

Codicil

**I, Joseph Adorno, do hereby agree:
if my wife, Penelope Cameron May,
should die before our daughters have reached eighteen years of age,
I will not remarry or cohabit
without the written approval of a majority of the persons listed below¹:
Signed: Joseph Adorno Date: _____ Signature _____**

We, friends and family of Penelope Cameron May, do hereby agree to give genuine and rigorous consideration to the suitability of Joseph Adorno's spousal choices as they would affect the health and happiness of his daughters, Tessa and June Cameron Adorno.²

Signed : Lucy Vargas Date: _____ Signature _____

Signed : Martha Templeton Date: _____ Signature _____

Signed : Susannah Newsome Date: _____ Signature _____

Signed : Clover Lindstrom Date: _____ Signature _____

¹ Breach of this agreement will require Mr. Adorno's immediate resignation from all executive duties at the Cameron Foundation as well as forfeiture of further annual disbursements and/or marital allotments.

² Parties will oversee the annual disbursements of funds to Mr. Adorno, and approve payment of marital allotment of fifteen million dollars in the event of unanimous approval by said signatories.

PROLOGUE

Penelope Cameron May had more money than God, which may have explained her need to play the deity from time to time. This impulse took on even greater urgency once Penelope's daughters were born. Thus it was that a codicil was added to her will, appointing her stepsister and three best friends from college to make certain that in the event of Penelope's untimely death, her husband didn't marry the wrong woman.

Joey had initially laughed at his wife's legal device, calling it a "post-mortem remote control." Penelope said she preferred to think of it as a safety belt.

You could tender all kinds of explanations for Penelope's codicil, but the most obvious was the fact that after her mother died of ovarian cancer, her grief-maddened father had married a deep-fried southern bimbo, big of breast and small of soul. The marriage hadn't lasted very long, but on the other hand, two years can seem an eternity to a six-year-old reeling from her mother's death. When the second wife ran off with another man, leaving behind her own birth daughter to be raised by Penelope's daddy, Penelope's protective mindset was only reinforced. This was an imprint that all the happiness of her own marriage could not erase.

In Penelope's estimation, romantic attraction endangered a parent's ability to make sound judgments, its effects somewhere between the false exhilaration induced by crack cocaine and the hallucinatory optimism of Ecstasy.

It didn't help that her husband, Joey Adorno, was the quintessential *catch*. Smart, funny and true to his word, the man also happened to look like he'd just walked off an underwear ad shoot, or maybe a renaissance painting. Add to this the small fortune he

would inherit and it wasn't hard to reinvent the stepmothers from Hansel and Gretel or Cinderella setting up shop in their small beach town and waiting patiently for the ripe fruit to fall from the tree.

It wasn't that Joey was stupid, but then again, Penelope would have told you, neither was her own father. Marcus had loved his daughter like nobody's business but still had gone off the deep-end and married the worst possible substitute for her mother. When it came to women, men could easily be deceived. End of story. This was a post-modern, politically-incorrect and nevertheless profoundly obvious *truth*. It wasn't just Penelope's childhood trauma that taught her this. No. There was something else, a closely-held secret, a cause for shame. Unlike her other character flaws, which Penelope would dissect to great effect at the drop of a hat, there existed a galling, awful, stupid *thing* she'd done that wasn't once trotted out with port and cheese at the end of a marvelous meal. That mistake was something Penelope had tried to bury just as deep as she could, not only for herself, but for the benefit of everyone she loved, or so she felt at the time.

For now, lest we complicate an already intricate tale, let's just say that Penelope had several reasons for making sure her family would be alright if she died. As for Joey, he never really believed the document he'd signed along with Lucy and the others would ever be anything more than a sop to his wife's overactive imagination.

After all, everyone knew Penelope was a little histrionic when it came to those things she couldn't control. She cultivated a sense of doom you could not help but laugh with her about. She knew just how hilarious she was, poor little rich girl haunted by her

neurotic imagination, dangling sarcomas and car wrecks where sugar plum fairies and Swiss boarding schools should have been.

It was just part of her *shtick*, as her best friend Lucy Vargas called it, this wink and a nod towards a premature death. They'd all laughed it off, her husband, her friends, ganging up on her delusions of doom until she'd worn *them* down, one suitably dark and liquid evening when they'd finally agreed to sign the codicil. After all, that particular year had been a spectacularly bad one for Penelope. Not only had her father had died of a heart attack at sixty years old, but a plane she'd been on a few weeks later had come very close to crashing when its landing gear wouldn't descend.

