

PINK PALAZZO

A Palm Beach Romance

by Kiki Astor

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Chapter 1

Penny could almost feel Guillermo's displeasure coming off him in waves. They were hurrying away from the house, towards Penny's car, which was barely visible in the driving snow, Guillermo having just wrapped up his photos of the grand New England colonial, and Penny having just interviewed, and apparently thoroughly insulted, the homeowner.

"Haven't I told you a million times to keep your stupid ideas in your head?" Guillermo hissed.

"Sure, but haven't about a million women told you to keep your stupid dick in your pants? And you still haven't learned." Penny retorted.

Guillermo recoiled as if she'd slapped him, which she had, but that had been months ago, back when he accosted her in the accessories closet of House Spectacular. The palm of Penny's hand had already made contact with Guillermo's face by the time she'd had time to consider that she was a lowly features writer, while Guillermo's father happened to own the magazine. But treading lightly was not Penny's forte. In fact, her grandmother still affectionately called her Bully, after the proverbial bull in the China shop. To make matters worse, upon finding out that Guillermo had also harassed a handful of other interns and employees of House Spectacular, Penny had started a coalition of sorts, effectively blackmailing him into negotiating pay raises and job security for each of his victims. She was pretty sure this wasn't peak female empowerment, but it was a start. Though his position as photographer at the magazine was all but guaranteed, Guillermo had every intention of keeping his nefarious activities secret, considering he was married to someone far too good for him. His wife, the elegant Samantha Campbell, was a society maven, a preppy goddess with aristocratic good looks. She probably could have done infinitely better for herself, if she hadn't had a savior complex. Penny was convinced that, as a general rule, men like Guillermo were not worth fixing. In fact, were men in general really worth the effort at all? No. That was why Penny didn't bother with long-term relationships. Historically, none of the women in her family had. And Penny sure loved history.

"I didn't say anything incorrect, anyway," Penny protested as she picked her way down the slippery path, cringing as snow entered her boot, and as she realized that she should have just dropped the mic after her awesome comeback.

"Oh, come on," said Guillermo. "You were rude, and honestly, I'm not very inspired to keep defending you."

"Ha. Have you forgotten your motivation already?" Penny scoffed. "Just tell your father the truth. That I simply told them a historic anecdote. You have to admit, painting over that chimney? It's a crime!"

"What's the big deal about painting crappy old bricks?"

"You've been working at House Spectacular for this long, and you don't know?"

Guillermo gave her a mocking look. But he took the bait.

"Know what?"

"Bedford village was burnt down in 1779, by the English," said Penny.

"But the plaque on this house says 1778."

"Exactly. It was spared. Because it had a Tory chimney."

"A what?"

"British loyalists painted their chimneys white with a black band, a kind of secret signal."

"So their houses were spared?"

"Yeah."

"So the original owner of this house was a Tory?"

"Not at all. But when Captain Jameson, who had built this house, let his wife Agnes know of rumors that the English were coming, she and a housemaid painted the chimney under the cover of night, while the captain and his friends gathered in a public house, strategizing."

"That's pretty ballsy," Guillermo admitted. "What happened?"

"Well, the English came through, before Jameson and his cronies could mount any kind of plan. Their home was saved, along with their whole family, including three young children. Most of their neighbors found themselves with their lives reduced to piles of smoking rubble."

"Wow, the captain must have been thankful to his wife," said Guillermo.

"On the contrary."

“What?”

“He blamed Agnes for making him lose face, and he ended up divorcing her, banishing her, and taking the children.”

“That's horrible,” said Guillermo.

“History isn't always pretty,” said Penny.

“True,” Guillermo agreed, “Which is why I don't know why you're so hell bent on preserving it no matter what. People are allowed to restore their home in a way that's not historically accurate. It's their choice.”

“You can't just plaster over things and make them disappear,” said Penny. “Do that, and we repeat the same errors that were made in the past.”

“That's great. But we work for a decor magazine. So, you'll do much better if you try to be sweet to our advertisers, and to the people we're trying to feature. We need wealthy people's support to keep the publication going. People talk. The upper echelons of society are a tight knit club.”

“You think I don't know that?”

“Oh yes, I forgot. You're a spoiled rich girl.”

“Hardly,” said Penny, struggling to unlock her car door- her vehicle was so old, it still had a manual key. If she was so spoiled, why did she have such a clunker?

“We all know you have a massive trust fund coming to you, Penny. I don't even know why you need this job.”

Got to love the gossip mill. But need this job, she did. And since this job paid poorly, she also taught etiquette to undeserving Upper East Side brats, many of whom were beyond help. And she helped Mrs. Parker, an old friend of Grandmama's, with her cotillion classes.

She thought, as she often did, of her grandmother. What was she up to right now? It had been over two long years, with COVID and uninterrupted cold winters in New York, since they'd seen each other in person. Penny and her grandmother had always been close. She'd been raised by her, had grown up with her, until she'd gone to boarding school. She didn't know why she had even moved to New York. Because every time she returned to Palm Beach to visit her grandmother, it was as if she was being welcomed back into paradise. Even now, as she settled into her chilly car seat and looked up at the leaden winter sky through her frozen windshield, she imagined she could feel the balmy air on her skin. She could almost taste that first glass of sweet

orange juice Uncle Lawrence would always give her as she arrived at Grandmama's pink palace on Lake Worth, after a long time away. Fresh squeezed orange juice always tasted like home.

"Hey, are you even listening to me?" Guillermo asked. She hadn't even noticed him getting into the car. Crap. She'd forgotten that Ben, the assistant he had carpooled with, had been dismissed earlier in the day, and that and that she would now have to put up with him the whole way back into the city.

"I was saying," said Guillermo, "you probably don't even need this job. I don't know why you're trying to hold on to it so badly."

Actually, Penny had been actively hoping that she soon wouldn't need it. She had done an audition for that show she loved to hate watch, *This Old Mansion*, which was the television version, essentially, of the magazine. She was in the running for the role of on-screen historical expert, a sort of sidekick to the host of the show, an elegant woman named Sarah.

Unfortunately, Sarah's first instinct was to modernize every home she came across. During the audition, Penny had engaged in comical banter with Sarah, which she knew would make for great TV, and win over the producers. The prospect of being on television was far more glamorous than laboring for the stodgy old magazine, and it would pay more, to boot. Yes, she had a trust fund coming to her, but that would only kick in after her grandmother's death, which she hoped would be a long way away. In fact, she was looking forward to throwing a massive 97th birthday party for Grandmama in just a few months. In just a couple weeks, she was going to Palm Beach to organize the last details and catch up with Grandmama. It would be lovely to have her all to herself for a bit. It would be lovely to be home.

Her windshield had barely started defrosting, and she had just put the car into drive, when her phone buzzed and jangled in her pocket. She put the brakes back on and fumbled for it.

"Do you need to get that?" asked Guillermo. "The damn thing's been going off all day. You should put it on silent while you're working a job. God. The roads are probably getting worse and worse."

"Yeah, sorry," said Penny absentmindedly, as she looked at the screen of her phone. In addition to about ten missed calls, she saw that the current call coming in was from a number that could conceivably be the production studio for the show.

Her heart began to hammer in her chest.

“Sorry, Guillermo, I do have to take this.”

Chapter 2

She didn't wait for a response, and let herself out of the car, slamming the door and cutting off his protests. Once back outside, in the driving snow, she tapped the green button with her thumb and lifted the phone to her ear.

"Hello?" she said, cupping her hand around the phone to block out the worst of the rushing wind, and taking a few steps from the car, trying in vain to shelter under the bare branches of one of the property's specimen trees.

"Yes, hi, this is Fiona from This Old Mansion."

"Yes?" said Penny. Her voice had come out almost in a yelp. This was it. This was the beginning of her real life, her real career.

"Yes, I was just calling to say that the producers decided you were not a good fit for the show. Sorry about that. Have a..."

"Wait," Penny said desperately. "What do you mean I wasn't a good fit? What did they say? I thought it went really well..."

"You thought it went really well?" The woman scoffed, in a pretentious tone.

What the hell? Was she *mimicking* her? How rude. Penny remembered this Fiona character now. A red headed woman with a strict bob haircut, sitting on a stool in the corner. Wrinkling her nose every few moments, looking at Penny disdainfully. Penny didn't know what her problem was. It wasn't like Penny was instantly intimidating or unlikable or anything like that. She was on the pretty end of ordinary, with big brown eyes and naturally blonde but annoyingly frizzy hair. The men she'd been with had praised her slim but curvy figure and her pillowy lips, but she didn't really care about their opinion, because just like all the other women in her family, Penny didn't need or plan to have a partner in her life. Whatever she needed physically, she could get it and then leave it.

"So, sorry, can you tell me what exactly they didn't like?" said Penny. "I mean, I kind of think I deserve the feedback."

Yikes. She did sound a little spoiled then. But she couldn't help how she acted and spoke. She'd been sent to Miss Porter's, for heaven's sake. A goddamn finishing school, for all intents and purposes. And she'd hung out

with a bunch of old socialites and antiques dealers in Palm Beach her whole life. So, of course, some of that had rubbed off.

“Question: You thought it was okay to get into an argument with your co-host?” asked Fiona.

“I thought it made for good TV,” Penny said weakly.

“In what world ...?”

“Anyway... It wasn't an argument,” said Penny. “It was more like banter.”

“Banter, my ass,” said Fiona. “You insulted her design sense, her historical knowledge, and her upbringing in one fell swoop. I mean, seriously, what the hell? At first, we thought you were joking. But then, we realized you're delusional. You've really got to learn that your way is not the only way.”

Penny winced. This was the second time she'd heard this message in about five minutes. If things kept going this way, she was going to end up believing it.

“Okay,” she said, shame burning in her cheeks. “I get it, it's fine. Thank you for calling me back and letting me know.”

Penny was nothing if not polite, after all. This is what made her such a good etiquette coach for intractable children.

“Have a fabulous day,” Fiona responded, and hung up on her.

“Damn it,” Penny growled under her breath.

She looked over to the car. Guillermo was gesticulating at her, pointing at his watch and pointing at the sky.

Yes, the snow had accelerated, and it had gotten even colder out, but the burning flush of embarrassment had kept her from feeling the icy pinpricks that now snuck their way up her sleeves and down her neck. She hoped the road back to New York would not be too treacherous. She would hate to have a car accident she couldn't afford, or even worse, be stuck staying in some second-rate motel with Guillermo. Besides, she needed to be back for her lesson with little Toby, and for cotillion later that evening.

She was about to open the car door when the phone buzzed again. This time, a text, from Toby's mother.

Can you be here in half an hour? Toby has a trumpet lesson at the time of his usual etiquette lesson.

Penny sighed. There was no way she would make it back to New York in half an hour. And no reason for Toby's mother to think that she should be expected to, except for her own entitlement. She glanced at Guillermo

through the windshield and made a gesture which she hoped would communicate that that she had no choice but to make another phone call.

“Hi, Mrs. Hillsworth,” said Penny.

“What's wrong with text?” Toby's mother responded. Penny could see the insufferable woman in her mind's eye, her skinny face contorted in a disbelieving moue, picking strands of her flat-ironed hair off of glossy, overinflated lips.

“Unfortunately, I can't be there in half an hour. I'm out of town right now. And I didn't know Toby was doing trumpet.”

“Well, he decided he was interested this morning, and I managed to squeeze it in,” said Mrs. Hillsworth. “Are you in a tunnel?”

You didn't really manage to squeeze it in if you had to bump my lesson time for it, thought Penny, but she decided not to say anything about that.

“I'm sorry I can't make it an hour early at the last minute,” said Penny, “but I understand if he can't make it today. Trumpet is pretty exciting, and musical instruments are wonderful for a young boy of his age to learn.”

“What about his etiquette lesson?”

“I'll see him next week. If you need to modify his schedule in the future, we will try to make it work. And I'm sorry, I will have to charge you for the lesson today.”

“Charge me?” Mrs. Hillsworth exclaimed. “But he's not doing the lesson. Why would I pay for it?”

“Because I set aside the time, Mrs. Hillsworth. Because I could have taken on another client, and now it's too late,” said Penny.

“You're being very unreasonable,” said Mrs. Hillsworth. “And in fact, I think Toby has learned quite enough from you. I think trumpet will be better for him.”

“Great,” said Penny. “Well, Let me know if you change your mind.”

She hung up. She hoped this woman wouldn't change her mind, but she didn't have enough etiquette clients to pay the bills without having to depend on the magazine, which was a tenuous position, despite her blackmail. And now, of course, the TV show was not going to happen. Her occasional appointments as a historical expert for Hollywood films had dried up- she'd had one too many arguments about the correct portrayal of history with movie directors and producers for her to be asked back. Her YouTube

channel, on which she talked about historic homes and history, had a loyal following, but not the type of numbers that would permit her to monetize yet. And she'd been working on a historical romance novel but had writer's block. She needed to figure something else out. Not only was she living hand to mouth, essentially, but she didn't want it to look like she'd just been waiting for her trust fund to come through. Though she would be a wealthy woman one day, she hated the optics of being the one who'd been waiting, doing nothing. And more than hating the optics, she hated the idea of it. She had lots of passions and loads of interests, but somehow, she never really accumulated the right skills to do something where she would earn a lot of money. She just didn't know how. She hadn't been raised that way. She liked to tell herself that she lived a rich life, nevertheless, but that wasn't completely true. This was why she was so very excited to be returning to Palm Beach next month. Palm Beach meant home, and it meant family: Grandmama, Grandmama's factotum, a sweet man she called Uncle Lawrence, and her best friend, Ella, who happened to be Lawrence's granddaughter.

A violent rapping on the car's windshield snapped her out of her reverie. Guillermo was gesturing at her, livid. She slipped into the car and slammed the door, shaking off the snow and eliciting a yelp from Guillermo.

"Listen, I get it that you have nowhere else to be," he seethed, "but some of us have a life we need to get back to."

"I was having an emergency."

"Have your emergency later," said Guillermo.

"Wow, what a charmer. Samantha's a lucky woman," said Penny as she started the car.

Guillermo held up his phone.

"It says here we should take the 22."

"No," said Penny. "That gets icy. I'm going to take the Merritt Parkway."

"You're familiar with this area," Guillermo observed.

"I came here a lot with friends while I was at school."

"Let me guess. Yale?"

Crap. Penny knew that Guillermo had a chip on his shoulder over his own self-perceived lack of breeding and education. Being married to his glamorous well-heeled wife probably didn't help matters at all. Penny couldn't help it if the guy had a complex. She couldn't help who she'd been born to, or

where she'd lived, any more than he could. And if you looked at how each of them was doing today, he certainly had nothing to envy in poor Penny. He lived in a gorgeous brownstone on the Upper West Side, while Penny lived in a walk up one bedroom on the Upper East, a one-time maid's room rented to her by Mrs. Parker. It was rent-controlled, but still almost more than she could handle financially. Still, she'd made the place beautiful, with hand me downs from Grandmama, old mirrors, porcelain, and artworks from local consignment shops, and tons of candles she bought at the discount store.

She knew she had good taste, and that she'd made the place look fantastic for what it was, but it was shabby and pathetic compared to what she'd grown up in, or compared to Guillermo's home, or to Ella's house, a modern mansion facing Lake Worth in West Palm. Ella was a successful commercial real estate broker, and Penny couldn't be prouder of her. Though, it did beg the question of why these two childhood best friends had grown up to be so completely different when it came to financial matters and lifestyle. Ella was happily married, with two adorable children that Penny considered to be something like a niece and nephew. After all, she called Ella's grandfather, Lawrence, Uncle Lawrence, because he and Grandmama had always been so close. In fact, there had been salacious rumors as to the nature of their relationship. Grandmama had been so livid about them that she had cut off contact with about half of Palm Beach society at one point. And that was after she had given up her membership at the Everglades Club. Surely Grandmama had her own reasons, but Penny still regretted the fact that Grandmama's actions meant that she herself rarely made her way behind the storied walls of the Everglades Club. She had heard so many romantic stories about ladies' teas, and golfing, and languishing by the pool, and would have loved that life for herself. Depending on the cost, perhaps she would reinstate her membership once the trust fund came through.

She shuddered. She really did need to stop thinking that way.

"Pay attention to the road," said Guillermo. "What the hell is wrong with you today?"

"Nothing," said Penny. "I've driven these roads my whole life."

But then, she clenched her jaw as she almost skidded on a patch of black ice. *Crap*, the roads were getting worse. Maybe it was a good thing that she didn't need to hurry to the etiquette lesson. As it was, she would barely make it to the cotillion class.

Guillermo was texting, and she could see a scowl on his face.

“What about you? Everything okay?” she asked him.

“Meh. The cousins are trying to use the mountain house next month, but it’s ski week,” Guillermo said.

“Ski week?”

“Oh, that’s right, you don’t have kids. It’s winter break in February, when everyone goes skiing.”

“Oh, everyone, huh? Who’s entitled now?” said Penny. “I guess that going skiing in Aspen or Vail or maybe Stowe is a God given right over Ski Week? It must be hell on the slopes.”

Penny didn’t dislike children but considering that she was pretty sure she would never have any of her own, something she was a little bit conflicted about, if she really admitted it to herself, she liked steering clear of kids when she could.

“It is an absolute nightmare,” Guillermo admitted. “I take it you’ll do the smart thing and stay put in town?”

“I’m going to...” she hesitated. “To Florida.”

“Oh, Miami?” asked Guillermo.

“Palm Beach,” said Penny, instantly regretting it.

“Of course. Why did I even ask?”

“To see my grandmother,” Penny specified.

“Oh,” said Guillermo, slightly mollified.

He was, after all, a family man, even if he was a terrible person.

“God, this weather just keeps getting worse,” Guillermo observed.

“No kidding,” said Penny.

“I can’t wait to get home and sit in front of the fire.”

Penny said nothing. Her apartment was not what she considered her real home. And she had neither a fireplace, nor was she going to have the benefit of staying in. She was already dreading the long nine-block walk to the cotillion class. In the spring or summer, it was a delightful little stroll, but in winter weather, it felt unending. Not to mention, she was hungry. Starving, really. Thinking that made her break into a small smile. Ella always chided her when she used the term *starving*.

“You’re not actually starving,” Ella would say.

“But it sure feels that way,” was Penny’s stock response.

And right now, it really did feel that way. She hadn’t had lunch. And now that she was going to get home so late, stuck in this slow stream of traffic, she would barely have time to eat something before class. She tried to remember whether she had used the box of pasta in her pantry, or if she still had a can of soup or something. She might have a yogurt in the fridge. She wasn’t one to keep a huge stock of food, because she never knew where she would be. She tended to say yes to every possible opportunity to make money. Not only because she needed the cash, but also because she simply was bad at saying no.

“Is it as slippery as it looks?” Guillermo asked.

“Slipperier,” said Penny, clenching the steering wheel harder. “We’ll be fine. I hope.”

Her phone buzzed again. Another incoming call. She ignored it. This was crazy. She regularly got spam from Palm Beach because she still had a Palm Beach number. But today had been a particularly heavy day, with more calls coming in than usual. She needed to call Ella, she reminded herself, to plan their upcoming joint birthday celebration, a lunch at Swifty’s at the Colony Palms. Penny had not been back there since it had been redesigned by Celerie Kemble. She was looking forward to seeing the preppy pink and green magnificence with her own eyes. But really, she was most looking forward to seeing Grandmama. She could see her grandmother’s mischievous smile and white curls in her mind’s eye now, and also the fluorescent green expanse of lawn in back of her house, the brilliant turquoise blue of the swimming pool, and the slate blue of Lake Worth beyond that. Swaying palm trees, pink walls, and a glossy wood gondola bobbing on the water completed the tropical Venetian fantasy that was Grandmama’s house, Palazzo Leoni.

Her phone buzzed again, bringing her back to reality. Out of force of habit, she took it out of the cupholder.

“Eyes on the road,” said Guillermo.

“Can you just tell me who’s calling?”

Maybe Mrs. Powell was canceling cotillion class because of the inclement weather. That would be wonderful. Penny really needed a rest. She needed to have a good cry, have a good cup of soup, and then go to sleep and not wake up until at least 9 o’clock the next morning.

“It says E,” said Guillermo. “Your boyfriend?”

“No, E is short for Ella,” said Penny.

She clenched her teeth. She didn't want to tell Guillermo more. Didn't want to have to share any details about her deep, lifelong friendship with Ella, which was more akin to sisterhood, with this guy, who belonged to a version of her life that she barely wanted to be in anymore. How she would prefer a life like Ella's. Not that she envied the husband and the kids, who were actually adorable, if she was honest with herself, but it was more the idea living in gorgeous Palm Beach year-round, looking out from floor-to-ceiling office windows onto the water and the palm-fringed skyline.

Maybe once the trust fund kicked in... again, she shook herself and reminded herself that she didn't want that. Not soon, at least. A life without the only family she had left was no life she wanted to consider. Palazzo Leoni wouldn't feel like home without the formidable mistress of the house.

“She's calling again. Want me to pick it up and hold it up for you?” asked Guillermo.

“No, it's okay,” said Penny. “I'll call her back.”

She didn't want Guillermo listening in on any personal conversations. They finally made it back to the city, the traffic slowing to a crawl.

“Are you okay dropping me off at 82nd and Broadway?” asked Guillermo.

“Sure,” said Penny, surreptitiously checking her watch. This meant she had almost no time at all to get home, change, and run back out. Her stomach growled.

Chapter 3

After she'd dropped off Guillermo, Penny went back to daydreaming as traffic crept across town.

Not counting their constant texting, she and Ella had last spoken a few weeks before. With their big birthdays, their thirtieth, coming the next month, Penny had been delighted to pull the trigger on a gift she just knew would thrill her best friend to no end: a DNA kit. Ella had always bemoaned the fact that she didn't know much about her own origins. Things on her father's side were clear enough, since he was of mostly English and Dutch stock. But on her mother's side, the family tree grew nebulous. On her mother's side, Lawrence's side, ancestors had originated from the vast continent of Africa. Any further details had been lost to the ocean waves. There was of course some whispered family lore, but none of it could be taken as fact.

"Imagine if I find out I'm related to African royalty," Ella was fond of saying.

"You probably are," Penny would always respond.

Ella had the stature and deportment of a queen.

The kit was a lot of money for Penny's paltry budget, but the thought of her friend ripping open the package delightedly made it all worth it. When ordering it, she had included a gift message that read: *No matter what you find out, you'll always be a queen to me.* But then, just a few days after she'd ordered Ella's kit, she'd received a package in the mail. A DNA kit. For a moment, she'd cursed technology and the company website, fearing that she'd accidentally had it delivered to herself. The extra time and expense it would take to run the kit to the post office would be minimal to some, but significant to her.

But then, she read the gift message and laughed. It was from Ella. *I've always wanted one of these, but I decided that maybe giving you one would be a great hint,* she'd written. Typical. They were so frequently on the same wavelength that even the people around them observed on it. When she'd called Ella to thank her for the gift, Ella was shrieking with happiness.

“I just got my kit! I can't believe it. I was trying to be passive aggressive and, well, you just made me so happy. I can't wait to do this. And now I get to do it with you.”

“You know I'm a little paranoid about that,” Penny had joked. “I don't want them to have my DNA information. They might use it to control us in the future, you know, for insurance companies and the like.”

It was just an excuse, of course. Maybe she didn't want to know who her ancestors were. She knew there was the great grandfather who had abandoned Great Grandmama with a baby girl, stealing away their two sons. The grandfather who had been a mere blip in Grandmama's life story, apparently, and the father who must have been nothing more than a sperm donor, not that her own mother had had any qualms about abandoning Penny and skipping town.

“Oh, stop it. You're such a conspiracy theorist. It's fun,” Ella was saying.

“You're right. But you wasted your money. I'm sure my genetics are super boring,” said Penny.

“Not that boring. We finally get to find out whether the rumor about your grandfather being an English aristocrat is true,” said Ella.

Penny smiled ruefully. Yes, her real first name, Spencer, was apparently a nod to the Earl that her grandmother had had a brief but torrid affair with. However, there was also the very real possibility that this story was just more family lore from a woman who had loved telling tall tales. But what was life without a little spice and embroidery?

“You literally don't know who half the men on your family tree are. You might learn something really interesting,” said Ella.

Penny remained silent.

“I have a great idea. Since you're so paranoid, why don't I put your name and email address for my test, and you put my name and email address for your test? That way we mix them up. That way we kind of trick them, you know?”

“That's a great idea, actually,” said Penny.

She had a brief thought for the people she would be robbing of accurate information about DNA relatives. Too bad. She couldn't always be worrying about everybody else. If anyone contacted her about being a long-lost cousin, she would send their info to Ella.

“When you come home, and we do our birthday lunch, we can reveal our results to each other. It’ll be super fun!”

Penny smiled at her friend’s enthusiasm.

“What if I find out I have some horrible congenital disease?” Penny asked. “And you end up having to spend our birthday lunch comforting me and concocting a bucket list?”

“God, you’re so grim. Anyway, I looked that up already,” Ella said. “You can uncheck the box about the medical information if you don’t want to know.”

“Thank goodness,” said Penny.

“Well, I’m curious for myself,” Ella said. “After all, I have kids. And you will, too, someday.”

“Me? Uh uh.”

“Come on, you’re the closest thing to a sister I have. My kids can’t not have little cousins,” Ella protested.

Penny was silent. She was sensitive to the fact that Ella had really latched on to the idea of her best friend’s kids being like cousins to her children. If anything could convince Penny to forego her fear of relationships and finally go for it, it might be that. But she was more likely to be like her mother and grandmother and be a single mom. Not that she was in a financial position to be able to do that. Or in an emotional one, for that matter. What her Great-Grandfather, Frederick, had put Great-Grandmama through when he’d left seemed strange and needlessly cruel. At least he had left her the house and half of the estate, which had been more than enough to support great Grandmama and, of course, her descendants.

Abandonment ran in the family, Penny considered darkly. Her own mother, Violet, had left her at the age of two and had run off to Europe after some argument with Grandmama. Clearly, it must have been her mother’s fault, because Grandmama was so sweet. Well, not always sweet. She had seen Grandmama raging at other people, but she had always been kind to her, with a few notable exceptions. Schoolmates had often asked Penny what it had been like to be abandoned by her mother, but frankly, Penny had never really felt much of a want, because Grandmama had filled every need. She had been her confidante; she had been the one to wipe away her tears when she had been frustrated by arguments with her friends and a rejection by her first crush, and she had consulted her on applying to school and taking

a job in New York. Grandmama had picked out her prom dress, had taken her on shopping excursions, and they'd vacationed together. What else could a mother have done? She'd been so lucky to have Grandmama in her life for this long, and hopefully, for a long time more. Grandmama was in spectacular health, which was a good sign. As other ladies in Palm Beach liked to say, *she might live forever, because she certainly can't go to heaven, and the devil knows that if Elizabeth Wells comes to hell, he might be out of a job.*

Chapter 4

Having finally made it across town, Penny parked in the underground garage for her building, which was, she had to admit, quite a luxury, and hustled up the four flights of stairs to her unit, unlocking the door in a single swift motion and throwing her bag and her phone, which was buzzing again, onto the slipper chair in the corner.

Quick, quick, she grumbled to herself. She needed to change into something a little bit more elegant than her boots and trousers. Mrs. Powell liked her to wear a skirt and ballet flats, especially if she was to be demonstrating dance steps to the children. She quickly slipped on some black stockings, a black pleated skirt, some ballet flats, a silk blouse, and a cardigan sweater. She looked like a little Puritan girl, but that's what Mrs. Powell liked. And lucky for the woman, Penny had quite a few of these outfits in her closet. They never were in style, never went out of style, and she hadn't changed sizes in over a decade, so there she was. She also had her Palm Beach wardrobe, which she looked at wistfully, crammed into the right-hand side of her closet, all pinks and greens and blues and whites. It was so diametrically opposed to what everyone was wearing in New York during this harsh winter. Her style did tend to skew preppy when given the opportunity, without going overboard. She preferred legacy brands when she could find them. She just couldn't afford them new, but she liked vintage. This gave her a slightly old-fashioned look that probably didn't help the fact that she didn't have very many friends her age here in New York. She had lost contact with most of her school friends when their financial fortunes had deviated from hers. Some of the prominent antique dealers in the city, however, felt like extended family, and had adopted her as one of their own.

She ran a brush through her hair, put on a headband to corral her frizzing strands, threw on a woolen cashmere coat she had inherited from Grandmama, the one with the Astrakhan collar, and slipped out the door again, wishing that she would have had time to eat something. At least, she could always count on Mrs. Powell to have cookies; she would have to sneak a few of those as she set them out before the class.

Picking her way up the street, dodging icy puddles and wishing she'd just worn boots and carried the ballet flats with her instead of stupidly not planning ahead, she gripped her umbrella as it threatened to fly away in a gale

of wind and snowflakes. Anyone who said they liked living in places with four seasons was absolutely insane, Penny decided.

Chapter 5

When she arrived at Mrs. Powell's small ballroom, situated above a pharmacy and a shoe store, Mrs. Powell gave her a once-over.

"You look a bit tired, my dear," said the old woman.

In this way, she was much like Grandmama. A little bit judgmental, but not unkind.

"I've had a really long day, Mrs. Powell," said Penny.

"You poor dear. Well, you shouldn't work too hard," she said.

Mrs. Powell came from that generation that thought it shameful for women to have a job. In fact, Mrs. Powell didn't need to teach the cotillion classes, not financially, at least. She just did it to keep away from her very boring husband, a wealthy but low-key man who was now, as Penny understood it, something of an infirm. Mrs. Powell gave the entirety of her compensation to Penny, again as a nod to Grandmama. Penny had thought she had detected that there had been some sort of falling out between Mrs. Powell and Grandmama, but she had not deemed it polite to ask.

"Well, I'm sure you'll be happy to have a little break," said Mrs. Powell, "though it does leave me a bit high and dry."

"I thought that you were closed that week," said Penny, surprised, "Isn't it President's day? Won't most of the children be at ski week? I learned today that that's what they call it; isn't that ridiculous?"

"Well, what else should they call it, darling?" asked Mrs. Powell.

"Right," said Penny.

"But you are correct- I had forgotten I was closing that week."

This was not the first time Mrs. Powell had forgotten something or experienced a major oversight of late, and, more and more, part of Penny's job was correcting the woman's slip ups, covering for her and making her feel better about her lapses in memory, because there was nothing that infuriated Mrs. Powell quite as much as her own shortcomings.

"Well, darling, quickly set out the cookies. The children will be here at any moment."

"Of course," said Penny, heading to the little kitchenette in the corner and retrieving what she needed. She stuffed a few cookies in her mouth as she

had her back turned and was crunching down on them when she heard Mrs. Powell ask her a question.

"I'm sorry," Penny tried to say through a mouthful of cookie.

"Oh dear, are you eating those cookies?"

"Just one," Penny lied.

"I was saying," said Mrs. Powell, "that I've been trying to reach your Grandmama. She's not answering. Do you think she's angry with me again?"

"I haven't spoken to her in a few days," said Penny. "We're due a phone call. I'll tell her that you asked about her."

"All right, dear," said Mrs. Powell. "And dear, can you please turn off the buzzing in your bag? It must be your phone. It keeps going off. It's very disruptive."

"Yes, of course," said Penny. "I'm so sorry."

She headed to her bag and picked up the offending device, thumbing it into silent mode. No vibrations. She noticed another Palm Beach number on the screen. These telemarketers were ridiculous. She'd have to figure out how to block all these robocalls. Somebody must have sold her number.

Ella often accused her of being paranoid. But people did that, didn't they? They sold your number, and then, you got all these phone calls. So maybe she wasn't so paranoid about the DNA test, either.

The cotillion class went by quickly. The children were all charming, well, most of them were, and Penny liked interacting with them, teaching them things, seeing the light in their eyes when they mastered a new dance step, seeing how they interacted with each other, like little miniaturized versions of adults in their social dynamics. Seeing some of these kids did make her regret that she would probably end up not having any children.

Finally, the class was over. They had cleaned up, and broken down, and bid each other goodbye, until the next Monday. By this point, despite the cookies, Penny's stomach was growling anew.

Picking her way back down the street, she noted that the weather had grown even more miserable than it had been earlier, if that was even possible. Now, Penny developed a sudden craving for the matzo ball soup from the deli kitty corner from her apartment building. She could almost taste it now. The idea of the soup's warmth seeping down her throat, warming her from the inside out, convinced her. The comforting aroma and flavor of matzo ball soup was exactly what she wanted on a day like this one, and it was

inexpensive, to boot. The deli made a rather spectacular version, and she could afford to buy a tiny little portion of it, couldn't she? Of course, she could. She'd had such a disappointing day- from the loss of the dream of the TV show to the altercation with Guillermo, to being fired by yet another etiquette client. At the very least, she could cap the day off with something wonderful and warm.

Chapter 6

Heading towards the deli, Penny started thinking that she really was in a dire position. She'd needed to buy a new phone to shoot better YouTube videos, but working all the extra odd jobs didn't leave her with the time or energy to create more content.

And now, she needed to drum up some more etiquette clients- Toby's mother wasn't the first to cancel classes. Anyway, etiquette classes weren't where her passion lay. Her passion lay in writing, and old houses, and the secret history of things. Could she have been an academic, a professor? Maybe. That way, she could have happily stayed ensconced in the past; but progress happened, whether or not one liked it. Maybe she would be more successful if she learned to work with that, instead of against it. That settled it. She would get the matzo ball soup, cuddle up in something cozy in her apartment, and strategize on what to do with her life so that it didn't look like she was just waiting for the trust fund. What would she do post trust fund? The potential could have been exciting, but instead it was terrifying to her. A world without Grandmama in it did not appeal.

She pushed the door to the coffee shop, already imagining the soothing flavor of the savory, salty, comforting soup on her tongue.

"Penny?"

The young man at the cash register gave her a shy smile.

"Hello, Francis," she said.

Francis was the son of the owners and had harbored a huge crush on her for years, she knew, but it had gone unrequited because Francis, though a really nice guy, didn't really know what he wanted to do in life. Funny how she could have such a double standard, letting it slide in herself, and not wanting it in a partner, but that was just the way she was.

"The usual?" he asked.

"Please. In fact, make it a double," said Penny.

"I'll only charge you for the small cup," said Francis. "Say, did you see that there's a movie playing- about the Gilded Age- in the theater right down the street? Would you like to go with me sometime?"

"Oh, that does sound right up my alley," said Penny.

"So... say yes," said Francis, looking at her with his sparkling hazel eyes.

"I'm afraid I'm not the best company right now," said Penny. "I just ..."

"No, never mind, forget I asked," said Francis, blushing. "Just... if you change your mind, why don't you let me know? If I haven't seen it yet, we'll go together."

"Yes, sounds good," said Penny hurriedly, taking the bag with the soup in it from him. She couldn't wait to get into her apartment, close the door, and have a good cry. This day had been so disappointing. And then, as a crowning touch, she had disappointed this kind man, out of sheer snobbery, maybe. Could it get any worse? She didn't think so.

She rushed across the street, unlocked the heavy glass door to the small lobby, and trudged up her stairs. She made it to the door just in time to hear her cell phone jangling loudly in her bag.

Shit, she said to herself, trying to juggle the soup bag and her handbag, and her keys, all the while digging for her infuriating device. Just as she finally located the phone, she dropped the bag containing the soup. In slow motion, she saw it falling and then hitting the floor, the plastic container bursting open, and searing hot liquid splattering her soaked, salt-ravaged shoes and stockings.

The tears ran freely down her face, now. This day could get no worse. And to add insult to injury, her phone kept ringing and ringing. Not to mention, it was probably another spammy robot call, just like the ones she'd been getting all day. Nothing worth spilling her soup over. Also, she had just remembered that she had never called Ella back. Great, she was a sucky friend in addition to being a sucky human. Standing there in a puddle of matzo ball soup, she glanced at her phone. It was Ella calling. Instinctively, though it was hardly a good time, she picked up.

"Hey E, you'll never believe what a crappy day I've had..."

"Honey, I'm so sorry," said Ella.

"Sorry? Sorry about what?" asked Penny.

"It's Grandmama."

"Grandmama? Is she okay?"

"Penny. She passed away today."

Chapter 7

Before she knew it, Penny had fallen to her knees into the puddle of soup, her hands wiping away the tears that flowed down her face, buckets of snot escaping her nose.

Grandmama *couldn't* be gone. She'd been so vibrant, so stylish. So bitchy. So *alive*. She'd had many years left in her. Penny hadn't been prepared to lose her. Hadn't been ready to lose the only family she'd ever had.

"What happened?" Penny sobbed. She didn't really want to know, but she needed to, at the same time.

"She was crossing Worth Avenue, wearing a fabulous outfit, brandishing her middle finger, apparently for the benefit of someone emerging from The Everglades Club, and apparently, she just dropped dead. I think she didn't suffer at all."

That was a small consolation. Grandmama had died doing what she loved. After all, she had never stopped complaining about the club, nor its members.

"You're going to have to come down to settle her affairs," said Ella, softly. "Can you get away?"

"I have no choice," Penny cried.

"Okay, let me know when you're arriving," said Ella.

"It'll feel horrible to be at Palazzo Leoni without Grandmama."

"I think it's best you don't stay there," said Ella.

Was Penny imagining things, or did her best friend have a strange tone to her voice?

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Nothing, I'll talk to you when you get here."

"So where am I supposed to stay?" Penny pressed. A hotel on the island would be impossibly pricey. Maybe Ella would offer her guest room. But why in the world was Grandmama's home- the only home Penny had ever known, why was that not an option?

"Don't worry, I've got a place for you," said Ella. "I'll pick you up at the airport. Just let me know me which flight you're on. Again, my condolences. I'm so sorry. Your grandmother was a special lady."

“Thank you,” said Penny, her voice shaking. “I’d better go.”

After hanging up, she dabbed at her eyes with the sleeve of her coat and tremblingly got herself back up to her feet, the smell of the soup now making her want to puke.

Grandmama was gone. It was the end of an era, literally. She felt singularly bereft. She had no mother, at least not one she could reach out to, or who cared anything about her. She had no husband. No children. No prospects. A pathetic nightmare of a life.

She would need to send Mrs. Powell a message, telling her what had happened. But she couldn’t. Not now. She guzzled water directly from the faucet, and got into bed, hoping to promptly fall asleep, but crazed thoughts were spinning and tumbling in her head, and now, she was hungry again. As she tossed and turned in her small bed, draped in the quilted coverlet Lawrence’s late wife had made for her, she thought of Palazzo Leoni, their beautiful Italianate mansion at the end of Worth Avenue. Would Penny live in Palazzo Leoni? It would shut up bitches like Missy and Jane and Savannah, and some of the other the girls she’d gone to school with, who would be so jealous of the beautiful pink mansion and its incredible deep-water dock, within walking distance of the best restaurants in Palm Beach, that they would not know what to do with themselves. But was it really Penny’s style? Would taking care of Palazzo Leoni be something that she wanted to do? It was a huge undertaking, even with the millions she imagined she would be getting from the trust fund. It was mind blowing. She hadn’t been brought up with huge extravagance. And really, when she thought about it, the house was not anything special without her grandmother there. She should give the house to a foundation, something to honor the women in her family and the historical role they’d had in Palm Beach. Her great-grandmother had been a legendary entertainer, a high society beacon, the most fashionable woman in Palm Beach, according to most. She’d had friendships with billionaires, like Henry Morrison Flagler, and with cultural icons like the legendary architect Addison Mizner, and had lived a life of extraordinary elegance before, like Grandmama, becoming a bit simpler and more streamlined in her old age. Maybe this was a lesson that Penny should learn. Maybe she would magnanimously give Palazzo Leoni to the city of Palm Beach, or maybe she would create a foundation, depending on how much great grandmother had left behind.

Chapter 8

A day later, Penny boarded a plane bound for Florida. The second she stepped out of the airport's sliding glass doors and into the Palm Beach evening, she felt tantalizingly close to home. That muggy tropical feel. The threatening rain shower, the sound of the breeze through palm fronds. Already, she could almost taste the orange juice on her tongue. But this time, there would be no hobnailed glass handed to her by Uncle Lawrence on the emerald lawn that looked out towards the sapphire bay. This time, she wasn't jumping into Grandmama's lovely old custom baby blue '57 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz, even though just thinking about it made a ghost of the jasmine scent her grandmother had specially made by some fancy nuns in Italy, and which she spritzed in the old car, tickle her nose. Penny wasn't heading to the home she had grown up in, that pink palazzo that intrigued all the tourists who made their way to the end of Worth Avenue and then craned their necks to see more details beyond the thick hedges and the high walls. All anyone could ever see was the arched doorway, topped by a Venetian lion bas-relief, the gas lamps always burning, and the pitted limestone walkway. The rest of it was Grandmama's kingdom, and Penny's own secret garden.

This time, Ella was picking her up, taking her out to a quick dinner, as it was apparently a school night, and then taking her to an unfamiliar apartment. An explanation was in order, even if Penny was relieved not to have to face the house without Grandmama in it, on her first day. That would be a task for tomorrow. She'd been too completely in shock in the day leading up to her departure to think much about what exactly she was going to do once she arrived in Palm Beach. *Handling grandmother's affairs*, whatever that meant, had been the explanation she'd given to the editors at the magazine, who hadn't seemed too sad to hear that she might be out of commission for a few weeks.

She had been contacted by a man introducing himself as a trust lawyer, who had left a message on her voicemail. He apparently was organizing her grandmother's finances but didn't explain much of anything at all.

"Let me know when you're able to come to Palm Beach and I will organize a meeting," he had said on the message, rather laconically, his tone less than urgent.

When she'd tried to call him back, there was no answer. She had not left a message on his voicemail because, well, she didn't know what to say. She would rather speak to him in person. Surely, she would hear from him in the next day or two, and perhaps then, she would gain some clarity.

She was checking her cell phone, about to call Ella, when she heard a brief honk. A sleek, dark SUV pulled up in front of her, and she recognized her friend's brilliant smile through the tinted windows. Ella hopped out of the car and enveloped Penny in a warm hug. Penny breathed in her best friend's signature scent, an Hermes perfume that Grandmama had gotten her hooked on and gifted her each Christmas. Ella was stunningly elegant, as always, in an all-white ensemble: immaculate jeans and a snowy silk top that set off her burnished skin tone. In her ears were twinkling aquamarine drops that stood out against her dark brown ringlets. The baubles were no doubt another gift from her doting husband, Sam.

"Here, let me help you with your bags," said Ella.

They good-naturedly argued about who would lift the heavier suitcase, and eventually got everything into the trunk of Ella's SUV.

"Wow, BMW X3, huh? Aren't you fancy?" Penny smiled.

Penny was more of a vintage car girl. Having gone from boarding school to college, to living in New York, she was a decent driver whenever she found herself forced to do it, but she didn't really care about the mode of locomotion, if she couldn't have one of her fantasy automobiles. She had been quite happy to take the ancient Toyota- which had once belonged to a gardener- that Grandmama had sent up for the New York apartment and hadn't really considered replacing it at any time.

"X5. It was a little gift to myself," said Ella. "When I closed a particularly challenging deal last year."

"That's amazing," said Penny, realizing that never in her life had she made enough money, let alone in a single windfall, to even think of such a thing.

"So... why are we not going to Grandmama's house?" Penny asked, once they had gotten the pleasantries out of the way.

"Why don't we go grab a quick bite? I can tell you're borderline hangry," said Ella.

Penny stared at her, but Ella had her eyes trained on the road, only giving Penny her perfect profile. Was she being evasive? In any case, it was true; Penny was growing hangry, and no one liked that.

“There's an Italian spot in West Palm that I really like,” said Ella.
“Casual.”

“Sounds great,” said Penny.

Casual was exactly what her budget needed, and Ella knew it.

“But for our birthdays, we're going to go to Swifty's,” Ella was quick to point out.

“Great,” said Penny, worrying about impact it would have on her wallet.

“On me,” said Ella.

“No, don't be silly,” Penny responded, even though she didn't really mean it. Their birthdays were still some time away. She would be able to figure something out by then. She would have spoken to the trust lawyer, and possibly have been given access to Grandmama's accounts.

They drove to the Italian restaurant, Ella filling Penny in on her latest job exploits. Ella was quickly becoming one of the most accomplished real estate agents in all of the beach cities surrounding Palm Beach. She had been responsible for one of the largest commercial sales in history, as well as one of the largest residential sales. It was a rare agent who could do both. But Penny knew that her friend had both charm and an eye for detail, which no doubt served her well in her career.

“How's the market these days?” asked Penny, not that it really mattered to her. She wasn't planning on selling Grandmama's house.

“Crazy,” said Ella. “With the New York money pouring in- all the houses cost a fortune, now. Palm Beach Island has become unaffordable for anyone but multi multi millionaires. Memberships to the Everglades Club are a hot commodity. Even apartments are in high demand and are astronomically priced. It's a good time to sell, I'll tell you that, but then you'll never be able to get back into it, so people are hesitant to let go of what they have. I have to say that West Palm Beach is still a more realistic option, but the people with money want the island.”

Penny simply nodded.

Ella found a good parking spot right next to the restaurant and expertly maneuvered into it. They hopped out of the car, and Penny noticed that her stomach was aching. With hunger, but also with apprehension.

As they sat down, Penny blurted out one of the many questions that had been on her mind: “Have you heard of this trust lawyer Grandmama hired?”

“Is it Rutherford?”

“I think so. Yes.”

“I figured. He’s a busy man. The consummate professional,” said Ella.

Penny peered at her. Maybe it was because they hadn’t spent time in person for so long, but Ella seemed a little off. A little cautious, maybe. But Penny decided not to dig; to let her friend off the hook, for once. Ella didn’t need to be mixed up in her messy issues, financial and otherwise.

“Hey, do you want to share a pizza?” she asked.

After pizza, a bit of catching up on Ella’s kids and work, and on Penny’s various failed projects, as well as a shared bottle of Nebbiolo, they re-entered the car and headed over the bridge to the island. Penny’s heart started to beat faster as they approached the end of Worth Avenue, where Palazzo Leoni sat proudly overlooking the bay. On her right, she noticed Mar Villas, a lemon meringue colored complex of apartments where Uncle Lawrence lived. She realized now that she had never been inside his place, even though it was just across the street.

“Wait- I’m staying in the apartment? With your grandpa?”

“No, he moved out a while back, just before COVID,” said Ella. “To a nursing home- it’s a better spot for him. You know how it is. I’m lucky he’s as healthy as he is at his age.”

“Yeah.” Penny felt a pinching in her heart. “Grandmama was healthy too, wasn’t she? Up until the end, I guess.”

“Yeah. I saw her just a few days before she passed. She was ageless.”

“They were the same age, right? Your grandpa and Grandmama? 97? That’s a pretty good life. A long life, at least.”

Penny had thought of this often. So many things had changed in the world since Grandmama had been born, almost a century before. The world she had been born into had gone through numerous revolutions, to the point where it was hard to imagine how she’d kept up with it all.

Chapter 9

They parked in a guest spot under the first apartment building. “In case you need to drive it, Grandmama's car is in this parking. You can't miss it.”

“It is?” asked Penny. “She wasn't still driving, was she?”

“Until the very end,” said Ella, wistfully. “A public danger, that one, but you know how she was. Stubborn. Anyway, the keys are in the desk.”

“Oh?” asked Penny.

She wondered who had brought the keys and the car over. They rolled her luggage over to the elevator and took it to the third floor, where Ella ushered Penny down the hallway. The apartment complex, though old, seemed reasonably well maintained in general, save one of the lights around the corner, which was flickering in the most annoying manner. About midway down the hallway, Ella retrieved a set of keys from her tidy bag and opened the door. As it swung open, Penny was suddenly enveloped in jasmine-scented memories, as her grandmother's perfume hit her nose. She fell silent as she looked around the apartment, recognizing all of Grandmama's favorite pieces of furniture. The rattan dining set, the Tony Duquette chandelier, the shell-lined mirror, a tole palm tree she had particularly liked, and the feminine writing desk, with a chintz-upholstered chair in front of it.

“But why is all her furniture...” Penny started to ask.

“She moved in here,” Ella said, hurriedly.

“When?” asked Penny. “Why?”

“Around the same time Lawrence went to the nursing home. I think it was just too much for her to handle by herself. And, well, the house needed work.”

“Why didn't she just get it fixed?” asked Penny.

Ella shrugged and moved about the apartment, gesturing to the bedrooms, to the kitchen, and to the bathrooms. Penny just stared at her friend. This all had happened in the two years she'd been away. And nobody had said a word to her about it. It felt like others, including Ella, were still part of the inner circle, and she, Penny, had been forced out. She realized that she hadn't been as present as she could have been for Ella for the past couple years. The pandemic had done a number on Penny. It had pushed her into extreme

isolation, which she had never truly recovered from, and she realized now that, whenever she had spoken to Grandmama, her grandmother had been responding in platitudes and talk of the past, idealizing her days as a young girl wafting through Palm Beach, wearing a beautiful sun hat and an embroidered sundress that she'd gotten on Worth Avenue, at one of the small, chic boutiques that was now long gone. During their phone calls, Penny had imagined her grandmother looking out the window at her Venetian gondola bobbing on the water of Lake Worth, when in fact she'd been here, in this apartment that Penny had never seen before.

"Well," said Ella. "I'm sure you'll find everything you need. I made sure that the fridge is stocked with a few basics. You have clean towels in the bathroom. The bed's been made. You can choose which of the bedrooms you like, but I know your grandmother liked the one with the balcony."

"Okay," said Penny, numbly, again thinking how strange it was that she'd had no idea that Grandmama was living in this place, Lawrence's place, instead of in her own home. Her eyes kept returning to the familiar writing desk, no longer where she'd imagined it, looking out onto the water, and at that emerald lawn. And Lawrence, in a nursing home, never to pour glasses of sweet orange juice for her again.

"Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't *she* tell me?" Penny asked.

"Not my place to say. Maybe she was ashamed," said Ella.

"Ashamed of what?" Penny asked.

"I... Listen, I think you need to talk to the trust lawyer," Ella began.

"I can't reach him! Why can't you tell me? You obviously know more than I do. Why don't you just spit it out?" Penny cried.

"Penny, I don't think there's very much left in your Grandmama's estate," Ella began.

"What do you mean? There's the house, there's..."

"I don't know about that," said Ella, her voice cracking. She couldn't even meet Penny's eyes. "But again, it's... I don't know everything, so why don't you wait until you hear from him? And if you ever need to sell Palazzo Leoni, you know that I..."

"Sell Palazzo Leoni? Are you mad? I would never do that!"

Ella took a deep breath.

“Honey, remember what I was telling you about the costs of all these houses on Palm Beach? It's not just the houses that cost a lot, it's the upkeep. How are you going to be able to manage a home like that? It's falling apart. That's why your grandmother moved out in the first place. Do you think she would have left if she hadn't been running out of money? I just don't want you to be disappointed by what you find.”

“Okay,” said Penny, clenching her jaw. She was about to throw up. Surely, Ella was mistaken about all of this. After all, Ella wasn't Grandmama's granddaughter. She didn't know everything. She couldn't. Penny didn't want to say any more at this juncture, because if she did, she might say something she regretted, might lash out at her friend, make it her problem, when it clearly was not. She gulped and tried to think of something pleasant to say.

“Well, it was nice of your grandfather to let Grandmama stay here,” she began.

“I better go,” said Ella. “The kids will be asking for me. I'm gonna go tuck them in.”

“Give them a big hug for me. Tell them Auntie Penny can't wait to see them,” said Penny.

She managed a small smile. Having Luna and Caleb to spoil once in a while, it was a wonderful thing, even though it didn't really replace real family, did it? But she had no family left. Ella's was the closest thing she was going to get, so she'd better not mess it up. And tomorrow would be a better day. She would hear from the trust lawyer and formulate a plan.

Her phone pinged then, surprising her. Surprisingly, it was a voicemail, from the trust lawyer, apparently. She hadn't heard the phone ring.

“Weird,” said Penny, “I just got a message. From Mr. Rutherford.”

“I'll wait here while you listen to it,” said Ella, comfortingly.

Penny put the phone to her ear and listened, and her heart sank.

“Crap, he says he's in Europe, skiing with his family. He won't be back for over a week. What am I supposed to do with myself until he returns?”

“Enjoy Palm Beach,” said Ella. “See your bestie. Get some work done. Take care of yourself. Go for long walks along the Lake. Go to the beach.”

“Oh, come on,” said Penny. “That's not going to really fill my time, is it?”

“Find some little kids to babysit.”

“If I’m babysitting them, how am I supposed to go out for drinks with their mom? And anyway, you’re busy with work and Sam.”

“Maybe you could find yourself a boyfriend,” Ella shrugged.

“Really, Ella?” Penny asked, exasperated.

What would she, Penny Wells, do with a boyfriend? She was generationally incapable of having a relationship with a man, just as her great grandmother, grandmother, and mother had been. She wasn't going to break their streak now.

“Well honey, I'll be seeing you,” said Ella, heading towards the door.

“Come by anytime. I'm always in the office or...well, maybe text before, in case I'm viewing properties. If I'm there, and if I can get away, we can go for a walk or have a drink or whatever.”

“OK,” said Penny, with uncertainty. It sounded like Ella wasn't very available at all. A boy toy might be a good idea- to keep her from getting bored enough to contact her old school friends, with whom she had zero in common by now.

“And then, well, we've got our birthdays to look forward to,” Ella was saying. “Maybe everything will be settled with the trust lawyer by the time that comes around,” she said reassuringly.

Penny was silent. It had better be settled by then. There was no way it could be that complicated. And here in Palm Beach, her paltry savings would dry up fast.

“Okay. You've had a long day,” said Ella. “Why don't you go to bed, and I'll talk to you tomorrow. In fact, we can do dinner again.”

“OK. Thank you for picking me up,” said Penny.

