

## 7. GOING SOUTH

Sofia gives me her phone number. I call her two days later. She agrees to meet me for lunch.

“Benny, I had a great time with you.” She munches on her salad.

“You were incredible.”

“That’s why I agreed to meet you.” She is looking into my eyes. She continues, “You know how things seem perfect at the moment. As you said, it was incredible.”

“Thanks!”

“But you’re such a child. You think that you can meet someone in a bar, and that’s going to change their world. There’s more to life than sex. I can’t trust you. Who knows who else you’re seeing at this moment now?.”

“How did things go with your lover?”

“Benny, that’s my life. It has nothing to do with us. We can’t be together again. That’s what fantasies are about. You entertain them for a brief moment. Then you come back to reality. What do you do for a living? You clean pools. You try to bed your clients. What is that going to be ten years from now? You’re already some kind of freak. What kind of person tolerates that kind of thing.”

I feel hurt, “I have loads of clients. I’ve just expanded my business.” They bring me my steak. She continues to eat her chicken salad. I dig in. I am famished.

“It’s not about that. There is more to life than your success. This is about becoming a human being.”

She talks on about my failures. How I have screwed up my priorities. I know that she wants to get back with me. I can see it in her eyes. But she has settled for this other life. I would find it boring.

“Benny, don’t judge me. You don’t know what I want. What I have.”

I only believe her kisses from the other night. Even when I look at her body, I imagine that we are again together. That belief sustains me as I plough through my meal. The steak is succulent. I am looking in her eyes. I am so taken by her. I pretend that nothing else matters.

I want to say something important to her. I do not want to sound desperate.

“Have you ever been in love?”

I tell her, “I go out with this girl who loves me.”

“You don’t love her. You’ve got sex and love so confused. You’ll never sort it out.”

“I don’t know.”

“I almost fell for the same trap that you have. I thought that love was just more intense passion. I’d go with guys who really turned me on. It only spun me around and prevented me from finding what I really wanted.”

Her talk is getting to me. But it makes absolutely no sense. Here, Sofia abandons her man at bar for someone else. She gives of herself completely to me. Now she is trying to backtrack. I can’t make heads or tails of her advice.

On the other hand, she is the only one to get through to me. She already has my attention.

“Did you have sex with me to teach me a lesson?”

“Why?” she wonders.

“Because you’re not getting anything out of this for yourself. It stands to reason from my perspective. But I had nothing to risk. You risked everything.”

I have boxed her into a corner.

“You want answers, Benny. I just did what I did.”

“Were you fighting with your guy? You were trying to pretend that you could do a revenge fuck.” I am looking for my in.

“What are you trying to say?”

“That you saw a possibility for something real. Now, you want to let it go. File it in the history file.” I am over confident.

“You seem that you’ve been through this before.”

“I almost destroyed this girl’s marriage. But I realized that I was too immature to follow through. I could break something. I just couldn’t put the pieces back.”

“What does that have to do with me?” she wonders.

“Maybe I didn’t break it this time. It was already broken.”

“So. What does that have to do with *you*?” She tried to turn the tables on me.

“You wanted me to put it back together. To say that you could go back together. And I offered you that chance.”

“You sound like you know something.”

“I know what we had the other night.” I again make my appeal to her,

“You’ve just been through some crisis.”

“So what. How would you know?”

“Benny, you’re trying to read your experience in mine. Our night may have patched up something for you. But it didn’t do that for me. I wasn’t broken like that.”

“How are you broken?” I think that I know her.

“I’m not broken like that.”

Sofia continues to avoid the other night. I have finished my meal and am sipping my wine. I have a free afternoon. I want to further pursue my curiosity. She will not yield.

“Don’t tell me that you have someone to share your hurt with.”

“Who said that I’m hurt?”

“I can taste it in your kisses.” She will not look me in the eye.

I don’t think that I have ever talked this in depth with someone. Only Jennifer. I am convinced that I need to break up with Corrine. I need to see her later on. For the moment, I am captivated by Sofia.

“You imagine what you want. It confirms that your life means something more for you. I said it from the start. You’re a male hustler.”

“You wanted something like that.”

“For a brief moment. But in the light of day I am seeing myself.”

“And I want to see you again.”

“A lot would have to change for me to do that.”

“It might happen.”

She tries to recover, “Benny, I am not holding my breath. We touched on something so passionate and so private. But I can’t let that destroy everything else that I hold dear. I can’t make a life, a career, out of things like that. I’m not a pool girl.”

“But your body tells you things that are deep in your mind. You have to listen to yourself. I’ve learned something about pleasure. I’m not only a pool boy.”

