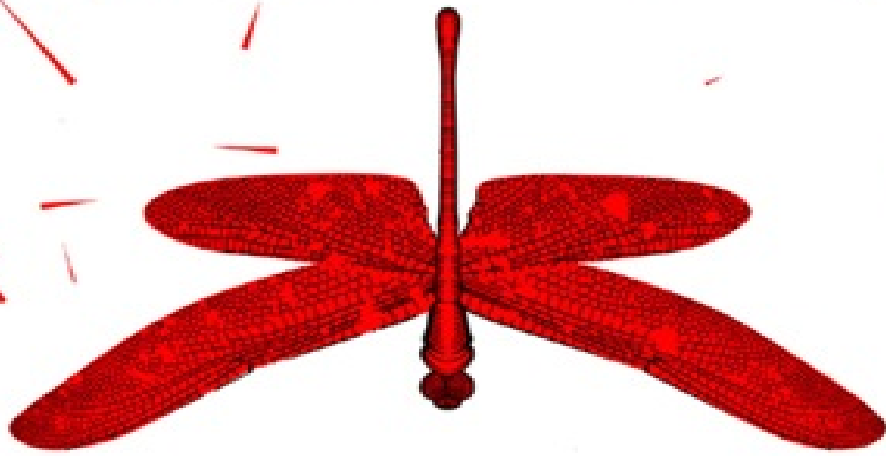


BEAUTIFUL

YOU



CHUCK

PALAHNICK

Fight Club

Survivor

Invisible Monsters

Choke

Lullaby

Fugitives and Refugees

Diary

Stranger Than Fiction

Haunted

Rant

Snuff

Pygmy

Tell-All

Damned

Doomed

Beautiful You

CHUCK PALAHNIUK

DOUBLEDAY • *New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland*



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*“A Billion Husbands Are
About to Be Replaced”*

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About the Author

Even as Penny was attacked, the judge merely stared. The jury recoiled. The journalists cowered in the gallery. No one in the courtroom came to her rescue. The court reporter continued to dutifully keyboard, transcribing Penny's words: "Someone, he's hurting me. Please stop him!" Those efficient fingers typed the word "No!" The stenographer transcribed a long phonetic moan, a groan, a scream. This gave way to a list of Penny's pleas:

His fingers tapped out, "Help!"

They typed, "Stop!"

It would've been different if there had been other women in the courtroom, but there were none. In the past few months all women had disappeared from sight. The public sphere was devoid of women. Those looking on as Penny struggled—the judge, the jurors, the spectators—they were all male. This world was a world of men.

The court reporter typed, "Please!"

He typed, "Please, no! Not here!"

Otherwise, only Penny moved. Her slacks were bunched down rudely around her ankles. Her underthings were ripped away to expose her to everyone who dared look. She swung her elbows and knees, trying to escape. In their front-row seats the sketch artists drew fast lines to capture her grappling with the attacker, her torn clothes flapping, her tangled hair whipping the air. A few tentative hands rose among the spectators, each cupping a cell phone and snapping a surreptitious picture or a few seconds of video. Her outcries seemed to freeze everyone else present, her ragged voice echoing around the otherwise silent space. It was no longer the sound of just one woman being raped; the reverberating, shimmering eddies of sound suggested that a dozen women were under attack. A hundred. The whole world was screaming.

In the witness stand, she fought. She wrestled to bring her legs together and push the pain away. Lifting her head, she tried to make eye contact with someone—with anyone. A man pressed his palms to the sides of his head, covering his ears and squeezing his eyes shut, as red-faced as a frightened little boy. Penny looked to the judge, who sighed piteously at her plight but refused to gavel for order. A bailiff ducked his head and mumbled words into a microphone clipped to his chest. His gun holstered, he nervously shifted his weight, wincing at her outcries.

Others peeked decorously at their watches or text messages as if mortified on Penny's behalf. As if she ought to know better than to scream and bleed in public. As if this attack and her suffering were her own fault.

The lawyers seemed to shrivel inside their expensive pin-striped suits. They busily shuffled their papers. Even her own boyfriend stayed seated, gaping at her brutal assault in utter disbelief. Someone must've called an ambulance, because paramedics were soon rushing down the center aisle.

Sobbing and clawing to protect herself, Penny fought to stay conscious. If she could get to her feet, if she could climb from the stand, she could run. Escape. The courtroom was so densely packed as a city bus at rush hour, but no one seized her attacker or tried to drag him away. Those who were standing took a step or two back. Every observer was edging backward as far as the walls allowed, leaving Penny and her rapist in a growing emptiness at the front of the room.

The two paramedics pushed through the crowd. When they first reached her, Penny lashed out, still gasping and struggling, but they calmed her, telling her to relax. Telling her that she

was safe. The worst was over, leaving her chilled, drenched in sweat, and shivering with shock. In every direction a wall of faces looked for blank spots where their eyes would meet other eyes filled with their mutual shame.

The paramedics lifted her onto a gurney, and one tucked a blanket around her trembling body while the other buckled straps to keep her in place. Finally the judge was gaveling, calling for a recess.

The medic pulling the straps snug asked, "Can you tell me what year this is?"

Penny's throat burned, raw from shouting. Her voice sounded hoarse, but she said the correct year.

"Can you tell me the president?" asked the paramedic.

Penny almost said Clarissa Hind, but stopped herself. President Hind was dead. The first and only female president was dead.

"Can you tell us your name?" Both medics were, of course, male.

"Penny," she said, "Penny Harrigan."

The two men leaning over her gasped in recognition. Their professional faces slipped for a moment and became delighted smiles. "I *thought* you looked familiar," one said brightly.

The other snapped his fingers, exasperated by words that wouldn't come to mind. He piped in, "You are ... you're *that one*, from the *National Enquirer!*"

The first one pointed a finger at Penny, bound and helpless, watched by every masculine eye. "Penny Harrigan," he shouted like an accusation. "You're Penny Harrigan, 'the Nerd's Cinderella.' "

The pair of men lifted the gurney to waist height. The crowds parted to let them wheel toward the exit.

The second medic nodded with recognition. "The guy you dumped, wasn't he, like, the richest man in the world?"

"Maxwell," the first declared. "His name was Linus Maxwell." He shook his head in disbelief. Not only had Penny been raped in front of a federal courtroom filled with people, none of whom had lifted a finger to stop the attacker, but now the ambulance attendants thought she was an idiot.

"You should've married him," the first one kept marveling all the way to the ambulance. "Lady, if you'd married that guy you'd be richer than God...."

Cornelius Linus Maxwell. C. Linus Maxwell. Due to his reputation as a playboy the tabloids and press often called him "Climax-Well." The world's richest megabillionaire.

Those same tabloids had dubbed her "the Nerd's Cinderella." Penny Harrigan and Cornelius Maxwell. They'd met a year before. That all seemed like a lifetime ago. A different world entirely.

A better world.

