

CHAPTER 1

ARRIVIAMO

The women watch as their luggage rolls lazily from one corner and across the aisle and back as the regional train rocks along ages-old tracks through the countryside between Florence and Certaldo, an unglamorous working class town differentiated by the crown jewel that sits on its hilltop. Certaldo Alto, our final destination, is a tiny, historic and lesser known gem in the travelogues of Tuscany.

A couple of the men who are standing by the doors, slowly adjusting their feet as four bulging bags come perilously close to their handsome leather shoes, give the women a look. A look that is distinguishable in any language: “What’s the matter, you can’t manage your overpacked bags?” or, perhaps something more disdainful, along the lines of “Why don’t you learn to travel like a European?” followed by grimaces when they catch sight of the shoes at least some of the women thought were a smart travel choice.

OK, point taken. Betty shifts her eyes downward to what looks like bubble-gum pink marshmallows on her feet. Crocs may not be everyone’s cup of espresso, but they are comfortable for a 60s-something woman, she thought, and they let your feet expand without any pain as the humidity increases, as it does every minute and with every step in the summer in bel paese.

When she took the lead on organizing this trip with three of her best friends, Betty was less concerned with fashion compared to her compatriots and more focused on the details of where to

stay, how to get there and the important difference between café and caffè, for instance.

“Betty, for God’s sake – grab one of the suitcases, will you?” Lena bellows as a battered American Tourister comes barreling down the aisle, narrowly missing her open-toed-sandaled feet. Lena bellows because she is, first and foremost, an actress – or was, before roles began to dry up for women, not off a certain age but over a certain age, who failed to cultivate “favors” with — much less a marriage to — a Hollywood producer. Dried up or not – roles, that is — Betty recognized that Lena still cut quite a figure. “She has flair,” Betty thought, “which, sadly, I do not. I have bulbous pink Crocs.”

Turning to see Lena handling one of her overstuffed suitcase with the graceful moves of someone who has stage presence, Betty barks, “OK, OK, don’t sweat it,” while snagging a dark blue suitcase with a glittery silver ribbon on the handle for easy identification. “I’ve got this one. Christ, Lena, how many costume changes did you load this thing up with?”

Lena’s response is much less graceful.

“Did you just snort at me?” Betty gives her best eyebrow-raised look of feigned indignation, just one of the acting cues she has picked up from Lena over the years of their friendship. While Betty was no shrinking magnolia back home in Oxford, Mississippi, Lena overshadowed her like a field of bold, towering sunflowers.

“Huh! You may chide my wardrobe choices, but I know deep down you envy me, and I love you for it, darling. Just don’t ask to borrow my Versace,” Lena shoots back.

Betty smiles indulgently at Lena. Then turns to see who has tapped her other arm.

“Hey, is this the way it’s going to be for the whole week we’re here? Can’t we just chill?” Janet, their peace-making pal, the woman who soothes everyone and brings them all back into the fold after they poke each other to the stinging point.

“No,” Betty assures her. “It’s only going to be like this until I no longer have to wrestle like a crocodile hunter with Lena’s oversized *trunk*, while I’m hindered by sweaty shoes of a similar name.”

Janet reaches for her own suitcase, the one with the peace sign ID, and moves closer to the large green doors of the rail car.

“Betty, you’re brilliant. I don’t care what Lena says.” Loretta, svelte and gorgeous in a linen jumpsuit, having left most of her aged-hippie garb at home, is seated next to Lena. Even though they are shoulder to shoulder, she doesn’t let Lena’s chip rub off on her shoulder.

Though she had her earbuds plugged in the entire time this brief conversation was going on, she recognized the tiff between the two from the group’s previous trip to Portugal two years earlier.

Betty glances at each of her dear, if exasperating in their own way, friends. They’ve known each other for 25 years, are as close as sisters but sometimes fight like cats, they would lie

down in front of a semi full of chardonnay for one other, without grabbing a bottle first, if it came to that.

To celebrate their sisterhood and — let's be honest, Betty thought — to enjoy all of the Italian eye candy, plus all the wine we can handle, she had organized this trip to Tuscany. She knew the four of them would be crammed into a small apartment right on the piazza named for 14th century author Giovanni Boccaccio. A fitting location, since both she and Loretta are writers, and, keeping Lena in mind, their destination hosts a huge, theatrical festival. For an entire week, Mercantia features fantasy acts, music, street performers, artisans and crowds of revelers, and their little apartment will be right in the middle of it!

As for Janet, well, who knows, Betty thought. She seems a stereotypically reserved librarian, but perhaps she will break out a bit in Certaldo Alto.

“Certaldo,” the conductor announces, and, the four friends more or less trip and stumble their way to the exit, luggage finally corralled, and wait for the doors to open. Nothing. They see the two red handles, but look at each other questioningly, knowing they dare not touch them.

“Scusi,” a tall man behind them reaches over Janet's shoulder, pulls the red handles and opens the doors. He nudges the four friends out, muttering something in Italian, which, fortunately, they do not understand, though Betty figures she could probably take a good stab at it.

“Well, who would have thought that RED meant GO? Honestly, the Italians have no sense of ... *je ne sais quois*,” Lena huffs.

“Really, Lena? French?” Loretta smiles. “We’ve been brainwashed in America to believe that red always means ‘emergency’ or ‘alarms will sound if you so much as touch a pinkie to this handle.’ Maybe there’s some sort of fashion - forward information about red that Italy is on top of and we’re missing. Someone needs to alert the guidebooks – a red alert, get it?”

