

## Excerpts from “Penelope’s Cruise” By Dodie Milardo

### Chapter 1 *The Beginning of the Cruise*

Way back at the beginning of the year 2002, I decided to take the week of Labor Day as vacation and as it got closer, I decided to use that week to do something really special, since my fiftieth birthday was September 17. I didn't like turning fifty, but still wanted to honor this milestone. However, I thought that hanging around my hometown of Hartburg, Connecticut for a week was not the way to celebrate it. So, Julia and Jeralyn, the travel agents who booked all our business travel at work, found a five-day Merriment Cruise Line trip from Manhattan to Nova Scotia that began on Labor Day — sounded like it was meant to be since it fell right during my vacation week! I got a cabin with a balcony and was very excited about going. However, after breaking up with Joe, disappointment knocked the wind out of my sails. So, instead of going on the cruise with a very special man or using the cruise as an opportunity to meet my perfect Mr. Right for Me, I decided to focus on introspection. I would do some journaling – thinking about where I have been in the last fifty years and where I wanted to go in the next fifty. And I could sleep late and dance all night — two things I never get to do enough of at home. But I decided I wouldn't actively look to meet someone — I needed a break. I needed to think about the guys I had dated since my husband, Tim, passed away six years ago, and see what I had learned about guys and relationships — and even more important, about myself.

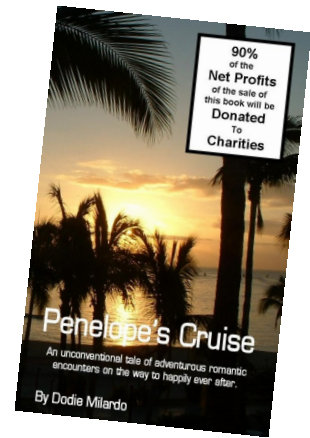
So, I woke up Labor Day morning ready for this soul-searching journey to begin. I had a little bit of last minute packing to do and then I would jump in the car, drive to the pier in Manhattan, park my car and get on the ship. Then, the phone rang. It was Mark. I hadn't heard from him in at least a month. He was the EMT I had met when Tommy died. I'll fill you in on Mark and Tommy in a little while, but for now, Mark and I had gotten very close. However, when he finally told me that he was married, we agreed it had to stop. Somehow, we kept up a friendship, although the chemistry between us was very difficult to ignore. Being with him made me realize that security and stability were great, but I needed more. I knew that I really wanted and needed to feel intense passion in a relationship; otherwise, it would be incomplete. It was just not the right time for us to have met.

But, he was on the phone right now. We chatted for almost an hour and I kept thinking it would be great if he were going with me on the cruise. That was a dream I didn't dare dream, because there were too many obstacles in the way. When we finally got off the phone, I was sad because I missed this incredible man, who made me tingle inside just by being on the phone with him.

Now, with much less enthusiasm, I finished the last of the packing and made my way to Manhattan. Once I parked the car and found the terminal, I felt like one of many cattle being herded onto the ship. That feeling ended soon enough and I was in my cabin fairly quickly. It was fabulous, and the balcony was icing on the cake. I had been on two other cruises, but this was the first time I'd ever had a balcony. Having a balcony on a cruise ship makes it feel like your room is enormous — as big as the sea!!!

I started to unpack, but decided to just leave everything. I wanted to take a peek at the activity list and other notices left in my room. I gathered them together and went off in search of a cup of coffee and a table out on the deck, so I could sit peacefully and read this material. The ship hadn't begun to sail yet and I wanted to be out on deck when it did.

I had been on this exact ship almost two years ago on my first cruise and I was surprised at how familiar it felt. As I headed to the café to get coffee, I passed through the atrium and casually glanced at the passengers seated at the bar. My glance reached the end of the bar and the sight of a man there took my breath away. He was amazingly good-looking with dark hair, dark eyes and a mustache. My first thought was — I have to meet this man. I started to laugh. You know when, in a movie, this kind of thing happens, a song starts playing in the background? Well, all kinds of romantic songs started to play in my head! I smiled an “I'm up to something” smile. Then, I thought — *stop that* — and I mentally slapped myself in the face, first one cheek, then the other. I sternly reminded myself that I was not on this ship to “cruise for guys” — pun intended. I kept on going and put this stunning man out of my mind as best I could.



