

## 11. PARADISE ON EARTH

We have stayed up all night long drinking. It is going to be a tough day at work. For the time being, paradise would be to wake up in Angie's arms.

"Benny, who are you kidding? You would want to make a sex slave out of me."

She has already sent those shivers through my body.

"I don't feel the same thing, Benny. It can't be love."

This thing with Angie has been going on long enough. I need to see Sofia.

Sofia is wearing the most marvelous red dress at dinner. It seems to pull with her frame as she reaches across her body.

"You look hot!"

She perks up, "Thank you!"

I react to my surroundings by absorbing this taste for luxury. I sit up in my chair and work to convey an air of sophistication. Sofia can see the change.

"Benny, I am impressed. Maybe, you are learning."

I am thinking what Angie said about my charm being irresistible. Maybe I can finally pierce this resistance on Sofia's part. I look down at her knee. I want to touch her leg. The feeling washes over me. I want to savor this delicious sensation. My fork catches a few pieces of lettuce. I begin eating my salad.

Sofia takes a sip of the wine, "I didn't know this was in you. I was half expecting to have a dinner served by poolside."

"You're being cruel."

"You can take the boy out of the pool, but you can't take the pool out of the boy."

"I'm no longer a pool boy. I don't even do the maintenance anymore."

"Don't you miss it?"

"I'm going to buy a new house."

Sofia is responding to these trappings of money. All the times that she held me on and then rejected me only underlined what was her real dream. I suppose it became mine as well. I wanted this success from the moment that I went to live with Ramon. I never knew how easy it would be.

"A house for one?" She has a sparkle in her eye.

"No, I'm looking for someone who would like to share it."

"Do you have someone in mind?"

"I do. But I'm not sure if she'll take up on the offer."

"Benny, I need a real proposal."

The import of the situation hits me. This has been her ticket all along. She hasn't been playing me. She's been waiting for the moment when we could marry our fortunes together. I brush her hand.

My sole is moist and flaky. The asparagus is crisp. The company is rich. I am gazing in Sofia's eyes. I can imagine a life with her. I visualize a story. Our honeymoon. The new house. Romantic trips together. I wonder if I am ready for domestic bliss. I hesitate before the dramatic change.

Even at this point I have not left behind my pool boy ways. I no longer handle the pool

vacuum, but I am still thinking like a pool boy. Can I really mature? It's easy to make plans while white table cloth dining, but can I sustain them day in and day out.

After successive bottles of wine, I am giddy.

"Do you want to move in with me? Would you marry me?"

"Benny, I want a real proposal with a ring."

I'm wondering if she expects me to bankrupt myself with a mega-diamond. I still trust her sense. But she is starting to become convinced by my transformation. The valet brings around the car. While inside, I hold her hand. I look at her longingly. She seems equally entranced.

The wine is still talking. I hope that I haven't drunk too much to drive. But I don't seem to bear the detrimental influences. I am just floating in paradise. When I pull to her place, I am lost in her eyes. I get out to open the door for her. I hold her against the car and reach over to kiss her.

It is delectable. I am immediately taken out of myself. All traces of cynicism now vanish as we share the same high.

"I want to come upstairs."

"I want you, Benny. This all seems too soon."

She is still banking on my announced proposal. I need to make good.

In the threshold of her apartment. I am kissing her neck. She pushes me into the door frame and rubs her body against me. The light dress makes her come more alive. There seems to be nothing holding us back now.

Is Benny finally in love?

As we move together in her bed, I wonder if I have ever tasted such paradise. The intoxication is overwhelming. I soar without any hindrance. I can feel myself passing through layers and layers of intensity until I finally transcend completely. I can sense her drawn to such heights. The communion is unequalled.

The next few days I drift on the same ecstasy. I think about her smile, her body, our love. I need to make the proposal.

We again meet for dinner. It is much more casual. During dessert I pretend that I am agitated. I get up.

When I come back I head straight for her chair. I am on my knees before her, "Will you marry me?"

