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Match Me If You Can

A Novel



If You Can



Susan Elizabeth Phillips



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TO OUR SONS . . .
AND THE WOMEN THEY LOVE

Match Me If You Can



Chapter One



If Annabelle hadn't found a body lying under "Sherman," she wouldn't have been late for her appointment with the Python. But dirty bare feet stuck out from beneath her nana's ancient Crown Victoria. One extremely cautious glance under the car revealed they were attached to a homeless man known only as Mouse, who was famous in her Wicker Park neighborhood for his lack of personal hygiene and fondness for cheap wine. An empty screw-top bottle lay near his chest, which rose and fell with the sounds of his wet snorts. It testified to the importance of her appointment with the Python that she momentarily considered trying to maneuver the car around the body. But her alley parking space was too tight.

She'd allowed plenty of time to get dressed and make the trip downtown for her 11 A.M. appointment. Unfortunately, obstacles kept creeping up, beginning with Mr. Bronicki, who'd caught her at the front door and refused to leave until he'd had his say. Still, this wasn't an emergency yet. All she had to do was get Mouse out from under Sherman.

She gingerly prodded his ankle with her foot, noting as she did that the emergency mixture of Hershey's chocolate syrup and Elmer's glue she'd applied to a scuff mark on the heel of

her favorite pair of strappy sandals hadn't entirely camouflaged the damage. "Mouse?"

He didn't stir.

She prodded him more vigorously. "Mouse, wake up. You have to come out of there."

Nothing. Which made it time to revert to more drastic measures. With a grimace, she bent over, gingerly picked up one filthy ankle, and gave it a shake. "Come on, Mouse. Wake up!"

Nada. If it weren't for his slurpy snorts, he might have been dead.

She shook him more vigorously. "This happens to be the most important day of my professional life, and I could use a little cooperation here."

Mouse wasn't interested in cooperation.

She needed more leverage. Gritting her teeth, she carefully slid up the skirt of the buttercup yellow raw silk suit she'd bought yesterday for 60 percent off at a Field's Day sale and crouched by the bumper. "If you don't get out from under there, I'm calling the police."

Mouse snorted.

She dug her heels into the ground and yanked on both filthy ankles. The morning sun beat down on her head. Mouse rolled over just far enough to wedge his shoulder under the chassis. She yanked again. Beneath her jacket, the white sleeveless shell she'd chosen to complement Nana's pearl teardrop earrings had begun to stick to her skin. She tried not to think about what was happening to her hair. This hadn't been the best time to run out of styling gel, and she prayed the ancient can of industrial-strength Aqua Net she'd found under the bathroom sink would tame the bedlam of her red curls, always the curse of her existence but especially so during a humid Chicago summer.

If she didn't get Mouse out in the next five minutes, she was in serious trouble. She made her way around to the driver's-side

door. Her knees cracked as she crouched down again and peered into his slack-jawed face. "Mouse, you have to wake up! You can't stay here."

One grimy eyelid flicked open then slid shut again.

"Look at me." She poked his chest. "If you come out from under there, I'll give you five dollars."

His mouth moved and a guttural rumble oozed out, along with a string of saliva. "G'way."

The smell made her eyes water. "Why did you have to pick today to pass out under my car? And why my car? Why not Mr. Bronicki's car?" Mr. Bronicki lived across the alley and spent his retirement coming up with new ways to make Annabelle crazy.

Time was running out, and she was starting to panic. "Do you want to have sex? Because if you come out, we could maybe talk about it."

More drool and another putrid snort. This was hopeless. She jumped up and dashed toward the house.

Ten minutes later, she managed to lure him out with an open can of beer. Not her best moment.

By the time she'd maneuvered Sherman from the alley to the street, she had only twenty-one minutes left to navigate the traffic into the Loop and find a place to park. Dirt streaked her legs, her shirt was crumpled, and she'd broken a fingernail when she'd opened the beer can. The extra five pounds that had accumulated on her small-boned frame since Nana's death no longer seemed like such a big problem.

10:39.

She couldn't risk the construction gridlock on the Kennedy Expressway, so she cut over to Division. In the rearview mirror, another curl sprang free of her hair spray, and perspiration glistened on her forehead. She detoured down Halsted to avoid more road repair. As she maneuvered Sherman's tanklike bulk through the traffic, she scrubbed at her dirty legs with the damp

paper towel she'd snatched up in the kitchen. Why couldn't Nana have driven a nice little Honda Civic instead of this bilious green gas-guzzling monster? At five feet three inches, Annabelle had to sit on a cushion to see over the steering wheel. Nana hadn't bothered with a cushion, but then she'd hardly ever driven. After a dozen years of use, Sherman's speedometer didn't quite register thirty-nine thousand miles.

