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CHAPTER ONE. GWEN'S PROBLEM.

I hate people. All of them. I don't really mean that. I just mean everyone I've ever met. Not always. Definitely in the morning, though. I hate everybody in the morning.

Name's Gwen. Please stop grinning like that.

Oh, yes, I get it. This is about my sister, isn't it? Sure. How did I know? Hmm. What are the odds? It's always about her.

Go ahead, tell me she's got a great body. It's okay, I don't mind. Some people ... men ... many men ... find poor dear Elaine attractive. I'm always, like, what's wrong with them?

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... Stupid bitch ...

Okay, since you insist, since you really want to talk about her body, fine, let's talk about it. Okay. Where do we start? Let's do the breast first. They're not shapely, or gracefully outlined, or anything like that. The reason is the bitch is zero-size. Oh, you didn't know? What are you, blind?

Now let's move on to her waist, if that's what people want to call it, okay, it's a free country, but I'm always, like, hello? Am I missing something? She doesn't have a waist. No waist.

Her ass, yeah, that's something that always makes men giddy. The moment the bitch turns her back to them, they stare at it. I wonder why. Her ass is like a boy's, really. There's nothing feminine about it. I mean, I should know, I've been studying it closely since the bitch was ten. I know every pore and pimple on it.

She looked like a clumsy flamingo when she was a kid, she really did. Everyone figured she'd fill out once puberty hit, our dear gorgeous sweet darling. Everyone except me. I hoped and prayed she didn't fill out. Guess what. She didn't. She's still a big clumsy flamingo with a pair of sagging tiny tits, and every man in town is in love with her.

Let me tell you something about her legs. They're okay. Take it from an expert. If you're not blessed with a pair of very good legs yourself, you become an expert in women's legs very early in life. Okay, the bitch's legs, they're ... hmm ... pretty decent, I guess. No, really. Honest. There's nothing strikingly, enchantingly, heartwarmingly wrong with them, no sir, no one would point them out to you in the street, going, "Wow, look how ugly and repulsive and not at all charming those legs are!" They're nothing like that. Alas. They're okay. There's just one problem. They're short. Not awfully short, mind you, not dachshund-short, but definitely on the short side. You don't think she knows? Yeah, right. Go through the bitch's closets, why don't you. I've been doing it for years, so I know. Every single item is hand-picked with one idea in mind, i.e. to conceal the ungainly shortness of the princess's limbs. Seriously. All those loose-fitting blouses, sandals and stilettos, ballooning no-waist coats, custom-made evening gowns – all of them serve just one purpose. She goes to great lengths trying to deflect people's gaze, to draw attention away from her legs and maybe direct it towards the swan-like neck I've been dying to wring ever since I can remember. Oh! Those extra long steps she makes when she's walking, just to make sure everyone thinks her legs are, like, normal! You know? The little accident I once arranged . . . I thought the stupid slut would go around limping for the rest of her pathetic life . . . and for a while she did . . . and then nice doctors with hirsute wrists and foul breath applied their very advanced skills and mended her.

Shit.

Okay, maybe I am a bit dumpy. Stocky. Right. So what? I'm the intelligent one in the family. My breasts are very graceful-looking, classically shaped, if I say so – look, I wouldn't lie to you about that. See for yourself. Oh, and I do have an ass! And a waist!

My legs are a bit short, though, just like hers. My calves are overdeveloped. They stick out a little, as do the knees. Just a little. Okay, they stick out a lot. So what. That's no excuse to give the bitch

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everything and leave me with what's left. The amount of attention she gets from everyone is just sinful.

