



*Her roommate is pregnant.
She's got the perfect solution...*

Daddy Wanted

PENELOPE MARZEC

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Dedication

For A.
Thanks for the inspiration.

CHAPTER ONE

Grace held her breath until Ulysses moved. He blinked at her and scrambled into his small pool. She sprinkled a few grains of his food into the water, and he went after them with the precision of a heat-seeking missile. The turtle belonged to her roommate, Elyse, but Elyse neglected him. Grace feared one day she would wake up and find he had passed away.

Assured of the red-eared slider's vitality, she stumbled into the bathroom, groggy from lack of sleep. She should never have turned off the snooze alarm. Her boss had scheduled a morning meeting, and she might have to run all the way to work to arrive in time.

Despite her blurry vision, a vivid pink color in the wastebasket caught her attention. Her heart sank when she read the words on the box: *pregnancy test kit*. She supposed she should not be surprised. Every man in New York City adored Elyse. Her slightly exotic, almond-shaped eyes, curly, coal-black hair, and perfect, hourglass figure drew men.

Grace's throat tightened. Her roommate might be in major trouble. A lot of young women went through pregnancy scares, but Elyse never had any trouble until now.

A cold chill went down Grace's spine. How could Elyse take care of a baby if she could not take care of Ulysses?

Grace fought to tame her short, mousy-brown, bedhead hair and lost the battle. She put down the

brush and opted to wear a hat. Her current favorite resembled a designer knockoff she'd purchased from a street vendor—the genuine article would have reduced her to poverty. She tilted the chapeau to one side and imagined herself a movie star from one of the ancient black-and-white films Gram favored. She pursed her lips and batted her eyelashes. The vision in the mirror did not resemble Lillian Gish. Disappointed, she told herself the bitter cold of February would give her frostbitten ears if she did not wear the hat.

Her gaze rested on the pink box again and a cold knot settled in her chest. Should she ask Elyse about the test? Would Elyse volunteer the information?

She had been sharing the Brooklyn apartment with Elyse for the past year and a half. Men regularly appeared on the doorstep hungering after Elyse. She had more boyfriends than B&J had ice cream flavors, but most of the swains did not last long—until Aidan came along. Elyse's infatuation with Aidan proved the most intense, up until one week ago when they'd had a fight.

Elyse called him a slacker because he did not have a job, nor did he appear to have any hope of landing one soon. "Do you think you can sponge off me for the rest of your life?"

Aidan had not responded. Instead, he'd walked out.

After the altercation, Aidan went from being an unemployed actor to imitating a rather good magician. He vanished, which might not be too hard to accomplish in a city with eight million people, but the speed of his departure was impressive, at least to Grace. He had been crashing at an apartment with two other young men, and they vowed he had left no

forwarding address after he'd packed up and moved out in less than an hour.

Grace needed more time than that to pack up her books.

After Aidan's departure, Elyse dissolved into long bouts of crying. Her grief would undoubtedly worsen if the pregnancy test came out positive.

Grace glanced at the mirror again. Dark smudges under her eyes attested to all her sympathetic listening. What else could she do? Elyse had helped her through the worst tragedy in her life. She had to be there for her friend.

Over and over, Elyse had blurted out between sobs, "He was such a poser!"

Grace bit her lip to prevent herself from saying, "Well, yeah. He's an actor."

The dull throb of a headache pulsed in her temples. She had the chore of taking out the garbage this week, which made her solely responsible for stuffing the pregnancy test kit box into the building's trashcan. She did not want anyone else in the apartment building to view the evidence. Especially the new guy in 2L who always seemed to be hanging around the garbage cans whenever she stepped outside. The mailbox in the vestibule listed him as Russell Thorpe. She frowned as she recalled how often he was hanging around the stairway when she went downstairs. When she picked up her mail, he stood in the vestibule glancing over her shoulder as she flipped through her bills.

Was he a stalker?

If so, he didn't instill any fear or panic in her. She did not break out in a cold sweat. On the contrary, instant warmth slid through her and her heart flip-

flopped at his nearness Her brief musing ended when Elyse banged on the bathroom door.

“Let me in!”

Grace hurried out. Elyse stood before her with wide eyes and a hand over her mouth. Then she ran into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Grace sank onto one of the kitchen chairs and covered her eyes. *Elyse has morning sickness!*

Grace squelched a groan as she glanced at her watch. The meeting was at nine thirty—in Manhattan. She hated rush hour in the subway, with strangers pressed together as closely as oranges in the display case at the fruit stand on Nassau Avenue.

She heard the sound of the toilet flushing as she grabbed her backpack and coat.

“Are you going to be OK?” she called out.

“Get moving. You’re late.”

“IM me!” She ran down the stairs.

