

# *... Would Like to Meet...*

## **Chapter One**

Malcolm D'Arcy, still nursing a hangover, unlocked the office door and, with a curse, dived for the ringing phone.

'This is Malcolm at Meet Your Match Introduction Agency, good morning, how may I help you?' he said, trying to sound pleasant and friendly.

'Oh...yes...well, good morning...I um...'

'I wondered if you could help me. You see I'm...um'

'Alone, finding it hard to meet nice normal people like you? Believing that you are a failure and coming to a dating agency is a last resort. Let me assure you... what is your name?' he asked, plunging into the familiar script and picking up a pencil expectantly from his cluttered desk.

'Katy,' she said softly.

'Well, Katy, I can assure you, thousands and thousands of people use services like ours to meet someone special. There's nothing wrong with them – it's just that their lifestyles don't allow for them to meet prospective partners socially. Is this your problem? If so...'

'Yes...I'd like to think about this, I'll call back,' she stammered, and put down the phone.

‘Wonderful start, boss.’ Sandra Vine shook the rain off her coat and hung it up behind the door.

‘What did I say?’ He threw the pencil down in a huff and switched on his computer.

‘You pinned her to the wall. And you are the one always telling me to take things slowly, to let clients tell you about themselves etcetera. Had a bad night?’

‘Yes. Bloody yes,’ he grumbled. ‘Coffee, woman, now!’

‘Okay, okay. We are Monday-ish aren’t we? What happened?’

‘Angela is what happened. She wants to get married. Christ! I’ve done it three times. Why can’t women just settle for a great sex life with me and forget the paper work?’

‘Great sex huh?’ With a wry grin Sandra disappeared into the kitchenette to switch on the coffee machine. Bambi, the office junior was late and Malcolm was going to be difficult today. She watched as he glanced in the mirror on the wall, tweaking his hair until it neatly covered the receding line, smirking back at his perma-tanned face. He was close to fifty. Sandra wished he would come to terms with the fact instead of trying to look like Brad Pitt.

The phone rang and Malcolm glared at the offending instrument. ‘You’d better get it, since I’m so incompetent,’ he growled.

‘Good morning, this is Sandra at Meet Your Match Introduction Agency, how may I help you?’

‘Hello’. There was a pause before the caller continued. ‘I phoned a few minutes ago...I read your advert in the paper and I wondered if...that is...I mean...’

‘Would you like some information about the agency?’ Sandra asked gently.

‘Well – yes please. I’ve never done anything like this before, you see and...’

‘May I have your name?’

‘Katy.’

‘Well, Katy, I’m so glad you plucked up the courage to call back.’ Sandra made a face at Malcolm who had thrown up his hands in disgust. ‘Let me start by telling you we are a successful agency because we offer a personal service tailored to suit each client and we do the matching very carefully. Can you tell me something about your situation?’

‘Yes. I’m thirty-three, a widow...Paul was killed three years ago in Iraq...and I’ve a six year old daughter called Jessie.’

Sandra’s heart stirred with sympathy. This was just the sort of client she loved. ‘I’m so sorry. But I’m glad you now feel you might be able to move on, and I’d love to be the one to try to help you.’

‘It’s so hard to meet people, at least, well, you know, men, who don’t try to take advantage, or who could accept Jessie. It’s really quite frightening, so I think I need some guidance.’

‘I assure you, Katy, that anyone you agree to meet has been vetted by us to make sure they are free, single and solvent. We can’t legislate for chemistry because that’s the magical X-factor, but they will have at least some of the qualities on your wish list.’

‘I see. So...what happens next?’

‘If you are interested, I’ll make an appointment to come to see you at home. We visit everyone, which gives all our clients the peace of mind of knowing we’ve met and approved the introductions we set up for them. There’s no pressure to join, it would be pointless. You have to want it.’

‘It will be you who comes to see me – not that other person?’

‘Not that other person, I promise.’ She grinned at a scowling Malcolm.

‘Well, all right then...’

They made arrangements for the next morning and Sandra replaced the phone with a little crow of triumph. ‘Softly softly, catchee monkey, Mr Boss Man. You were too heavy handed for my delicate little flower.’

‘Silly bitch,’ he muttered and went to check his e-mails.’