Never in human history had there been a better time to be a woman. Penny knew that.

Growing up, she repeated the fact like a mantra: *Never in human history has there been a better time to be a woman.*

Her world had been perfect, more or less. She'd recently graduated law school in the top third of her class, but failed the bar exam twice. Twice! It wasn't self-doubt, not really, but an idea had begun to haunt her. It bothered Penny that, due to all the hard-won victories

women's liberation, becoming an upbeat, ambitious girl attorney didn't feel like much of a triumph. Not anymore. It didn't seem any bolder than to be a housewife in the 1950s. A couple generations ago, society would've encouraged her to be a stay-at-home mom. Now all the pressure was to become a lawyer. Or a doctor. Or a rocket scientist. Whatever the case, the validity of those roles had more to do with fashion and politics than they did with Penny herself.

As a college undergrad she'd devoted herself to gaining the approval of the professors in her gender studies department at the University of Nebraska. She'd exchanged the dreams of her parents for the dogma of her instructors, but neither of those outlooks was innately her own.

The truth was, Penelope Anne Harrigan was still being a good daughter—obedient, bright, dutiful—who did as she was told. She'd always deferred to the advice of other, older people. Yet she yearned for something beyond earning the approval of her parents and surrogate parents. With apologies to Simone de Beauvoir, Penny didn't want to be a third-wave *anything*. No offense to Bella Abzug, but neither did she want to be a post-*anything*. She didn't want to replicate the victories of Susan B. Anthony and Helen Gurley Brown. She wanted a choice beyond: Housewife versus lawyer. Madonna versus whore. An option not mired in the lingering detritus of some Victorian-era dream. Penny wanted something wildly beyond feminism itself!

Nagging at her was the idea that a deep-seated motive kept her from passing the bar exam. That submerged part of her didn't want to practice law, and she kept hoping that something would happen to rescue her from her own small-scale, predictable dreams. Her goals had been the goals of radical women a century ago: to become a lawyer ... to compete toe-to-toe with men. But like any second-hand goal, it felt like a burden. It had already been fulfilled ten million times over by other women. Penny wanted a dream of her own, but she had no idea how that dream would look.

She hadn't found her dream as a well-behaved daughter. Nor had she found it by regurgitating the hidebound ideology of her professors. It comforted her to think that every girl of her generation was facing this same crisis. They'd all inherited a legacy of freedom, and they owed it to the future to forge a new frontier for the next generation of young women. To break new ground.

Until a wholly new, novel, original dream reared its lovely head, Penny would doggedly pursue the old one: an entry-level position at a law firm, fetching doughnuts, wrangling chairs, cramming for the next bar exam.

Even now, at the age of twenty-five, she worried that it might already be too late.

She'd never trusted her own natural impulses and instincts. Among her greatest fears was the possibility that she might never discover and develop her deepest talents and intuition. Her *special* gifts. Her life would be wasted in pursuing the goals set for her by other people. Instead, she wanted to reclaim a power and authority—a primitive, irresistible force—that transcended gender roles. She dreamed of wielding a raw magic that predated civilization itself.

While she mustered her courage for a third attempt at the bar exam, Penny reported to work at Broome, Broome, and Brillstein, the most prestigious firm in Manhattan. To be honest, she

wasn't a full associate. But she wasn't an intern, either. Okay, occasionally she ran to the lobby Starbucks for a half dozen last-minute lattes and half-caf soy cappuccinos, but not every day. Other days she'd be dispatched to fetch extra chairs for a big conference meeting. But she wasn't an intern. Penny Harrigan wasn't a lawyer, not yet, but she certainly wasn't a lowly intern.

The days were long here at BB&B, but they could be exciting. Today, for example, she heard thunder echoing amid the towers of lower Manhattan. It was the roar of a helicopter landing on the rooftop. Sixty-seven floors up, on the heliport of this very building, someone incredibly important was arriving. Penny had been standing on the first floor, juggling a flimsy cardboard box loaded with a half dozen hot venti mochas. She was waiting for an elevator. Reflected in the polished steel of the elevator doors, there she was. Not a beauty. Not ugly, either. Neither short nor tall. Her hair looked nice, clean and pooling along the shoulders of her simple Brooks Brothers blouse.

Her brown eyes looked wide and honest. In the next instant her clear-skinned, placid face was erased.

The elevator doors slid open, and a scrum of massive men, like a charging football team in identical navy blue suits, emerged from the arriving car. As if running offense for a star quarterback, they shouldered their way out, pressing back the impatient crowd. Forced to step aside, Penny couldn't help but crane her neck to see whom they were protecting. Everyone else with a free hand reached straight up, every hand cupping a camera phone, and began to shoot video and pictures from overhead. Penny couldn't see through the onslaught of blue serge, but she could look up and see the famous face in the screens of the numerous recording devices. The air was loud with electronic clicks. The static and chatter of walking talkies. From behind it all came the muffled sound of sobbing.

The woman on the small screens of myriad phones was dabbing at her cheeks with the corner of a handkerchief, the linen and lace already stained with tears and mascara. Even wearing oversize sunglasses, the face was unmistakable. If there was any doubt it was resolved by the dazzling blue sapphire balanced between her perfect breasts. If you could believe what you read in the supermarket checkout line, it was the largest flawless sapphire in history, almost two hundred carats. This stone had graced the necks of ancient Egyptian queens. Roman empresses. Russian czarinas. It was impossible for Penny to imagine what any woman wearing such a jewel would have to cry about.

Suddenly it made sense: The helicopter delivering some megacelebrity to the building roof while this traumatized beauty scurried out on the street level. The senior partners were taking depositions today. It was the big palimony suit.

A man's voice within the mob shouted, "Alouette! Alouette! Do you still love him?" A female voice shouted, "Would you take him back?" The crowd seemed to draw its collective breath, growing quiet as if waiting for a revelation.

The weeping beauty framed in the small viewfinders of a hundred phones, documented from every direction and angle, lifted her elegant chin and said, "I will not be discarded." Fractured into all of those perspectives, she swallowed. "Maxwell is the greatest lover I have ever known."

Ignoring a new flurry of questions, the security team forced its way through the curious throng to the street doors, where a motorcade of limousines waited at the curb. In a moment

the spectacle was over.

The woman in the center of all that fuss had been the French actress Alouette D'Ambrosia. She was a six-time Palme d'Or winner. A four-time Oscar winner.

Penny couldn't wait to e-mail her mom and dad and tell them about the scene. That was one of the perks of working at BB&B. Even if she was only fetching coffee, Penny was still glad she'd left home. You never saw movie stars in Nebraska.

The motorcade was gone. Everyone was still looking in the direction it had disappeared when a friendly voice called out, "Omaha girl!"

It was a fellow clerk from the firm, Monique, snapping her fingers and waving to get Penny's attention. Compared to Monique, with her elaborate porcelain fingernails studded with flashy Austrian crystals, and her long weave, braided with beads and feathers, Penny always felt like such a plain, gray sparrow.