Ella gave her a quick squeeze, handed her the set of keys, and let herself out. Penny locked the door behind her and rested her forehead against its painted surface, closing her eyes and taking in a deep breath. What the hell was she going to do? Well, for now, all she could do was try to sleep.

Chapter 10

She'd gotten less sleep than she would have liked. After tossing and turning until about two a.m., she had gotten up and wandered around the apartment. Rifling through the desk drawers, Penny found the car keys Ella had mentioned. She smiled weakly as she palmed the keychain with its Cadillac logo. On visits from boarding school, she had begged to borrow this car, and Grandmama had occasionally acquiesced. At the time, it had been kept in mint condition. Lawrence used to wipe it down with a soft cloth each time Grandmama wanted to take it out and would religiously eliminate any bird poop from its light blue paint. Grandmama had the maids constantly scanning the sky for any of the evil feathered bombers otherwise known as seagulls, shooing them away and installing multiple faux owl decoys on the roof of Palazzo Leoni to minimize the chances of any caustic bird guano marring her precious chariot.

As for the keys to Grandmama's house, which her grandmother had kept on an easy to spot and easy to carry gold bangle, they were nowhere to be found. That was frustrating. Penny indulged in a brief, cleansing cry.

After that, she must have nodded off, at least for a bit. Got up again. Made some eggs and toast. Fell asleep for a minute on the sofa, face down, of course, so she got beautiful pillow marks on one side of her face. Eventually, she got up again and went for an early morning run. It was supposed to clear the brain fog but had only managed to make her sweaty and exhausted.

She headed over to the Palazzo Leoni and opened the wrought iron gate leading to the front walk. It creaked, as if in protest, resisting, but she finally gained entry. She noticed how the walkway looked a bit crumbled, but she then remembered that this was part of the architect, Addison Mizner's artistry. His ability to make things look old was unparalleled. Still, Penny did notice some weeds growing between the limestone pavers. She would have to track down Jorge, the gardener, and ensure that he be more conscientious in the future. When she arrived at the front entrance, she tried to jiggle the door handle, but of course it was locked. She tried to peer in one of the front windows, but the curtains were drawn, and she came away feeling like a trespasser. She worried that a concerned neighbor would call the authorities on her, to boot.

She was fumbling for her keys in front of the apartment door when she noticed a ladder sticking out of the space around the corner. Strange. She

walked down the hall to investigate and got an eyeful. A man, a handsome one, from what she could tell so far, stood on the ladder, blue jeans draping perfectly over his perfect gluteus maximus muscles, fiddling with the light fixture on the ceiling.

“Oh, I’m glad you’re fixing that,” she said.

The man turned around on the ladder to face her, causing the muscles on his tanned arm to flex. Damn. His eyes were nice, too. Chocolate brown, slightly almond shaped.

“Good morning,” he replied, giving her a slow, crooked smile that made her feel flushed.

“Oh! I’m sorry- that was rude of me,” Penny stammered. “I should have said good morning. And thank you for fixing that. I’m glad I met you, because could I have you look at a few things in the apartment, too? There’s a drip in the sink, and there’s something horribly wrong with the trash compactor. We don’t get trash compactors in New York, so I was hoping to take full advantage of this one. But I put some stuff in there this morning and there was a horrible grinding noise and it stopped.”

The man considered her, with a funny expression that she couldn’t exactly read. God, he did have a handsome face, complete with a blinding smile and a jaw you could cut glass with. At second glance, he looked a little bit older than she’d first imagined. Close to her age, if not a few years older.

“I mean, at your convenience,” she stammered, flustered. “I totally get it if you can’t get to it now.”

“Would five o’clock work?” the man responded.

That was quite a few hours away. But she supposed that, in a building complex like this one, there was always a long list of things to do.

“Of course. I’ll make sure to be home then,” said Penny.

The man nodded and gave her another one of those smiles that made her heart beat double time. *Shit*. She really looked terrible, didn’t she? Sweaty, with her frizzy hair sticking out at all angles all over her head, no doubt. This man was an argument for leaving New York for good. She hadn’t seen a specimen like this one in all of her time in the Big Apple.

“It’s a date,” he replied.

“Yes! Well, I mean, not really a date, right? But I’ll be happy to get my trash compactor fixed.”

She cringed. Could she be more awkward? The man gave her an amused look. He probably could tell she was lusting for him and thought she was being ridiculous. Then again, she probably wasn't the only woman who had fallen all over herself in his presence.

“Great. Where do you live?”

“Apartment 311.”

“Ah.”

“Maybe I'll open a bottle of wine for us, unless you don't like to drink and work,” she suggested.

Holy crap, was she flirting? She didn't know how to flirt.

“Sure,” said the handyman.

But he seemed more hesitant, now. More serious, less flirty than a moment before.

Blushing, she headed back to the apartment. What was she going to do until five o'clock? The answer was easy enough. She was going to go pay her respects to Uncle Lawrence.

Chapter 11

Penny had never spent time in this part of West Palm Beach, which Ella had explained was known as Pleasant City. The outside of the Millwood Senior Living Center was certainly pleasant, with a pleasing pink stucco finish reminiscent of the facade of Palazzo Leoni, the vegetation around it tropical and well maintained. But when she stepped inside, despite the cheerful tropical wallpaper and the chintz seating area on one side of the room, the smell of cold soup and old person accosted Penny's nose, and she had to force herself not to hold her breath.

At the reception desk was a petite woman with elaborately braided hair, dressed in streamlined pink scrubs.

"Hi," said Penny, as she approached the desk. The woman looked up, giving her a brilliant but puzzled smile.

"Can I help you? You may be lost- people always get us confused with the Oakwood Senior Center- it's about ten blocks south?"

"No, I'm pretty sure I'm in the right place- I'm here to see Lawrence Jones," said Penny.

"Oh, Mr. Lawrence. What's your relation to him, may I ask?"

"He's my uncle," said Penny.

The woman gave her a funny look.

"Well, not really my uncle. Close family friend."

"Ah. He's one of my favorite patients!"

"I'm sure," said Penny, beaming. No one was immune to Lawrence's charm.

"Well, let me go find an administrator," said the woman. "I'm just filling in here this morning. I'm not sure of his schedule."

She rose, leaving Penny looking around, inspecting the details of the reception room. She didn't know what she'd been expecting. The only other senior center she had ever seen had been with Grandmama as they visited Great Grandmama, years ago, and that place had looked more like a country club. Was it in Naples? Jupiter? She couldn't remember. She'd been so young. This place felt more like a vintage motel mixed with a small-town doctor's office. On the walls were photographs of laborers, people having lunch, family get-togethers, and church events. Of course, Penny, being such a history buff, had never seen an old photograph she didn't love, so she

leaned in more closely to take a better look. Most of the people in the photographs were African American, elegantly dressed, and told a tale of a completely different Palm Beach than the one she had grown up in. This was a Palm Beach that Uncle Lawrence probably knew intimately. It would be interesting to hear stories from him, if he was in any condition to speak. Ella had intimated that Uncle Lawrence was growing tired. Grandmama's death had probably been a blow to him, as well. After all, they had been so close.

An elegant woman dressed in a coral-colored pencil skirt and a tropical print silk blouse emerged from the offices behind the reception space, followed by the nurse.

“Hello, you're here to see Mr. Lawrence? And your name is?”

“Penny Wells,” said Penny.

“And your relationship to the patient?”

This question again.

“He's my uncle.”

The nurse gave Penny an apologetic shrug. Penny was starting to worry that, if she told the truth, which was that Lawrence was a family friend, a very close family friend- or had he been an employee, she may not gain access to him, and would have to have them call Ella, who was definitely busy this morning. It was hard to explain exactly what the depth and the nature of her relationship to Lawrence had been. He simply had always been there. She knew there had been rumors about Grandmama and Lawrence, and maybe there had had a secret romance at some point, not that Penny could tell from their interactions. They'd just always been very close. Lawrence had acted as something of a factotum at the Palazzo, but obviously, he'd had an independent life at some point. He'd gotten married, had been a husband, though his wife had passed years ago, a father, and a grandfather. Ella's parents had lived in a cute cottage in West Palm Penny had only seen a handful of times- Ella was always sleeping over at Grandmama's. Her parents had passed away in a tragic car accident when Ella was in middle school, and Grandmama had paid for her go to boarding school. Penny had begged to let her apply to Miss Porter's, but Ella had gone to a school in Florida, which had ended up being far more diverse and far more helpful in terms of fostering life skills. For college, Ella had been accepted to several schools with a full scholarship and had elected to attend Emory. Penny's own college

acceptances, especially to Yale, stemmed, she suspected, less from her merit and more from Grandmama pulling some strings.

“Why don’t you go see if Mr. Lawrence is awake,” the woman said to the nurse.

“Thank you,” said Penny.

Much as she was impatient to see him, she also dreaded seeing what the couple years she had been away had done to Uncle Lawrence. Had he aged? Had he lost mobility? Was he still in possession of his considerable faculties? He’d always been the best storyteller she’d ever known, and had given the best hugs, too.

The nurse emerged after a couple minutes.

“He’s excited to see you,” she said.

Penny followed the nurse down a hallway. Her heart felt like a jumping bean. The old person smell intensified, and she shuddered. For all that she loved old houses, old people were a different matter, except for Grandmama, who had never felt like an old person to her.

“Mr. Lawrence?” The nurse gently tapped at a nondescript door halfway down the hall, and then opened the door a crack.

“Mr. Lawrence, Penny Wells is here to see you.”

“Penny!”

She heard a voice call out to her, stronger than she’d feared. Uncle Lawrence had always had a lovely baritone. And now it was just slightly weakened. This heartened her, and she took a step into the room. Uncle Lawrence sat in a chair by the window, a crocheted blanket across his lap, which she recognized as something from Grandmama’s house. Perhaps Grandmama had brought it to him. Had she visited him here? She must have. But she’d never mentioned it during their phone calls.

Uncle Lawrence wore a dressing gown, but with his natural elegance, it could have been a tuxedo.

“Come give me a hug, my girl,” said Lawrence, a broad grin breaking onto his face, which she was thrilled to notice hadn’t aged that much since she’d seen him last, after all.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she said, crossing the room and giving him a hug. He was still a great hugger, but she could tell he was frailer under the dressing gown, and this made her sad. He was fragile. Not eternal, after all. She’d thought Grandmama would live forever, as well. Her first thought when

Grandmama had died was, *now I'm all alone*. She had consoled herself with the thought that she still had Lawrence and Ella, and that she would still have a home, but now, after seeing Palazzo Leoni this morning, the air of general decrepitude that hovered over the property made that feel tenuous.

"So, what have you been doing with yourself?" Lawrence asked.

"I've been trying to figure out some things, you know, after...you know..." She couldn't even say it.

"It's hard," said Lawrence. "I miss her so much," he said. "I can barely remember a time when we weren't together."

Interesting. Penny realized that she had never really heard the story of how Lawrence and Grandmama had come to know each other. Since they were children, she knew. When, exactly, and how had they met, though? When had they started this close relationship of theirs, which was so atypical, even scandalous, for the time? Had his family worked for hers? She might as well ask.

"Uncle Lawrence, how did you and Grandmama meet?"

"Oh, that's a story for another time, my child," said Lawrence. *No*, thought Penny. Time was of the essence. But she couldn't force Lawrence to tell her what he didn't want to spill.

"Have they been treating you well here?" She asked. "What do you do with your days?"

"It's just like the Everglades Club used to be," said Lawrence. "You know, they bring us tea, and we play croquet, and we gossip. Always the same stories. The good news is, many of us can't remember what anyone said on any given day, so it always feels new, which is more than I can say for the Club." Lawrence laughed, delighted at himself.

Penny smiled. He had a point. She still resented the fact that Grandmama had given up her membership to the Everglades Club, though. She had gone there with friends, and had been invited to events, or for tea. But it would have been nice to be a member and go preen and flounce about on the golf course or at the swimming pool. All the girls she knew from Middle School were still members, and she felt that this put a divide between her and them. Pathetic, but true.

"Tell me more about the Everglades Club, Uncle Lawrence. Did you ever go?"

"Oh no, of course not," Lawrence smiled. "They didn't let in my kind. But your grandmother, she went, until, well, you know... And your great

Grandmama. She was one of the first to sign up. She would play cards with the ladies, and then she would have George pedal her to the beach in her wheelchair.”

“Her wheelchair? Grandmama had mobility issues?”

“Oh, no, that's what they called them at the time- they were these wicker contraptions. All of the society ladies had a manservant whose job was to pedal them around.”

“Wow, that sounds kind of... inappropriate,” said Penny. She remembered, now, seeing a photo or two of this, but hadn't realized her great grandmother had partaken in these activities.

“Well, that's the way it was done at the time. Anyway, your grandmother had a small coming out at the Everglades Club, before her debut in New York, and then of course, after that...”

Lawrence's sentence tapered off. He appeared lost in thought.

“Why did she give it up? What happened?” Penny pressed.

“Why talk about that, when you can instead imagine her, wearing the splendid white silk dress they had custom made in New York, standing out like a beautiful orchid, shining amongst all those spoiled young ladies, making her debut. Your great grandmother had gifted her a custom set of pink pearls and...”

“I thought that the debutante thing was a way of introducing young ladies to society so that they would get married,” Penny noted. “Why didn't Grandmama get married?”

“Oh, this and that,” said Lawrence.

“And how did she come to go to England? Did she actually go, or was that one of her tall tales?”

Penny had felt, at a few moments in her life, like Grandmama hadn't always told her the whole truth. At first, she'd found it fun and charming, but after Grandmama's death, not knowing the truth left her feeling uniquely bereft.

“The truth is overrated,” said Lawrence, giving Penny a sad smile.

“Anyway, everyone's version of it is different. Also,” he sniffed and readjusted the blanket on his lap, “it's your turn to talk.”

“What do you want to know?”

“What are you up to? Have you seen Ella?”

“She picked me up at the airport. She's more beautiful than ever. And so successful.”

Lawrence beamed.

“Yes, I’m so proud of both of my girls.”

Penny tried to smile back at him, but this statement had hit her hard. Only Ella truly had the right to be called one of Lawrence’s girls. And only one of them had truly made anything of herself.

Lawrence frowned.

“I can read you mind; you know. I’ll have you know I am very proud of you. Everyone’s different.”

Penny kept talking. It was better than crying.

“We’re having lunch at Swifty’s for our birthdays. I’m really looking forward to it.”

“Oh, that’ll be lovely,” said Lawrence. “Please take a picture and send it to me. I’m so pleased you’re still as close as ever. Remember, family is everything.”

Penny fought not to scowl. Yes, family was everything, and here she was without one. She felt bad to be classifying her chosen family as somehow inferior to her biological family. But wasn’t that how most people did it?

“I’ve thinking of going to Antiquers’ Row,” said Penny, “and talking to some of the decorators and architects. I don’t know if I told you, but I make YouTube videos...”

“I had the nurses show me how to watch them. You’re a natural.”

Penny smiled, pleased.

“I mean, I haven’t monetized my videos yet, but in time... and it’s something to do while I wait to speak to the trust lawyer yet.” She paused, debating whether to try to dig a bit more. Might as well. She was here, wasn’t she?

“I’m starting to get the feeling that maybe there’s not as much left as I’d assumed...”

“Ah,” said Lawrence, too quickly, she thought. “Well, I’m sure you’ll work it out.”

It wasn’t fair of her to try to get Lawrence mixed up with this, she realized.

“I wanted to thank you so much for letting me stay in the apartment.”

“Letting you stay? Darlin’, it’s only natural,” said Lawrence.

“Well, regardless, it’s really kind of you,” said Penny.

“Treat it as your own,” said Lawrence. “You know, if you want to make it homier, or anything. How long are you planning on staying?”

“I can’t say I have a plan,” said Penny, ruefully. “You know, I’ve always lived in the past. Or projecting myself into the future, and right now, I literally am kind of stuck in the present, and I don’t know what to do with myself.”

“I know the feeling,” said Lawrence.

“Uncle Lawrence, I would love it if you would tell me a few more stories,” said Penny. “I really love them, and I don’t want to miss any good ones.”

“Come back and see me,” said Lawrence. “I’m tired out. But I’ll have some good ones for you next time.”

“All right,” said Penny, a little dejected.

She gave him one last hug, feeling the worrisome protrusion of bone under parchment skin.

“I’ll be back soon. I promise.”

“You’d better,” Lawrence smiled weakly. “Now go, go have fun. Go do something. Meet a boy. Fall in love.”

Penny paused. Hesitated. What would it hurt, to tell Lawrence about the hot handyman? It would entertain him.

“You know, I might have met someone...”

“You did? That’s wonderful! Tell me more!”

“It’s brand new- so there’s nothing much to tell. And besides, don’t get too excited- no one in my family ever had a serious relationship.”

“That you knew of,” Lawrence corrected. “Now, shoo.”

As she walked away, Penny wondered what he had meant by that. Was there some secret romantic liaison in Grandmama’s past? Or even her mother’s past? Something that she didn’t know about? For the first time, she started wondering, who had her father been, after all? Who had her grandfather been? Maybe she did have family somewhere. How would she ever figure that one out?

Then she realized: the 23andMe that Ella had conned her into doing, maybe that would yield some biological relatives.

Chapter 12

On the way back to the car, she made a decision: she might as well go visit Antiquers' Row right away. After all, that was something that always cheered her up, and she definitely needed cheering up after seeing the state of Lawrence, and of the house.

Now, she thought about the handyman who was coming over at five. Maybe he could show her the house, and he could give her an estimate of how much it would cost to fix things. No, she decided. If she was planning on using him as a distraction, no need to muddy the waters. Also, she didn't want him deciding she was a spoiled princess too precious for the kinds of things she had been fantasizing about doing with him.

She found a parking spot along the Dixie Highway. Going down Antiquers' Row was always a step back in time for Penny, not just because of the beautiful old furniture, but because she'd known many of the shopkeepers since she was a child, when she and her grandmother would go to the shops and she would inevitably get a treat, something like a Hershey's kiss or an Almond Roca. For this reason, she always associated antique shops with chocolate.

She popped her head into the first store and immediately spotted Candace Brownley in the corner, draped in an ikat kaftan, her white hair coiffed in her trademark Vidal Sassoon bob.

Candace's face broke into a wide smile when she saw Penny.

"Penny! My God, look at you, so gorgeous! I haven't seen you in what... since before that horrid pandemic."

Penny nodded, falling into Mrs. Brownley's comforting embrace.

"We've all lost so much time. I was so sorry to hear about your grandmother."

"Thank you. I'm devastated," Penny admitted.

"Are you moving here now? Or just visiting?"

"I'm just settling my grandmother's affairs," said Penny, again not knowing what the hell that was supposed to mean. She had settled exactly zero percent of them since she'd arrived.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," she admitted. "I have no plan."

“Well, there are worse plans than moving into Palazzo Leoni,” said Candace. “Though, it’ll probably be beastly to maintain. I know your grandmother certainly complained about it enough.”

“True,” said Penny.

She didn't want to admit that Grandmama had given up on the house and had been living in Lawrence's apartment. If Candace didn't know, that was probably by design. What a strange situation. A reversal of fortune, if she'd ever seen one.

“So what are you looking for today, my darling? You always did have the best taste.”

“Thank you,” said Penny. “That means a lot, coming from you. I'm just keeping busy. I'm thinking about writing a book about Palm Beach.”

“Well, you certainly have the fodder. There are so many good stories,” said Candace.

“I'm just starting to realize that maybe I haven't heard the best ones,” said Penny, smiling.

She was fishing, obviously. Hopefully, Candace wouldn't notice. But this wasn't the old antique dealer's first rodeo. She simply raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, if there's anything scandalous, I would love to hear it,” Penny stammered.

“Well, you and I will have to have tea sometime, and I will possibly share some of those with you,” said Candace. “Unfortunately, I have someone coming in soon. But please let me know if there's anything I can do. I'm so glad you're here.”

“Thank you,” said Penny.

“By the way, darling, I just received the new Palm Beach Illustrated- a whole stack of them- do you want one?”

“I'll leave them for your clients,” Penny smiled.

She missed the old Palm Beach Life, which she had perused religiously. In her opinion, most of their articles in this newer publication were thinly veiled advertisements for restaurants, clothing, and jewelry she couldn't afford. She wandered around the aisles of the shop, looking at a few pieces, marveling at how Palm Beach had such a distinct vernacular. She would go visit the Celerie Kemble shop soon, too. That was always a trove of

inspiration. And then it hit her. What if she did a YouTube series on all the old Palm Beach decorators? Palm Beach was all about the houses, and those who lived in them, and who better than the antiques shop owners and decorators to spill the dirt? Well, though that was fun, she chastised herself, there was no way she could make any money from that. Maybe if she sold ads. What if she upped her viewership? Got some sponsors and affiliate links? She stepped out into the street, into the blinding sunshine, and squinted into her phone. As she tapped out the numbers into her calculator, the sheer enormity of the sums Ella had told her houses on the island now sold for. Ten, twenty, even thirty million? Coming up with money like that didn't even seem possible, at least not for a girl like her. A graduate of Miss Porter's, for God's sake. What had Grandmama been thinking? The only people who still sent their daughters there were those who wanted to make damn sure their girls never even thought of being independent in the world. She had skimmed some of the magazines Miss Porter's had been sending out lately and had noticed a newfound focus on STEM and business skills, but she wasn't buying it. All the girls from her generation at Miss Porter's were good at was fundraising, from family and friends. In fact, maybe a big private donor would feel sorry for Penny and would jump in to cover the cost of fixing the house. Crazier things had happened.

Chapter 13

Penny went into the next shop, this one owned by Paul Rodriguez, a dapper fellow who collected Panama hats and embroidered Cuban shirts. He still looked younger than his advanced age, with suspiciously black hair, a jaunty, dimpled smile and always a kind word for Penny, who he recognized instantly, as well.

“Penny! My condolences. Your grandmother was one in a million.”

Penny could tell that Paul, oddly enough, was struggling to keep his expression serious, but then, his lips twitched into a smile, and a laugh burst forth from his mouth. Seeing Penny’s shocked expression, his face fell. He composed himself and took her hands.

“You haven’t seen the obituary yet, have you?”

“The...what?”

Penny had been meaning to pen an obituary, but she hadn’t had the fortitude yet. Her phone pinged.

“Why don’t you answer that,” said Paul. “I’ll go find the magazine for you.”

Penny glanced at her phone. It was a message from Ella.

Don’t read the obituary alone.

Penny squeezed her eyes shut. Oh, no. Fingers trembling, she tapped out a response.

It’s that bad? Who wrote it? I’m going to go give them a piece of my mind.

But even as she sent the message, she had a feeling that she knew what was coming.

Ha. This has Grandmama written all over it. Certainly, one of her finest works, to be equaled only perhaps by her Mar-A-Lago diatribe.

A giggle escaped Penny’s lips. She knew who she got her writing chops from. Grandmama had made it something of a hobby to wage epistolary battle with any perceived enemies, and her publisher of choice had been Palm Beach Life, and now Palm Beach Illustrated. She reserved her shorter form content for the Palm Beach Daily News, AKA the Shiny Sheet.

Paul returned with the magazine and handed it to Penny.

“She went scorched earth with this one. Maybe wait to read it ‘til you’ve had a cocktail or two.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

She thought of her evening plan with the handyman. Maybe she would pre-game with a glass of wine and the obituary, and then could blame any irresponsible behavior on emotion.

“Your grandmother certainly wielded the poison pen like no other,” said Paul. “It was damn funny, though.”

“I’ll read it when I’ve steeled myself appropriately. Right now, I’m just focused on dealing with the estate.”

Paul made a commiserating face that left Penny wondering whether her grandmother had told everyone but her something she needed to know. She should have spent more time on the phone with her, come to visit more often despite Covid and despite Grandmama’s protests. She could have just shown up and quarantined long enough to be safe for her to see. But Penny hadn’t done that. She’d been too busy ... with what? With her life of doing nothing constructive? She could kick herself. Too late for that. Time to focus on the future.

“Anyway, I’m thinking of some kind of video series showcasing decorators and antiquarians,” she told Paul.

“That’s a fun idea,” he said. “But how will you be making money with it?”

“I’m working on that. It’s just the beginning of an idea. So, are you in? Will you help me?”

“Yes, I’d love to help you,” said Paul. “But remember, monetize, monetize, monetize. Speaking of... I’ve heard there might be a buyer for the house.”

“Where did you hear that?” Penny snapped.

“It’s a small island,” Paul shrugged. “Are you going to sell it?”

“Well, this is the first I’ve heard of it,” Penny admitted, deflated. “I need to see what my options are.” She was starting to understand that maybe things wouldn’t be as she’d assumed, and it was a terrifying feeling.

“I’m trying to stay positive until I’m told otherwise,” she said.

“Positive only gets you so far,” Paul chided.

“Well, it was nice seeing you,” said Penny. It wasn’t that nice, though, to be honest. “Can I keep this?” She held up the magazine.

“Of course,” said Paul. “I hope you’re not upset with me. I really want to help.”

“I know. Thank you. I’ll circle back for the video.”

“Looking forward to it.”

Chapter 14

Penny stepped out into the street. She was already losing momentum and starting to reconsider her decision to go visit all her old haunts and the old people who seemed to know a lot more about her situation than she did. She would go to Celerie Kemble, she decided. Celerie's mother, Mimi, and her grandmother had been friendly despite their age difference, and Penny remembered visiting the old church she lived in, as a child. She'd been very impressed with the decor, which had struck her as relaxed, compared to her great grandmother's formal taste. Penny and Celerie had not been the right age to be friends, but she had found Celerie impossibly glamorous, and she was proud and impressed that an island girl had built such a big business, in Palm Beach, and beyond. Good for her. How did she do it? Why couldn't Penny figure something like that out? She parked near the shop and walked in, through the hand painted door. As always, the colorful wares inside the shop caught her eye. Whereas on most of Worth Avenue, you barely even looked at the things in the windows, because you knew you couldn't afford any of them, the things in the Kemble shop were cheerful, and at least somewhat attainable. Fabric samples lined the hallway beyond, and Penny knew they spilled out into the staff bathroom, to boot, which also served as a changing room in inclement weather, the main changing room having been created by stringing a few sheets on a clothesline, outdoors.

"Hi," she called out, once she had stepped into the shop. The salesgirl, an elegant young woman that Penny had never seen before, looked up. Penny found herself a little bit disappointed not to see a familiar face.

"Can I help you?" The young girl asked politely.

"No, I'm just looking around," said Penny. Would Celerie be willing to appear on her show? She wondered. Or was she too famous, now? Also, was Penny just distracting herself to postpone facing the inevitable? Well, it wasn't over 'til it was over. After all, she had not yet heard any official news from the trust lawyer.

She considered a pretty pair of earrings and toyed with the thought of doing some retail therapy, and then decided that she didn't have the luxury of spending any of her hard-earned money.

"Have a nice day," she said, as she walked back outside. She checked her watch as she got behind the wheel of Grandmama's car. It was almost four

o'clock already. Time to get ready for her so-called date with the handyman.

Chapter 15

At precisely five o'clock, there was a knock on the apartment door. Penny padded across the floor in bare feet. After coming home from exploring Worth Avenue and environs, she had showered and had debated with herself on what to wear, settling on white jeans and a linen button down shirt. She wasn't going to make the handyman think that she had dressed up specially for him, even though she had spent a good five minutes in front of the mirror, debating how many unbuttoned buttons were indecent. She had also wracked her brain for possible subjects of conversation and had kept landing on the one thing that might interest him: Palazzo Leoni, and what kind of repairs he thought it might need.

"Thank you so much for coming," she said, as she opened the door. "I'm realizing it's late. You could have just made it tomorrow- I don't want to be keeping you from your family or your wife."

Oh God. She was rambling.

"You're not keeping me from anyone," the handyman said, smiling.

"Oh," said Penny, strangely pleased to hear this. "So..." she stood there, awkwardly.

"What do you want to show me first? The trash compactor or the faucet?"

"Oh, yes, the compactor is this way," Penny said, gesturing towards the kitchen. "I'll just be... I'll be over there if you need me."

She sat behind her laptop at her grandmother's writing desk and tried to concentrate on creating a list of things she needed to do to get organized. But, much as she tried to come up with line items, she was too distracted by the presence of the man in her kitchen. She couldn't help herself from looking over in that direction. From where she sat, with the kitchen island partially blocking her view, she could only see a very perfect ass sticking out as he knelt to consider the broken appliance. God, he was good looking. Those handyman duties must have exercised every muscle in his body because he was a fine, fine specimen. He could be exactly the distraction Ella had been recommending. After all, he couldn't be any more geographically convenient, since he worked in the building. This could make it awkward when things inevitably ended, but such was life.

“Aha!” she heard the man say. She saw his ass move back. *Damn.* She quickly cast her attention back to her computer, to make it look like she hadn't been staring at his butt the whole time.

“Aha?” she asked.

“Yes, I found the problem. There was a fork stuck in there.”

“Oh?” Penny stifled a laugh. Her grandmother had always blamed her for losing the silverware, and now, she had proof that Grandmama was the fork thrower away-er. But then, she remembered using a fork to scrape her burnt toast into the compactor that very morning. The plate was still in the sink, which she probably should have taken care of before the handyman showed up, and the fork...oops. *Damn.* She was going to have to apologize to Grandmama in heaven.

“Sorry, that's pretty embarrassing,” said Penny.

“Don't worry. It happens. Now, how about that faucet?”

That task, too, was summarily dispatched.

“Damn, you're good,” Penny observed. “Do you always finish quickly?” She suddenly realized what she had said and blushed furiously.

“Oh, God, I didn't mean...”

“Well, I don't like to waste time,” he remarked. “And now, it's the end of the workday, and I think you promised me some wine?”

“Absolutely,” Penny stammered. “It's... it's over here, do you like white?”

“I'll take what I can get.”

Penny opened the bottle, a Sauvignon Blanc the guy at the overpriced local wine shop had recommended and poured some into two glasses.

“I have some cheese, too, if you want some.”

“No, it's fine. Just the wine is great.”

The man clinked his glass against Penny's, giving her another disarming smile, and took a sip.

“Love this Sauv Blanc. Napa?”

“You seem pretty knowledgeable about wine,” Penny observed.

“Oh yeah, I can be a total wine snob.”

Well, that was atypical for a handyman, she thought. But again, this was Palm Beach. Handymen were no doubt a different breed here.

“So, how long have you been in the building?” He asked, looking around.

“I just arrived.”

“Oh. I’m new here, too.”

“Nice. What brought you here?”

She listened intently for his response, trying to pause the X-rated movie, starring him, she was playing out in her mind.

“Oh, something came up, and it seemed like a good opportunity.”

“This a nice complex,” said Penny. “I hope the residents aren't too much of a pain in the butt.”

“When I saw the name on your buzzer, I thought you’d be a guy. Lawrence Jones? Is that really your name?”

“Actually, Lawrence is my uncle, well... not really. Long story. But anyway...I do have a funny name, but you can call me Penny, if you want.”

“I want to call you anything you like.”

Oh, the look in his eyes. Was he flirting with her, or was that wishful thinking? And there was something about his tone. A confident cockiness that she didn't dislike.

“You never told me your name,” she blurted out. How embarrassing. How rude of her not to ask before she started ordering him around.

“William.”

Oh. She didn’t know what she’d been expecting. Some hot handyman name, not that she knew what those were.

“Do they call you Bill? Billy? Willy? Wills?”

“When I was a kid I was Trip, but I’ll settle for just William.”

“OK. So what do you do for fun in Palm Beach, Just William?” asked Penny.

Oh God, that joke was so childish.

“I mean...I haven't been here in a little while and it feels like it's even stodgier than it used to be. And now, all that New York money has come in...”

William smiled.

“Oh, I mostly keep to myself,” he said. “I’m also new, so just trying to get the lay of the land.”

“You haven't found any bars or restaurants you like so far?”

Damn. Was he going to think she was angling to have him ask her out? Though, to be honest, she kind of was.

“Yeah, there are some places in West Palm. The usual suspects. On the island, I like Hive for breakfast.”

“You go to Hive for breakfast?”

She would have thought that was more a decorator or influencer place. After all, she had just discovered Hive herself, in a high end travel blog, and it looked pretty over-the-top, one of those places that was specifically designed to be instagrammable.

“That seems a bit metrosexual for a...for a guy like you,” she said.

“Maybe I am metrosexual,” said William, raising an eyebrow.

She blushed. She’d just said the word *sexual* in his presence. And if he was metrosexual, that was definitely her type now.

“So do you live in West Palm?” asked Penny. “Sorry if that’s personal, or if you think I’m being creepy.”

“No, no, I live here.”

“Here in the complex? Did an apartment come with the job?” asked Penny.

“Something like that,” said William. “Listen, I better go, get out of your hair.”

“No, take your time. You’ve not finished your glass,” said Penny.

“I’ve got to hit the gym,” said William. “I’ll see you around, though.”

Damn. She had scared him away, with her silly blathering.

“Where should I put this?” William held up his glass.

“On the counter is fine,” Penny said, lamely.

He did as he was told and as he turned, she found herself admiring his physique. Again. Of course he was going to the gym. A body like that one wasn’t honed by changing light bulbs and fixing leaky sinks. She could imagine him now, at the gym, his muscles rippling. What wouldn’t she give to see that?

“Thank you for the wine,” he said, pausing at the door.

That was it. She was a sucker for a polite man. She found herself looking into his eyes, which she had to tilt her head up to do, even though she was not a short woman. That was when she realized that she was standing entirely too close to him than what was strictly appropriate. She took a quick step back. What was wrong with her? He was drawing her in like a moth to a flame. But she had the feeling that he wasn’t as into her.

“Um...you’re welcome.”

What was he going to do now? Give her a hug? A kiss on the cheek? She didn’t think she’d survive it if he did- not without doing something rash. But instead, he gave her an awkward half-wave and let himself out. Disappointing, but probably for the best.

Once William had left, Penny realized she hadn’t thought to ask him what he thought about the cost of freshening up a house like Palazzo Leoni. But at this point, she felt kind of silly asking him anyway. It wasn’t the kind of job an apartment building handyman would know anything about, not even one as handsome and as knowledgeable about wine as William.

She glanced outside. It was already dark. Other than her upcoming dinner date with Ella, she had gone through almost a full day in Palm Beach, and still was none the wiser about the situation with Grandmama’s estate. She had no idea when she would be able to get back to New York, not that she was dying to return there. And she had not the foggiest notion of what her next steps were.

The one thing she did know without a doubt was that she had the serious hots for her building’s handyman, and that, if he would even have her, he might be the best way to pass the time.

Chapter 16

Penny walked into the lobby of the Brazilian court. It hadn't changed at all, though she had never gone to eat at Café Boulud with Grandmama. Grandmama thought the restaurant was an upstart. Its patrons were new money, in her opinion, though she had gladly frequented Boulud in New York, and she refused to be seen at this Florida location, even though she would condescend to have tea or a beauty treatment at the hotel. Grandmama had her principles about which places she graced with her presence. She basically pretended that the new places didn't even exist and spoke as if the old places were still there. It was charmingly delusional, a trait Penny had always referred to with affection, even though she realized that it was a little bit on the snobby side.

Ella was already waiting at the table when Penny was ushered in by one of the impeccably dressed staff members.

"Wow, you look gorgeous," said Ella. "I'm flattered you got all dolled up like that for me."

Penny smiled.

"Look who's talking."

She wasn't about to admit to Ella that she'd gotten all gussied up for a five o'clock compactor fixing appointment with the handyman in her building.

"You better watch out, or you're going to be breaking hearts all over the island," said Ella.

"That would be fun," said Penny, grinning. She was thinking about the handyman, obviously. William. What an anti-sexy name. It somehow made him even hotter. Was that the sort of name one could scream out in the throes of passion? She was willing to try.

"What's that smile?" asked Ella suspiciously. "Have you already met somebody here?"

"No, of course not," said Penny. What a liar she was. "Listen, I really appreciate that you're having dinner with me. But you know, you don't have to hold me by the hand."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want you to think I'm too dependent or... I mean, yes, I'm not in the mood to see my other so-called friends. But also, I can be on my own."

"That's so ridiculous."

“You have a husband and children, and I don’t want them to resent your loser friend.”

“Don’t be silly. And, we have to have you over one of these days soon,” said Ella. “The kids are sick right now, though, and I don’t want them to contaminate you.”

“Ew. I don’t want their cooties either,” Penny laughed, even though she couldn’t wait to see those little fuckers.

“How was your day?” asked Ella.

“It was fine. I saw your grandpa. I got the compactor fixed.”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t realize it was broken,” said Ella.

“Uh, it was probably my fault,” Penny admitted.

“Ah, a fork?” Ella laughed. “So you’re saying Grandmama was not being completely unfair?”

“Unfortunately,” Penny admitted.

“Got it. Well, good job on getting it fixed. It’s impossible to find good help around here.”

“Really? The building’s handyman was super responsive,” said Penny.

“Really? In my experience, it’s been impossible to get anything done in there. They have some sort of weird bureaucracy that puts 10 layers of BS in between you and anyone who can help you with anything.”

“Oh, lucky me then,” said Penny.

She was going to add, *he’s hot, too*, but decided against it.

“By the way, I was looking around the apartment, and I couldn’t find the keys to Grandmama’s house.”

“Oh,” said Ella. She seemed to stiffen.

“Do you have any?” asked Penny.

She felt her friend’s reaction was a bit strange. Maybe she would ask Lawrence if he had some.

“Uh...I can get a set.”

“Oh... So can you...”

“Yes, of course. I’ll get it to you. Just remind me.”

“Perfect,” said Penny. “Thank you. I just thought I’d, you know, go see it and start figuring out what needs to be done.”

“What needs to be done?” Ella repeated.

“Well, once I speak to the trust lawyer, I’m guessing that I’m going to need to figure out whether I want to move in or, you know, rent it out or

something, depending on whether I want to go back to New York or stay here.”

“Oh, honey,” said Ella. “I didn't think you'd want to move into that old place.”

“How can you say that? Asked Penny. “Palazzo Leoni is beautiful!”

“Yes, but it's fallen into disrepair in the past few years. I haven't even been inside in a while, but the deferred maintenance alone...”

“Is that what grandma told you?” Asked Penny, again frustrated that her grandmother had not breathed a word of this to her, her own granddaughter.

“Well, she moved into the apartment because the place was growing pretty unlivable, among other things...”

“But how much do you think it would cost to get it fixed up?” Asked Penny.

“A lot,” said Ella. “It might be sliding into Lake Worth, for all we know.”

“Maybe I could have someone come and take a look at it,” said Penny.

“You know,” said Ella, uncomfortably, “maybe you shouldn't bother, not until you know what's up with the trust.”

But the lawyer was away for the next week, at least. Better for Penny to have some kind of an idea before he got back.

“I mean, until you know the terms of the trust,” Ella was saying.

“Are you saying that you think that Grandmama maybe gave the house to a charity or something? Wouldn't she have mentioned that to me?”

“Um, I don't know,” said Ella. “But I do know that trusts can be messier than you think.”

“How? It's just me, right?”

“Sure,” said Ella. “I'm just saying that the place is a hot mess.”

“How can you say that? We spent so many years in there. So many good times. It was gorgeous. You know as well as I do that it is the prettiest house in Palm Beach.”

“It was,” said Ella. “I just think, these old homes are really hard to maintain. I don't want you to put yourself in the poorhouse trying to fix something up that maybe wasn't worth fixing up.”

“Not worth it?” Penny stared at Ella.

“Just promise me you won't be building a castle in the sky until you know what the terms of the trust are,” said Ella. “I'm serious. I'm your realistic friend. I don't know how much money Grandmama had left, if any. She

wasn't repairing the house, we know that. So maybe there wasn't enough left to repair it with, or maybe she didn't want to repair it, for some reason."

"OK," Penny said carefully. There was nothing she could contradict in that.

"If she'd been planning on you taking it over, I'm sure she would have tried to spare you the pain in the butt of dealing with all her deferred maintenance, unless she wasn't capable."

"Ella, do you know something that I don't know?" Penny asked, finding it hard to keep calm.

"No, I just... forget I said anything."

"Yeah, that request always works."

"Can we talk about something else, though? I want to hang out with my best friend, not with the ghost of her grandmother."

Penny considered her friend, squinting. The way Ella had said *grandmother* sounded a little bitter. What was that about?

"Why does it sound like you're mad about Grandmama?" asked Penny.

"I'm not mad about Grandmama. She wasn't my grandmother," said Ella. "And you know as well as I do that she had her foibles and her quirks."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Some of the stuff she said...Frankly, she was a racist, Penny."

"She wasn't racist! Look how close she was with Uncle..."

Ella rolled her eyes, stopping Penny mid-sentence.

"What? She was!"

"He was close to her, but not equal, right, Penny?"

Penny blushed furiously. Ella had a point. Yes, Grandmama had been a product of her time, but that didn't excuse a few of the things she'd said. Penny had nearly idolized her grandmother and hated to see her as a less than perfect human being, but Ella was right. Some things Grandmama had said and done- they displayed at the very least a serious bias. It was wrong, certainly by today's standards.

"I'm sorry, Ella. You're right. I can't imagine... I'm sorry. This shouldn't create a chasm between us. It's my shit to deal with."

"So what are your long-term plans?" Asked Ella. "Not that you would know after a single day back, but I would love for you to stay in Palm Beach, for sure."

"Part of me would love that, as well," said Penny. "I'm just having a hard time picturing what that would look like."

“I don’t know- meet someone nice, settle down...”

“Ha! Me?” Penny scoffed. “At the very least, I would need a job...”

“Would the magazine let you work virtually?”

“I suppose so,” said Penny, but she sounded as doubtful as she felt. The magazine would be only too happy to get rid of her. Guillermo's fear of her retaliation would probably fade over time, and with distance, and he would probably begin to realize that she wasn't going to blow up his marriage. It would be bad karma. besides, he could do that very well on his own without her help.

“I've been thinking about filming the various antiquarians and getting their stories of the old days of Palm Beach before it's too late...”

“Like a kind of oral history thing? I love that idea,” said Ella. “But also, I think it's important for you to talk about the present and, you know, not have rose colored glasses on when you speak about things. I mean, there was some massive inequality, still is. We're barely eighty years away from the end of the convict leasing program, which was just a step above slavery, after all.”

“Agreed,” said Penny. “I know I need to refrain from glorifying the past, especially the parts of it that weren't glorious.”

She was about to start talking about the book she'd also been thinking about, about the Palazzo, when Ella got a worried look in her eye.

“Oh shit, there's Savannah.”

Penny swung her head towards the right, in the direction that Ella was looking in. A willowy blonde was striding towards them, a giant smile plastered onto her smooth face.

“Crap, how did you even recognize her?” Penny whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

“She still looks the same as when we were 12, just a little sluttier,” said Ella.

“Yeah, but barely sluttier.”

“Oh my God, I can't believe you two are here, and still together,” said the blonde.

“Yup, here we are,” said Ella. “Great to see you, Savannah.”

“I've been seeing so much of you in all the magazines,” said Savannah to Ella.

The pinched expression on her face communicated the big underlying question, which was, *why aren't you spending all your time doing Pilates and*

playing golf like the rest of us, when you aren't dressing your kids to match you and ferrying them to social events?

"And Penny, I haven't seen you at all. Have you been gone?"

"I've been working in New York."

"Oh, you work?" Asked Savannah, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Believe it or not," Penny shrugged. "How about you?"

"Oh, you know, same old, same old," said Savannah.

Penny glanced at Ella, who gave her the most discreet of eye rolls. How was she supposed to know what *same old, same old* meant? They hadn't seen each other in 15 years.

Oh, you're still writing Brock's name in your diary with the pink cover, sitting in your room with the Laura Ashley cabbage rose bedspread. That's so cute, she thought.

"So...still living with your parents?" Asked Penny.

She couldn't help herself. Savannah straightened.

"No. I ended up marrying Brock, and, well, we moved to Greenwich for a short time, but now we're back on the island with our kids Missy, well, you know, I named her after Missy, you know Missy, and my son Jack, and basically, you know, I'm just playing tennis and hanging out and, you know, Missy and I are still best friends, and you should come meet us at the Everglades for tea one day."

Ella and Penny gave each other a look.

"That would be so fun," said Ella.

Penny kicked her under the table. It would not be fun.

"Well, let's get on a group text. Do you still have the same number? We'll make it happen," said Savannah. Like she was some kind of CEO.

"Can't wait," said Ella.

Penny simply nodded. She couldn't bring herself to say anything. When Savannah was gone, Penny speared Ella with her eyes.

"Really? Fun?"

"Maybe the more accurate word would be entertaining," said Ella.

"No. I mean, she is still doing the same thing she was doing when she was 12. Like, literally. She married Brock. She's still friends with Missy..."

"There is something to be said for continuity," said Ella, smiling.

"It's so deadly boring. Tennis and the club? Oh my God!"

"Not your idea of fun?"

“No. It’s the one thing that makes me wonder whether I could actually come back here full time. I need something real to do.”

“Fair point.” Ella smiled. “But keep in mind that some people don’t seem to experience that imperative.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

“Forget about her; what are you ordering?” asked Ella.

“What do you usually order?”

“There’s a burger that’s pretty good.”

“It’s 49 dollars, E!”

“It’s worth it. It’s delicious. Just don’t ask the truffle on top. That bumps it up to 150.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

They ordered their burgers and a glass of pinot each.

“This is on me,” Ella said, again.

“I’m not a charity case. I’m just poor right now,” said Penny, even though she was grateful for her friend.

“Besides, if you were to sell the palazzo, I would be your agent, right? So I’m putting this down as a business dinner.”

“You know I would never,” said Penny.

Ella said nothing, but the look in her eyes said, *if you have the choice*.

“Just think what the commission would be on that,” said Ella.

“Stop it,” said Penny.

“I would split the commission with you anyway, girl. Don’t worry,” said Ella.

“I would be one of those bitch clients who negotiates the lowest commission ever,” Penny warned. “Because, you know, you’re a friend, so your work isn’t worth as much.”

Ella laughed.

“And you’re putting me in your book and we’re splitting the profits because I gave you all your best ideas.”

“Totally.”

“Now, can I complain to you a little bit about my husband and kids?”

“No. Your husband and kids are perfect angels. You guys are a ridiculously perfect family.”

“Stop it. Nothing is ever perfect,” said Ella. “So stop waiting for it to be.”

“You’re a wise woman. I’m lucky to have you as my chosen sister,” said Penny, growing serious.

“Aw. You know I feel the same,” said Ella, reaching across the table and squeezing Penny’s hand. “I have to say, I’ve really been hoping that you decide to stay here. But I know I’m just being selfish. So whatever you decide to do with your big, beautiful life...”

“Ha. Look at how little I’ve done so far...”

“Not true. You’ve been trying to carve out a niche for yourself that feels authentic to you. That’s so hard!”

“I mostly sat around waiting for an inheritance to drop into my lap.”

Penny clenched her jaw and looked away from her friend. There. She’d finally admitted it. She didn’t need to defend herself and specify that she hadn’t ever wanted Grandmama to die. But still. It was pathetic.

“Don’t you realize that’s the case with most trust fund babies? I feel like people can get shackled by these things, waiting for real life to happen...”

“Yeah,” said Penny.

“If the trust lawyer paints a different picture than you expected, promise me you’ll try to see it as an opportunity?”

“I’m sure it can’t be that bad,” said Penny.

Ella gave her a look.

“Wait, did you hear anything? God, everyone gossips like crazy on this island. What did you hear?”

“Nothing you couldn’t have observed yourself. Your grandmother was spending money hand over fist for a minute. Granted, she slowed down at the end, so who knows?”

“You know, I was thinking about it last night, after you were talking about the cost of maintaining a property like that. I wouldn’t mind a scenario where Grandmama gave the palazzo away to a foundation or something. You know, have people come visit it. It is one of Addison Mizner’s most famous works, after all.”

“A foundation would need to be funded,” said Ella.

“Well, there have got to be ways to fund something like that,” said Penny, but she was remembering how even the US government gave Mar a Lago back to Marjorie Merriweather Post’s family because it was too costly to maintain. Anyway, Ella was right. She shouldn’t be getting ahead of herself. She’d been waiting this long, and she didn’t know what the trust lawyer would have to say.

“I can’t believe the lawyer’s out of town. I mean, talk about bad timing for a trip.”

“I know- I always wish that everyone would adjust their schedules around mine too,” Ella smiled. “I’ve got a difficult client in town right now. He’s investing heavily in and around the island and expects me to be at his beck and call all the time. And I’m like, ‘my bestie’s in town, I have other things to do!’”

“I think that when people get super wealthy, they expect that, don't they? I just literally got fired by this woman because I couldn't magically materialize on command an hour early when her brat decided he wanted to play trumpet...and yeah, I realize that's on a different scale than a multi millionaire client, but you know what I mean.”

“I do,” Ella smiled. “It's just as annoying.”

They spent the rest of their meal reminiscing about the good old days. Penny wanted to question Ella about more of the things that Grandmama had said to her, but she didn't want to poison the atmosphere. She would have time to tease these things out. It was important to talk about them. It wasn't fair that she had all these rosy memories of Grandmama, whereas Ella had experienced something a bit more fraught. Grandmama had sometimes been mercurial, had sometimes snapped at Penny, too. She remembered, now, how crazy her grandmother got about some things. Back in middle school, when all the girls got obsessed with being tan, Penny had for once found something she was good at. She would sneakily buy tanning lotions at the CVS and spend hours on the beach with her friends, minus Ella, who loved to swim but considered lying in the sun a waste of time. Grandmama had flipped out. Penny was going to get all wrinkled. She was going to die of skin cancer. When she caught her basking by the pool, she'd grounded her and had put on the pool cover for the season. It had been an over-the-top overreaction. But Penny had simply reasoned with herself that her grandmother loved her and wanted to make sure that she didn't get hurt, didn't suffer at all. But she was suffering now, with the unknown. With the surprise of coming to Palm Beach and finding herself in an apartment that Grandmama hadn't even told her she was living in. There was real discomfort in feeling edged out of everything, excluded from reality.

They wrapped up their meal. Penny had found herself thinking about William's visit more than once. She really liked him, she realized. Not just because he was so good looking, but also because of his demeanor. There was something about his energy that she responded to. The only problem was, the feeling didn't seem to be mutual. Hopefully, she would see him again

and get an opportunity to let him warm up to her. Spending some quality time- preferably of the naughty variety, with him would be a good distraction.

“So what'd you think of the meal?’ Asked Ella, as she was paying.

“Definitely not a \$49 burger,” Penny smiled. “Maybe \$48. But it was delicious, and the service was excellent. And the company beyond compare. So thank you.”

“This is one of the great things about Palm Beach. You get the New York and Miami restaurants for the same price, but since don't have to pay for bad attitude, it feels like a deal.”

“You're being unfair,” said Penny. “In New York, the attitude is free.”

But, lightly as she was speaking, she knew she couldn't make a habit of going to this sort of establishment. At least not until she knew what was what with the trust. She'd been so confident that she would be a wealthy woman at some point, but now she was starting to worry that her financial position might be just as precarious as it currently was. And it wasn't a good feeling.

“Honey, I gotta go. The kids need me. You go sleep. Tomorrow is a new day. Call me if you need me.”

Penny made a face. She didn't want her friend to feel like she had one more dependent.

“I see that look. You're my best friend. I am not sick of you.”

“You will be.”

“Maybe eventually,” she said. “I'm joking. And you just got here. I don't know my schedule, but I do plan on seeing you tomorrow.”

Chapter 17

Penny had woken early and had spent part of the morning wandering through the apartment, examining all the photographs on display on every surface. Grandmama had certainly made this place her own since she'd moved in. In fact, there was nary a trace of Lawrence's existence, save his presence in more than a few of the photographs. He must have brought all of his things to the nursing home.

What to do today? She would go pick up some breakfast for Ella, she decided. In fact, she would go to Hive. Not because William might possibly be there, but because she had a hankering to see the glossy green tile wall she'd admired on Instagram, and to taste the spectacular looking pastries that had made her salivate just from the images on the curated pink-and-green centric photo grid. That would give her something to do this morning, other than thinking about her pathetic interaction with the handyman the evening prior. She just couldn't get him out of her head. Something about that crooked smile. Those sparkling brown eyes. The mop of dark chestnut hair. Not to mention his body. She generally didn't care too much about men's looks. She went more for personality, but it was only logical: if one was setting out to have a fling, going for the hottest guy she'd ever seen was the smartest idea. You couldn't have a long-term thing with a man like that. It would be impossible. He probably had so many options that she didn't even have to worry about letting him down easy once she decided that the relationship had run its course. If he'd even have her, which wasn't a foregone conclusion. Sure, maybe he'd been acting professional the previous evening because she was a resident in his building, but if he'd felt a spark, like she had, she would have thought she would have noticed.

She was just thinking about this, and making her way into the underground parking garage to fetch Grandmama's car, when she caught a movement in the corner of her eye.

She stiffened, every nerve ending suddenly on high alert.

Ever since watching *Single White Female*, or some such movie, she couldn't remember which one, really, and it didn't matter, she'd had an absolute fear of parking garages. Nothing good ever happened in a parking garage. And, well, seeing someone in this largely deserted space was not a situation she wanted to find herself in.

She fumbled with her keys, hoping to make it to the car before this interloper, whoever they were, attacked her, or did whatever they planned on doing to her.

“Penny!” she heard a voice call out.

She breathed a sigh of relief. *William*. Now that was someone who could make her heart beat triple time for a better reason. But then again, that didn’t mean he wasn’t a murderer. She was being silly. If he wanted to, he could have gotten rid of her much more easily in her apartment last night, and disposed of her body in the newly working trash compactor.

“Did I scare you?” he asked, smiling, stepping closer.

Well, if he was a murderer, at least the last thing she saw would be a dreamy vision. He was still wearing those perfectly fitting jeans, now with espadrilles, and a T-shirt that draped from his shoulders in the most alluring way. The effect was casual, but refined. Surely, he wasn’t going to fix toilets in that.