I can hear the wedding bells ring as she says yes. I am truly among the chosen few.

I am so up in the sky. I am flying!

That night I spend a wonderful time with Sofia. The next night, she has to go away for some business. I have the strangest dream. It is all based on that feeling of intoxication that I share with Sofia. I am surrounded by woman in revealing swimsuits. They are members of a priesthood, my sisters. They lead me to an altar. Before me is a crowd. They are waiting for my words. I tell them of my journey to enlightenment. I describe the sense of freedom that my belief offers them. In front of the altar is this immense pool. Everyone plunges in the waters. They are all saved like me.

I am now at the head of the pool. I dive in as well. We are all transported together.

From our place in the water, we merge with the sky. We all float in the heavens. I have

tasted my destiny. I must spread the word of the cleansing waters. I wake with a sense of wonder. I have tasted a revelation. It is about something greater than Sofia and I. I am the new high priest.

The wedding is fast approaching, and there are all kind of arrangements. My house won't be ready so we decide to have the ceremony at Ramon's. I am out one afternoon buying flowers when I seem to recognize someone down the street. She is coming towards me.

It is Erin. She is older and has a mature attractiveness that she never had before.

"Erin."

She gives me a big hug. She kisses me. For a second, I forget myself in the kiss.

"Benny, you look great. I don't know how to describe the change."

"I'm getting married."

"Wow. Do you have some time? Let's get some coffee and catch up."

"I just have to make a phone call."

I cancel an appointment.

"I'm free now. Let's go over there." I point to a nearby café.

"Corrine met some guy and moved to Seattle. I think that they have a kid. We actually made up before she left. I think she understood what was going on in those days."

"Are you finished your degree?"

"I'm doing hair. I went to beauty school." She looks at me. "Benny, you look great."

The spark hits me. I know that I am engaged. I am about to be married. I want her. She knows it. We catch up with other meaningless details.

She looks into my eyes. "Benny, I'm not the girl that I used to be. I don't do those silly things anymore. I'm with a guy that I really like. I'm completely faithful. We're going to move in together."

I miss that tight body. My mouth is almost watering thinking about our former times together.

"That's too bad. I thought that we might have some fun."

"Benny, you're incorrigible. You're going to be married soon."

"I don't know if I can ever spend my life with one woman."

"You don't have to think that way. It's not a prison sentence."

Erin is right. I get her number. I give her a big kiss and take off.

Later that evening, I think about calling her. A few days later I am at a job site. I scroll through my numbers and see hers. I call her. We exchange pleasantries.

She is honest, "Benny, I've been thinking about you since we saw each other. I guess you're going to be married on Saturday."

"Yeah. I'm a little nervous."

I am hardly thinking about any of that. I want to see Erin. I haven't been with anyone else since the proposal. I wonder if my attraction for Sofia is not just another intense physical feeling.

I tell myself that I am testing out my love.

I meet her at her apartment. We know where this is heading. She warns me, "Benny, this is for old time's sake. We can't do this again."

She is even more open than Sofia. With Sofia, each intimacy seems planned out. It seeks

its spiritual anointing. On the other hand, I find the raw sex with Erin so natural. It is what I am accustomed to. I welcome being with her again.

Even a kiss says the world. I can feel the room again shake. She is even more concentrated in her actions than before. I can think about nothing else when I am with her. I cannot think. It is so automatic. We have become machines for pleasure. This is why I accepted my role as a pool boy. I am hesitant to let it go.

I haven't seen Brenda in a while. She probably can give me good advice.

We are sitting by her pool. She confides, "My marriage never stopped me from exploring myself, but, Benny, you are different. Erin will only destroy what you have."

"What are you saying?"

"It's two days before your wedding, and you're thinking about sex with Erin. What about Sofia?"

I had thought of her as my antidote against my wayward times. Now Erin is making me question this.

"Brenda, I want to be like you."

"No, you don't. You have tasted happiness."