“You sound like you’re preaching wisdom. But how can you back it up?.”

“I don’t know. I’m working on it.” I try to be appealing.

“I don’t think that I can take that risk.” She takes a sip of her wine

“I want to see you again.”

She hesitates, “I’ll think about it. I need time. I’m not promising you anything”

She doesn’t take up my offer for the afternoon. The next day I start to catch up with my work. It is a full day. I have plans to meet Corrine for pizza.

We hardly say anything to each other. She is very busy with school. She is worrying about exams and projects.

“Benny, you thought that you could hide it from me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Erin.”

“Your roommate?”

“Your lover.”

I am totally surprised. What is she saying to me?

“What?”

“You’re sleeping with Erin. Don’t deny it.”

“I don’t understand.”

She is firm, “Benny, I already know. You shouldn’t have tried to hide it from me. I hate the fact that I let you go on so long. But I wanted to believe that it was just a mistake. You kept up at it. You were embarrassing.”

I thought that I had been so careful. I want to ask how she found out. But I don’t want to face the music. It would be so easy to get up and leave. Just when I thought that I had a purpose in life, Corrine is coming to haunt me.

“What do you expect from me? You’ve been a real dick. I should have known not to trust a pool boy.” She cuts to the bone.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve heard the stories. I thought that it was a big joke. I guess that it’s not. I guess that’s how you get business.”

“Does Ian know?”

“I don’t give a fuck about Ian. This is between you and me. And you’ve been a real piece of shit.”

I don’t pretend that I can explain. I should have seen this coming. She is hurt. I know that I can walk away from this. That is probably the worst part.

“Benny, don’t you have something to say for yourself. All you care about is how I found out. But you don’t even have the guts to ask me that. Do you like to lead women on?”

“I don’t really lead them on. I just do what I do.”

“That sounds like a real prick answer.”

“What do you want me to say to you?” I ask sheepishly.

“You could start with *I’m sorry*. But you’re too much of a prick to even say that.”

“I am sorry. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m not much good to you now since you’ve already fucked me over.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“What can you do now? Ask me to marry you. You’re pathetic. You’re a rat. A total vermin feeding off the shit of others.” Her arguments don’t stop.

I have never seen her this alive. I know that sounds despicable.

“You want me to do your work for you, Benny. You want me to be a conscience. To punish you. Make it all better. You have to live with yourself. I can go home and try to forget you. That’s the best that I can do.”

I still don’t know how she found out. If she told me, it would mean that she cared. She just wants to bury me in my own shit.

I want to talk to Erin. I want to sort it all out. I don’t know if she will have anything to say. She meets me for coffee the next day.

“I’m not going to say that you used me. We learned a lot together.” Erin wants to give me credit.

“Does this mean that we’re not going to be together again?”

“Just thank God that Ian never found out,” Erin reminds me.

“Were you planning to tell him?”

“I can’t. I won’t.”

“Did you tell Corrine?”

“I didn’t think that she knew.”

“She’s known longer than we know,” I inform her.

“She’s never said anything to me.”

“Are you going to move out?” I ask Erin.

“She never said anything. It’s all for the best.”

“Now that she’s told me, I think that she’s going to say something to you.”

“It’s all for the best.”

“I’m going to miss being with you most of all.” I stare longingly at her.

“Benny, you’ve become a real pig.”

I try to defend myself, “You did everything that I wanted.”

“That’s just it. You used me.” She looks bitter.

“We used each other.”

“It’s not the same. You were already that way. And you knew how to turn me into a user. That’s the real difference.”

And I know what Erin is talking about. I already had this idea of how I wanted to transform her. I pulled all the strings. She never had a chance once her emotions came started to affect her. It was too easy for me. I just called, and she came. I gave her a script and she reacted automatically.

I can only think about my time with her as pleasant. I know that we brought out the worst in each other. But there was a magic to it all. And I loved her for it. It was almost as if I reduced her to nothing. Just sex. I might claim the same about her. But I have a more defined life. I was only distracting her from her own development.

I can’t get over watching those pictures of her at my place having sex. How I get pushed onto the bed by her intense climax. Her body was so sensitive. I get aroused just contemplating

those moments. I can feel the explosion catapult us together.

Erin has captured something elemental about what we desire. We try to make it work for something else. For our happiness. For our more humane instincts. But desire is not so sanguine. It breaks us down and sucks us dry.

I will hold on to something deep between us. It is cruel to Corrine to admit what I took from Erin. But this is what I have become. I have learned to take my physical desires and transform them into something almost supernatural. It took my time with Erin to come fully to this realization. We didn't share our most tender moments. We weren't off for hikes in the woods or holding hands in the park. We went for that more violent side in our personalities. I welcome that part of her.