The guy in 2L came out of his apartment, but she kept her eyes focused on the steps. She didn’t want to look at him. If she cast a glance his way, she would be left with the sensation of losing her balance. She had never met a man as tall and handsome, or so...*intense*.

“Are you practicing for the marathon?” A hint of humor touched his voice.

She caught a whiff of his aftershave. The woodsy undertones had her remembering the scent of the tall pines which grew in Gram’s backyard in Long Branch, New Jersey.

“I’m late.” She clipped her words as she gripped the railing.

“That’s unusual for you.”

Her heart thundered as she hurried into the vestibule and escaped onto the street. What was she to

do? The guy watched her every move.

* * *

Russell Thorpe shook his head as *The Perfect Woman* slammed the door on her way out. Despite her hasty departure, he had determined she fit all his requirements. In two weeks, his childhood friend, Zane, would be married, with Russell standing in as best man. He needed to show up at the wedding with a suitable woman by his side in order to make Zane's grandfather, happy. Mr. Dudley didn't have long to live, but he claimed seeing Russell with the right gal would allow him to die in peace, and Russell's conscience wouldn't allow him to ignore the old man's wish because he had done so much for him. Not that Russell intended to get married, not yet at any rate. He planned to have his own business, a substantial amount of money stuffed away in a 401(k), and a house in the suburbs. He would not be poor again. Ever. He avoided dating women because New York City's entertainment spots drained his wallet. So he decided upon the ruse of bringing a fake fiancée to the wedding.

Of course, no ordinary woman would do. Mr. Dudley had indoctrinated Russell with the specific qualifications—no makeup, hair without dye, and modest clothing. She needed to be sensible, honest, and thrifty. She needed to possess old-fashioned values along with the knowledge of how to clean and sew. Most importantly, she must be a good cook.

When *The Perfect Woman* in 3L went running by him, he noted her freshly scrubbed face and her lack of jewelry. Her slacks had a sharp crease. She wore low-heeled shoes, but he saw little else of her physical

attributes due to February's weather.

He did sometimes wonder about the terrain beneath her coat, but he dared not dwell on the thought for very long. Otherwise, he might have to take a cold shower *before* he went for a serious workout at the gym.

Mr. Dudley had many other prerequisites for a wife, but Russell figured the essentials would do for now. No one else in Brooklyn or Manhattan fit the bill.

Drumming his fingers on the newel post, he let out an exasperated sigh. He had to get 3L to listen to his proposition, but she went out of her way to avoid him.

He intended to pay for the dress she would need. Didn't women love to go shopping? Who could possibly object to an all-expenses-paid weekend in Squash, Minnesota? Granted, Squash, Minnesota had a reputation for being as boring as dirt. With the exception of Zane and his grandfather, nobody in Squash wanted to be seen with Russell, which was why he'd left. Still, plenty of people believed Squash to be a veritable paradise. Most visitors described it as quaint and charming.

As he turned to retreat into his apartment, he heard a loud thump overhead, and then a horrific crash. *The Perfect Woman* had a roommate—the type of young lady Mr. Dudley would call a *floozy*. She must have fallen.

He raced up the stairs and knocked on the door. Hearing a moan, he called out as he tried the knob, "Are you OK?"

No answer.

He pulled out his penknife, jimmied the lock, and it sprang open. He saw the roommate on the floor beside a toppled chair and a broken mug. Running to

her side, he asked, "Can you hear me?"

"Yeah," she whispered. "I just...I tripped."

"I'll call an ambulance." He put his hand in his pocket to grab his cell phone.

Her eyes flew open. "No! I'm OK." She pushed herself up. "I'm fine. Nothing's broken."

He held out his hand, but she grabbed the edge of the table and got to her feet. Her skin had an ashen pallor and her hands trembled.

He righted the chair. She sat. He wondered if she'd hit her head.

"I intended to make a cup of tea," she explained. "Obviously, I'm a klutz."

He picked up the cracked cup. "I'll fix tea for you."

"I can do it myself." She shot him a ferocious glare. "I told you, I'm fine."

Her churlish tone surprised him. "I live downstairs—right below you," he explained. "You fell hard."

"I don't need a knight in shining armor."

"I only want to be neighborly."

"This is Brooklyn. Everyone minds their own business."

"Everyone needs a helping hand sometimes—"

"Not here. New Yorkers are independent. Move someplace else."

The woman had a chip on her shoulder the size of the Empire State building. He turned to go. "You're Elyse Luccatelli. Right?"

"My name is no concern of yours." She tilted up her chin and frowned.

He noticed a small, discolored bump swelling on her forehead. Once, he had gotten beamed by a baseball

as a kid and suffered a concussion, which included nausea.

"You need to be seen by a doctor," he blurted out. "You hit your head."

"There's nothing wrong with my head. Now get lost." Her voice held the chill of scorn.