I had tasted happiness. But it wasn't sex. It was something else.

I become entirely daring. I convince Erin to come over. Sofia decides to surprise me. Erin is already in my room taking off her clothes when Sofia walks in the front door.

"I just thought that maybe we could spend the night together.

"I'm not sure, honey."

She gives me a deep kiss. I can see Erin watching from the almost closed door.

"What's wrong?"

"I think that I've got pre-wedding jitters. I thought it was supposed to be bad luck to see each other before the wedding."

"That's the day of the wedding when I'm in my gown."

I know that Erin is getting a kick out of this. I don't know what to do. I need a better excuse.

"I've got the stomach flu."

"You really don't want me here?"

"I'm not feeling well. I'll be OK be our wedding night."

I sure hope that I will be OK.

She is convinced by my poor excuse. She feels the same trepidation. She takes my nervousness as an omen. The minute that she is out the door, I am lost in my own omen.

Erin is lying naked on my bed.

"You are a dick!"

"That's what you always loved about me. The danger."

"Is nothing going to slow you down."

"Maybe a case of stomach flu!"

We both laugh.

I jump on the bed and we roll around until she is on top of me. Her moist body is wrapped around me. I am still dressed. She is humping me as I lie there. I am so aroused. I kiss her.

That night I have the dream again. I am presiding over this ritual by a pool. Then I feel myself floating in space. Such a massive feeling of enjoyment almost equal to my time with Erin.

She wakes me up early. She wants me to make love to her before she goes.

“I’m not sure when we’ll have a chance to do this again.”

“Tonight. After my bachelor party.”

“I thought that you’re going to do a stripper.”

“Heavens no. I’ll just find her a let down.”

“I have to be with my guy.”

“You’ll think of an excuse. You always do. Besides, I already have a reason not to be with Sofia tonight. Tomorrow *is* my wedding night.”

Things are getting so crazy. Ian shows up at the bachelor party. It is lead by Ramon. I give Ian a big hug.

“I’ve missed you, buddy.”

I really can’t tell him that I’ve just been with Erin.

“I miss you too,” I tell him.

He is in law school. He also works with an immigration lawyer trying to help his fellow Mexicans.

“I no longer go by Ian. I’m Julio. It’s my real name.”

“Julio, it’s a great name.”

“Are you still playing the life of a pool boy?”

“I’ve got a construction business.”

“I saw you in that commercial with that porn star. Did you really do her?”

“Discretion, discretion.”

“The Benny that I knew would never say no to a woman.”

“I’m the new Benny. I’m going to be married tomorrow.”

Ian leaves me with a lesson, “I hope so. After a while, we just have to grow up. I realized that about myself. I just wanted to make money for so long. Then I realized who I really was. There’s so much money around. And so many people who have nothing.”

I am not really looking for a sermon on my wedding night

Ramon wants to take us to a strip club. Instead I convince him to take us to this new dance club.

I’m getting a drink when I see Kim.

“What happened to you stranger? I thought that you’d call.”

“I’m getting married. I didn’t know it when I met you. But she finally relented.”

“I hate being second choice. I thought that we really hit it off.”

In another world, I would have pursued her at that moment, no matter what. But I am a changed man. At least temporarily. I can’t help calling the party a little early so I can meet Erin.

Erin explains her situation with her lover, “He was about to go down on me when I told him that I wasn’t in the mood. He about strangled me. Benny, you better be good.”

I have one of these visions of going soft on her. That is the farthest thing from the truth. I am so turned on by her. I have never known myself to have this energy. We fall asleep arm in arm. I wonder why I can’t make something of this.

I have my same dream. Erin seems to assist me in this ritual. I wake up on this higher plane. I pull Erin over to me.

“Benny, I do have to go. If we’re ever going to get together again, I can’t get caught.”

“I thought that was your intention.”

‘It’s your wedding day today. Be careful.’

