

## Chapter One

Bree Sorenson's parched throat felt like rough burlap and her face prickled with heat. If she could dive into the carafe of water that beckoned from the podium, she'd do it. She eyed it before returning her attention to her audience.

"For those of you who dream of a Provence cooking tour, we have one scheduled later this fall, where world-class chefs will teach you French recipes in small groups." The microphone gave her voice a strength she didn't feel. The metal felt slick in her hand as she relaxed her grip. She panned a friendly gaze around the ballroom, making eye contact with the scattered few, seated in the first four rows. If the Coastal Cove Gracious Retirement Community had given her a smaller room in which to do her presentation, it might not have been so brazenly obvious how few people had shown up.

"Our May trip will be to the magical Lubéron mountain region, well-known for having the loveliest villages in France." Rivulets of perspiration traced a path down her spine beneath her spring linen jacket and blouse, despite the air conditioning flowing through the room. If only she'd taken the *unseasonably warm* forecast more seriously.

Several wizened residents nodded. Others fidgeted in their chairs, faces blank, probably wondering why she was wasting their time. She took a deep gulp of water and forced the corners of her

## *Prodigals in Provence*

lips upward, trying to keep her expression enthusiastic. “When you travel with Le Bon Voyage, you’ll be part of a small, exclusive group of no more than ten people, for a more personalized experience.”

*Stay upbeat! Smile!* The mental reminders flowed countercurrent to the weight pulling inside her. If she didn’t fill this trip with a minimum number of travelers, the company’s profit would be almost non-existent for the second trip in a row. They have to plunge again into their reserves.

Bree glanced around the room. The elegant five-star details—the carved molding on the coffered ceiling, the plush patterned carpet underfoot, the impressionist-style paintings on the walls—spoke of the financial means of the residents. But that didn’t guarantee they’d be open to European travel on short notice.

If anything would convince these would-be travelers to sign up for the nine-day Provence excursion scheduled for the following month, her photos would. They’d plant in her audience a burning need to go. That need had been like breathing for Bree, ever since she first lived in France as a college exchange student. But such a passion was difficult to communicate in a few short minutes to a fidgety crowd, whose minds were likely on the dinner menu or tomorrow’s bridge game.

She started the slideshow and adjusted the focus. A vibrant purple panorama of lavender fields lit up the screen on the wall behind her, and she was rewarded by ooh and ahhs around the room. The pink-hued buildings of Roussillon, the fountains of Aix-en-Provence surrounded by colorful café awnings, stretches of gnarly grapevines in neat rows, medieval walled villages perched on hilltops. She clicked through the photos, one by one, and watched the expressions on the faces in her audience. The final photo of an elevated sun-swept terrace shaded by overhanging grape vines expanded on the screen then faded from view. She loved ending

## *Prodigals in Provence*

with that one, the most dramatic *and* most likely to trigger a decision to sign up.

“After each day’s adventures, you’ll return to a private villa where you’ll be able to take a swim, then dine on the terrace under the stars.” Bree proffered a handful of brochures to each row. Her eyes roved to a wall clock on the other side of the room. Only ten minutes left to convince them. “The brochure highlights our current trip. We still have space, and I’d love to have you among us for our tour. If you can’t come in May, be sure to sign up for one in the future.”

Thirty minutes later Bree stepped through the sliding glass doors from the cool air onto the baking sidewalk. She trudged away from the main building, which resembled a large Caribbean villa, and passed the smaller patio homes on the way back to her car. Her shoulders sagged from a laptop case on one side and a canvas bag of brochures on the other.

It was late April and the property was already fully landscaped with cloudbanks of impatiens in red, white, and pink, framed by pale green ferns. A balmy breeze, carrying a scent of new plants and fresh mulch tickled her neck and filled her lungs. Spring in northern Virginia never failed to revive her spirits, though that day she fought her dark thoughts and what-ifs, and their tag-along emotions.