You have no idea. She's not the only one with blue eyes. My eyes are blue too, and very pretty. Prettier than hers. You should see my eyelashes, they're a mile long. My hair is dark and wavy. Excessively so. You know what? So is hers! The amount of money the bitch pays to have it straightened and smoothed out and dyed for her, it's an outrage. Natural blonde, my ass. She dyes her pubic hair, too. I can prove it – I have video recordings of the two stupid broads with pharisaic smiles and squeaky voices dropping by and waxing the bitch all over, and dying what's left of her stupid pubic hair at the end of the session. They comb and douse it with this, like, special solution to make it feel softer, so it's, like, believable. I wonder what would happen if she swallowed the stuff by accident. She'll gulp down anything when she's drinking.

The number of people attending to my sister, man oh man, if she let them all go, the unemployment rate in this city would shoot up fifty percent. She had surgery to have her thumbs and big toes altered. Her outmost phalanges used to be thick and rotund, making her thumbs and big toes look like golf balls. Miss Natural Blonde.

I must have come into this world with one thought in mind – how I was going to loathe my sister. My mission in life. I mean, I've had my share of men . . . Don't get me wrong, I'm not a slut. That's not my style. Once in a while, though, someone exceptionally good-looking comes along, someone this girl could really use in bed and elsewhere. When that happens, I don't make a fuss, like some others. I don't go around whining, or sprawl lifelessly in my living room chair, wearing my blue silk pajamas, the back of my hand on my pallid pate, sipping brandy after brandy, suffering languorously. No way. What I do is I walk right up to the source and tell him like it is. Most times, anyway. Most men I like are far from wealthy, so they can be bought. It doesn't have to be money. You know what I mean. It's easier to buy a man than a woman, I guess, since there are a lot more male buyers than female buyers. Most women have no guts to do it.

Don't get me wrong, I've had my share of long-term relationships. One was with a man from our own milieu. We spent a whole year together. I was considering going off the pill when the son of a bitch just went ahead and dumped me. I could have gone to someone else right away. Guess what. I decided to grow fat instead. Earlier, I'd been minding my body, eating sparingly, denying myself. Well, I went ahead and grew fat, just to spite everybody. I put on weight, as our middle-class neighbors say. (Those pseudo-genteel expressions are pretty comical sometimes). I also took up being cruel to my parents by showing up at their soirées and making derisive comments in front of everybody. I mean, those guests, they're just a bunch of obnoxious nouveau riche clowns, or maybe you'll see some pathetic impoverished bluebloods now and then, exchanging prissy little remarks. I hate the lot. They'd be, like, oh no, it's that fat little Gwen again.

My stupid parents named me Gwendolyn. In their infinite high-class-wannabe wisdom they must have figured it sounded awfully snobby and British. My sister has everything – of the three children in the family, she's the only one with, like, a normal name. Elaine – a bit on the plain side, unassuming, delightfully

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unpretentious, given in simple, forgivable ignorance to the first child. I'd kill to have a name like that.

When I think back to that night . . . Guests – a gaggle of tame celebrities – were on hand. My parents only choose to deal with the milder type. They would never invite anyone who might have to be sedated after a couple of drinks, which is why those parties are so dull, even though if anyone found out how much the catering and the music costs my poor naïve father, there would probably be a revolution. Anyway, there was this conceited opera singer, obese yet dignified; a pretentious pseudo-poet with a scarf; and some movie tart everyone goes crazy about these days, I can't remember her name. And then there was . . . he. The man.

You should have been there. Despite the silly rich-man suit (or a commoner's idea of one, anyway), you could tell he had a perfect body. Broad shoulders, solid wrists, a very good waist . . . longish legs . . .

His features are amazing – well, you know that, I suppose, the photos are all over sports publications, he's their poster boy. Finally they've got a boxer whose presence doesn't frighten anyone and whose small talk isn't wildly embarrassing.