She gives me a big kiss on the way out. I hop in the shower. I have loads of stuff to get done. Ramon is picking up my parents. I have to get the tux. But I feel this sense of paralysis. I have a towel wrapped around me. I’m watching TV. They are showing a full immersion baptism in a swimming pool. I feel that this is my destiny. I see the light.

The rest of the day is a big blur for me. I didn’t really drink the night before. But from the first chance, I start drinking. I hardly even remember seeing my parents. I am so glad that Ramon is helping out. I get through the ceremony. Sofia looks so beautiful in the dress. But I find that I am looking at one of the bridesmaids. She gives me the same look as well.

I hate to say it, but I am totally zoned during the vows. I am completely on automatic pilot. A little later during the reception I see my bridesmaid head up the stairs to the bathroom. I follow her. I look intently at her ankle as she heads up the stairs.

I am just behind her. I pull her into one of the guest room. My hand is already under her dress as she is kissing me. I turn up the skirt and just plunge in.

Sofia is downstairs playing hostess. She doesn’t even miss me. I want to be missed. I find a bottle of champagne after my little escapade. I just take off.

My workmen find me the next day passed out in a big truck on a job site. I am still in my tux. I look a mess.

“Boss, you need to go home.”

Where can I go? I have totally fucked things up.

I always felt this distance from my parents. I used to tell myself that I was Henry Winkler’s lost brother who had been kidnaped and forced to live with my family. Now I really feel disowned.

Ramon does everything that he can to smooth things over. I know that Sofia’s father wants to put a hit out on me. I call her up.

“Sofia, I need to see you.”

“Benny, you couldn’t have done worse if you put a knife through my heart. You’ve got to give me a few days.”

We meet for coffee that Wednesday.

She lays down the law, “I was thinking about bringing some goons with me to rough you up. Then you’d feel what I feel.”

“I wanted to say something. Everything was spinning around me.”

She doesn’t know about the bridesmaid. If she did, I’d definitely be dead. We agree on an annulment. She doesn’t want to face a future of trying to live down her humiliation. This way, she can blame it all on me. I don’t think that her family would accept me after this anyway.

My parents need to go back without seeing me. Ramon patches things up.

“I explained to them California communal property laws. She would have owned half of your pool business. If things failed, you’d be back to being a pool boy with your half. I think that made sense to them.”

“Thanks, Ramon.”

“I owe you.”

“I will collect some day. I do need you to help me clean up.!”

“I’ll be there.”

I am surprised how easy this is. I still haven’t learned much of a lesson.

I call Angie the next night.

“My husband’s here.”

“Can you find some excuse to get away?”

She meets me at a bar about a mile from her house.

“This could be a little risky. You sounded desperate.”

I relate the story of my wedding.

“I thought that you were crazy. I didn’t know that you’d gone this far.”

“What about my dream? Does it mean anything?”

“You’re baptizing people in a swimming pool. Benny, you’ve been doing this too long.

There’s so much more that I want to talk about. I can’t talk about what really is distracting me. But she has some idea.

“You’re really trying to fuck up your life.”

“I didn’t want it to turn out this way.”

“I think that you believed that Sofia was the crown. And she really thought that you had something to offer.”

“I did for a while. But things got out of control.”

“Now you’re going to tell me that it’s all about me.”

“It could be!”

“I don’t want to hear it. So I leave Josh, and you leave me at the altar.”

“We could elope.”

“I’m already married. I have the house. I don’t want to lose it. At this stage, he’d claim adultery. He’d say that I tricked him all along.”

I almost beg her, “You’ve never even kissed me.”

“And now you want to get married.”

“We could try it.”

“I thought that you just got married.”

“It’s going to be annulled.”

“Wow! It did work out in your favor.”

After Angie has her time berating me, Erin wants her turn. She shows up at the house.

“I forgot my underwear from the other night.”

“No, you didn’t. I would have held on to something like that.”

She pretends to slap me. “You chickened out on that girl.”

“I got married. I was just on a tear, and I didn’t wake up until the next day. I was in my fucking truck at a job site.