Bree moved her jaws, stiff from an hour of eager smiling. More like pitiful pleading. She may as well have said, “Please, I need another warm body in order to make my bottom line!” Maybe the low numbers were the result of the economy or insufficient marketing. Whatever the case, Le Bon Voyage was in trouble.

Once her tired body slid into the gully of her Honda’s hot bucket seat, she sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. How long could she keep doing this? The last-minute tension, the fear that important details would fall apart at the wrong time . . .

## *Prodigals in Provence*

Sometimes the stress was unbearable. Each trip held the inherent challenges of weaving together an excursion on foreign soil. She always double and triple checked dozens of lists and computer files, as well as stacks of folders and notebooks piled on her office desk, to make sure she hadn't neglected any detail. Despite this, something could still slip past her obsessively watchful eye. And that didn't even take into account the possibility of random events, such as vendors in Europe who had misplaced requests, gone on strike, or double-booked a service she needed.

The phone beeped in her purse. Maybe it was Lauren, her business partner and best friend. Glancing at the screen she saw the name Mariah, her friend from church. Bree could use a friendly voice, even as she sweated in the car. Mariah was studying counseling and got a lot of practical experience with Bree. She turned on the ignition and flipped the air conditioner to max before responding. "Hi, Mariah."

"Hey, Bree. How did your presentation go?"

Bree sighed. "The presentation went well enough, but I'm afraid the timing is too tight for most people. We should have done this kind of promotion months ago, but I kept thinking the trip would fill up."

"Don't you think you'll have enough people?" Mariah's voice held a layer of concern which calmed and reassured Bree. It was good to have a friend who wasn't annoyed by Bree's anxious nature.

"It's hard to tell. We still have six weeks, but usually people reserve months in advance." Bree let out a glum sigh. "It's been three years, Mariah, and Le Bon Voyage still takes two steps forward, then one step back. All we need is two more tours that are under-filled, and that'll be the end of us. We're just a razor's edge from disaster."

## *Prodigals in Provence*

“It might still work out, though.” Mariah’s voice was soothing, but she didn’t have answers either. “It takes time to get a business established.”

“I know.” A message flashed across Bree’s phone indicating a call. “Oh, I wonder if I should get that.”

“You have another call?”

Bree stuffed down a sigh. “I’ll call them back. I might as well tell you and please keep this to yourself. I’ve quietly made some inquiries into other travel companies just in case— you know. In case we go under. One of them just called back.” Maybe she should never have contacted them. Would she be ready for their response if it were positive?

Mariah drew in a quick breath. “Are things that bad?”

“If we have a good summer, we can get back into the black. If not—

Well, it never hurts to make a plan.”

“What about Lauren? What would she do?”

“She’s dating Mark, and they’re pretty serious, so I think she’s all set. But I’ll have no place to go if the business folds.” She couldn’t return to her mother in Minnesota. She’d never be content with small-town life. No, Bree would have to fend for herself if everything went up in smoke. So, she prepared for the worst, plotting her leap from the burning building before it actually caught fire.

“Oh. I see. Don’t worry, I won’t say a word to Lauren. Maybe it will work out. Just take one day at a time.”

Sound advice, if she could do it. She hung up with Mariah and listened to the voicemail. It was from Horizon Tours, one of the companies where she’d sent her resume.

## *Prodigals in Provence*

She listened to the raspy male voice in the message. They didn't need her. Not right now. The company's current interest was Asia, although they might expand into Europe within the coming two years. They'd keep her posted.

And in the meantime, she'd pray the bottom would not fall out of her fragile business.

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Travis Jefferies planted his hands on his knees, leaning over to catch his breath after a rigorous climb up the Huckabee Trail. He lifted his head and squinted, making out the edges of Wilson Mountain in the distance. All of Sedona sat at his feet. The savage, quirky wilderness, the pointed red rocks jutting into the crystal blue expanse above, soothed him to a standstill. He had no choice but to stare at the grandeur. This was pure majesty in dry, rocky form . . . hushed, pristine, natural.