Later, when everything began to fall apart, even Joey would have to admit that he'd surrendered first. Something had overcome him, a momentary weakness. Or was it instead a strength of imagination? However silly it was, this ridiculous fear, surely it wasn't worth keeping his wife awake at night. She must have known he was humoring her, signing off on that ridiculous contract. At the time, however, it just seemed like a kindness.

By the time Joey and her friends each trooped into the second lawyer's office to sign the official documents, Joey had already taken to calling his wife's committee the Gang of Four. This was a name he'd originally handed Penelope and her dorm suitemates back in college, when China's notorious political junta had been all over the news and so many of the decisions Penelope delivered appeared to have been vetted by her three best friends but not her lovesick boyfriend.

“I hope you’ll let me know when you decide we’re getting married,” he’d remarked in their fourth year of college, after she’d submitted his senior thesis for the university prize without asking. “I might want to get myself a suit.”

“Don’t worry, I know your size,” Penelope had laughed.

The year they’d met, she’d replaced most of his clothes with catalog items that looked pretty identical to what he’d worn before except for the tell-tale softness of the cloth and the labels he’d only seen in magazines. If he’d been the only recipient of her generosity, he might have taken offense but she’d done the same for her girlfriends and even some of her favorite teaching assistants. Joey knew it was just Penelope’s *way*.

After they’d graduated, it was only a matter of time before Penelope would manage to tempt each and every member of the Gang of Four to move south with her to Omega, Florida, the town where she’d grown up. With its charming central square, sea breezes and low-country architecture, Omega was within spitting distance of the Atlantic Ocean and the Georgia border. Unlike so many benighted beach towns, this one hadn’t been overrun with tourists or paved within an inch of its life. No, Omega’s fortunes relied on the cleanest industry of all, philanthropy, otherwise known as The Cameron Foundation. The area’s picturesque qualities had been preserved by generations of Foundation lawyers who took their charity’s environmental and economic mission a mite seriously. Best of all, the village was a haven for artists, with its reasonable cost of living and a series of grants restricted to local creative talent. “Hell, it’s so cheap to live here, you can’t afford not to,” Penelope had laughed. In Lucy’s case, as the recipient of several years of Resident Artist grants, this was true enough, though Lucy hadn’t needed much inducement. After all, Omega was close to Charleston, where she’d grown up.

Penelope's presence there was certainly icing on the cake, a confection that only grew sweeter with the addition of Susannah and Martha to the Cameron Foundation's staff.

Jealous onlookers might have argued with Penelope's hiring of her own husband and dear friends, but it was also true that all her job candidates brought with them certain attributes that met the Foundation's particular needs. Joey had graduated with a double major in political science and sociology, Susannah would take top honors in finance and accounting, and Martha, the last recruit, had made Law Review at UVA. No one could argue with their qualifications, quibble as they might over the suspicion that each applicant had been groomed by Penelope for the work of running a major international foundation from the time they'd all met in college.

Certainly her friends weren't balking. Who in their right minds would have passed up a chance to work for the legendary Cameron Foundation? Getting paid to give away money? To any number of worthwhile causes? Jetting across the world to witness first-hand the effects of projects on the poor, the sick, the weary? It was another form of playing God except this time, it came with benefits.

Lucy was the only exception to this mass hiring campaign, exempted by her artistic talent, which would have been wasted at the Foundation. Instead, Penelope had made it her business to grow Lucy's artistic career, connecting her with galleries, museum curators and other useful contacts. When Lucy had finally exhausted the Foundation's quota of one year grants, Penelope had presented her with a large bed-and-breakfast that had been in her father's family for generations. "You need a reliable source of income," Penelope had explained off-handedly. She made it seem like the gift she'd given Lucy was a small but functional item, a coffee maker or alarm clock, not the

sort of present that took legal counsel, batches of paperwork and weeks of persuasion to execute.

Lucy had been embarrassed by the offer, even as she knew how well it would suit her needs. “No way. I’d feel like a kept woman or something.”

“Oh hush, Lucy. You know I’ve got more than I can spend in twenty lifetimes. Why can’t I support your art?”

For Penelope, such largesse wasn’t exactly *noblesse oblige*, more like *easy come, easy go*, though as fate would have it, such a turn of phrase would one day come to have the most unfortunate ring of truth.