“I wanted to thank you for the glass of wine last night.”

“Paltry payment for your services,” Penny retorted. Though she supposed he was paid by the HOA.

William pointed at Grandmama's car.

“Is that yours? I've been wondering who it belonged to.”

“It's my grandmother's.”

“Cool. My grandmother had one like that. Well, not exactly the same model. If I’m not mistaken, this one is the ‘57 Eldorado Biarritz.”

Penny wrinkled her nose.

“Damn, you’re good. I think that’s what it is, yes.”

“You think?” He walked around the car, examining it.

“Yeah, it is. Wow, and in mint condition, too. Wow- there are only like 90 of those left in the world. And you drive it all casual like that?”

“Well, not anymore,” said Penny. “Now I’ll be freaking out every time I get behind the wheel. Thanks.”

William grinned. That cute, lopsided grin.

“And it’s a custom color, so if you scratch it up it’ll be a doozy to match it,” he added, winking at her. “You’re welcome.”

This did elicit a laugh from Penny.

“What color was your grandmother’s?”

“Actually, I’m not sure. I just heard the stories. She passed away when I was a baby.”

“I was lucky to have mine for so long,” Penny smiled. “Did your grandmother live here?”

“No. Maryland.”

“Oh. So you don’t have a family tie to Palm Beach? You just decided to come here because... Sorry if I’m being nosy,” said Penny. “You don’t have to answer that question.”

“Actually, funnily enough, I’d never so much as visited here before this.”

“Oh?”

She was going to ask more questions, but decided she needed to chill.

“I’m going to that coffee shop,” she offered. “Hive?”

“Oh! You’ll love it.”

“You could join me?” Penny asked.

“Sorry, I’m running late for an appointment.”

Penny’s cheeks burned. Turned down by the handyman. He wasn’t as lame and as idle as she was. He had things to do, people to see. Which reminded her. She should check with Ella if she actually wanted her to bring breakfast. Chances were, she was busy, too. Ella also had a real job.

“Well...it was good seeing you,” she said to William. It occurred to her that it probably wasn’t a good idea to get involved with someone who lived and worked in the same apartment building, anyway. Not that it was even an option. He was not interested. So what did she decide to do? Make it a hundred times more awkward, obviously. *L’appel du vide*, her grandmother had called it. That strange impulse, when standing on the edge of a cliff, to just go ahead and jump.

“I know you can’t go to breakfast today ...but maybe...I don’t know-dinner?” She heard herself say, before she’d had a chance to reflect on how forward and idiotic and presumptuous this was.

“Dinner? Um...I’m not sure about my schedule.”

Penny blushed furiously.

“No. Of course. You’re busy,” she stammered. How embarrassing.

“Why don’t I let you know when I’m available? I know where you live.”

“Ha! That’s creepy, but I was creepier,” she said. “Forget I even said anything.”

“No- I didn’t mean to be abrupt. I...”

“Please. I don’t know why I was so pushy. Forget it.”

Forget this guy. He made her crazy. They’d simply engaged in polite conversation about a car, and she’d decided to escalate for no good reason.

She turned back to the car, feeling like her insides had been put in a blender. As she got into the Cadillac, she noticed again how very close her chest was to the steering wheel. Yesterday, she’d been intent on keeping Grandmama’s settings, out of nostalgia. Also, she had been used to it. When she used to visit and borrow the car, Grandmama would get annoyed if the mirrors had been moved by so much as a millimeter. But now that she knew how valuable the car was, and since Grandmama would not be coming back to chastise her, she should adjust the settings with safety in mind. An all-subsuming wave of loss hit her as she remembered how her petite grandmother would sit ramrod-straight at the wheel, her giant sunglasses slipping down her nose, a running monologue about the ineptitude of other drivers flowing from her lips.

Wiping away a tear, she picked up her phone and texted Ella.

Just adjusted the settings on the Caddy. Had Grandmama shrunk even more than last time I’d seen her? By the way, can I bring you breakfast from Hive?

She had just finished adjusting the seat and mirrors when she heard a ping.

She was tiny. TINY! I have a client meeting in a few minutes but if you can give me an hour, I’ll take a plain croissant. They’re the bomb.

Chapter 18

Penny knocked on Ella's office door, holding aloft the beautiful green bag from Hive Coffee Company containing a variety of croissants. Ella smiled and gestured for Penny to let herself in. "You're a bad influence," Ella said, once Penny had lowered herself onto a stylish sea foam boucle chair on the other side of a sleek desk that looked to be modeled after the deck of a yacht. "Don't worry, I only bought two of each flavor. I knew you had to be lying when you said plain. That was meant as a challenge, right?"

"Totally. I'm glad you came by," said Ella.

"Well duh. Croissants."

"Not just that. I was hoping to meet you out for dinner tonight to run something by you, but Sam has a last-minute work trip, and I couldn't get a sitter."

"Damn. I would have loved that. Especially since I just got totally, humiliatingly rejected by a guy I asked out."

Ella considered her, surprised.

"You asked someone out? You met someone in the twenty-four hours since you've been in town?"

"It's more like, a guy was thrown into my path. A hot one."

"Oh, really? Do tell," said Ella.

"There's nothing to tell. He said no, remember?"

"Who the hell rejects a girl like you? Who is this guy?"

"He's... well...he's that handyman, from the building."

"Wait...a handyman? You? Seriously?"

"You need to see this handyman," said Penny.

"Still. You?"

"It's not like I was going to marry the handyman. Anyway, it's a non-starter."

"If anything changes, I need to hear all about it."

"Of course," said Penny. "Wait...what did you want to run by me? Did you change your mind on our birthday plans?"

"No way. It's not that."

“OK...Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like this?”

“You might like it...”

Ella’s hand was hovering over the bag of pastries as she debated which one to choose, but Penny could tell she was acting faux-casual.

“Go ahead, just cut them all in half so we can try them all, and spit it out. If you could see the look on your face- you’re scaring me,” said Penny.

“Oh, good idea.”

Ella hit a button on her phone.

“Carmen, can you bring us two plates, napkins, and two knives? Thanks.”

“Stop stalling,” said Penny.

But then they had to wait as Carmen, a very glamorous young woman in a sleek red suit, brought in the items her boss had requested and was introduced.

“And?” Asked Penny, once Carmen was gone.

“I’ve potentially found a buyer for your grandmother's house,” said Ella, carefully cutting up pastries and therefore having an excellent excuse not to meet Penny’s eye.

“It’s not for sale!”

“No, of course not. I told them it’s not for sale. But they seemed to know it was in a trust. It was weird. I said that, in any case, the current owner is exploring all their options.”

Penny’s blood ran cold. Who was this person, and how did they know anything?”

“They might be one of these obituary chasers. The real estate equivalent of ambulance chasing lawyers. But this one did seem more serious than that. At first, at least.”

“What do you mean?”

“They were offering a high number, but then, they said something about multiple parties in the trust, and buying one out, so I shut them down.”

“There aren’t multiple parties...” Penny started to say, outraged.

“Exactly. So that’s when I decided that this person was just fishing, at least where the Palazzo is involved. Which is not to say they might not turn into a real buyer. They have other deals that have already been completed on the island. So they were just thinking of lumping something else into their portfolio. This sort of thing happens all the time. They probably heard your grandmother died and...”

“That’s gross.”

“Business is business. Anyway, they were talking huge numbers. So it’s a good person to keep on the back burner, just in case.”

“Is this the difficult client you were talking about?”

“I’m not supposed to say....”

“Ella! You’re my friend!”

“OK, he is, and maybe you should date him, instead of moping around about the handyman. I can arrange for you to just happen to come by one day when we have another meeting.”

“Tell me more...” Penny said, but of course she was still thinking about William, which was awfully self-destructive of her.

“He’s a real estate investor- a pretty major one. Absolutely not my type, which means you would probably think he’s hot, in an arrogant way.”

“And what would meeting this hot asshole achieve?”

“Play your cards right, and you could sell the house, and keep it, too.”

“Hilarious. Great plan.” Penny wrinkled her nose. “But it doesn’t make sense. If he’s a big investor, what would he want in what everyone seems to think is a money pit of a house?”

“Sink a stupid amount of money into it, and it could be a trophy property. Also, the house is close to some of his other investments, so maybe it just makes sense for him geographically. I’m not sure. He was playing with his cards pretty close to the vest.”

“Does he like historic buildings?” asked Penny.

“How am I supposed to know? I mean, I don't think you should assume that he's automatically going to wreck the place. Isn't it better knowing that your great grandmother's house is going to be saved and not fall into the water? Not get eaten by termites? You know how it is to maintain these properties on the island. It's not easy.”

“I know it's not easy,” said Penny. “But we don’t know the situation.”

“Exactly. Which is why I told him that he needs to cool his jets. But Honey, just between us- I think you're being unrealistic. I don't think you know how the real world works.”

Penny stared at her friend, mortally offended.

“Wow. So that’s what you think, too. Everybody always tells me that, that I’m this spoiled little girl, and I don’t know what to do and I don’t know how much things are worth. Maybe that’s true, but I’ve never been given the chance to prove myself.”

“Really?” asked Ella. “I want you to know that I love you, so I am saying this simply to help you- and if anyone else said it, I would fight them- but I think that you had so many opportunities, dangling right in front of you, but you just were given too much, so you never reached for them.”

“That’s not fair,” said Penny.

“Isn’t it?” asked Ella. “You grew up incredibly privileged. And now, even though things might not be as perfect as you expected, you’re still holding the golden ticket. Just sell the house and walk away from it. You’ll end up with a clean slate, maybe even a little bit of money to buy yourself a cottage in West Palm.”

Penny just stared at her friend, outraged.

“Consider yourself lucky. That’s more than most people ever get.”

Penny blinked. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“I want to talk to the buyer,” said Penny.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” said Ella.

“Then just tell him no,” said Penny, getting up and smoothing croissant crumbs off her skirt.

Ella closed her eyes, frustrated.

“I’m not going to do that. Often, the first offer is the best offer.”

Penny stormed out of the office. Ella, her friend, her chosen sister- not on her side. So that’s what she really thought of her, that she was a spoiled rich girl, and that she was not realistic. Who was the one living in a waterfront mansion now, wearing designer suits and going to all the glittering galas? Ella was. Not Penny. Penny had a ridiculously modest, simple life, when you really thought about it. She couldn’t help it that she’d been raised to not know how to work.

She left Ella’s office in a huff.

But as she got outside, and to the car, she started to realize that Ella was just trying to help. Ella was her best friend, had never led her wrong. And if Ella thought that selling the house was a good idea, she was probably trying to save Penny from an unfortunate truth she was too dumb to see. If there wasn’t any money left in the trust, no way did Penny have the means or the ability to repair the house, let alone maintain it.

If only she knew exactly what kind of financial deal she was dealing with, she could at least try to make a plan. But thanks to the trust lawyer's vacation, she was spinning her wheels. The idea of potentially seducing the handyman to distract herself while she tried to solve an impossible problem had been so tempting. She couldn't believe he had shut her down. She was in the mood to be terribly irresponsible, and this guy was hot enough that she just knew he would be fully capable of screwing her worries about how she would survive right out of her head. But alas, it was not to be. It had been a while since she'd been intimate with someone. If she was going to start up again, he would have been a great start. Though he possibly would have ruined her forever for other men, but oh, well. Why was she still thinking about him? He clearly was not interested in her.

She was already in Grandmama's car when she remembered that she had forgotten to ask Ella for the keys to the Palazzo. After their argument, she certainly wasn't going to go back and ask. And now, the day stretched ahead of her, empty of anything else to do. Loneliness hit her like a bag of damp sand.

Chapter 19

Back to Antiquers' Row she went, heading further down the Dixie Highway. She parked, more carefully than before, and stepped into one of her favorite architectural antiques stores. The owner, Peter Palin, was a dapper gentleman, usually clad in a bow tie and a seersucker suit. Maybe she could get some Palm Beach history from Peter. She knew that her grandmother had frequented his shop, and that he sometimes functioned as a gentleman walker for her, until she became something of a hermit. He, too, had memories of glittering parties at the Everglades Club, at Mar a Lago, and at The Breakers. Soirees where all the women broke out their finest jewelry, and their most beautiful dresses. He had once regaled her with a story of her grandmother having an argument with a young Lily Pulitzer, whose monkey had jumped on Grandmama's head and had apparently stolen an earring. But between the stories that Grandmama told that were true, and those that were false, she was starting to see that there was a little bit of a gray area.

Peter Palin's shop was bigger than it looked from the outside. It was a deep warren of little rooms that he had somehow created out of pipe and drape partitions, a very dramatic operation that had turned into something quite genius. As she wandered around the little vignettes, trying to find the antiquarian in the maze, she heard voices towards the back of the space. She started heading in that direction, and as she approached, she saw Peter deep in conversation with a man who she could only see from the back. And a very handsome back it was. *Ha, take that, William. You're not the only one with a perfect ass*, she thought, as she took note of the well-shaped proportions of the shoulders, and a muscular rear end encased in faded, perfectly fitting chinos, not to mention a luscious head of hair. Now that she looked at it a little bit more in detail, she groaned. She knew that ass. Was it possible? She coughed gently to call attention to her presence, in case the conversation was a private one. Peter's lips turned up into a broad smile.

"Penny, my darling," he cried out dramatically. His conversation partner turned around, and his eyes met hers. *William*. She didn't like the flip flop her heart did at that moment. What was wrong with her? She'd had a just a few run-ins with this guy, he'd rejected her, and now she was feeling like she had an unrequited crush on him or something. *As if*. William was a

handyman with an attitude, and she literally didn't know what made him tick. They had nothing in common that she knew of, other than that he was geographically desirable for her in that very moment, which he would probably count as geographically undesirable.

"Penny," said William, and just the sound of her name coming out of his mouth gave her another little jolt. This was ridiculous.

"I'll be right there, Penny," said Peter Palin. "I'm just wrapping up with this gentleman here."

"Take your time," said Penny, eager to get out of there. She turned her attention to a few of the architectural details Peter had on display. Old limestone columns and pilasters in that special Florida limestone that was designed to basically decompose on command. Addison Mizner had loved using this, because it gave an impression of age, and he had used it abundantly on Palazzo Leoni. Too bad it also meant that the house was rotting in front of her very eyes. Forget a handyman. Shoring up the house without making it lose its architectural integrity would take an engineer and a host of experts, and cost money-money she didn't have. Anyway, if William couldn't even say yes to a coffee with her, she doubted he would be up for helping her with a losing battle against the elements. Better to focus on asking Peter to collaborate on a segment for YouTube. They could film something about preserving history, and how to integrate historical architectural elements into newer homes to give them personality. Not that Penny agreed with that fully, but there was a right way and a wrong way to do it, in her opinion.

She was bent over a wooden chest in a corner, trying to find a price tag on a stunning shell framed mirror she knew she couldn't afford, when she sensed she was being watched. She composed herself and spun around.

"Hi," said William. There was a strange expression on his face. Something she couldn't quite read.

"That's a beautiful piece, isn't it?"

"You have good taste."

"I like to think I do," said William.

Again, that strange, unreadable look. She felt uncomfortable, like he was undressing her with his eyes. But clearly, that was wishful thinking.

"You left so quickly this morning. Everything OK?"

“Fine.” said Penny coldly.

She had to force herself to look away from his liquid brown eyes. This would only end in further embarrassment and heartbreak. But he was looking right back at her, holding her gaze, and it felt like he was reeling her in again. She was powerless, and she didn’t like it.

“I’m glad I ran into you,” he said.

“Why?”

She knew she was being rude, but he deserved it. If only she could break the spell.

“I took a look at my calendar, and it seems I do have some free time, after all.”

“Time for what?”

Now it was William’s turn to look mortified. *Good. How does your own medicine taste, you absolute jerk?*

“I...I thought we could go out. Like you said. For dinner?”

“I don’t know if that’s a great idea, said Penny.

“Why not? Did something change since this morning?” William asked.

“Yeah. I thought about it and came to my senses.”

“What are you talking about?”

Now, she had his attention, at least.

“I don’t know if we have anything in common,” she said.

“Well, why don’t you give me a chance, and find out?”

He was just like every other man she’d ever met. Powerless to resist a challenge. A game player, albeit a gorgeous one. Then again, she was good at playing games, herself. What did she care? She wasn’t looking for a long-term relationship. She fundamentally did not believe in them. She didn’t have a biological clock, or at least she kept telling herself that. So, there was no such thing as wasting time. Besides, Palazzo Leoni was her priority, and if she needed to go to dinner with a hunk to save the house, that was what she would do.

“You win,” said Penny. “Maybe. Where would you take me, if I accepted?”

“How about Café Boulud at Brazilian court?”

“Nah. I was there yesterday,” Penny said, acting far more bored than she felt. “Not to mention, isn’t that a little steep?”

“My treat, if I’m taking you out,” said William. “How about Bilboquet?”

“I can’t accept that.”

“Why not?” asked William, starting to look a bit offended. “You don’t like French food?”

“I love French food,” she said. “But I can’t have you paying for dinner when we’re clearly going as friends.”

“Why don’t we go to dinner, and we’ll see how we feel then?”

Crap. She shouldn’t have said anything. After all, why not lead him on, and make him pay for the way he’d made her feel? Chances were, anyway, he was still playing, and would end up ghosting her before this so-called date even happened.

“So when were you thinking?”

“How about tonight?” asked William.

She stared at him. Those damn butterflies.

“Um, sure, I guess. But only because original plan for tonight just fell through.”

Normally, she would have played hard to get, but she didn’t have anything exciting going on, and the idea of a solo meal at the apartment wasn’t something to look forward to.

“All right, I could pick you up at the apartment,” said William.

“Ha. Yeah. You do know where I live.”

“We can walk from there, unless you’ll be wearing sky high heels?”

“Not my style,” she said. “Especially not for a friendly bite. We can walk. What time?”

She enjoyed seeing that he frowned a bit when she said *friendly*. But then again, it could have been a trick of the light.

“Six?”

“See you then.”

William looked pleased. Which only made him look hotter.

After he had taken his leave, and Penny had composed herself somewhat, she started to wonder what she would wear on this so-called date. She’d loved Bilboquet in New York in its heyday, and then it had moved and had lost a

lot of its charm, but the version in Palm Beach was a treat. You could always count on seeing George Hamilton and his freakishly beautiful wife, or any number of other Palm Beach Society mavens. The people watching was beyond compare, even if everything was rather overpriced, but she was definitely looking forward to a nice glass of rosé and being seen on the arm of someone as handsome as William, even if she wondered what had finally made him ask her out. She felt a little bad about him coughing up the funds to go. Grandmama had always pooh poohed the place because she'd said it was nouveau riche, but then again, Grandmama didn't really go anywhere where she thought she'd be seen by any of the ladies she'd so eloquently sent to hell in the obituary Penny had finally gotten the guts to read. She didn't want to think about the obituary. Thankfully, Peter Palin joined her in the little vignette.

“Beautiful mirror isn't it,” he said. “It's so elaborate. One of the most elaborate I've ever seen. Most shell mirrors are just cheaply glued on. This one is done with some real artistry- and a specially composed cement, so it'll last.”

“Speaking of that,” said Penny, “that limestone that's falling apart everywhere in Palm Beach- what happens once that totally disintegrates?”

“Expensive replacements,” smiled Michael Palin. “And believe it or not, I still sell it to people. There are still a few quarries that mine it. It seems silly, doesn't it, to keep replacing something with a material so porous and so fragile.”

“At least it's authentic,” said Penny. “Isn't that what Addison Mizner did to give his buildings an impression of age?”

“Not only that, but he was known to crack mantles with a hammer. He would chip tiles, too. I once saw him purposely rust out some balcony railings with some Godawful solution.”

“Oh, so is that why my house is falling apart?” Penny smiled.

“Palazzo Leoni?” Asked Peter.

“What else?” asked Penny.

Was she dreaming, or did Peter look uncomfortable, all of a sudden?

“So, what's going to happen now that your Grandmama is gone? My condolences, by the way. We lost one of the good ones when she passed,” he said. “Thank goodness I wasn't mentioned in her obituary. I don't think I would have survived it. But God, how fun she was. Such a party girl. Such an iconoclast. A rebel.”

“Grandmama was a rebel?” Penny smiled. “She didn't seem that way to me.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” said Peter. “She sure was. Even though she was considerably older than me, and by considerably, I say about 15 years, which, you know, when you're growing up, that's a lot- I looked up to her so much. She lived life on her own terms. Told those Everglades Club ladies to go screw themselves, didn't she?”

“What happened? Why did she do that?”

“Oh, there are so many conflicting versions. Anyway, I don't think that's my story to tell,” said Peter.

“Well, whose story is it to tell? Grandmama's gone,” Penny snapped, frustrated.

“Maybe Lawrence will tell you.”

“You know Lawrence?” Asked Penny, surprised.

“We all know Lawrence,” Peter shrugged. “Give him my best when you see him. So, what can I do for you today, my dear, or are you just visiting?”

They spent the next half hour with Penny explaining the concept of YouTube and of YouTube videos, and this seemed to interest Peter, who'd always had an eye for modernity, despite his classical aesthetic.

“I love this idea,” he said. “You could really make something of this, Penny.”

“I hope so. Originally, I was only doing it so that I could get a job on a TV show,” said Penny.

“Oh? Which one?”

“This Old Mansion,” she said.

“I love that show,” said Peter. “I mean, sometimes their restorations are...you know...”

“Yes, I know. And unfortunately, I told them so. So, they decided I wasn't a good fit,” said Penny.

“Sometimes, rejection is a form of protection,” said Peter, sagely.

Oh, so what was happening with William, was that the universe protecting her, too?

“Don't worry. There's something else for you out there, Penny. You're so gifted. You just need to make up your mind. This YouTube thing could be the start of something big.”

“Thanks for the show of support. At the very least, having you on there might make it go viral,” Penny smiled.

“When shall we film this video?”

“A couple days from now? Let me get myself organized and get back to you?”

“I look forward to it,” said Peter.

Penny left the antiques store, a spring in her step. She was starting to elaborate a concept for a great new YouTube series that might just turn her channel around. She had a date to look forward to with William. And just thinking of the Cajun chicken at Bilboquet was making her mouth water. This day was definitely looking up.

She headed back to the apartment early, to get ready. But then, she settled on her outfit quickly, throwing on a simple cream silk shift dress with an oat-colored cashmere cardigan and gold platform sandals that gave her a bit more height, and didn't make a huge effort with her hair or makeup. It might be self-sabotage, but she didn't want to make it look like she'd tried too hard for a friendly date.

She killed time as the hands of the old clock on the writing desk crept towards six o'clock, looking around the apartment and redecorating it in her mind. Lawrence had said to make it homey, but it already was. What would she do to it if it was hers? The apartment could use some new drapes and perhaps new upholstery on the sofa. The chintz fabric was a little bit tired- she could modernize it and make it her own. The kitchen was actually quite fabulous- an old-fashioned galley that was efficient, cramped by today's standards, but very usable and practical, with charming jade green tile that she wouldn't have changed for the world. In fact, how lovely would it be for this place to actually be hers, or for her to have a place like this? Maybe Grandmama's will would leave her enough money to make that a reality, but she knew that even apartments like this one were expensive. The sheer amount of money it took to subsist in places where she wanted to live was mind-boggling.

Chapter 20

Penny stood up and smoothed down her dress and her hair when she heard the knock. She wondered what William would be wearing. As she opened the door, she held her breath, and had a hard time finding it again, as she found herself looking deep into his chocolate brown eyes, only breaking her gaze to notice his blinding smile.

“Somebody’s in a good mood,” she said.

“Yes, I’ve had a productive afternoon,” said William.

Her eyes finally moved down to take in the rest of him. He wore a linen button-down shirt in a light blue shade that set off his tanned skin, and medium blue trousers that looked like they were custom cut for him, paired with an elegant belt and suede slip on shoes worn with no socks. He had a navy cashmere sweater thrown over his shoulders. The look was positively European.

“Wow, you clean up nicely,” said Penny.

“So do you,” said William, smiling.

“Well, touché,” she responded. “But you’ve seen me in a variety of outfits already.”

“Shall we?” William held out his arm out to her. The old-fashioned gesture warmed her heart. Here was a true gentleman. She laughed and took his arm, and they set off down the hallway, into the elevator, and out into the night. The weather had grown more humid as the day had progressed, but a breeze kept everything from being too muggy. She actually liked weather like this, even if it did make her hair frizz.

“So, I made three reservations for us,” William said with a grin.

“I thought we were going to Bilboquet.”

“Well, we could be, but I just wanted to make sure that you were happy with that choice. I also made a reservation at Renato’s and Swifty’s.”

“All of those are excellent choices,” said Penny. “I’m surprised you were able to make reservations at any of them on such short notice.”

“I have my ways,” said William, smiling.

“You’ve got expensive tastes,” said Penny.

“I suspect you do, too,” said William.

“Yes, you have a point,” she responded. “We’re going to Bilboquet. I was looking forward to it.”

“Your wish is my command.”

As they strolled down Worth Avenue, the short distance to Bilboquet, they chatted about the various things in the shop windows, she, marveling at a set of rock crystal table lamps, but deeming them too modern, he pointing across the street at the Stubbs & Wooton store, where he had fallen for a pair of slippers that he found perhaps a bit too flamboyant for him.

"I think you could rock them," Penny insisted. "After all, you're so masculine- I think a little flamboyant slipper might throw them off the scent. It would be a good juxtaposition," she said.

"So, you're giving me permission to wear pink and green slippers?"

"Permission is a strong word. I don't know if that's truly your vibe," she teased.

"You're right. Whose vibe are those shoes, though?"

"You're so clearly not from around here, or you would know."

"Possibly."

"We were talking about your family the other day, but I never got a clear answer: where did you grow up?" asked Penny.

"Boarding school," William said with a grin.

"Well, me too, technically," said Penny. "Which one?"

"Choate."

"Fancy."

"If you say so. You?"

"Miss Porter's."

"Oh, finishing school," William cracked.

Penny grew silent. She didn't like this reputation that Miss Porter's had.

"I'm surprised you went to boarding school," she said to William. "It's not a common thing for..." She let the sentence trail off, not knowing how to put it politely. Which meant that she shouldn't say it at all.

"For?"

"For many people, these days."

Yeah, well, I guess that's just the way it turned out," said William. "For both of us, it seems."

"And after boarding school?"

"University of Virginia. My family had a few businesses, and after school, I spent some time trying to figure out which of them I wanted to go into."

Interesting. And he had decided to become a handyman? She supposed there were worse things to be.

They had arrived at Bilboquet, where the hostess clearly wanted to impress William, and seated them at an excellent table in the courtyard.

"Enough about me," said William. "What do you want to drink?"

"I've been craving a rosé all day," Penny admitted.

"Perfect. Whispering Angel or the French stuff?"

"Whispering Angel is French Stuff with a marketing degree," said Penny.

"That was a trick question," William cracked.

"Sure, it was".

"All right, and what do you think you'll order?"

"Is that another trick question?" Penny scoffed. "There's only one thing to order. The Cajun chicken."

"Correct. You passed. Or at least, we agree. See, maybe we have more in common than you think."

William gave her a disarming look. *Ha*. So he had been thinking about her statements about them being ill suited, earlier in the day. *Good*. The problem was, she didn't know if she could be friends with benefits with William, anymore. She was starting to see that she liked him entirely too much. It would be too complicated. She looked at him with a bemused expression. "What's that look?"

"I was just thinking of something funny," she said.

"Want to share?" Asked William.

No, she didn't want to share. She didn't want to tell him that she'd spent years in New York never finding anyone she actually liked. And here, she went to Palm Beach, where she was sure she would only hang out with old ladies. And within less than a day, she had found herself the hottest man she'd ever seen. Not that he necessarily liked her back, but still, it was something.

"Tell me something else," said William. "What are you doing here? I mean, other than hanging out in antique shops and ordering me around."

"Well, both of those things are completely acceptable pastimes, I think," said Penny.

"Oh, absolutely. Especially the bossing me around part. I don't mind that at all. But did you say you had family here?"

"I did," said Penny. "But there are so many more interesting things to talk about. You, for example."

She had decided that crying over her dead grandmother wasn't the sexiest subject of conversation. That was the beauty of a fling- it got to be a distraction from the crappy stuff.

"How about you? You never finished telling me what made you come to Palm Beach. It's a funny choice of location if you're not a retiree."

"Nothing exciting. I'm here for some...business concerns of mine," William replied.

Penny smiled. So that's how he referred to his handyman job. Okay. Men were so confident like that. She never dared call any of the random things she did a job or a career or a business. And here he was. But anyway, good for him. Actually, no. She was going to call him out on it.

"Business concerns? Aren't you a handyman?"

William gave her a funny look and took a long sip on wine. He wasn't going to respond. She had struck a nerve. Good. But then, the silence grew awkward, and she decided it would be nicer to fill it.

"And what about your family?" asked Penny.

"Gone," said William.

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. I never knew my grandparents. And my parents were so wrapped up in each other that I was pretty much left by the wayside."

"Wow. I had the opposite upbringing. All the women in my family were single moms. So, you can imagine..."

"Uh oh," said William. "Does that mean that you never want a relationship either?"

"Well, history does tend to repeat itself," Penny shrugged, playing it casual. But she was starting to see she didn't necessarily want this particular historical rule to be true, in this instance.

"We aren't always cursed to repeat history," said William. "Sometimes you can learn from history and then move on."

"That's very optimistic," said Penny. "And an interesting philosophical question, actually. How often do you think humanity has learned and moved on? When is progress better?"

"Oh, so you're one of those brainy girls. Your looks fooled me, at first. But I think I like it." Penny looked at William to see if he was mocking her and fought not to blush. There was something about the shape of his lips, the sparkle in his eye that called to her.

“I sometimes think there are point where certain things become good enough. Where they reach an acceptable peak, you know, and that anything else is more or less a waste of time, reinventing the wheel, if you will. But then, you’ll have a quantum leap of exponential progress, and you get out on the other side wondering why you even needed a wheel to begin with.”

Interesting. She liked brainy William, too.

“Oh, look who’s not just a pretty face, either. I like this conversation. But can we talk food for a second?”

She stared at her menu, hoping she wasn't being so transparent as to her desire for him. No holds barred fling, or something else- she was willing to see where this went, if he was game.

“We already decided unequivocally that we were having the Cajun chicken,” said William.

“I know, but it’s a lot- are you the sharing type?”

“Depends. Are you a sharing plate or pick off the same one kind of girl?”

“Depends on how many of your fries you’re willing to get stolen. Then again, a silly sharing plate never stopped me.”

“I get it. Plates are such a construct. Let’s bring back the communal trough,” William cracked.

“No way. I’m more selective about who I share with.”

“So...I’m in?”

He raised an eyebrow at her, and she felt a flush of heat start at her heart and bloom throughout her body. Oh, he knew exactly what he was doing. He was so in; it wasn’t even funny. But two could play this game.

“And then we can have dessert. Whatever that means to you.” She gave him a sweet, slow smile, and was pleased to notice that he swallowed as she kept eye contact a beat longer than she, and clearly, he was comfortable with. When she looked away, he cleared his throat nervously.

Well. She thought she didn't know how to flirt, but she wasn't too bad at it when it came down to it. The waiter came and saved them from themselves, and they continued their philosophical discussion, this time with less double entendre, as if there was a mutual decision to take things slow and not to pounce on each other in the middle of the restaurant. At least, Penny hoped that was what was going on.

When the Cajun chicken arrived, the waiter put the plate between them and winked. He clearly could tell what was most possibly going to go down later that evening, no pun intended. “You try it first,” said William, watching

her intently as she brought a piece of chicken to her lips. She was almost embarrassed at the way she moaned when the buttery, chicken hit her palate.

“It's amazing,” she said. “I'd forgotten how good it was.”

“Isn't that often the way?” said William. “We sometimes forget how delicious some things can be.”

She looked at him. Oh, really? He was looking to speed things up, was he? She took a slow sip of her wine, making sure his eyes were on her as she did. They were.

“If I get completely drunk,” she said, “can I count on you to not let me do anything irresponsible?”

“Define irresponsible,” William responded, raising his eyebrow again in that devilish way.

“You flirt,” said Penny.

Oh no, she'd said that out loud. She wasn't supposed to highlight what was going on with their game. It was meant to be under the radar, at least in the rules she had made up. But at least he was reciprocating. Was he attracted to her the way she was to him? She hoped so. She hadn't given much thought to the way she looked, recently. But today, she'd actually shaved her legs, and even though she'd tried hard to not make an effort, she'd spent some extra time on her hair, and had added more scent behind her ears. What would happen once he took her home? She had wondered, even back then, but she'd been able to talk herself into quieting those thoughts, because chances were, nothing was going to happen. Now that the meal was drawing to a close, however, those thoughts of what might happen next were back with a vengeance. She took in his perfectly ruffled linen shirt. What would he look like once that shirt was off? She'd noticed a sliver of abs back when he was on the ladder. She'd certainly noticed the shape of that ass. She hadn't been with someone so ridiculously physically fit in a long time. New York men were not of the same species, whatever this rare species was that seemed to split its time between the gym, the beach, and God knows where. Even better, looking the way he did, she would have thought that he had nothing in his head, but the conversations they'd been having that evening about history, about art, and about their goals in life... she hadn't been so titillated in so many different ways in a long time. But when they were finally done eating, she found herself a bit embarrassed.

“I'm so stuffed,” she said. “Did that chicken just inflate in my stomach?”

“Me too,” William moaned, leaning back and putting a hand on his impossibly flat stomach. “Can you imagine if we’d tried to each have our own dish? Impossible.”

“So much for a nightcap, I think.”

“I didn’t know a nightcap was on offer. We’re going to have a constitutional walk on the way back home,” he said. “Who knows how we’ll be feeling then?”

She kind of liked the way he said home, even though she lived in one apartment and he in another. She wondered what his apartment looked like. How did he decorate it? Was he minimalist? Was he modern? Was he a traditionalist? Not that it mattered, but if she was thinking of dating someone, she did care a little. Or more than a little. And maybe that was part of what was wrong with her. It was one of the walls she had put up. Just because all the women in her family had done it alone, did that mean that she had to? It wasn’t like they’d been happier for it, was it?

Chapter 21

Leaving the restaurant, they walked side by side, William's shoulder bumping into hers every few steps.

"You're being quiet," said William. "What are you thinking about?"

"I was just thinking about my family," she responded truthfully. "Your family? As in, that long line of women with no men?"

Penny smiled wistfully.

"When you put it that way..."

"Here's a question. How did that work out for them? Did they like it that way, or did they feel something was missing?"

Most men would have asked that question, and she might've read something into it. But with William, it sounded like genuine curiosity.

"You know, I used to think that it was the right way to do it," said Penny. "I thought that that was the best way to live life, to have no constraints, no bothers. But now- I don't know, maybe were they missing something? I have no idea. And do I know everything about their lives? Maybe they hid some things from me."

"Everyone has secrets," said William.

"Oh yeah?" she asked, leaning into him and poking him in the ribs. "So, what's yours?"

"Well, that depends, right? What do you call a secret? And what's the difference between a secret and a lie?"

"Oh. Wow. Maybe it boils down to the intention? I always feel like a secret has a delicious whiff of scandal. Of the illicit," said Penny.

"I think a secret is only as good as the stakes."

"The stakes?"

"Yeah. What it costs you to reveal it to someone. What the fallout might be."

"Wow, that's deep," said Penny. "You sound like you definitely have one. Or more than one."

William shrugged, but he looked serious all of a sudden. What the hell? They'd been having a fun conversation. He definitely had a secret, and she hoped it wouldn't impact his ability to carry on a fun affair with her. They had arrived in front of her apartment building, and had slowed their pace, as if wanting to linger a bit more outside, in the balmy evening air, complete with

the whispering sound of the breeze through palm fronds. Penny could sense, more than see, Palazzo Leoni across the way. When Grandmama had been in residence, the gas lanterns on the gate posts had been permanently burning, but now, all was dark. It wasn't too hard to force herself to focus back on William.

"Are you going to walk me to my door?" She asked, bumping him gently with her shoulder.

"Of course," said William.

If there was a perfect time for him to take her hand and turn her around to face him and give her at least a little goodnight kiss, this would be it, wouldn't it? But now, she felt that he was holding back, somehow. Had she imagined the attraction she felt from him at the restaurant? Was it just wishful thinking because she thought he was the hottest thing she'd ever encountered? Had he been leading her on? Maybe he was just looking for a friendly dinner because he was lonely in Palm Beach. She'd not really gotten a concrete answer out of him as to why he was even here, other than his vague talk of business. He could have done his handyman job anywhere, definitely in a less expensive zip code, though he did seem to have a sweet deal with the apartment provided for him with the job.

"So, I'm guessing you're not looking to date anyone right now?" She asked him, wincing at herself because, well, that was far from subtle, wasn't it? But now, the alcohol was taking over. The Whispering Angel, doing anything but whispering.

"What makes you say that?"

Damn, she'd ruined a perfectly pleasant evening by asking weird questions.

"I don't know. Just curious...just checking, or confirming, rather that this was just a friendly dinner, I guess."

"I don't know," said William.

This gave her pause. It was certainly not the answer she'd been expecting. He didn't know. Of all things, he seemed like a man who knew exactly what he was doing, at all times. Maybe it was the shock at his strange response, or maybe it was the wine, but she decided she might as well just go full awkward.

"So, what were you thinking when you asked me out?" she asked.

"I wasn't thinking much, to be honest."

"OK. Because, for me, at first, I thought that maybe it was just friendly. And then I kind of started to assume that maybe it was a date."

“Oh,” he responded. “I didn't think you were the kind of girl who would date a handyman.”

“What?” Penny regarded him, shame burning in her cheeks. She wanted to defend herself, but it was impossible to, because clearly he'd seen right through her. She was a little snob. And just because she was maybe making an exception because this fine specimen was outside of any kind of rulebook she could imagine, it didn't mean that she would feel comfortable telling people that she was dating a handyman, would it?

“Have you ever dated a blue-collar person?” William pressed. Funny, the way he said that. He didn't seem blue collar at all, whatever that meant—though he was wearing a linen shirt in the most alluring shade of blue.

“Well, no,” she admitted. “I had a dalliance with a firefighter once, but I don't know if that counts.”

“Not sure. Does it?” asked William.

This whole line of questioning was making her feel very uncomfortable.

“Does it matter to you if I'm going outside of my comfort zone? Maybe I'm working on myself. Maybe I'm being a better person,” she said.

“OK,” said William.

Dammit, this was not how she'd seen the evening ending. She hadn't done anything wrong. He'd been the one to ask her out in the first place. Well, not in the first place. She'd been so insistent earlier that he'd probably felt obligated. Well, if there was nothing possible between them, why didn't he just say so and move on instead of trying to embarrass her like this?

“Listen, William, you asked me out. I accepted because I wanted to go, and now I feel like you're punishing me somehow. I don't understand what happened between you asking me and now. If you didn't have a good time at dinner, just say so.”

“I had a great time,” he said.

But he wouldn't meet her eye.

“Okay, you had a good time, but now you just don't want to see me again?”

“It's not that,” he said.

“Okay. I mean, you don't owe me anything, but it'd be great for me to understand what it is. I had a great time. I thought we'd see each other again.”

“Yes, I'd been hoping that too,” he said.

She noted his use of the past tense. They were now in the lobby of the building. This was so bewildering. She'd never had an evening like this one.

Never encountered this sort of issue before. She was getting a bad case of emotional whiplash. Why did it even matter if she didn't usually date guys like him? She'd never met a man like him, anyway. Also, they didn't have a future. She didn't know what she was doing tomorrow, let alone next month. Her whole life was falling apart like Palazzo Leoni apparently was, and she'd been hoping that she'd have one little iota of fun, and here he was ruining it. In fact, the disappointment was making her furious. She was struggling to remain polite, and that felt uncomfortable.

"Thanks for a lovely evening," she said. "But clearly this isn't working out. I don't know if you just invited me out to punish me for being myself, or what. I never hid the fact that I'm a little bit of a snob, but I liked you. I liked you for you. And now you're telling me you can't get past the way I grew up or something. That's fine. I guess it's better for us to know it now." He gave her a wounded look.

"That's not...forget, it doesn't matter. I really..."

"Drop it. You don't owe me an explanation, William. Good night."

"Let me at least walk you to your door," he said.

"I think I can make it from here. I'll see you around."

She pulled her cashmere sweater around her more closely, feeling the chill now that she wasn't shoulder to shoulder with him. This was ridiculous. The thing she'd been looking forward to as something easy and fun had turned into something crazy making.

"Good night," she heard him call out as the elevator doors closed. She rolled her eyes.

When she got up to the apartment, she was still seething. What the hell? She'd been about to tell Ella all about William, and now there was nothing to say. It wasn't worth even talking about. She was glad she'd been spared the embarrassment of opening up to her best friend about a guy she really liked, only to have him dump her. How humiliating. Dumping her before they'd even started, really. But she'd felt such potential there. That made the loss all the worse.

She brushed her teeth and got into bed, replaying the whole evening in her head. Where had it gone so wrong? She couldn't find any specific moment. She tossed and turned, until she finally started playing one of the jazz albums that Grandmama loved so much. Hearing the familiar tones finally rocked her to sleep, and she dreamt about the palm fronds swaying over the emerald lawn at Palazzo Leoni.

Chapter 22

When she walked into the Hive coffee shop and spotted William sitting at a table with a laptop and a grim expression on his face, she debated on whether she could escape before he saw her. She wasn't in such a great mood, to put it lightly. First, the debacle two nights earlier, followed by a lonely, rainy day spent at the computer- at least, that had borne fruit- and then this morning, Ella had pinged her first thing to invite her to dinner, and then, just five seconds ago, had retracted the offer. William looked like his mood was on the stormy side, too, and it might be wiser to find another coffee shop. But she couldn't resist the siren song of perfect croissants, and, considering she was getting ready for a day of filming antiquarians, she needed fuel, in the form of caffeine and butter. Unfortunately, William's table was right near the coffee pick-up area. He was unavoidable. With a little luck, he wouldn't look up. She made sure to keep her back to the table as she approached the pick-up counter and stood there, wishing she hadn't given her real name to the sweet girl at the register. If William hadn't noticed her yet, he certainly would when the barista yelled out *Penny* at the top of her lungs.

She stood stiffly, preemptively cringing at the prospect of hearing her name, and what that would entail, but when she heard it, it came from the wrong direction, and from a voice she knew.

"Penny."

She turned to face him, reluctantly.

"What are you doing here?"

His tone was accusatory. What? Like he owned this coffee shop or something? She had every right to be there. He certainly didn't look particularly pleased to see her, but then again, she probably had a very similar expression on her face.

"What am I doing here? Getting my hair blown out, isn't that what everybody does at a coffee shop? Don't worry. I'll be gone before you know it."

"Why are you being like that?"

"Because my very presence is so displeasing to you."

William rubbed his cheek. Ugh. That jaw. He sighed.

"Penny, I'm sorry if I was abrupt. You are not displeasing to me."

“Oh, that’s such a relief,” Penny scoffed.

“Do you want to sit down?”

“Not particularly,” Penny was saying, but William was already on his feet, pulling out a chair for her. Again, she noticed what a gentleman he was. Too bad he hated her for some reason.

She still wasn’t about to sit down, except that the traitorous server had taken it upon herself to hand-deliver her coffee and croissant to the table. On a plate. *Dammit*. She would have given anything for a to-go bag right about now. She sat down stiffly and proceeded to pick at her pastry. She’d been ravenous a few moments ago, but now, she was feeling sick to her stomach, and didn’t want William to judge her any further for stuffing her face. She decided to do the polite thing.

“Want some?” She offered, nudging her plate towards him.

“No thank you.”

Penny looked up. Was there even anything left to say? But she had just made a tactical error, because looking at him meant him looking back at her, and now, she found herself swimming in hot cocoa-colored eyes so delicious that they could have made the pain au chocolat at Hive jealous. Was she dreaming, or was he leaning forward, towards her? She hadn’t imagined his initial flirtatiousness, had she? Was she really so off-putting that he’d been initially attracted, then turned off?

“Do you have anything exciting going on today?” he asked, hurriedly, as if making some decision to speak to her. “My day has just been turned topsy turvy.”

“Oh? Hate it when that happens. I’m going to film a segment with Peter Palin, you know, from that shop we bumped into each other at on Antiquers’ Row.”

“What a lovely man,” said William. “So... filming?”

Penny sighed. Had he even listened to her at dinner the night before?

“Yes, remember I told you about my YouTube channel?”

“Yes. I know- I just meant, that sounds fun. Need any help? I could make an excellent gaffer, whatever gaffers do.”

“I have no idea what gaffers do,” Penny smiled, reluctantly. “And I’ve been on film sets. So...you were proposing to do what? Hold the microphone? Or fetch us water? Be my personal assistant for the day?”

William grinned.

“Any of those sound like jobs I might be qualified to do.”

She knew this was just banter. In a second, he was going to grow serious and tell her he needed to attend to his very important business.

“You don’t have anything to do at the apartments?”

“Nope, looks like I’m all clear,” said William, smiling. “I’m open until this evening.”

“Great.”

“So, I can join you?”

Wow. He was really going to go through with this, whatever this was?

“Sure, I guess.”

Penny wasn’t sure whether this was such a good idea, and why William had had such a change of heart, but those eyes had her in their thrall, and she was being stupid.

“Do we go directly from here? And do we get a lunch break?”

“I don’t think it should take us longer than a couple hours to get the footage I need,” Penny smiled. Her idiotic heart was beating triple time.

“So you’re saying that after that, the world is our oyster, or at least Palm Beach is?”

Penny was nodding, when she heard a ping coming through the speakers of the laptop on the table.

“Sorry, that’s so rude,” William said. He scowled at the screen. “One moment, I just need to address this, and then I’m all yours.”

“Of course,” said Penny, discreetly looking at his muscular forearms as he tapped out a response to his message. She wouldn’t mind having him all to herself, just for a night. How rude it was of the inhabitants of the apartment complex to ping William at all moments. Sure, she’d been a bit demanding when she met him as well, but she was trying to get better. And people forcing him to come make repairs in the evening, that was also beyond the pale. She supposed that some people worked, but come on, this was Palm Beach. Did they really? Did they not want the repairs to their apartment to interfere with their golf game? Did they not trust William to let himself in and fix what

needed to be fixed? These Palm Beach people were so nit-picky and strange. Since William was still occupied with stabbing at his keyboard, Penny texted Ella. She had been so distracted by her William sighting that she hadn't responded to the dinner cancellation yet.

Penny: *That's disappointing. What happened?*

She knew that etiquette dictated that one should not ask why someone couldn't make it to your plan, but Ella was a good friend, and she was curious.

Ella: *Damn client buying up everything on the island is part of a partnership that can't find any other time to all be in the same room.*

These might be the same investors who had purchased the majority of the Mar Villa apartments. Penny's heart sank. Change was coming, sooner rather than later, to Palm Beach.

"All done," said William, closing his laptop. "Walk me through the plan with the filming- what you hope to capture, so I don't get in your way."

"I'm going to have Peter tell the story of how he came to Palm Beach, how he developed his aesthetic and what he's seen as a change since he's been working. I want him to tell some of the old stories, you know, when he used to socialize with my Grandmama and..."

"Did I just hear you say Grandmama?" William snorted.

"It's just what she wanted us to call her. She was a little fancy."

"So that's where you get it," William smiled.

"I'm really not fancy," Penny protested. "Maybe I was just raised that way." She hoped that William would stop judging her too much for being spoiled. Her lifestyle these days certainly didn't reflect how she'd been raised.

"Back to the filming. So yeah, I want to make Peter look as interesting as possible, and we'll try to get some extra shots from inside his store, maybe get some shots of houses he's contributed to."

"So maybe after lunch, we go driving around and get some exterior shots of some of the few remaining older homes in the area?" William suggested.

"I love that! Peter sold gobs of furniture to everyone who mattered in town, even Marjorie Merriweather Post, towards the end of her tenure."

"Talk about a grand dame," said William. "What an impressive woman. The history of Mar a Lago is fascinating."

Penny tore her attention away from her croissant and looked at William. Really looked at him. Looked past the perfect jaw, the full lips, those eyes. William was really knowledgeable, wasn't he? Maybe she should ask him what he thought of Palazzo Leoni. After all, he was a contractor. Or a handyman, but still, he seemed to know quite a bit about old houses.

"Was your grandmother a client of Peter's?" William asked.

"No, most of her furniture was already there from Great Grandmama. Really, Grandmama barely needed to do anything. She had quite a few wild parties early on, and I assume they had to replace a few things that got broken, but after a while, once she quit the Everglades Club, she stopped socializing with the same people. So, her link to the gay decorator contingent of Palm Beach was more of a social one."

"She quit the Everglades Club? I hear people hold on to those memberships even if it means firing the help and drinking the cheap stuff to save for the fee."

"I know, I guess she was something of a rebel."

"Cool."

"Not that cool. I could have been grandfathered in, or grandmothered in, you know what I mean," said Penny.

"You would have wanted that? Isn't it always the same people and the same things, same conversations. Golf, drinks, repeat?"

"You have a point," Penny smiled.

William's description of life at a high-end country club was pretty on point, despite the fact that he probably didn't know what he was talking about firsthand. Then again, he'd been to Choate, so maybe some of his friends...

"What time is Peter expecting you?" William asked, interrupting Penny's thoughts.

"Oh, you're right!" She had been so busy staring into William's soulful brown eyes that she had become distracted. She checked her watch. "We should be there in just a few minutes. Good thing it's just down the street."

"Why don't I leave my car here and we go in yours? It's not every day I get to ride in a '57 Biarritz."

"Sure."

Not only did she have her notebook, her microphone, and some lighting equipment she'd borrowed in the car, but William might have been embarrassed by his own vehicle.

As they exited the coffee shop and headed towards the Cadillac, a beautifully restored Land Rover caught her eye.

“Will you look at that,” she sighed. “That’s my favorite car of all time.”

“Mine, too,” William smiled. “Yet another thing we have that in common.”

Penny smiled delightedly. He was going to keep looking for various things they had in common, he? It was fun to find those things. Not that she needed anything further to justify the attraction she felt towards him. However, she couldn’t let herself forget his behavior just a couple days prior.

Chapter 23

They arrived at the antiques store to find Peter more dapper than ever, in a blue and white seersucker suit and a pink and green bow tie. His hair was freshly washed and slicked back.

“You look adorable,” Penny exclaimed. “This is going to be so perfect. Thank you so much for being the star of the show today.”

“I see you brought an assistant,” Peter smiled. “Nice to see you again, William.”

“Good memory,” said Penny.

“Well, he's a memorable guy,” said Peter.

Was Peter flirting? She had to admit that no one could be immune to William. She guessed the old man still had it in him. He must have been quite the charmer, himself, in his time. And the stories told by Grandmama certainly supported that. Apparently, Peter had broken up more than one marriage, usually when the husband suddenly discovered that maybe he wasn't as hetero as he thought.

“That sort of thing actually happens?” Penny had asked, feeling very naive.

“Yes, it happens more than you think,” her grandmother had said, her lips suddenly forcing themselves into a straight line.

That was strange. Well, Grandmama had never been in a relationship that was very serious, as far as Penny knew, so it couldn't be something that had happened to her. But still, she seemed rather shaken. Penny had hurried to change the subject. Every time Peter had come over for dinner at Palazzo Leoni, Penny had hung on his every word, relishing the stories of his colorful youth. The flamboyant outfits he'd worn to scandalize Palm Beach society. How he'd carried on at parties. He was an expert raconteur, and she hoped to channel that in her video today.

“So, tell me, Penny, what kind of stories will be off limits?” Peter asked, faux-innocently. “Is YouTube G-rated, or can I say anything that comes to mind?”

“The more shocking, the better,” Penny smiled. “But try to keep it to at least something resembling the truth, okay?”

“Are you accusing me of lying? *Moi?*”

Penny cast a glance at William, who seemed absolutely charmed.

“I would never dare even imply that, Peter, but let's just say that, as a decorator, you're damn good at embellishing.”

“That’s fair,” Peter said, looking downright flattered.

“All right, so I was thinking that we could pick a few standout items from your shop, and you can ...”

“Oh, don't you worry darling. I'm way ahead of you,” said Peter. “I've already picked out a few of the items. I have pictures of some of the spaces I've decorated, and I've got some great gossip.”

“You're a gem,” said Penny. “If only anyone was like you, it would make my job so easy. My channel would be viral in no time.”

“Stick with me kid, you'll go far,” said Peter.

The filming went by in a blur. William was in fact super helpful, always there where she needed him with extra lights, moving things to make for a better tableau, making brilliant suggestions that Penny knew would make her shine on screen. Peter was made for video. He positively flirted with the camera, glowing as he spat out anecdotes and bon mots. He was hilarious. He should, in fact, have his own show, Penny thought. Recounting the old days colored his cheeks with the glow of youth.

She would add some of her commentary afterwards to round out the whole thing, but she was beyond thrilled with what she had on screen. She checked a few of the clips and nodded, satisfied.

“How is it?” Asked William.

She gave him a thumbs up. It was nice to have a sidekick, someone to help her with life. She'd gone through so much alone. She felt a bit guilty. Why wasn't she as able to live her life alone, like all of her strong women in her family had? Because damn, it felt good to have someone by your side. Almost for the first time, she wondered, who was her father? Who was her grandfather? These men had to have impacted her in some way. There had to be some genetic imprint, something that explained why she was different from these other women in her family, who were so independent.

“Are you all right?” William asked. “You look a little serious, all of a sudden.”

As she looked back into his eyes, she felt it again. That desire to dive right in. To have him hold her, and never let go. She was being silly. She barely knew him. He'd run hot and cold with her, and now that he was being adorable, she was going to forget it all and throw herself at him?

“Nothing, I was just thinking how fun it is that you're here helping me, and I'm already sad for next time, when I'll have to go it alone.”

"I'm having the best time," he replied. "I wish I didn't have to ever do anything else."

