



The Perfect Mistake Preview (selected excerpt)

Meet me tonight. Ten o'clock. Corner of Fourth and Walnut.

And be ready for anything.

Penny

Penny Halloran released a nervous sigh as she peered down at the note she'd just penned on a plain white card bearing her business's logo. She wished she'd had something more romantic to write on, perhaps scented stationery, something with flowers or hearts. Or maybe something sexier than that—animal print came to mind, then leather, then lace—but where did a girl get leather stationery? She read the words once more and wrinkled up her nose. What she'd written them on was irrelevant. What mattered was: Could she go through with this?

She wasn't usually an impulsive woman, and if this could wait, she'd let it. This was the sort of thing that needed weeks of planning to make sure it came off without a hitch. Even the note seemed lackluster; she wished she'd had time to think of something more clever, playful. But

it *couldn't* wait—Martin was going out of town tomorrow, and when he returned in a week, he expected an answer to his marriage proposal. Tonight was the night for action.

Swallowing her fears, she reached for a stapler and attached the card to the bag containing Martin's sandwich—ham and Swiss on rye, light mayo—the same as he ordered every day. Gathering the bag lunches to be delivered to Schuster Software Systems upstairs, she yelled, “Be back in five,” to her sister, Patti, who stood working the bar of the Two Sisters Restaurant and Pub as the lunch hour started. Exiting the door of the restaurant that led into the skyscraper's lobby, she headed for the elevator.

This is really quite simple, she lectured herself as the elevator climbed toward the eighth floor of the downtown Cincinnati office building. *I'm just going to seduce him, that's all. Nothing to be nervous about. Men love this sort of thing*, or so she'd heard. *Martin will love it, too*. And as for why her heart was beating ninety miles an hour and her stomach felt as if it had been left back on the ground floor...well, that was only because she'd never seduced a man before. And maybe it was also because Martin's expressions of affection so far had been...less than enthusiastic. Goodnight kisses at the door that often felt more obligatory than passionate. And handholding. Martin was big on handholding. But nothing more.

Oddly, that hadn't bothered her in the three months they'd been dating. Martin was everything she wanted in a man—ambitious, dependable, sensible, and smart. Tall and lean with trim brown hair that never touched his collar, he was even somewhat handsome in a simple yet classic way. On top of that, he owned his own company, so they shared an entrepreneurial spirit, too. And at twenty-eight, she was mature enough to know there was more to life than sex. She enjoyed his companionship; they liked the same movies and had the same taste in restaurants, and they enjoyed spending lazy weekend afternoons picnicking at Eden Park, then meandering through the art museum afterward.

A few days ago, however, Martin had taken her hand in his to say, “Penny, I'm in my thirties now, and I want children before I'm too old to enjoy them. I think you and I make a good team. Will you marry me?” It had been an unexpected turn of events, all things considered. And although it hadn't been the most romantic proposal in the world, she couldn't deny that he was right. They made a good team; they were well suited.

But wasn't marriage supposed to be more than that—more than teamwork and suitability? The fact was, though, that while not the only facet of a relationship, sex *was* important. Up to now, she'd supposed it would develop between them over time; she'd decided maybe he was just a slow mover, and there was nothing wrong with that. But with a marriage proposal on the table, she just didn't think she could accept without...taking a test drive.

In fact, in the three long days since Martin's proposal, she'd done a lot of long, hard and rather *disturbing* thinking about herself. Disturbing because, not only did sex matter to her, and not only did it suddenly matter a lot, it was also beginning to matter in ways she'd never even imagined before.

After several stops to let other passengers on and off, the elevator finally opened on a crisp, contemporary lobby. Grace, the receptionist, sat behind her round desk with a phone receiver tucked beneath her chin, saying, "Mmm hmm...mmm hmm..." She shoved back a lock of wispy red hair that had fallen from the bun at her nape and rolled her eyes at Penny from behind her small, gold-framed glasses as if to say the person on the phone wouldn't shut up.

"I'll just go on back," Penny whispered, pointing. Then she padded toward the hallway that led to the private offices, her heart rising to her throat. She was about to do this, about to deliver this crazy, demanding note to sensible, *undemanding* Martin, who would likely think she was off her rocker the moment he saw it.

But don't think like that. You've got to do this. And maybe he'll even like it. Maybe it will even...unleash the animal hidden inside him. If there was an animal hidden inside him. Oh please, please let there be an animal hidden inside him. Even if it's just a little one.

Because the startling fact Penny had figured out about herself over the past few days was that an animal lurked inside *her*. She'd never known that about herself before. And okay, maybe it was a slightly timid animal at this point. Yet when she'd realized she might soon commit herself to one man for the rest of her life, it had dawned on her that not only did she have sexual desires that were going unfulfilled, but they were sort of *wild* sexual desires. Dating a guy without passion...that was okay. But when she imagined getting *married*, the package came with great sex.

Maybe she'd always just been waiting, assuming that that part of her life—a true, possibly even hedonistic sexual awakening—would come along later, that she'd meet some perfect man who would set all her inhibitions free and lead her through the thrilling, reckless affair of a lifetime...

But it hadn't happened yet, and if it was going to happen with Martin, she would clearly have to give him a push in the right direction. *It'll be worth it in the end.* She made the promise to herself as she stuck her head into his corner office to find it blessedly empty. *It'll be worth it tonight when you sweep him off his feet and he loves it and you love it and a whole new sexual landscape unfurls before you both.* Actually, just thinking of the plan she'd formulated this morning was enough to leave her mildly aroused and imbued with a sudden sexy new nip of confidence. *Oh yes, this was going to be good. This was going to be very good.*

Her heart now pumped with more excitement than fear as she lowered the bag onto his desk in the middle of the scattered papers and folders. Her little surprise would be the perfect thing to take his mind off business, and it would be a wonderful, even generous way to send him off to his software conference in Las Vegas.

After turning the note toward the desk chair where he'd see it first thing upon sitting down, she pivoted and scurried from the room. Then she went about the business of distributing the rest of the sandwiches to the appointed offices, finishing with the new guy, Ryan. He didn't have a nameplate outside his door yet, but had been occupying the tiny office next to the conference room for the past week.

Heading back toward the elevator, she re-immersed herself in thoughts of the night to come. When she returned to the restaurant, she needed to call the limo service, then break it to Patti that she was leaving early to shop for something special to wear.

She jerked to a stop just before barreling head on into the dark suit and bright tie that suddenly loomed before her. "Oh!" She lifted her eyes, expecting to find Martin but relieved to see that it was only Ryan, who was taller and considerably broader than she'd realized before. "Hi."

"Hi," he replied, although his smile looked a little off-kilter, questioning, and it didn't take a genius to figure out why—Penny probably looked as nervous as if she'd just made off with the petty cash drawer.

"I, uh, was just..." *Preparing to ravish your boss.* This seemed like a good time to shut up rather than explain. "Enjoy your lunch," she said instead, then skirted past him toward the elevators without sparing him another thought.

She had more important things on her mind, after all. She had a seduction to orchestrate.

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