasped. Perched high on a hill and surrounded by lush fields, the medieval structure welcomed them. A self-contained city with a walkway surrounding it and tall towers jutting up at even intervals.

She pulled her notebook from her purse and scribbled notes about where they were headed.

“This commune,” Julian continued, “has a perfect circular perimeter, but not because of artificial construction, rather it was created by just following the curves in the natural ground...”

Despite her earlier exhaustion, she soaked in details of the world they passed through. Words of poets and authors returned to her, but they barely did justice to the exhilaration stirring inside her chest.

Julian worked it like a travelogue host, and she scribbled furious notes. “The castle was built by the Sienese between 1213 and 1219 for defensive purposes; its strategic location atop a hill overlooking...”

Her hand slowed and she stopped writing. All this beauty and history. Ted would’ve loved it here. If only they’d travelled more...

Tears filled her eyes. She turned abruptly to the window, pretending to watch the blurred scenery.

*Get a grip on yourself!*

She counted to ten while forcing herself to tune into Julian’s voice.

“We’ll be parking soon at a lot at the bottom of the hill. There’s a short climb to the village. Once we arrive, you’ll be right in the village’s center, called the Piazza di Roma. The church you’ll see is the Church of Santa Maria Assunta, a beautiful example

of Romanesque and Gothic style architecture.”

Churches. There were so many in Italy. The car accident had deepened her disdain for a faith she once believed in. A church was the last place she wanted to visit, but they were unavoidable in this country, where they seemed engrained in the landscape. Besides, she had a job to do and a journey to take. Time to get over her issues. Fast.

She drew in a breath, stiffened her lip, and forced herself to turn around and face the tour director.

“Monteriggioni was cited by Dante Alighieri in his most famous work, *The Divine Comedy*—” Julian’s gaze locked on hers and his brows furrowed.

Adjusting in the seat, she sat more upright and looked straight at him.

“Um...Dante...” Julian blinked a few times then looked at the paper in his hands. “I’d like to read a poem of his before we get off the bus.”

He began to read, but she didn’t listen. She reminded herself to stay strong and make sure nobody knew her real mission in Tuscany or her real story in life. Felix’s offer for her to take his place was a gift, offering escape from the pity of well-meaning friends and family. An escape from the memories that kept her from living life. A chance to regain a semblance of her former self in a safe setting. Mamie inhaled and blew out a breath, feeling a little better.

Julian must’ve finished reading the Dante poem because now he faced the front, looking out the bus window. “Beppe will be staying on the bus if you decide to leave anything on your seat. We’ll be here through dinner.”

He turned around and, for a brief second, his gaze stopped on her. He parted his lips and she sensed he was about to say something. Only he closed his mouth and returned to his original position.

Mamie stared down at her hands to the empty bucket list. Ted and Zoe’s bucket list. It needed filling up. From this point forward, she’d think like her husband. Do the things he’d have done if he were here. Even if it scared the hell out of her. Even if it pushed every single boundary she possessed.

The time had come to live again. In every way possible.

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“Here.” Chef Saburo approached Julian, who’d been standing in the kitchen

doorway and watching his passengers interact. “L’antipasto for the tour director.”

Saburo smiled, showcasing the space of a missing tooth on the right side of his mouth. His splotted white apron covered his ample mid-section, and he looked as if he’d lost a food fight with the simmering pots on the old gas stove in the restaurant’s old kitchen.

As Saburo lowered the plate to a nearby counter, Julian’s stomach growled. Salami, pecorino, bruschetta and Tuscan crostini with chicken livers. “Saburo, you’re always too good to me.”

“Eh, it is no big deal. Buon appetito.” He waved his hand in a simple Italian gesture that spoke to his modesty. On his way back to his stove, he asked, “Why you not out there with the others?”

“I usually don’t eat with them at first. Gives them a chance to enjoy each other. Sometimes when I’m around, passengers feel like they need to talk to me about the trip.”

The large man dipped a wooden spoon into a pot while nodding. “Ah, I see.”

“How’s Abriela?” Julian took a piece of pecorino and leaned against the counter.

“Keeping me busy.” He rolled his eyes, but then softness filled his face with the love Julian understood Saburo had for his wife of many years. “She is good.”

They chatted, as they’d always done since meeting a year ago, when Julian brought his first Wanderlust tour here for a meal. Like all the men Julian had grown up with in Italy, Saburo loved to talk. Life. Politics. The summer heat. The conversations reminded him of living in the homeland of his mother, at least when his parents weren’t filming their show. While growing up, Julian had enjoyed being part of “The Wild Adventures of Allie and Alfred,” yet he loved when the filming ended and they lived a more normal life even more. Back then, not only bloodlines, but also being a neighbor or friend defined family. Food always served as the glue bonding them together. His father’s family in the US were almost strangers.