A cab cut her off. She laid on the horn, and a trickle of perspiration slid between her breasts. She glanced at her watch. 10:50. She tried to remember if she'd put on deodorant after her shower. Of course she had. She always put on deodorant. She lifted her arm to make sure, but just as she took a sniff, she hit a pothole and her mouth bumped against the buttercup yellow lapel, leaving behind a smudge of tawny lipstick.

She gave a cry of dismay and reached across the vast front seat for her purse, only to have it slip off the edge and tumble into the Grand Canyon below. The light at Halsted and Chicago turned red. Her hair was sticking to the back of her neck, and more curls were springing up. She tried to do her yoga breathing, but she'd only been to one class, and it wasn't effective. Why, when Annabelle's economic future was at stake, had Mouse picked this day to pass out under her car?

She crawled into the Loop. 10:59. More of Chicago's permanent road construction. She passed the Daley Center. She didn't have time to follow her customary practice of cruising the streets until she found a metered parking space large enough to accommodate Sherman's bulk. Instead she wheeled into the first exorbitantly expensive parking garage she could find, threw Sherman's keys at the attendant, and took off at a trot.

11:05. No need to panic. She'd simply explain about Mouse. Surely the Python would understand.

Or not.

A blast of air-conditioning hit her as she entered the lobby of the high-rise office building. 11:08. The elevator was

blessedly empty, and she punched the button for the fourteenth floor.

"Don't let him intimidate you," Molly had told her over the phone. *"The Python feeds on fear."*

Easy for Molly to say. Molly was sitting at home with a hottie football player husband, a great career of her own, and two adorable children.

The doors crept shut. Annabelle caught sight of herself in the mirrored wall and gave a hiss of dismay. Her raw silk suit had turned into a limp mass of buttercup wrinkles, dirt smudged the side of the skirt, and the lipstick smear on the lapel stood out like a light-up Christmas pin. Worst of all, her hair was uncoiling from the Aqua Net curl by curl, with the hair spray weighing it down just enough so that the escaping locks hung lank around her face like bedsprings that had been tossed from a tenement window and left in an alley to rust.

Usually when she got upset about her appearance—which even her own mother described only as “nice”—she reminded herself to be grateful for her good features: a pair of very nice honey-colored eyes, thick lashes, and—give or take a few dozen freckles—a creamy complexion. But no amount of positive thinking could make the image that stared back at her from the elevator mirror anything but horrifying. She scrambled to tuck a few curls behind her ears and smooth her skirt, but the elevator doors opened before she could repair much of the damage.

11:09.

In front of her, she saw a glass wall imprinted with gold letters. CHAMPION SPORTS MANAGEMENT. She hurried across the carpeted hallway and entered through a door with a curved metal handle. The reception area held a leather couch and matching chairs, framed sports memorabilia, and a big-screen TV muted on a baseball game. The receptionist had short, steel gray hair and a thin-lipped mouth. She took in Annabelle's

disheveled appearance over the top of half glasses with blue metal frames. "May I help you?"

"Annabelle Granger. I have an appointment with the Py—with Mr. Champion."

"I'm afraid you're too late, Miss Granger."

"Only ten minutes."

"Ten minutes was all the time Mr. Champion had available in his schedule to see you."

Her suspicions were confirmed. He'd only agreed to see her because Molly had insisted, and he didn't want to upset his top client's wife. She glanced in desperation at the wall clock. "I'm really only nine minutes late. I have one minute left."

"Sorry." The receptionist turned back to her computer and began tapping away.

"One minute," Annabelle pleaded. "That's all I ask."

"There's nothing I can do."

Annabelle needed this meeting, and she needed it now. Pivoting on her heels, she rushed toward the paneled door at the far end of the reception area.

"Miss Granger!"

Annabelle dashed into an open hallway with a pair of offices on each side, one of them occupied by two buff young men in dress shirts and neckties. Ignoring them, she headed for an imposing mahogany door set into the center of the back wall and turned the knob.

The Python's office was the color of money: lacquered jade walls, thick moss carpet, and furniture upholstered in varying shades of green accented with bloodred pillows. An assortment of news photos and sports memorabilia hung behind the couch along with a rust-streaked white metal sign with faded black block letters that said *BEAU VISTA*. Appropriate, considering the sweeping wall of windows overlooking Lake Michigan in the distance. The Python himself sat behind a sleek, U-shaped desk, his high-backed chair turned toward the water view. She took in a state-of-the-art desktop computer, a small laptop, a BlackBerry,

and a sophisticated black telephone console with enough buttons to land a jumbo jet. An executive headset lay abandoned next to it as the Python spoke directly into the receiver.