I hope that I might find some consolation with Sharon. We really worked to have something more than just this physical experience. But she is even more brutal.

I've just finished cleaning the pool. I'm standing at the door from the deck to the house.

"If I keep hanging out with you, I'm going to leave Aaron. I never wanted that from the beginning."

"We've had all these great times together." I am almost begging her.

"What were you expecting? You knew it wouldn't last." She seems so cold.

"I felt like I needed you."

"You took me for granted." She turns away.

"That wasn't my intention. I would have spent more time with you if you had let me."

"It couldn't have been any more perfect. We even took trips together. It was what it was."

I try to touch her. She moves away. "It was still building into something."

She is adamant, "You can't ask for anything more."

"I want you now."

"We start all over again, and we'll never be able to stop. You're not my forever."

I move to embrace her, and she pushes me away.

"I don't want Aaron catching us."

"You've never acted like this before."

"Benny, you know that we're never going to amount to anything more than this. Let me go."

"Do you still want me to do your pool?"

"I'm going to have to get someone else. We have to move on."

"This is not like turning a light switch on and off."

Sharon is laying down the law, "You should do better than that. I worked to make something with you. You were in your own world. Down deep, you're not a good person."

"I have always been available for you," I reassure her.

"You made me doubt what I already had. My great home, my husband."

"You were doubting him already. What made you come on those trips with me?"

"I felt forced. It was a way of relieving that pressure."

"You're crazy."

She wants to cut deep, "I have a normal life. You're the one without any roots. The pool boy making love to all his clients."

“That’s hardly true.”

“I know the stories.”

“Most of it is a myth.”

I want to hold her. Sharon has always been close to my heart. I never wanted it to end so abruptly. But I can feel the book slam shut. I gather all my equipment and carry it to the truck. I sit out back for about a half hour. Sharon comes out and sees me there.

“Benny, you have to leave. Aaron is coming home.”

“I know. I just can’t move.”

“It’s for the best. We have to make a clean break.”

I can’t look back. This is tough.

Wendy is a recent customer. I’ve been to her house around five times. She tells me that she is impressed with my work. That isn’t all that she’s impressed by.

She comes out to the pool to talk to me. She’s in tight jeans and a revealing top. She isn’t wearing any shoes. I kiss her on the neck.

“Benny, stop that. The neighbors are going to see.”

“You didn’t say that the one time when you were on your knees right here.”

“That was in the evening.”

“Be a little more daring.”

She kisses me deeply. She comes out of herself.

“That’s all you’re going to get today.”

Wendy tries to shove me in the water. I reach over at the last minute to pull her in. Her top flies up in the water to reveal her stomach. I slide my hand over and pull it off. I have her wedged against the wall and I’m sucking on her breasts.

“Benny, you are so bad.” She smiles.

I slide off her wet jeans. “These are only weighing you down.”

I prop her up on the edge of the pool. I am kissing the inside of her thigh as I slip off her panties. She lies back on the deck as I kiss her more intimately. My tongue is now doing all the work. She is already sighing deeply.

After she achieves climax, she jumps back into the water. She pulls off my shorts and guides me inside her.

We feel so good together. I am forgetting about all my troubles. Her sense of daring only adds to her excitement. I turn her around and pull her ass over to me. She is in flames. This was the kind of feeling that I had with Erin. She cared for nothing else but the moment. The physical intensity.

The water only makes our movements smoother. I kiss her neck with my full mouth. She turns her head around, and we kiss as I move inside her. I take her upstairs, and we make love on her bed for another hour. She is married. But she is not afraid. We are lying there in her bed afterwards.

“Benny, this is great and all. I’m going to have to let you go.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t do this anymore. I need a new pool boy. You’re getting too used to the soft life. You really should go to the gym and work out.”

I feel insulted. I look at my body. I don’t see anything unusual.

“What’s wrong?”

“You need a trainer. You have no muscular definition.”

I try to hold a pose. I look silly.

“Benny, you’re fun. But you’re not the only one. You know the deal.”

I’ve lost two customers in two days. I have other new ones to make up. But I wonder if things are out of hand. But this is what they often expect from the pool boy. I guess that I have to get used to turnover. There’s always a younger pool boy ready to do more extravagant things.

“I always thought that I was the best.”

“Benny, you’re good. You just think too much about your own pleasure.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You need to be a little more adventuresome.”

I feel like a circus freak. She craves something more bizarre.