“A house.”

“No, a commercial site.”

“Close call. You’re almost officially a loser. When are you going to stop?”

I talk to her about my religion idea. “You were in the last dream.”

“I was telling you about the meditation that I’ve been doing. You need to do something to take your mind off sex.”

“I wonder who was over here boffing me before my wedding night.”

I congratulate her, “We have a winner.”

“Bingo bango bongo!”

“I’m going out with a bang.”

Erin offers more advice, “What’s your complaint? Do like me. I found a nice guy to settle down with.”

“And every couple of weeks you find someone to do on the side. Talked about a mixed diet. I thought the meditation quieted you down.”

Erin defends herself, “It does. I used to be worse.”

“Ian told me about his cousin.”

“At least he saved your skin. Ian would have gone off on you.”

“I guess we really are birds of a feather.”

“I should really get home, Benny.”

“You’re already here. How about a little work?”

We soon are exploring that plateau together. No wonder she is in my dream. We react so quickly to each other. I remember Kim shaking her body at the club. Now those gyrations of Erin’s. I am already in her mind and she in mine.

What does Erin know that is so insightful? She can’t vocalize it. But I know that she is clued in.

It has been a long week. I return to the well, my Brenda.

She is angry, “What the hell are you doing, Benny? You were supposed to marry that girl. You’re starting to believe your own bull shit.”

“I think that I’m in love with another girl.”

“You don’t have that girl. And even if you did, she’s married. You could have still been with Sofia.”

“I wanted to be with Angie.”

“You felt the same way about Sofia until she agreed to marry you. You can’t let your emotions get in the way of good decisions. You never did that with your business. Why are you doing that in matters of the heart?”

I tell her about my dreams.

“Benny, are you going to start a religion now.”

“It’s an idea.”

“Why not dig a deeper hole and pour all your money down it?”

“You could be more understanding.”

“I always have been. Now you’ve gone over the edge. Someone has to draw you back.”

“Maybe you could!”

“Benny, I don’t do charity fucks. There has to be something in it for me.”

“There’s always been the same thing in it for you.”

“You are damaged right now. You need to take care of that.”

I wonder if the CIA has something to repair personalities. I am sure that they do. But there has to be side-effects. They could very well be much worse than what I am now enduring.

Brenda's wisdom has again steered me back to sanity. Nevertheless, I crave my time with Angie.

I drive over to my new house. It is almost ready for me to move in. I have protected myself through all this turmoil. I accept my isolation. How can I ever sell the rest of the world on this paradise. I drive up the driveway and around the circle that leads by the door then back down. I have finally attained my dream. But it has not been enough to sustain me.

I spend the next few weeks packing up my stuff. It's therapeutic moving to a new place. But it's lonely being on my own. Erin's counsel has been temporary. Brenda and I only hang out occasionally. I can never really bother Sofia again.

I phone Angie.

"This is a terrible time, Benny. I'm working through some shit with Josh. I don't want to ruin this. Be patient."

"I want to see you."

"I know, I know. It's just not possible."

Angie has a separate life. Sofia was supposed to be my refuge. Something upset that dream. I can't go back I already took all this time to win Sofia away from her man. And I blew it. I pretend that I could pick up those pieces. There is a lucky star that will allow me to come back. But what could I really do to make it all better? I have gone too far out to expect any sort of rescue.

I don't want to wait the night out. I find Kim's number. She agrees to meet me for a drink.

"I thought that you were going to get married," Kim wonders.

"I chickened out. We got married. But we got it quickly annulled."

"What happened?"

"It wasn't right for me." I can't very well tell her about Angie. She doesn't want to know that she was my second choice.

"How long were you engaged for?"

"A couple of months. We've know each other for a while. Then it just seemed like the thing to do. I had been waiting to be with her again."