"Did you see?" Penny stammered. "It was Alouette D'Ambrosia!"

Monique threaded her way closer, calling, "Omaha girl, you need to be up on sixty-four." She caught Penny by the elbow and towed her toward a waiting elevator. The cups of her coffee sloshed and threatened to spill. "Old man Brillstein has the entire crew together, and they're screaming for more chairs."

Penny's assumption was correct. It was the deposition. The palimony suit: *D'Ambrosia v. Maxwell*. Everyone knew it was a nuisance lawsuit. A publicity stunt. The world's richest man had dated the world's most beautiful woman for 136 days. Exactly 136. Penny knew the details of the case because of the grocery store checkout lines. In New York the cashiers were so slow and surly that you could read the *National Enquirer* from cover to cover while waiting to pay for your melting pint of Ben & Jerry's butter brickle. According to the tabloids, the billionaire had given the woman the world's largest sapphire. They'd vacationed in Fiji. Glamorous Fiji! Then he'd broken off the affair. If they'd been anybody else that might've been the end of the matter, but this couple had the whole world watching them. Most likely to save face, the jilted girlfriend now demanded fifty million dollars' compensation for emotional distress.

As they stepped into an elevator, a cheerful voice called across the lobby, "Yo, Hillbilly!" The two girls turned to see a smiling, fresh-faced young man in a pin-striped suit sprinting toward them. Dodging between people, he was only a few steps away, shouting, "Hold the elevator!"

Instead, Monique punched the button to shut the doors. She repeatedly stabbed the button with her bejeweled thumb as if she were sending a distress signal in Morse code. Penny had lived in the Big Apple for six months, and she had yet to see anyone press an elevator button fewer than twenty times. The doors thudded together, mere inches in front of the young lawyer's aquiline nose, leaving him behind.

His name was Tad, and he'd flirted with Penny every time they'd met. His pet name for her was "Hillbilly," and Tad represented what Penny's mother would call "a real catch." Penny herself suspected otherwise. Secretly, she sensed that he only paid attention to her because he was trying to endear himself to Monique. It was the way any man might curry favor with a pretty girl by fawning over her fat, stinky dog.

Not that Penny was stinky. Or fat, not really.

Not that Monique cared, either. With her flashy streetwise attitude she was angling for

hedge fund manager or a newly minted Russian oligarch. Unapologetic, she told everyone that her only aspiration was to live in an Upper East Side town house, munching Pop-Tarts and lounging in bed all day. Breathing a huge, fake sigh of relief, she said, "Omaha girl, you should let that poor boy put his slippery little tadpole inside you!"

Penny wasn't flattered by his winks and wolf whistles. She knew she was only the ugly dog. The stepping stone.

Aboard the elevator Monique appraised Penny's workaday outfit. Monique cocked her head and wagged a finger. There wasn't room left on any of the stylish girl's fingers for even one more glitzy ring. Monique pursed her lips, sporting three distinct shades of purple lip gloss and said, "G'friend, I love your retro figure!" She tossed her beaded braids. "I love how you're so okay with your big-girl thighs."

Penny hesitantly accepted the compliment. Monique was a work friend, and that wasn't the same as a real friend. Life here was different than in the Midwest. In New York City you had to settle.

In the city every gesture was calculated to dominate. Every detail of a woman's appearance demonstrated status. Penny hugged the cardboard box of warm coffees, holding it like a vanilla-scented teddy bear, suddenly self-conscious.

Monique cut her eyes sideways, recoiling in shock at the sight of something on Penny's face. To judge from Monique's grimace, it couldn't be anything less than a nesting tarantula. "A place in Chinatown ...?" Monique began. She took a step away. "They can take care of those crazy werewolf hairs you have sprouting around your mouth." Adding in a stage whisper, "So cheap even you can afford it."

Growing up on her parents' farm in Shippee, Nebraska, Penny had seen cooped-up hens peck one another to bloody death with more subtlety.

It was obvious that some women had never gotten the memo about universal sisterhood. As they arrived on the sixty-fourth floor the elevator doors opened, and the two young women were greeted by the probing noses of four German shepherds. Bomb-sniffing dogs. A burly uniformed guard stepped forward to wand them with a metal detector.

"We're on lockdown above this level," explained Monique. "Because of you-know-what being in the building, they've evacuated everything between sixty-four and the roof." Sassy as ever, Monique took Penny by the elbow and reiterated, "Chairs, girl. Fetch!"

It was ludicrous. BB&B was the most high-powered firm in the country, but they never had enough seating to go around. Like a game of musical chairs, if you arrived late to an important meeting you had to stand. At least until some underling like Penny was sent to find you a chair.

While Monique ran to the meeting to stall for time, Penny tried door after door and found them all locked. The hallways were strangely deserted, and through the window beside each locked door Penny could see the chairs each associate had safely left behind at his or her desk. Here in the rarified air of the executive floors it was always hushed, but this was spooky. No voices or footsteps echoed off the paneled walls or tasteful landscape paintings of the Hudson River Valley. Open bottles of Evian had been left behind so quickly that they still fizzed.

She'd completed a four-year undergraduate degree in gender politics, and two years of law school, and now she was rounding up chairs for people too lazy or too self-important to talk

their own to meetings. It was so demeaning. This, no, this was something Penny would definitely not e-mail her parents to boast about.

Her phone began to vibrate. It was Monique texting: "SISTER, WHERE ARE THOSE CHAIRS?!" By now Penny was sprinting down hallways. With the cardboard box of coffee barely balanced in one hand, she was lunging at doors, grabbing knobs only long enough to see whether they'd turn. Frantic, she'd all but given up hope, hurtling breathlessly from one locked office to the next. When one knob actually turned, she wasn't ready. The door swung inward, and she was instantly thrown off balance. Falling through the doorway in a great splash of hot coffee, she landed on something as soft as clover. Sprawled on her stomach, she saw close-up the intertwined greens, reds, and yellows of beautiful flowers. Many flowers. She'd landed in a garden. Exotic birds perched among the roses and lilies. But hovering directly in front of her face was a polished black shoe. A man's shoe, its toe was poised as ready to kick her in the teeth.

This wasn't a real garden. The birds and flowers were merely patterns in an Oriental rug. Hand-dyed and woven from pure silk, it was the only one of its kind in all of BB&B, and Penny realized exactly whose office this was. She saw herself reflected in the dark shine of the shoe: her coffee-drenched hair swinging in her eyes, her cheeks flushed, and her mouth hanging slack as she panted on the floor, out of breath. Her chest heaving. The fall had lifted her skirt, leaving her bottom stuck up in the air. Thank goodness for old-school opaque cotton panties. Had Penny been wearing a racy thong, she would have died from shame.