Julian reached for a crostini and leaned against the doorjamb, peering back out into the dining room. From this spot, he enjoyed a clear view of the woman who made him break Claudia’s rules. What the hell had possessed him to say yes?

Sandra and Bernie Wallburg seemed to take her right under their wings. Kind of nice, actually. Maybe they sensed what Julian had, that Mamie seemed to need someone.

Not because of her unkempt hair, with pieces of a sloppy ponytail sticking out from beneath a Yankees cap. Not because of those tired, albeit dark and mysterious eyes, that tugged at a more masculine side of him. Certainly not the subtle limp, because she carried herself like it wasn't a problem. No, she had an aura about her. One that said capable, but hurting.

Another passenger, whose name Julian didn't remember, loudly shared a joke. A roar of laughter rose above the table. Mamie's eyes brightened and full lips curled upward, softening the tension—or maybe pure sadness—he'd sensed earlier. What caused such misery in her wet eyes as they'd neared Monteriggioni? Was it an illness, as he suspected, or something else?

Once finished reading the poem on the bus, Julian almost asked her if something was wrong. He'd stopped himself just in time. No sense in getting involved. He had enough problems of his own.

With the thought, hardness engrained in his heart since losing his parents wobbled and stole his emotional footing. Since watching Carlos die on that jump, the horrible hot air balloon fire that had taken his parents' lives twisted into his subconscious every single day. Helplessness and unsatisfied desire to save them had left Julian with lifelong regret, only compounded by the latest tragedy. Now, he could not stop thinking about them.

The food at his side lost all appeal as he wallowed in disgust for himself over the role he'd played in the loss of another life.

He again focused on the pretty stranger, taking a deep breath and exhaling to get rid of the negative thoughts pummeling him. Mamie. Unusual name, but it suited her. She smiled again at someone's remark and Julian breathed in her delight from across the room. Maybe he'd done one right thing by letting her join them. A small contribution toward helping whatever mysterious thing ailed her.

Julian left the doorway and pulled up a stool near the food. Only a fool would let this wonderful meal go to waste. He selected another crostini, better than thinking about his problems. "You've outdone yourself, Saburo."

"There's more to come."

Julian patted his gut. "You're killing me, you know that?"

"We need to fatten you up." The rotund chef grinned and patted his own extended

belly. “Like me.”

Julian’s cell phone buzzed and he pulled it from his front shirt pocket. The display showed Josef’s name.

“Hey, buddy.” Julian’s mood lifted at the call from one of his closest friends at Wanderlust Excursions. “Where are you this week?”

“Naples. I’ve got a lively group of forty singles that are in a chorus. The Singing Singles.” Josef’s German accent delivered the line rather straight, but Julian detected light sarcasm in his tone. “I swear, you can’t make this shit up. We’re headed north to the lakes over the next eight days. What about you?”

“Smaller group. Survivors of the famous Woodstock concert. They’re pretty fun. We’re doing Tuscany.”

“I heard, from Claudia.”

Julian had always suspected the German tour owner and Josef were closer than either let on. Since Claudia insisted everyone follow her rules, though, Julian wasn’t surprised they were both quiet about it.

“My tour is scheduled to head north after Naples and we’ll be in Siena for a couple days. Want to get a drink while I’m there?”

They worked out the details and were saying goodbye when a thought occurred to Julian. “Hey, question.”

“Ja?”

“You know the company rule about transferring trip packages to other people?”

“The one Claudia fired a guy two years ago for abusing?”

Julian put down his fork, the food suddenly like lead weight in his gut. “Yeah, that one.”

“Why?” Josef asked, saying the “w” sound with a “v.”

“Just reviewing the rules.”

“It’s still a rule.”

Julian should’ve kept his big mouth closed. “Thanks. I’d better run. Looking forward to that drink.”

He hung up just as Saburo came over carrying a plate of thick pappardelle noodles covered with a meaty red sauce in one hand, a bottle of wine in the other.

“Here you go.” He placed the dish in front of him. “A little red wine to go with it?” Saburo arched his thick dark brows.

Julian nodded as he eyed the Chianti, a surefire way to cure his woes. “Make it a large.”