"I was engaged to this guy. But I ended up giving him back the ring." She does this thing with her hands. It reminds me what excited me about her in the first place. She has some of that magic that Erin has. She knows that she captivates men. But she is hardly aware of the reason why. She can't focus it into any other pursuit. She is hoping for the perfect catch. Someone who will believe the charm enough for him to trade his fortune for her love. It is almost worse than waiting for a role in a Hollywood picture.

For a moment, I am distracted by Elsie. I need to make more commercials. I could explore the film industry. If I could build pools, I could make movies.

Sure my business is doing well. But I don't want to get carried away.

"Benny, are you listening?"

"Sorry, Kim. It's just been a tough couple of weeks. I had this dream. Now it means nothing to me. It wasn't as if she left me. I realized that I just made up this feeling about her."

I realized it because of Angie's influence. Can Kim do that same thing for me? I want to see her dance. I want to see the marvel that turned me on to her in the first place.

I ask her, "Do you want to go somewhere else?"

"Benny, what do you mean?"

"A dance club.

"I'd love to."

When we arrive, she just loses herself in the music. I am again drawn to the enticing style that she first demonstrated on the floor. She has this way of shaking both her arms to almost rally her whole body. I move behind her to copy this style. She smiles as she slides her body into mine.

As the music keeps the night pumping, her moves become more provocative. I am acting out sex with her on the dance floor. This attitude is so critical to her. Her intimacy is this open book. She flaunts her knowledge. Even her private world is a more extended version of this same thing. I can see her in the gym demonstrating her acrobatics. She has to be on the tip top of her game so that she can perfectly convey these bursts of passion.

"I want to go back to your place, Kim."

"You think that you can just call me to mend your broken heart."

I am surprised by her resistance.

"I thought that was your idea. I thought that we were feeling the same thing."

Kim protests, "I don't want you to get this false idea about me."

"What's that?"

She is more brutal, "That you can just call me for a fuck."

"It's not that."

"What is it, Benny?"

"You're fun!"

Kim questions me, "But what am I besides fun? Do you even know what color are my eyes?"

"They're brown."

She smiles. She is trying to come up with another question. I kiss her. She has only been playing with me. She doesn't have enough to resist.

For a while I tell myself that I am with Angie. And she allows my fantasy. As the night hangs on longer, I enter a more desperate world. Here, Kim comes alive. She attains a form hardly human. I am drawn to the raw quality of her desire. This is why she reminded me of Erin. I am afraid that I will always be drawn to this extreme. It is part of my animal nature. Her paradise is way more precarious than I have contemplated with Sofia. Could Angie ever appreciate this thing?

It would only drive me as long as she continued to be tied to Josh. I admire the deviousness of it all. Erin is now most prominent in my pantheon. I worship her. Kim is driving me wild. It is not what I can do for her or to her. It is what this experience is doing to me. I am being ripped apart. I am being torn from my sentimentality. Kim hungers. I hunger with her.

I realize that our connection will always remain unstable. But I hold on to her as my balance to Angie. As long as Angie refuses me, I continue to pretend with Kim. Part of Kim knows the secret. She loves that wildness that we share. She knows that I am destructive for her. But that is why she comes back. When we seek this intensity, we almost accept that fact that it is its own satisfaction. If our partner wavers, there is always someone else out there willing to play

the game with more fervor.

By later in the week, Angie is free. I have started to move into my new place. I take her by to see it.

I tell her, "The pool's still not ready. It looks great."

There is a fountain at one end of the pool. The water circulates back into the main pool. It is a mess back there. But she is impressed.

"This is going to be a wonderful place for a party."

"You're invited."

She surprises me "What if I bring Josh?"

"He can come. But won't he suspect something?"

"I don't know. It's not like we've done anything, Benny."

I remind her, "I said that to you a while ago."

"It's true. That's why I feel safe."

"Safe from what?"

"From being abandoned. You tried that once. I just don't want it to happen again."

"It's not the same."

She informs me, "You have to find someone who's not wise to your history."

"I thought that you can tell just by looking."

"That's silly, Benny."

She stares into my eyes and laughs.