Her eyes followed the black shoe up to a strong, sinewy ankle sheathed in an argyle sock. Even the jaunty green-and-gold pattern of the man's sock couldn't disguise the muscles with it. Beyond that was the hem of a trouser cuff. From this low angle, her gaze followed the sharp crease of the gray-flannel pant leg upward to a knee. Meticulous tailoring and cut revealed the contour of a powerful thigh. Long legs. Tennis player legs, Penny thought. From there the trouser inseam led her eyes to a sizable bulge, like a huge fist wrapped in smooth soft flannel.

She felt the hot wetness between her and the floor. She was wallowing on the squashed cups. A combined gallon of soy latte skinny half-caf mocha chai venti macchiato was soaking into her clothes and ruining the room's priceless floor covering.

Even in the buffed, murky leather of the shoe, Penny could see the blush in her cheeks deepen. She gulped. Only a voice broke the moment's trancelike spell.

A man said something. The tone sounded firm, but as soft as the silk carpet. Pleasant and bemused, it repeated, "Have we been introduced?"

Penny's eyes looked up through the veil of her long, fluttering eyelashes. A face loomed in the distance. At the farthest point of this gray-flannel vista, there were the features she'd seen so often in the supermarket tabloids. His eyes were blue; his forehead was fringed by a boyish ruff of his blond hair. His gentle smile put a dimple into each of his clean-shaven cheeks. His expression was mild, pleasant as a doll's. No wrinkles in his brow or cheeks suggested he'd ever worried or sneered. Penny knew from the tabloids that he was forty-nine years old. Neither did crow's-feet offer any proof that he'd smiled very often.

Still sprawled on the floor, Penny gasped. "It's you!" She squeaked, "You're him! I mean you're you!" He wasn't a client of the firm. Quite the opposite, he was the defendant in the palimony case. Penny could only assume he was here to be deposed.

He was seated in a guest chair, one of the firm's highly carved Chippendale armchairs upholstered in red leather. The smells of leather and shoe polish were pungent. Framed diplomas and leather-bound sets of law books lined the room's walls.

Behind him was a mahogany desk that glowed crimson from a century of hand rubbing and beeswax. Standing on the far side of the desk was a stooped figure whose bald head glowed almost as red, spotted and blotched with age. In the gaunt face the rheumy eyes blazed with outrage. Thin, palsied lips revealed tobacco-stained dentures. On all of the diplomas and certificates and awards, inked in elaborate gothic calligraphy, was the name Albert Brillstein Esq.

In polite response to her stammering, the younger man asked, unflustered, "And who might you be?"

"She's no one," snarled the man standing behind the desk, the firm's senior partner. "She shouldn't even *be* here! She's nothing but a girl Friday. She's failed the bar exam *three times!*"

The words stung Penny as if she'd been slapped. In shame she looked away from the blond eyes and once more caught sight of her reflection in the younger man's shoe. Her boss was right. She was just a gofer. She was nobody. Just some stupid bumpkin who'd moved to New York with dreams of finding some ... destiny. Something. The brutal truth was that she probably never pass the bar. She'd spend her life filing papers and fetching coffee, and nothing wonderful would ever happen to her.

Without waiting for her to get up, Mr. Brillstein snapped, "Out." He pointed a trembling bony index finger at the open door and shouted, "Remove yourself!"

In the pocket of her skirt, her phone began to vibrate. Penny didn't have to look to know it was Monique, justifiably exasperated.

Brillstein was right. She shouldn't be here. She should be in suburban Omaha. She should be happily married to a pleasant, even-tempered Sigma Chi. They would have two babies and a third on the way. That was her fate. She should be covered in baby spit instead of expensive double-shot espressos.

Reflected in the shoe, there she was, made as tiny as Alouette D'Ambrosia had been shrunk in the screens of so many cell phones. Penny felt tears well up in her eyes and watched one spill down her cheek. Self-loathing flooded her. With her hand, she dashed the wetness away and hoped neither of the men had noticed it. Spreading her fingers against the carpet, she tried to push herself up, but the combination of whipped cream, caramel, and chocolate syrup was gluing her down. Even if she could get to her feet, she worried that the hot liquid would make her blouse transparent.

Despite their cheerful color, the blue eyes watching her were as focused and unblinking as any camera. They were measuring and recording her. He wasn't any more handsome than she was beautiful, but his jaw was firmly set. He oozed confidence.

Mr. Brillstein stammered, "Mr. Maxwell, I can't tell you how sorry I am about this rude interruption." Lifting his telephone and punching a few numbers, he said, "Rest assured that I'll have this young lady evicted from the building immediately." Into the receiver he bellowed, "Security!" Judging from the vehemence in his voice, this would be no simple dismissal. It sounded as if he planned to have her flung from the roof.

"May I offer you a hand?" asked the blond man, reaching down.

A signet ring with a large red stone gleamed on his finger. Later, Penny would discover the

it was the third-largest ruby ever mined in Sri Lanka. It had belonged to sultans and maharajas, and here it was coming to her rescue. Its sparkle was blinding. The fingers that closed around her own were surprisingly cold. An equally amazing strength lifted her as the lips, those lips she'd seen kissing movie stars and heiresses, said, "Now that your evening is free ..." He asked, "Would you grant me the pleasure of your company at dinner tonight?"

The saleslady at Bonwit Teller eyed Penny with a disdainful expression. "May I show you something?" she asked, a sneer in her voice.

Penny had run every step, all eight blocks from the subway to the department store, and hadn't yet caught her breath. "A dress?" she stammered. More resolutely, she added, "An evening gown."

The associate's eyes looked her up and down, not missing a detail. Not Penny's tragic knockoff Jimmy Choos, bought at an Omaha factory-outlet mall. Not her shoulder bag with the fraying shoulder strap and pecan pie stains. Her almost-Burberry trench did little to hide the fact that her clothes were drenched in cold coffee and sticky whipped cream. A few houseflies had found the sweet scent and followed her from the crowded train platform. Penny tried to wave them away with a cavalier gesture. To a stranger, she must've looked deranged. The saleslady's evaluation felt like an eternity, and Penny fought the urge to turn on her scuffed heel and stalk away from the snobbish woman.

For her part, the sales associate could've been a penthouse socialite slumming from Beekman Place. Chanel everything. Immaculate nails. No pesky black flies hovered around her perfect French braid or roamed the flawless skin of her forehead. After taking color inventory, the associate's eyes met Penny's. With an aloof tone she asked, "Is it for a special occasion?"

Penny started to explain the situation, but caught herself. The world's richest man had asked her to dinner tonight. He'd suggested eight o'clock at Chez Romaine, the most exclusive eatery in the city. Perhaps in the world. People reserved tables years in advance. Years! He'd even agreed to meet her there. No way did Penny want him to see the sixth-floor-walk-up, one-bedroom she shared with her two roommates. Of course, she was busting, absolutely dying to tell someone. Good news didn't seem real until you'd told at least a dozen friends. But this suspicious stranger in the dress department of Bonwit Teller would never believe her. Such an incredible story would only serve to confirm the impression that Penny was a homeless nut job, here to waste the associate's valuable time.