Hey lovebirds, the star is over here, said Peter, breaking the spell. "No, we're just, we're just friends, we barely know each other," Penny protested.

"Sweetheart," said Peter. "I've been around the block a few times, and I think I know love...or at least lust, when I see it."

"Penny, don't contradict your elders," said William. "God," he said in a dramatic aside to Peter, "I thought she told me she was an etiquette expert, and that's one of the major rules, isn't it?"

"How do you know I'm older?" Asked Peter, batting his eyelashes. "Anyway, you two get out of here. I'm sure you have better things to do than hanging out with an old man."

"Yes, I'm taking her to lunch," said William.

"As friends, right?" said Peter, giving an exaggerated wink. "I call BS."

"Any idea of where we should go that isn't so stuffy?"

"Well, I personally love a good IHOP. It's not fancy, but it sure hits the spot," said Peter. "Now shoo. Send me the video when you have it. I can forward it to all my exes."

Chapter 24

“What do you think?” asked William as they walked out the door.
“I don't know.”

“Ha! See? You're too fancy for IHOP.”

“No, it's just that I'm normally a waffle aficionada, and the last Waffle House I knew of in West Palm closed a while back.”

What she didn't mention was that the last time she'd frequented a Waffle House had been in high school. And it had happened once.

“They have waffles at IHOP now,” William

“Fine, let's do it,” said Penny. “But you'd better not be lying to me about the waffles.”

She couldn't believe it. Her, Penny Wells, going to an IHOP. Well, going to IHOP with the hottest guy she'd ever met. She supposed that balanced it out.

“Do you want us to pick up your car before we go?” Asked Penny. “In case you need to run after?”

“No, no, I'll grab it later,” said William. “My meeting's not until 6.”

They got back into her car, and she followed his directions to IHOP. When she noticed the iconic blue roof, and when they stepped inside and saw the decor and the clientele, Penny almost begged William to turn around and take her somewhere else. Her eyes darted around from the fluorescent lighting to the ancient linoleum, and she wrinkled her nose as she registered the smell of gristle in the air.

“Penny, I can see your face,” said William. “It's not too late to cry Uncle. You can just admit you're too fancy for IHOP, and I'll take you somewhere else.”

“No. I'm going to give it a chance. But if I hate it, you owe me,” she said. “By the way, this lunch is on me. This is one that I can afford.”

She felt guilty saying that. William had paid for a fancy meal, on a handyman's salary, and she, the trust fund baby, was paying for IHOP. But that was just the way this particular cookie crumbled, she decided. No justifying it.

“I guess it's useless to ask whether I can order wine here,” she smiled.

“Yeah, that's one thing you won't be getting, but maybe we have time before my meeting to go for a sundowner somewhere.”

Penny liked the thought of that. She let William guide her as they basically ordered basically one of everything. She smiled up at the waitress, a woman with the best table-side manner she'd seen in a long time.

“You know, William, you're right. I kind of love it here,” she smiled, as she tucked into a delicious waffle. “I've been a snobby bitch.”

“Snobby, maybe. Not a bitch,” he said. “Can I tell you how disappointed I am that I can't change my meeting and take you out to dinner tonight?” William smiled.

“I would have loved that, too,” Penny admitted.

“Can I take you out on a real date as soon as possible?” he asked. Of course, her heart was now beating hard in her chest. But she decided to tease him.

“What do you mean by real date? One where we make out?” She was already blushing as she said that, but William upped the ante.

“Exactly. I know that our first kiss being making out after a hot lunch date at IHOP is not the story you would want to tell our grandchildren, so either we wait until I take you out again, or we do it, and we don't tell them.”

“You're funny,” Penny said.

“Are you okay? You look flushed,” said William, looking deep into her eyes.

“I'm fine,” she smiled. “I should just let you know that I had a horrible accident in my youth and can't have children...”

William's face fell.

“Really?”

“Gotcha,” she laughed. “I'm just allergic.”

“Oh, I was, too. Another thing we have in common. They give me shots, now. It's no biggie. You'll see.”

Penny started giggling. He was absolutely crazy. They had that in common, too. Speaking of crazy, outside the palm trees were being tossed in what looked like gale force winds. The beautiful weather had turned, and now the sky was beyond ominous.

“We'd better ask for the check,” said William, “if we want to get back to your car before we get dumped on.”

So much for the sundowners, Penny thought regretfully. By the time they were walking to her car and just crossing the parking lot, the skies opened up.

William tried in vain to hold his jacket over her head, but the water gathered in it and splashed in her face.

“I think you just made it worse,” Penny laughed. He tried to shelter her with his arm, now, and she stumbled, bumping into him and instantly feeling the warmth of his arm and chest. She took in a deep breath. While making out in the parking lot of the IHOP didn't make a good story for grandkids, making out in a freak rainstorm was a little romantic, wasn't it? A smile played on the edges of her lips. She snuck a peek at William, whose eyes delved into hers.

“Are you thinking what I'm thinking?” He asked.

“I don't know what you're...”

Before she could finish the sentence, he pulled her to him, tilting up her chin and looking into her eyes. Her insides were quivering now.

“This is pretty romantic, right?” William asked. “Just erase the IHOP from your memory and...”

“Shut up and kiss me,” said Penny.

And then, he did, and it was everything she could have hoped for. Those proverbial fireworks? *Yes*. There they were, not even dampened by the downpour. The beating of her heart in her throat. The tingling in her whole body. There it was, complete with a very urgent throbbing between her legs. God, this man was hot. God, he was a good kisser. All of her fantasizing about him did not compare to this. He took her face in his hands to deepen the kiss, exploring her mouth with a tongue that still tasted of maple syrup. That was one positive point to the IHOP setting. She loved maple syrup, would love it even more now. She pressed herself against him, shivering. He came up for air.

“Are you cold?”

“No, I'm feeling hot,” she said.

“You sure are,” he responded, going back in for another kiss, running his hands down her neck, slipping them under her shirt. She shivered and ground herself against him.

“You are so sexy,” said William. “And I've been thinking about you ever since the first moment I met you.”

“You have?”

“How could I not? Look at you. Look how you feel against me. It's like you're tailor-made for me.”

Penny nodded, kissing him back. That was how she felt. What was going to happen with them? She would have to leave Palm Beach eventually, but after a single kiss, she already didn't want to be separated from him. It felt too good. She felt stupid. They hadn't known each other for more than a few days, and already she was intoxicated by him. Thinking about grandchildren with him. She was the polar opposite, she realized, of everything she'd been taught to be. Her grandmother would have been devastated. One kiss from this man, and she was reduced to dreaming about being a housewife for the rest of her days. Well, a housewife with a YouTube channel, she decided, and hopefully some good books under her belt. But William...William was all she needed. She didn't care if she lived in a tiny apartment for the rest of her life. And besides, who said that that was how it would work out? She could work. He was capable, more than capable. Maybe they would do something together. They were a good team. For the first time, she didn't see her life as something that would happen sometime in the future, somehow, once a mysterious set of circumstances had come about. She saw her life right now, with this man, who she was making out with in the rain with. And maybe, if she was lucky, if he had time before his meeting, the man she would make love with on a rainy afternoon.

"Come on, let me get you to the car," said William. "I'm sure your shoes and handbag are ruined."

"It was worth it," said Penny, smiling.

"Oh, I'm not saying it wasn't worth it," he said, "but let's get you inside and get you dried up. You'll catch cold."

He opened her door for her.

"You don't need to do that."

"Why not? Because I'll get even more soaked?" he smiled. "Come on, I'm not going to drop my manners just because there's a little bit of rain. However, I'm worried about the car seats."

"We used to get in this car straight from a swim all the time," said Penny. "That isn't gonna change just because it's possibly worth a bazillion dollars."

"I'll help you dry the seats at home."

"Sexy."

She sat behind the wheel, laughing as she felt the water droplets pouring down her forehead.

"Okay, let's go by and pick up your car, and then we'll reconvene at the apartment?"

“Sounds good,” said William.

They approached the Hive coffee shop, Penny driving carefully to avoid sinking into a massive puddle, her windshield wipers working overtime. She could barely see ten feet in front of her. “Where'd you park?” She asked. “Right in the parking lot,” he said. “But you know, I think I'm going to grab a coffee. To warm me up. Do you want one?”

“No, I'll be fine,” said Penny. “I'll see you back at the apartment.”

“Absolutely.” He leaned in and gave her one last delicious kiss, something to tide her over for the next few minutes. As she drove to the apartment, she imagined how she would get ready for him. She could brush her teeth, throw on a pretty dressing gown, maybe. Her friend Constance was in the habit of gifting her Italian silk dressing gowns, and she had packed one with her, not realizing that just such an occasion would come up. She would quickly remove the smudged mascara from under her eyes and apply a little bit of extra color to her cheeks. She should make sure the bed was made. She was still running through this checklist when her phone buzzed with an incoming call from William.

“Wait, you didn't beat me here, did you?”

“No, I'm so sorry to do this to you, but I have an emergency meeting. Listen, if I'm done before my evening meeting, can I call you? Maybe we can still see each other.”

“Sure,” said Penny, dejected.

She went back to the apartment and spent the next hour carefully drying the car seats. She couldn't be so cavalier about the car anymore, especially not if there was a chance she wasn't going to inherit as much as she'd assumed.

She kept busy editing videos, and then stayed up scrolling through social media, but William never called.

Chapter 25

The next day, Penny arrived at Ella's glittering office building, once again blown away by the level of success her friend had achieved at such a young age. She texted Ella and was given instructions to head up to the roof, where Ella would meet her directly. She set out their burgers and a bottle of wine and two glasses, as well as the plates and other utensils she had brought from the apartment. Just because they were having food from Tropical Smokehouse didn't mean she couldn't make it special and fancy. Ella was, after all, her best friend, and she deserved only the best. Penny picked a semi shaded spot with a sweeping view of Lake Worth. This would be perfect. Even the furniture on the rooftop was chic, quite possibly selected by her friend herself. Ella definitely knew what she did and did not like when it came to decor and design. Her tastes, of course, were diametrically opposed to Penny's. Penny, according to Ella, liked all things grandmotherly and antique, whereas Ella liked clean lines, noble materials, and minimalism.

As she waited for her friend, Penny allowed her thoughts to return to her favorite subject of late. William. She hadn't heard from him this morning, either. How could she orchestrate an accidental meeting between them? The door to the glass elevator swept open, and Ella appeared, clad in a stunning cream pantsuit.

"Wow," Penny exclaimed, when her friend had come within earshot. "Will you look at that boss babe? You certainly look the part."

"Well, I'm feeling like hammered shit," said Ella. "So, thank you for bringing this. Burgers make everything better."

"Oh no, what's up?"

"When I say I have the most difficult client on earth, I don't think you can imagine how bad it really is. Forget what I said about you dating that guy. He's impossible."

"I'm so sorry."

"By the way, how are things going with your mystery man? Have things progressed?"

"Well, if you'd asked me yesterday, said Penny, I would have said that things were going great. We made out in the rain. He took me to IHOP."

"You went to IHOP?" Ella looked incredulous. "Wow. You must really like him."

“I really do,” Penny admitted, “but he runs hot and cold. Worse than the faucets in that downstairs powder room at Palazzo Leoni.”

She took a bite of her burger. Delicious. Grandmama had always refused to go there, and she’d been silly to avoid it.

“Oh, yeah. I always thought that bathroom was haunted. Sorry. I interrupted you.”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand. Right when I think I’m getting somewhere with him, that I think our relationship’s going to grow, he pulls away. It’s infuriating.”

“Babe,” said Ella, “walk away. it’s not worth it.”

“I can’t. When I tell you he’s hot, I don’t think you understand how freaking hot he is. And he’s smart, and funny, and polite.”

“OK. I love that for you,” Ella conceded. “Can I meet him?”

“If I even see him again,” said Penny.

“We could do a simple barbecue at home...”

Ella was already in planning mode. She loved entertaining.

“What, invite him to your house? No way.”

“Oh. You think he’d be uncomfortable?”

“That’s not it, Ella. He’d probably be fine with that. I was thinking more about Sam questioning him. But you know, I have the feeling he probably would hold his own even with your husband.”

“Oh good, so it’s a plan, then,” said Ella, clapping her hands delightedly.

“Let’s see. Anyway, I don’t know when you’re gonna be free, and I don’t know when he’s gonna be free.”

“Well, in my case,” said Ella, “I’ll be free as soon as this asshole client stops making impossible demands.”

“He hasn’t mentioned anything further about the house, has he?” Penny asked.

“Nothing since the first time,” said Ella. “Anyway, now I don’t want to sell to him, so you and I are firmly on the same page.”

“That’s a relief,” said Penny.

“Back to your hot handyman, why don’t you call him, if you want to see him?” Ella asked.

“Me? Call him first? What do you think I am, some kind of psycho? I can tell you’ve been out of the dating game for far too long to be of any help, here.”

“Okay, why don't you text him, then? Isn't that the casual thing you kids are doing these days? Or slide into his DMs?”

“Ha! I doubt he's on social media. Anyway, I have my reasons for not wanting to be too direct. Remember what happened when I asked him out before? He straight up rejected me.”

“But that was before your hot IHOP date.”

“We didn't just go to IHOP. We also went to Bilboquet, the night before.”

“You took him to Bilboquet?” Asked Ella.

“No. He was the one who suggested it. And he treated. But it wasn't like a *date*, date, you know what I mean? Anyway, we had a fight, kind of.”

“What does that mean?”

“It felt, I don't know, it felt weird. Like, sometimes I feel like he's attracted to me as I am to him. And sometimes it's like he's trying to, I don't know, force himself not even to look at me, or he thinks I'm disgusting.”

“Honey, nobody who wants you so bad that they'll make out with you in the IHOP parking lot thinks you're disgusting, trust me.”

“Speaking of disgusting, did you get a message from Savannah and Missy?”

“The invitation to boozy tea at the Everglades club?”

“Yeah. I'm dreading it. At least we can laugh about it after.”

“Sorry, I can't make it.”

“What? You're the one who...never mind. I'll go. I probably need to not make enemies here. That's one lesson I learned- indirectly, mind you, from Grandmama.”

“God, that obituary of hers. I'm still laughing,” said Ella.

“Don't remind me. I'd rather talk about my hot handyman.”

“Just text him. If he's really avoiding you, or playing games, better you know it sooner rather than later, right?”

“I suppose,” said Penny.

The idea of William not wanting to see her was strangely devastating. Why was she so invested? After all, she, Penny Wells, did not do relationships. And a single make-out session in the rain, romantic as it might've been, was hardly something that one could base fantasies of grandchildren on.

“Why don't you just ask him how his day was? You said he had some meetings or something?” Said Ella.

“Yeah, he's funny. It's like I know that he's probably setting a rodent trap or fixing a leaky faucet, but he refers to it as *meetings*. He also said he's a real estate investor. He probably went in on an apartment with a couple of friends, or something.”

“Penny, you're sounding snobby,” Ella warned.

“I know, but honestly, I just think it's funny. I don't even care what he does or has, really. How could I? I mean, look at me, I'm pathetic.”

“Don't say that about yourself,” said Ella. “I think your grandmother just gave you some wrong-headed advice about how to live your life. I heard her doing it.”

“You never said...” said Penny.

“It would have made no difference, and you would have just gotten mad at me. You worshipped the ground she walked on.”

“I should have been smart enough to think for myself,” said Penny. “So anyway, should I really ask how his meetings went?”

“Yeah. And conclude with, ‘hopefully, we'll get to see each other soon.’ Something like that.”

“OK, but etiquette dictates that...”

“Girl, this is the 21st century. You're a modern woman. You're just asking him how he's doing. It's not like you're asking him to take his clothes off.”

Just the idea of William taking his clothes off had Penny start to get hot and bothered.

“Oh my God, you're imagining him naked, aren't you?” Said Ella, clapping her hands delightedly.

“If only you could see him.”

“When you do talk to him, invite him to dinner at my house. If not for yourself, do it for a poor married woman who's not seen fresh meat for years, now.”

“Ha, Sam is gorgeous, and you know it,” said Penny. “And anyway, you don't know when you have your next free evening. You better not cancel on me for birthday brunch, either.”

They had finally settled on a date between their two birthdays.

“I would never. That is blocked out in my calendar, carved in stone, difficult clients be damned,” said Ella. “Part of being my own boss is that I can, once in a while, say no. Our birthdays are sacred. And you better not ditch me if Hot Handyman decides to call you up and invite you out for a hot dog or something.”

“As if,” said Penny.

“Okay,” said Ella, “I better go back to work. It's been crazy around here. I'm hoping things will settle down soon. Keep me posted.”

“I will,” said Penny.

“Did you even send that text message off?” asked Ella.

“No,” Penny admitted.

“Do it. Do it now while I'm watching,” said Ella.

“You're so bossy.”

“I'm three days older. I'm allowed to be,” said Ella.

“Fine.”

Penny tapped out a message, showed it to Ella. Ella nodded. Penny hit the send button.

“There,” she said, a pinching in her heart. “It's done.”

The girls said their goodbyes and Penny pensively made her way back to the car.

Of course, the thing about having sent the message was that before, the idea of texting her could have simply slipped William's mind. But now, if he didn't text her, he was willfully ignoring her. Modern people didn't not look at their phone for hours on end. Unless William had drowned in a leaky toilet, or electrocuted himself while changing a lightbulb, there was no real excuse for not answering within the hour. She tried to send him some psychic message to write her back. And oddly enough, within five minutes of that desperate ploy, her phone pinged. She pulled the car over to check the message.

William: Things have been chaotic. I'm just coming back up for air. I don't know if I'd be good company to you tonight.

Penny: I never asked you what you were doing tonight. So, you don't need to preemptively turn me down.

Great. She was getting weird, cold William again. She didn't need this. She saw the series of dots flashing on her screen that indicated that William was typing, and then it stopped, and then more dots, and it stopped. Was he hesitating on what he should respond? Or was he trying to text while driving?

William: *No, I'm glad you texted. I wanted to see you. Why don't we just do something low key?*

Penny stared at the screen. Low key? What was he trying to say? No making out? Well, if he wanted to forget that episode, she could try to do that, too. Even though she knew it wouldn't work. She should just say no to this half-assed invitation of his, but of course her traitorous fingers sent off a response of their own.

Penny: *Sure. What were you thinking?*

William: *How about the Honor Bar at Royal Poinciana?*

Penny had never been, but she'd heard good things. Not from Grandmama, of course, who had called the place a *nouveau riche Californian Gen X outpost*.

Penny: *OK, time? Are you picking me up or?*

More dots as Penny waited for the response.

William: *Let's just meet there. 6?*

Why did she feel like he was trying to minimize the amount of time he spent with her? Why spend time with her at all, or was it just because a man had to eat, and he'd rather be with someone than alone? She understood that; she was kind of feeling the same way, at this point. She shouldn't get excited about this evening, clearly. He'd agreed to it without great enthusiasm. But a girl needed to eat too, and she was happy to have a plan to get out of the apartment. Also, she hadn't had a chance to explore the latest developments at the Royal Poinciana, so she decided to give herself time before dinner to explore the shops. Not that she could afford anything in them, but it would be a diversion.

After getting back to the apartment, she spent the rest of the afternoon editing videos. The Peter Palin episode was almost ready to post on YouTube already. Would it meet with a good reception? Would people like it? Or was she missing the mark? She allowed herself to fantasize on

what would happen if these videos met with some success. Would it change her life somehow? Give her professional opportunities? Would it help her to have more time to write her books? Of course, she technically had ample time as it was, she could be writing her book, but she wasn't doing it, for some reason. She knew the resistance just boiled down to plain old fear and laziness, but she could make excuses with the best of them.

As evening approached, she surveyed her closet and realized that the things she had brought from New York did not really reflect how she wanted to dress for William. She wouldn't make any moves on him, but she could try to make him sorry that he wasn't making any on her.

Chapter 26

Ella had cleared a small hall closet for Penny, but Penny had noticed that the other closets were stuffed full of Grandmama's extensive clothing collection. Her grandmother had been much smaller than Penny, but some of her stretchier knit ensembles- the Missoni, the St. John, the Chanel, well, they might look interesting on Penny, though certainly not in a way that Grandmama would have approved of. Grandmama tended to drown her figure in her clothes, as did Penny, now that she thought about it. Maybe trying a different style would get William to make up his mind whether he liked her or not. She hated that she was trying so hard for a guy- he should like her for her, but she was considering a possible fling with him as a form of self-care in a difficult time. Much as she thought she liked everything about him, she was seeing that there was no point in hoping for something more long-term with someone so mercurial.

Penny opened the door of the closet in the bigger bedroom and started going through the hangers, inhaling deeply, smelling Grandmama's perfume, holding back the threatening tears. She missed her grandmother so very much. Ella had been right; she did think Grandmama walked on water. Wearing her clothes would make her feel closer to her. Hopefully, she would find something that worked. After a moment, she selected something that could be appropriate: a woven Missoni dress. On Grandmama, it would have been long. On Penny, it would be calf length. The dress was not low-cut, of course, but it had no sleeves- Grandmama had been proud of her arms, which had remained shapely into advanced old age. Hopefully, Penny had inherited that trait. Unlike most of the Palm Beach ladies, who grew speckled and freckled and leathered, Grandmama had had no sun damage on her skin, on account of having protected herself her whole life. She'd been religious about it, and if anyone was a testament to the power of sunscreen, it was certainly Grandmama. Penny remembered Grandmama wearing this dress. It looked so elegant. The way it draped on her birdlike figure, the flame stitching dancing.

Well, here goes nothing. She slipped on the dress. At first, she thought to herself, *oh no, this will never do.* The garment was a bit tight. In fact, very tight. Not something she would have ever worn. But, as she considered herself in the mirror, she thought to herself, *well, why not?* Instead of falling nearly to the floor, as it had on her grandmother, the dress highlighted

Penny's every curve, coming down to a flattering length just below her knee. With the right pair of shoes, it could look positively modern. And in fact, since this was to be such a low-key dinner, Penny decided that she would be comfortable and wear flats. Grandmama had gifted her a pair of flat leather sandals from Europe, from a long ago trip they had taken together, and Penny had chosen to pack them at the last minute. But then, she changed her mind and slipped on some almost as comfortable, still casual, but a little sexier, buff-colored Jack Rogers sandals.

Now, she examined her hair, wondering what could possibly be done. The humidity had wreaked its havoc. The modicum of control she managed to have over her locks in New York was not applicable here. In the bathroom, she found a bottle of styling pomade from Kiehl's that Grandmama must have used. It could be a fun look, thought Penny, to lean into the volume. She could smooth and pin her hair in the front, do a deep side part, and then let the rest of it go wild in back, creating a golden halo. When she was done, she surveyed the result. Not too bad. She wondered why she hadn't worn her hair like this before. But then, the answer came to her. Grandmama had said some very rude things when Penny hadn't carefully smoothed her locks. When Penny had told Ella, Ella had shaken her head and had refused to come to Palazzo Leoni for at least a month, until Uncle Lawrence had begged her to forgive Grandmama for her old-fashioned attitudes.

"She's not old fashioned," Ella had said. "She's a racist."

"You don't understand," Lawrence had replied, but it was hard to explain away such an attitude.

Penny squeezed her eyes shut. Why hadn't she remembered this? She must have blocked it out. It was funny how wearing Grandmama's clothes seemed to have brought forth that memory, one so different from the other gilded ones, the fantasies of swaying palms and idealized life at Palazzo Leoni. Maybe there really was rot at the center of the house, and at the center of her memories. And just then, she realized: she had forgotten to ask Ella for the keys, yet again.

No time like the present. She didn't want to disturb her friend with a call, especially during what she knew was a particularly stressful week, but she tapped out a message to her.

Penny: *Honey, I had so much fun with you at lunch.*

Ella: *Same. Did he write back?*

Penny: *Yes- we're going to dinner- as friends, I think.*

Ella: *Ugh. Sorry. But at least now you know. And who knows what will happen at dinner? You might seduce him.*

Penny: *Ha. By the way, I forgot to ask you for the keys to the palazzo.*

Ella: *Oops. Let's try to get them to you as soon as possible.*

Penny: *No hurry.*

But there was a hurry. She wanted to get into the palazzo, even if she did feel a strange sort of resistance, as the same time. Going in without Grandmama there, without all the furniture in its rightful place, without many of the photographs. Would it feel empty? Would it feel haunted? Would it feel wrong? Would it awaken other memories? Memories she didn't want? But she couldn't think about that right now.

She took one last look in the mirror and slicked on some lipstick. She smiled as she thought of her friend Constance, who wore lipstick as an armor of sorts to prevent her hot Italian ex, Lorenzo, from kissing her as they rekindled their relationship. They were married, now, with two children and another on the way.

Did Penny really not want children? Had she been lying to herself about that as well? Her banter with William about grandkids had been in jest, but it had made her positively giddy. She snapped her lipstick shut, as if closing the door on such thoughts. She selected one of Grandmama's wicker handbags, transferred her things to it, and let herself out the door.

The Royal Poinciana had become considerably fancier since the last time Penny had been there. They now had valet parking, which she found a bit ridiculous, and oddly enough, the parking was not free. *If you're going to be having people park somewhere to spend money there, the valet should be free*, thought Penny. Or was that a ridiculous expectation? She pulled into the parking lot and purposely bypassed the valet parking guy, a floppy-haired golden retriever of a boy wearing a polo shirt and a blinding smile. She

surveyed all the cars lined up in the parking, glistening in the waning sunshine. Every luxury automobile brand was represented, but oddly enough, her car was possibly the most valuable. Checking in her side view mirror, she noted that the valet parking boy was running after her. The golden retriever resemblance was even more striking now. When he pulled up to her open window, Penny looked at him, exasperated.

“Yes?”

“Valet parking is over there, miss,” he said.

He was polite, at least.

“Oh, I’m looking for self-parking,” said Penny, innocently.

“Oh.” His face fell. “Well, the self-parking is over there.” He designated a nebulous spot across the street.

“Really,” said Penny. “This whole parking lot is valet?”

The boy shrugged uneasily.

Good thing she'd come a bit early. This was ridiculous, emblematic of the new Palm Beach. In the olden days, this never would have been a thing. But of course, in the olden days, people had their drivers driving them around. Even Grandmama, once she'd gotten rid of the official driver, had Lawrence running her around town on errands. Though, to be fair, it felt like he usually did it on his own schedule.

Penny found a spot two blocks down, on the street, and carefully locked the old Cadillac, hoping it would be okay. Then again, if it couldn't be safe on Palm Beach Island, where could it be safe? She found herself wishing she'd worn the flat sandals, after all. The dress felt awkwardly tight as she self-consciously wiggled her way down the sidewalk towards the shopping area. She winced as she heard a cat call. *How rude*. In her normal get-ups, no one would disrespect her so. But she also felt freer, more herself, more edgy, more fun, in this outfit, and also was thrilled that she had made one of Grandmama's things her own. Hopefully, she would be able to do that with Palazzo Leoni as well, after all. Maybe there was a way to take this old crumbling house and make it into something that would have value. A community center, a gallery, a museum, something. But the sheer funds needed to maintain such a place still boggled the mind. Someone like Ella might know how to make it work, but if Ella seemed doubtful that it was realistic, what chance did she, Penny Wells, have? As she walked past the valet parking boy, she saw him mouth *sorry*. She ignored it and walked into the main shopping area. In the center, there were fabulous fountains, and on

either side, glittering boutiques, most of them selling pricey caftans, shoes, and swimwear. *Forget the clothing stores*, she would go look at the bookstore, where large, colorful picture books were lined up like precious artworks. She spent some time leafing through, admiring the beautiful photography, letting it inspire possible future visuals for her YouTube videos. It would be fun to work on books like these. She could see herself compiling one on Palm Beach, for example. But then, as she looked, she saw that it had already been done, by Aerin Lauder, no less. She had to admit she couldn't have done it better herself. Still, this book would make wonderful research for her novel. She looked to the salesman, who had been discreetly hovering around her, ready, should any question arise. He looked thrilled to have her employ him at last.

“Your books are so beautiful! How much is this one?”

“Fabulous, isn't it?”

“Yes, lovely. So, how much?”

She was starting to be afraid that it was one of those *if you have to ask* situations, and she was correct.

“250.”

“Oh, wow.”

“Would you like to buy it?”

“Maybe later,” she replied, breezily. “Right now, I'm going to dinner, so I don't want to have to carry it around.”

“Alright. We close at seven,” he warned.

“Thanks for letting me know. If I miss you, I'll come back,” she lied.

She checked her watch. How late was it? There were still 15 minutes left before the appointed meeting time. Time to go wander through another shop or two, or maybe she would just sit at one of the tables that dotted the grassy courtyard. Just then, she saw William, heading into a shop that sold bathing suits for men. *Huh, not so busy then, is he?* She thought to herself. She decided not to go ambush him or risk running into him, because then, he would probably be forced to lie about what he'd been getting up to all day. She would go have a drink at the bar of the Honor Bar instead, providing the name of the establishment wasn't misleading. She hoped the place wasn't too overpriced. Low-key meant they were clearly going Dutch. Even this place, which he'd mentioned as casual, seemed highbrow. Pricey, for sure. She wished he'd invited her someplace else. Too bad, a drink was what she needed, and well, she would just have to budget elsewhere, wouldn't she?

She walked into the dim space and right past the hostess stand. Oh, she could check if they had a reservation.

“Hi, I'm wondering if you have a reservation for...”

“We don't take reservations,” said the hostess, a pretty young woman in a sleek bun and primly buttoned black uniform shirt, “but you can put in your name on the waiting list.”

If he was running early, perhaps Michael had preemptively put their name on the list. She looked through the space. It was already buzzing, full of typical Palm Beach denizens sitting at white tablecloth-covered tables.

“Oh, well, maybe I should check if my friend put in our name already.”

“What would the name be?”

“Ah, William...”

Penny realized she didn't know William's last name.

“Oh, William! Yes, he called earlier,” said the young girl, smiling. “As soon as he arrives, you can be seated.”

So, there were exceptions to the no reservations rule. Interesting. William had clearly operated his charm on this one, as well. Maybe he was even dating her. She could see that they might make a good couple. The girl was a bit young for him, but wasn't that what most men liked? She stood up straighter, sucked in her stomach, and headed to the bar.

She'd just put in a request for a glass of bubbly when William came through the door. There was almost an audible hush in the space as many of the diners turned to look at him. Yes, he was looking rather spectacular in his navy blazer, white trousers, and white linen shirt, his chestnut hair curled just so. His chocolate eyes swept the space, widening as they alighted on Penny, standing at the bar.

Chapter 27

As he came up to her, William groaned. “Why did you have to wear that dress?” Penny looked down, self-consciously. She thought she'd looked pretty great, but he seemed completely disgusted by it, or perhaps experiencing some other mix of emotions she couldn't quite place.

“You don't like it?” she asked. “It belonged to my grandmother. Do you think it's too old-fashioned?”

“Your grandmother went out in that?” he laughed.

“What do you mean?”

“Isn't it a little bit...”

Now Penny was getting annoyed.

“A little bit what? She asked. “Avant-garde? I'll have you know that my grandmother started wearing Missoni before anyone wore Missoni, back when only Europeans even knew what it was, and it was very fashion forward and kind of artsy, I guess. But still classic.”

“That's not what I would call it,” said William.

“Well, I know it's a little colorful, and the pattern is a little bit out there, but I've seen much worse in Palm Beach. And now, you're being rude.”

“No. I didn't mean to be. I just didn't realize your grandmother wore ensembles that were so...form-fitting.”

“Well, it wasn't formfitting on her,” Penny admitted. I'm about a foot taller than she was and definitely a lot...”

“Curvier,” said William.

“There's nothing I can do about that. I don't think I look obscene or anything. I mean, for a minute there, I actually thought I was looking pretty good.”

“I think you look...” his voice trailed off. “I need a drink.”

Penny stood there, blushing, mortified, not knowing what to do. Maybe she should just go back to the apartment. Being alone was better than this. Even if he found her outfit distasteful, he should have been more polite. Why the hot and cold? Why the attraction and repulsion? Was it a game? Was he trying to get her hooked on him? Because, much as she hated it, it was working. Or maybe it wasn't a game. Maybe he was attracted to her in general, but didn't like her style, and didn't like her as a person. He definitely thought she was a spoiled brat. Maybe he actually had principles and didn't

want to get involved with anyone he couldn't see a future with. Well, screw him. She was hungry, so she would have dinner. But she would mess with him, to entertain herself. At least, when he ultimately rejected her, she could lie to herself and say she'd purposely pushed him away.

"So, I think what you were trying to say is, you think I look damn sexy. And you're shocked I had a drop-dead sexy grandma, too." She smiled, batting her eyelashes and arching her back, making her breasts point in his direction. She was pleased that his eyes went straight there. *Ha.* "Your mouth may be saying that you don't like what I'm wearing, but your eyes are saying something different."

He moved closer to her, and whispered, urgently.

"Stop. Don't say another thing until we sit down, please," he said. "People are going to talk."

"Nobody can hear what we're saying," said Penny, rolling her eyes. "And anyway, there would be nothing wrong with you thinking I look sexy. Don't worry, I know you don't, actually."

William took her arm and looked at her intently.

"They may not hear what we're saying. But they can sure as hell see how I'm reacting." He looked down. She looked down, too, following his gaze. *Oh.* The huge bulge in his trousers was indeed unseemly.

"I see. You're right. People might talk." She smiled. Good. So at least some part of him wanted her. "But you're lucky," she continued, making light of it, "in this town, people will just think you're carrying a very large wallet in your front pocket."

"Very funny," said William. "I'm going to the men's room."

"What are you going to do in there?" She asked, sweetly.

"None of your business," he responded.

She sat at the bar alone, nursing her Prosecco, imagining what William was doing in the bathroom. Probably reading the tax code on his phone, waiting for his erection to go down. When he came back, she gave him a look.

"That was fast. I hope you didn't do what I think you went to do."

"What are you thinking, Penny?" he asked. "I just went and readjusted myself."

Now, she decided to play dirty.

"Oh good, because, I mean, if there was a blue balls situation, I'd like to watch you take care of it," she said, an innocent expression on her face.

William choked on the sip of water he was taking.

“Did you just say what I...”

“I mean, if you don't want to touch me, I would gladly watch you touch yourself,” she said, boldly. Now she was going too far, she knew, but she couldn't stop. She didn't know where this was coming from but knowing that William didn't really want anything to do with her gave her the freedom to say whatever she liked. It was fun to be shocking. This was something that Grandmama had always enjoyed, herself. Maybe not in the same register, of course, but her obituary proved that she certainly relished shock value.

“Don't talk like that to me if you don't mean it,” William whispered.

“Why not?”

“You know damn well. Can we not talk about this right now?”

“I'm shocked to be having this effect on you. I've come to the conclusion that you're not particularly interested. When you run into me, you only seem to ask me out of pity or something, but otherwise, you're working so hard to avoid me.”

“Listen,” he said, facing her. “I know you're probably wondering why I'm running hot and cold. Believe me, I'm so attracted to you. I want you. I have since I first saw you. But I just don't think it's appropriate.”

“Not appropriate?” Penny asked.

“There's too much proximity,” he explained.

Oh, so it was inappropriate that he'd carry on with her, being a handyman in her building. Maybe there were HOA rules against such things? She certainly didn't want to be responsible for making him lose his job.

“Okay. I get it, but how would anyone know?” She asked.

“I would know,” he responded, looking serious. “Tell me this, Penny. What would you do, if you could have me, if we just went for it? And don't talk about anything physical. I mean everything else.”

She considered this. It was a fair enough question. And she would endeavor to answer truthfully.

“Can you elaborate?” She asked.

“Well, would you want a serious relationship with me? Would you want a family with me? Children?”

She hesitated.

“You've told me about your family history. So, you probably don't want kids,” he said.

“Probably not,” she responded, her certitude lessening with every moment.

If she could have kids with William- kids with those hot cocoa eyes, that crooked smile, his chestnut locks, they would be so cute.

“I’m looking for a serious relationship,” said William, “and, well, I’m not willing to compromise. And there are complexities in our being together. It’s not really appropriate. So, if you’re just looking for something casual, as attracted as I am to you, it’s not worth it to me.”

Penny’s mind was racing, as was her heart. So, basically, if she told him she was serious about him, he might risk losing his job, find something else, to make the relationship work? It sounded so tempting, but the responsibility was weighing on her. They barely knew each other. What if she tried, and found she was incapable of having a long-term relationship? What if they ended up not getting along, and he’d lost a cushy situation for a mistake?

“Come, I think our table’s ready,” said William.

Once they were seated, They perused the menu in silence. She eventually looked back up to him. Those eyes. She threw caution to the wind.

“I mean... William, what if I were to tell you that I could try? Something about us feel so right and...I could certainly try. I can’t promise anything. I’ve never had a long-term relationship, but I like you. I really do. And you’re not the kind of guy I normally go for. I get that. And maybe I’m not the type of girl you normally go for...”

William shrugged.

“If I started something with you, I would never want to let you go,” he said, simply.

Her heart leapt. Just hearing that was everything she’d wanted to hear, and she hadn’t even known it.

“But you say it’s not appropriate,” she said. “If we got caught?”

“It’s not that,” said William.

“Hear me out- what if we acted perfectly appropriate out in public and just got to know each other behind closed doors?”

“That’s not sustainable,” he said.

“Just for now,” she responded.

“It’s not just that. I’m afraid of hurting you. I never want to do that.”

“How could you hurt me?” she asked.

“There are so many ways.”

“Why, are you a crappy boyfriend?”

“I didn’t say that. There’s just... There’s a lot. I just...can we just have a nice time today? Just get to know each other?”

“Yes, of course,” said Penny.

“Before we start talking about more acceptable topics, I’m glad we’re sitting now,” he remarked. “You have the perfect hip to waist ratio.”

“Oh, you’re a scientist, huh? What did you study in school?”

“Engineering.”

“Oh wow, I knew you were smart, but I hadn’t pegged you for a brainiac.”

She didn’t want to insult him by telling him that she thought his mind was underutilized by what he was doing now. After all, she had a master’s degree in history, and look at what she was doing.

“What did you study?” he asked.

“In case you couldn’t guess, history- I have a master’s degree. I almost went for my PhD, but, well, I wanted to start my real life, and well, that never really happened.”

“What do you mean?”

She decided to be brutally honest. What would it change?

“I’ve been struggling for my whole life, trying to find something meaningful, you know, something that’ll sustain me.”

“You seem super excited about your videos, and you’re such a good storyteller. So, I’m sure your book is going to be amazing, when you write it. You didn’t tell me- what’s it going to be about?”

“Oh, just some historical thing about a house,” said Penny. She didn’t want to think about the house right now. She was supposed to be having fun. “So...you were talking about kids. Do you want kids?”

“Yes,” William said. “At least two, maybe more. I was an only child. So, I feel like I missed out, you know?”

“I know what that’s like. But I have my best friend. She’s like a sister.”

“You’re lucky. I feel like I have a lot of love to give. And, I’d love to have some little friends running around, you know? Show them the world. Teach them things...”

“I can see you being really good at that,” Penny smiled.

“And so, you, you were saying you didn’t want kids, huh? Really? Because I feel like you would be a good mom.”

“Honestly, I sometimes feel like I say that as a reaction, or to get a reaction out of people. But it’s funny, but when I used to say that to Grandmama, she

was actually surprisingly fine with it, she encouraged it even, so it kind of made me feel like that was the right decision.”

“I can see how that would happen. What about your mom?” asked William.

“I never knew her. She left when I was little. I don't know why, some argument, I think, between her and my grandmother. My grandmother said I'm better off without her. And now, maybe I'm starting to question that. Who just abandons her child? Unless there's really a lot of bad parenting in my genes, and maybe there is. Sorry. I'm rambling.”

“I'm so sorry,” said William.

“Don't be. I don't know anything different,” said Penny. “I'm just...I just have no model to know how I would be as a parent. And also, I never met the right person. So, it didn't even come up.”

“What if you did meet the right person? What are you looking for in a man?”

“Honestly, I've barely ever thought of that,” Penny smiled, wryly. “You're going to think this is horrible, but I usually went on the basis of looks and, you know, some kind of swagger, some energy. In general, I tend to go for artists. But then, every time, I find out that they're secretly some kind of businessman, then, I feel like I'm out of my league, and it all falls apart.”

“Oh.”

“And with you,” Penny continued, “it's embarrassing, but I'm going to tell you, because I have nothing to lose, but when I first met you, I don't know, I had a feeling about you.”

“Why is it embarrassing?” William asked.

“I don't know...because you don't feel the same?”

“I do feel the same,” he said.

“Then why do you think it's such a bad idea, us being together? I don't understand.”

“I don't want to talk about it right now,” he said. “Can we just have a good time?”

“Okay, Mr. Mysterious. Maybe once you've spent more time with me, you'll change your mind,” she teased.

“I know I would,” he said. “That's why I'm holding back.”

“I don't understand,” said Penny.

“You don't need to understand. Not now. Here,” he held up the menu. “What should we drink?”

Chapter 28

The rest of the evening flew by.

He walked her back to her car, conducting himself as a perfect gentleman, unfortunately.

“I’ll meet you in the garage and walk you to your door,” he promised.

He hadn’t kissed her yet, so on her whole drive back, she wondered whether it would happen.

Sure enough, he met her in the parking garage, accompanied her on the elevator, and at her door, leaned in and gave her the kind of kiss that confirmed that the hot and heavy make out session two days prior had not been just a fluke. There was some incredible chemistry between them. If looking in his eyes made her want to take her clothes off, kissing him made her feel like rubbing herself against him and having him fill every inch of her. It made her feel like she couldn’t get close enough to him, and like she just needed to melt into him. She moaned as he nipped at her lips, and ground against her, so she could feel how excited she was making him.

“Come on,” she said. “You don’t want to get caught. Why don’t you come inside?”

“Not tonight. I’ve got some work to do.”

“Oh.”

There he was, running hot and cold again.

“Don’t look at me like that. I don’t want to rush things. I want it to be special, when it finally happens. And it will, if you’ll have me.”

“Alright,” she said. This was atypical behavior, for most men. But she supposed he was, after all, a gentleman. She’d noticed all the little gestures he made. The opening of the doors, the pulling out of the chair. The way he walked her back to her car.

“Believe me, I just can’t stay away from you,” he said.

“The feeling’s mutual. Why not give in to it?”

He didn’t respond, just kissed her more deeply, and then pulled back, staring into her eyes.

“You’re so beautiful. Can I see you tomorrow?”

“If you actually keep your promises this time. I waited for you the other day...”

He squeezed his eyes closed for a moment.

“I know. I was having an argument with myself.”

“I don't think it's that complicated,” Penny said. “I'm certainly not going to hurt you. But why do I have the feeling that you might hurt me? I don't give my heart away easily, so don't you stomp all over it.”

“That's what I don't want to happen,” he said.

“Are you really that much of a bad boy? You don't strike me as one,” she considered. “Well, we shall see,” she said, lightly, much more lightly than she felt.

“Good night,” he said, giving her one more kiss that left her feeling shaky.

Once he had gone, she closed the door and leaned against it, reflecting on the evening. That last statement bothered her a bit, but, after their initial argument, all of the other parts of the evening had been so delicious, as she replayed them in her head, that she didn't want to think about the little negatives that niggled at her, in the midst of what was otherwise a dreamy night out. She was really falling for him, wasn't she?

She texted Ella.

Penny: *I think I'm a goner.*

Ella: *Hot date with the handyman?*

Penny: *I think I might give a real relationship a try.*

Ella: *Whoever took Penny's phone, you're in big trouble.*

Penny: *Ha ha. You've got to meet this guy.*

Ella: *I can't wait. Ugh, the kids are going nuts. I've got to go. I'll try to figure out a date for our BBQ ASAP. Tomorrow might even work.*

Penny: *LMK. Good night. Kiss the kids for me. I miss them.*

Ella: *They're asking for you constantly.*

Penny: *Oh, by the way- keys?*

Ella: *Why don't you pick them up when we have you over for dinner? Hopefully tomorrow. Just let me double check my calendar when I get into the office.*

Penny: *I hope that your nightmare client doesn't try to pull some other crap on you.*

Ella: *I think I've got him in a holding pattern.*

Penny: *Good. Sweet dreams.*

Now, Penny thought about William, wondered what he was doing right now. Had he gone straight back to his apartment? Was he was thinking of her? If so, was he was pleasuring himself?

And just as she thought it, her phone pinged.

William: *I'm not doing what you think I'm doing.*

Penny: *What? Do you have a surveillance camera in my head?*

William: *I wish. But anyway, I thought of doing it. But I'm not. I'm saving it for you. See you tomorrow?*

Penny: *Time?*

William: *I think I have a reasonably light day. So, we'll figure it out in the morning?*

Penny: *OK*

She fell asleep with a smile on her face.

Chapter 29

Penny rubbed her eyes and massaged the back of her neck. Editing the videos she created for her YouTube channel was normally one of her favorite tasks. She could take rough footage and mold it into a story that her viewers could appreciate as she unveiled certain themes. She'd found she was pretty good at it, if she did say so herself. She'd learned to tease information, only revealing it at the most crucial, most devastating moment. In fact, that was why she had thought she'd be such a shoo-in for the TV show where she'd applied. The stinging rejection felt like a lifetime ago. So many things had changed, and now she didn't even know whether she would ever return to her life in New York. And these videos felt like maybe they were taking her towards a future of some kind. It was a future that was still too nebulous for her to see the outlines of it clearly. But a nebulous plan was better than no plan at all. When the hell would this trust lawyer finally get back from his vacation? It seemed irresponsible to leave people high and dry like this. Granted, most people were probably not as financially strapped as Penny was. But nevertheless, wasn't it his job to help trustees?

She needed a break, something to look forward to. It was still morning, just barely, so she was hoping William would keep his promise and reach out. Maybe she would step outside, and he would magically appear, as he seemed to do more often than not. The thought of this made her smile. Just as she was thinking it, she heard her phone ping. Oh, maybe it was William. They did seem to be completely on the same wavelength, already seemed to have a kind of unspoken communication between them. Maybe the simple fact of thinking of him had summoned him. She checked her phone.

Ella: Hey- Dinner tonight is a go! Sam and I are thinking of barbecuing. It's so beautiful out. Shrimp? Corn? Potatoes? Bring your hot handyman if you want.

Penny: Is Sam going to cross examine him?

Ella: He promises he'll be good. We both just want to meet this guy you're so obsessed with.

Penny: Ill ask him. If he texts me this morning like he's supposed to.

Ella: Eek. Seems like a pattern. See you 6:30 pm, with or without him.

Penny held her phone, looking out the window at the blue sky and the swaying palms, wondering how she would invite William without making it sound too serious. Not that she hadn't let him know exactly how she felt about him. And he had reciprocated, hadn't he? Well, kind of.

Chapter 30

Her phone pinged again, and this time, yes, it was William.

H William: *Gorgeous day. Fancy a picnic? On the beach? I need a break.*

Penny: *Me too. And that sounds lovely, but actually I was going to invite you to dinner. My friend's having a little barbecue. She's dying to meet you.*

William: *Sure. Sounds good. Can't we do both? We can discuss it on the beach.*

Penny smiled. Two plans in one day? With anybody else, she would have felt that that was too much, but with him, it just made her feel excited.

Penny: *Great, should I meet you downstairs?*

William: *Yes, give me half an hour.*

There was a perfectly serviceable beach just down the street, with a little picnic area. It was not really someplace where one would go swimming, or they could drive someplace. Penny packed her keys, just in case. She'd noticed that William seemed embarrassed about letting her know which car he drove, and she certainly wasn't going to make him feel bad.

She spent the next few minutes considering what she would wear. When she'd packed for Palm Beach, she had brought one bathing suit, a nautical blue and white striped one-piece bought for her by Grandmama, not thinking she would be hanging out on the beach much, and certainly not with someone like William. She quickly threw herself into the shower and shaved. She hadn't had the time or the money to go to the waxer before coming here, so this would have to do. After the shower, she tried on her bathing suit in front of the mirror. Lucky for her, she didn't look too washed out, thanks to her naturally olive skin, so unlike Grandmama's. She wondered again; did she look like her mother? She had no way of knowing. Grandmama had stricken all traces of Violet from her home, and from her life. Penny had always thought that Grandmama had done so to protect her, but now she

wasn't so sure. If only she could have asked her grandmother if she had any pictures, where they were hidden, or if she'd thrown them out. After all, she had the right to have some traces of her biological mother, did she not?

No use thinking about that now. Maybe she would find something in the Palazzo, once she got the keys tonight. She quickly moisturized her limbs, hoping that William wouldn't be too judgmental about the fact that she hadn't been going to the gym this year, and then selected a navy sundress with white piping and a white sarong, and located some beach towels inside the linen closet. She checked her watch. Time to meet William downstairs.

When she arrived, he was already in the lobby. He broke into a wide grin as he saw her.

"I love a girl in a sundress," he said.

"Oh?" Penny asked.

"I love you in a sundress, specifically," said William. "Do you have a favorite beach? You don't mind if you..."

"If I drive?" Penny asked. "Of course not. I love to drive my grandmother's car, while I still can."

"While you still can?" Asked William.

She realized she hadn't told him why she was in town, that her grandmother had died, and now she knew that she wanted to keep it that way. She didn't want to make their time together heavy, tied up in all of that. So, she ignored his question.

"Why don't we drive to Phipps Park? The beach there is usually pretty empty, and parking is easy."

"Great," said William. He lifted up a cooler. "I packed us a little picnic. It's nothing fancy."

"Any picnic is pretty fancy to me," said Penny, smiling. "I brought one to my friend the other day- the one you get to meet tonight- and it was just burgers, but still special."

"That's sweet. She's lucky to have you."

"And I'm lucky you packed a picnic. I'm starving."

As if on cue, her stomach growled, and they laughed.

A quarter hour later, they were on the beach. Penny spread out both beach towels on the sand.

"These are classic," William remarked, smiling.

"They belonged to my grandmother," said Penny. "I like them. They remind me of my childhood. Do you know she had this little wicker chaise

that she would get pedaled to the beach on? It wasn't very PC, but they had a man who would bicycle them over."

"Yikes," said William. "Unfortunately, I think my Palm Beach ancestors had one of those, too. Apparently, some scandal ensued."

"Well, I'm glad they don't do that anymore...wait- so you do have Palm Beach roots?" Penny asked.

"Several generations back, but after that, they stayed well away. I'm the first generation coming back in. I do like it here."

"I do, too," said Penny. "It makes me want to just throw everything away and leave my life in New York."

"So why don't you? Do you have someone in New York?" William asked.

Penny sat up straighter.

"Someone in New York? I wouldn't be carrying on like this with you, if I had someone. Wait, do you have someone?"

"No, of course not," said William. "I...I was engaged, but I broke it off long before coming back here."

"Engaged?"

"Don't ask. I'll tell you sometime," he said. "But suffice it to say, we were together for all the wrong reasons."

"And what were those? No, never mind. Sorry, you told me not to ask. None of my business," she said.

"Well, it could be your business," said William, "but it's such a beautiful day. Why complicate it with speaking of the past? In case you're wondering, this isn't a rebound or anything. I really feel something with you, something different."

Penny smiled to herself. She felt the same.

"So," said William, "this dinner tonight- should I be worried about these people?"

"No, they won't bite," said Penny. "I mean, Ella's husband, well, he's a little bit of a snob, but he's promised to be on his best behavior."

"Ella?" Asked William.

"Pretty name, right?"

"Yeah. You don't meet that many Ellas these days. Is she from Palm Beach?" He asked.

"Wait, are you afraid she's like an ex of yours or something?" Asked Penny.

"Don't be silly," said William.

But he looked guarded. A bit strange, all of a sudden.

“What does she do?” He asked.

“You seem very curious about my friend. She's a super successful commercial real estate agent,” said Penny. “But she's really chill, super nice. I promise.”

“It must be pretty lucrative to be a commercial real estate agent in Palm Beach. Does she specialize in the Island or in West Palm Beach?”

“Both,” said Penny, realizing, now, that it was normal for William to be curious about this, since he wanted to get into real estate investing. Maybe Ella could give him a few pointers. “She started in West Palm, and that's where she lives, so that's where she's got this great office with killer views of Lake Worth. You should see it.”

“Sounds nice,” said William. “Egg salad sandwich or tuna? I got both, just in case.”

“Ooh, egg salad for sure. Where'd you get these?”

“Uh, Greens Pharmacy,” said William.

“That's my favorite place!”

“Oh,” said William, oddly enough not looking very pleased. The leaden atmosphere had made Penny somewhat lose her appetite by this point, but she made a valiant show of eating her egg salad sandwich, looking out to sea, wondering why their previous easy banter had been ruined.

“Can I just ask you,” said Penny, “is there something wrong? Did I do something or say something? Did I move too fast, inviting you to this dinner? I mean, if you don't want to go, I totally get it. It wasn't a big deal or anything. I just thought it would be nice.”

“No, no, it's not that,” said William. “I just remembered that I have a thousand things I needed to do, and I was debating whether I actually would have time to come. I don't want to show up and be checking my watch every minute and be on my phone. You know, it would be rude.”

“You don't have to come if you don't want to,” said Penny, a pit forming in her stomach. She who had prided herself on never being obsessed with a guy, she who'd never been dependent, was now having her heart broken apart because this guy didn't want to come to a barbecue?

“I'll make it up to you. I promise. Maybe you can come over for a nightcap, after.”

“Sure,” said Penny, hesitant, but happy to potentially have an alternate plan. “I mean, they've got little kids, so they go to bed super early. Should I just text you when I'm done?”

“Please do,” said William, smiling.

The tension she'd noticed was almost gone, but not completely disappeared. What was that about? Maybe Penny was making a mistake, trying to mix her worlds together. Maybe she'd made him feel uncomfortable. She wanted to reassure him that her friends were cool and all, despite Sam's snobbishness. But who was she, a spoiled girl, to actually decide who he would or wouldn't be comfortable with?