CHAPTER ONE

Eight years after signing the codicil to her best friend's will, Lucy Vargas was celebrating her fortieth birthday with her closest companions and one perfect stranger. The stranger, a dance instructor and nutritionist who worked at the town's newest fitness franchise, had been picked up along with the gift Lucy was opening, a small bracelet-sized box wrapped in gold foil and festooned with white organza ribbon.

The present had been wrapped by Penelope's stepsister, Clover Lindstrom, who was proud of her creativity, and of the guest she'd brought to Lucy's gathering. Who else would have thought of a Kick the Pounds! certificate for a fortieth birthday gift?

Who else indeed? Lucy was thinking, the color rising in her cheeks, prompting the stranger to wonder if the birthday girl was embarrassed at Clover's generosity.

This question, like so many that the newcomer would raise about Lucy, was completely off the mark.

First of all, Lucy was *not* a blusher. Her skin, unlike the vast majority of the world's redheads, was the same unruffled bronze as countless generations of her Spanish ancestors. It wasn't the sort of tender-headed, *mood-ring* complexion that broadcast its bearer's emotions far and near. Besides, a meticulous observer would have noticed that the color change began with Lucy's narrow nose, pinking up from her delicately-curved nostrils and blossoming out to her wide cheekbones before rising to those unnaturally

dark Sephardic eyebrows, plucked within an inch of their Mediterranean lives for this august occasion.

No, Lucy was not a blusher. Nor was she an ungrateful wretch. She knew precisely how lucky she was, the owner of this beautiful rambling house on the ocean, surrounded by friends from college, a painter who'd established herself in the world of fine art. Nothing to sneeze at, her good fortune.

Why then, instead, would Lucy have been trying so hard not to cry?

Was she sensitive about her generous figure, about turning forty without a husband, much less children? This might have been the unexpected guest's next speculation, were she to puzzle the slight hiccup in Lucy's manner, the lack of conviction in the way she had lifted her glass to her friends.

No, none of these complaints explained the sadness, which revealed itself only in the sudden tilt of Lucy's shot glass, the way she winced at the Jack Daniels pouring down her lovely throat.

It still happened, going on two years, no matter how often she found herself ambushed by the very same, impossible desire. Lucy's first thought, opening the intricately-wrapped box from Clover, had been a gleeful impulse to call Penelope and share the latest Clover Moment, over which the two would *howl*, giddy with their storied history of Clover Moments.

"You are such a bitch!" Lucy's unspoken admonition was aimed at herself, a private term of endearment, admiration even, that Lucy and Penelope had begun using in college and had tossed affectionately at each other ever since. "You bitch!" they'd crow,

hugging each other, loving the way the words sounded so opposite from what they'd meant.

Lately, Lucy had found herself repeating the words as a form of self-comfort, and simultaneously, a form of self-reproach. It was not the time to make a spectacle of herself, not in front of Penelope's family, who'd tried their best to make her happy on this special day.

Tessa, fourteen, had painted a card of Lucy's childhood home in Charleston, copied painstakingly from one of her family albums. June, ten, had tricked out the dining room with crepe paper and balloons. Joey, his voice ragged from a nasty cold, had marked the auspicious occasion with a poignant anecdote about how he'd met Lucy and Penelope at the University of Virginia.

Around the table, other celebrants had joined in with their own tales of yore. Martha and Susannah had gone to UVA too, had participated in the same revelries about which Joey was waxing so nostalgic, and Sateesh, Martha's husband had heard these stories so many times he felt he might as well have been an alumnus too.

Clover, Penelope's stepsister, hated it when people brought up the University, for she'd not she'd not gotten in, in spite of her adoptive father's intercessions on her behalf. Perhaps that was why, after Lucy opened her present, Clover had stood up and cleared her throat. She opened a large purple scroll she'd lettered in silver verse. "Lucy, I wrote you a poem," she said. "I was going to set it to music but I ran out of time."

Clover placed her manicured hand on her heart.

If Penny were here, I know she'd say,
We'll go to Paris, I promise, someday,
Until then, let's lose that weight,
Just like your French *sophisticate*.

I'll go too,
We'll do it together,
And be best pals through nasty weather.

Clover stood, her trim figure enshrined in a pair of tan gingham capris with matching bustier. Her hands were clasped, her eyes shining with the emotion of the moment, grateful to have been able to give Lucy such a useful present.