A fly landed on the tip of her nose, and Penny shooed it off. She willed herself to calm down. She wasn't a lunatic. And she wasn't going to run away. Smoothing the fear from her voice, she said, "I'd like to see this season's Dolce and Gabbana wrap gown, the one with the shirred waist."

As if testing her, the associate narrowed her eyes and asked, "In crepe chiffon?"

"In satin," Penny countered quickly. "With the asymmetrical hemline." All those long waits in the grocery checkout line had paid off yet again. The dress she had in mind was the one Jennifer Lopez had worn on the red carpet at last year's Oscars.

The woman scrutinized her body and asked, "Size fourteen?"

"Size ten," Penny shot back. She knew houseflies were landing in her hair, but she willed them like they were Tahitian black pearls.

The associate disappeared in search of the dress. Penny almost prayed she wouldn't come back. This was crazy. She'd never spent more than fifty dollars on a dress, and the one she asked to see couldn't cost less than five thousand bucks. A few keystrokes on her phone showed she had that much available on her credit limit. If she charged the dress, wore it for two hours during dinner, and returned it in the morning, she'd have a story she could tell for the rest of her life. She wouldn't allow herself to imagine anything beyond tonight. Tonight was a gamble. A longshot. Cornelius Maxwell was renowned for his gallant gestures. That was the only way to explain this. He'd seen her humiliated on the carpet in front of her furious boss, and he was trying to salvage her pride. It was chivalrous, really.

From what Penny had read in the tabloids, Cornelius Maxwell was famous for his chivalry. Their backgrounds weren't all that different. He'd been born in Seattle to a single mother who'd worked as a nurse. His dream had always been to someday support her in high style, but his mom had been killed in the crash of a bus. When it happened Cornelius had been a graduate student at the University of Washington. A year later, he'd founded DataMicroCorp in his dorm room. A year after that he'd be among the wealthiest entrepreneurs in the world.

Among the glamorous women first linked with him had been Clarissa Hind, an unlikely candidate for the New York state senate. With his financial backing and political connections she'd won. Before her first term was complete, she'd set her sights on becoming the youngest senator the state had ever elected to Washington, D.C. It didn't hurt that the media idolized the couple: the statuesque junior senator and the maverick high-tech billionaire. Between his money and her determination, she won by a landslide. Fast-forward to three years ago, when Clarissa Hind had fulfilled not just her own dreams but the dreams of millions of American women. She'd been elected the first female president of the United States.

Throughout it all Corny Maxwell had stumped tirelessly on her behalf, always praising her, always supporting her in public and private. But the two had never married. A miscarriage was rumored. There was even gossip that she'd asked him to be her running mate, but once the election was over, they'd issued a joint press release to announce that they were dissolving their relationship. Sharing the podium at a press conference, the madam president-elect and her dashing consort had affirmed their continued affection and respect for each other, but their romance was complete.

Penny knew that such success involved hard work and sacrifice, but the paparazzi photos made it look seamless and effortless. President Hind had been her inspiration for becoming a lawyer. Dared she dream? What if Corny Maxwell was looking for a new protégée? It wasn't impossible that he saw some innate potential in her. Tonight might be an audition, and if she passed it then Penny Harrigan might find herself being groomed to take a major role on the world stage. She was about to enter the world's most exclusive sorority.

Her reverie was interrupted by a large housefly buzzing into her mouth. Then daydreaming in the dress department of Bonwit Teller, Penny began to cough and hack.

It was just as well. She was getting too carried away with her fantasy, and the future had a way of breaking your heart if you expected too much. Just look at C. Linus Maxwell, who smiled through one failed romance after another. Following Clarissa, he'd been involved with a member of the British royal family. A princess, no less, and not one of the ugly, inbred ones. She was no slouch. Princess Gwendolyn was beautiful. She was third in the line of succession, only two heartbeats away from becoming the queen. Again, it seemed like a

ideal match of European aristocracy and Yankee high-tech know-how. The world waited for them to set a date. When the king had been felled by an anarchist's bullet, it was Corny who supported the weeping princess at her father's funeral. And when a freak accident, a plummeting satellite of all things, had killed the heir apparent, Gwendolyn's brother, her coronation was assured.

By all rights Corny Maxwell should be a prince living the high life in Buckingham Palace but history repeated itself. The tycoon and the aristocrat had parted amicably.

Twice he'd sidestepped marriage to one of the most powerful women in the world.

If you believed rumors, he felt threatened by women whose status began to rival his own. The tabloids despised him. But Penny suspected, as did most people, that C. Linus Maxwell would forever be an orphan still looking for the lost mother on whom he could shower his adoration and riches.

None of Maxwell's ex-flames seemed the worse for their love affair with him. Clarissa Hind had vaulted from shy political neophyte to leader of the free world. Gwendolyn had become something of a heifer, pretty but overweight; during their relationship she'd slimmed down and the royal had been a fashion plate ever since. Even Alouette had struggled with her own demons. The tabloids were full of her drunken, drug-addled misadventures. Maxwell had gotten her clean. His love had accomplished something that a dozen court-ordered addiction treatment programs had not.

There in Bonwit Teller, Penny's phone began to vibrate. It was Monique. No longer carping about chairs, Monique had texted, "CALL ME!" Everyone at BB&B must've heard the news by now. A part of Penny wished no one had found out. It was going to be embarrassing to be linked in people's minds with President Hind and Queen Gwendolyn and Alouette D'Ambrosia. Penny surfed her memory for the romances that had occurred in the interim. There had been the Nobel Prize-winning poetess. The heiress to a Japanese steel fortune. The newspaper chain baroness. To date, none of their feet had fit the glass slipper. Penny tried not to think about it, but what she did between this moment and midnight might determine the rest of her life.

Before she could respond to Monique's text, the sales associate had returned. A swath of red chiffon was draped over her arm. One penciled eyebrow arched skeptically, she crooned, "Here you are ... a size ten." She motioned for Penny to follow her toward the dressing room.

President Penny Harrigan. Mrs. C. Linus Maxwell. Her mind reeled. In tomorrow's *Post* her name would be set in boldface among the celebrity names on Page Six. Tomorrow, the snooty woman would know she wasn't a liar. Everyone in the city would know her name.

Whatever the case, she'd wear this dress very, very carefully.

It was three o'clock. Dinner was at eight. There was still time to have her legs waxed, her hair done, and to telephone her parents. Maybe that would help make the situation seem more real.

Scurrying after the saleslady, Penny asked nervously, "You do offer a full money-back return policy, don't you?" And she crossed her fingers that the zipper would go all the way up.