"The third-year money is good, but not if they cut you early," he said in a voice that was deeply resonant, crisp, and mid-western. "I know it's a gamble, but if you sign for one year, we can play the free agent market." She glimpsed a strong tanned wrist, a rugged watch, and long tapered fingers curled around the receiver. "Ultimately, it's your decision, Jamal. All I can do is advise you."

The door burst open behind her, and the receptionist flew in, feathers ruffled like an offended parakeet. "I'm sorry, Heath. She got past me."

The Python turned slowly in his chair, and Annabelle felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach.

He was square-jawed and tough, everything about him proclaiming a brash, self-made man—a roughneck who'd flunked charm school the first couple of times around but finally gotten it right on the third pass. His hair was thick and crisp, its rich color a cross between a leather portfolio and a bottle of Bud. He had a straight, confident nose and bold dark eyebrows, one of which was bisected near the end with a thin pale scar. The firm set of his well-molded mouth proclaimed a low tolerance for fools, a passion for hard work that bordered on obsession, and possibly—although this might be her imagination—a determination to own a small chalet near St. Tropez before he was fifty. If it weren't for a vague irregularity to his features, he would have been unbearably gorgeous. Instead, he was merely drop-dead good-looking. What did a man like this need with a matchmaker?

As he spoke into the phone, he turned his eyes on her. They were the exact green of a hundred-dollar bill singed at the edges with displeasure. "This is what you pay me for, Jamal." He took in Annabelle's disheveled appearance and shot the receptionist a hard look. "I'll talk to Ray this afternoon. Take

care of that hammy. And tell Audette I'm sending her another case of Krug *grande cuvée*."

"Your eleven o'clock appointment," the receptionist said as he hung up. "I told her she was too late to see you."

He shoved aside a copy of *Pro Football Weekly*. His hands were broad, his fingernails clean and neatly clipped. Still, it wasn't hard to imagine them ringed with motor oil. She took in a navy print necktie that probably cost more than her entire outfit and the perfect fit of his pale blue dress shirt, which could only have been custom-made to accommodate the width of his shoulders before tapering toward his waist.

"Apparently, she doesn't listen well." His shirt molded to an impressive chest as he shifted in his chair, making Annabelle uncomfortably aware of a junior high science lesson she vaguely remembered about pythons.

They swallowed their prey whole. Head first.

"Do you want me to call security?" the receptionist asked.

He turned his predator's eyes on her, leaving Annabelle at the receiving end of another of those knockout punches. Despite the effort he'd taken to polish all those rough edges, the bar brawler still showed. "I think I can handle her."

A jolt of sexual awareness shot through her—so inappropriate, so unwelcome, so totally out of place that she bumped into one of the side chairs. She was never at her best around excessively confident men, and the absolute necessity of impressing this particular specimen made her silently curse her clumsiness right along with her rumpled suit and Medusa hair.

Molly had told her to be aggressive. *He's fought his way to the top, one client at a time. Brutal aggression is the only emotion Heath Champion understands.* But Annabelle wasn't a naturally aggressive person. Everyone from bank clerks to taxi drivers took advantage of her. Just last week she'd lost a confrontation with the nine-year-old she'd caught egging Sherman. Even her own family—*especially* her own family—walked all over her.

And she was sick of it. Sick of being condescended to, sick of too many people getting the best of her, sick of feeling like a failure. If she backed down now, where would it end? She met those money green eyes and knew the time had come to tap deep into her Granger gene pool and play hardball.

"There was a dead body under my car." It was almost true. Mouse had been dead weight.

Unfortunately, the Python didn't look impressed, but then he'd probably been responsible for so many dead bodies that he'd grown bored with the whole concept of corpses. She took a deep breath. "All that red tape. It made me late. Otherwise, I would have been punctual. More than punctual. I'm very responsible. And professional." Just like that, she ran out of air. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Yes."

"Thank you." She sank into the nearest chair.

"You don't listen well, do you?"

"What?"

He gazed at her for a long moment before dismissing his receptionist. "Hold my calls for five minutes, Sylvia, unless it's Phoebe Calebow." The woman left, and he gave a resigned sigh. "I assume you're Molly's friend." Even his teeth were intimidating: strong, square, and very white.

"College buddies."

He tapped his fingers on the desk. "I don't mean to be rude, but you'll have to make this fast."

Who did he think he was kidding? He thrived on being rude. She imagined him in college dangling some poor computer geek out a dorm window or laughing in the face of a weeping, possibly pregnant, girlfriend. She sat straighter in the chair, trying to project confidence. "I'm Annabelle Granger from Perfect for You."

"The matchmaker." His fingers tapped away.

"I think of myself as a marriage facilitator."