(continues on page 2)

I found both coffee and table and began to read. A minute, maybe two, went by and a man walking by me stopped and turned around. Seeing the movement out of the corner of my eye, I looked up. He was smiling at me and said hello. My thought was — OK, I am on this cruise to soul-search. At this point, I have been on the ship for about a half hour. First, I see Mr. Eye-Candy and now a guy is trying to meet me. Is there a sign here???

So, Mr. Stop-and-Smile came over to the table and asked if he could sit down. I agreed and we began to talk. He was very handsome and had an appealing Italian accent. His name was Antonio. He actually admitted to me that he got on the ship early and chose a seat on the deck with a great view of all the passengers as they boarded the ship. He said that when he saw me, he just knew he had to meet me. His mistake was that he also said that there weren't many single women on the ship. So, I pointed out to him that he had just implied that I was the best the ship had to offer, instead of someone he wanted to meet. A bit embarrassed, he tried to make light of it, but that wasn't necessary. I laughed and he realized I had not taken offense at the comment. We continued our conversation as we wandered over to the deck railing. As the ship began to sail, we found ourselves waving to perfect strangers standing at the dock — who knows why?!?! Then, I left him to unpack and settle into my room.

When I went to dinner at eight (first day of vacation and I am already on a time-clock!) that evening, I was wearing a black halter top and black Capri pants — dinner was casual, according to the activity sheet. I felt quite sexy and since I am usually self-conscious about how I look, I was thrilled. Well, it must have showed, because as I approached the dining room, Antonio, who was waiting for me at the entrance, saw me and said, "Ciao, bella!" That sure was great validation that all my fussing and primping for the evening paid off. It gave that self-conscious part of me a bit of encouragement. We walked into the dining room together and found our table.

Well, who do you think was seated at the opposite end of my assigned dining table? Yup, you guessed it: Mr. Eye-Candy. And the sight of him took my breath away — again. This time, I could digest him up close and personal and, just as I thought when I first saw him, he was a bit younger than I was. It took me a few seconds, but I finally realized there were other people seated at the table. There was a woman, Donnalee, to my right, a man, Dean, opposite me, and a woman, Dahlia, next to Dean. Mr. Eye-Candy, whose name was Gregory Morgan — Greg for short — was next to Dahlia. Everyone took turns introducing themselves.

Donnalee had just opened a day care center, but things weren't going well. You could tell she was very sad. She didn't spend much time with us during the cruise and always seemed preoccupied.

Dean was a podiatrist, who had just moved from Michigan to Manhattan and wanted to start a practice in New York City. He had a wonderful sense of humor. When I mentioned ballroom dancing, he showed a great deal of interest and suggested I teach him some steps. I got the sense that the interest in dancing was a means to an end — not sure if I was right or not. Time would tell.

Dahlia was a Reiki master. She was French, with a lovely, enchanting accent. She was very specific that the first syllable of her name be pronounced *doll* instead of *dal* (which would rhyme with gal). She was very endearing!

Antonio, a.k.a. Mr. Stop-and-Smile, was a financial advisor for high-net-worth clients. He worked approximately one day a week and could live off of that income quite nicely. So, the rest of the time, he could play. I must be in the wrong line of work!

Greg — ahhhhhh, Greg. He was quite intriguing — maybe not to everyone else, maybe just to me, probably just to me. But that didn't matter. He worked as a computer investigator for a consulting firm whose clients were politicians and government officials. In other words, he was a computer genius who used this talent to investigate, among other things, the computer communications of suspected terrorists. It was almost a year before that 9/11 had happened — when terrorists deliberately flew two planes into the World Trade Center, crashed a third plane into the Pentagon and tried to attack the Capitol in Washington, D.C. So, investigating cyberterrorism was even more vital than ever to our nation's security. He lived in Darfield, not far from the Baltimore/Washington International Airport. He was on this cruise because his boss had told him to take a vacation. He was working way too many hours and she told him he had to take a break. In fact, she booked the trip for him. He hadn't even picked this vacation himself. Some boss!!!