Kwan Qxi and Esperanza were the ideal roommates with whom to share a cramped studio

apartment in Jackson Heights. Months earlier, as Penny's mom had helped her pack for the big cross-country move to New York, the wise older woman had sagely insisted, "Get Chinese and some kind of Latin to share the lease."

Penelope's folks might sound, at times, like backward, race-baiting monsters, but they really had their daughter's best interests at heart. In a multicultural, racially diverse household, they reasoned, there was less chance of girls poaching one another's makeup. Cosmetics were expensive, and sharing them could spread deadly staph infections. This was sensible advice. Herpes and bedbugs were everywhere. Theirs were salt-of-the-earth words to live by.

Despite her parents' corn-fed good intentions, the three young roomies from a trio of widely divergent cultures had had more in common than they'd ever imagined. In no time they'd been sharing their clothes, their secrets, even their contact lenses. Not much was declared off-limits. So far, this casual familiarity hadn't been a problem.

Esperanza was a fiery high-breasted Latina whose dark eyes sparked with mischief. She often feigned exasperation over the simplest tasks—changing a lightbulb, for instance, or washing a dish—shouting, "Ay, *caramba!*" because such a patently stereotypical outburst never failed to make Penny bray with laughter. Clearly, she wasn't too uptight to poke fun at herself. The fact that Esperanza could toss a gaily embroidered sombrero onto the living room floor and then stomp a lively hat dance around the brim proved that she'd evolved far into the post-politically correct future of personal identity.

Kwan Qxi, so quiet, so implacable, Kwan Qxi was the counterpoint to the hot-tempered señorita. The Asian moved soundlessly about the crowded apartment, dusting the baseboards ... trimming her bonsai ... folding the trailing end of the toilet paper roll into origami surprises for the next user, in general always transforming chaos into order. Her placid face and manner acted as a balm on Penny. Her dense curtain of dark hair was a wonder compared with the frizzy, doo-wop ponytail that Penny wore most days.

In the final hours before the dinner at Chez Romaine, Penny begged both girls to contribute their best skills to perfecting her appearance. From Esperanza, she wanted eyelids painted to glow like Havana sunsets. From Kwan Qxi, she wanted hair that hung like great harvest sheaves of heavy silk. Her roommates pitched in tirelessly, coddling her like flower girls attending to an anxious bride. Together, they primped and dressed her.

Resplendent in the gown, Penny was a vision. To complete her look, Kwan Qxi had unearthed an elegant pendant. It was bright green jade carved into the shape of a dragon with two pearls for its eyes. A true family heirloom. Esperanza dug out her own favorite earrings, each shaped like a tiny, rhinestone-encrusted piñata. Whether or not her roomies accepted her story about dinner with the world's richest man, both girls were teary-eyed at the sight of Penny's stylish transformation.

Someone buzzed from the street door. The taxicab they'd ordered had arrived and was waiting.

At the last moment, Penny held her breath and went to retrieve a small, gray plastic box she'd long ago hidden in the bathroom. The box held her diaphragm. *An ounce of prevention*. She hadn't needed it since the winter formal, her senior year as an undergraduate. Still, searching the bathroom cabinets, she wondered whether such a long period of disuse might've damaged the birth control device. Would the latex have dried out and become brittle, like

condoms were known to do? Might it have cracked? Or worse, would it have grown furry with mold? She snatched the gray box from the jumble in a drawer and held her breath as she opened it. The box was empty.

Tapping her foot in mock outrage, Penny confronted the two girls in the kitchen. She held the empty box like an accusation. Printed on its label was her name, Penelope Harrigan, and the name and address of her family practitioner in Omaha. Placing the box on the counter next to the rusted, cheese-encrusted toaster oven, she announced, "I'm going to shut off the lights and count to ten, okay?" The faces of both girls were unreadable. Neither blushed nor sheepishly evaded her gaze. "No questions asked," she said. A swipe of the wall switch plunged the room into pitch darkness. She began counting.

A faint, wet sound was followed by a gasp. A giggle.

Penny counted, "... eight, nine, ten." The lights blazed, revealing the open box, filled with a familiar pink shape. The diaphragm glistened, fresh and dewy, beaded with someone's healthy vaginal moisture. Clinging to it was a single tightly curled pubic hair. Penny made a mental note to rinse the thing off if she'd need to use it later in the evening.

It never failed. The taxi was late getting to Chez Romaine. Traffic had been backed up in the tunnel, and it was impossible to get a cell phone signal. That was just as well. The cabbie kept glancing in the rearview mirror, saying he was sorry. Saying she looked terrific.

Penny knew he was only being nice. For as much money as she'd spent that afternoon, Penny told herself, she'd darn well better look good. To the saleslady's chagrin the dress had fit perfectly, hugging her young body. Her new Prada shoes, another last-minute splurge, also looked amazing. But Penny was sensible enough to realize that she'd never be a ravishing beauty.

At least there were no dirty houseflies buzzing around her. That was an improvement. Anything was an improvement over living in the Midwest.

Nebraska had never been a good fit for Penny. As a young woman in Omaha, or even when she was a small girl growing up in Shippee, Penny had always felt like an outsider. For one thing, she'd looked nothing like her sturdy, pear-shaped, splayfooted mom and dad. When they were densely freckled and ginger-haired members of the Irish Diaspora, Penny had a peaches-and-cream complexion. As pale as birch bark. They'd both thought she was crazy for kiting off to New York City.

Moments before, when she'd first climbed into the cab, she'd called Omaha to spill the big news. When her mother's voice had answered, Penny had asked, "Are you sitting down, Mom?"

"Arthur!" her mother had shouted away from the receiver. "Your daughter's on the line."

"I've got some pretty exciting news," Penny had said, barely able to contain herself. She had looked to see whether the driver was watching her. She wanted him to eavesdrop.

"So do I!" her mother had exclaimed.

There was a click, and her father's voice had joined the conversation. "Your mother grew up with a tomato that's the spitting image of Danny Thomas."

"I'll send you a picture," her mother had promised. "It's uncanny."

Her father said, "What's your big news, cupcake?"

Penny had hesitated for effect. When she'd spoken, she'd made sure her voice was loud.

enough for the cabbie to overhear. "I have a date with C. Linus Maxwell."

Her parents hadn't responded, not right away.

To save time, Penny's dad drank his morning coffee while sitting on the toilet. Her mom dreamed of owning a waterbed. Every birthday they sent her a Bible with a twenty-dollar bill tucked inside. That was her parents in a nutshell.

Penny had prompted them, asking, "Do you know who Mr. Maxwell is?"

"Of course we do, sweetheart," her mother had replied flatly. "Your father and I don't live in Shippee anymore!"

Penny had waited for their shouts of joy. For their gasps of disbelief. For anything.

Finally, her father had said, "We love you no matter what, Pen-Pen. You don't have to invent wild stories to impress us." He was calling her a liar.

