

READING GROUP GUIDE

"A powerful debut. . . . This moving page-turner is a love letter to Florence . . . filled with passion, history, courage, secrets, and second chances."

— LISA BARR, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Woman on Fire*

ESCAPE *to* FLORENCE

a novel

KAT DEVEREAUX



HARPER

AUTHOR NOTE

*E**scape to Florence* is a story born of spite. That's rather a dark motivation; but then again, I started to write it at rather a dark time. It was the second year of the pandemic, and my freelance translation career had taken a serious hit from which it—and my bank account—had still not recovered. Determined to cut costs, I'd moved across the country from hilly Tuscany to the humid flat Po Valley. Now I was living in a tiny flat in an unfamiliar city, trying to rebuild my life while I battled a fresh wave of culture shock and post-Brexit bureaucracy.

And still—and still!—I had friends back in the United Kingdom, perfectly lovely friends who would write or text hoping for a bit of Continental joy to brighten up their day: *How are your Italian adventures? So jealous!*

Of course, that's exactly how it works. They were weighed down with responsibilities: jobs, mortgages, family commitments, caring duties, all made infinitely harder by the bloody pandemic. They wanted a taste of another life. They wanted to imagine me as a free spirit, swanning around in the sunshine with nothing more taxing to do than drink another spritz and plan my next love affair. I understood that. But I also resented it, and with each blithe inquiry that resentment grew a little stronger until, finally, I had to do something creative with it. *You want Italian adventures? I'll give you Italian adventures!*

So I decided that I would write a different kind of novel. I'd written four already, the most recent a Renaissance historical that had garnered some lovely rejections but no offers. I was sick of throwing myself into projects that didn't work out—sick of failing at the things I most desperately wanted to do. This time I would bow to pressure and write exactly the story other people seemed to want from me: An escapist story with an aristocratic heroine who swigs cocktails and takes lovers. A story where the Tuscan sun is always shining, but without the sweat and mosquitoes, and the biggest problem on any given day is which designer sunglasses to match with which designer bag. My heroine wouldn't have to buy the generic brand

mozzarella. She wouldn't sit on her bed translating chainsaw manuals on her crappy laptop. She'd be living the dream. And I wouldn't set out to do anything with this novel—I'd give up on agents, give up on publishers, keep it to myself like the luxurious, liberating thing it was meant to be.

Obviously, things worked out a little differently.

I love sex-and-shopping books, but I failed to write one. As I got to know Tori, her concerns became thornier and her voice more serious, though she never lost her spark. She developed money worries, relationship trauma, sibling troubles. She lost someone she loved. She gained depth, complexity, a deep well of suppressed anger. And she also gained a family hinterland, a historical relationship to the city on the Arno that went far beyond spritzes and shopping sprees.

In the process of researching that hinterland, I stumbled across a YouTube video of an interview with the partisan Luciana (Luce) Romoli. Here was an elegant ninety-year-old woman in pearls, her voice full of pride and emotion as she talked about her work as a courier for the Resistance when she was just thirteen. I knew that my story had to include something about the girls and women who had done that dangerous work. Stella was born, and—as Stella herself would say—from that day, Tori had a sister. And they balanced each other beautifully: Stella's cool-headed, clear-eyed pragmatism; Tori's naturally bubbly nature and broad streak of maladaptive humor.

Writing *Escape to Florence* changed my life. There was still pain and uncertainty. But now I had a sustaining project to carry me through, with not one but two stories in which to lose myself. And even though it began as a spiteful act, an exercise in malicious compliance, it was authentically mine because I wrote it first and foremost for myself. Perhaps it's no surprise that of the five novels I wrote from 2012 to 2022, this was the one that found me an agent and then a publisher.

It's not very dignified, as origin stories go. But you know what? I think dignity is overrated.

—KAT DEVEREAUX

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The two narrators of *Escape to Florence*, Stella and Tori, lead very different lives. What qualities do they have in common? Which did you find more relatable?
2. The partisan writer Claudio Pavone described the Italian Resistance as fighting “a civil war.” How does Stella’s story reflect the tensions between Italians during the German occupation?
3. Women were crucial to the success of the Italian Resistance, but many saw their contributions dismissed when the war was won. How does this affect Stella after the Liberation? Does she manage to break free of her limitations or does she stay trapped?
4. Both Stella and Tori have difficult relationships with their families. How does this affect their choices in the story? Where do they find the unconditional love that’s lacking at home?
5. Stella’s life in Romituzzo is shaped by two strong and distinct forces: Catholic faith and communist politics. Where do religion and politics combine in her story? Where do they clash?
6. The people around Tori respond very differently as she works to escape her abusive marriage. Why do you think their reactions vary so much? Whose perspective do you most agree with?
7. The character of Achille Infuriati is central to both Stella’s and Tori’s narratives. In your eyes, is Achille a hero?
8. To what extent is Tori’s relocation to Florence a true escape? What problems does she bring with her, and what new issues does she have to face?
9. What would you have done if you were in Stella’s position in 1944? Or in Tori’s position in 2019?
10. At the beginning of *Escape to Florence*, both Tori and Stella suffer bereavement. Tori loses her grandmother and Stella her friend. How do these losses impact the story that follows? How does each of them deal with her grief?
11. When she arrives in Florence, Tori finds herself in a context that’s both familiar and strange. Have you ever moved to a new city, state, or country? How does her experience relate to yours?
12. There are several love stories in this novel: some romantic, some platonic. Do you have a favorite?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KAT DEVEREAUX was born near Edinburgh and has lived in the United States, Russia, France, Chile, Germany, and the Czech Republic before finally settling in Italy. She is a writer and translator with a special focus on Italian literature.

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