Another very interesting and unique piece of info about Greg was that he was an Apache Indian and was born on an Indian reservation in Arizona. Now, that is a lifestyle with which I am not familiar. And one more thing he told us was that he was a volunteer firefighter and EMT. A man of many talents.

When I introduced myself, I explained that I was turning fifty and this cruise was my gift to myself. I said that I hated the thought of turning fifty, but figured that the more I spoke about it, the more I would get comfortable with it. I was glad I mentioned it, because if Greg had any interest (in my wildest dreams!), at least he would know that I was older than he was. I still didn't know his age.

On my last two cruises (the only two I had ever been on), I found the food to be excellent and plentiful and tonight was no different. Everyone agreed. It's no wonder that they put gyms on these cruise ships. You need to do something to work off the excess caloric intake, which you just can't resist since YOU ARE ON VACATION!

During our discussion over dinner, we talked about who paid what for their room and we discovered that I was the only one with a balcony. I told them I splurged because it was my birthday and I WAS ON VACATION. They were all curious about that balcony, so I invited them all to come visit my room some night during the cruise. They took me up on my invitation the following evening.

As our conversation continued over dessert, I asked if anyone was interested in seeing the show after dinner. Since everyone was, we decided to all go together. The show was spectacular, again, just as the shows were on my last two cruises. After that, I asked if anyone wanted to go for a drink. You know, I should have been a cruise director! The response was half-hearted. I encouraged them all to stay up for awhile. After all, WE ARE ON VACATION! That phrase turned out to be the group's mantra, although sometimes, when I said it, I think they were ready to throw me overboard. We all moved en masse to a bar and had drinks. Somehow, we lost Greg and ended up walking Donnalee to her room. Then, Antonio asked if he could come with me to my room — after all, we only had five days on the cruise. I politely said 'What are you crazy???' No, I didn't say that, but wanted to. I just said that it was way too soon for me and that I would see him tomorrow.

### ***Tuesday, September 3, 2002***

The next morning, I slept in. That was a luxury — a change from my "5:15 A.M. jump out of bed and run to the gym before work" routine! I stepped out on my balcony and knew that paying the extra money for that balcony was definitely the right decision. It was beautiful, peaceful — ocean everywhere. Such serenity. Just perfect. As lovely as this was, my desire for a cup of coffee and a bit of sunbathing tore me away. I found the coffee and while in search of the "rays," Antonio found me. He was quite attentive and escorted me to the sundeck near the reggae band. He spotted Greg and we went to join him. So, now I have Mr. Eye-Candy on my right — listening to classical music on his CD headset — and Mr. In-A-Hurry-To-Get-In-Someone's-Pants (a.k.a. Mr. Stop-and-Smile) on my left, asking me if he can kiss me and come to my room tonight. How lucky can one girl get? I took off my T-shirt and shorts to reveal a bikini I probably had no business wearing. Remember, I am a bit (well, more than a bit) self-conscious about my body — a pound or two one way or the other can make me feel either ecstatic or miserable. So, my original thought on this vacation was — I won't see any of these people again, so who cares. My current thought was — I hope that Mr. Eye-Candy likes what he sees. I discreetly held in my stomach — *all day!* By the way, I still have no clue about whether he has any interest in me at all — this could be all one-sided and all in my head, but it sure was fun to fantasize about him. There was just something about him that attracted me to him. I had to know his age, so during our conversation on deck, I made a point of saying — oh come on, you are probably twenty-eight, maybe thirty-two. He said he was thirty-seven. OK — thirteen years apart — not too bad — and people keep telling me I look like I am forty (of course, they are my friends!) and I have a ton of energy — OK, OK, this isn't a deal breaker for me. Dahlia joined us, but nobody saw Donnalee or Dean. I had brought with me the literature about the shore excursions for the next day when we docked in St. John, New Brunswick. I was trying to find out if anyone was interested in kayaking, since I had never done that before and wanted to try it. Specifically, of course, I wanted to see if Greg would be interested. Nobody would commit — I think I was being a bit too subtle.