Listen. My sister may pretend all she likes; she may smile and kiss me, and share secrets with me, and ask my advice (I'm the clever one, remember?); that's just a front, though. Deep down the infernal pig knows there's a rivalry going; she so enjoys each and every one of my defeats, no matter how insignificant – it's ridiculous. She's worse than I. She thinks I don't remember. She thinks I don't know she almost had me kicked out of Princeton for smoking weed – after she graduated. I still have the audio of all the subversive little chats she had, clicking her whore tongue sympathetically: at the Dean's, at our parents' (two tongue-clicking chats with Dad, seven with Mom, who just kept gasping and crying and going oh, no, oh, no, and covering her freshly painted lips with a delicate neatly manicured hand), at our aunt's (took the poor woman to the kitchen to share a girlie secret, with all the help around . . . well . . . the kitchen was where I had installed three mikes, ha, ha). Because I knew what was going on, I managed to take some preventive measures. I didn't get tossed out on my ass for a year, no way. The Dean got tossed out instead. I'd had some of his conversations recorded, too, just to keep all bases covered. I could have lit up a joint in the middle of a lecture, and everyone would have just minded their own fucking business. I had the entire faculty by the balls – just to make sure my big beautiful short-legged sister did not poke her surgically beautified beak into my life too much.

Anyway, there he was, the man, at that soirée.

Oh, stop.

I'm no boxing fan. You've got to be kidding me. I'm the proverbial blue stocking: the classic spinster type. I don't follow boxing, or baseball, or hockey, or any other sport. Not me. Not in a million years. My idea of a fun evening is I've just had some very good sex, and the moron is snoozing beside me (and not snoring too much). Sticking a pillow behind my back, I sit up and maybe read something captivating, or watch a recording of some verismo opus. You know what else is good? Pouring water on people's heads from your

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window and not ducking back into the apartment. You have to be careful, though. Mind who your target is.

French was my first language. When I was a cute little girl, no one in the damn house spoke to me except my governess. She was pretty stupid, poor dear. I got on to her when I was three. I kind of liked her, though, so I didn't really, like, dedicate all of my spare time to blackmailing her. I just made her understand a thing or two. Once was enough. The amount of leeway I got from her after that was inordinate by anyone's standards. Even though I frightened her, she didn't hate me for it. She must have been naturally submissive, just begging for someone to boss her around. Some chicks are like that. She couldn't quit either, not with the kind of salary she was getting at our house. A mid-echelon executive would kill for that kind of money. Money's good to have.

Anyway, there he was – the boxer, future world champion, big hulking man with the shy smile. He wasn't accustomed to his celebrity status yet. He felt awkward, which was pretty funny. They introduced him to the opera singer, and you could tell he had a very vague idea of what opera singing was all about, but he was in awe anyway. I thought the opera singer was going to be smitten. He wasn't. Later I found out he wasn't gay.

Anyway, I sure was smitten. And you can tell me I'm nuts, and maybe I am, but you know what, if it weren't for my fawning on the boxer that night, my sister would have never even noticed him. She saw me all starry-eyed and drooling, so immediately the bitch interfered, shouldering me aside and taking control. Well, guess what. She spent quite a few days sprawling lifelessly in her chair, pajamas and all, the back of her hand on the pallid pate, sipping brandy after brandy and suffering histrionically. And then the boxer called. He called her. Not me. Her. They started dating. He would arrive in this, like, very posh car, which was kind of comical, like he was trying very hard to impress everybody with his wheels, and he'd refuse to come up. He'd just wait for her outside, which was why I never got the chance to put a mike under the back seat. They would go out, and I would read Stendhal furiously, or watch a video, or terrorize the help or whatever.

Once in a while she'd spend the night at his place, horrifying our parents. Their friends enjoyed it a lot, giggling and gossiping. My sister ended up marrying the boxer and looking very courageous in the process, like, she defied her milieu's sentiments, ignoring class and race prejudices and convention and all that shit. Yeah, go get 'em, tiger. Mom and Dad had to resign themselves to the inevitable. They weren't very happy about it, you understand.