\* \* \* \*

Mamie tied her bathrobe tighter, crawled beneath the bed covers, and tucked a pillow behind her back. She sent a text to Allison, to let her boss know she’d arrived safely. No point in mentioning the problems on arrival since she’d worked them out on her own. She reached for a notebook and pen on the nightstand and started to write.

So far, Wanderlust Excursions got good grades. Julian proved to be knowledgeable and knew many locals. Beppe, though a fast driver, loved to joke and offered a smile to everyone. The Siena hotel decor pulled off contemporary and Tuscan in the same breath, and offered their guests million-dollar views of the countryside.

The restaurant where they’d eaten left her certain about one thing; Italian food back home would never be the same. The feast spread before them tonight was worthy of a meal for the Medici family—who once ruled the region in the fifteenth century, she’d learned. Wild boar ragu sauce over pappardelle noodles would live forever in her dreams.

She grunted as she leaned across the bed for her camera, her stomach so full she admitted she’d better pace herself with food on this trip. Flipping through the photos, she studied in more detail a vibrant hand-painted Tuscan countryside mural hanging in the main dining room, not far from the stone fireplace. Rustic goldenrod walls and flickering candlelight gave the room a certain romance. Almost a shame for her to have wasted the mood on a dinner with twenty-five people old enough to be her parents. But when she reached a group photo taken with her camera by the waiter, it struck her how she wouldn’t change a thing about tonight.

She never wanted to forget these people. They’d welcomed her to their group, no questions asked. Reaching to the nightstand, she lifted the nametag Bernie had insisted she wear as an honorary member. Bob Leon, apparently the group’s secretary at large, pressed her for her favorite Woodstock song as he wrote her name on a blank tag. She only knew a few, but one of them suited her life. Running a finger along the words, only she understood why Janis Joplin’s “Piece of my Heart” held any meaning.

As she placed it on the bed to her side, she couldn't believe it had taken her this long in her life to visit Italy. A place rich in history, culture, and culinary treats.

She lowered the camera and lifted her notebook, going straight to her short bucket list. At dinner, while the others talked about sights they wanted to photograph on the group's free time, Mamie thought about how to fill this page.

Earlier, she'd considered asking Julian for some advice. The idea disappeared as quickly as it had arrived. Since he wasn't thrilled about her being on the bus in the first place, her more adventurous plans might cause him some mild hysteria.

Her cell phone rang. Allison's name flashed in the display and Mamie answered right away.

"Hope I didn't wake you. I couldn't remember if it was a five or six-hour time difference."

"I'm up. It's six hours I think, almost ten here."

"Thanks for the text letting me know you got to the hotel. Did you have any problems with the tour company?"

"I almost did. The guy in charge didn't want to let me join them." She explained about the communication problem. "I guess Felix never contacted them."

"So how'd you get on?"

"The tour is a bunch of former Woodstock concert attendees. I think their chants in my support may have tipped the scales."

Allison laughed. "Holy cow. That three-day concert sure toughened them up."

"Just like you want this trip to toughen me?"

"Nah, you're already tough. You're just rusty on how to use it. Is it beautiful there?"

"It's almost beyond words." It struck Mamie even after one day here any visitor could love this place. But she wanted to understand the mystery of Tuscany. What was really behind the charm that lured in so many unsuspecting visitors?

"Well, you'd better find some words. That's why we sent you."

"If not, another glass of Chianti will inspire me."

"That's the spirit. I'll shoot off an email to Felix to notify someone he transferred his ticket."

“Don’t bother at this point.” Mamie didn’t want Julian to get in trouble for getting approval after letting her on board. “I think the director took care of it.”

They said they’d be in contact later in the tour and hung up. Mamie reached for her laptop and jumped headfirst into a search for out-of-the-ordinary things to do in the region.

The search hit the jackpot. Her excitement mounted as she read about paragliding outside of Pisa, hot air balloon rides, cave exploration, and riding the countryside on scooters. Ted-worthy activities. She scribbled the ideas onto her list. A few, like the hot air balloon or paragliding, seemed terrifying. All the more reason to add them.

A half hour later, she stopped writing and admired the results. Ted would’ve loved this.

Once in the bathroom, she brushed her teeth and stared at her face in the mirror. Dark circles beneath her eyes belied the tremor of excitement making her pulse sail.

Less than forty-eight hours ago, fear gripped her over the notion of stepping foot on a plane. Now, after a full day in a foreign land, pride swelled inside her chest, something missing for five years. When she’d forgotten how to live and only existed.

A day of living a little sure felt damn good. Two weeks of this and maybe the fog of her life would finally clear.

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