

VENICE! I was really going to Venice. Pinch me. I, Anna St. James, was about to

arrive in Venice for the first time in my life. My heart had been racing in anticipation from the moment I had first heard our next trip would take us there. I had been propelled into a new lifestyle of flying for Mr. Stuart Manning over the last few months, seeing the world in nothing but the luxury afforded a billionaire. Yes, I was certainly getting used to this way of life in a hurry.

Descending upon this floating city of romance, I could see what looked like highways in the water below; boats were speckled throughout, racing to where, I could only imagine. Soon, I thought to myself, I will see the city I have heard so much about! We would only be here for a little over a day, but I didn't care. We would be landing in a few minutes, with the sun shining brightly overhead and Brian, my trusty pilot, ready to be my tour guide once we got settled at the famed Hotel Danieli.

Getting here, however, had not been so wonderful. Mr. Manning had a business associate on board. Yes, two of the richest men in the world together on this one airplane. The contrast between the two was evident from the beginning. Mr. Manning was kind, compassionate, and thoughtful, while Mr. Allister Cummings was aloof to the point of rudeness. He also did us the favor of bringing his administrative assistant/mistress along for the trip. Precious, if that was her real name, was a petite firecracker from the moment she boarded the airplane. That's a polite way of saying she was high maintenance. Both men had meetings scheduled in the afternoon, followed by an elegant dinner party on the island of Murano in the evening, and Precious wanted to shop until she dropped. It looked like she already had all that money could buy, but there were deep pockets in the company of Mr. Allister Cummings.

Precious boarded in Paris as if she owned the airplane—bags and suitcases along with luggage carts full of her shopping purchases in tow. Yes, she and Mr. Allister Cummings deserved each other. The first words out of her mouth were, “Stewardess, can you get me a blanket?”

Stewardess? You've got to be kidding me! I reluctantly gave her one of our beautiful cashmere throws, dyed to match the leather seats and soft as silk. “Stewardess, this blanket is not warm enough. I want something warm and soft, not this thing. I forgot my skincare kit in my suitcase. I assume you have La Mer products on board?”

Oh, I would give her a warm blanket and La Mer all right. Thankfully, I had stocked the airplane with the luxury toiletries of her liking. I approached her seat again with a soft Restoration Hardware blanket I used for our beds and an overnight La Mer kit for women.

She took the items quickly, without a thank you but with some sort of affirming grunt. “This will do.”

Mr. Manning looked over, imploring me to hang in there. Almost on cue, Precious said, “I use the lifting and firming mask but don't see it in here. Where is the lip balm? At least you have the mist.”

Ignoring Mr. Manning's silent look and knowing I would probably never have darling Precious on board again, I leaned over, opening my mouth with the biggest phony smile I could work up and summoned a voice to match. “I'm so glad we have the mist for you. If you need other items, please, next time, send your shopping list to Mr. Manning's administrative assistant, Linda, who will forward it to me. That way I can have exactly what you would like on board.”

Not missing a beat, she demanded, “I need a hair brush and comb, too.”

Did this look like a Neiman Marcus department store? I was on to her little game as I went to fetch her comb and brush. She took them from me with a shrug, “Well, at least you have Mason Pearson brushes on board. You know, they are the only kind I use.”

Good to know. I was just out of her sight, and feeling relieved, when I heard the service button activate just before takeoff. Her head was leaning into the aisle as she called me: “Stewardess? Stewardess?”

I have been known to get a little agitated when called stewardess. Up until this point, I had shown great self-control. In the phoniest smile I could possibly muster I asked how I could help her. Her response, “What kind of champagne do you have on board?”

“You can ask Mr. Manning more about the champagne from his Sonoma SMS winery. I think you will find it an excellent champagne.”

“Well” she said, “I guess that will have to do. I personally like Cristal.”

“Good.”

I tossed Mr. Manning an eye roll on my way back again to the galley, wanting to slip

arsenic in her champagne. My Jimmy Choos were already hurting with the repeated trips back and forth to fulfill every request of Miss Precious. We hadn’t taken off yet, and I was exhausted!