Following the wedding, our parents suffered a temporary loss of speech. In comes Neil, our dear brother, arriving for his annual visit, the great Oxford man. He grabs Elaine, takes the bitch aside, and goes, "Now, listen, just one thing, sis, I just have to stipulate this ... You can watch your pugilist batter people on TV all you like, but you'll never, ever, ever, ever, you stupid fucking salacious twit, you will never ... be spotted ringside. By anyone. Ever." My short-legged sibling realized he was actually right, sort of. Pretty smart for the kind of dumb flat-chested fake blonde she is.

As expected, our secret rivalry intensified after she married the boxer.

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He's not merely good-looking ... he's a demiurge ... a quintessence of masculine beauty. The two races combined to produce a specimen whose bodily perfection is unprecedented. What did – what does he – see in her? I mean, come on. If I had to put all my videos on tape, there would be enough of it to make a braided leash for the moon – their outings, conversations, sex, fights, tantrums, you name it. Incidentally, she's more or less frigid, my dear sister is, and a very mediocre faker. I mean, very mediocre. A Korean hooker in a suburban bordello can do better. Would you believe it – he hasn't had an affair since he married her! They have two kids almost ready for boarding school. She has had four lovers in the meantime! He knows about two of them. What's wrong with him!

And I'm like, you know what, I don't know, and I don't care, I just want to be with him, live with him, die with him, adore him and pamper him.

It's embarrassing. I've made advances. I couldn't help it. Unprepared (me!), I attempted to seduce him. He was very shy. I came on strong. He felt sorry for me. He didn't know how to turn me down without offending me. I couldn't stand it, it was so humiliating. I slammed the door. An hour later I realized, silly cow that I am, that I should have used his stupid pity to advance my cause. Well, I'm going to have to be more careful and far more patient from now on. One way or another, he'll be mine. I know it. Because I love him. Yes. I know love doesn't exist. It's all sex and chemicals and the late eighteenth century German Romantics and Sleeping Beauty and books on sensuality, but I love him. I haven't had a lover in six years – since their wedding day. In a sense, I'm just as faithful as he. It's my wicked dumb sister who's the libertine.

My daydreaming is very special and unlike anything I've ever heard of. I can just sit in an armchair Indian-style and stare, and travel back in time and space, or whatever. It's like an imaginary ... oh, I don't know ... quantum leap, or something ... It's always the same place and the same epoch, mid-nineteenth-century Paris. It feels very real, though, so real that I'm in control of all my senses. I'm actually living it. Because it's my daydream, I'm a queen in it, and not just any old queen, but the Queen of France, residing in Versailles and visiting Paris once in a while, in disguise. When I look in a mirror, I still see good old Gwen, aged thirty-three, with the short legs, overdeveloped calves, curly dark hair, knobby wrists, amazing blue eyes, and all the rest of it. I'm me. A royal version of me. I can have any man I want, and I'm very, very picky. Needless to say, they all adore me. It's not just my money, either. I mean, they really adore me. I was born, and later on married, into power – the ultimate aphrodisiac. I only keep one lover. He's this totally unknown artist, and I'm cruel to him. I could make him famous overnight, and he'd still be my lover, but, to be honest, I enjoy keeping him in his place. He doesn't get it. He's very sincere and very gentle. He refuses to take money from me. So I give him presents. He sells some of them on the sly. He's always behind on rent. Never has enough to eat except when we go out together – I in disguise, he in anguish. We favor the Latin Quarter, so called because at some point, students from all over the world lived there and hung out together, communicating in Latin, which was the language they all knew. Only the rich can afford it now.

My servants hate my guts. I make them bring up the tub twice a day

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or, when my lover comes calling, three times. He thinks I'm mad. Everyone thinks I'm mad. Reality or dreamland, it's all the same. My lover doesn't know I'm from the future. He has no idea he's only a figment of my deranged imagination. Our trysts have been growing less and less frequent lately.

Today, I sat in my armchair and tried to concentrate. Nothing happened. No daydreaming. The boxer is definitely a problem.