I go see Brenda to cheer me up. I hope after Palm Springs that she won’t forget. I will be devastated if she acts the same.

We are sitting out on her deck drinking rum drinks.

“You can’t listen to Sharon. She’s lying to herself. I clued you in early to the game. And you played it with the best. But Sharon wanted to make it into something else. And she’s blaming you for it not working out. You were right not to put all your eggs in one basket.”

“What about Corrine?”

Brenda informs me, “You didn’t love her. None of this will ever make sense until you fall in love.”

I wonder when this will happen.

“Just remember, Benny, you’ll always have me.”

She gets up to get us more drinks. I sit back in my chair. Maybe I have to go to the gym. I am getting distracted. This is a good time to turn over a new leaf. Really take a hard look at the business. At my plans for the rest of my life. I let the rum work its effects.

“Benny, you want to come upstairs.”

“What?”

“You need some caring.”

She leaves no doubt about her intent. She wants to make me feel good. Her lips are the remedy that I need.

She promises, “I have to make sure that you’re really satisfied.”

I am again turned on by her body. I almost climax from her oral stimulation. She herself has become excited. I melt into her as she spreads herself across the bed. It feels like old times. I can feel that potency that I tapped in Palm Springs. I can feel the extension. It is such an extreme sensation. It makes her want more and more and more.

She is already yelling at the top of her voice. I feel that this is the after-shock of all my earthquakes. All of LA is quaking along with us. I explode. She explodes. We all are sent flying by the impact. I hold Brenda close to brace myself. We collapse on the bed from the fatigue. Hours have passed in minutes. It is already deep in the night.

I wonder where Rocky is. If he came in now, he would have no doubt what is going on. That would be the end of Brenda and me as well. But he is nowhere to be seen.

“Brenda, I better go. It’s late.”

She doesn't seem to care. She has dozed off. Oh well.

I dress and drive off in my truck. There is something right in the world. But I am still hanging on by a thread. Wendy has hurt me. Sharon has shown me that I am not invincible. Even Brenda has Rocky. I am alone. Very alone.

I need to meet Ian tomorrow. It is too late to call him. I head back home. I am a little hungry. There's very little in the house. But I prepare a snack. I relax before the TV.

Ian is pissed the next day. I meet him at a job site, and we head off for burgers.

"Erin's been stepping out on me."

"I don't get it."

"She's been cheating on me."

Is he toying with me?

"I know who it is. I know who she's been with."

I can't even look at him. I don't say a thing.

"Benny, you're my friend don't you have anything to say?"

"What am I supposed to say?"

I can't figure out what's his game. He only has to reach across the table to hit me. I am looking for the nearest exit.

"If you suspected something about her, you needed to tell me. You were around their place all the time. You must have talked to Corrine."

"What are you talking about?" I'm not sure what is going on. He still doesn't let on.

"I caught her. Evidence and all. She was totally red-faced. She couldn't say a thing. It was with my dumb-ass cousin. He's not even cool. Just some home boy b-boy."

I breathe this sigh of relief, "Whew!"

"The way you were acting, Benny, was as if I caught you."

"I know. What was I thinking? You were being so dramatic about it and all."

"What did you think of Erin?"

"I thought that she was nice."

"Really, Benny."

"I thought that she was one hot piece of ass."

"After a while she knew that. That's why she became the way that she did. Thinking that she could flaunt it with my damn cousin. Shit!"

I can't tell him. But I contributed to that transformation. She started to think about guys differently. She was almost a reverse-Benny, a *pool girl*. She just needed the business.

"Benny, I've got to do something about my life. I've got into UCLA business school. I'm going to quit doing the pool stuff. I'll sell you off my share. Something like that."

"Ian, I need you to help me manage."

"It's not going to happen right away."

I feel like I need a drastic change in my life. People are leaving me. But that really has nothing to do with my life.

The next time I visit Brenda, she is more philosophical.

"With any business, you don't want to get stale. Either you expand, or you wither and die."

I look desperate, "I'm barely managing as it is"

“You have a great customer base. A good business. You might need some help. Maybe some new ideas.”

“You’ve given me your share.”

I want Brenda to make a suggestion.

“You can’t get so personally involved. I know that’s how you got it all going. Now you need to learn how to step back. Just take a breath. Let others work for you.”

“Ian wants to leave.”

“That’s probably good. You almost messed that up.”

“Erin was so fun.”

“But it was more of a challenge. You did it just to see if you could get away with it.”

“I did, Brenda.”

“That is the most frightening thing about it. You shouldn’t push your luck.”

“We all do. You’re doing it with me.”