Unsure what to do, he pulled out a card from his shirt pocket. "I'll leave you my phone number."

"If I had a problem—which I don't—I would call 9-1-1. Not you. Make yourself disappear. Now!"

He shoved the card back into his pocket and left. She might call the cops on him. Some people in Brooklyn did have a tendency to be more than a little paranoid. He did not want to wind up in jail accused of breaking-and-entering and leaving-a-phone-number. He did not want to see his name in a headline again. Ice slid up his spine as he recalled the screaming headlines condemning him. Years hadn't erased the trauma.

He walked slowly downstairs thinking about the pain he had caused so many people. His mother's tears. Mr. Dudley's disappointment. The memory still stung. Undoubtedly, someone at the wedding would be compelled to tell *The Perfect Woman* the truth. Yes, she could never be anything more than a fake fiancée, because after the wedding she would hold him in contempt for the rest of her life.

* * *

Grace jogged to the subway station, caught the train right away, and found a seat. She thought of Elyse and the baby. Her roommate had been estranged from her parents for years. She claimed they lived in a shack without running water or central heat, which

would not be a good place for a baby.

Grace wondered if the pregnancy might somehow turn into a positive situation for her friend. Under the nurturing influence of gestational hormones, Elyse might become more conscientious about caring for Ulysses. With her very nice salary, she could hire a plumber to fix up her parents' house and effect a reconciliation. This pregnancy could be the start of some mighty big miracles.

On the other hand, Elyse and her baby could wind up as statistics. Grace swallowed hard. No, she had to help. She had to do something.

Grace glanced at her watch and took a deep, calming breath as the train neared the station in midtown. Even if she jogged the three blocks, she would still be late.

She closed her eyes and dreamed of a perfect winter surfing day complete with a bright, blue sky and high waves. The cold water did not bother her when she wore her heavy neoprene suit. She imagined the rocking train as her surfboard.

The squeal of air brakes ended her brief escape from reality. She opened her eyes and sighed. What she really needed was a pair of roller blades. Even then, she would be late for her meeting.

She dashed from the subway, hurried down the street, and wove her way through the crowds. She drooled as she passed one coffee shop after another, but she knew her boss would have doughnuts and coffee waiting. He always did on deadline days. Although the sugar and the caffeine intensified his dragon-like behavior, Chase had not charred any of his employees with fiery breath—yet. She did not want to be the first.

She arrived at the office only five minutes late. She took a moment to compose herself before she walked in the door, but the minute she stepped inside she knew something had gone awry.

Bambi, the secretary, sat at Chase's desk. More importantly, Grace did not see coffee and doughnuts. Worst of all, she did not see Chase. In fact, nobody, other than Bambi, appeared to be around.

The secretary ignored Grace.

"Good morning," Grace offered.

Bambi said nothing and continued to stare at the computer screen, which counted as typical behavior for her. As a rule, Bambi disregarded everyone—except Chase, of course.

"Um...I guess I missed something important." Grace's heart pounded in her chest from her race to work. "Are they having the meeting at a restaurant?"

Bambi remained focused on the monitor. "This office is closed until further notice."

Grace slid down on a chair usually reserved for visitors. "What happened?"

"Why should you care?"

"I work here."

"Not now you don't. At least, not until Chase comes back."

A cold sweat broke out on Grace's forehead. "Where did he go?"

Bambi shot her a scathing glance. "He went snowboarding. He crashed into a tree and now has a concussion, a broken elbow, and a fractured femur. Under the circumstances, we may possibly get an extension on the project, but for now all work is suspended until...whenever." The secretary turned back to the computer screen and tapped a few keys

with a flourish.

A bubble of hysteria rose in Grace's throat. "B-but we can't just stop working. I mean...*Extraterrestrial Nova* is ready to go. I checked everything yesterday. You cannot believe how phenomenal this is." Her nervous giggle escaped. Well, she had never put together such an awesome game—her greatest project so far.

"Why are you laughing?" Bambi whipped her head around and glared at Grace.

"I-I thought about the game...and how good it is."

"Chase has not approved anything yet, and nothing goes out of this office without his say so."

"Then...what should I do?"

"Post your resume on the Internet."

Grace held onto the arms of the chair as the room spun. The lack of caffeine, food, and sleep hit her. Or the shock, the second one of the day. The game of life had become violent, with her as the ill-fated character getting slammed into proverbial walls.

She never put together destructive computer games. She programmed bloodless amusements with no brutality or sex. One of the nice things about working for Chase included how he respected her principles.

She took a few deep breaths. She simply had to find a similar job which allowed her to produce more nonviolent, E-rated games. Her head cleared a little. *I will handle this. I will find someone else who understands my ethics.*

She cleared her throat. "What hospital is Chase in?"

"You aren't going to visit him."

"Why not?"