“How do you like your sandwich?” he asked.

“So good. I definitely need to bring one to my...to Lawrence.”

“Who's Lawrence?”

“Oh, he's...a family friend. He's in a nursing home in West Palm.”

She didn't want to elaborate too much. It would be hard to explain to a stranger what her relationship with Lawrence was. And she didn't want to bring into it the fact that she was staying in his apartment, and that Ella was Lawrence's granddaughter.

“If he's important to you, I'd love to meet him someday,” said William.

Penny considered this, looked at him, at his dark eyes, his warm smile, his capable hands, his general demeanor.

“Yeah, I think Lawrence would like you,” she said.

Again, they were making these tentative plans, binding the ties between them tighter and tighter. Until one of them finally panicked and decide that they'd gotten too close.

Off on the horizon, Penny noticed, storm clouds started gathering.

“Oh shoot. It was such a gorgeous day, and it looks like it's about to be ruined.”

“It wasn't in the forecast,” said William. “I'm sure it'll blow over soon. Here, want me to check?”

He pulled out his phone. She noticed a host of messages on the screen, which he swiped away quickly, and logged into the weather app.

“Looks like it's going to rain for a little bit, and then go back to being absolutely gorgeous. Your barbecue is safe and sound. And so is our nightcap,” he said, reassuringly.

“Should we go before we get rained on?”

“I think it's for the best,” he said. “Now, I have something to look forward to later. And I can get my work done.”

Penny wasn't unhappy to go back to editing her video. It would be nice to be able to release it in the next few days. And it would be great to get her ideas about Grandmama's house in order before the trust lawyer finally came back to her. She would have to tell Ella about William's last-minute cancellation. She hoped she didn't take it personally. She was also trying not to take personally the fact that this picnic hadn't had the romantic ending she'd been hoping for. As they walked back to the car, William brushed against her, sending a chill through her body. “I'm sorry I'm distracted,” he said, his low voice tickling her eardrums. “Tonight, I'll be in a better place, I think,” he said.

“Okay,” said Penny, carefully.

He stopped and tilted up her chin, looking deep into her eyes.

“Penny. I hope you're not upset with me that I'm not coming to this dinner.”

“No, it was a last-minute thing. It was casual. It's nothing.”

“My time is not always my own,” said William.

“I get that,” said Penny.

She knew what it was like to be at everyone's beck and call, running from one place to the next. Hell, considering what his job was, William was pretty damn available, much more so than she would expect. It was a big apartment complex with several buildings. There must have been endless tasks to perform. And he didn't seem too panicked about it. But then, a sneaking jealousy came over her. What if she wasn't the only one who had made moves on him after seeing him working in the halls? He was pretty damn irresistible. What if he had other women pining over him in other apartments, on some other floor? He didn't belong to her, of course not, but surely that link she felt between them, that was real, wasn't it? He was still holding her chin up, examining her as if trying to make some decision. She couldn't read his thoughts, and it bothered her. She wished she could crawl into his heart and know exactly what lay there.

“I know we supposedly have a plan,” she said. “So why do I feel like something just happened between us, something not good?”

“I just have some things I need to work on.”

He gave her a quick peck on the forehead. The consolation prize of kisses. It was worse than nothing, in fact. After that, they headed back to her

car in silence. She was thankful that the drive back to Grandmama's was a short one. She wasn't proud that this man had her all tied up in knots. Grandmama would have rued her lack of independence, but she couldn't help it.

“Well,” she said, as they pulled up to the apartment complex, “why don't I drop you off here? I'm going to go pick up some wine to bring to Ella's house.”

“Sure,” said William, a little too quickly. “I'll see you soon.”

He grabbed her arm, squeezed it, and hopped out of the car, looking much lighter than she felt at that moment. She drove to the store with nebulous worries drifting in and out of her psyche and shook her head to force herself to pay attention to the road. No good would come of this. She would just have to wait and see what happened between them after dinner. After this failed lunch, she didn't have high hopes.

Chapter 31

She arrived at Ella's house just as the rays of the sunset were dying over the horizon.

"Penny! Auntie Penny!" Ella's two adorable children cried out, as they rushed Penny's legs, almost knocking her down in their embrace.

"Oh my God, they've grown so much," Penny exclaimed. Even during the pandemic, she'd made sure to keep in touch with ample video calls between them, but it broke her heart to see that these two tiny little toddlers were now sentient children who probably terrorized the school playground.

"How'd you guys get so big?" she asked.

"Maybe you're getting smaller, Auntie Penny," said Luna.

"Mommy's making corn," said Caleb.

"She is? Lucky me," said Penny.

"In here," Ella called out. "She stood in her modern kitchen, silhouette against a sweeping view out onto Lake Worth. Ella and Sam had been lucky to snag a large property, and they had renovated it in a beautiful way, giving it a sense of openness and modernity mixed with solidity. Unlike so many of the houses here, this one didn't feel like it was slowly being consumed by the salt air, even though Penny knew it probably was.

"Hello, hello," Sam cried out, ambling out from the hallway leading to their bedroom. He was freshly showered, his dark hair slicked back, his sparkling blue eyes shining with humor.

"So, I hear your gentleman got too scared of us to show up?" he asked.

"I don't think so," said Penny. "I told him you'd be on your best behavior. Was that a lie? Would you have been horrible if he'd come?"

"Of course not," said Sam, jovially.

"I don't know. I feel like you're the only one who can out-snob me," said Penny.

"Ella says he's a...carpenter?"

"A handyman," said Penny. "Listen, I'm the first one to be difficult about things like this, but he's just a really capable guy. He's got this inherent class to him. I don't know what to say, but for once I kind of don't care who his people are and what he does. He holds his own. I wish you could meet him."

"Next time, I hope. So ...what? He's busy being handy somewhere else tonight?"

“I guess so,” said Penny, the jealousy worming its way back into her heart. “If I come back early enough, we may have a nightcap.”

“Oh, a nightcap. Is that what you young people call it these days?” Sam smiled, elbowing her in the ribs.

“Ow,” said Penny. “Ella, your husband's being inappropriate with me again,” she called out.

Penny really admired the relationship between Sam and Ella. Sam had gone against his parents' expectations of who he would marry. But Penny, of course, knew that he had scored an absolute gem in Ella. Ella was the most beautiful, smartest, most ambitious, most successful woman she knew. And she wasn't just saying that because she was her best friend. It was damn true. And she happened to be a pretty darn good mom, and no doubt the perfect wife. She was even a good cook.

“Sam, stop being mean to my friend and fetch her a glass of wine, please. Start with the bubbly.”

“Bubbly? What are we celebrating?” Asked Penny.

“Well, our birthdays are coming up.”

“Not for almost another week,” said Penny.

“Still. And I just signed a contract for that annoying client. I think that it might mean a lot of good things coming my way. He really is a power player. You know, I know that you've got your beau, but this guy's pretty hot, too.”

“Not interested,” said Penny.

“Cheers to you, my friend.”

“Cheers to you,” said Penny. She wished that she would have something concrete to celebrate herself, some achievement in her life after putting off doing things for so long.

“Come on, let's eat. The kids have been whining all afternoon. They need to be put to bed. And I suppose that you're not going to be too sad if we wrap up this dinner quickly, are you?” She said, winking at her.

“No, I guess I'll be okay,” Penny responded.

Chapter 32

Penny pulled into the parking garage at the apartment complex and started second guessing herself. Would she really ping William? He hadn't wanted to come to dinner. He'd had other things to do. Had he been busy with somebody else for dinner, and now she was the unnecessary dessert? Maybe she was playing too pathetically easy to get by reaching out to him. She checked her watch. It wasn't even 8 o'clock yet. He wouldn't be expecting her for a while. Maybe she should just sit with her feelings and see where it took her. She didn't need to always be the one asking him to do things. Sure, he'd proposed this nightcap, but maybe she'd accepted too readily. She was still waffling and debating within herself, sitting on the apartment's chintz sofa, when her phone pinged.

William: *You're not back yet?*

Penny: *Just arrived*

William: *I'm making you your favorite cocktail. Hurry*

Penny: *which cocktail might that be?*

William: *French 75*

Penny: *?? I've never had one?*

William: *you'll see*

William gave her the apartment number. It was in the same building as hers, on a higher floor. It was odd that they would reserve the best views for a handyman, but perhaps they'd just made available what was open. Whoever the new owners were did seem to be trying to turn the apartment complex over, renovating apartments as they came free.

Penny took the elevator up and headed down the hallway, her stomach doing nervous little flips. This was part of the complex that had been renovated already. The flooring was a high-quality limestone. The doors were done in a dark tropical hardwood that looked expensive. When she came to

the apartment number William had given her, she knocked lightly. In just a few moments, the door was opening, and she was looking into William's eyes. Was it her imagination, or was he tipsy?

"You're here," he said simply, and before she knew it, their lips were locked, bodies coming together, she breathing him in and pressing herself against him. The shock of how good it felt to be close to him again, taking her breath away. But she could taste the alcohol on him.

"Come on, let's get inside," he finally said, as he pulled away for just a second. "The neighbors will talk."

Penny allowed him to sweep her inside the apartment. For the next few moments, they were lost in each other.

But this wouldn't do. Penny reluctantly pulled away. He'd been drinking already, probably with someone else. And the nightcap was the peck on the forehead of plans. Much as she wanted William, she would stick to a kiss and a conversation, not the main event she'd now been fantasizing about multiple times a day. If it ever happened, the delayed gratification would make it amazing.

"I am absolutely exhausted tonight...I think I'll only be able to stay for a quick cocktail," she said, lightly.

She noted the flash of disappointment in his eyes, but he politely headed to a bar area in the living room.

While he made the drink, Penny looked around the room where they stood.

"Wow," she gasped. "This place is amazing. Was it furnished when you moved in?"

"Kind of," said William evasively.

"So, this isn't your taste or anything. It's beautiful," she allowed.

"It's kind of a show apartment," he responded.

He approached her and handed her a delicate stemmed coupe. The apartment came equipped with primo glassware, apparently.

"Here's your drink."

"Where's yours?"

"I over-served myself while I was going over some paperwork this evening."

Oh, so that was his excuse. She peered at him. It rang true. But which paperwork could he possibly have?

“This is going to be the look for the new apartment rental models. Staging, if you will.”

“It’s nice that you get to benefit,” Penny said. “Wow, this is a killer view.” She watched sparkling lights dance on the gentle waves of Lake Worth.

“Cheers,” she said, lifting her glass toward William and taking a sip. The drink was indeed delicious. Sophisticated, with a Champagne base and a citrus tang.

“Your new favorite?”

“Maybe. I take a while to make up my mind.”

“Oh? So which factors would sway you?”

William had led her to the sofa, which she sank into gratefully. She was tired, and the feel of it was positively cloud-like.

“How many bedrooms in this place, anyway?” She asked, looking around the room, focusing on the well-chosen art and objects. Was that an original Walton Ford? No, it had to be a print. A good one. She noticed she’d gotten no response from William. She turned to look at him. He was out like a light.

Penny sighed, and carefully got up. She put her half-finished glass on the kitchen counter and let herself out.

Chapter 33

Ella: *You'd better be on your way across the street.*

Penny rolled her eyes. She wasn't even sure if she wanted to go to this thing. Boozy Tuesday at the Everglades Club with Missy Bollinger, the queen bee of kindergarten, sounded like a bad time waiting to happen. Penny had been holding out hope that Ella would come, but she had begged off, claiming she had an important client meeting. When Penny had asked her about it, she'd been strangely evasive. Perhaps it was just an excuse after all, but it wasn't like Ella to lie to her friend. Perhaps they had grown apart in all these years, after all. Penny hoped that wasn't the case.

In terms of going to the club to meet up with her school frenemies, it wasn't like she had anything else going on. She was still waiting for the trust lawyer to come back from vacation. William had sent her message in the morning apologizing for falling asleep, which had been perfectly contrite, but he hadn't made another plan with her. Editing and filming YouTube videos featuring gossipy old timers was fun, but she couldn't spend all day long on them without a break. It wasn't like her schedule was chock full of important things. Life could get pretty boring in Palm Beach without a hobby, a husband, a project, or an unhealthy obsession with USTA tennis. Would she be able to live here full time without getting crazy bored? After all the fantasizing she had done about living here, the reality now lay in front of her, twinkling, like the lights on Lake Worth she'd so admired last night, but also nebulous. Joining a club wasn't an option. She didn't like golf, Grandmama had ruined her chances of being a member of the Everglades Club, even if she could afford it once the trust came through, and there was no way she would join Mar a Lago. She hadn't investigated any other alternatives. Would she take up some sport? Maybe she would parlay her morning jogs into ultramarathon training. *As if.* Would she continue her relationship with William? She wondered what the girls from the Everglades Club would have to say about that. Maybe they already knew about William. It was a small island, after all. Someone was bound to have spotted them along Worth Avenue, or having dinner. Well, as long as they didn't know he was a handyman, they would just think she'd found an incredibly handsome partner. Now that she really thought about it, she wasn't sure whether it really bothered her, if they knew what he did for a living, or not.

She had plenty of time for generalized angst later. For now, she had five minutes until she was supposed to be there, so she should definitely worry about what she was going to wear. Even though she'd been coming to Palm Beach for a long time and had spent most of her youth there, since she'd been living in New York, she had slowly lost, or fallen out of love with, many of the pieces of her Palm Beach wardrobe. And she'd noticed that the basics that had worked for over a decade were now being supplanted by something different. All those Lilly Pulitzer shift dresses- they still held sway over some women, mostly tourists who swarmed the boutique. For the locals, they had slowly been replaced by none less colorful, but more sophisticated, designs by Brazilian designers, or showy capsule collections designed by Russian oligarch's wives. Classic Jack Rogers sandals had given way to those Hermès ones everyone wore, or to Manolo Blahniks or Christian Louboutin, which Penny still found inescapably tacky. Designer bags, which had always been something of a thing here, but only in the evenings, had gotten all the more omnipresent, showy, and expensive, usually accessorized with a designer dog, and a designer child or two. Penny knew she couldn't compete, so she would be unique. There were more of Grandmama's things here in the apartment. She had barely scraped the surface of what lay in the main closet and had not even dared to check out the overstuffed closet in the second bedroom. Sure enough, upon opening the louvered door, she was almost buried under an avalanche of clothes, hats, and bags. A gentle smell of mothballs and lavender also wafted out, but she supposed she could air that out rather quickly, and spray some of Grandmama's perfume on the clothes. Old lady chic would be better than the overly simple items she had brought with her. Throwing piles of clothes onto the bed, she quickly was able to select a relatively casual black sleeveless jersey Chanel dress, knee length, with white trim, and significantly, no logos. She remembered this had been gifted to Grandmama by her much younger Russian friend, Natasha, a woman with a wicked sense of humor who loved to scandalize Penny's grandmother with colorful stories about yacht life.

Going through the boxes on the top shelf of the closet, she was able to locate a wicker bag with black details and decided that this look would go well enough with a simple pair of flat black lace-up sandals she had packed because they took up no space in her suitcase. She slipped on the ensemble and considered herself in the mirror. Other than her crazily frizzy hair, she looked like a polished lady. An authentic adult, for once. She took herself to

the bathroom and smoothed down her crazy locks using the pomade and strategically placed hairpins. She added, then removed, a strand of Grandmama's pearls, and decided that it would have to do. She checked her watch. *Well, here goes nothing.* At least there would be wine, or at least she hoped there would be. Did she really want to do this? Did she really want to subject herself to Missy and Savannah and their grade school antics? She'd been following along on Facebook and knew that Missy and Savannah and their other best friend Jane, also a kindergarten peer, had perfectly photogenic lives on Palm Beach, with the expected wealthy husbands and all of the trappings of their place in society. She hoped they would be too busy talking about themselves to ask her too many questions about her failed attempt at an exciting life.

She picked up her purse, double-checked that she had her keys and her lipstick, and headed out the door. The Everglades Club couldn't have been any closer to the apartment building. In fact, she could already see it, right across the street, next door to Palazzo Leoni. It was quite ironic that she had managed to get into the Everglades Club before she made it inside her own grandmother's house. *Shit.* She had forgotten to ask for the keys, again, yesterday. She made her way to the unmarked front door, where she gave her name. She gave her name again to the person at the front desk, who said, "Miss Bollinger and the other ladies are on the veranda. Follow me."

Even though Penny knew exactly where to go, she was led through spaces that reminded her of Palazzo Leoni, from the sagging wood beams to the wrought iron chandeliers and dramatic archways. Penny knew that, when Mizner revealed his design for what was originally meant to be a hospital, but quickly became the Everglades Club, he had society ladies all over the island firing their architects and hiring him, including Great Grandmama.

She could hear the giggling before she saw her old classmates and held her breath for a moment as she approached, anxiety mounting.

"Oh my God, Penny!" A high voice squealed as she came closer to the table.

"Missy!" Penny hoped that her impersonation of a delighted person was not too wooden.

"You haven't changed at all," said Missy.

"What, since middle school?" Penny smiled. She shouldn't have said that. There was no real excuse for why she had avoided these women from the time she started attending boarding school.

“Well, you look beautiful,” she said to Missy, which was hopefully a compliment that would work, and detract from the fact that Penny was gutted, absolutely shocked, to see what Missy had done to her face. Some overzealous plastic surgeon had pulled it so taut that Missy's expression remained as surprised as Penny felt. Missy had always been a petite girl, and now she was positively bird-like, like Grandmama had been. Penny could already imagine how she would look at 70, and beyond. She would probably be sitting on this very same veranda at that age as well, which was a thought both comforting and terrifying. Was this really what she would want for herself? Maybe it was a good thing that Grandmama had taken away the option.

“You remember Jane, don't you?” said Missy.

“Jane, absolutely!” said Penny. Jane was a glacial brunette with stick straight hair with a mirror shine, the sort that Penny had always been jealous of. Her linen shift was starched to within an inch of its life. Jane had always been the sort of girl who prioritized neatness and correctness. Even linen had no right to crease around her. In every picture of Jane's children on Facebook, her three offspring sported matching haircuts and seersucker outfits. Jane's husband, Gunnar, Penny had learned from diving down the online rabbit hole, ran the family office. She guessed he was technically a billionaire, none of which he had earned himself- without skimming off the family funds, that was.

“I love your outfit,” said Jane. “Is it Chanel resort collection?”

Meant as a subtle dig, no doubt.

“Thanks,” said Penny. “It's vintage.”

“That's so brave. I could never pull that off,” said Missy.

“Of course, you could,” said Penny, smiling, even though she wanted to slap her in the face. This boozy Tuesday had better start producing some booze pretty quickly, or she was going to lose her mind.

“Have a seat,” said Missy. “Savannah had to cancel at the last minute, like she always does. But let me introduce you to our friends Pepper and Marty. They moved here from New York.”

Pepper and Marty were interchangeable, with straight blonde hair. The same plastic surgeon had probably done their noses and their eyelid lifts. They had identical teeth and wore similar massive diamond engagement rings and Tory Burch ensembles. “Are you two sisters?” asked Penny.

“No, why would you think that?” One of them responded.

Penny decided that she didn't need to invest the time and effort into learning how to tell them apart. She took her seat and gratefully ordered a glass of bubbly when the server, a tall man clad in a white livery, approached.

"It's been so long," said Missy. "What have you been up to? How's life in New York?"

Penny was taken aback for a moment, but she realized that, with social media, one's whereabouts were never a secret. Not that she posted very frequently, but by examining posts by friends of friends, Missy would have been able to glean this information.

"You know how it is," said Penny. "Always the same thing. Parties, work, the Hamptons in the summer. How about you? Do you ever get up to the city?"

To these women, Palm Beach was to be considered a suburb of New York.

"Sometimes," said Missy, "but I'm so busy with the kids."

"I totally understand," said Penny, even though she didn't.

"I see you're writing for House Spectacular," said Jane. "That's so glamorous."

"It is, isn't it?" Penny responded with a smile, even though it couldn't be further from the truth. But they didn't need to know that.

"So, tell us- are you still single? No husband, no kids?" Asked Missy.

Penny groaned internally. Damn it, they were already asking this and the alcohol wasn't there yet.

"You know me, I've always been a free agent," said Penny.

But then, the thought of William entered her mind, unbidden.

"Yeah, I know you always said you would never get married, but I thought that was because your grandmother wouldn't let you date in middle school. She was so strict. So, there's no one? Not even a man friend?"

"Or maybe you're into women?" Jane smiled, giving Missy a look. What was that supposed to mean?

"That's a thought," said Penny. "Anyway, so, what's life like in Palm Beach these days? I'm debating whether I want to move down here full time."

"Oh, yes," said Missy. "My condolences, by the way. Your grandmother certainly was a character."

"Thanks," said Penny, even though that didn't really sound like a compliment. Grandmama had been feared and admired in equal measure.

“So, what do you guys do for fun here? Things have changed so much since we were growing up. I’m just, you know, weighing my options,” said Penny.

“Well, it really boils down to school drop off, tennis, golf, club, school pick up, pool, dinner, repeat,” said Jane laughing.

“You forgot the second tennis game of the day,” said Missy. “We’re really blessed,” she said.

Is blessed the new synonym for bored? Penny thought.

“Can you believe we get to live this life every day?” Jane asked. It was a rhetorical question, clearly, but Marty or Pepper responded, “so lucky.”

Penny stared at them all. Was that truly lucky? Once again, she thought to herself, what would she do here with her days? What would she find to occupy herself if she didn’t have the need to make money? Would she still continue with her YouTube channel? She would, she decided, and she would push her book through. She would make damn sure she was known for something other than just spending Grandmama’s money.

“So, what’s going to happen to your grandmother’s house?” Asked Jane.

Penny knew everyone was dying to know, but of course Jane had been the one to ask. She had always been the uncouth one in that group.

“I’m not sure,” said Penny. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Is that really going to be up to you?” Asked Jane.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Penny retorted.

“I’ve just heard...” Jane started. The table shook slightly. Had Missy just kicked her? “Nothing,” said Jane.

She and Missy exchanged a look.

“No, really, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I heard rumors that there’s a buyer.”

“Who’d you hear that from?”

Penny started to wonder now- had Ella begged off on today because she was more in touch with these girls than she’d admitted to? No, that was a ridiculous thought. Ella had spent almost as much time at Palazzo Leoni as Penny had as a child. It was part of their DNA. *Well*. It was part of Penny’s DNA. But Ella had always been treated the same...not exactly the same, she had to admit. People had always assumed that Ella was the daughter of the staff, and that she lived in a staff apartment. But her parents, and Lawrence, had always made their own way. Even though he’d been there, always.

“So, how are you keeping yourself busy?” Missy asked.

“Just settling my grandmother’s affairs,” Penny responded.

She noticed Pepper and Marty giving each other a side glance and a small smirk. So, they'd been brought up to date on the rumors about Grandmama and Lawrence, had they? *Bitches*. She wished she could slap those amused expressions off their faces. So what, if Grandmama had had an affair with Lawrence, if it made her happy? Though would she really have had an affair and then lied, and said that the Wells women didn't need men? Grandmama wouldn't have done that, would she have?

“And how's Ella doing? It's a pity she couldn't join us,” said Jane.

“Don't you all hang out?” Asked Penny, not so subtly trying to feel out whether Ella had been in contact with them.

“No, she never has time. She thinks she's too good for us now,” Said Missy, her lips in a straight line.

“I guess she's too successful for her old friends,” Missy shrugged.

Wow, so Missy and crew were jealous of Ella. It figured. Really, all they had done was find wealthy men to marry. They'd probably inherited some cash from their parents or grandparents, as well. Penny didn't know where she got off thinking she herself was that much different. Perhaps the not wanting a man thing was the only thing that set her apart, really. And maybe she was being stupidly headstrong about the whole thing, anyway. Again, she thought of William. His lips, the way he felt against her, his arms around her. That ass of his.

“So, what does organizing your grandmother’s...estate...entail?” Asked Missy. “I heard that the house has been empty for years. Surely, you're not having to organize anything there?”

Penny straightened and took a gulp of her champagne. How did they know?

“Well, you know, there's a lot of paperwork, and I'm working on other projects, too.”

“Oh, what kind of projects?” Asked Jane.

“I've seen her YouTube channel,” said Missy, or was it Pepper?

“You have?” Asked Penny.

“Yeah, someone sent me one of your videos. It's pretty cool, actually. I enjoyed it.”

Maybe this Marty or Pepper wasn't that bad after all. Maybe she deserved for Penny to learn her name.

“Thanks,” she said, still guarded, but feeling newly confident. “I’m launching a new series in the next few days. Keep an eye out for it. It’s fun.”

“We should all do dinner one of these nights. If you aren’t dating anyone, I could set you up. There are more single guys now that the New York money has come down. Lots of divorced dudes, with loads of cash, driving around crazy cars.”

“I’ve noticed,” said Penny. Now that the conversation had grown a tad more positive, she decided to let down her guard, just a little.

“I’m, well, I’ve met someone,” she said.

“Here? Tell us about him!” said Jane.

“There’s not much to tell. He’s... he’s nice,” said Penny.

“Nice? Well, what does he do?” Asked Missy.

“Does that matter?”

The girls all looked at each other, taken aback.

“Well, kind of,” Pepper and Marty said, in unison. “Jinx!”

“Right now, we’re just getting to know each other,” said Penny. “I’ll let you know when there’s anything to tell.”

As if she would tell them anything about William. Not that she was embarrassed to be in a relationship with a handyman, she realized. But she wanted him to herself. Didn’t want these women passing judgment on him.

They sat for a few moments more, making small talk, but it was obviously awkward. The conversation wasn’t flowing as it might. They reminisced a bit about grade school and middle school, explaining some of the supposed in-jokes to the New York girls, and caught each other up further on what each of them had been doing, but since there was so little, the conversation quickly ran dry. Penny wondered what these ladies talked about when it was just them. They would probably rehash their drinks with Penny for a long time to come. Not that there was any fodder, but that wouldn’t stop them. She spent the rest of the time asking them for recommendations for lunch and dinner spots, shopping, excursions, and more things to keep her busy, but there was nothing that sounded that enticing. Nothing she hadn’t been able to surmise on her own with a little online exploration.

“Will you look at the time?” Missy exclaimed. “I need to go pick up Topper at judo.”

“Oh, Mia’s finishing up with her tutor, too,” said Jane. “Shall we all walk out together?”

“Sure,” said Penny.

She went for her purse.

“How much do I...”

“Oh, no, no, it's on me. It's on my account,” said Missy. “I have to meet my minimum, you know.”

“Well, thanks,” said Penny.

They strode through to the lobby, Jane, Missy, Marty, and Pepper waving at a well-groomed woman.

Once she'd passed and was presumable out of earshot, Missy whispered, “she's terribly rich, but can you believe the plastic surgery?”

They finally stepped into the street.

“Well, we must do this again,” said Missy.

“Absolutely,” Penny replied, even though she absolutely didn't mean it. “Well, I think I'm going to take myself for a little stroll,” she said. “I'll see you all soon.”

She left the women waiting for their cars at the valet. It was a beautiful day. She would go window shop on Worth Avenue, even though it wasn't that fun when you couldn't afford any of the things in the windows. But still, beauty was beauty. And it gave her something to do before returning to the empty apartment.

Chapter 34

She was engrossed in the sight of a beautiful table setting in one of the shops at the top of the avenue, when her phone pinged twice in quick succession. Ella and William had just sent her messages, seconds apart.

Ella: *Im done with my meeting How did it go? Or are you still there?*

Penny: *No, they set me loose. They asked about you. They're jealous as hell of your success.*

Ella: *No shit. Im the only one who actually did anything.*

Penny: *Ha. True*

Now, she felt guilty and stupid, because when Ella said that, wasn't she including her? Realistically, that was absolutely the case.

Now, she checked her message from William, pleased that she had held out on checking it for a few seconds.

William: *Heading back to the apartment. Meet you for dinner?*

And then, while she was considering what to respond, another ping.

William: *I see you. Don't move- I'll meet you there.*

Penny swiveled her head around.

Penny: *Really? Where are you?*

William: *Parking in the garage. You look adorable, by the way. Very fancy.*

Shit. Penny hoped that he wouldn't find her outfit too stuck up. She would tell him she'd borrowed it from Grandmama. The ladies had missed him by mere minutes. She wondered what they would make of him.

Wondered, too, what he would make of them. He seemed like the sort of man who could hold his own with even these pretentious bitches. She kept making her way more slowly down Worth Avenue and was examining a pair of slippers in the window of Stubbs and Wooten when she felt William sidle up next to her, brushing her arm with his and giving her a kiss on the cheek, before letting his lips slide down to her neck. She shivered. But she was still a little mad at him for falling asleep the night before.

“You look very Palm Beach Grande Dame, maybe a little old lady, but I could get used to it,” he whispered into her ear.

“I’m channeling Grandmama,” Penny said primly. “How was your day?”

He took her arm, gently, and turned her to face him, which of course meant having to look into those liquid eyes.

“I apologize for my behavior yesterday. I over-served myself while waiting for you. I hope I didn’t do or say anything inappropriate.”

“You didn’t.”

And that was the problem.

“Can I make it up to you?” He asked.

“Maybe.”

Before she could let him kiss her, which would erase her resolve to continue showing him how displeased she’d been, she pulled back and looked him up and down. He was wearing a beautiful pair of suede loafers, a pair of light gray chinos, a linen shirt, and a light jacket.

“You look elegant. Have you been working in that outfit?”

“Well, I had meetings,” said William. “Boring stuff. Anyway, shall we go to the Italian place?”

“Buccan or Renato’s?” Penny asked.

“Renato’s. More romantic. And closer.”

“It’s kind of pricey, isn’t it? I have limited resources, you know,” said Penny.

“So? I wouldn’t invite a lady out for dinner and not cover it,” said William.

Again, Penny wondered, did he have some kind of side hustle she didn’t know about? She hoped he wasn’t into anything illegal. His slick clothes, and the insouciance with which he paid for their expensive dinners out was not in keeping with his job, and she found it worrisome. Sadly, she also enjoyed his company too much to jeopardize seeing him by asking him indiscreet questions that she didn’t want the answers to. At some point, maybe they’d

broach the subject, except that, well, Penny wasn't one for relationships, was she? And that, unfortunately, was what they ended up discussing, again, as they sat across from each other at a small table, in the elegant Italian restaurant tucked into Via Mizner.

“So, you don't have a father figure?” William asked, taking a sip of the excellent Nebbiolo he had chosen, which paired well with the *Bruschetta and penne a la vodka* they had shared, again from the same plate.

This had never really been a sensitive subject for Penny, or maybe she had just avoided it skillfully throughout her life, but now, it started to bother her.

“Yeah. Weird. I guess I just never really thought of it,” she said, and I never really knew my mother, to boot.”

“Is she still alive?” asked William.

“I think so,” said Penny. “Listen, I promise you all of this is fine. I'm not traumatized, or anything. It wasn't an unhappy childhood, for me. Grandmama was amazing. And I had Uncle Lawrence.”

“Uncle Lawrence?” Asked William. “The guy in the nursing home?”

Oh, that's right. She had told him about Lawrence.

“He was my grandmother's...I don't know, I guess, assistant? Something like that,” she said.

“But he was your uncle?”

“Not really. But we were close. Are close. He's still alive.”

“Oh. Okay,” said William, wrinkling his forehead.

Penny found that she didn't want to say anymore. Explaining the presence of somebody like Lawrence felt uncomfortable. She started seeing how problematic it was, again. And once again, found herself wondering what Lawrence's life had been like alongside Grandmama. Had he had the choice of working somewhere else? Had he been happy? Had they had a relationship? Had he simply worked for her? Or had it been a little bit of both? Seen from the outside, it indeed seemed like a confusing situation. One which she might never get to the bottom of, especially if Lawrence kept withholding his secrets.

“It's funny to have you sitting across from me, dressed in your Palm Beach finery,” said William, smiling. “You look like you fit in here, all of a sudden.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Until now, you've looked like a fish out of water. A gorgeous one, don't get me wrong, but more of a city girl vacationing here, you know? And now, you look like a lady who lunches.”

“That’s because of where I spent my afternoon,” Penny began. She regretted, then, having said it, but now it was too late, and she needed to go through with it. She hoped William wouldn't think less of her, that her childhood friends were all idle housewives who hung out at the Everglades club all day long. Then again, maybe he didn't even know anything about the Everglades club to begin with.

“Oh, and where was that?”

“I hung out with my old school friends. They haven't changed a bit. Well, except for their faces,” she smiled. “Lots of plastic surgery, there.”

“How long had it been since you’d seen them last?”

“Over a decade. And they’re living exactly the lives we'd all expected them to live. You know, perfect husbands, perfect kids. Comfortable lives here on Palm Beach.”

“Was that the life you expected for yourself?” William asked, looking her deep in the eyes. It made her feel naked all of a sudden. And whatever she answered, it either wouldn't make her look good, or would make him feel less than.

“Well, no, I've never thought I be so conventional, I guess you would say,” Penny said.

“Oh? Why's that?”

“It's just... I don't know- just something I always kind of believed, the way I was raised, I guess.”

“That's atypical for a young Palm Beach lady,” William smiled.

“I guess it is,” said Penny.

“But I suppose that extended to relationships, didn't it? Have you really never had a long-term relationship?” William asked.

“Never,” said Penny.

“Are you... I mean...” William blushed.

“Are you literally going to ask me if I'm a virgin?” Penny asked, starting to cackle.

“I guess I was. I'm sorry, that's really stupid,” said William.

“No, it's not. But no, I'm not,” said Penny.

“How about you?”

“Yes, I'm a virgin,” William smirked.

Penny kicked him under the table.

“Ow. Fine. Yes, as I told you, I've been in a serious relationship. I was engaged, but it's over.” He looked pained- clearly, he did not want to talk

about it, but Penny didn't know if she could let that slide. She suddenly felt very, very curious.

"I don't want to talk about it, remember? Suffice it to say that I'm over it, over it enough to want to try to convince you that maybe you need a long-term relationship at least once in your life...No?"

"Not sure," said Penny.

She softened when she saw the look in William's eyes.

"Well," she said lightly, "maybe you can convince me otherwise."

"That's better," said William. "I mean, it would be silly to reject something on principle if it felt right, wouldn't it?"

"You have a point," said Penny, and it did feel right with William, in so many ways. He took her hand across the table, enveloping it with warmth, making her think of his hands on her body.

"I like that look in your eye," he said.

She blushed.

"I don't like that you think you can read my mind," she responded.

"But I like what you're thinking," he said.

"How can you be so sure what I'm thinking?"

"Are you trying to tell me I'm wrong?" He responded.

She shook her head, looking down and biting her lip. William's other hand reached under the table and felt for her knee. She sucked in a breath as she felt his hand move up her thigh.

"Stop it," she said. "People are going to notice."

"Not if you don't make any suspicious sounds," he smiled.

"But I might."

"I'd like to hear that. I'd like to make you scream," he responded in a low voice.

The idea of it sent a rush of wetness between her legs, and she bit her lip harder, staring into his eyes and swallowing.

"Should we ask for the check?" He asked, raising his eyebrows.

"I would say that's probably a good idea."

Was it really going to happen? Was he going to take her home and have his way with her? Granted, his way was also what she'd been dreaming of, for days, now.

"I can't wait to have you in my arms, and to be able to kiss you properly," he said. "This table between us is no good." He held up a hand. "Check,

please,” he told the waiter, and went back to caressing her thigh under the table.

The waiter brought the check, and William threw down his card, a silver one that looked singularly like an American Express Platinum, but she knew that that couldn't be right. She forced herself to look away. She didn't want to pry, and she didn't want to know. If she ever did go against her principles of having a long-term relationship, they'd have to have a serious talk. She didn't want to date someone who was into anything illegal, but in the meantime, fantasizing about William as a bad boy wasn't a bad thing. The waiter brought back the card. William barely glanced at the receipt and scribbled out a tip and a signature. He stood, holding his hand out to Penny.

“My lady,” he said.

She rose, and he squeezed her hand, leading her out of the restaurant.

“Good evening, come again,” the waiter called.

William waved, and they swept out into the tropical night. The breeze had lifted. In fact, it was downright gusty, as they slowly strolled towards the apartment complex, just a few blocks away. “Your place or mine?” Asked Penny, bumping her shoulder against William's.

“Yours?” He asked. “You probably have all kinds of cute lingerie you want to show me.”

“I do not,” she smiled, “but yes, we can go to mine.”

By now, they'd noticed that the breeze had become a strong wind. Penny jumped as a palm frond landed on the sidewalk in front of them.

“Hurry, let's get you inside,” said William, hustling her into the building. As they entered the lobby, his phone pinged.

“Crap,” he said under his breath, as he read his message.

“Everything okay?” Asked Penny.

“No, there's a tree down at one of my properties. Broken window, damaged roof. I'm sorry Penny, I need to go check on this.”

“Of course,” said Penny. “Work comes first.”

“I'll give you a call as soon as I get this squared away.”

“Of course,” Penny responded.

She was disappointed, but also relieved. That was it. William worked on other complexes, as well as this one. He probably took in extra money under the table, and that was why he was so financially well off.

“Can you at least walk me to my door, though, and then we'll see if business truly comes first?” she asked.

“Of course, I’ll walk you to your door,” William smiled. He stopped in front of the elevator, hitting the button and planting her in front of him, putting his finger under her chin and tilting her head up, smoothing her hair away from her face and looking into her eyes.

“You’re so beautiful. I can’t get enough of you.”

It was all she could do to not fall down. Her knees were weak, literally. She’d heard that expression, but this was the first time that she’d actually felt it.

“So, do I get a good night kiss?” He asked.

“What do you think? But one of the old people in the building is going to see you,” she giggled, even though she wanted nothing more than a good night kiss. Well, actually she did want more.

The elevator arrived, and in it, an old woman Penny had seen before, walking a very fluffy Maltese. This was, in fact, the first time she’d seen the Maltese actually walking. Usually, it had its own stroller, but she guessed this was the evening constitutional plus pee break. She and William smiled at each other as the woman rushed past them as they were still staring into each other’s eyes, muttering, probably preemptively scandalized at the idea that these two young people might be getting it on as soon as they went upstairs. It made it all the more tempting. They got into the elevator, and he wrapped his arms around her, making her wish they could stay like that forever. The elevator arrived at her floor, and he took her hand, leading her down the hall. He slowed down as they got to the door. When he leaned down and claimed her lips, her body responded instantly again, as if she had always known his. It was almost embarrassing, the way she found herself vacuum sealed to him, tilting her head so he could explore her mouth more deeply with his tongue. Fireworks were going off in her brain. *Yes*, she thought, *this feels so right*. He ran his hands down her back, cupped her ass, and squeezed her closer to him, where she could feel the desire mounting in him, as well. She wanted so badly for this to keep on going. Why did they have to stop? Suddenly, William broke contact, pulled back, and looked at her.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

His eyes burned into hers.

“Nothing. It just feels so good, to be with you,” he said.

“So good,” she agreed, moaning as he claimed her lips again. “I don’t want it to stop,” she said.

“Neither do I. Forget the broken roof. Let me in,” he said.

“I'm not that kind of girl,” she responded, even though every part of her was screaming that yes, she was that kind of girl. She wanted him now, wanted him inside of her, wanted him every possible way. Backwards, forwards, it didn't matter. She was a goner. She was done for.

“I'm lying. I am that kind of girl, but can we just pretend that I'm not?”

“I hate playing pretend,” he said, biting her neck as he kissed it. “I don't need to pretend I'm anywhere else but here, with you. But unfortunately, I do need to go check on the situation in my building.”

He sucked on her earlobe, gave her one last nibble to the lips, and smacked her on the ass.

“Go ahead, open the door, I want to see you in,” he said.

“You're such a gentleman,” she responded.

“Don't test me,” he said.

With trembling fingers, she opened the door. It was all she could do to not drag William in by his belt loops.

“I'm going to come back as soon as I can.”

She nodded, gave him one more peck on the lips, wished him luck, and closed the door. She almost sank to the floor at that moment. She paced around the apartment. William's eyes and lips were imprinted on her mind. The smell of him was in her nose, the feel of him lingering on her body. And she loved it. This wasn't what she'd planned for her life, but it felt so damn good. How could it possibly be wrong? What was she going to do? Take a cold shower? Watch a stupid TV show? There was an insistent throbbing between her legs that she couldn't ignore, but she had none of the toys she had back in New York. Just her fingers, and those were a poor substitute for what she imagined was in William's pants.

And then, her phone pinged.

William: *Still thinking of you.*

Penny: *Me, too.*

William: *I am hoping I can come back to you tonight.*

She fell back onto her bed, closing her eyes and trying to control her breathing. She'd quickly grown addicted to William, looking forward to his presence, his smell, the feel of him. She'd thought tonight would be the night. That they would finally give in to what they'd been tiptoeing around this whole time. But now, here she was, left with more delayed gratification. For a couple of hours, she held out hope that William would ping her again, telling her he was on his way back. But unfortunately, the hours ticked past, and eventually, her fatigue got the better of her, and she put herself to bed.

Chapter 35

The next morning, Penny woke up to an email from the trust lawyer. *I'm coming back into town, he'd written. We should have a meeting. And also, you should meet the other parties in the trust.*

Penny had to reread the email a few times. Her vision was blurring, her eyes almost crossing. So, it was true? There were other members in the trust. How was this possible? Nothing she knew of her family history would lead her to this conclusion. Had her grandmother or great grandmother made some bizarre business deal that now she was being punished for? She wrote back to the lawyer, *Perhaps I can meet you first and you can explain things and then I suppose we can meet the other parties, as you say? Could you tell me who they are?*

She made herself coffee and milled about while waiting for a response. She didn't know this trust lawyer personally, so didn't know what his email style was. It could be days, or it could be minutes. Thankfully, her phone pinged as a message came through. *We can meet, but I'm not at liberty to discuss. You'll have to meet them in person, and I'm also not at liberty to divulge their identity.* Penny clenched her jaw. How frustrating. What was that supposed to mean? That wasn't very helpful. She wrote back, *Well, is there anything to discuss until we meet these so-called other parties?* The lawyer's response was almost immediate. *Not really.*

Penny quickly tapped out an answer. *In that case, she wrote back, can we just meet this so-called other parties as soon as possible?*

It wasn't like she was really busy doing anything else. Her whole life was up in the air until she met these mysterious so-called other parties and figured out what the hell was going on with the trust. Every time she peered out the window, she could see Palazzo Leoni, and she felt a wistful longing, remembering times spent as a child having sweet tea in the courtyard, sunsets on the dock, getting onto their boat, motoring around Lake Worth, looking at manatees, going fishing, picnic baskets packed with the cream cheese and cucumber sandwiches the kitchen girl used to make. She remembered Lawrence bringing them to the beach, early in the morning before the sun got too strong. She and Ella having sleepovers and being told to stop giggling in the middle of the night. She could see in her mind's eye the pretty tiles all around the glorious fireplace they barely ever had to use because it was usually so warm. But on those couple nights a year when it got chilly enough

to make a fire, she remembered roasting marshmallows with Ella, Lawrence and Grandmama always nearby, smiling at them. Again, she wondered: had there been something between Lawrence and Grandmama? She'd never thought of it as a child, obviously. He was just always there, like a family member. But now, seen with the perspective of an adult, their closeness became suspect, especially in a historic context. What did it mean? How sad, if they had had a love affair and hadn't been able to be together in public, in society. Had there been some sort of scandal? Was that why Grandmama had quit the Everglades Club so suddenly? Why she'd had a decade of not socializing? She'd slowly come back, via the fabulous gay contingent on the island. She was such a grand dame, after all. A generous patron of the arts. Such a respected part of Palm Beach history, that people naturally gravitated towards her. The whole Everglades incident had happened before Penny's birth, so by the time she had been conscious of anything, things had seemed rather normal. Sure, the ladies around Grandmama weren't all from the upper, upper echelons of society, but everyone did respect her as the owner of Palazzo Leoni, and as the great friend and protege of Addison Mizner. Great Grandmama had been friends with the Flaglers, and those pictures of the beach days, and of the ice cream dates and of visiting friends' private zoos, all of that looked very, very glamorous. Penny felt like she could almost reach out and touch it. Reach out and taste it. What wouldn't she have given to live in those times? Grandmama's must have been a magical childhood. But her great grandmother and grandmother had never spoken of it with such longing. Was there a hidden dark side? Yes, she realized. Of course, there was. The things Ella had alluded to and said outright. Some of the things even Penny herself had experienced. There had been secrets, clearly. There had been inequality. And what about Lawrence? What had his life really been like? What had his parents' life been like? Palazzo Leoni had been built partially through the convict leasing program, which was barely a step above slavery. The staff in the house had all been what great Grandmama would have called *colored*. The more Penny remembered, the more she finally understood that there had been such an inequity that she now had a hard time reconciling it with the glamour of the house. If she in fact inherited this house, what would she do with it? Would she use it to entertain? To throw parties for the high society ladies of Palm Beach? That wasn't who she was, was it? But who the fuck was she? She wasn't at home in New York. She wasn't at home in the present. She wasn't at home in the past,

even though she'd spent her whole life dreaming of the it. Dreaming of the way things used to be. Trying to recapture something that had once been. And now, coming to realize that all of that had been an illusion. Having met William, too, having felt that spark of attraction to him, seeing the potential for something that was her own. What would she do if she got Palazzo Leoni? Would she sell it? It almost didn't feel right. Was the house really falling apart, like people said? How much could she actually get for it? And what would she do with the proceeds, if any? And who were these people who were co-trustees with her? Did they have a bigger share? That was another question. She wouldn't know, until the meeting. Until that meeting, she had however many days left, where her life would still be completely up in the air. Which, to be honest, it had been for years now. So, she should just simmer down and try to enjoy it. Maybe she should call William and have him take her somewhere fun. They could go on an adventure. She still didn't know exactly how much work his handyman job entailed, and whichever other businesses he talked about. But maybe she could give it a try. She checked her phone. *I'll try to organize a meeting as soon as possible*, the lawyer had written back.

She texted William.

Penny: Good morning. I don't know how much work you have, but do you want to play hooky? Go on an adventure?

William: Good morning, beautiful. Sorry about last night. I was up til past midnight. That sounds so fun. I'm waiting on a meeting, but as soon as that's settled, can I let you know?

Well, darn. The meeting with the trust lawyer was up in the air. A date with William was up in the air. What did she have to do? She should just go for a run and try to get rid of some of her nervous energy. She slipped on her sneakers and her leggings, grabbed her keys and her phone, and slipped out the door. She took the stairs down, which ensured she didn't bump into any old ladies. Once she got out the door, she ran past Palazzo Leoni, and onto the path that went around the waterway. It was still early, and not many people were out, save a few blue hairs walking their little fluffy white dogs. As her feet pounded the pavement, Penny tried to push all of her concerns, all

of her worries out of her mind. But it wasn't easy. She pushed herself harder, to run faster. Eventually, the struggle of breathing and keeping up with her heart rate would have to push all of those extraneous thoughts out of her mind, wouldn't it? But soon, as she ran, she started thinking about Grandmama, Great Grandmama, and her mother. Where the hell was her mother? Was she even still alive? She didn't know. Grandmama had refused to even speak of Violet, her wayward daughter. Lawrence had always shut down all her questions about this, too. Why was that so? Was there something wrong with her mother? Was there some other family secret she didn't know about? As she kept running, she started feeling more and more sorry for herself. To the point where, not only sweat, but also tears, started pouring down her face. Pathetic. And even worse, she had no one to comfort her. William was still mulling over whether he would take time to do something with her. Ella was on the other side of Lake Worth, probably getting dressed in a gorgeous power suit. Kissing her adoring husband and getting ready to go to her stunning modern office, where she would be making huge business deals and earning the equivalent of a luxury automobile in one fell swoop. How had Ella figured it all out, and Penny had no idea what she was doing? She picked up the pace, and pushed herself harder, but it only resulted in her gasping for air, and sobbing some more. She was being ridiculous. Here she was, in Palm Beach, which most people thought was heaven on earth. She had the luxury of going for a nice run in the morning instead of being stuck at work in some menial job, except, if she was stuck at work, maybe she'd have a feeling of purpose. She sobbed more loudly. She could stop running and just wipe her tears and sit on a park bench and feel bad for herself, but no, she would keep going, because clearly, all this energy had to go somewhere. As she rounded a blind corner, looking down at the ground so she wouldn't trip, she ran headlong into another jogger. *Oh no. How mortifying.*

"Oh! So sorry," said a voice.

Oh no. It was a familiar voice. She looked up, tears still running down her face.

"Oh my God, Penny, are you okay?"

Of course. She had to run headlong into William. Of all people.

"I'm fine," she sniffled, trying to get her sobs under control. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, I just...stubbed my toe," she lied.

“If you’re hurt, you’ve got to stop. Sometimes you need to slow down, Penny. Do you need me to walk you back home?”

“No, I’m fine,” she said. Why was he out for a run, when he was supposedly waiting to hear about a meeting?

“I just got back my schedule,” William said, brushing wisps of hair out of her eyes. “Are you still up for an adventure today?”

Yes, she needed to stop feeling sorry for herself, and go out with this gorgeous man.

“You sure you don’t have anything going on?”

“No, it’s my day off. The meeting I was waiting on is postponed. So where should we go?”

“Alright, uh, so how about Wellington?”

“Why don’t we go to Miami?” Asked William.

“Sure! I’ve been dying to revisit the arts district. Do you want us to take the train, or do you want us to drive?”

“I’ve never tried the High-Speed Rail. Let’s do that. It’ll get us there in just over an hour. Why don’t I walk you back home, and we get cleaned up, and we go?”

“I’ll take myself home,” said Penny. She needed some time to settle down. “I might have a little more crying to do. But I promise, I’ll be better after a shower.”

William smiled at her.

“All right, shall I pick you up at your door at, say, 9 o’clock? I’ll get us train tickets.”

“Sure,” she said, nodding, checking her watch. “I can make that work.”

“Okay,” he said, “so I’ll run this way. You run that way.”

She nodded, and even giggled. She was pleased that he seemed to accept her ridiculousness. She just hoped she didn’t bump into him in the elevator on the way back, because that would feel silly. But if she ran faster than he did, she should be okay. Having a fun day to look forward to did a lot to stop her tears. She made it back up to her apartment without spotting anyone else. Not William, not an old lady, not a little white dog.

What would she wear for their trip to Miami, she wondered as she showered, scrubbing herself, washing away all the negativity. If she wore a dress, would that lead to indiscreet high jinks on the train or under the table, wherever they chose to go to lunch? She heard Grandmama’s voice in her head. *Penny, remember to act like a goddamn lady.* Therefore, once she’d

toweled off, she selected a pair of white jeans, a comfortable pair of wedge sandals, and a pretty linen tunic with poppies on it. That would be something that would look good in any situation, wherever he would take her. Of course, what she really wanted to do was just jump into bed with him. But if she wanted to start considering a long-term relationship for the first time ever, she should prioritize getting to know William as a person before complicating things by sleeping with him, despite how he made her feel.

Chapter 36

Before she knew it, there was a knock at her door. Her heart started beating hard. She was so looking forward to today. Now that she wasn't sobbing, she was able to give William a shaky smile. She realized how awkward the situation was. Last time she'd seen him, other than this morning when she'd been crying, they'd been making out like two school children. They'd been on the brink of falling into bed, and now, something had shifted, again.

"I need to say this- I'm almost glad we were interrupted by a wayward branch last night," said William. "I want a real relationship with you, and I don't want the physical part to sway your decision..." He had a dead serious look on his face, and Penny was concerned for a moment.

"How would it affect my decision to..."

"Because it'll be that good," William said at last, with a cheeky grin, "I don't want you to fall in love with me for my body."

Penny burst out into giggles. In all seriousness, it was too late. She adored his body. Thought about it all the time. But she also loved being with him.

"I feel the same way- I mean, you shouldn't just want me for my body. That's why I wore jeans today," she admitted.

"I noticed. Not exactly easy access," William said. "But you still look fucking sexy."

"Stop it. We'll miss our train."

He had made her feel so much better. She was so glad they were able to do this. She needed a day of fun.

As she drove to the station, she told William as much. She didn't want to elaborate, but she he had received another email from the trust lawyer between her shower and getting dressed, confirming that a meeting between herself and the other parties in the trust would be happening the day after next, at 10 o'clock.

"My life is hell right now, too," said William, "except for the parts that have to do with you. So today, my only job is making sure we enjoy this day together."

"Thank you," Penny said, simply.

They made it to the train station, parked, and they hustled over just in time for the train.

“I think it was revolutionary when they built this,” said William as they boarded the train.

“The old people must love it. They can go to their favorite restaurants and hotels and cultural things and get as drunk as skunks.”

“Exactly, or they can take a nap,” William smiled, as they found their seats.

“I might take a nap,” Penny admitted. “I’m absolutely exhausted.”

She had an image of resting her head on his muscular shoulder and drifting off. It would only be better if he held her in his arms.

“Do you want me to go get us a coffee in the bar?” he asked.

“I would love that,” she admitted. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“No, you relax.”

By the time William came back with two coffees, she was indeed almost asleep.

“Sorry, I’m never like this,” she said, yawning.

“Here’s your coffee.”

He handed her an Americano, just like she’d requested.

“Come on, take a sip of your coffee, and then give it to me. And lean against me.”

She did as she was told, and before she knew it, she had drifted off. She woke up with a start, feeling a gentle hand on her arm, and yes, his arms around her.

“We’re almost there,” William was saying.

“Oh my god, did I drool on you?”

“Yes. I liked it,” he cracked.

“I’m so sorry I’m such boring company.”

“I’ll make you make it up to me. My turn to snooze on the way back- I’m warning you, I snore,” he laughed.

“I’m so not surprised. You seem like the snoring type,” she smiled.

“What’s your perfume, by the way? I love it.”

“Were you sniffing me while I slept?”

“Just a little,” he shrugged.

The train was coming to a stop. She was so excited for their adventure in Miami.