Mr. Cummings finally spoke, but it was as if I wasn’t standing there in front of him. In retrospect, I wished he hadn’t said anything. All I heard was, “I want eggs Benedict for breakfast.”

That was it! No “please” or “may I have?” All he gave me was a command: “I want eggs Benedict.” Did he not see the menu in front of him? Eggs Benedict most certainly was not on the menu. I gave him that awful, fake, flight attendant smile, walking back to the galley to make a quick call during takeoff to Nancy, our chef back home, asking how to make eggs Benedict. She laughed, putting me immediately at ease with instructions on how to pull off this miraculous feat while taking off from Paris. I thankfully had the exact ingredients on board.

Serving Mr. Allister Cummings his requested eggs Benedict, my frozen, flight attendant smile was plastered on my face. I know my expression was not lost on Mr. Manning!

It took all my restraint during the flight to remain civil. The minutes until we landed in Venice couldn’t go by quickly enough. If Precious wiggled her champagne flute in the air one more time for a refill, stop me; I wouldn’t be responsible for what I might do.

Descending for our final approach, I checked with Brian and Chris in the cockpit. They told me in just a few minutes we would be on the ground and ready for our day in Venice. Okay, Anna, I thought to myself, you can do this. I had just seated myself for landing

when she did the wiggle, not even bothering to look up as she committed the act. My only visual was picturing her neck between my hands. I caught another plea from Mr. Manning’s eyes, so I went over with my best flight attendant’s voice and asked Precious, “When you wiggle your glass in the air, does that mean you would like more champagne? You do know that we will be on the ground in less than three minutes, right? Can you wait?”

She ignored me, so I sat down. I felt nothing short of relief when we landed and pulled up to our FBO (Fixed Base Operation), Venice General Aviation, for VIP services. I knew my time with Precious was almost done and Mr. Manning would be my only passenger the following day. That’s when I heard her ask Allister for eye drops out of her purse. I wondered why she couldn’t get them herself, but then, I watched as Precious wiggled out of her seat and onto Allister’s lap. “Allister, sugar, can you put my eye drops in for me?”

I wanted to gag! With a flare for drama, he dropped the liquid into her eyes, sealing the act with a kiss. Within seconds, the screaming began. Now what was the problem? In full-fledged panic, with arms flailing wildly about, she screamed, “I CAN’T OPEN MY EYES!”

Yes, Mr. Allister Cummings had just put superglue into his precious girlfriend's eyes—instead of her eye drops. It really was an emergency but, oh, never mind. I raced back to the galley for wet compact cloths to put over her eyes—anything to stop the screaming. “Precious,” I implored, “you need to hold still. If not, it could cause further complications. Let's get you to the hospital immediately.”

I looked up at Mr. Manning and Mr. Cummings, expecting they would escort her to the hospital. That was wishful thinking on my part. Already late for their meeting, the two seemed rather inconvenienced by the entire ordeal. The pilots proved no further help in assisting the eyes-closed-shut Precious. Of course, it was up to me.

Precious's intermittent moans narrated my first journey through Venice as the water ambulance whisked us off to the nearest Italian hospital. The city's vivid colors welcomed our approach, even in the oddest of circumstances. The wind drew color to my cheeks and a few splashes of cool water awakened my senses dulled from the flight. The city was breathtaking.

The Hotel Danieli glowed with pink-orange hues of paradise in the distance as we made our way to the Ospedale Civile di Venezia at Scuola Grande di San Marco in Campo Giovanni e Paolo. The building was enormous, and my romantic vision of Venice soon evaporated in a sea of white scrubs. Since the ambulance boat pilot had indicated the whereabouts of the Hotel Danieli, I had wanted to make a run for it. Precious must have sensed my eagerness to run as she grabbed my hand and begged me not to leave her. She knew my name after all. “Anna, please don't leave me here alone. I can't do this without you!”

I, Anna St. James, was stuck in Venice, in an ospetale with a woman named Precious, mistress to one of the richest men in the world!