It was at that point the cab had gone under the river. The connection was broken. Her roommates hadn't believed her either, but they'd fussed over her, helping with her eye shadow and lip liner as if they'd been bridesmaids. Tomorrow they'd all believe her. Normally she'd never take such pains with her appearance. She hadn't primped just because Maxwell would see her. Tonight the whole world was watching. Penny would walk into the restaurant a complete nobody, but by the time dessert was served she'd be a household name. Even her hero, President Hind, would know Penny's name.

Stalled in the traffic beside her, Penny noticed two men seated in a black sedan. Like the bodyguards who had escorted Alouette D'Ambrosia, both wore tailored, navy-blue suits and mirrored sunglasses. Their stern, chiseled features betrayed no emotion. Neither turned his head in Penny's direction, but she knew from long experience that the pair of them were covertly watching her.

From her earliest memories, she'd been aware of similar strange men following her. Sometimes they'd trailed behind her in slowly moving cars or sat parked at the curb outside her grade school. Other times, they'd strolled purposefully in her wake, always at a discreet distance. There were always two, sometimes three men, each dressed in a plain dark suit and wearing mirrored sunglasses. Their hair was clipped short and neatly combed. Their wingtip shoes were highly polished, even as they'd trailed her like two-legged bloodhounds across rain-wet Cornhusker football fields and the sandy beaches of Lake Manawa.

Many a winter afternoon as the twilight faded, these chaperones would shadow her steps over lonely farm fields, weaving between the dead, wind-blasted stalks of corn as she trudged home from school. One man might lift his lapel and whisper into a microphone pinned there. Another sentinel would raise his arm and appear to signal to a helicopter that was also tracking Penny's every step. Sometimes a great slow-moving blimp would hover above her day after day.

Ever since Penny could recall, these chaperones had haunted the edges of her life. Always in her peripheral vision. They were always in the background. Chances were excellent that tonight, they'd be among the diners at Chez Romaine, albeit seated at inferior tables, ever watchful.

She'd never felt in the least bit threatened. If anything, she felt coddled and safe. From her first inkling that she was being followed, Penny assumed the men were agents of Homeland Security. All Americans, she told herself, enjoyed this same brand of diligent supervision. S

enamored was she of her bodyguards that she'd come to accept them as guardian angels. role they'd fulfilled more than once.

One grim winter's eve she'd been picking her way homeward through acres of rotting silage. The eventide sky was dark as a bruise. The chill air smelled heavy and ominous with decay. In a twinkling, a killer funnel cloud descended, churning the landscape into a dirty froth of fertile topsoil and airborne dairy cattle. Razor-sharp farm implements clattered around her on all sides. Fist-size chunks of hail pelted her young scalp.

Just as Penny thought she'd be killed, some force had knocked her facedown in the furrow and a gentle, insistent weight pressed itself upon her body. The tornado spent its fury in that moment. The weight lifted, and she could recognize it as one of the anonymous watchers. Her pin-striped suit soiled with mud, he removed himself from her backside and walked away without accepting a word of thanks. More than just a passive guardian, he had been a hero. This stranger had saved her life.

Years later, when Penny was in college, a beer-saturated Zeta Delt had dragged her down some stairs into a dirt-floored cellar. It was during a high-spirited Pledge Week mixer. In retrospect, she recognized that she might've promised the young man more than she was willing to deliver. Frustrated, he had thrown her to the ground and straddled her, a knee planted on either side of her struggling torso. His muscular hands began the savage task of shredding her brightly flowered afternoon frock. He fumbled with the zipper of his chinos, producing an angry red erection. Dire as this situation seemed, Penny remained a lucky girl.

Thank goodness for the agents of Homeland Security, Penny thought, as a gray flannel-suited stranger stepped from the shadows near the cellar walls. He delivered her attacker a violent karate chop to the windpipe. With the would-be rapist gasping, Penny had raced away to safety.

Even after she'd said good-bye to her home state, the guardian angels had kept tabs on her. In the Big Apple, she saw them, the neon lights glinting off their sunglasses as they watched over her from a discreet distance. At Bonwit Teller. Even at BB&B they wore their sunglasses indoors, and still they guarded her. As the agents of Homeland Security, she assumed, they guarded all Americans. All of the time.

While she'd been lost in thought, traffic had begun to thaw. Even now her cab was pulling to the curb in front of the Chez Romaine canopy. A valet stepped forward to open her door. Penny paid the cabbie and took a deep breath. She checked the time on her phone. Fifteen minutes late.

She did a last-second check of her dress and arms. No flies.

In the pages of the *National Enquirer*, Jennifer Lopez or Salma Hayek never walked a red carpet without an escort. Penny Harrigan had no choice. There was no sign of Climax-Well. A cadre of photographers was corralled behind a velvet rope, but they didn't give her a second glance. None of them snapped her picture. No one with a microphone stepped up to say how nice she looked and ask about her dress. Another car arrived at the curb, the valet opened another door, and she had no choice except to proceed through the restaurant's gilded entrance, alone.

In the foyer, she waited for the maître d' to notice her. He did not. No one noticed her. Elegantly dressed men and women lingered, waiting for their cars to arrive or to be seated.

The din of laughter and conversation made her feel even more invisible, if that was possible. Here, her dress was barely good enough. Her jewelry drew bemused stares. The same way she'd wanted to run from the haughty saleslady at Bonwit Teller, Penny again longed to turn and flee. She'd wrap the gorgeous red gown in its original tissue paper and take it back tomorrow. Men like Maxwell didn't date girls like her.

Still, something nagged at her. She wished she'd never bragged about this date. Her roommates ... her parents ... even the taxi driver had thought she was a liar. She had to prove she wasn't. Even if one gossip columnist saw her with Corny Maxwell or a shutterbug snapped their picture together, she'd be vindicated. This thought pushed her the length of the foyer, toward the door to the main dining room. There, a flight of carpeted steps led downward. Whoever entered would draw every eye in the vast, crowded space.

Standing on the top step Penny felt as if she were on the edge of a high cliff. Ahead of her beckoned the future. Behind her, the rich and powerful were already bottlenecked, backing up like gridlocked traffic in the streets. Someone cleared his throat loudly. Below her, the room was packed. Every table was occupied. A mezzanine held even more watchful diners. Where Penny found herself, on the stairs, was like a stage, visible from every seat.

In the center of the room, one man sat alone. His blond hair caught the light from the chandelier. Open on his table was a small notebook, and he was studiously jotting notes in it with a silver pen.

A stranger's breath touched Penny's ear. An officious voice behind her whispered, "Pardon me. Young lady?" The speaker sniffed loudly.

Everyone in the restaurant was watching the lone man scribbling, but watching in the discreet New Yorker way: ogling him over the tops of their menus. Spying on his reflection in the silver blades of their butter knives.

More insistently, the officious voice at Penny's shoulder whispered, "We must keep the space open." He said, "I must ask you to step aside."