“It’s a custom blend Great Grandmama had made for me when I was a kid. It’s based on the perfume she wore,” Penny said.

“It smells of something from my childhood. Like roses.”

“We’re here,” said Penny.

They both looked out the train window. It would be fun to be in Miami. She hadn't been there in a while. She thought of her friend Constance, who used to live here, again. Constance’s romantic life had been pretty much as bad as Penny’s until she had gotten back together with her sexy Italian count, Lorenzo. Talk about a dream life.

About an hour later, Penny and William were at the Wynwood Walls, looking up at a mural.

“This one is so impressive,” Penny said. “It isn't my normal aesthetic, but the way the colors are, the way the shapes kind of abut each other, there's like, a tension here, you know what I mean?”

“Oh, I feel it,” William cracked. “But in all seriousness, I kind of love this. I feel like I respond to it.”

“So...I never asked you this, and this might sound a little bit silly, but I've usually judged people on it. What's your style?”

“My style?”

“I mean, I know what your apartment looks like, but it’s staged, right? And I know how you dress, but do you like modern, or are you more traditional?”

“I would call myself eclectic, I suppose,” he said. Penny shuddered.

“Ooh, eclectic...”

“I know what you're going to say,” said William. “You're going to say that people call themselves eclectic when they have no discernment, and they just put things in their space willy-nilly, but it's just that I react positively to things from different eras and different styles. And I hope I manage to put them together rather well.”

“Hmmm,” said Penny.

“Maybe you should have been an interior decorator,” William said. “You certainly have strong opinions.”

Penny thought about that for a second.

“I think I might end up insulting the homeowner.”

“You? Never!” William grinned and winced as she gently punched him in the arm.

“Did I tell you I worked for a design magazine? I mean, I guess I technically still do, but they're not sorry to see me gone. I tend to insult homeowners- the ones I interview, on the regular that way, too.”

“Yikes,” William smiled. “Why?”

“I just can't stand it when they redo something in a way that's historically not correct.”

“But sometimes, history was wrong,” said William. “History has been witness to so many abominations. I mean, just because something's old, or happened in the past, do you think that automatically makes it better? I don't think it does.”

Penny spun around and stared at him.

“Wow, that was really deep,” she said.

“Are you mocking me?”

“No, I'm being serious. I think you just said something I really needed to hear right now. Honestly, it has me doubting everything I've ever believed.”

“Not everything, I hope.”

Penny smiled.

“Well, maybe not everything.”

“Phew.”

“Now it's my turn to get a little deep,” said Penny. “I used to think that the past was the only stable thing I had to look back on. Like my present wasn't really real somehow, you know?”

“I don't know what that's like,” said William, smiling gently, looking at her with a warm, sweet expression. “But I'm so glad you're sharing how you feel with me.”

She looked back at him and hesitated, then just came out and said it:

“You make me want to try for a real relationship.”

Within a second, he had her in his arms, his lips on hers, the smell of his aftershave in her nose, the feeling of his hot skin against hers. It had been less than 24 hours since the last time he had done this, but already she'd been missing it. Craving it. Being back in his arms felt so right. He pulled back and gazed at her, giving her the chance to delve into those deep brown eyes of his, so close in color to her own, but richer, in her opinion. She'd never seen such a beautiful hot cocoa tone.

“Come on, let's walk, go see something else,” she said, tearing her eyes away from his.

“Gladly. I haven't been here since Covid,” he said. But they hung back, he, stroking the side of her face.

“Were you in the habit of coming here a lot before that?”

“Yes. I suppose I didn't tell you, but I have a Cuban ancestor, maybe more than one.”

“That’s cool. What else do you have in your background? I’ve never been curious about that sort of thing before, but my friend Ella and I, we’re doing DNA tests for our birthdays, so now, all of a sudden, I’m obsessed.”

“That’s fun...In terms of me, I’m not quite sure, but maybe a little bit of Jewish mixed in, too. How about you?”

“Oh, Great Grandmama was DAR, so she was as white bread as they come. Great Grandpapa was Mayflower society through and through. As for my grandfather and father, I don’t know. But I guess I’ll find out more, soon.”

“Do you think there’ll be any surprises?” Asked William.

“Well, not necessarily surprises, since I don’t really know anything, but I can’t imagine it’s anything too exciting.”

At the same time, she realized how ironic it was that she, who cared about history so much, about provenance, about the origins of things, hadn’t thought to care who the men in the family line might have been.

“You all right?” Asked William, noticing that she had gone silent.

“Yes. Kiss me again.”

He did as he was told, gladly, and only broke it off after sucking on her lower lip, which left her breathless.

“Yeah, definitely, I can feel a little bit of Latin lover in there,” Penny smiled.

“If you think you can sense the Latin lover in just a kiss, just you wait,” he grinned.

“You’re a bad boy,” she chided.

But maybe she was the bad girl, because instantly, all she had in her mind was the image of William in her bed, or better yet, in the shower. Those abs. That fine ass. His hands on her body.

“What are you imagining?” He asked. “You should see the naughty look on your face. I like it.”

“What about you? Can you imagine it?” She asked.

He groaned then and ground himself against her.

“What do you think?”

Oh yes, she could feel that he could imagine it quite well. And now, she couldn’t get him out of her mind.

“You’re lucky we’re out in public...”

“I would say unlucky,” he responded. “If we were at your place or at mine, I would have you already.”

That did it. She felt more wetness between her legs, more throbbing. She wanted him so badly. He ran his hands down her back, and then wrapped his arms around her, squeezed her hard.

"You're amazing," he said. "I've never met anyone like you."

"You don't really know me," she responded. "And I barely know you."

"But you feel it too, don't you?"

She nodded. "Yes, I don't know what it is...but yes."

"Come on, let me take you to lunch, or I'll end up taking you against the wall, right here."

"Too bad I decided to wear jeans," she smiled. "Where are you taking me? I'm starving."

"It's a surprise."

They hopped in an Uber, and moments later, found themselves at Joe's Stone Crab.

"This is my friend Constance's favorite," Penny exclaimed. "Her's ... and her uncle Harold's. They come here, always. It's their celebration spot."

"Well, it's my celebration spot too, now," said William, "celebrating having met you. You might think I'm ridiculous to say that so early after meeting you, but I can't help it."

"I like it."

Having never had any kind of serious relationship, nothing much past a one-night stand, she didn't know what a serious relationship was meant to look like anyway, so this felt just fine. It felt exactly right. It felt familiar and lovely. It felt like everything she'd been missing for such a long time. It felt like the closest thing to home she had right now.

William ordered for them, and they spent the meal alternately struggling with the massive crab claws and gazing into each other's eyes, smiling like two drunk people, even before they got tipsy on the Rombauer Chardonnay that Penny had mentioned Harold and Constance always enjoyed.

"This stuff is ridiculous," said William. "Could it be butterier?"

"Well, if you're going to go with a chardonnay, go for a butter bomb," Penny said. "That's what my Grandmama always said."

"Oh, your Grandmama condescended to have chardonnay, did she?" William teased.

"Occasionally. She wasn't as much of a snob as I've maybe made her out to be. Well, at least, I don't think she was. She picked and chose what she was snobbish about."

“I can respect that,” said William.

Penny raised her glass.

“Well, it seems that each of us has things we're not looking forward to in the next few days. But after that, we can get back to more fun together. Maybe I can cook for you.”

“You cook?” Asked William.

“I don't know if I'm a gourmet chef, but I have a few dishes up my sleeve. I should do that for you, to pay you back for all the meals you've taken me out to.”

The train ride back was full of kisses and whispered promises. Penny felt like she was buzzing, her entire body vibrating. There was nothing she would want more than to have William come home with her and ravage her there and then, but the shadow of the meeting in two days began looming over her, turning her mood dark as they approached Palm Beach.

“Is everything okay?” William asked, frowning, as she nosed into her parking space in the apartment building's garage.

“Yeah, I'm just a little stressed about...”

“Do you want to talk about it?” He asked.

“No, I hope that's okay,” she said. “It's not that I don't want to share these things with you, it's just that this is just kind of my own bullshit, and I want to move past it without dragging you down.”

“You know I'm here for you if...”

“No, this stuff needs to be put firmly in the past, and after that, we can move towards the future.”

“OK, and what do you have in store for tomorrow?”

“Stuff- including filming another YouTube segment.”

“That'll be fun.”

“If you thought Peter Palin was wild, you should see some of these other characters- each one has the potential to go viral.”

“I'll bet,” William smiled.

Was it a sad smile? She noticed he hadn't made another plan to see her, but she shouldn't be ridiculous- they had just spent a beautiful day together, talking about their budding relationship. Why was she so insecure?

They paused front of her door. He gave her a deep, delicious kiss, which almost had her throwing her resolve out the window and asking him to stay. But even then, the meeting with the trust lawyer loomed over her. Her whole life hung in the balance. But truthfully, this day with William had changed a

lot. Even if things went badly in this meeting, it wouldn't be so bad, would it? She had something to look forward to. Something she could be building on.

Chapter 37

The next day, Penny emerged from the shower, wrapping her hair into a turban like Grandmama had taught her, and throwing on a waffle knit bathrobe from one of those shops on Worth Avenue that was incredibly overpriced, but had lovely Turkish linen. She'd been crying again. Bawling, really. After alighting from the little cloud she'd been floating on in Miami, this morning, she had awoken with the crushing feeling of being stuck in limbo. The reality was, she was running out of money. The certainty that the trust lawyer was going to give her some very bad news was eating her alive. Chances were, she would need to return to New York soon, back to a life she didn't want, one that would mean leaving William. But realistically, how could she stay here, in Palm Beach? By getting a job in one of the fancy shops on Worth Avenue, for minimum wage? Where would she live? She couldn't stay in Lawrence's apartment forever.

She was in the kitchen, making coffee and feeling sorry for herself, bemoaning the fact that she hadn't gotten any groceries, and therefore had no eggs, or even bread to toast.

There was a knock on the door. She groaned. The only person this could likely be William, and she did not need him to catch her crying, for the second day in a row. Another knock. William clearly knew she was inside and wasn't going to take no for an answer.

"Just one minute," she called out. She hesitated. Did she have time to take the towel off her head? To check her bare face to make sure she was presentable. To throw on something other than the bathrobe? Another knock.

"Coming," she cried out.

She wiped under her eyes, pinched her cheeks, bit her lips, and cautiously opened the door. There stood William, his fine form nearly filling the entire door frame. Today, he was in his work wear, in those jeans that fit just so, smudged with paint and spackle. His worn work boots gave him a certain swagger, and his thin T-shirt highlighted his honed physique beautifully. Even better, in his hands, he held a white paper bag and a plastic cup.

"What's this?" Asked Penny.

"Only fresh OJ and your favorite breakfast sandwich."

“I don't deserve you,” said Penny, snatching the juice and the bag from his hands. He had truly listened to her, when she'd said that the first thing she would have upon coming to Palm Beach was fresh sweet, tangy orange juice, something that was not available to her in the cafeteria at Miss Porter's school. Just the simple taste of it would transport her straight back home, make her feel like she had officially arrived. By the time she'd gone to college, juice bars had sprung up in every supermarket, and the shock of the sweet Florida orange juice had somewhat abated, but still, there was a magical dimension to those freshly picked oranges from the Sunshine State, squeezed close to where they had been grown.

“Do you... do you want to come in?” Penny asked.

“If you're inviting me in,” said William cautiously. “Are you OK?”

Penny gestured for him to enter and closed the door behind him. She placed the bag of the orange juice on the kitchen counter. He pulled her into a hug.

“Why are you so nice to me?” she mumbled into his chest. “I'm so difficult with you, and I cry all the time, and I've been stupid about the whole no relationship thing. I totally get it if you don't want to complicate your life.”

William pulled back for a moment, and she looked up at his face, examining it, trying to read every micro expression.

“Believe me, I know what I'm getting into, and I've already made my decision,” said William. “I just hope you don't end up regretting it.”

“How could I possibly?” asked Penny. “You're everything I never knew I wanted.”

William gave her that devastating look. The strange, conflicted one she'd noticed several times before.

“Am I not actually your type? Is that it?” Asked Penny, biting her lip.

“You have no idea,” William groaned and squeezed her again, his hug turning into something entirely different. She felt, acutely, the fact that she was naked under the dressing gown. At first, William didn't kiss her, just squeezed her, held her close, and it felt so good that she almost sobbed. But then, she felt his lips on her neck, and shivered. His hands started exploring past the collar of the dressing gown, stroking her shoulders, which were still damp from the shower.

“Too bad you just got clean,” he whispered into her ear.

“You could see that as a good thing or a bad thing,” Penny shrugged, feeling the tie of her dressing gown loosen.

“You smell so good, but I might like you even better when you're a little sweaty,” William said.

“Oh, really?” She smiled. “I like you both ways. You're looking pretty cute in your work gear. What's on the schedule for today?”

“This.”

She shuddered again as his hand went down her back. Now, she pressed herself against him, her fingers playing at the waistband of his jeans, encountering bare skin. He pulled back for a moment, took her face in his hands.

“This?” She asked.

“There's absolutely nothing on my schedule that couldn't be postponed, for this,” he said, going in for a kiss that she melted into.

“What do you have on under that robe?” He asked.

“Why don't you find out?”

“I've been dying to, since the moment I stepped inside the apartment,” he said.

She gasped as he yanked at the belt, making the dressing gown fall open, revealing her naked form to him. She stared into his eyes, as if challenging him not to look down as he cupped her breasts. She took in a sharp breath. He came back in closer, shoving her against the kitchen counter.

“You're so beautiful,” he whispered into her ear.

Before she knew it, he had lifted her up, placing her butt on the counter. Now, he was grinding against her, and she arched her back, crying out as he sucked on her nipples. She wrapped her legs around him and squeezed. God, she wanted him inside of her so badly. She was trying to go for his belt, when he sank down to his knees in front of her.

“Where do you think you're going?”

The phrase ended in a gasp and a moan as she felt his fingers splay her open, and his tongue diving into her most intimate spot.

“I don't usually have breakfast, but for you I'll make an exception,” he growled, going back in to tease her with his tongue. The shock and sensation of it was already almost sending her over the edge. She'd fantasized about this, or something like it, so many times, and now it was happening. The things he was now doing with his tongue, and with his fingers, were beyond delicious. But she wanted more. She wanted him inside of her, filling her.

“Please, please,” she was crying out.

“I want to make you come like this, first” he whispered.

With that knowledge, she focused on the sensation of his tongue, on how he sucked on her clit so gently, his fingers spreading her apart and delving into her, awakening sensations she hadn't felt in so long. She arched her back more, and gasped as she felt one of his hands running up her stomach, cupping a breast, pinching a nipple.

“Oh my God,” she groaned. “I'm so close.”

Another thrust of his finger, and she exploded. Waves of pleasure coursed through her. She bit her lip and ground herself against his face, and he licked at her harder. She heard him, and felt him, groaning, which created a buzzing vibration, and sent another wave of pleasure coursing through her. As the orgasm rode out, he lapped at her more gently, teasing out the sensation to the end. When she finally let out a shudder and a sigh, he rose back up, his hands on her thighs, massaging them as he kissed his way up her stomach, between her breasts, and to her mouth. She could taste herself on his lips. He was breathing as hard as she was. She loved that giving her pleasure had excited him so much, but... *wait*.

“Why are you stopping? You promised...you promised that once you made me come...”

“You were too sexy,” he groaned.

“What? I didn't even touch you.”

“Oh, but I touched you. It was just the thought of you. The sight of you. It was my mouth on your pussy. You can't imagine how you drove me crazy, but I wanted to give this to you this morning.”

“I wanted you to give me something else, too,” she smiled.

“We've got time,” he said. “I'm here. You're here.”

“Can you fault a girl for being impatient?” She smiled.

He kissed her again.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning. You want to share my breakfast sandwich with me?”

“Oh, I've had everything I wanted,” he smiled. “I might have a sip of coffee, if you make me one.”

“It's the least I can do.”

“Cover yourself up,” he said. “I don't think I can take it anymore. As is, I'm going to have to go home and change.”

“You're like a teenager.”

“You make me feel like one.”

She made him a coffee and took a sip of her orange juice. It was nothing so delicious as what she'd just experienced, but it was not too shabby. She was ravenous now and took hungry bites of the breakfast sandwich William had brought her, basking in the afterglow. All of a sudden, she remembered. Reality. *Shit.*

“Crap,” she said. “I'm going to be late. Thanks to you.”

“Oh, you don't need to thank me,” he grinned.

“I really do,” she said, “but now it's your fault if I'm late. I've got to go, and I have to take another shower.”

“Why? You smell delicious.”

“To you, maybe.”

“To me, definitely. I think I'm going to wear your perfume all day long,” he said. “Do I see you when you're done? In fact, I might postpone what I was doing and come with you. Do you need a cameraman again?”

“I suppose it couldn't hurt,” Penny smiled.

She would welcome having William with her today. It would give her more gravitas that she had another person helping out. She should eventually hire a cameraman, if she ever had the money to do so. In William's case, she would gladly repay him with favors.

“Could you possibly be ready in 15?” She asked.

“Yep. I'll be right back. I'll even wash my face.”

“I think it's best,” she laughed.

He gave her a light kiss and swept out the door, leaving her staring after his perfect ass. William was the hottest man she'd ever seen, and she'd made him come in his pants. The thought of it made her strangely happy.

Chapter 38

She washed up quickly, hopping back into the shower for a minute, trying not to replay the events of that morning in her head, lest she get distracted. She threw on the outfit she'd already been planning, another pair of slim white trousers with tan suede espadrilles, and a blue and white striped tunic belonging to Grandmama, who had worn it as a dress, with tassels on the bottom of it. It was a look that said polished, but that was comfortable enough to move around in as she worked. She was excited for this project, this one featuring a well-regarded decorator her mother had apparently gone to school with. Her grandmother had been friends with the decorator's mother. Theirs was one of the older businesses in town, situated not on Antiquers' Row, but in a little house set apart from the main drag. Penny remembered going in with Grandmama a few times. There was a shop, stuffed to the gills with cute fashion and home accessories, and then the design studio, with fabric samples lining every wall and stacked in every corner, including in the bathroom. Penny wondered if the place had changed, like so many other things in Palm Beach had. It was getting harder and harder to find the traces of the old town she had loved so much. But living in the past simply wasn't an option, was it? So many things from the past were just an illusion, or a lie. They were rusting and rotting from the inside, like so many of the houses here, including, no doubt, Palazzo Leoni.

Penny was just putting the finishing touches on her outfit, including putting on a pair of chic fuchsia pom-pom earrings her boarding school friend Brooke had sent her, when she heard a knock on the door.

"Are you here for a replay?" She said, as she opened up for William.

"You decide," he said. "I'm simply reporting for duty."

"Well, you look perfect."

His hair was damp, which of course made her imagine him in the shower. He wore one of his many linen shirts, and a relaxed pair of tan trousers paired with some slip-on sneakers.

"OK, let's go. I imagine we should take my car. Some of my equipment's still in there. You know how to work the lights and the microphone by now."

"Yes, maybe you can hire me as your full-time assistant," William smiled.

"I would love that, but I don't have the budget."

"I would gladly accept various forms of payment," William suggested.

If only, thought Penny. It would be a blast to work alongside William. Especially if she got to pay him in favors. They hadn't slept together yet, but this morning's episode, and their off-the-charts chemistry, had made her pretty positive that the main event would be nothing short of explosive.

"Tell me more about this project," said William, as they drove towards their destination.

"It's Crystal Interiors. They've been around forever," said Penny. "Mary, the grandmother...her house was one of the first on this island. A Victorian confection of a home. It came in shipped on a barge, a gift from her new husband."

"That sounds romantic."

"Yes, and there's an old church nearby that they've since converted into a home, too. It's pretty iconic. The daughter started out working with her mother."

"Speaking of, you mentioned your mother only briefly, and I didn't ask- Is she still alive?"

"I barely knew her," said Penny.

"Oh, I'm sorry. So, she's passed away?"

"Not that I know of," said Penny. "She basically abandoned me to Grandmama. They had a falling out, and she was disinherited."

"Why?"

"I guess she was something of a free spirit, and she went to Europe. Why? You think that half of why I'm a little messed up is because my mother didn't want me? If so, let's not even talk about my father."

"What happened to your father?" Asked William.

"Nothing. I don't even know who he was. And I thought I told you-I don't know who my grandfather was, either."

"Oh. Wow."

Did William look shocked? Horrified? Uneasy? She couldn't really tell.

"At least I know who my great grandfather was, if that makes it less tragic for you."

"Oh?" asked William.

"Hold up," said Penny. "We're here."

They pulled up into the parking lot of Crystal Interiors.

"We'll continue this conversation later. I want to know all about your family, too. Yours is clearly less fucked up than mine."

"It's all a question of degrees," William retorted.

“Okay, well, here we go. How do I look?” She asked as she picked up her bag.

“You look delicious.”

“Don't you start,” she grinned.

They entered the shop and were greeted by Tiffany, the head design assistant.

“Mary and Minty wished they could be here,” said Tiffany, “but they got called away by a client. You know how it is. These New York types, these days, they won't take no for an answer. When they say jump, you have to respond with ‘how high,’ even though there's nobody like Crystal Interiors, you know what I mean?”

“Sure,” said Penny.

“They're all dying to get their McMansions decorated by us to try to gain that old money Palm Beach look. The problem isn't with what we deliver, though, the problems happen after the fact. They start adding in things, and then they just lose the look.”

“Oh?” Penny and William shot each other a glance.

“And, well, it's all in their lifestyle,” Tiffany continued. “They'll just never have it. And that old Palm Beach, well it's sad to say, isn't it, but it's kind of gone...”

Penny found herself nodding, bemused. This monologue was entertaining, but she shuddered to think what would happen if Mary or Minty caught wind of her employee's truth bombs.

“I am so sorry,” said Tiffany. “I've got to stop saying things like that. You're here to film us and make it all romantic, right? You're not here to film those pathetic ladies standing out on the sidewalk out there...here- look at them...” Tiffany gestured out the window. Two women, dressed to the hilt in pink and green ensembles, were casually loitering on the sidewalk, striking poses.

“What are they doing?” Asked Penny, fascinated.

“There's a TikTok creator who started doing pieces on Palm Beach fashion, and now it's a status symbol to be featured, so these ladies get dressed up every day and hang out in places where she's liable to be filming.”

“OK, that is hilarious,” said Penny.

“I know. But anyway, you're here to do an old Palm Beach piece.”

“Well, that was the original plan,” said Penny, “but quite honestly, what you said is so true. The old Palm Beach is pretty much gone. It's just present

in gilded memories, and in these caricatures. I was going to say that I could come back and film when Mary and Minty are here, but frankly, I'd just love to know what new clients are asking for, and what the struggles are."

"Let me give my boss ladies a call," said Tiffany. "I would hate to get fired over this, but I think that this is something that needs to be said."

Penny and William looked at each other as Tiffany ran off to fetch a phone.

"You sure about this?" William asked.

"I've been unrealistic. It's time to move forward and live in the present."

"Okay," said William. "I mean, I like it. I think it's worthwhile to talk about these things. You can keep it positive."

"Yes, I think I can," said Penny.

Tiffany returned with a huge smile.

"Well, I'm shocked, but they love the idea. Now, we can't insult any of their clients or anything, but they said, let's look to both the past and the future and talk about how that tension is working in our business."

"Great. And also, please, please, please, can I take some shots from inside the bathroom? It's kind of one of my favorite things," said Penny. "The fact that you're like the most glamorous number one decorating studio in Palm Beach, and that most of the fabric samples are in the bathroom, because you can't afford a bigger building, while your clients are living in these giant McMansions..."

"Hmm, I didn't ask that, but I can't imagine they would say no," said Tiffany. "So... sure. I hope this doesn't mean our clients will stop hiring us."

"The chances of them watching my YouTube channel are low," Penny admitted. "And we'll make sure to give it a twist where they're still clamoring for you. After all, the design speaks for itself."

"You know," said William, "your Peter Palin video has a similar theme- his stories about the good old days contrast so much with the present reality."

Penny stared at him.

"What?" He asked. "What did I say wrong? It's true!"

"I'm an idiot. I noticed that tension when I was editing, and was desperately trying to edit it out, to portray a lie, which is so boring. This dichotomy- it's so much more interesting. It's going to be the theme of the whole series!"

"Oh, well, I'm glad I could help," said William, with a wink.

She could have kissed him, but it wouldn't have been professional.

The next few hours went by in a blur. As Penny and William got back into the car, she was beaming.

“I think I got some amazing footage,” she said. “Thanks to you.”

“You also got some pretty great sound bites, as far as I can tell- and that’s all thanks to your interviewing skills, Penny.”

“I mean, I’m going to have to do some pretty intensive editing work on this...”

“Who edits your videos?” William asked.

“Duh. I do,” said Penny.

“You do?”

“It’s not rocket science. It’s just time consuming, but it has to be done.”

“OK, and how do you advertise?”

“Well, I don’t like to pay for advertisements, so I just announce each video on social media, and well, I have my mailing list, and I’ve automated some things.”

“Penny, why are you so hard on yourself?”

“What do you mean?”

“You say you don’t have any skills, and that you’re not employable, but look at all these things you can do- and you’ve taught yourself.”

“I didn’t have a choice. I didn’t have the finances to do it, and I wanted it done right,” she said.

“You’re amazing,” said William, beaming at her and squeezing her hand.

“Whatever.”

“No, you blow me away. I think you’re amazing at what you do, and I want to see you pursuing your creative passions, but if you ever needed a so-called real job, you could get one in a second.”

“Thanks, but I don’t believe that,” Penny pouted. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“What about monetizing this?” Asked William.

“I thought we agreed to...”

“Nope. We didn’t. I want to know, how are you monetizing your videos? How do we support you, using your creativity to make money instead of trying to teach manners to Upper East Side kids? Those brats, they don’t even appreciate you.”

“I kind of enjoy it though,” Penny smiled. “I almost miss some of those little brats. Except for Toby. He’s an asshole.”

“I’m sure you’re really good with children.”

“Yeah, weirdly I am,” said Penny.

“So, have you decided?”

“Decided what?”

“Do you want any?” William pressed.

“Are you asking me to have kids with you?” She scoffed.

“That would be a bit forward. I'm just asking if you like the idea of it.”

“I could like the idea of making them with you,” Penny retorted.

“William groaned and squeezed her hand, placing it on his crotch. He was rock hard already.

“Oh, I can tell that you like that idea, too,” she said, “but we don't want an incident like this morning, do we?”

“No, that was a waste,” William smiled. “But you haven't answered me yet.”

“Maybe one day, with the right person,” Penny said.

“Good, so, back to that, I would love to go to practice making babies with you. But unfortunately, I have some meetings this afternoon.”

“Oh.” Penny was disappointed. She'd already been starting to picture what would happen when they got back to the apartment.

“Can I call you in case I get out earlier than I'm afraid I might?”

“You mean, like a booty call?”

“Never mind, you're right. I don't want our first time to just be a booty call.”

“I don't mind,” she said. “We could make it special no matter what time you come by.”

“I don't doubt it. Stop making me think that way, you're driving me crazy,” he groaned, pushing her hand against his member. From what she could feel, he was impressively proportioned, which came as no surprise.

“What am I going to do with you? God, talk to me about taxes, or something, or...”

“Wait, you aren't one of those premature...” she began, taking her hand away.

“Stop it,” said William. “No, it's just you. It's your fault. You're so fucking sexy. Don't worry. As soon as I've had you, all of you, every which way, I'm sure I'll become blasé, maybe a little bored. After that, maybe it'll take me some time to get it up, even.”

“Stop it,” Penny smiled.

“Kidding. I don't think that will ever happen,” said William. “But right now, I need to go to work. You need to help me to control myself.”

“What do I get in exchange?” Asked Penny.

“You name it. But not now. Don't name it now. I couldn't take it.”

She laughed, delighted. This. This banter. This sort of exchange. She loved it. Couldn't get enough of it.

She parked the car in the apartment's parking garage, and William walked her to her apartment door.

“You are not to let me in under any circumstances,” he said. “I'm going to be late.”

“Oh, you mean, just like you made me late this morning?”

“I didn't make you late, we made it there on time,” he said.

He gave her a peck on the lips. They both wanted more, but he pushed himself away.

“I need to go,” he said. “I'm never going to get anything done, with you around. But I love it.”

She watched him leave, her eyes glued to that fine ass, a smile playing on her lips.

Chapter 39

Once William was gone, Penny wondered, what about the projects he was going to do this morning, wearing his work pants and work boots? Now, he was heading off to some mysterious meetings. What kind of meetings? Again, she wondered, was he seeing someone else? The suspicion started to creep into her mind. It didn't add up. A handyman who then had these meetings that he went to, well dressed to boot, living in the building, but not really doing the work that he should be doing to warrant the free apartment, if it was free, which she assumed it must have been. And now that the whole complex had been purchased by an investor, she wondered if Lawrence had been getting threatening letters asking him to sell his apartment. That's what usually happened. In any case, Ella would probably inherit the apartment before things came to a head. She would probably end up selling. The resulting windfall would be merely a blip in her real estate empire. If Penny had to choose, would she live here on the island, or in West Palm? She was starting to really appreciate West Palm, especially its texture, the differences between the various neighborhoods. She particularly liked El Cid. It was of course ridiculously out of reach for her, but the retro style of the 1930s villas called to her. Again, these houses were all probably falling apart, and they were shacks compared to Grandmama's place, but Penny had to prepare herself for the very real possibility that she would not be able to maintain the palazzo or hold on to it herself. But until she knew the specifics from the trust lawyer, she shouldn't dwell on the negative. She might as well occupy herself editing more of her footage.

She sat down at the computer and airdropped everything she'd recorded that day to her laptop. She thought about what William had said. Was she really capable of working in the real world? Did she really have some skills she could apply? She clearly was lacking some trust in her own abilities. Maybe she had sold herself short. She scanned through the video, trying to decide how to organize the segments. She grew distracted by a frame where she had accidentally filmed William, his handsome face scrunched up with intense focus as he set up the light to illuminate the scene perfectly. He really was so gorgeous, and he was hers, wasn't he? Her heart beat a tattoo as she stared at his image. Had he really meant what he'd said about babies? She, Penny Wells, was for the first time not just dreaming of having a family to nurture her. She dreamed of having a family of her own. Having babies with

someone like William would have its challenges financially, but theirs would be a house filled with joy. She could feel it. Was it true that they had all the time in the world? Could she possibly stay here? She had to believe it. She was glad she hadn't had any further outbursts today, and that nothing bad had happened during this perfect morning of filming with William. She'd proven that she wasn't completely a crazy bitch. And he'd made her feel so good about herself, and also, well, he'd made her feel so good, period. Was this a glimpse of her potential future life with him? Where would they even live, though? In his apartment? She hated herself for feeling that that might not be enough for her. But they could build something together. It wasn't just about William, and what he was doing. He was right. She had some skills. She could apply them to something. She just needed to brainstorm.

Before she knew it, the light was fading, and she looked out the window, shocked. She'd been hyper focused on her video editing, and her dreams of the future, and she was proud of what she'd begun to create with this series. She needed to create thumbnails and descriptions for the videos, but first she needed to go for a walk, or a run, get some fresh air.

Again, she had that nagging thought: was William telling the truth about business meetings, or was he spending time with someone else? Why was she thinking this way? She needed to put that out of her mind. They didn't owe each other anything right now. They had barely just met. They didn't need to be exclusive, did they? Despite the promises, and the banter...

She checked the time and threw on a running outfit. She felt guilty that she hadn't gone to see Lawrence. It clearly made him happy to talk about the good old days in Palm Beach. But also, she felt a tension in Lawrence, between wanting to tell her stories and for some reason withholding information. Sure, maybe some things weren't his story to tell, but how unfair it was that he knew the truth, and she didn't.

After her run, she returned to the apartment, ordered a pizza, and ate it while watching new episodes of *This Old Mansion*. The cohost they had hired instead of her, a girl named Heidi, was pretty knowledgeable, Penny had to admit, but also cute, self-effacing and charming. Penny hated to admit it, but it made for good television. And she couldn't had done better herself. This was disappointing. What could she even hate watch anymore?

Eventually, she gave up hoping that William would text her for a booty call, and just went to bed.

Chapter 40

She woke up in a panic. In her dream, she'd overslept, and had been forced to run to the trust lawyer's meeting in her pajamas. Rubbing her bleary eyes with her knuckle, she checked her watch and groaned. She had a couple hours left until the big meeting. She was going to put on her fashion armor, in the form of one of Grandmama's St. John dresses, a red one, and looking her best, she would face whoever her mysterious enemy, the other party in the trust, might be. Once she was dressed, she got sick of pacing the apartment and decided to distract herself with a stroll.

Penny made her way down Worth Avenue, aimless. As she crossed the street, she spotted a familiar figure- or was she just imagining things? No, there he was. It was William, wearing another very un-handyman like ensemble of white linen shirt and perfectly cut blue trousers that hinted at what she knew lay underneath. A pair of slip-on loafers worn with no socks, of course, made him look positively European. He had an old woman with coiffed platinum curls, dressed in a fuchsia Chanel suit, hanging off his arm, her eyes hanging on his lips, evidently following his every word, as if he were spewing forth diamonds. Well, she couldn't blame the old lady. Did those two have some sort of family relationship? She wondered. He hadn't mentioned anyone in town. Penny realized that she'd paused in the middle of the sidewalk to watch the pair. William's body language was so careful. So serviceable. What a gentleman. Whether this old lady was related to him or not, he was being so solicitous as he helped her to cross the street, like a ridiculously hot Boy Scout. Penny almost wished that she could be the one hanging on his arm at that moment. Then, William happened to spot her. He lifted his eyes towards her and gave her a wink that set her heart a-fluttering, before discreetly gesturing for her to wait one second. Evidently, the old lady was arriving at her destination, and would no longer need his services. Penny paused, her heart beating. She didn't usually take orders from men, but William was different. If he told her to wait, she would wait. No matter how long he meant, whether it was one second, one minute, or one hour, there she would stay, rooted on the sidewalk. Just to make herself look less lame; she started pretending to pay attention to a bejeweled necklace in a window. Within less than a minute, William was by her side.

“Hi,” he said, giving her a squeeze.

“Hi.” She looked into his eyes, not quite sure how to greet him, after yesterday morning. Were they at the point in their relationship where they kissed each other hello in public? She didn't quite know.

“What were you doing? Is that a relative of yours?” Penny asked.

“Oh no, that's old Mrs. Parma, who has an apartment above Via Amore. She was a Grande dame in Palm Beach for years, but recently downsized, by choice, apparently.”

“Oh yes, she was a friend of my grandmother's,” Penny smiled. “I hadn't recognized her. You know, these ladies, they end up looking a bit similar, unfortunately.”

“I know, such a shame,” said William. “I wish people would just leave their natural faces alone.”

“And accept their natural beauty?”

“And help me to be able to tell them apart. Sometimes I feel I have that processing difference where I can't recognize people, but then I realize I just live in Florida,” William quipped.

Penny let out a giggle.

“That might be the funniest thing you've ever said, William.”

“Why, thank you. Anything to make you smile. I love that giggle.”

“Yesterday was fun,” Penny said.

“Which part?” William asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Not just that part. All of it. You helping me. I had a wonderful time.”

“So did I. And I enjoyed Miami, too,” he said. “I hope that's the first of many excursions for us.”

“Definitely. I was thinking maybe we could maybe go to the Keys,” said Penny.

“I was thinking I could maybe take you to bed,” said William.

“Well, aren't you direct?” She smiled. She felt exactly the same way. “Should I pencil it into my calendar?”

“I think it warrants pen. You look elegant. Where are you off to now?”

“I have that annoying meeting today, remember? I'm dreading it.”

“Oh, I have one, too. What time is yours?”

Penny considered him. She didn't want to think about the meeting in too much detail. Not when she had this dreamboat in front of her. “Oh, mid-morning,” she said evasively.

“Me too, as luck would have it,” said William. “So, how about this? How about after our annoying meetings are over, we reconvene, maybe around four or five? I think I could get away from my duties before too late, and I could take you out.”

“Oh? Where would you like to take me?” Penny smiled.

“How about we explore the wrong side of the tracks? We could go to some place in West Palm Beach, to be dangerous and different. You know, get off our island.”

“I think that would be perfect,” Penny replied. “So, I’ll change into something casual.”

“Yes, casual, but don’t hesitate to wear something I could take off easily.”

What was it about him? That mix of bad boy and gentleman? The way he made her react in a microsecond?

“Thank you,” she said.

“For what?” he asked, sweeping her aside as a small poodle ran past them on the sidewalk, followed by a woman with overly inflated lips and precariously high heels.

“You gave me something to look forward to. I’ve been dreading today, so thank you for giving me something that’s a bright spot.”

“I should thank you. I’m feeling the same,” said William. “Give me a kiss. For luck.”

Chapter 41

Penny was just getting behind the wheel of her car, dread in the pit of her stomach, but also, a tiny little butterfly of hope, as she thought about what she was going to find out during this meeting, when her phone rang. She picked up.

“Hi, this is Francesca at Mr. Rutherford’s office?”

“Yes?”

“I know you have an appointment with Mr. Rutherford this morning, but one of his children had a nasty fall on the playground, and he’s having to reschedule his appointments.”

“Oh,” said Penny. “I’m so sorry. Is his child okay?”

“I think it’s just a broken arm, but I’ll let him know you asked about him. Are you available tomorrow, same time, by any chance?”

“Yes.”

Her birthday lunch with Ella was scheduled for noon, tomorrow, but what choice did she have? Ella would understand if she was late. Penny noticed a silence on the other end of the line.

“You there?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry I thought you needed to check your calendar. Did you say yes?”

Certainly, Francesca was not used to people with such a clear schedule as Penny’s. Then again, she did live in Palm Beach, where the original Ladies of Leisure lived.

“Yes, I can make that work,” she said. “10 o’clock tomorrow, correct?”

“Yes, we’ll see you then and there.”

“Will the other party be there, too?” Penny asked, but Francesca had already hung up.

Now that she was already dolled up, and behind the wheel of the Cadillac, she decided to kill time by going to find some more possible subjects for her YouTube series. It would be wonderful to see if old Sheila Ford was still around. She had been a very eccentric lady with a cotton candy coif, which she had taken to dyeing a soft shade of purple. Her style was inimitable, truly maximalist, with her kaftans and gobs of extravagant jewelry, which she had inherited from a doting husband who had long since passed away. Her sidekick, which she featured prominently on her Instagram stories, was a massive potbellied pig, one of the ones that was supposed to be miniature,

but never was. Sheila owned one of the more over-the-top furniture and style emporiums in Palm Beach. Penny could get her to talk about the different characters she'd come across in her life, and some of the better houses she had furnished. That could be interesting. She could talk about classic versus eccentric.

She drove towards Sheila's shop, guided by memory, and pulled into the parking lot, which was empty. The shop was dark, but sometimes it was just a trick of the sunlight. She went and tested the door, which, sure enough, opened, with a jingling bell signaling her entrance. She looked around the space, which was still just as cheerfully appointed as, admiring a wall panel featuring two monkeys, flanked by two mirrors with a plaster seashell detail. Sheila came from around the corner, supporting herself on a cane carved of some material which may have been wood, but was made to look like red coral.

"Penny!" Sheila cried delightedly.

"Sheila, so good to see you. Wow, I love your cane. That's so chic."

"It would be far chicer if I didn't need to use one," Sheila cracked. "How have you been? It's been such a long time. My condolences, by the way."

"Yes, I'm devastated," said Penny. She had barely given herself time to truly mourn Grandmama, and she realized now that visiting all of Grandmama's old friends was cathartic to her, as well as giving her a sense of purpose.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I thought I would come by and say hi. I'm, you know, collecting stories about Grandmama and just waiting to see what happens with the house."

"Oh gosh, the house. I hope you won't be saddled with that," said Sheila.

"What do you mean?" Asked Penny, taken aback.

"I'm sure it's nearly crumbling into the ocean at this point," said Sheila.

Penny considered the elderly woman, cheeks burning.

"Et tu, Sheila? Everyone's so negative about it. It's such a beautiful structure."

"Yes, but Palm Beach is such a terrible climate for homes and, well, Addison was brilliant, visually, but the materials he used tended to gain a bit more of an impression of age than he'd planned on."

"I suppose you're right about that," said Penny.

Almost so as to prevent Sheila from saying anything more about the house, Penny filled the silence by explaining her new concept for the YouTube series.

"I've already interviewed Peter Palin," she noted.

"Oh, that old rascal," said Sheila. "I hope he didn't tell you too many salacious stories."

"Well, just a few," said Penny. "I hope you have some too."

"Oh, you can count on me, darling. You know, you should also interview Lawrence," she said pointedly.

"Really? He's not a decorator."

"But he is old Palm Beach to the hilt. He's got the dirt..."

"Funny. I have been speaking to Lawrence," Penny said, "but he's not very forthcoming. He just tells me some romantic crap about lemonades and private zoos, and it stops there."

"Well, he's not going to live forever. He might grow more motivated to spill some of his secrets," said Sheila. "Ask him about the boating party. Phenomenal party, a Venetian theme of course, to go with the house. Manservants wearing striped gondolier outfits and singing, rowing all over Lake Worth. People who hadn't been invited were staring jealously over from the Everglades Club and falling in the water trying to get in. Candlelight everywhere. Oh, the food, the buffets were piled with incredible food. Suckling pigs with apples in their mouths. Shhh don't tell Bitsy," she said, gesturing at her hog, who was busy snuffling at something in a corner. "It was a memorable evening, even more so in that was just before your grandmother told everyone to fuck off," said Sheila. "Pardon my French."

"Oh, that sounds like Grandmama," said Penny. "And you were saying, she told them to fuck off because?"

"Ask Lawrence."

Fine. She would.

Chapter 42

Penny walked into Green's Pharmacy, ignoring the hordes of tourists who had started frequenting it after hearing about it from some influencer or another. In many cases, this sort of success would change a place, make it not as authentic as it once was, and send the locals who had loved it fleeing for different shores, but that was not the case with Green's. Elegant locals mixed with wide-eyed tourists hoping for a sighting of one of the famous denizens of Palm Beach. Penny recognized the old waitress behind the counter from years and years of going with Grandmama. This had been a special treat for them. A place where Penny would tell Grandmama about her various frustrations and her crushes, even if Grandmama had always simply told her, "You don't need a man, Penny. Be like me. Strong. Forget that silly boy."

Penny was starting to think that maybe Grandmama had been wrong. Maybe she would have been happier with somebody to support her through her life. At least her grandmother had had Lawrence. She'd never believed the rumors about a romantic relationship between Grandmama and Lawrence. But now, she wanted to know the truth, and she would get him to talk by bribing him with his favorite food.

"Hey, Kathy!" said Penny.

"Penny, it's been so long. You look absolutely breathtaking, my dear."

"You're too kind," said Penny.

"We miss your grandmother."

"I do, too."

"What are you in the mood for? Grab that spot down at the counter before one of these kids stops taking pictures and gets it."

"No, actually, I was going to do takeout. I'm going to go visit Uncle Lawrence."

"Oh, that sweet man," said Kathy. "I haven't seen him in forever. I was worried about him. So, he's okay?"

"He's in senior living," said Penny. "But he's doing great. I thought I would bring him his favorite food."

"Tuna melt it is, then," Kathy said.

"With extra mayo," Penny added.

“You know it. And extra pickles. I know.” She tapped the side of her head. “I still have a mind like a steel trap. He took to adding hot sauce in these past years. Do you think that’s wise?”

“Let’s put it on the side,” said Penny, sagely. “You know what? You might as well make me one, too. Lawrence’s way.”

She winced a bit, knowing that this was a luxury her bank account could scarcely afford, but a girl had to eat. And she had her credit cards. She heard Grandmama’s chiding voice in her head, then. “When you buy something on credit, it’s not really yours.” Tell that to the tuna sandwich that would soon be in her belly. Penny handed Kathy her card.

“Why don’t you hang out over there and I’ll let you know when you order is ready.”

“Sure thing. Nice seeing you, Kathy.”

Penny stood in the corner, watching the tourists jostling for attention inside the luncheonette, snagging extra copies of the free publications in the corner as souvenirs. She turned her attention to the traffic going by down the street. It was a veritable parade of luxury cars. Rolls Royces. Bentleys. Ferraris. Porsches. It had been like this when she was growing up here, but she felt like it had become even more pronounced. Normal cars were in the minority, and the supercars were getting even more souped up. Where was the limit? And funnily enough, Grandmama’s car was probably counted as one of the more valuable ones. It felt so strange to be in a place where there were no houses under at least ten million dollars. It was certainly not real life, though people did live their lives here, in this artificial wonderland. A shiny, perfectly restored baby blue classic American car- similar to Grandmama’s, but not exactly the same, went by, driven by an ageless woman with perfectly coiffed white hair and glimmering diamond earrings. She was probably on her way to pick up her poodle from the groomer’s, Penny decided. Though she realized that this woman probably had someone to do that for her, or the groomer came to the house. Then again, one had to do something to keep oneself busy. A dapper gentleman behind the wheel of some kind of convertible, a gull-wing version, no less, so perhaps a Mercedes, adjusted the gold signet ring shining on his pinky. And now, here came Penny’s favorite car, a well restored Land Rover, much like the one she’d seen in the parking lot of Hive. She craned her neck to see if she could see who was behind the wheel. A few times, she had seen impossibly young boys driving these elegant cars. She mentioned this to Ella, mentioning that their parents must have been a whole

new level of wealthy to let them drive something so expensive, but Ella had laughed.

“No, they’re probably sugar babies, AKA cabana boy house sitters.”

Was it a cabana boy in this Land Rover, she wondered. She squinted. She could see a relatively youthful, handsome profile, but it was more a man than a boy, his face in shadow. William would look good behind the wheel of such a vehicle. It would suit him well. And she’d be all too happy to ride along with him. She knew that what he actually owned was a probably a vastly different story. But frankly, as her attraction to William grew, she realized that she would be willing to ride along with him in any vehicle he might have. Was William magically making her less snobby? Crazier things had happened.

“Sweetie, your sandwiches are ready,” Kathy called.

“Thank you!”

She took a white bag out of the old waitress's hands, bid her goodbye, and got back into her car. She was already imagining Lawrence's broad smile when he guessed what was in the bag. She wondered how long it had been since someone had brought him such a treat. Ella did go visit when she could, but between the kids and her high-flying career, she didn't have as much time as she would like. Penny hadn't heard from Ella today. Well, their birthday lunch date at Swifty's was the next day, come hell or high water, or bad meetings with trust lawyers, difficult clients be damned. She thought about the date William had promised, after his meeting. This was it; she knew. They would be sleeping together, at last, and maybe having a tuna fish sandwich wasn't the best plan, but she would have ample time to primp and brush her teeth before. What would she wear? She wondered. No, it was silly to focus on William too much, when she needed to strategize for her visit to Uncle Lawrence. Hopefully, the bribe of the tuna fish sandwich was going to work. She needed Lawrence to tell her a little bit more. Was it just morbid curiosity? Or was she desperately looking for something, anything real to hold on to, in case the trust left her with nothing?

She pulled up to the senior center, smiling to herself. It really was a beautiful day, no one could take that away from her. And she'd already spoken to Lawrence, who had promised he would be in the back garden, so she didn't have to spend too much time indoors. She would just head straight back, holding her breath through the soup smell. *Soup*. Why did it always smell like soup in these sorts of places? Surely in this climate, they weren't serving much soup, were they?

She waved at the receptionist, who waved her through. She hustled towards the door, juggling the bag and the sodas she'd picked up along the way. A nice cold Coca Cola for Lawrence. That had always been his poison. She almost gasped when she saw him sitting in a patch of sunlight in the courtyard. She'd only seen him in his room up until now. The dimness had allowed her to lie to herself and tell herself that he wasn't as frail as he was. Now, in full sunlight, without the blanket bulking up his limbs, she could see how very skinny he'd become. How fragile he looked. Good thing she'd brought the sandwiches. She would do it every day, if it meant bulking him up. She couldn't afford to lose the last semblance of family she had.

"How are you doing, Uncle Lawrence?" she said, more cheerfully than she felt.

"Better, now that you're here," he smiled. "What do I see in your hand?" he asked, grinning.

"I think you know."

"You better not be teasing me. What are you waiting for? Hand it over!"

"Wait, why don't I bring you over to this table over here?"

Penny wheeled him over and pulled a chair up for herself. She set out napkins to protect the table and made sure that Lawrence's limbs were in the sun, while his face was in the shade. She opened the wrapper of the tuna sandwich for him.

"Hot sauce?" he asked.

"I wasn't sure if it was prudent. I put it on the side."

"I'm too old for prudent."

"Well then here you go," smiled Penny. "I even got extra, and Kathy gave you extra pickles."

"Kathy knows how to spoil a man," said Lawrence, taking a bite of his sandwich.

Penny hadn't realized how hungry she actually was. As they both dug into their food, she could see tears glimmering at the corners of Lawrence's eyes.

"Are you okay? Too spicy?"

"No, just remembering your Grandmama and I having these together. Once a week. It was our thing. We would go during off hours and enjoy our sandwiches together. Simple pleasures. She thought I was disgusting for getting the extra mayo and extra pickles, and the hot sauce, of course. She got hers what she called *extra dry*."

"That sounds about right," Penny laughed.

That memory sounded so much more real than many of the others, but still, if she wanted family secrets, she had to dig deeper.

“So, Uncle Lawrence, tell me more about the old days. Tell me why Grandmama gave up her Everglades Club membership.”

Lawrence gave her a look.

“I don't know, maybe she did it because I couldn't come with her, and everybody else was more boring compared to me.”

“Ha,” said Penny.

But then she looked at Lawrence and considered him, more seriously now.

“Wait a second. That's right. They didn't allow black people at the Everglades Club, did they?”

“Not until, oh, I don't even know if they have black members now,” said Lawrence. “They didn't allow Jews either, apparently, but then, of course, you had a couple people who said that they did, but I just think the exceptions proved the rule.”

“So, you think that Grandmama was protesting that or something?” Asked Penny.

It didn't seem like her grandmother to be so socially conscious. Maybe for her friends. She was loyal to her friends.

“Maybe it was something like that,” said Lawrence.

“Tell me more. Tell me about Grandmama's rebel phase... No, actually, tell me about when Grandmama was a socialite. Were you there when she was going to all the parties? Did she have a cotillion? Did she... was she a debutante? I never saw any photos.”

“Of course, she was a debutante. Your great grandmother wouldn't have had it any other way. But your grandmother, she thought it was ridiculous. She told your great grandmother that she was going to bring me as her date. And of course, your great grandmother wasn't going to have that.”

“Was Great Grandmama a racist?” Asked Penny.

“No, no, I wouldn't say she was,” said Lawrence carefully. “But she was a woman of her time.”

“So, who was her date?”

“Well, then, your Grandmama wanted to take Addison Mizner. Now that would have been a fun date, but he wasn't exactly age appropriate, and he was quite flamboyantly gay.”

“Grandmama really was a rebel, wasn't she?” Penny smiled.

“Yeah, she was.”

“And who did she end up taking to her debutante ball?”

“She took a Flagler boy, who fell desperately in love with her. It was unrequited, of course.”

“Do you think Grandma ever was in love?”

“No, I don't believe so,” said Lawrence.

“What about when she went to England? Was she in love with my mother's father? Is it true that he was some kind of aristocrat?”

Lawrence looked at her and sighed.

“Penny, it's hard. I don't know if any of these stories are mine to tell. I wish I could have asked Grandmama what she wanted me to say and not say, you know? I don't want to give away any of her secrets. We trusted each other.”

Penny gave him an encouraging smile. Yes, she understood that. That made sense. That was the one thing that could motivate her to not press Lawrence too hard. But she was Grandmama's flesh and blood, dammit.

“So, you're not going to tell me who my grandfather was? Do you know who he was?”

“I'm not at liberty to say,” said Lawrence.

Penny gave him a sharp look, and they sat in silence, for a moment. She'd lost her appetite.

“Ask me something else, anything else,” Lawrence pleaded.

“Okay, what about my mother? Why did she really leave? Did they have a falling out?”

“Pass,” said Lawrence.

“Come on, you've got to tell me something. Grandmama died, and now I don't know anything. It's not fair!”

Lawrence sighed and rubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Your mother and your grandmother had a falling out. They disagreed on some things. Your grandmother couldn't stand to see your mother following her heart. Put it that way.”

“So, my mother fell in love with a man? Was it my father?”

“No, it wasn't,” said Lawrence.

Penny waited for him to continue, but he didn't.

“This is so frustrating! I brought you tuna fish sandwiches, and Coca Cola!”

“So, you're admitting it was a bribe? Listen, Penny, your grandmother kept a diary,” said Lawrence. “And I don't know if she left it to you or not. I

don't know what she did with it. Maybe it's in the safe in the apartment. I know some of her jewelry is."

"The safe?"

"Behind the painting with the monkey," Lawrence said.

Penny didn't bother asking him the combination at this juncture.

"Maybe once you speak to the trust lawyer, maybe that'll answer everything."

"And if it doesn't?"

"I'll pray, and I'll try to see if I get an answer from beyond to see which parts I feel I can share and not. I hope you understand."

Penny sighed.

"Yes, I get it, Uncle Lawrence. You were a good friend to Grandmama."

"She was everything to me," said Lawrence. "Listen darling, I'm feeling tired. Can you go call the girl to wheel me in?"

"Of course. I'll be right back."

Penny got up and ran to the front desk.

"My uncle needs to go back to his room," she said.

She felt guilty for tiring Lawrence out with her demands for the truth. Suddenly, she felt quite happy that she'd gotten the 23andMe test. She also felt slightly sneaky. Maybe this test would reveal some relatives. Reveal some of the secrets that had been kept from her. Maybe she would be able to track down the story of how she came to be. She would have preferred to get that story from Grandmama's lips, shared over a fun lunch or a boozy dinner, but this is what she had now. Now, those results couldn't come soon enough.