Even with her earbuds plugged in, Loretta could hear the others' eyes rolling.

“OK, that was funny, Loretta. Now, let’s get serious about where the heck we’re going.” Betty digs for her phone to try to map out our directions, which honestly are pretty obvious, given that they can see Certaldo Alto on the hilltop about a half-mile above them.

The women were not really in a hurry, which suits, as neither is anyone else in Italy. As they stood on the concrete platform all the wiser to the ways of *Italia*, they slipped on their sunglasses and wide-brimmed straw hats, smiling as they took in the sun and the unremarkable little railway station in front of them. After a brief announcement over the loudspeaker, the yellow and green regional train rolled away, on to its next stop in Poggibonsi. Little did they know then that the next small town along the route would turn out to be a pivotal place during their stay.

“So, let’s see. Clearly, up there is where we want to go.” Janet scans the horizon beyond the fairly nondescript buildings that line the streets stretching in front of the station. “The question is, *how* do we get up there?” She tilts her head up to see the stone towers of the centuries-old castle on the hill and the great fortress wall wrapping around Certaldo Alto.

“Easy peasy,” Betty says. “Ladies, hold on to your hats. We’re about to ascend to the little town of our dreams. There’s a funicular just down the street that will deposit us a stone’s throw from our apartment, and the owner, Antonella, is supposed to be there to meet us. And then, my friends, it’s vino time.”

“Darling,” Lena gives me a look over the top of her Gucci sunglasses. “It’s aperitivo time....*then* wine.” She tosses her raven curls in the way only actresses can pull off without looking ridiculous, and then turns around ever so slowly to pick up on the admiring glance of a tall, 40-ish dark-haired man who has just arrived on the platform.

“Going somewhere so soon? But I just arrived.” He fake pouts and looks down at his stylish leather shoes, then takes a step back after catching a glimpse of Betty’s Crocs.

“Mamma mia!”

I thought they only said that in the movies, Betty thinks, but keeps the thought to herself. Before she has a chance to say anything, she feels Janet’s elbow poke her in the side, and she smiles sweetly at this gorgeous man, whose hair falls carelessly and ever so fashionably onto his forehead. Meanwhile, Loretta seems to stand a little taller in her chic black leather sandals. So,

for now, Betty realizes that she is the pink sheep of the group and silently vows to unload her Crocs at the first sighting of an Italian shoe store.

As she stands daydreaming about footwear that attracts the right kind of attention, she hears Lena chatting away with....Stefano, Alessandro, Francesco, or whatever his name is. She only catches the “o” at the end because, frankly, along with the rest of her traveling companions, she is quite taken with the dark, intense eyes of whoever it is that came before the “o.”

“Ah yes, Matteo, grazie mille. Mi piacere.” It sounds as though Lena is drawing on a role she once had as a frail 18th century maiden suffering from the vapors. Apparently, Matteo has offered to help with directions, and Lena leans ever so slightly forward, enough so that he can air kiss first her left cheek and then her right, while the three others watch with mental notes of envy.

“Yes, that’s right, we are heading to the funicular,” Lena confirms. She clearly is scanning him from head to toe, even though no eye movement is visible behind her very expensive sunglasses. “And you, Matteo? Where might you be going?”

Janet whispers something to Betty that sounds like “Let the good times roll,” but it must have been “Don’t let Lena go.” Then, Loretta, with just one earbud plugged in, is distracting Matteo with her hip-swaying to the beat.

“Si, around the hour of 9,” says Matteo, handing Lena what looks like a gold-embossed card, which she promptly puts in her décolletage. Meanwhile, he has not taken his eyes off of Loretta,

who grins like a coed who has just learned that Jude Law is her English instructor.

While everyone else tries to think of something to say, a futile effort since Italian language skills were not part of the pre-trip planning, a stunning woman in a cream linen sheath, wearing large gold bangles, dazzling gold earrings and very high red heels, struts like a model from the train station and plants herself between Matteo and Lena. She puts one arm through Matteo's and smiles at the women, disingenuously in any language. Very quickly, she whispers something to Matteo, gently tugs him 90 degrees to the left, and they head off toward a waiting Mercedes. Matteo turns halfway to give the women a small wave before he ducks inside the car and is whisked off, the four "abandoned" women can only presume, to some fantasy-worthy Italianate estate.

"Lena...what is it? What does the card say?" Loretta appears to be ready to dive for Lena's décolletage before Janet pulls her away.

Lena dips a hand into her bra and fetches the card, removes her sunglasses and smiles so broadly that her friends all hold their breath in suspense. She pauses a moment to fan herself with the little card, for dramatic effect of course. With her translation from the Italian, the women are given to understand that they are in receipt of an invitation to a party that very night at the villa of Matteo and Sofia Augusto, somewhere in the vicinity of Castellina in Chianti.

"Anywhere that has Chianti in the name is the perfect destination as far as I'm concerned," Lena says. "Ladies, let's

get going – I’m going to need *hours* to get ready. This is nothing short of a command performance as far as I’m concerned.”

“Lena,” Janet interrupts. “It’s a party, not a royal engagement.”

Ignoring this remark, Lena swishes past Janet, tossing a much-unnecessary silk scarf across one shoulder, and leads everyone to the funicular. She skitters to a halt and dabs perspiration from her face with her scarf. She sees a sign with one word she does understand.

“*Chiuso.*”