Such a jarring contrast to his sterile apartment back in Portland, and his filming projects across the globe. Of course, he thrived on the kaleidoscope of people, tastes, cultures. But sooner or later, he ought to stop. Rest.

Not his best skill.

Footsteps crunched on the crumbly gravel. Travis turned. More hikers, a couple in colorful spandex and chunky hiking boots, approached. He smiled, nodded, then turned back to the panorama before him. The couple, too, was silenced by the scene painted in bold colors as the cliff dropped away.

"Wow," said the woman. "I could stand here all day." She grinned at her companion and included Travis in her gaze. "You

## *Prodigals in Provence*

found a great lookout. I hear there's a creek at the bottom that's really something to see."

Travis nodded. He'd been on the trail before, one of the more rigorous in the national park. He knew what awaited him once he reached the final portion of the trail—along the fresh, clear waters of Oak Creek two hundred feet below.

"Hey, I know you." The woman had turned back to face him. "You're on TV, aren't you? Travis something? What was it . . . *Planet Discovery*. That was it. We just saw the latest one in—" She turned to the man. "Do you remember, Rick?"

"Nepal, or Bhutan or someplace in Asia."

"Nepal and Kashmir," Travis said. Wasn't too often that someone recognized him from his programs, which aired four times per year. Certainly unexpected, out here in the middle of a desert trail. He was usually able to keep his privacy intact. Fortunately.

"We love your program." The woman shielded her eyes from the sun with one hand. "I especially like the interviews."

Travis grinned and took a sip from the water bottle on a string over one shoulder. "That's one of my favorite parts to do. I enjoy introducing viewers to new places, but it's the people who live there that make it memorable, I think."

"Every show gives us new ideas for places to go," the man said with a smile.

"You guys on vacation?"

"Yes, we hike all over the U.S." The man slid his sunglasses to the top of his head. "This is our second time in Arizona. You?"

Travis's gaze slipped to the trail that beckoned him. He could almost feel the cool water of the creek. He planned on wading

## *Prodigals in Provence*

barefoot. He drew his attention again to the couple. “We just finished shooting in Serbia and Croatia for a special that’ll air in midsummer. Just taking a few days to rest.”

“If you can call this resting.” The man chuckled then wiped perspiration from his brow.

Travis moved toward the trail.

“We’ll look for the program later in the year. Good to meet you, Travis.”

Travis waved and stepped through a narrow space between two boulders. He felt a thread of satisfaction from the encounter. For that couple, at least, he’d helped open the world a little bit wider. He loved helping viewers discover other cultures and ways of life. And plan their vacations.

Being on vacation himself, however, was another story. Having time off left too much room for memories to bounce around inside his skull. So, he stayed on the move. Once in a while, though not very often, he’d pause to take a breath. This was one of those times. He’d stopped to visit his mother in Sedona, Arizona before heading home to Portland.

Two hours later, Travis parked his rental car in the driveway at his mother’s house. He glanced at his watch. She wouldn’t be home from church yet. He circled the house and slipped through a low, painted fence onto the patio. It looked mellow and inviting, though in a couple months it would be like a hibachi grill out here. The scents of bougainvillea and of jasmine from star-petaled carissa flower wafted toward him. The plants shared space in tidy beds with red yuccas and hibiscus bushes. Stucco ranch houses of the retirement community, all similar to his mother’s, lined the curve of the street like neatly-placed dominos, the expanse of beige and muted pinks broken by the turquoise of swimming pools visible over the row of fences.

## *Prodigals in Provence*

When he heard the garage door mechanism groan, Travis slipped from the patio into the cool kitchen. His mother was just closing the door to the garage behind her. She looked up and met his smile. Her lined face, framed by close-cut gray hair, was lit with intelligent blue eyes.

“There you are.” She set her purse on the kitchen table. “Did you sleep well?”