“I know when to draw the line. I don’t flaunt it. I know how to say no to you. Can you say no to yourself?” She has a point.

“I haven’t yet. Sometimes my body won’t do what I want. But I haven’t said no.”

“As long as you have the power, you think you’re free. Often the power just slips from our hands. You wouldn’t know what to do if you were truly helpless.”

”That sounds like a curse.”

I have overstayed my time at Brenda’s. I look through my phone. I need to talk to someone. I call Sofia.

“I’ve given it some time. I thought maybe we might get together.”

She continues to resist, “You really think that I’m going to sit down with you again.”

I know that she is. I can’t tell her.

“I was hoping. I didn’t want to mess things up.”

“You’ve run out of girls to fuck.”

I don’t have a comeback. “That’s a low blow.”

“I haven’t left my man for you. Who’s to say that I’m going to do it now?”

“I just want to sit down for some coffee. That is all.”

“You know you’re cute,” she tells me.

“Let’s continue this face to face.”

“No sex. Just coffee.”

“Promise.”

When I first see her, I hate the fact that I promised. I shake my head.

“What’s that about?” she wonders.

“You look fabulous.”

“You’re not looking bad, Mr. Benny.”

“I try.”

“It’s been a while.”

I reach over to give her a kiss on the cheek.

We both order coffee. We sit there in silence.

“What’s all this tension?” she asks.

I can sense an attraction. I don’t want to jinx it.

“We’re just getting used to seeing each other again.”

She is honest, “I miss you.”

“You don’t have to admit it.”

“Benny, I do think that you’ve got a good heart. You’re just a little misguided.”

I realize that I don’t know that much about Sofia. “You know that we never really talked about your life. What do you do?”

“I work in an art gallery. I also design clothes.”

“You obviously model your own stuff.”

She smiles. “Benny, you’re good at flattery.”

“I try to be sincere.”

She offers her point of view, “It’s not enough to speak honestly now and then. You have to make it a habit. Chain together your acts of kindness.”

“You sound so altruistic.”

“I try.”

I seem more cynical, “I wish that I could. I just feel that I’m trying to survive.”

“It’s Benny against the world.” She wants to take my side.

“You’ve lived here all your life. The world is real for you. I’m still looking at it from the outside. That’s why I seem a little desperate. If I fail, I have nothing to go back to.”

“Was it that rough at home?” she asks.

“Not at all. But I’m here now. I have to make my own way.”

“We’re all like that in one way or another.”

I state my case, “Your friends are something real for you. I’m just hanging on.”

“It’s not that bad. You’ve got a business. Look at me. I still don’t know if I’m coming or going.”

“You’ve got a man.”

“I still haven’t got over being with you. I don’t know if I can trust myself with him anymore. I almost want Rick to do something so I can catch him, and tell him to bug off.”

I’m trying to prod her, “Do you suspect anything?”

“Not at all. It’s my own way of dealing with my guilt.”

“You feel guilty.”

“You would too if you did what I did to him.” She looks down in shame.

“It was one night. You had fun.”

“It was one night. I had a fight. I walked out with him.”

“You made up later.”

“I never told him what happened.”

“Good thing that you didn’t.”

She’s not sure what is happening, “Benny, I’m confused. I didn’t think that you were on my side.”

“I’m not.”

“Why are you defending me against him?”

“I’m trying to be sympathetic.”

She takes a long draft from her coffee. She calls the waiter over and orders another.

“Benny, I know that waiter. He’s a painter. Not a very good one. But he’s a painter.”

“He doesn’t seem to recognize you.”

“I know him. He doesn’t know me.”

The sun is reflecting off her face. It gives her an ethereal tone, almost as if she isn’t here. It makes her look more like a spirit. I stare at the image.

“What?”

“I was looking at your face reflected in the light. It was one of those moments that you want to hold on to forever.”

“I didn’t know that you were so poetic.”

“I’m not. It just struck me at that moment.”

“Maybe you are improving.” She has a glow in her eye.

“I don’t know.”

We talk a little longer.

“Benny, I’m glad that we sat down together.”

“We’ll do it again.”

She kisses me, just brushing my lips. I watch her walk out. I am sure that we will see each other again.

Part of me feels that I have played the worst trick on her. I have played her game. I have been slow with my desire. She has been the same. I am just waiting to strike.

On the other hand, I may be so desperate that I am willing to try anything. I can’t call up Erin or Sharon for a quickie. I have been left to my own devices. I really miss both of them. There is little that I can do. Both told me that my time was up. I had nothing else that I could use to hold them close. It’s rough. But I feel hope.