“He’s in a different state, and you can’t afford the plane fare on your salary.”

Grace wanted to retaliate by saying something nasty, but she bit her tongue. Gram always said, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say it.”

Anyway, she needed references. She had to get another job, and quickly. After all, there would be another mouth to feed—in nine months. She swallowed her resentment. “Please, may I ask you to write up a reference for me?”

“Why are you asking me? I don’t know what you did. Only Chase has that information.”

Slowly, she rose from the chair—still woozy. She would walk away with as much dignity as possible. She now understood why working in such a small company had been a risky endeavor. She had interned there while in college, so landing the job had been easy.

Once, she had believed in Chase’s vision and thought he was a genius, but everything at the small firm hinged on him—his ideas, his vision, his projects. His clients. He ran his company like a petty despot. She had been an underpaid pawn.

“Make sure you close the door firmly on your way out,” Bambi ordered. “If Chase comes back, you might get a call, but he’s going to take a long time to heal.”

CHAPTER TWO

Grace walked into the café across the street and noticed Dean sitting at one of the tables. Evidently, he too no longer worked for Chase because he sat at a desk directly opposite hers in the office. Though he had trained his thinning brown hair to disguise his receding hairline, this morning his comb-over had gone askew and tumbled into his eyes. His scrawny frame leaned forward as he stared at the screen of his laptop.

Misery loves company. She sighed. “Any leads on a new job?” she asked as she reached the table where he tapped intently at the keyboard.

His fingers leaped off the keys. “Hey! Nice to see you, I guess. Nah. I’ve been sitting here IMing some old friends. Terrible about Chase. I had no idea he went snowboarding.” He shoved the hair out of his eyes.

“Me either. Did you happen to run into anyone else?”

“Nope. Just Bambi.” He grimaced. “Want to take over the company?”

“Bambi won’t let us.”

“That woman is a—”

“Gram says if you don’t have anything nice to say—”

“Your grandmother grew up in the dark ages before the Internet was invented.”

“Foul language is a bad habit.”

“Whatever. You possess a few evil habits

yourself—like eating meat. Anyway, Bambi reminds me of a troll.”

Grace laughed. “Like the one in our game, The Three Billy Goats Gruff?”

“Yeah. We should have used Bambi as a model for the beastly ogre.”

“Her hair is too neat.” Grace tucked a few loose strands of her own under her hat. “In fact, she’s always perfect—her nails, her makeup, everything.”

“Whooeee, the way she fills out her sweaters—she’s awesome in that department.” Dean whistled.

Grace glanced down at the barest hint of a curve on her chest. Beneath her sweater, she wore a lacy, little A-cup—pretty, but superfluous.

“I can make a caricature of Bambi and mess her up a bit.” Dean’s face lit up. He switched programs on his computer and began to draw, achieving a basic likeness in a few simple strokes. And then he overemphasized Bambi’s most notable asset.

“Don’t post that anywhere,” Grace warned. Some people did foolish things on the Internet, and since Dean needed a new job she did not want him to take any chances.

“I’ll make a poster, throw a party for the gang, and we can all play *pin the tail on Bambi*.”

“That’s vengeful.”

“Aren’t you bitter, too, right now? Tell the truth.”

“I’m overwhelmed.” Her problem encompassed more than the loss of her salary, but she would not tell Dean. At least, not yet. Her stomach grumbled. She changed the topic of conversation. “Did you eat?”

“Nah. Nothing vegan here. I got the Chai. They will use green tea, if you ask. I only came in for the WiFi.”

"I'm starving."

Dean scowled. "Suit yourself."

She ordered some cappuccino and a huge, chocolate-chunk cookie. Dean gave her a look of disgust. She commandeered the small table next to him and opened her laptop. By noon, she had posted her resume on several job sites while slowly sipping her cappuccino. She finished off the cookie in a few bites, but it did not alleviate her hunger. She craved a substantial chunk of protein.

A popular, online classified site listed several possibilities and she received a quick reply from one company. As soon as she set up an appointment for an interview the next day, some of the weight on her shoulders lifted. She sat back in her chair and took a deep breath.

Elyse's instant message popped up on the computer screen. *C U l8r.*

U'l b ok? she typed and waited, but Elyse had logged off.

Grace rubbed her forehead. She hoped Elyse had made an appointment with an obstetrician.

One horrible thought crossed Grace's mind and settled like a cold stone in her heart. Would Elyse terminate the pregnancy? Her values differed from those that Grace held dear.

Surely, things would work out for the best.

If only someone had placed a tracking device on Aidan. The baby should receive child support. Unfortunately, Grace did not think he would be a good father. He had not been a good boyfriend, in her opinion, and he'd refused to go near Ulysses. He thought the turtle had salmonella. He might never change diapers, fearing the contamination of *E. coli*.