Penny stood by helplessly after the nurse took control of Lawrence's wheelchair.

"Do you want me to come with you, Uncle Lawrence, settle you in?"

"No, darling, I'll be fine," he said. "This young lady's a professional." He winked at the nurse, still flirting at 97.

"Okay, well, I'll be back soon."

"Next time, bring more hot sauce," he smiled.

"Will do."

When she gave him a hug it broke her heart anew to feel those frail bones again. She turned to leave.

"Penny. Wait."

She spun around. Was Lawrence going to tell her something, after all?

"I love you, baby girl."

Penny smiled, disarmed.

“I love you, too, Uncle Lawrence.”

Lawrence smiled, as if he'd just captured a particularly warming sunray. His expression then changed, flickering into something else.

“Wait. I almost forgot,” he said. “I have something for you.”

He dug into the pocket of his dressing gown and took her hand, transferring something into it. Penny knew instantly what it was.

“Thank you, Uncle Lawrence,” she said. “I'll be back soon, with extra hot sauce.”

She wiped away a tear that had come unbidden to her eye and headed back to her car. Sitting behind the wheel, she took a deep breath, and ran her fingers along the golden bangle in her hand. What to do? She'd thought she'd be happier, but she felt like a hollowed-out shell, sad and empty. What would she do now? She realized that she was close to the power plant. When she was little, and upset about something, her grandmother would take her to look at the manatees. Maybe that would help. As if on autopilot, she drove herself towards the big industrial building, parking and dodging groups of school children until she stood on the water's edge, looking down, watching the sea cows, waiting until one bobbed up to take a peek at the surface. Something about their gentle movements and rotund forms soothed her. How much easier would it be to be a manatee with not a worry in the world? Feasting on sea lettuce and hanging out in the warm water by the power plant. *How does one get so chubby feasting on seagrass*, Penny wondered. She was uncomfortably full from the partial tuna sandwich, which now sat like a rock in her stomach. She would get back to the apartment, take a brisk walk along the waterfront to digest, and then wait for William would call her. She couldn't do this alone. At the thought of that, butterflies replaced the leaden feeling that speaking to Lawrence had left behind. Well, at least she had William. And now, the keys to the Palazzo.

Chapter 43

By four o'clock that afternoon, she was nearly vibrating with impatience. Holding those keys in her hand, she had thought about going to visit the house ten times between when she'd gotten back to the apartment and now, but then she'd thought to herself, what if there were vermin in the house? What if she fell through a floor, or had a chandelier fall on her head? It would be safer with a trained professional, after all. And, well, she didn't want to ruin the surprise, and she wanted to see it with fresh eyes, along with him. She was so pleased with herself to have something to do, something other than going to the same old expensive spots, before going to bed with William at last, that a smile played on her lips before she even opened the door.

When the knock came on her door, she leapt up from the sofa, nearly tripping over herself in her excitement. She threw the door open, and there was William, his warm smile making her heart do somersaults instantly.

"Hey, so have we established that we kiss hello, now?"

"I think we have," he responded, sweeping her into his arms and giving her the kind of kiss she'd been looking forward to all day, maybe for years, maybe for her whole life. This was what it was like, she thought, to find your person, to find the other half, the one. *The one* was a silly concept she'd never believed in, and now here he was. It was sad that Grandmama had had to pass away for her to finally meet this man, but now that this was her life, she was going to make the best of it. She would try not to mess this one up. She would make sure not to be difficult and challenging with him, though she had a feeling he could take any challenge she would throw his way. The only thing that could tear them apart was if she was forced to return to New York, her tail between her legs.

"Are you ready to go? Wait. Seeing your cheeky expression, do you want us to just stay in?"

"I wish. But I have a plan for us, first."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

She held up the keys.

"What are those?"

"What does it look like? They're keys. To my grandmother's house."

"The keys to your grandmother's house?" William asked, blankly.

“Yes. Do you want to come see it with me?”

“OK,” said William.

She considered him. He looked almost...what? Reluctant? This was certainly not the way she'd imagined this going down.

“Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to do work on it for free! You'll see,” she gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. “You'll love it.”

He was still standing rooted there, in the doorway.

“Shall we go?”

“Not sure. You look so beautiful,” said William. “Maybe too beautiful to take out quite yet.”

“You don't look so bad yourself,” she responded, lightly. “Come on, let's go.”

She was glad William had noticed her outfit, though. She'd made an effort, putting on a green silk slip dress that Grandmama had probably bought for use as an actual slip. She knew the shimmery bias-cut silk highlighted her curves and skimmed over her body just so. She had paired it with a trusty pair of sandals that would be both elegant and practical for walking around the house, all 10, 000 square feet of it. William was looking handsome as usual in the same or a similar white shirt from this morning and a darker pair of trousers, with a light blazer thrown over the ensemble.

“You look fancy,” she said. “How was your meeting this morning?”

“Actually, it was postponed,” said William. “But I had a few others.”

“Oh,” said Penny.

This raised her hackles a little, but she should stop prying. She could tell that William wasn't comfortable talking about his career. Maybe he thought that, for a spoiled girl like her, whatever he did was not enough. But when she really thought about it, that was not the case. There was something about him so capable, so sophisticated, that for the first time in her life, she didn't really care about what the man actually did. She had the feeling that William could do anything he wanted. So, if he was a handyman, that was because something about it called to him, and she respected that.

“How far is your grandmother's house?”

She could sense that strange resistance in him. Maybe he was worried that he was finally going to get confirmation as to how much of a spoiled rich girl she actually was. Would this actually draw a divide between them? That was what she had worried about at first, upon meeting him, and then, she had been reassured as to the fact that it didn't matter. They'd certainly gone

through their ups and downs, but ironically, it was just in the past days that she'd decided they were past thinking they were somehow not suited. But was that really so? Now, he had her doubting herself. In any case, it was too late now, because they were already walking across the street, William's eyes losing their shine, his expression and body language growing closed off as they approached Palazzo Leoni. She almost considered turning back, telling him it was all a prank, and could they please go to dinner at La Goulue but she wanted to base their relationship on honesty.

"This is your grandmother's house?" William asked, his voice husky.

"Yeah, it's no big deal though," said Penny. "I'm sure it's falling apart, you know, it's not as fancy as it looks."

"Right," said William, clearing his throat. "Sure."

"Shall we have a look around?" she asked. It was a rhetorical question. Of course, he wanted that. Who wouldn't? "There are so many memories here. So many good times," she said, her voice sounding overly cheerful to her own ears.

"Yes, I can imagine so," said William.

He was still hanging back, as if he didn't want to go into the house at all. Well, maybe he wasn't used to something this grand, but he would soon see that this didn't define her. It was just part of her history. They would be laughing about this in no time, back to the banter she loved so much.

"Ready?" She asked, holding up the key. She was almost asking herself, really, because now, a sense of trepidation had gripped her. What was it like inside? Maybe it had been a mistake, taking William here. What if seeing the palazzo for the first time in almost three years brought up some weird emotions in her?

"Yes," William said, seeming to rally now.

It would all be fine. The house would be fine. And this wouldn't come between them, would it? Penny gave William's arm a squeeze, again, but he didn't react, or reciprocate.

Here goes nothing.

Penny turned one key in the massive old lock, and another in the deadbolt. The heavy wood door, its surface strangely tacky, creaked as it opened. She didn't remember it making any sound, in the past. It had always been kept well-oiled by one of Grandmama's army of servants, or by Lawrence himself. The foyer was still similar to how it had been, just a bit emptier. The circular table in the center was still there, minus the usual large

vase with an impressive tropical floral arrangement. It made Penny sad to not see beautiful flowers there. Grandmama had always been very proud of her flower arranging skills and would hit up the top florists on the island looking for just the right bloom to add to her arrangement. In later years, she had prided herself on going to Trader Joe's for filler, and on using cuttings she sourced around the neighborhood.

"So, this is the foyer," said Penny, "and as you can see, it's double height. Addison Mizner liked the drama, you know, that European, Italian feeling. This whole house, of course, was modeled on an Italian villa."

"Yes, it looks Venetian," said William.

"Exactly," said Penny, pleased. See, they had this in common, too. He knew what he was talking about when it came to architecture and houses.

"I was hoping you could ... maybe, I don't know, give me your opinion on what needs to be done to this house?"

"What needs to be done to it?" William asked, his tone still flat.

"Well, you know, I suppose I'll be inheriting it, and I'd love to keep, it. But my friend Ella thinks I'm crazy. She says that it's going to be too much maintenance for me, and..."

Penny's voice trailed off. She was rambling now, William looking at her with something resembling horror.

"Keep it?" he asked.

"I mean, I know it looks fancy, but I have so many memories here," she said. "I don't know what I would do in Palm Beach full time, but it could be a great family home."

She smiled at him, hopefully. She could imagine it now. She, who had never really thought of having children, was now seeing little Williams running around, imagined taking them to the beach, walking them out the front door of the house. Maybe she would even try to get her membership to the Everglades Club reinstated. After all, wasn't she 'grandmothered in'?"

William remained silent.

"All right, well, let me show you the reception room," she said, sweeping him into another space with tile floors and a large, tiled fireplace with a marble and limestone mantle. "Look at this. Mizner chipped some of these tiles with a hammer, to give them the impression of age."

"Well, looks like it's not just an impression," said William dryly. "This place is falling apart."

Penny tore her attention away from the fireplace to stare at him. She was shocked, and disappointed. In her fantasies, she'd imagined him being surprised, at first, but then quickly growing as enamored with this house as she was. Now, she tried to look at the house with new eyes, objective ones. Yes, it looked a little tired, but part of that was by design, no? The dining table was still there, along with the straight-backed dining chairs that had never been very comfortable but were quite elegant. The chandeliers still hung from the ceiling, minus the large rock crystal one, the one that Grandmama had told her was worth \$100,000. She'd always suspected that Grandmama had inflated these figures, but it had always thrilled her to have something so fancy dangling from their ceiling, and now it was gone. She wondered what had happened to it. Maybe Grandmama had sent it to have it cleaned and had not had the chance to pick it up.

"Look at the view," said Penny, gesturing to the windows, to the vista onto Lake Worth.

"See that dock? Grandmama had had her speedboat and a few real Italian gondolas there!"

She wondered, where had the boats gone? Well, at her age, Grandmama couldn't very well be zooming along the Intracoastal. Maybe it was around the corner, or at one of the harbors. Maybe she'd put it into dry dock storage.

"These windows look like they're rotting," William observed.

"Wow, way to suck the romance out of a place," Penny teased. But her smile died on her lips when she saw William's grim expression. "You think they're really that bad?"

"Not just rot, looks like termites, too," said William.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Look at the dust on the windowsill, there. That's not dust, that's wood bits."

Now, he knocked on a wall, hard, the sharp sound making Penny jump.

"Sounds like there's almost nothing in here. It's completely hollow."

"It's Florida. Do we even need insulation?" Penny asked, lightly.

But William was already back to examining a corner between the wall and ceiling, above a French door.

"Unfortunately, it seems this house was never properly weatherproofed. It's a wonder it hasn't been blown away already." William spun around, looking up at the ceiling. "Jesus," he whispered, under his breath. "All right. Show me the next room," he directed.

“Not if you're going to keep telling me that the house that I have all my best memories in is rotting out from under us,” Penny pouted. There. She was being difficult. Acting like the spoiled girl. Was that what William was afraid of?

“Don't worry, I'll keep my opinions to myself,” said William.

“Okay,” said Penny, cautiously. “Well, here's the library,” she started to say, but then, she gasped. All the books were gone. All of the tomes so she'd enjoyed reading, sitting on the chintz sofa. She'd loved this room, full of nooks and crannies. She and Ella had played hide and go seek here, and had loved making a little fort out of the seating and blankets in this room. And now, the coziness had been stripped from it. But by whom? By Grandmama herself? By thieves?

“It looks like someone might have stolen Grandmama's things,” said Penny, lamely.

“I doubt that,” said William. “Thieves would have sacked the place. This looks like things were intentionally removed.”

He had a point. Penny kept silent.

“There used to be photos in here,” she told William. “I was looking forward to showing them to you. There were these amazing safari pictures from the 1920s with Great Grandmama and Great Grandpapa.”

“Oh, yes? And what were their names? You never said.”

Penny considered him. It was like he was just being polite. He didn't really seem to want to know, but she told him anyway, just to keep the conversation going.

“Frederick and Marie,” Penny said.

Now, she smiled, because she was thinking back on all the romantic stories about them. Up until Frederick had left great Grandmama, that is. She didn't know why that had happened. Maybe he'd been ill, or something had taken him away. She glanced at William. Was it a trick of the light, or was he pale, ashen even? Well, this evening certainly wasn't going the way she had thought it might. She had fantasized that she would take him through the rooms, delighting him with stories from her great grandmother and Grandmama, and from her childhood, all bathed in the golden, idealized light of memory. She had thought that maybe William would even take her against a wall in one of the bedrooms, or that the beds would still be dressed in their luxurious linens, the ones from Porthault that Grandmama had so carefully selected, that made the bedrooms look like luxury hotel rooms. She

had dreamed of William ravaging her, kissing her neck, feeling his muscles as he roughly rubbed up against her, maybe standing against one of the marble vanities in the bathroom, so she could watch his naked form in the mirror. Just thinking about it, she grew embarrassed. What had happened between this morning, or even a few minutes ago, and now, to change his demeanor so much? Was it really such an issue to him? Did he think that Penny was a pathetic little rich girl? Did he think less of her?

“What’s wrong?” she finally asked.

He simply shook his head, his jaw clenching.

“You seem like you’re not well,” she pressed.

“I’m not. I think I need to go outside.”

“OK. I’ll...”

“No. Why don’t you keep checking out the house. I’ll go back to the apartment and... I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Okay,” said Penny, hesitating. “Do you need me to walk you back?”

“No, I’ll be fine,” said William. “I just need some air.”

“So, when I’m done in here, should I...?” Her voice trailed off. She was being ridiculous. Selfish. He didn’t feel well. Looking like he did, it was not like he was going rally for their drink and dinner plan. She should take care of him.

“Okay, well I guess I’ll text you later, and you can let me know how you’re feeling? Let me know if you need anything?” She asked.

“Yes, sure,” said William.

She knew he didn’t feel well, but his tone was dismissive, almost like he was brushing her off. And then, he simply turned away from her and walked away. *What the hell?* This wasn’t about him being ill, was it? It wasn’t fair of him to jump to conclusions about her, about who she was, just because he’d seen this house. She was still the same girl that he had kissed, and looked at in that way, and the same girl who’d gone to Miami with him, who’d gone to dinner with him, the same girl he’d laughed with, the same girl he’s gone down on in the damn kitchen, of all places, and the same girl he’d wanted to get into bed even half an hour ago. He was being unfair. This was ridiculous. If he couldn’t move past this, maybe he wasn’t the right person for her. She had been so open, accepting him and his background and his job, and now he wasn’t going to accept her? That was rich. She had worked herself into a bit of a frenzy of annoyance by the time she went to the window and watched him crossing the street back to the apartment complex, jabbing at his phone.

Was he making another date with somebody else? Was that it? Jealousy bloomed in her heart. *Wow*. So, William was going to just ditch her and run to the next girl? He probably had women clamoring for him all over town. The righteous anger that started to consume her as her jealousy grew like a hothouse flower on steroids actually helped her to get over the embarrassment and the feeling of guilt that had started to creep into her soul. *Screw him if he's not secure enough to be with a girl with this house*, she thought.

She started making her way through the rest of the rooms. But now, she could only see it through William's eyes, the eyes of a stranger. Yes, it was falling apart. Yes, there were some spots where she could see that the ceiling had leaked. She could only imagine the damage to the roof and the underlayment. She could sense the walls growing spongy, the limestone eroding, to where some of the pediments barely existed anymore. The rusted balconies were probably too unsafe to step out onto. She could only imagine what the dock was like. She tried to step outside at one point, onto the weedy lawn, but the wood of the French doors was too swollen. The door was firmly stuck shut, and trying to force it any more might make the whole thing splinter apart. Starting to feel claustrophobic in the previously palatial space, she let herself out the front door, locking it carefully, and made her way around the overgrown side garden, tropical vines scratching at her face as she tried to get around to inspect the house's backyard. The swimming pool had been drained. Dead leaves and a puddle of brackish water gathered in the bottom. She made her way towards the waterfront and the dock. Yes, the boats definitely were missing. Wherever they had gone, she would maybe find out tomorrow when she spoke to the trust lawyer. Hopefully, the trust lawyer had details as to where everything was, whether it had been stolen, or whether Grandmama had put it away. And then she had a horrible thought. What if Grandmama had sold these things? What if she had been running out of money? What if the trust lawyer was going to tell her tomorrow that she really had nothing left, and that her shares in the house were worth nothing? And what about this other so-called trustee? What in the world did that mean? Had Grandmama sold part of her shares in the house to somebody? But who? Why would she do that? And why wouldn't she have told her? Was she waiting for her viist, so she could break it to her in person?

Lawrence knew about this, dammit. That was it. She fought her way back through the side yard, ignoring the vines pulling at her hair. She needed to

Speak to Lawrence again. Too bad for his so-called loyalty to Grandmama. He owed her the truth.

Chapter 44

She stood on the limestone pathway leading up to the Palazzo, dialed the number of the nursing home, and thought of the smell of old person and soup that would greet her when she came into the lobby. The ring tone on the other end of the line set her teeth on edge. An answering machine picked up, with a message saying to call back during business hours. *Ridiculous*. Surely, they had someone there round the clock. This wasn't a business. This was people. She kept calling. Someone would get tired of the incessant ringing and answer, wouldn't they? What if there was an emergency?

Finally, a click.

"May I help you?" came a young, impatient, female voice.

"Yes, I was hoping to come see my uncle," she said. "I just wanted to make sure there was someone at the front desk."

"Visiting hours are over," said the woman.

"But it's really important," said Penny. Her voice sounded pathetic to her own ears.

"Who's your uncle?"

"Lawrence Jones."

"I wasn't aware he had a niece."

"Well, he does. So could I possibly see him?"

"It's against policy."

"Can't you make an exception?"

"Then everyone would expect us to make an exception."

"Please!" a sob escaped Penny's lips.

There was silence on the other end of the line. Penny stood there, sniffing, feeling dizzy.

"Hello?"

Finally, the woman seemed to take pity on her.

"Let me check if he's awake, and if so, I can pass him the phone. You should have called and made an appointment," the woman said. By the tone of her voice, Penny could tell that she was already walking down the hall.

"I know," said Penny, "but this was kind of a last minute thing."

“Understood,” said the woman.

Penny heard a tapping, which was possibly the woman knocking on Lawrence’s door. The sound of muffled voices.

“All right, your uncle will talk to you, but he’s tired, so please don’t keep him too long.”

“Of course,” said Penny.

Now, she heard Lawrence’s voice, no trace left of the silky baritone he had cultivated his entire life. He did sound terribly tired. But at 97, what did she expect? She was being selfish, disturbing his rest, only to put her mind at ease. But now, the tenuousness of Lawrence’s presence hit her all the more strongly. He needed to tell her what he knew. He couldn’t hold out like this.

“Uncle Lawrence,” she said.

“Baby girl. What’s wrong?”

“You know darn well what’s wrong. I went to the house.”

“Oh?” he said, innocently.

As if he was surprised. As if he hadn’t given her the keys that very afternoon. What in the world did he think she was going to think when she saw the house?

“How did it look?” Lawrence asked. “Remember that party your Grandmama threw with the gondoliers singing songs? Do you know she hired real Italian men? They were singing bawdy tunes. And they got so drunk that one of the gondoliers fell off the boat and another one made moves on Mrs. Johnson. It was quite the scandal at the time.”

Normally, Penny would have loved to hear these stories, but now, she saw them for what they were. A gilded layer over a rotting heart made only of lies.

“Uncle Lawrence, you need to tell me, did someone steal Grandmama’s things?”

Silence. She waited.

“No, girl. She sold those things,” said Lawrence, barely audible.

“Why? Why did she sell them?”

“Why does anyone sell anything?” he said. “I remember when Mrs. Snowdon sold her pearls, and it was such a scandal because...”

“Lawrence! Why?”

“Because she needed the money, darling.”

“She what?”

“Honey, some women weren't allowed to work in your Grandmama's time. Well, maybe they were technically allowed...But most of them just didn't do that. Old money, high class ladies, they did charity, not careers. Your Grandmama did what she could. She raised you right, didn't she? She paid for your school, but there wasn't much left.”

“So... so... do I not own the house? And what's this I hear about another trustee?”

“Oh, so they found him,” Lawrence said. So it was no longer a them, but a him.

“What do they mean, they found him? You need to tell me!”

“The details escape me,” Lawrence responded, his voice trailing off.

“Lawrence!”

“I'm serious. I don't know exactly who this person is, but I knew he existed. Your grandmother hoped he would not find out about the trust and everything else and, well I'm sorry honey, maybe she should have told you.”

“*Maybe?* What the fuck was she thinking? She let me think I had this huge trust fund coming to me!”

“Honey, you didn't live your life waiting for the trust fund, did you?”

“Well...” *Crap.* She would have liked to be able to hold her head up high, say she hadn't, but she had. “If Grandmama had been straight with me... if you'd been straight with me... What was your relationship to Grandmama, anyway?”

No response. She heard a muffled sound. A burr of voices.

“Yes, I'm tired,” she heard Lawrence say. “I think she needs to go.”

“Uncle Lawrence, how *dare* you?” Penny yelled into the phone, livid. Her cheeks were burning, blood rushing in her ears.

“Don't speak to him like that, young lady,” the woman on the other end of the line chastised.

“Put him back on the line,” Penny demanded. “This is my *life!*”

“I will not be spoken to that way, either,” said the woman.

She heard Lawrence's voice in the background.

“What did he say? He wants to speak to me. Give him the phone!”

“He says he'll talk to you tomorrow, after your meeting. Good night.”

A click, and then nothing. And Penny was left with a ring tone, and a storm raging inside of her.

Her mind was racing. She had been lied to, her whole life, and she still didn't know the truth. And William...William wasn't even there to support her in all of this. What had his weird behavior been about? Maybe he had just been reacting to the strange energy she'd been giving off, earlier. Some men were bad at dealing with emotions, weren't they? Granted, he'd done quite well with her crying jags. But maybe this had been the final straw for him. Still, she decided to text him.

Penny: *Just checking in. What happened?*

Maybe he would respond, and ask her how she was, and she could spill her guts.

William: *Nothing. Just tired.*

Penny: *OK, well let me know if you need anything.*

She wished he would ask if *she* needed anything, but also knew better than to expect it. She checked the time. It was barely seven o'clock. She'd been looking forward to night of conversation, flirting, and much more with William. But now, the evening lay in front of her, long and empty. She couldn't face the apartment, full of Grandmama's things, full of mystery. She would go to Swifty's, she decided, have a drink by herself. No, Swifty's was for her lunch with Ella, tomorrow. She would go to the bar at the Four Seasons. None of the locals went there, so it was safe. She would watch all the wealthy families coming through. That would be distracting, good people watching. She would have a drink, or ten. and figure out what to do next. Or actually, if she was planning on drinking that much, maybe she was better off going somewhere off of Worth Avenue. Yes, she would go to the small bar at Bilboquet. That would be perfect. She let herself out the front gate of the Palazzo, half expecting to see William going for a jog, because maybe it wasn't true that he was tired. Maybe he just didn't want to see her. She thought they'd gotten past the whole spoiled girl dating a handyman thing, but maybe

he couldn't let it go. *His loss*, she thought. Even though she keenly felt that it was hers.

Chapter 45

She crossed the street and walked down Worth Avenue, dodging the ladies with their dogs, and dapper old gentlemen wearing Brioni suits, and young women with overdone faces. She headed down the little alleyway leading to Bilboquet, reliving the memories of the times she'd gone out to dinner with Grandmama, though Grandmama had preferred Henry's, or the restaurant at The Breakers. Those stories Grandmama had told her, of social feuds most dramatic between the bored ladies who spent their days at the Everglades Club. Why had grandma left the club, she wondered again. Was it on a whim? Was it really about social justice? Or had she had some feud with one of the *grande dames*? Now that Penny really thought about it, most of Grandmama's people were not the high society, but rather the antique dealers, the artists, the gays, the people on the fringes of society. Not the ladies who ran Palm Beach Society. Those women knew damn well who she was, but they gave her wide berth.

Penny sat herself down at the bar of Bilboquet.

"Oh, you're alone today," said the bartender, a retro-handsome man with a waxed handlebar mustache who had probably moved here from Brooklyn.

"Alone?" Asked Penny.

"Last time, you were here with your husband, weren't you?"

"Not my husband. Just a date."

"Oh. You two are well suited. If you're not married already, I can see a marriage in the near future," said the bartender.

"Oh, yeah? So, you think you're some kind of fortune teller or something?" She asked. "I think you might wanna keep your day job- I'm pretty sure we just broke up."

"You'll get back together," said the bartender. "Mark my words. Anyway, what can I serve you?"

"I'll have a French 75...never mind. I'll have a Campari Spritz. And maybe some fries."

"Sure thing," said the bartender.

He prepared her drink, and she settled in, watching the people coming up to the hostess stand. There was George Hamilton, perpetually tan, well dressed, dapper, with his gorgeous wife. The fact that this woman was so stunning at that age gave hope to the rest of humanity. It would have been so much more fun to be here with William. They would have been able to

people watch together and make up theories about the other patrons. What would he have had to say about all the ladies who lunch, who were now having dinner, or about the table with the couple that seemed miserable together, both of them knocking back drinks, and the young family with the badly behaved children? She would never know. She sent him a text message, and instantly felt stupid about it.

Penny: You don't need to respond- I just want you to know that I'm sitting at Bilboquet. People watching would be so much more fun with you.

William: Nice. Have fun.

Penny put her phone down, dejected. Well, at least she'd tried. Now, it was on him. As she sat there, nursing another drink and then another, her mood plunged precipitously. The families and the seniors were supplanted by couples. Happy ones, less happy ones. Now, she reflected on how unfair it was that, once she'd finally found somebody she actually wanted to be coupled up with, someone who had admitted he wanted the same with her, he now inexplicably had gone cold on her.

"One more drink," she told the bartender.

"Are you sure?" He gave her a probing look. "Do you want me to maybe call your friend to come pick you up?"

"Absolutely not," said Penny. "He doesn't like me anymore."

"I can't imagine that's true," said the bartender. "You guys were both obviously very into each other, not to put too fine a point on it."

Penny blushed.

"Well, it's over now," she said, a bit too loudly. A few patrons turned to stare at her and whispered to their dining partners.

"You're not driving home, are you?" asked the bartender.

"No, I'm walking," she said, with as much dignity as she could muster.

"You know, my shift is ending. I feel that maybe I should walk you back," he said, genuine concern in his eyes.

"I'll be fine," said Penny.

"No, I kind of insist," said the bartender. "You know, this is part of my job description. Helping damsels in distress who maybe have had one too many Campari spritzes."

He whispered something to the other bartender, who nodded.

“Alright, we’re off,” he said. “Let's go. Which way?”

Penny slid off her bar stool, and weakly pointed towards the Mar Vista apartments. She stumbled, and the bartender took her arm. Maybe it was a good thing she was getting walked after all, but what wouldn't she have given for William to walk her instead?

“Oh, the Mar Vista apartments, those are really great. I hear they were just purchased by a big investor. One of these multi-millionaires, maybe even a billionaire,” said the bartender. “I hope they won't be hiking up the rents. But that's usually the way, isn't it? They redo it, and then they kick everybody out.”

“My Uncle Lawrence has an apartment here,” said Penny. “He owns it, I think, so I guess they can't kick him out.”

“Oh, well, that's good,” said the bartender, politely.

They made their way down the street in silence. Penny tripped again.

“Sorry,” she said, starting to slur. “Oh god, I'm slurring. This is so embarrassing.”

“It happens,” said the bartender. “Believe me, in my line of work, I see it all. My name's Ian, by the way.”

“Penny,” said Penny.

“Well, nice to meet you, Penny. Maybe next time we'll meet under better circumstances.”

She was glad that the bartender wasn't being inappropriate in any way. How easily he could have been, considering her condition.

“It's over here,” she said, gesturing to the gate. The bartender kept a tight hold on her arm and unlocked it. As they walked towards the building, Penny saw a figure of a man that looked suspiciously like William. The same curly brown hair, athletic figure, dressed in running shorts. Could it be? Just as she noticed him, she stumbled again, and the bartender wrapped his arms around her to prop her up.

By the time she looked back up, the man was gone.

Once she was in her apartment and had slammed a few glasses of water, she stared at her phone and debated on whether she would write William, to explain herself. But he wrote her first.

William: lovely. I see you found a replacement dinner date.

Penny: It's not what it looked like.

But then, she realized that if William was telling the truth about being tired, he wouldn't be going for a run, and she deleted the text without sending it. She drank another glass of water and put herself to bed. Amid all the uncertainty, she knew one thing for sure: As bad as today had been, tomorrow would be even crappier.

Chapter 46

The next morning, at ten o'clock, Penny stepped into the buttercream stucco office building that housed the offices of her trust lawyer. She felt positively nauseous, leaden musket balls of dread mixing with the noxious fumes of her epic hangover and forming a nasty cocktail in her stomach. Her mouth was dry, and her hands felt cold, despite the brilliantly sunny weather. She would rather have been on the beach. Or even finding some old timers to interview. Or doing anything else, really. She had posted her first YouTube video this morning, as a way of trying to do one thing that she actually had control over, but in the first thirty minutes of refreshing it constantly, it wasn't seeming to get any traction at all. So much for that. So now, her mind was completely free to keep worrying about this meeting. Who in the world was this other trustee? Had Grandmama made some stupid business decision in her wild youth? She couldn't imagine how there could be anyone else with a claim on Palazzo Leoni.

She entered a glacial reception room, rendered all in shiny surfaces and shades of gray, that was completely at odds with the building's exterior. Who had designed this office? It was criminal. She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. The egregious interior design of the office was not her problem. Not today.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Penny Wells. I'm here to meet with Mr. Rutherford."

"Oh, yes. They're waiting for you. You're the last to arrive," said the receptionist. "I'll show you to his office."

Now, Penny's heart was beating triple time. She would have appreciated the opportunity to ask Mr. Rutherford some questions before the other person who held her fate in their hands...*his* hands... appeared. But unfortunately, she'd been dragging her feet to get here, and had ended up sabotaging herself, as usual. The receptionist knocked gently on an office door.

"Mr. Rutherford, your client is here."

"Come in," said a deep voice on the other side of the door.

Penny paused, composed herself as best she could, and stepped in, towards whatever her future might be. Her eyes were focused on Mr.

Rutherford, an imposing figure in a blue three-piece suit, but her breath was quickly taken away as she saw the other person who occupied the office.

“William?!”

“Penny.”

“What are you doing here?” she cried, before realizing that, as uncomfortable as William looked, he looked more disappointed than surprised to see her.

“Oh, so you two have met,” Mr. Rutherford exclaimed. “Well, I suppose that makes sense. You are related...”

“We're what?” asked Penny, horrified. “What are you talking about? William is the handyman in my apartment building.”

“What?” asked Mr. Rutherford, taken aback.

“No, I'm not ...” said William.

“What's going on?” asked Penny. “Explain yourself!”

“Mr. Rutherford?” William begged, helplessly.

Mr. Rutherford was looking from one to the other, bemused.

“So, you two don't know...” he started. “Okay, sit down. Let me lay this out. So,” he said, looking from one to the other, “Uh, can I get one of you a coffee?”

“You can get me a triple vodka,” said Penny.

What the fuck? To think that she had almost slept with William, and they were... they were what? Related somehow? How was this possible?

“Okay. Let me try to clarify what is going on,” said Mr. Rutherford. “So, Mr. Brooks, and you, Ms. Wells...”

William shot daggers with his eyes at Mr. Rutherford.

“Why did you tell me that the other trustee was some dude named Spencer?”

“I never told you it was a dude,” said Mr. Rutherford carefully.

“You told him the name of the other person in the trust?” Penny asked, livid. “You didn't tell me shit!”

“Well, you're not the one paying for my services,” said Mr. Rutherford.

“Excuse me?” Penny hissed, feeling her eyes blazing, staring William down. If only she could set him on fire. “How can you afford...”

“Enough about that,” said Mr. Rutherford. “So, you two are the sole trustees. As descendants of Frederick Brooks and Mary Wells Brooks ...”

“Great Grandpapa and Great Grandmama?” Penny exclaimed, shocked. She glanced towards William, who just looked vaguely ill.

“So we *are* related?” he asked Mr. Rutherford.

“Technically, I imagine, yes,” said Mr. Rutherford. “Is there a problem?”

The silence was deafening, as Penny and William stared at each other, horrified, their eyes and mouths wide. It would have been comical if it wasn't so disastrous. Leave it to Penny to find the one person that felt right to her. And of course, he was fucking *related* to her. She knew what Ella would say: *Maybe he's not that closely related. Cousins do it all the time.* But that was not OK with her. Not to mention, their whole relationship had been built on a lie. There was no getting over this.

“How?” Penny finally managed to say.

“When Frederick and Mary separated, Mr. Brooks took their two boys, and Mary kept a daughter.”

“Grandmama?”

Mr. Rutherford consulted his paperwork.

“Yes. Elizabeth Wells.”

“So... then, where do I come in?” asked William, glancing at Penny with a panicked expression. To his credit, at least he was just as worried about this as she was.

“So, Frederick Brooks had the two sons, and of the two, a single one survived. William. William married a Miss Standish, and they had one son, William Jr., who then had...well, you. William Brooks III..”

“All right, so we're not that closely related,” William started to say, making a calculation in his head.

“You can't be serious. We're still cousins,” Penny said, horrified. “And that's not even the point, is it? You...”

“It doesn't really matter how closely you're related,” said Mr. Rutherford, not seizing on the subtext. “Legally, you're both trustees, and it remains to be seen how the trust is structured.”

“But how are we both trustees? I thought that Grandmama had her own money?”

“Not exactly. Mr. Frederick Brooks and Mary Wells Brooks split off their estate. When Frederick left, he left Mary Palazzo Leoni and some money, with the understanding she was to raise her daughter with it, but it was always understood that, since they never legally divorced, he was in fact part owner of the house, and that after both of them and all their children passed, the estate was to be divided amongst their issue.

“How long have you known this?” Penny asked William.

“Only since your grandmother died, I guess,” said William. “But I swear...I didn’t know who you were!”

“But wait,” said Penny, turning to Mr. Rutherford, “what about the person trying to put an offer on my house? Wait...” she narrowed her eyes at William “You weren’t trying to negotiate with this person and cut me out of the deal, were you?”

“What? No! I was trying to buy your...well, the other share.”

“You *what?*”

“I was... I was coming down here on business anyway, and then I was presented with the opportunity to buy Palazzo Leoni,” William explained, as if to a child.

“Excuse me? You? Buy Palazzo Leoni? Palazzo Leoni is worth at least 30 million dollars!”

“No, it’s not,” said William. “It’s falling apart. I saw it, remember? Before that, I would have thought 25, max. Now, I think more like 15.”

Penny narrowed her eyes at him.

“What do you even know about real estate?”

William sighed.

“I told you- I’m an investor.”

“Yeah, probably in some shitty little apartment or something. Which other real estate do you even own?”

“Well, the apartment complex you live in, for one,” William started, now on the defensive.

“You? But you’re a handyman!”

“I’m not!”

“Then why were you pretending to be?”

“I wasn’t! I mean, I do like fixing things, it relaxes me,” said William. “And I guess that...well, fixing your compactor seemed like a good excuse to spend more time with you, at first.”

“Ha!” Penny spat out bitterly. “Now that I know you’re my cousin, you’re not spending another second with me.”

“What about family reunions?” William asked, deadpan.

OK, that was funny, to be fair, and she almost laughed, which made her even madder.

“What is your fucking problem? This is horrible,” said Penny. “And you’re trying to buy Palazzo Leoni out from under me? Is that why you befriended me?”

“Is that what you’re calling it?”

“You’re disgusting. You wanted to get closer to me to drive the price down?”

“Penny,” said William, more serious now. “I swear to you. I did not know. Not at first. And then, when I started suspecting, I tried to stay away. I really did. But I couldn’t. I’m sorry.”

“You’re a sociopath,” Penny hissed.

“I’m not,” said William, his face a mask of agony.

“Well,” said Mr. Rutherford, trying to regain control of the situation, “we need to discuss the issue that Palazzo Leoni already halfway belongs to Mr. Brooks. And, quite honestly, Miss Wells, your grandmother’s estate was down to almost nothing, except for the apartment.”

“Which apartment?” asked Penny.

“An apartment in Mar Vista Apartments.”

“The one I’m in now? That doesn’t belong to my grandmother, that belongs to Uncle Lawrence,” said Penny.

“It says here it belongs to your grandmother, Elizabeth Wells, with a certain Lawrence Jones residing there. But even selling the apartment wouldn’t cover your grandmother’s debts. That would mean selling Palazzo Leoni, but Mr. Brooks would have to accept to sell, or buy you out of your share...”

Penny turned on William.

“You’re disgusting. You went to my best friend behind my back and...”

William looked positively ill.

“I told you, I didn’t know. And then...”

Mr. Rutherford held up his hand.

“If I were to consult Mr. William as his lawyer, I would recommend he not buy you out...”

Penny couldn’t even look at William. She was disgusted. This was a nightmare. Everything she’d thought she had...everything she’d believed...There was nothing left. Nothing she could do. She hated to be so powerless, but there was one way she could gain control of the situation and keep her head held high. She could remove herself from it.

“Well, we seem to be done, here. Why don't you tell me what your *client* decides, Mr. Rutherford? And if there’s anything else you need from me, send me an email. You can charge your hours back to Mr. Brooks. I can’t afford you. Good day.”

She stood and headed towards the door. William rose, too, trying to stop her, but she evaded him and made it into the hallway. She could barely see through the tears blurring her eyes. She'd known today would be difficult, but in truth, she had hoped for a slightly uncomfortable meeting, followed by a delightful lunch with her best friend, leading to...who knew? Ha. She knew exactly what she'd been hoping the evening would lead to. And now, that was never going to happen. Thank God she'd learned of their family relationship before anything too over the top had happened. Still, she shuddered as she replayed some of their finer moments. She couldn't believe this. She stumbled towards her car. She was shaking all over, hyperventilating. She needed to calm down.

Her phone rang.

Chapter 47

She wouldn't have picked up, but she saw Ella's name. It was good that Ella was calling. There was no way Penny could sit through lunch. She would have to postpone. But first, she needed to tell Ella what was going on with the apartment. Unlike everybody else, from Grandmama to Lawrence to William to maybe even Ella herself, she didn't want to be a liar, or even to lie by omission. She hoped Ella wouldn't be too disappointed that the apartment didn't in fact belong to Uncle Lawrence. At least, her friend didn't really need the money.

"Penny, are you okay?" Ella asked, once Penny picked up.

"No." A sob burst forth from her lips, and then a wail.

"That bad?" asked Ella. "Oh, honey...I was trying to prepare you, but..."

"There's almost nothing left. Nothing but debts and..."

"What about the Palazzo?"

"Split in two, and the other owner is...is..."

"Wait, there really was another owner?" Ella asked. "Who...?"

"My hot handyman," Penny wept.

"What? So, he wasn't really a handyman?" Ella asked. "And wait, does that mean he's related to you?"

"The universe has a sick fucking sense of humor," Penny cried.

Here, she'd been bemoaning the fact that she had no living relatives, and the one guy she wanted to maybe take a chance with turned out to be her cousin.

"Well, he's probably not too closely related," Ella started.

"I *knew* you would say that," Penny moaned. "But anyway, it's not just that. He lied to me! And speaking of, I don't know how to tell you this, but your granddad's apartment..."

"It belonged to Grandmama, didn't it?" asked Ella.

"Yes, but how...?"

"Just a hunch. I promise. I don't know the details. But I think you need to talk to Lawrence," said Ella.

“No. All he tells me are bullshit romantic stories about days gone by,” said Penny, bitterly, sniffing now. “I confronted him, and he straight out told me he wouldn’t talk.”

“OK. We’ll figure this all out. Can we talk more at lunch? If you’re up to it, that is. I know you’re not in a celebratory mood. But I do have some interesting news- your 23 and Me results came in today.”

“Oh?” Penny looked down at her phone, sniffing, and opened her email with shaking hands. Talk about comic timing. The Universe was testing out a particularly screwed up improv routine at her expense.

“Looks like yours did, too.”

Penny wiped at her eyes. If only those results had come in before she’d started making out with William. Maybe it would have told her she had a blood relative nearby.

“We could just meet at my office if it’s better,” Ella suggested, her voice, soothing.

“No. We’ve been waiting for this. This is the one good thing that’s going to happen today.”

“OK...So... Swifty's? Noon? My treat?”

“I was gonna say not to be ridiculous, and that we would go Dutch. But I’m dead broke.”

“So what? I’m not. We’re going to figure all of this out. And we’ll exchange our 23andMe results!”

Penny almost smiled through the tears as she heard the excitement in Ella’s voice.

“And we’ll laugh about it...well, we won't laugh about yours,” said Penny. “I know how important it is to you to find out your heritage. So, I’m excited about that, at least. I’m glad I can help to give you something to look forward to... because my world just went to shit...”

“Oh honey, I wish I could be there to hug you. But I’ll see you at noon! I’ll be glad to take a break- I’ve got a million work things going on.”

“And I’m about to pile some more on top of you, because I need to figure out what’s really going to happen with Palazzo Leoni now that my fantasies of taking it over are a thing of the past. Why didn’t Grandmama tell me how much money she’d spent?”

“I don't know, honey. Maybe she didn't even understand it, herself. Maybe she assumed that you wouldn't even have wanted the house. It's a lot to maintain. And obviously, she was barely holding on, as well. At least she left you with some good stories.”

“And most of those were lies,” Penny said, the tears threatening again.

“Oh, honey. Think about our lunch. I'm going to get us a bottle of Champagne, and we'll watch all the Russian prostitutes around the pool, okay?”

“Thank you. Thank you for being my friend,” said Penny.

Once she hung up, she put her head on the steering wheel and started sobbing anew. A rap on the window made her jump, recoiling in horror, *Fuck*. It was William, his face contorted in some fake emotion, so doubt. How fucking disingenuous. No, she couldn't talk to him now. This was not happening. She put the car into reverse and peeled out of the lot, leaving a desperate looking William in her wake.

Chapter 48

Penny was glad she'd decided to force herself to go to lunch. She needed a pleasant diversion. After losing her whole family legacy, seeing her best friend was exactly the medicine she needed. She walked over to the Colony Palms, looking up at the pink facade, and stepping inside, marveled at the renovated interior. It had changed so much since the last time she'd seen it, but had become more intensely Palm Beach than ever, if that was possible, a pink and green fantasy with wallpaper featuring Johnny, Addison Mizner's monkey, wielding bottles of Champagne. She smiled weakly at the cheeky naïveté of the design. Her great grandmother had loved that monkey, and she thought she remembered that her grandmother had played with it as well, but was that even true? She'd seen pictures, hadn't she? In fact, she reminded herself to make sure she made digital copies of the photo albums before she was forced to completely vacate the city. But when she thought of all the pictures of Grandmama in her little wicker wheelchair, going to the swim and tennis club, or on her way to her friend's private zoo, as one did back then, she now felt guilty. The men pushing these chairs had always been colored, and though there were a few photos of Lawrence with Grandmama as a child, he did not go to the beach in such a vehicle and was never invited to the parties or to the private zoos.

She took a right and headed down a short hallway, towards the hostess stand for Swifty's. Ella would of course already be there. Ella was always scrupulously on time, if not early. She always liked to get the best table and scope out the space. The people watching at Swifty's was without compare, true lunch theatre, featuring self-conscious socialites arranged in curated tableaux. Around the pool, well dressed children, their mothers in matching garb, everyone spying on everyone else from behind their dark glasses. Penny spotted her friend at the power table in the corner. Ella had really made a name for herself in Palm Beach as one of the most successful commercial realtors, and was a fashion powerhouse, to boot. Her friend was so modest when they spoke that it took being in Palm Beach to truly realize the scope of her success. Whenever Penny asked herself, *who in the world buys these outrageously priced clothes on Worth Avenue*, the answer was, inevitably, *Ella does*. And her friend wore them well, setting off her perfect figure and glowing skin. Today, she wore a pink and green pleated skirt with a crisp shell

with a scalloped edge in a slightly more violent shade of pink. Faceted peridot earrings glimmered in her ears, an Elizabeth Locke pendant with peridot and pearls hung around her neck, and of course, she wore her massive wedding ring set, which had been inherited from her husband's mother. When Ella spotted Penny, she rose and gave her a huge hug. It felt so good to be enveloped by her friend's arms.

"I'm so sorry about all of this mess," Ella whispered. "I know how much the palazzo meant to you."

Ella had spent almost every weekend with Grandmama too, when the girls were little, both of them playing house in the Venetian fantasy, fishing off the dock, getting in trouble spying on the cocktail parties Grandmama threw for her ever-revolving cast of friends. It had been a dreamy place to grow up. But maybe it hadn't been quite so dreamy for Ella.

"We're not talking about me. Happy Birthday, beautiful. I know you're dying to see your results," Penny said to Ella once they sat down. She would do her best to be good company. Ella deserved that.

"So, I thought we'd forward them to each other at the same time, and then we can take a look and report back. We could toss a coin to see who reports back first."

"I know you've been waiting for this, so it'll be you, Penny said. "It'll be fun," she added, almost to convince herself.

"First, some Champagne," said Ella.

Two glasses of champagne miraculously appeared, and the friends toasted each other.

"And to Grandmama," said Ella.

"Yes, to Grandmama," Penny echoed weakly.

Dramatically, each of them picked up their telephones.

"Alright. Ready, set, forward," said Ella.

"Done," said Penny.

Ella impatiently scrolled through her phone, waiting for the message to come through.

"It's here," she squealed. "Oh my God. I can't believe it. I'm so excited. But what if it's totally boring?"

"It won't be," said Penny, opening the email her friend had forwarded to her. She obediently created an account, as requested, and then finally, after some false starts, peered at her results. She frowned.

“What's wrong?” Asked Ella. “You're a peasant, is that it?”

“No, I'm so sorry. I fucked it up. I think I accidentally have your results,” said Penny.

“That's impossible,” said Ella. “I gave them your address for mine. You gave them my address for yours, right? You didn't mess up. So as long as you opened what I sent you, and not what you sent me...”

“No, I triple made sure. You know how paranoid I am.”

“So those have to be yours.”

“Well, it doesn't make any sense,” Penny said.

“What do you mean?” Asked Ella, now paying attention to her friend instead of looking at her own results.

Penny felt a pang of guilt. She was ruining her friend's birthday. “I'm sorry, I don't want to distract from you...”

“No, not at all, this is our day. For both of us. And if you think there's been some mistake, let's figure it out and fix it, or it's not fun. What's wrong?”

“It says here, I'm 12 percent Sub Saharan African.”

“OK...” Ella peered at her own phone. “Well, that's not my result, I'm clearly ...Oh shit. Mine says I'm only 25%. What? I guess from now on I'm going to need to be more sympathetic to the plight of white women...”

“I don't get it,” said Penny, still trying to make sense of her results.

“Well, congrats, you're way more interesting than you thought you were, at least,” said Ella.

“Yeah, but how? Who? I mean, nobody in my family...”

“Nobody in your family that you know of,” said Ella.

All this represented to Penny were more lies. Another layer of falsehoods that she had been fed as a child. A crushing sense of loss came over her. She couldn't breathe.

“Penny- are you OK?”

Penny shook her head.

“Do you need to go freshen up?” Ella asked.

She was saying all the right things, but then, Penny saw Ella scrolling through her 23 and Me results, an excited expression on her face. And she just couldn't do this anymore. Before she knew what she was doing, she got up from the table and ran out, out into the street, straight up Worth Avenue, and back to the apartment, where she took the stairs to make sure she wouldn't run into William. Her phone had been pinging the whole time, but

she couldn't bring herself to look at it. Once in the apartment, she slammed the door behind her and threw herself on the sofa, where she burst into violent sobs.

Chapter 49

Penny sat on the balcony of the apartment, her eyes red and raw from crying for the past two hours, and now, she felt like there were no tears left. She'd been dreading the meeting with the trust lawyer, yes, but she'd been far from imagining how bad it would be. Not to mention, William, who she'd stupidly thought was the best thing to come into her life in a long time, William had been lying to her from the moment he'd met her. He'd toyed with her, manipulated her. It was so cruel that it took her breath away. But in addition to the devastation of having everything ripped away from her, she was plagued with something even worse: guilt. She'd ruined Ella's birthday lunch. She'd just had the strength to read her text messages, all of them from Ella, and they had gone from shock, to concern, to righteous anger.

Ella: *Are you OK? Did you go to the bathroom?*

Ella: *I checked the bathroom. You're not there. Where are you?*

Ella: *Did you leave?*

Ella: *I'm worried about you. Please text.*

Ella: *Well, that was an awesome birthday lunch. Thanks a lot. Good thing I enjoy my own company.*

Ella: *My ancestors are from Senegal and Mali. And Holland, England, France, and Spain. Thanks for asking.*

Ella: *Did you ever stop to think that it's not always all about you? Did you ever consider what it was like for me growing up with your snobby, racist ass grandmother, who always treated me like a second-class citizen, but you pretended you couldn't even see it?*

Penny had been an idiot. And blind. And a crappy friend. Why had no one ever bothered to tell her about her African American side? She felt

robbed of her whole birthright. But then, she realized how fucking privileged it was of her to even think that way.

Suddenly, it didn't feel like it mattered so much that she was going to lose the pink palazzo. It was a rotting house, built on lies. What was much more tragic and pathetic was she'd never been curious about her identity, about her heritage, about her history. Other people, namely the grandmother she idolized, had made the decision to withhold that from her. She who had been fascinated with history, she didn't even know her own. Whenever she'd spoken with Ella about Ella's experience as a black woman out in the world and in business, did she even really listen and try to understand? Would she have been able to understand her more if she had been raised with the truth of her identity? Or was that just her selfishness talking?

Now, she felt a pressing desire to know who her father was, to figure out who her grandfather was. And to learn what had happened with her mother, really? Her so-called existence, built as it was on secrets, was barely an existence at all.

Even so, the biggest loss, if she really admitted it to herself, was William. Those feelings they'd had between them- that irresistible pull, that familiarity. To know that it had all boiled down to biology and genetics was beyond disturbing. Ella had said they weren't that closely related, but it was too close for her, and also, it was more the fact that William had lied to her. She felt turned inside out. How could he have done that to her? She needed to talk to Lawrence. She would force him to finally tell her the truth. He had to know everything, or at least something. Had he been the key to the whole puzzle, but he hadn't told her? Out of some misguided loyalty to Grandmama, maybe? Or was it true that they had been lovers? She made a calculation in her head. If Lawrence was only half black, for example, the math worked out. Was Lawrence her grandfather? If so, he had some explaining to do. She quickly ran a brush through her hair, laughing bitterly as she realized the source of the texture that had so frustrated her so all through her youth. Now, she would at least appreciate it as a tiny outward sign of the heritage that had been hidden from her. Stolen from her. The memories of all those times Grandmama had critiqued her hairstyles popped back up. *How cruel.* She examined herself in the mirror again, wondering, now, who did she look like? Who did she take after? Might she track down her mother somewhere? After the big bombshell of her DNA, she hadn't really looked at the section containing her genetic relatives. William would probably pop up, if he'd done

the test. Maybe her mother or even other siblings she didn't know about would show up, too. Maybe they would be entitled to part of the trust. This day was fucked up enough that it would probably continue to pile on the disasters. But who even cared? They could have anything they wanted. She was done. All she wanted was the truth. Penny grabbed the keys to Grandmama's car- if it was even hers, still, and her handbag, yanked the door of the apartment open, and ran headlong into a solid form.

Before she had a moment to react, the smell of William's aftershave hit her. A shock coursed through her body as she felt the warmth of his muscular chest under her cheek. His arms began to wrap around her, and she felt an irrepressible urge to tilt her head up and let her lips be claimed by his, but at the last moment, she found the strength to shove him away.

"What do you think you're doing here?"

"Penny. We need to talk."

She noticed how he looked absolutely shattered, almost as bad as she felt, but still hot, of course. She couldn't think that way. He was her damn cousin.

"This thing, whatever the hell it was between us, it's over. Do you understand?" She cried.

Why couldn't she just shut off her feelings for him like a tap? Why couldn't she tell her body to stop craving him? Not only was he a liar, but he was a relation. One who was essentially going to steal everything she had thought was hers. The one person she thought might support her in all of this, and who, instead, had been lying the most.

"I just want to explain," William began.

"There's nothing you could possibly explain," she hissed.

"Where are you going?" he called after her, as she stalked down the hallway.

"To get answers," she said.

"I'm right here," he called back.

"I don't get answers from liars," she spat out, breathing a sigh of relief as the elevator doors closed behind her.

But what she had just said wasn't true either, was it? She was going to try to get answers from Uncle Lawrence, but he, too, had lied. Whether blatantly, or by omission, he had been complicit in hiding the truth from her. And now, she wondered, what about Ella? How much did Ella really know? How much has she been hiding from her? She'd certainly been in contact with William

about the sale of the property. But she couldn't think that way. Ella had been forthcoming about the offer. And the fact that the apartment belonged to Grandmama instead of to Lawrence was none of Penny's business. She understood why it wouldn't be the kind of thing that Uncle Lawrence wanted publicized. Uncle Lawrence, or was it Grandpa Lawrence? Was he related in some way?

She got behind the wheel and drove to the nursing home in a daze. At one point, the car behind her emitted a loud honk, because she'd been paused at a stop sign for too long, lost in her thoughts. A nauseous feeling came up from the pit of her stomach. She parked the car in the nursing home's lot, right as a torrential downpour began. By the time she had made it to the front desk, she was a drowned rat.