Frozen, Penny willed the solitary diner to look up and see her. To see how pretty she looked. The crowd forming behind her grumbled, restless. She couldn't move. The doorman, the parking valet, someone would have to lift her and carry her out like a sack of potatoes.

At last, the man writing in his notebook looked up. His eyes met Penny's. Every head in the cavernous room turned to follow his gaze. The man stood, and the noise of so many people dwindled. As if a curtain were rising at the opera, every voice fell silent.

Without breaking eye contact, the man crossed to the bottom of the stairs and began to climb toward her. Still two steps down, he stopped and offered his hand. As she had once been below him on the office carpet, reaching up, now he was beneath her.

She reached out. His fingers felt as cold as she remembered.

Just as she'd seen in the *National Enquirer*, C. Linus Maxwell escorted her. Just as he'd escorted so many exquisite women. Down the remaining steps. Across the hushed room. He pulled out her chair and seated her. He took his own seat and closed his notebook. Only then did the voices that surrounded them begin to rise.

"Thank you for joining me," he said. "You look lovely."

And for once Penny actually believed she might.

In the next instant, his hand lashed out. As if to slap her face, he leaned forward, swinging his arm so fast it blurred. She winced.

When she opened her eyes, his fist filled her vision, huge, hanging there, his knuckles so close they almost touched the tip of her nose.

"I'm sorry if I scared you," he said, "but I think I caught him." Opening his fingers, Cornell Maxwell showed her the crushed little corpse of a black housefly.

The next morning, Penny was standing outside the locked doors of Bonwit Teller for a half hour before they opened. She couldn't afford even a day's credit card interest on what that evening gown had cost. Even if this made her late for work, she had to return the dress right away.

The fairy tales never showed Cinderella getting up at dawn to return her gown and her shoes, terrified that some wary sales-clerk would notice a flaw and refuse to credit her account with a full refund.

Despite the extraordinary food and wine, dinner had been less than magical. The stares had never let up. It was impossible to relax and have fun in a fishbowl. Maxwell wasn't the problem. He'd been attentive, almost too attentive, hanging on her every word. Several times, he'd even opened his notebook and written a few words in a quick, spidery shorthand as if he were taking dictation. It felt less like a romantic tryst than a pleasant job interview. He'd volunteered almost no information about himself, nothing she didn't already know from gossip columns. In her nervousness, Penny had chattered without taking a breath. Desperate to fill any possible silence, she'd told him about her parents, Myrtle and Arthur, and the suburban life. She'd reminisced about the long hours in law school. She'd rambled on about the love of her life, her Scotch terrier, Dimples, and how he'd died the year previous.

Throughout her monologue, Maxwell had smiled calmly. Thank goodness the waiters had occasionally arrived, giving her a moment to shut up and catch her breath.

"If madam will allow...", a waiter said with a white-gloved flourish of his hand, "the kobashira sushi is a house specialty."

Penny smiled winningly. "That sounds delish."

Max shot her a questioning look. "You do know that's raw aoyagi scallops, don't you?"

She didn't. In fact, Maxwell might well have just saved her life. Unknown to him she had a severe shellfish allergy. One succulent bite and she would've slumped to the floor, swollen and lifeless. Penny's alarm must've shown on her face, because he'd immediately revised her order, saying, "The lady will have the Chicken Divan."

Thank God that someone was paying attention. Her runaway mouth resumed its nervous monologue.

She knew she sounded pathetic. Still, Penny couldn't stop herself. No one here had ever expressed any interest in her, not in New York City. She'd gone from being her parents' little miracle to being miserable and invisible. Most nights she'd force herself to walk around the streets until the neighborhood fell quiet and she felt exhausted enough to go to bed. She'd wander around the Upper East Side, alone except for the doormen who stood behind glass in the elegant lobby of each building and watched her pass. These stately town houses and sumptuous co-op apartments, these were what everyone aspired to. In some way she was trying to train herself to want them also. The truth was: She didn't. Penny only pretended to want the jewelry in the windows at Cartier and the furs at Bloomingdale's.

She didn't want merely the trappings of success. Penny craved actual power. Even to have

own ears she sounded *crazy* ambitious.

Above all, Penny didn't want what other women professed to want. They seemed possessed, the way they swarmed to the same mundane things. And that worried her; she felt shut out of some hive. If she didn't crave the correct movie heartthrobs and scented candles she worried that something was horribly wrong with her.

Daily, she caught sight of lady attorneys and execs furiously crunching numbers and barking demands into phones. None seemed to possess some progressive enlightenment. Theirs no longer seemed like the road less taken. Penny sought a career path beyond the knee-jerk strictures of gender identity politics.

Over the dessert course, Penny Harrigan admitted that she didn't know what she wanted.

Becoming a lawyer wasn't her life's dream. As a teenager in high school she'd been told by everyone—her parents, her teachers, her minister—that a person needed a long-term goal and a plan for achieving it. Everyone said she needed to devote her life to something. She'd chosen a career in law as blithely as if she'd plucked the vocation, unseen, from a hat. President Hind notwithstanding, being an attorney was no more appealing to Penny than wearing a sable coat and walking two afghan hounds in diamond collars to hear Verdi at the Met. No, to be honest Penny said she didn't know what she wanted, but she knew something ... soon, some glorious destiny would reveal itself to her.

Maxwell hadn't asked about any of this, but he listened intently. He watched as if he were memorizing her. At one point, between the appetizers and the salad, he took out the small notebook in which he'd been jotting notes when she arrived. He opened it to a blank page. He removed the cap from a silver fountain pen and began to write, seemingly transcribing her fears. Penny couldn't tell for certain, because his handwriting was cramped, almost microscopic. Scribbling continuously, he was either remarkably rude, or Maxwell was enormously empathetic and caring.

Having her words recorded made her feel self-conscious, but it couldn't silence the overflow of her pent-up anxiety. She'd never expressed this to anyone, but her life seemed to have stalled. After twenty-five years of getting good grades and behaving politely, she'd reached a terrifying dead end. The full extent of her potential. Even as she talked Penny was aware that she'd most likely never see this man again. That made him a safe confessor.

Her relief was evident. Under his rapt gaze Penny glowed. She preened. Emboldened by his attention, she shook her head to make the piñata-shaped earrings dance. She lifted one hand to her bosom, trailing her fingertips over the sinuous curves of the jade dragon. Both accessories reminded her how blessed she was with girlfriends.

Max's blue eyes seemed fascinated by her every gesture. He smiled but didn't interrupt. His eyes never left hers, but his hand continued to write.

He almost looked in love. This was more than infatuation. More than love at first sight. Maxwell seemed enchanted by the sound of her voice. With his entire body, he seemed to lean forward with yearning. Something in his expression said that he'd been searching for her his entire life.

Penny wanted this kind of attention from the world. She wanted people everywhere to know her name and to love her. There, she'd admitted it aloud. But she couldn't do anything that would justify such massive public acclaim. She just needed a mentor, a teacher, someone to discover her.

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