“I don't know how to thank you,” Lucy had said gravely, pinching the skin at the inside of her elbow. She could not look at Martha or Susannah, or she would start laughing. Then they'd all be forced to spend the rest of the night comforting Clover, or, as Lucy thought of her at moments like this, one hell of a consolation prize for losing Penelope.

This was not something Lucy would ever say out loud. Still the thought had crept in from time to time, ever since that famous night eight years before, when Penelope had finally talked each of them into signing her contract. Initially, instead of quieting her fears as the signatories had expected, their capitulation only seemed to confirm the urgency of Penelope's pessimism. She had spent the evening spelling out ever more precisely the things they must attend to in the event of her death. This included a complete catechism about taking care of poor Clover as well as Tessa and June. By night's end, Penelope had extracted numerous promises from each of them, promises not one of them expected to have to keep.

Even Penelope, whose imagination had been formidable, couldn't have known how things would turn out; she was just being herself, her lovably hysterical self. Nothing pleased her more than to talk about her impending death from plane crashes, car

wrecks, killer bees or brain tumors masquerading as migraines, unless it was, of course, her epitaph or her funeral. “Let Clover sing. She’ll be the center of attention.”

“Well, no better time than a funeral for the voice of an angel.”

Lucy was alluding to a compliment Clover had gotten in her teenage pageant days and couldn’t help but introduce into conversation at the oddest times, no matter how far-flung, no matter how off-topic.

“Don’t be mean now,” Penelope had scolded, overcome with guilt at having laughed at Lucy’s sentimental swoon, her *faux* reverence, her dainty elocution.

If there was one thing Lucy knew, it was how much they all loved Clover, even when she was driving them completely crazy. For that, Penelope deserved a huge amount of credit. “Oh, stop feeling guilty, you’ve been great to her. Nicer than her own mother, for goodness sake.”

“Hard to be meaner, Hon,” Penelope had murmured.

For Penelope, playing God had certain spill-over effects, for her view of human nature was almost supernaturally forgiving. Clover might have seemed shallow, even silly to most people, but Penelope had observed the damage inflicted on her stepsister at an early age. There was the fact that Clover’s mother had eventually abandoned her, and then there were the two years before that, when Tabitha had been married to Penelope’s father. This was a period that Penelope liked to call the “reign of terror, poise and cosmetics” when Mommy Dearest had either ignored the children completely or relentlessly rehearsed them for regional competitions of Tiny Confederate Dames of the South. By the time they attended that last contest in Savannah, Tabitha had already met

her next husband, a bass boat magnate from Montgomery. The man apparently didn't care for children, but such conclusions were way beyond Clover's six-year-old ken. No, for Clover, the explanation was obvious. Having failed to place in the semi-finals, she would just have to try harder to become the sort of person who pleased her mother enough to bring her back.

"You have to take care of her," Penelope had insisted, the night they'd agreed to the contract, holding the champagne bottle over Lucy's glass without pouring, a *quid pro quo* in the making.

"Stop it," Lucy had laughed. "We're all going to be little old ladies together."

"I mean it."

"I know you do. That's the saddest part."

Lucy often thought back to this conversation, the way they'd all laughed, even Penelope, though some prescient inkling must have been telling her otherwise. *How could they have known?* Lucy asked herself regularly, a mantra against the guilt she felt for dismissing her friend's fears.

Up to the very moment your life changed, it was impossible to abandon the survival tactic some people called optimism, others denial. Lucy would come to see it as the naivety of youth. Disasters were something that happened to other unfortunate souls, a conviction she'd gripped tight up to the very last moment, when a ringing phone delivered incomprehensible news.

Their particular cataclysm had hit on Thanksgiving morning, nearly two years before Lucy's fortieth birthday. Joey's plane had been delayed, and so Penelope had gone by herself to deliver a carload of food to an impoverished family. She'd left Tessa

and June at home with Rocky, their golden retriever, and rushed along a country road, almost certainly rushing, knowing her girls were alone.

The recipient of her philanthropy, a woman named Cassie, was being held at gunpoint by her estranged husband. When Penelope arrived, honking festively in the driveway, she'd been invited inside to join the party.

They all took comfort in knowing it couldn't have lasted too long, medical examiner's estimates being what they were, confirmed by neighbors' testimony about the timing of the horn honking and the shotgun going off. And too, whatever else she'd suffered, there must have been a flicker, at least, of something else, an imp in Penelope that would appear even in the darkest of moments, to say, *see, I told you so*.