We spent the afternoon listening to a wonderful calypso band which had taken over after the equally talented reggae band finished. Then, we all went back to our rooms to get ready for dinner and met up again in the dining room. Autumn joined our table for the first time after not being happy with the company at the table where she had dined the previous evening. Autumn was a very lovely blond woman, just a bit younger than me. My first thought was — she is competition. Although on the outside, I appear to be confident and happy with myself, all is not what it appears to be. On the inside, I am quite insecure and am always fighting the feeling that everyone else is better than I am. So, out came my insecure cat claws! Ha, ha! But very quickly, her inviting personality and gentleness, combined with my getting a grip on my irrational notions, dissolved that thought completely from my mind. She is very much like I try to be — confident, independent, attractive inside and out. After dinner, we went to the show and then to my room. Greg, Dean and I made our way to my balcony. Antonio, Dahlia and Autumn stayed inside and chatted.

(continues on page 4)

## **Chapter 2**

### **At The Beach**

POLY HARC (in case you skipped the introduction, that's scrambled for HOLY CRAP, but sounds so much nicer)! That cruise was four years ago! I had been thinking back to that cruise, while I was sitting here on the beach. Pardon the cliché, but that was the beginning of the rest of my life!

What a difference a couple of years make! Now, I have *the* guy! I have *the* car! I have *the* life! I feel truly blessed! But I never thought it would all turn out this way. Getting here was like what it might feel like to be bungee jumping in the middle of a tornado, and in order to tell you about it, I think the best place to start is today, so here goes!

Earlier today, I called my husband at work to ask him some questions about a house we will be seeing tonight, a house we are considering buying. Then, I went to Sandy White Beach. True to its name, the sand is a pearly white — glistening and smooth — and it feels like baby powder under your feet. The tide was coming in and would soon cover that irritating row of crushed shells and ocean objects which the waves wash up to shore, those same items that hurt your feet when you walk over them to get into the water. So, in about an hour, the tide would rise to cover this rough barrier and be high enough to swim right over it. This afternoon would be perfect. It was ninety-seven degrees and very humid, but the playful breeze blowing in from the ocean would be enough to make it divine. We were experiencing a major heat wave. Media alerts regularly warned people to be careful, drink fluids, exercise outdoors only in the early morning or late in the day, if at all. I, on the other hand, just walked four miles right in the middle of the day — not that I am “little miss athletic.” It's just that I hate getting up early in the morning and by the end of the day, I can think of a million excuses not to exercise.

Anyway, I set up my beach gear. First, a beach chair, then a hand towel, laid out like a side table, so I didn't have to put the myriad beach essentials I toted along with me directly on the sand. Then, a beach bag (a gift from a former student/cheerleader, Cindy — an amazing girl then and an amazing woman now) that contained everything I could possibly need. When I leave my house, I always pack as if I will be away for weeks, even for a trip to the beach for a two-hour time-out. Included in the red and white beach bag were an insulated bag with glorious iced hazelnut decaf coffee with a splash of heavy cream and two packets of artificial sweetener — almost as good as ice cream — and some grilled chicken from last night's supper.

I was restless at first. It was hot, so I actually decided to go into the water — navigating my way over that little strip of crushed shells. Maybe that is Mother Nature's way of keeping us out of the water, so we couldn't pollute it!

That dip in the ocean was equally as refreshing as my iced decaf hazelnut. I'm two for two on the refreshment front! Cooling off helped me to relax and I settled into my little beach chair — this time content to bask in the sunshine and listen to the waves tapping on the shore, the voices of numerous children emitting delightful giggles and screams, the enticing bells of the ice cream truck, which I had a tough time resisting, and the roar of the jet skis racing around offshore. The sounds melded together and lulled me into an almost hypnotic state, consciousness returning just long enough to take another quick dip in the water to cool off again.

Two luscious hours of relaxation passed. This is a rare phenomenon in my life. I am so programmed to “do-do-do” that I believe I have forgotten how to “stop-stop-stop” and relax. I am rarely capable of that fine art of doing nothing and not feeling guilty about it. The other “beachers” here seem to have mastered it and seem to do it effortlessly.

So, here I am in my rare relaxed and guilt-free mental zone, totally content and at peace. I slowly become aware of a little “ooohing and aaahing” around me and then I feel the coolness of a shadow blocking the sun. I open my eyes in response to feeling the change in temperature on my skin.