Travis grinned. She always asked that question, ever since he was a kid. “I always sleep well when I come here.” Far from the pressures he’d created with his travel business, which had exploded with success in the last couple years. The pressures he’d return to in just a couple of days.

“You’re with family. You can let your hair down.” She reached up to his shoulder and tugged playfully at the shaggy curls that hung below his ears. She opened the fridge and pulled out a glass casserole pan covered with foil. “I marinated these all night, so we’ll stick them in the oven and see what we get.”

She turned on the oven to preheat. “They were asking about you today. Ellie and Sheryl, you know, my old friends. They know you’re in town and wanted to say hi.”

Travis avoided his mother’s gaze. He’d told her last night that he’d let her know if he’d be attending church with her today. But early that morning he’d slipped out to the trails, leaving a note for her on the counter. “I don’t mind going to church, it’s just that your friends give me those sad eyes, as if to say, ‘Isn’t he over that thing yet?’”

“They just miss seeing you, that’s all.” His mother’s voice was quiet. “It’s been five years. They figure you’ve gone on with your life. Recovered. I’m the only one who knows,” she shrugged one shoulder, “maybe you haven’t.”

## *Prodigals in Provence*

“Of course, I’ve have, Mom.” He pushed down the note of adolescent defensiveness in his voice. Maybe she had a point. “I’m fine now, really. Lexi made her choices, I went on with my life. I know you’d like me to find another girl, but I’m okay.”

Compassion etched his mother’s face. She cupped his cheek with one hand. “Finding someone else will take care of itself, in time. But I know my son. You aren’t the same zealous Travis you once were. Well, you’re zealous for other things. Your documentaries all over the world, your books. Yes, zealous and maybe even a bit driven. Not that I’m not proud of you. Of course, I am. But it’s not the same.”

He sighed. No, he wasn’t the same. He’d gotten wiser, more wary. He’d learned a lot from being kicked in the head by life. By Lexi. Maybe even by God. But he’d poured his hurt and anger into his work. At least he’d had a productive outlet. He wasn’t angry anymore. It just didn’t matter.

She leaned against the counter. “You know, you don’t have to work so hard when you come to visit Gray and me. I saw all the junk you put out on the curb. Thank you for cleaning the garage. And the grill, and the storage bins.”

“Just wanted to help. I may as well be useful while I’m here. It’ll save you two the trouble, since you’re not spring chickens anymore.” He grinned at her, and she laughed.

“I want you to be able to unwind here after your trips. It couldn’t have been too relaxing over there in—where were you again?”

“Serbia and Croatia. It *was* kind of a grueling schedule.” He had to admit, he thrived on the pace. For nearly two months on location, he’d slept in places ranging from comfortable to primitive, eaten strange food, and negotiated with locals having little vocabulary in common. He loved his work, doing the research, preparing scripts,

## *Prodigals in Provence*

filming, interviewing nationals. Though lately, somehow, something had been missing. He was still struggling to figure out what it was. What would he do if he lost his passion for his work?

“Once you get back home you won’t relax, I’m guessing.”

“Probably not. That’s why I come here, to see you guys and to get away.” True, getting out of town was the only way to refuel his batteries. “Besides, in Sedona it’s drier, sunnier—and warmer than Portland.”

“Plus, you have your mom’s TLC and coconut pie.”

“That too.” He’d already eaten more than he should have during his visit. His gaze found hers. “Are we going to see Gray today?”

“Yes, we’ll eat lunch then go,” she said. “That’ll give him time to get his nurse’s visits out of the way and have his lunch.” She flashed a sudden grin. “He wanted me to smuggle some snacks in for him. I guess the hospital food is living down to its reputation.”

“I’ve got him covered.” Travis pulled a box of cheese crackers, a bag of chocolate-covered yogurt balls, and cinnamon graham cookies from the cupboard and tossed them on the counter.

“That was sweet. You always did remember our little cravings. Seems the older we get, the more we have.”