"May I help you?" asked a young woman at the front desk, someone she'd never seen before. There seemed to be lots of turnover in this place. She hoped some regulars remained, at least, so that Lawrence could have some sense of security and continuity.

"I'm here to see Lawrence. Lawrence Jones?"

"And you are?" said the young woman.

"His niece," said Penny, staring the woman down as she registered the flicker of surprise in her eyes. At least this woman hadn't been as overt as her predecessor, the one who had suggested that she might be in the wrong nursing home, directing her to a "whiter" one up the street.

"His niece?"

"That's what I said," said Penny, defiant.

"Let me see if he's able to receive visitors," said the woman. She stepped away from the desk. Penny was tempted to just run down the hallway and let herself into Lawrence's room, but she figured she owed him at least a fair warning. After all, their conversation would probably be far from pleasant. She could have brought him a sandwich, but had decided against it on the way. Too bad for him. *No truth, no sandwich.* The woman came back to the desk. I'm sorry. Your uncle is having a few procedures right now, she said.

"What do you mean, procedures?" Penny asked, her heart beating.

"Just a few blood tests and...ah, something to do with his pacemaker," said the woman.

Penny's heart hammered in her chest. Lawrence was all she had left. Lawrence and, well, Ella, if Ella could forgive her.

"You could wait here," said the woman, "but it might be a few hours. Why don't you come back just before dinner, when he's rested?"

Feeling numb, Penny retreated back to Grandmama's car, the rain soaking her to the bone. It felt cruel to have her discovery of the truth further delayed. What was she going to do between now and then? She opened up the 23andMe results and started to examine them more closely. Maybe she would find another relative. She navigated to the section bearing the heading DNA Relatives. As she scrolled through, a frown appeared on her face, a pain in the pit of her stomach. Penny Wells, AKA Ella Jones, wasn't listed among her relatives. So that probably meant Uncle Lawrence was back to being an uncle in name only. There were a few people listed as distant cousins, in the UK. So maybe that part had been true. She would investigate those later. No one closer- so much for hoping that her mother might appear in the listings, but all that meant was that her mother hadn't given her DNA. No William, either. But again, that meant much less than the fact that Ella was not related, unless the database hadn't been updated yet. She took a deep breath. Well, now she had to go back and speak to the one person who probably hated the most her right now. She tried Ella's number, but her call went straight to voicemail. Understandable. She fired off a text.

Penny: The only good thing coming out of this whole bullshit lie was the dream that we might actually be cousins. But we're not, it seems- at least not from I can see in my account. Is there anything different in yours?

She stared at her phone as if willing a response to come through, but none did.

Then, her phone pinged just as she was starting the car, having decided to go back to the apartment.

William: Can we please talk?

She pulled the car over and blocked his number. Doing this left her feeling even more bereft than finding out that she was not going to inherit the house. By the time she got closer to the apartment, the wind had picked up. It was lashing the rain about, and the visibility was close to zero as her hands

gripped the steering wheel. Having a car accident- wrecking Grandmama's beloved, expensive Cadillac- it would just be the icing on the cake. Would she even get to keep the car, anyway? Probably not.

She finally made it safely into the garage, checking around carefully to make sure that William wasn't lurking somewhere as she made her way to the elevator. She breathed a sigh of relief when the elevator doors closed, but groaned as the car came to a stop at the ground floor. She didn't want to face any strangers from the apartment building, not with her raw eyes and swollen nose. She probably looked like a crazy woman. She almost wasn't surprised when the familiar, tall, muscular form was revealed as the elevator doors opened. William's brown hair was plastered to his head. His wet T-shirt stuck to his body. She tried not to dwell on this. There was a haunted look in his eye, his lips pinched. He gave her a beseeching look.

"Penny, please..."

"And where have you been? Across the street? Taking possession of the house?" Penny hissed. "What are you going to do with it now that it's all yours? Make it into condominiums, I bet."

"Penny."

He put his hand on her arm. She wanted to shake it off, but though it was wet and ice cold, she felt a flash of warmth go through her.

"I wasn't at the house, Penny. I went for a run, trying to clear my head. I can fix this. We can fix this."

"No. You win. Congrats. I'm going back to New York. Back to my real life."

The thought of it almost made her sob anew, but she fought to keep herself under control. She wasn't going to give William the satisfaction.

"Penny, I..." he looked at her then, taking in her furious expression, and his mouth settled into a grim line. "You're not going to give me the chance to explain, are you?"

"Fuck you, William."

She couldn't believe she had almost let him in, almost let herself imagine a future with him- a shared life, with kids and joint projects. She'd been so stupid. She tore her arm out of his grasp and rushed out of the elevator the moment it arrived at her floor. She stormed down the hall, but he wasn't even bothering to follow her. She fumbled with her key in the lock, hoping to keep

the sobs from bursting forth before she safely closed the door behind her. And then, she gave into it the tsunami of emotion. The tears bubbling up, the harsh hiccups shaking her heaving body. Everything had been a lie. She'd lost everything, and anything she thought she'd had was rotten from the inside. She'd wasted her whole life believing fiction, when the glaring truth was staring her right in the face.

Once she'd calmed down the tears, she grabbed her laptop and started doing a search for her mother. Had Grandmama lied to her about that, too? Why had her mother abandoned her? Violet wasn't such a common name, but which last name might her mother be using? There were no results for Violet Wells. She searched for Violet Jones, in case Violet had used the same last name as Uncle Lawrence. Not that they were actually related, from what she could tell. Holding her breath, and dreading what she might find, she looked up Violet Brooks. William's last name. Great grandpapa's last name. And with that, she came across an Airbnb listing.

Farm stays in France. You'll be greeted by your hostesses, Violet Brooks and Anne Martin. La Ferme de Gassin is a bucolic retreat where you'll be able to do artistic study with well-known oil painter Violet Brooks, take cooking lessons with local restaurateur and co-host Anne Martin, and enjoy hiking trails and natural beauty. La Ferme de Gassin is LGBTQ friendly and open to all races, creeds, and backgrounds. Discounts available for lower income guests.

Ha. If this was indeed her mother, Grandmama would be rolling in her grave. Penny tried to zoom in on the photo of the two women holding hands, but she couldn't clearly see their faces, couldn't tell which one was Violet and which one was Anne.

"Violet Brooks art," she typed into the search bar. She landed on a minimalistic website featuring paintings, mostly semi abstracts, with colors reminiscent of Palm Beach. She read the artist's statement.

Unlike words, paintings can reveal the truth, whatever that means. Artist Violet Brooks grew up in Palm Beach, and now lives in Southern France with her loving partner of many years, Anne Martin.

No mention of the beloved daughter she'd left behind. Obviously, that was too much to hope for. Her mother had moved on, had made her own life, and her unwanted daughter had been left behind to be raised by liars.

And then, a photo. Penny zoomed in, almost afraid to look. It was like looking in an aging mirror. Her mother was a darker version of what Penny

might look like 20 years from now. No wonder Grandmama had wanted to keep Violet away. As a child, she might have smoothed her hair and kept her out of the sun, but as Violet grew up, her appearance told the truth that her own mother would not. Also, though Grandmama had cultivated the friendships of all the gay men on the island, her spirit of acceptance would have ended at blood relations. Penny thought she would have felt more upon discovering her mother, but there was nothing but numbness. Maybe one day, she would come to know her, but even if Grandmama had sent her away, her mother had been complicit in abandoning a baby girl. Had she had compelling reasons? Maybe, but Penny couldn't find it in her heart to forgive her, especially not today.

She didn't want to, but she found her fingers typing *William Brooks*. This, of course, was a terribly common name. There were a phenomenal number of hits showing high school football players, spelling bee champions, and business profiles on LinkedIn, none of which immediately seemed to correspond to the one she had thought of as "her" William. She typed in *William Brooks, Palm Beach*. The first hit was a historical society article. The William Brooks House, it read, built in the 1940s. The William Brooks house had been a spectacular mansion built on the ocean side of the island for a wealthy industrialist and his young wife. Apparently, the family didn't spend much time there, and the home was destroyed in a hurricane. Penny dug further. Here was an obituary for William Brooks Jr., who had been living on Nantucket at the time of his death. This head of several large companies was preceded in death by his wife, Nan, and survived by his son, William Brooks III, a real estate investor. William Brooks III. Trip, William had told her his nickname was, and she hadn't paused to think that it was kind of preppy for a handyman. If she was honest with herself, she had to admit that William had never actually said that he was a handyman. He just hadn't corrected her assumption. He had come right out and told her he was in real estate, but she hadn't listened properly. She entered *William Brooks III* into the search bar, and there it was, an article from the Brown University alumni publication. *William "Trip" Brooks III Talks Real Estate Investing*.

She laughed bitterly. Good old Trip's number one lesson, if he was being honest, should be to inherit all your real estate, especially the stuff you could get from people who thought it was all theirs. She kept digging. There was another article, this one from the New York times, a report of the

engagement between William “Trip” Brooks III and Miss Alice Foster Remington. How chic. So, he was engaged, maybe married, to boot. At this rate, nothing surprised her anymore. She wasn't being fair. William had told her that he'd been engaged once. He just didn't tell her that he'd been engaged to a girl recognized by Vogue Magazine as one of the bright young things of the social season a few years prior. A modern debutante, if there ever was one. They'd had their engagement party at the Everglades Club, she was surprised to read. So were William's family members there? Was that why Grandmama had given up her membership? Not for loyalty or principles, but more out of a burning desire to not be confronted with the other side of the family? Would Penny ever find out the truth? It almost felt like it didn't matter anymore. That's what happened with rot. Once it touched one thing, it spread, and made everything spoil.

Digging some more- by now, it was just pure masochism, like picking at a painful scab when you know damn well it's not ready to come off, she found more mentions of William. He'd been the head of various boards and charities, been photographed at a slew of gala dinners, from Washington DC to San Francisco to Miami. No mention of Miss Foster Remington. Until a bit of digging uncovered an article in Town and Country about the recent marriage between Ms. Emily Foster Remington and Mr. George Hill Farnley. So much for that, then. William had been telling the truth when he'd said it was over between him and his fiancée. Penny wondered who had dumped who. Who would possibly dump William? Well, other than his newly discovered cousin, that was.

She noticed that Ella still hadn't called her back, but now, enough time had passed that she could go back to the nursing home to speak with Lawrence.

Chapter 50

Penny shouldn't have been driving. She could barely see through the tears. As she drove, she cried some more, and reflected on how she'd never felt that her life was so horribly empty in New York, when it essentially had been, but now that she'd had the possibility of family and love and history and legacy dangled in front of her, only to be ripped away, she felt more bereft than ever.

She was dizzy from the sobbing and the hiccups, but she needed to see Lawrence, right now. All this bullshit about it not being his story to tell... it sure was. At least, he was the only person left who could tell it. And those 23andMe results had only added to the confusion. Was there some family link to Lawrence? At the very least, Grandmama had to have known about her heritage. Those things Grandmama had said to Ella- she'd been judgmental, racist, even. Was Penny even actually related to Grandmama? It boggled the mind. And Lawrence, well, he didn't owe her an explanation, but she sure hoped that he would give her one. Again, Penny felt pushed out, a stranger in her own life. It was freaking unfair.

The road to the old folks' home was so familiar by now that she somehow made it there, despite the fact that her mind was racing and she was barely paying attention to the road, and that, of course, it had started raining again. By this point, she halfway expected it. But this was a middling rain. A sad, pathetic rainstorm, nothing like the one she'd been caught in with William, that first time that they had given in to their lust- their messed-up lust. She'd read articles about people who didn't know they were related and found themselves inexplicably attracted to each other. Biology was a joke, a cruel one at that.

She parked the car in the nearest spot. Was it even her car anymore? Could she even afford to keep it? She hadn't even stayed to listen to the full terms of the trust, which was probably very self-destructive and stupid. She'd have to come back to the lawyer with her head down and her tail between her legs and ask for more details. But right now, she had a more immediate imperative. Lawrence was going to tell her the truth. She slammed the car door and stalked towards the entrance of the Senior Center, almost getting run over by an ambulance that had come out of nowhere.

"What the fuck?" She yelled, into the rain. Her phone pinged as she walked in. She ignored it. It was probably William, pathetically trying to make

excuses, or Ella, wanting her to apologize. She didn't want to speak to either one of them.

There was no one at the front desk. Not her problem. She was going to take herself directly to Lawrence's room. Too bad about signing in. She didn't have time to look around to make sure no one was going to chide her. She headed towards Lawrence's room, a storm of emotion inside of her. But strangely, it looked like there was something going on down the hall. There were a few nurses milling around, their energy off. Then, she heard footsteps running behind her. She spun around. It was Ella, running towards her.

"Penny!"

Ella didn't need to say anything else. Penny's heart seized in her throat. Both women hustled towards Lawrence's room. The door was open, the bed unmade, empty.

"Where is he?" asked Ella.

"What's happening?" asked Penny.

"They called me. I sent you a text. Something's wrong." Ella's eyes were wild. She turned to the nearest nurse. "Where is he?" she demanded.

"Hospital," said the nurse.

And then, Penny remembered the ambulance.

Without another word, they ran back to the front desk. Now, the woman Penny recognized as the center's director was there, on the phone. Ella's phone rang just as they reached her.

"Oh," said the woman.

"Where is he?" asked Ella. "Where's my grandfather?"

"Good Samaritan."

Penny and Ella spun around and ran towards the parking lot. The rain was falling even harder, now.

"I'll drive," said Penny.

She realized that, as upset as she was, with her whole life falling apart, this was Ella's grandfather. She had to be sensitive to that.

"I left a pretty pissed off client in my office," said Ella as they sped towards the hospital. "But none of it matters. I know he's old, but I felt like he's eternal."

"Just how I felt about Grandmama," said Penny.

"I'm sorry, you know," said Ella. "I was insensitive. Some of the things I said about you, and your grandmother... she was your Grandmama, and I know you worshiped her, and I shouldn't have said anything to make you think any differently of her."

"No, you were right to do it," said Penny. "Everybody's got their own relationship to people. What she said, what she did to you, it wasn't right. And I'm mad at myself that I didn't even notice. She wasn't perfect. I knew that. But Lawrence, he was pretty damn close."

"He was," Ella smiled. "You know he wasn't my blood grandfather, right?"

"He wasn't?"

"He adopted my mother when he married my grandmother. She was a single mom."

Penny's heart dropped. "So wait, even if it turns out I'm related to him, I still won't be related to you?"

Another wave of loss rolled over her. But then she realized- what she and Ella had, it was still family, wasn't it? Chosen family. Ella reached over and grabbed her arm.

"We're sisters in my heart, okay? We just are. And Lawrence, he wasn't my blood, but he was family in every way that counted."

Lawrence had felt like family to Penny, too. But was he really related? Flawed as she was, Grandmama had always made sure that Penny spent ample time with Lawrence. There was something to it, wasn't there?

They parked in the hospital lot and ran to the front desk. He was in the ICU, they were told. They sat there, side by side in the uncomfortable chairs in the waiting room, holding each other's hands for comfort. There was nothing left to say right now. They watched the clock, watched the screen of the television in the corner, looked at some of the other people in the emergency room, all of them shell-shocked, all of them living through their own personal tragedies. Neither Penny nor Ella had the strength to tell the other that everything was going to be okay. Lawrence was 97. He'd lived a long, full life. He had to go sometime. But it hurt. It always hurt losing someone, especially losing two people back-to-back.

Ella, at least, had her family to comfort her. Sam and the kids. She would come home to them, and they would encircle her in their love. Whereas Penny... Penny would go back to the empty apartment, and be surrounded by only uncertainty. Where was she going to go? What was she going to do?

Her phone pinged again. A strange sound. It was not a text message. Instead, it was some alert from some app that she hadn't signed up for, no doubt.

"Do you need to get that?" asked Ella.

"No, nothing's more important than being here for you," said Penny. Another ping. And another.

"Crap. I should probably turn it off."

She went through her notifications, finally realizing that it was YouTube. What in the world was going on? Her video was blowing up, that was what. She'd posted it this morning, and ever since then, had been living through a shitshow. And that whole time, another storm had been brewing, online. She had gone viral, apparently. There were over a million views, and more comments than she cared to count. She didn't want to read anything right now, but it looked like people were begging for more. She couldn't believe it.

"What is it? Everything OK?" asked Ella.

"It's silly," said Penny. "My video, it's apparently doing really well, but who cares about that?"

"I do," said Ella. "I want to see you do well. I want to know that you're going to be fine. You've gone through a really horrible time, and I'm sorry. There are some things that maybe I could have told you, but you know, I don't even know everything, and it wasn't my place. And then, I was trying to help you, and I was misguided, and..."

Penny shook her head.

"No need to apologize. But I'm sorry, too."

She had also started to realize that maybe William had been trying to do right by her, as well. Maybe, was it possible that his reluctance to give in to their mutual attraction at the beginning had been because he was trying to spare her, somehow? He hadn't told her the truth, but maybe he'd had his reasons. Maybe he'd thought she was hiding something, too. In any case, there was no time to think about that right now. A doctor stepped into the waiting area.

"Miss Jones." Ella stood up.

Penny stood, too, even though she wasn't officially kin.

"Yes," said Ella.

“Your grandfather... he's resting comfortably now. But it's time for you to go in and be ready to say your goodbyes.”

“What?”

Ella squeezed Penny's hand, shaking as the sobs overcame her.

“Well, Penny needs to come, too.”

“Alright, you two go in.”

The doctor ushered them into a sterile hospital room. There lay Uncle Lawrence, tubes in his nose, tubes coming out of his arms. He looked even more sparrow-like than the last time she'd seen him.

“My girls,” said Lawrence weakly. “I think this old man is being shown the exit,” he said. “You're both my girls, you know.”

They each took a hand.

“You still have years ahead of you,” Ella said.

“No,” said Lawrence. “With Lizzy gone... she was my other half.”

Penny's eyes widened. So, it was true? Lawrence and Grandmama had had a relationship?

“It's like that, with twins,” said Lawrence.

Twins? Ella and Penny looked at each other.

“So wait- are you really my uncle? My great uncle?”

“Of course,” Lawrence whispered.

He smiled at both women, squeezed their hands weakly, and closed his eyes. They barely noticed it when the heart monitor flatlined. It wasn't like in the movies. It wasn't dramatic. It was just a transition. They held his hands until they felt a change. A loss of vitality. Lawrence had let go. They looked at each other, tears running down their faces.

“He's gone,” said Ella.

Penny nodded. She'd found family again, only to lose it so cruelly. But at least Grandmama had done this right for her. She'd always kept her so close to Uncle Lawrence that, even without knowing that he actually was family, he'd always felt like it was so.

The doctor came in, turned off the monitor. Penny and Ella looked at each other through the tears, nodded at each other, and gave each other a hug.

“We're family forever,” Penny said. Ella squeezed her harder.

“What happens next?” Ella asked the doctor.

“There's some paperwork. Which one of you is going to fill it out?”

“Well, I'm the next of kin on paper. She's the next of kin in reality. So maybe we'll sign together,” said Ella.

Then, it was all a blur. The minutiae, the making decisions. Lawrence would be buried next to Grandmama in the family plot. “They were almost always together,” said Ella simply. “Couldn't live apart.”

Perhaps Grandmama hadn't had a long-term love affair, that they knew of, at least, but she had had a long-term bond with her brother, a secret family tie that she'd always held sacred. Despite the wrong-headed things Grandmama had said, when she had given up the Everglades Club, Penny was now sure, she'd done it because of Lawrence, and because of what she was. It had been her own tiny but significant way of standing up for herself, and for her brother.

“Do you want to come to my place for dinner?” Ella asked as they were leaving the hospital. The rain had broken, and the sky was washed in pastel hues. Sunset was quickly approaching.

“No, I think I'll let you spend some time with your family...”

“You are my family, too.”

“I know, but I think there's someone I need to talk to,” said Penny.

“Someone?” asked Ella. “The handyman?”

“Yeah, kind of,” said Penny, smiling wistfully. She was now just half whatever degree of cousinhood she'd thought they were. It was still too close for her, personally, but at least she owed it to William to hear him out.

“Alright,” said Ella. “Call me if you need me.”

Penny dropped her off at her car in the parking lot of the Senior Center, and she drove off, dusk settling in just as she passed over Lake Worth.

Chapter 51

As she approached the door to the apartment- Grandmama's apartment, she saw an envelope taped to the door.
Oh no.

None of the surprises in the past few days had been good ones. Except for having Lawrence be family, of course. She approached warily. The envelope was probably an eviction notice, or anthrax, knowing her luck. She plucked it off the door. On the front of it, there was a stamp bearing the lawyer's name and office address, and a scrawled, handwritten note:

You left so quickly; the lawyer didn't get a chance to give you this. W.

No terms of endearment. That would have been weird anyway. And her brief instinct to forgive him had evaporated. How had he seen Grandmama's house and not said anything?

With shaking, trembling fingers, she ripped the envelope open. She might as well see what this was. No use wasting any more time.

It was folded-up sheet of paper. She unfolded it and found a series of numbers, and a short note:

As requested by Ms. Elizabeth Wells, here is the combination for the safe in the apartment at Mar Villas, to be opened only by Ms. Spencer Wells.

She unlocked the door and rushed to the monkey painting in the second bedroom. When she removed it from its hook, it revealed a safe set into the wall. Inside the safe, a jewelry box. She would examine this later. But more interestingly, a stack of notebooks. Diaries? Grandmama's diary? She felt weird reading something that was written as a private diary, but if Grandmama had made sure the combination was given to the trust lawyer, then she must have meant for her to have them. She opened the top notebook, and inside, found an elegant envelope. Grandmama's stationery. She opened that and took out a card.

Spencer, darling. If you're seeing this, I have passed, and I was too weak to tell you the things I should have said in person. Hopefully this will explain everything. I lied to you. Being alone is not the way. And I wish I could have told you that, but my stupid pride got in the way. Darling girl. Go forth and be happy, please. I'm sorry. All my love, Grandmama.

Tears pouring down her face, Penny started leafing through the first diary. This one was visibly from when Grandmama was a young girl. She wasn't a consistent diarist. Apparently, her entries were separated by days, weeks, sometimes even months. She leafed through. Here was a full year gap. But the entries did seem to cover the key moments of Grandmama's life.

December 16th, 1938.

Mother is so unreasonable. Frank asked me out for an ice cream date, and he's a perfectly nice fellow. And Mother says it's not appropriate. She says I'm too young. I'm twelve, and tall for my age. And it's just ice cream. She treats me like I'm a baby- or a delicate flower. Doesn't let me spend a moment in the sun. I can barely go swimming. I know that my brothers used to go to the beach all the time, before I was born. I saw all the pictures with the wheelchair being pushed by that colored man. Every time Mama looks at those pictures, she cries. Of course, the children were stolen away from her. By father. Mother says not to call him that. Why did father take the others and leave me? Lawrence came back from school, and he took me to play under the mangroves, by the water. And then, I felt like a child, after all. We found some crabs and poked at them with sticks. It was wonderful, but then of course, Mama sent the maid to fetch us, and forced Lawrence to go do his homework. I don't know why Lawrence can't go to school with me. We'd have so much more fun doing our homework together. It doesn't seem fair.

April 23^d, 1940.

I have just been told two things by Mother that have changed me forever. Lawrence is my brother. My twin. I have always felt like he was my best friend, my other half, and it is such a joy to know that we are truly connected in this way. Our father was apparently not Frederick Brooks, but the man in the pictures with the wicker wheelchair. But I can't find those pictures, now. Mother has hidden them away, and she will not speak of it. The two boys the man I thought of as my father took away with him were in fact the fruit of his illicit liaison with a woman named Gloria, who was their housemaid until Mother had her sent away. Apparently, this was not Frederick's only transgression. Mother intimated that he carried on with men, as well, but would not explain any further. Mother is still livid that she had accepted to

raise these boys as her own, to avoid scandal, but then, when she had an affair with a colored man, the husband who made a mockery of their marriage vows time and time again wasn't able to accept his wife's issue? The double standard is repugnant, whether or not it is a question of race. It does make me feel warm towards mother, but here's the horrible thing: Mother is sending me away. To an all-girls school, a finishing school. I am quite finished, thank you very much. What will I do without Lawrence? He's continuing on with school, which is good. He was always smarter than I was. But I don't understand why he has to go to the colored school, and I somehow do not. The fact that mother kept this from me until now is horrible. I should have known the truth years ago. It seems rather impossible to continue on with the charade, knowing what I am. To add insult to injury, mother has said I must do my debutante ball. What a vain and pathetic pursuit. Perhaps when I'm at school, I'll meet some man at a dance, and run away with him before graduation, and then I won't have to be a debutante. Being paraded with all the other silly girls and shown off like a pig to market. What's the use even? Mother has already told me that if I have children, my children may be colored. So, I must remain a spinster to avoid the shame. If I'm so shameful to her, she should send me away and never have me come back, instead of going through the motions. What am I to do? She says there's the house to take care of, and I do love the house. Lawrence, of course, can live with me. He's allowed to have a family, I suppose, but not live in the house with his family, unless they pretend to be my servants, which I can't abide by. Mother keeps taking me to the Everglades Club and all these ladies look over me, commenting on the frizz in my hair or the shape of my nose, and I wonder if they suspect. It's the sort of thing that I might just be compelled to shout out someday. Let the truth come out into the open air. I hate Mother. I'll gladly go to finishing school, if it means getting away from her. Miss Porters. What a silly name. I wonder what a frumpy old lady Miss Porter is. Anyway, diary, I don't know when I'll write in you next.

December 12, 1944

Most girls dream of this day, and I'm just dreading it. My debutante ball. I've been poked, prodded, starved, and laced into this ridiculous confection

of a dress. We've had to travel to New York, to the Waldorf Astoria. Why on earth Mother is going through all of this, after telling me all the things she did, four years ago, is beyond me. She's been quite clear that she will not support any marriage on my part. So, this leaves me with very few prospects. I don't care so much about the romance of it all. I've had a few suitors court me at dances when I was at school, but I find them all very childish. There's no one I could respect and be happy being saddled to my whole life. But that may all change one day. But then, what would this imaginary man say if he ever found out the truth?

Lawrence has grown into a handsome and strapping man. He has graduated from school and is talking about going to university. I'm so proud. He has many young ladies running after him. I think he would have his pick of any. He's luckier than I am in that way. He has his freedom, or at least some version of it. After the debutante ball, Mother is throwing me a tea at the Everglades Club. How can mother even stand it there? Boring tea parties, croquet games, golfing for the men, and the same conversations, over and over. How Mother continues on with this charade is beyond my understanding. But I do see the sadness in her now and again, and sometimes, I think that she misses him. I asked her the other day what it was like being with a colored man. A convict, no less. How shocking, to think of it. She slapped me. I suppose I deserved it.

My date for the debutante ball is Henry. He's a nephew of Flagler's. Very well regarded. A good match for anyone, but of course his mother would not suffer the shame of this going any further, if she knew. So, I know I shall invent some excuse for not seeing him after the dance. Mama had originally been planning on sending me to Europe on a grand tour after my debutante ball, far from prying eyes. I had been so looking forward to it, but the war has ruined all of that for me. Anyway, dear diary, I must go. It's time to put on my gown and put on the pearl necklace and earrings that mother has so carefully chosen for me in a pink shade that makes me look even more pale.

June 6, 1944

Dear Diary,

As I write this, I sit at my vanity in Palazzo Leoni. Mother and I have had another argument. I have told her that, when I am finally able to go to Europe, I shall never come back. She said I was killing her. That I'm all she has. I told her that was by choice, after which she slapped me. I've become quite cheeky after my 18th birthday. I am, after all, an adult, and I should be able to do what I like. I told mother I would get a job, and she told me I was being ridiculous. So, I must wait for Europe. I am so impatient with this war. I know our boys overseas have it much worse, of course, but still. Mother has friends and relatives I shall be visiting and some of her friends are also sending their daughters to Europe as soon as they are able, so I shall be chaperoned. Don't worry, dear diary. I shall not leave you behind. Is it childish to write my hopes and dreams into a diary? If so, and if this is my last entry as a child, let me spill my guts.

Mother always said I didn't need a man and that I should be alone, but that's not what I want. I understand that some may find my very existence shocking, but surely in modern times there will be more people like me? Not in high society, said Mother. But I have heard of such a thing. Even in the English aristocracy, some young ladies coming from the Caribbean, perhaps. I have convinced mother to let me do a course of study abroad, in architecture, when the war is over. She says it's a too shocking for a young lady, but it's close enough to art history that she may soften, over time. It's painful to have to wait.

* * *

September 12, 1946

How is life so unfair? I say this, and sound very spoiled as I bemoan the fact that the war is over at last, but I'm not able to leave for Italy. Mother has fallen ill, and though she has plenty of staff, it would be unseemly if I were to depart on my long-anticipated grand tour. Henry, my date from the debutante ball over two years ago, has been assaulting us with numerous letters begging to have the privilege of taking me out again. I think he's quite in love. But if he only knew, he wouldn't be so interested. I can see Mother's point. I can't saddle someone else with my problems. But now she really is quite ill. Something brought on by the humidity of the house, no doubt. It looks smashing and elegant from the outside, but I know the truth- that it is rotting

from the inside at all times. It's a constant battle to keep it from falling into the water. Black mold lives between its walls. The roof corrodes constantly. The railings on the balconies are rusting through. Mother replaces everything surreptitiously, as if this decrepitude was a sin, an outside sign of her moral failings. I wish she would just let the house fall apart, show what it truly is, show what we truly are. A beautiful facade with nothing true on the inside. But I shall be the dutiful daughter. I shall stick around. The doctor says just a few months, and I'll be able to set off. But by then it will be winter, and I'll have to delay my trip. Ah well, off I go to fetch her some tea. Thank goodness Lawrence is here to entertain me, but he leaves for University in a few short days.

December 1, 1946

Dear Diary,

Here I am, completely alone. The quick recovery they promised me for Mother has not materialized, and now Lawrence is gone, and I am quite bored. I've read every book in the library. I've begged Mother to let me go work in an antiques shop. But she says Antiquarians are dissolute, and a bad influence. Well, that's what I like about them.

Going away to school drove me away from all the girls I once knew, and all of them are either traveling or marrying already. Marrying doesn't sound like a very tempting thing at this juncture, but the travel part, how I wish I was in France right now. Yes, I double checked my calendar, I would have been in France on the Lake of Annecy at this very moment, perhaps enjoying a French café with a handsome Frenchman, who would look into my eyes and not know what I am and fall in love. And if he suspected the truth, I could travel further south to Morocco, marry a Moorish man. How shocking. And he would be darkly handsome enough that any child born would not raise so many questions. I find that quite exciting, the potential of a Moor. I wonder if we would have a wonderful Moroccan Riyadh with a beautiful plunge pool in the center. I can quite imagine my life there. The smell of rose water and orange blossom. And exotic spices. But mother would never allow it. Ha!

Allow it. Look at how I'm thinking now. I'm 18, almost 19. I have my own mind. But still. I am the dutiful daughter, so I will stay until she improves.

* * *

November 4, 1947

Dear Diary,

Well, I had packed my bags. I had been told I could leave at last, a full year late, a full year marked by nothing, really. Lawrence came back and visited us once. He introduced us to his young lady. Mother does not know this, but he has already married her, for she already has a baby, by another. Man, which he is raising as his own. I am quite excited about the whole thing, to be honest. Mother was doing much better and now has taken a turn for the worse again. At this point, I suspect her of exaggerating just to keep me here. She was doing better convalescing, and she dragged me to the Everglades Club at least once a week, hoping that I should meet some female friends of my age, but I find their conversation so tiresome. Talking about setting up house and having babies. Both things that I will not do if mother has her way. I love her, but she is a monster, a monster of selfishness. How could she do this to me? Make me a monster before I was even born. This was her choice. I had no say in the matter. And now she must continue controlling my life when I'm an adult. If I am ever able to go to Europe, I shall never come back.

* * *

October 20, 1948

Dear Diary,

I can't believe it's been so long since I last wrote in your pages. I wish I could say that it was because so many exciting things were happening, that I was living a fabulous and colorful life, but that is not really so. I have finally managed to start helping Martin in his shop, not that I am paid, Mother says that would be inappropriate, so Martin gets my help for free. But my help, admittedly, is mostly going to lunch and laughing about the client's poor taste.

If it wasn't for him, I would go absolutely mad. Lawrence has returned to a sort of university for colored people. He writes occasionally. His young family is doing well, and I'm happy for him, but also jealous. Mother is a mystery. She gets better, and every time I start making motions to leave for Europe, she takes a turn for the worse. I have concluded that she is absolutely doing this on purpose. I am now 22 years old. Not quite an old maid yet. But absolutely not living any kind of life. I wish I could write more, but is there even anything to say?

December 3, 1950

Dear Diary,

It's been two years. I reconciled myself with the Everglades Club. It is, after all, the only activity I have open to me. Martin is now carrying on with a crew of young men who I find to be a bad influence, and I don't want to associate with him anymore. I'm more like my mother than I knew. Lawrence is almost finished with school. He will be officially marrying his beautiful, sweet wife. I'm so excited for the wedding. I hope Mother lets us go. After that, Lawrence will be going into the military, so they will be separated for a few years, after which he will have made enough money to buy them a small home. I wonder if I can go live with them one day. It'd be better than being with mother and living this perpetual lie. After all this to-do about her health, one would think Mother would be frail, but she is stronger than she has ever been. She displays an iron will, stopping at nothing to bend me to her desires. That imperious finger she points at whatever she wants. I am convinced she is eternal. I feel guilty wishing that she would just go away. Leave me to do what I will. But what would I do without her? In this house? Alone? No skills? I suspect the money, too, is less than what it once was. When she was left by her husband, he never divorced. He gave her a sum of money, which seemed quite massive at the time, but with no work and no wise investments, I realize that it has slowly been disintegrating. I must speak to someone and try to build a plan for myself if I wish to survive for long. Mother still will not allow me to take a job. She says that no well-bred young woman does. But well-bred young women are allowed to marry. And I clearly am not. So here we

are. Stuck. God, diary, I think I'm probably boring even you. Your pages must grow more brittle as I write my pathetic words into them. I shall try to come up with something more exciting for next time.

** * **

September 22, 1951

Dear diary,

It finally happened. Mother has condescended, at last, to let me go to Europe. Though I am a spinster. 25. I still look young for my age, and I can at last go to Europe where no one knows me. The need for a chaperone has evaporated with my advanced age. I may be more independent now and travel as I will. I still would like to study some of the grand homes of Europe. And have been corresponding with various people who can gain me entree into some of these stately manors, chateaus, palazzos, and the like. This will give my travels some structure and provide built in friendship for me as I explore. I wish never to return to this damned island, to this crumbling house on the water; it's so bleak, I can't erase the darkness that permeates it. Lawrence has gone off to the military. He got married, officially- the ceremony we were all meant to attend- and mother suddenly decided she would not allow it, though I saw her shed a tear at her own intransigence. Her own son, and she was more worried about what people would say? I embroidered a special wall hanging for Lawrence and his sweet wife and hope to spend more time with them, and the child, when he returns from the army, if I ever return from Europe. In the meantime, I am packing my bags. Three trunks. It's full of dresses and hats and all the fripperies I need to go through Europe as a well-bred young lady. I will lie about my age, I have decided.

Chapter 52

There were more entries, but Penny, bleary eyed, needed to take a break from reading. She looked up. It was pitch dark outside. She checked the time on her phone and noticed that she had missed more calls from William. At least now she knew that they were not cousins. But still. Could she move past the lies, or at least give him the benefit of the doubt? If she had learned anything in the past day, it was that history was never quite black and white.

Her fingers hovered over her phone's keyboard. He wasn't related to her. At least there was that small consolation. He had mentioned something about working together, at the lawyer's. Would that be possible? From now on, would their relationship be purely business? It was probably too broken for them to embark on anything else.

Just then, a knock at the door. She hesitated. She looked like hell, obviously. She'd been reading, and crying, and rubbing her eyes, but William had seen her at her worst a few times, and, well, he was probably there to talk business anyway, if that was who was at the door. She got up and looked through the peephole, her breath catching as she saw him standing there. He still had that effect on her. At least it wasn't incestuous. The fact that getting that information was the high point of her day almost made her laugh.

She opened the door. William looked at her, concern painted on his face. He looked like he'd aged a few years in a single afternoon. She probably was the same.

"I know you don't want to talk to me," he said.

"I don't, but I probably need to."

"There's something I need to do first," said William.

She gasped as he took her into his arms. Not to kiss her. No. He gave her an all-enveloping hug that she melted into. She'd been needing this so much, more than he could imagine. It disarmed her.

"Uncle Lawrence died today," she said, into William's chest.

"Oh baby, I'm so sorry," said William, pulling back to look at her, smoothing her hair away from her face. He was holding back, she could tell, not quite knowing how to navigate their relationship with the information that he had been given but trying to be there for her. It was in danger of melting her heart and making her forgive him. But first, she needed to know the severity of his lies.

“He was my real uncle. Well, my great uncle.”

“He was? How?”

“Not that it matters, but just so you know, you and me aren’t really related, at least by blood.”

“We’re not? Thank God!”

He squeezed her again, holding her close. It felt so good to be in his arms, but how could they have anything between them after everything that had happened? She was still mad at him, she remembered.

“There’s something I need to explain,” said William. “I want you to know that when I first met you, I tried to stay away from you, because I assumed that, coming into that apartment belonging to Elizabeth Wells, you might be the other trustee. I felt so attracted to you, but I was furious at myself for being so fucked up. So when the trust lawyer told me the trustee’s name was Spencer Wells, I was so relieved to know it wasn’t you, after all.”

“Penny is my nickname. I told you it was. You could have guessed...”

“I could have. But by then, I was so attracted to you, falling for you so hard, that I tried to lie to myself, and tell myself that it wasn’t you- that you just happened to come into my life when I needed you most.”

He was still holding her, kissing the top of her head, making her weaken in her resolve.

“I have to admit it, when you told me about Ella, it was hard to keep lying to myself- I was pretty damn sure that she was my real estate agent, but I canceled the dinner, just so I could tell myself that I didn’t really know that for sure. And just to make certain, I retracted the offer on the house.”

“That feels like an instance of too little, too late,” said Penny, a little dryly, pulling away to peer at him.

“I know. But you can’t imagine how taken I was with you. It made me delusional.”

She could imagine it quite well. She’d been obsessed with him from the get-go.

“And then, of course, when you took me to the house, I knew for sure. I couldn’t lie to myself anymore. I was devastated. I didn’t know what to do. You don’t know how badly I hated myself for it.”

“What about lying to me about being the handyman, when you in fact own the building?”

“You’re the one who jumped to conclusions- at first, I thought it was no big deal, something funny we would laugh about together later. But then, when I

heard your attitude about these heartless developers who try to ruin the spirit of a place, I thought it would be better to keep that under wraps- I had no idea we'd get so serious. I mean, believe me, I wanted to, but..."

He stared into her eyes, taking her face in his hands. It was taking everything she had to resist him right now.

"So, what do we do now? How do we work this out?" he begged.

Penny remained silent, thinking. Was there any way?

"Penny, why do we need to be on opposite sides of this? What if we were on the same team?"

"How?"

"We don't need to work against each other. We can work with each other. As partners."

She looked at him, shaking her head. He had said that in the lawyer's office, yes. But how could he think that would work? He had financial resources, and she didn't.

"I don't have the kind of money you clearly have," she said simply. "I would like to blame that on the fact that I come from a long line of women, and that they didn't think they should work. But honestly, I should have known better."

"You have talent. Creativity. I'm so fucking proud of what you've done with your videos already."

"The first one is going viral," said Penny, "for what it's worth. I think I'm onto something. But it's going to be a journey."

"I *know* you're onto something," he said. "So can we agree to be on the same team?"

He was saying all the right things. But how could it even work?

"Here. Come sit," he said, leading her to the sofa.

"What would it even look like, a partnership between us?"

"It could look like a million things," William said, "it can look like whatever you want. I've not read through all the trust documents yet. But why don't we agree to go over them together?"

"OK," said Penny, warily. "But I think my eyes are too exhausted for that right now."

"So close them," William said.

She did as she was told. She was so, so tired, but when he leaned in and gently kissed her closed eyelids, and then moved to her mouth, she was

suddenly wide awake again, even though she kept her eyes closed, savoring the sensation.

William shifted on the sofa. Somehow, he lifted her and positioned her over his lap, so she was now straddling him. He was rock hard beneath her.

“I would have wanted you even if you were my cousin,” he whispered. She laughed, then, for the first time that day.

“You’re so beautiful. I love your laugh.”

She opened her eyes, to take in his gorgeous face. That jaw. Those liquid eyes. He took her face in his hands and kissed her, nipping at her lips, groaning as she opened her mouth and let him twine his tongue with hers. His fingers running down her neck gave her goosebumps everywhere he touched. She pressed herself against him, already so impatient, but needing simple closeness with him, as well.

“I want you closer. As close as I can get,” he said.

She ground down against him, wetness and heat forming between her legs. She went back in for another kiss, then moved her lips down, kissing William’s neck, giving him a gentle bite, tasting his salty skin on her tongue.

“You’ve got too many clothes on,” he said. “Is it okay if I take this off?” His hands lingered over the top button of her linen shirt.

“Sure, it’s getting a little hot in here,” she said, trying to play it cool. He unbuttoned her shirt, taking his time, while she peeled his T-shirt off of him. When that first layer was off, he pulled her to him. The shock of his warm skin against hers was delicious.

“That feels so good,” he said.

She nodded, and then their lips were back together.

“Still too many clothes on,” she mumbled into his mouth, not wanting to break their kiss. She moaned as he unhooked her bra and removed it, cupping her breasts and sucking on one nipple, then the other.

“I’m going to have to ask you to get off of me,” he stated.

“What? Why?...oh.”

She did as she was told. She stood back and watched him, transfixed, as he got up, unbuttoned his jeans, and let them fall around his ankles. She unzipped her pants and stepped out of them, too. She already missed the contact of his skin against hers.

“Still too many clothes.”

He pulled down his boxers, kicked them off. She stared at his proud erection. It was everything she’d imagined. He sat back onto the sofa.

“Come closer,” he said, and pulled down her panties. He pulled her towards him, until she was standing there, her legs spread by his. He explored her with his fingers, spread her apart, slid down to kneeling and started lapping at her, making her gasp. Her knees almost buckled, but he was holding her thighs. She wanted him so badly. He stopped for a moment and looked up at her.

“Look at you,” he marveled, grabbing her hips and pulling himself up, kissing a trail up her body and coming to standing in front of her. His cock was pressed between them, now.

“I've been thinking about this for so long.”

“Me too,” she admitted. “Do you have...”

“I wouldn't be so forward as to come to your apartment prepared, today of all days,” he said.

“I have a clean bill of health,” she responded. “How about you?”

“I haven't been with anyone...”

“Liar,” she said.

“Unprotected, at least.”

He sat back down on the sofa, pulling her on top of him so she straddled him. She could feel his heat. His member was positioned perfectly against her clit, which was throbbing by now. Her nipples begged for his mouth. As if reading her mind, he obliged, sucking on one, nibbling it gently between his teeth, then giving attention to the other. But she needed more.

“Please,” she begged.

He held onto her hips and guided his shaft into her. This. This was what she'd been craving. Feeling him enter her, inch by inch. Stretching her. Filling her. She arched her back and cried out in ecstasy, riding him, grinding herself against him, feeling how he hit every spot just right. He threw his head back now, too. It was his turn to close his eyes.

“I can't look at you,” he said.

“Or what?”

“Or I'll finish before I can give you what you deserve.”

He cupped her breasts, pinching her nipples between his fingers.

She rode him hard, feeling the pleasure mounting, the tension increasing inside of her.

“Oh my God, I can feel you,” he groaned. “You're so hot.”

“Don't you dare open those eyes until I'm done. Think about taxes,” she said.

“Oh God,” he replied. “You just made taxes far too sexy.”

His hands grasped her hips, now, moving her against him, guiding her into a rhythm that they both wanted and needed. This was it. She could feel it, the delicious tension mounting, and then the paroxysms of pleasure starting at her core and then moving through her whole body in waves, every nerve ending pulsating and electric, and his hands, everywhere, his mouth finding hers. She cried out as she bucked on top of him, and he thrust more deeply, deeper than she imagined possible, harder than ever.

“I can feel you coming. I love it,” he moaned.

When she finally was done, he pulled her off of him and deposited her on the sofa, leaving her looking up at him, mesmerized by the sight of his hand stroking his cock, as he came all over her stomach.

“If I did what I wanted, I'd be pumping you full of babies right now,” he said, groaning.

And for the first time in her life, she thought that sounded really hot.

“Maybe next time,” she teased.

Later, when they were cuddling on the couch, and he was gently stroking her back, she asked him, “so what were you saying about babies? Were you serious?”

“I think we'd have a beautiful baby. A beautiful family. I don't know why, because we're not related, thank God, but you already feel like family.”

“You do to me, too,” she said.

“So, before the babies, I want you all to myself for a bit.”

“You've got yourself a deal.”

Chapter 53

6 months later.

Penny sat on the balcony, working on her laptop in the soft early fall sunshine, her Jack Rogers sandal hanging off of her freshly pedicured toes. She smiled to herself. Her book was coming along. She had brand partnerships and consulting opportunities, thanks to her fast-growing YouTube channel. She'd had a fun lunch with Ella, who'd just opened a secondary office in Palm Beach proper. And William would be home soon. *Home*. Well, home for now. They were here in the apartment for another few months, and then, the house they had bought together in El Cid would be completed. William was acting as the general contractor, and Penny as historical consultant, of course, but the house had both classical and modern elements. She'd learned a lot. Learned to compromise a little bit; learning to give and take with William had been a delightful, delicious lesson.

It was the six-month anniversary of when they'd first made love, and so much had changed since then. But their passion was still just as all-consuming. She was wondering if he would attack her before they even got to go out to the dinner they'd planned, at Bilboquet, of course, to celebrate half a year of partnership, in life and in business.

She heard his key in the door. Though he had his pick of apartments in the building, she loved that he'd been happy to have them live amongst Grandmama's things, for now. That chintz sofa was certainly going to be retired, especially after everything that it had been through lately. Some of the other furniture would be going back to the palazzo.

Penny got up and met William halfway to the door, in the living room.

"How's my gorgeous girl?" He said, sweeping her into his arms and giving her the kind of kiss that she could always feel in every part of her body. So much for going straight to the restaurant. She knew, even a few seconds in, what was coming next.

"Before I take you to bed, how was your day?" He asked. "Actually, you can tell me while we get undressed."

He led her into the bedroom by the hand.

"Ella and I ran into that insufferable Missy," she said. "Wait. I have a six-month anniversary gift for you."

He grinned as she unzipped his pants.

“I was going to tell you that I already have everything but...”

“But this is the gift that keeps on giving,” she said, tracing her finger down his chest, smiling as she noted the growing bulge in his boxers.

“Apparently, Missy's just dying to have us over for dinner. I told her we'd check our calendar. She probably wants to be the first one into the palazzo when it's opened to the public.”

“I bet she wants to... what? Do some kind of benefit there?”

“Oh, I'm sure she'll come up with some excuse, but if she wants to fundraise, so much the better,” said Penny, “but let's talk about that over dinner. I don't like to talk with my mouth full.” William gave her a devilish grin.

“I agree. Any etiquette coach worth their salt would, too.” He let her pull down his boxers and push him back onto the bed. Now, she straddled him, giving him a moment to realize that she wasn't wearing anything under her dress.

“Oh,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh,” she said, moving down, depositing little butterfly kisses on his chest, on his stomach, and rubbing his member between her breasts before finally taking him into her mouth, making him gasp as she took in his whole length and then slowly worked her tongue up, down, and around the head. She used her hand to rub the base of his shaft. As she worked her mouth up and down, she felt him stiffen even more in her mouth. He held her face in his hands, then took in handfuls of her hair as her head bobbed up and down.

“I'll never get tired of this,” he moaned, starting to breathe harder. “But I don't want to miss out on giving you *your* anniversary gift. You're going to have to slow down that magic mouth of yours.”

She giggled, and it translated into a hum that made him gasp. “I'm warning you,” he groaned.

“Oh, all right,” she said, giving him one last lick and a teasing stroke with a finger. She straightened back up again, still straddling him, and pulled off her dress, giving him a look at her at last.

“You're so beautiful,” he gasped, reaching up and cupping her breasts. “Come over here.”

He pulled her down, and gave her a deep, delicious kiss. Now, he flipped her on her back and positioned himself next to her, stroking her and letting his hand trail between her breasts, over her belly, and between her legs.

“Somebody’s wet for me.”

“Always.”

She ground against his hand, and he put a finger inside of her, then two. She arched her back. His fingers worked like magic, hitting all the right spots, massaging her pussy inside and out. It felt so good, but she knew it would get even better, soon.

“Please,” she moaned.

He got up and kneeled between her legs, and she got a good look at him, at how rigid he was, at how much he wanted her. She lifted her hips for him, and he entered her in one smooth motion, making her scream with every delicious thrust that came after that. His hands were on her breasts again, squeezing them, teasing the nipples. She wrapped her legs around him and pulled him closer. Coming down onto his elbows, he paused for a moment, looking deep into her eyes.

“I love you so much, do you know that?”

“You’re just saying that because you’re balls deep inside of me.”

“I say it to you every day. I love you, Penny Wells.”

“I love you, too, and not just because of how you’re making me feel right now.”

He started thrusting harder, filling her, making her moan. There. She was about to come. She could feel herself getting close.

“Don’t stop,” she begged.

“When are we going to have those babies?” He asked, suddenly serious. He had slowed down his thrusting, and now he was grinding against her, slowly pulling out and then easing himself back in, making her want to scream. It was delicious, but she wanted more. Needed more.

“Are you seriously asking me to have your children? Now?”

“It seems like as good a time as any. Probably better than most, actually,” he said, thrusting deep into her to make his point.

“I think I’m ready,” she groaned, frustrated. “Faster,”

“You’re just saying that because you don’t want me to stop.” Another delicious thrust. He bit her neck, and her eyes almost rolled back in her head.

“Oh my God. Maybe. But don’t you dare stop.”

“How’s this?” he asked, grinding against her just like she wanted. “What would your Grandmama say? A baby out of wedlock? Would she be shocked?”

“Hello? I think she’d be okay with it,” Penny laughed. “But can we not think about her right now?” Her laugh was punctuated by a groan as William thrust into her more deeply.

“What if I’m not okay with it?” he responded, kissing her.

“Not OK with what?”

“Not being married.”

“I don’t know what to say to that,” said Penny.

A moment of panic bloomed in her chest, but it was quickly eclipsed by another groan. He felt so good. She couldn’t imagine ever wanting to be away from him.

“I’m asking you to marry me, Penny. I know this is maybe not as romantic as...”

“This? Not romantic?” she asked, grinding against him harder. “I think it’s pretty fucking romantic.”

He smiled. That crooked smile she loved so much.

“You do?”

“We literally couldn’t be closer than we are right now.”

“I would like to try,” he said, and he did, which made her gasp. “I don’t have a ring for you.”

“You don’t have a ring? You’ve got over ten of them in the safe.”

“We have over ten. You have your pick.”

“I have everything I want right here,” Penny said. She lifted her hips, angling for him to get even deeper. Her heart was full, but so was her pussy, and she wanted more, more, more, and she told him so.

“So, what’s it gonna be?” he asked, as he thrust into her.

“What’s what going to be,” she smiled wickedly, trying to play it cool, but then he made her moan again.

“Have I changed your mind about marriage? I want to mark you as mine. I want it official,” he said, thrusting harder.

“Can we talk about it later?” she asked. “I’m about to...Oh...”

“About to what?” he asked, pumping her harder.

“Oh my God,” she cried. “Yes. Yes! Yes!!” she screamed, as her orgasm shook her.

She could feel him now too, throbbing, shooting a hot load deep into her. He groaned, calling out her name, and she locked her legs around him, keeping him inside, wanting this moment to last forever.

“Did you just say yes to my proposal?” William asked, when they had finally caught their breath and were lying on the bed next to each other.

“Well crap,” said Penny. “You tricked me into it.”

“I don’t know. I think I got your answer fair and square. Sounded to me like you were pretty sure of it, in fact. I mean, you all but screamed it. Three times, if memory serves.”

Penny laughed.

“I mean, I don’t remember, exactly. But I’ll take your word for it. In any case, I guess it’s too late to retract, right?”

“It’s absolutely too late,” he said, kissing her deeply. “But if I have to, I can make you scream your answer again.”

“Maybe it’s best. Just to be sure. But it feels like you put me in a difficult position when you ask me like that.”

“That? Difficult? That was missionary!”

“Hmmm. You’re right. Maybe next time you can...”

“Stop teasing me, or we’ll never make it to dinner,” William laughed, pulling her to him.

“Do we really have to go out? I feel like we have everything we need right here. At home,” she said, tracing his jawline with a finger. She couldn’t believe they had found each other. Couldn’t believe he was hers. Forever. “Let’s stay in.”

“I like the sound of that,” he responded.

So did she. She kissed him and put her head on his chest, feeling the heat of him against her cheek, feeling his heart beating in unison with hers, in a rhythm that seemed to say, *you’re home. You’re home. You’re home.*

The end.

If you enjoyed this book, please leave a lovely review. It is much appreciated!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kiki Astor is a romance author and etiquette maven based in Montecito, California, where she lives a rich life with her delightful husband, mortified children, and incredibly demanding lap dog. When she isn't penning slightly naughty stories, she keeps herself busy doling out rich life, Old Money, and etiquette advice on TikTok as everyone's favorite Auntie Kiki. Her steamy novels are set in wealthy enclaves such as Gstaad, Montecito, St Barth, St. Tropez, Greenwich, Beverly Hills, Middleburg, and Napa Valley.

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