There, in front of me, stands my reward for something wonderful I did in my life, but I don't know what it was. I do know, however, that it must have been something incredibly special for God to have sent this particular man to me. This is my husband and he is, right now, standing in front of me with a bag in one hand and a vase full of irises (my favorite flowers!) in the other. He is a striking presence. He has dark tanned olive skin and a great big smile. I love the way his eyes smile at me — just like the very first time he saw me. He is properly attired in his beach trunks. Here's the view: his broad shoulders and nicely maintained upper body, gently speckled with some chest hair, all quite attractive to me. His torso tapers in a nice V to his waist and I know it leads to the cutest little tushie — oops, I'm getting carried away. Actually, that's what happens when I see him. Beyond all of this, his heart and soul are even more attractive to me. As I said before, I am blessed.

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He left work early to surprise me — and I am delighted. He says, “Hi, cutie pie!” (he always calls me that), and gives me a great big hug. Then, he pulls a large towel from his bag, spreads it out next to me and sits down. Next, he pulls out of the bag a battery operated purple (my favorite color) candle (you probably thought it was something else!). “Honey, where on earth did you find that?” I ask. He responds, “I can’t tell you all my secrets!” I can’t stop smiling!

Next out of the bag is a bottle of Pinot Grigio, our newest favorite wine, and two purple-stemmed wine glasses. He forgot the corkscrew. But remember, I pack for anything! So, I pull out one of those multi-purpose tool thingies and we open the bottle. We are a great team. He pours the wine and toasts to our forty-first anniversary. That’s forty-one months since we first met.

We chat for awhile. Then, he abruptly changes gears and proceeds to recite all of the things on the very practical to-do list in his mind. I have to write my list down on paper; otherwise I forget to do the things I am meaning to do. God bless him, he is able to keep it all in his head. Then, he shares it all with me. Now, this clutters up my head, because his to-do list is now all mixed up with mine. So, I have developed a semi tune-out mechanism, fine-tuned so that I can listen, but not take it on as my own, like a good Virgo normally would do. In the middle of his list recitation, I point out that he is frowning — he gets that way when he is really focused. He quickly points to his face and responds, “See this face! This is a *happy face!*” This might be one of those jokes that you “had to be there” to appreciate, but it reminds us that life is good — very, very good!

As he continues reciting his list, I catch a glimpse of the gold link chain which looks fabulous around his strong, tanned neck. It was my engagement gift to him. I think that guys get gyped when they get engaged. The guy gets the woman. The woman gets the guy *and* the ring. Now, feminists might say that this is very balanced. I wanted to add a little something extra to the pot! So, I bought him this chain. With it, I gave him a card, which said:

This chain is my gift to you to represent my commitment to our engagement and our relationship. It is:

Gold — a metal which is precious, as is our love for each other.

Linked — as our lives, hearts and souls have become.

Valuable — as our unique bond is to me.

Sparkling — as your eyes sparkle when you smile at me.

Brilliant — as your first heartfelt email to me, and all those that followed.

Circular — the same shape as the very special and beautiful ring you have given to me. This chain surrounds your neck just as you gently surround me with your love.

Jewelry — which adorns and adds beauty, as your love does in our relationship.

I was daydreaming back to the time we got engaged. It was a movie-quality romantic scene I played back often in my mind and heart. I’m so blessed.

But now, I bring my thoughts back to being on the beach. He finishes his list just as the sun is about to set, so we just sit, holding hands, watching the pinks and blues, and then the brilliant oranges of Mother Nature’s sunset painting.

Once this glorious artwork disappears, we realize we are getting hungry, so we gather up our gear and head to the parking lot to go home — he to his 1994 Acura NSX and I to my 1978 Datsun 280Z. I have just *got* to tell you how I came to have this Datsun. And this brings me back a few years to that cruise I started to tell you about. I left off at the point where we had all just gotten to my room and a couple of us meandered out onto the balcony. So, let’s sail back in time to that balcony.

(End of Excerpt)

You can purchase “Penelope’s Cruise” online at [www.dodietalk.com](http://www.dodietalk.com).