Gray certainly had his cravings. After shoving a few cheese crackers into his mouth, he stuck the box out to Travis and his mom, and even the nurses, so they could help themselves. “Travis bought the good ones, not those knockoff crackers no one likes.”

“Only the best for you, Gray.” Travis closed his fist around some crackers in the depth of the box. “So, one hip replacement out of the way. What’s next?”

Gray rolled his eyes, deepening the lines around them. “One down, three to go.”

“Three more hips? No wonder you were in pain.”

Gray’s laughter barreled through the room. He winced, then sputtered, “One more hip, two knees. By the time they’re done with me, I’ll be new like Barbie, plastic parts from the waist down.”

Travis secretly wished he could get a few of those plastic parts for his heart and his brain. At least plastic didn’t hurt or ask questions. “So, how’s that going to work for the Provence trip? Will you be able to walk around okay? Climb castle walls, browse in tourist shops?”

A lengthy silence followed. Gray’s tightened lips worked around, as if he needed to say something, but didn’t dare begin. His eyes met his wife’s, a plaintive shadow behind them. “Honey, I know this is your dream. I can try, but don’t know how much good I’ll be. Think I can get a hold of a wheel chair once we get there?”

Travis’s mother laid a hand on Gray’s arm. “No, Gray. I’ll cancel tomorrow. Provence isn’t going anywhere. Maybe we can go next year.”

“I don’t want you to miss this chance, Marcia. You’ve waited ten years to do this. I—I thought I’d be okay to travel, but the hips went faster than I expected. You need to go. I want you to.”

“I don’t want to go alone.” Her voice was quiet. She arranged the salmon-colored carnation blooms that spilled from a clear glass vase on the bedside table.

“There must be other ladies going,” Gray said. “Widow ladies who are used to traveling alone.”

Her lips tightened, and she gazed across the room away from her husband. His mother seemed drained of her usual energy, despite forced cheerfulness. She’d had to know that Gray wouldn’t be ready for an overseas trip for at least a year, maybe even two, considering how many surgeries he needed. And Gray had confided to Travis that he hadn’t wanted to go on the trip in the first place. He’d only agreed for his wife’s sake.

His mother looked back at her husband brightly. “It’s not that important. I’ll go another time.”

Gray leaned back and scowled. “My lower half hurts, but they say I’ll be good as new. That is, until the next operation.” He settled a tired gaze on Travis. “Why don’t you go to France in my place, Travis?”

Travis’ eyes widened. “I . . . uh . . .” He swallowed. For one thing, he was about fifty years too young.

“It’s already been paid for, and you love to travel. Only this time, you won’t be working. You’ll just enjoy the trip, like everyone else. Seeing the world from the traveler’s perspective might even help you with your work.” From his cloud of pillows, Gray stared at him. Travis thought he saw pleading in the man’s eyes.

Travis waited for his mother to intervene and save him from having to respond. Instead she turned a direct gaze on him, her eyes slicing him in two. “You’d enjoy it, Travis. Not everyone is elderly. You could gather some new ideas about traveling, couldn’t you?”

Travis squirmed under his mother’s hopeful gaze. “Uh, I don’t know. I guess I can have a look at my schedule and see, but don’t set your heart on me, Mom.”

## *Prodigals in Provence*

Accompanying his mother to France was not on his itinerary.

Later on, he'd tell her he'd checked his schedule and it was out of the question. His mother would understand and find a friend to go. She might find someone among her numerous friends at church or in the weekly Bible study she led.

Once back at his mother's house, Travis rummaged in his canvas bag for his calendar. He preferred the old-fashioned paper kind. He never had to charge its batteries or worry about it being stolen. His chicken scratch was the only disadvantage. He thumbed pages forward and checked the nine-day period when the Provence trip was scheduled. He checked it a second time and frowned. Wide open. For the two weeks prior, he'd be in Copenhagen, and the weeks after, in the Italian Lakes region. He had a full ten days completely free between the two . . . and he was already going to be in Europe.

He'd have to find another excuse and do it fast.