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Katy Grainger put down the phone and made herself some breakfast. Jessie was safely at school, so now she could relax for a few minutes before going into St.Albans to meet her client. She wandered into her workroom, a bowl of Weetabix in her hand, and gazed round at the mountains of fabrics, half-finished curtains and covers, colour swatches, paint samples and furniture brochures, which were the tools of her trade.

A course in interior design had been her sanity-saver after Paul's death. Her mother had helped care for Jessie while Katy studied, and during the past two years her business had blossomed.

As Katy glanced at her watch, wondering what had happened to her seamstress, the doorbell rang.

'Sorry I'm a bit late, the bus was delayed by road works in Radlett,' puffed Brenda, taking off her raincoat almost before she was through the door. She bustled into the workroom and planted her ample bottom on the chair in front of the sewing machine.

'Shall I finish these curtains and tie backs for Mrs Curtley-Brown first?'

'Thanks, Brenda. I have to see her tomorrow to arrange for the decorators to go in, so I could take them with me.'

'Elegant, these are. You do have a good eye for detail and colours. Sometimes you put things together I would never have thought of, and it works. Suppose it's what they call an artistic temperament.'

'I suppose it is,' she replied, smiling.

‘Did you go out with that young man last night?’

‘Well I went to meet him. His name was Jason – a friend of a friend who was supposed to be a real charmer.’ Katy sighed. ‘Another let down. In fact it was all a bit disturbing. I met him at the restaurant as arranged, but then he said he’d changed the plan; we were going to a club first to meet some friends of his and we would go in his car.’

‘He never did!’ Brenda blew out her cheeks at the very idea. ‘What did you say?’

‘That I wasn’t prepared to do that as I didn’t know him at all, and certainly wasn’t getting into a car with him. He got very stroppy, so I got back in my car, locked the door and drove away. He was furious.’

‘Seems a shame you can’t meet someone nice. With your looks, you should have men falling at your feet.’ She pulled some Regency striped material from a box and began to measure it into lengths. ‘Hold that end a second would you?’

Katy obliged and continued ‘Most of my clients are women and I’m tied at home with Jessie. But you know what? I don’t really expect to find anyone. Jess and I come as a package and I doubt there’s a man out there who would be good enough for her. However, please don’t laugh, but I have someone coming to interview me from a dating agency tomorrow. They meet everyone in their own home, so at least anyone I do go out with has been checked out...but I hate the whole idea really.’

‘Good for you. See if they can find someone for me while you’re at it; someone who likes a cuddly lady who can sew on their buttons.’

‘Brenda, I should think most men would rather have you undoing their buttons than sewing them on,’ she laughed. ‘You’re cuddly, but you’re sex on legs.’

‘Fat legs,’ chuckled Brenda. ‘Fortunately there are some blokes out there who like a woman they can cuddle without the risk of breaking them. Oh, not that I’m suggesting you’re too thin, Katy. You’re just right...what, size twelve, five-seven?’

‘Five-six, with a few stretch marks, thirty-four c cup and the beginnings of a varicose vein.’

‘Where?’

Katy showed her the faintest blue vein and Brenda threw up her hands in mock horror. ‘Paranoia setting in if you ask me. Do you have grey hair, sagging boobs, or a hairy chin? No – well be grateful. Now go and see your new client and let me get on with this lot.’

Katy drove away, confident that her business was in good hands. Brenda had come to her three months before when she could no longer cope with her work load. She had become a friend and ally, willing to do anything from sewing, typing and even picking Jessie up from school when needed.

The traffic was still backed up through the pretty Hertfordshire town of Radlett, so she sat patiently waiting for the lorry in front of her to move. Ever a people-watcher, she let her attention wander to a maroon coloured Jaguar parked on a yellow line beside her, and a traffic warden, with a wide grin on her face, writing a ticket. Just as she slapped it onto the car, the owner emerged from the bank and began to remonstrate with her.

Katy watched as he waved his arms, shouted, scowled and finally snatched the ticket from the windscreen and tore it up.

‘Power-crazed witch,’ she heard him yell before he eased his tall, athletic frame behind the wheel. With a sweet smile, Katy indicated he could pull out in front of her and he had the grace to raise a hand in thanks. She was quietly pleased that he did a rather elaborate double take and gave her a broad appreciative grin.

The traffic crept slowly forward and at last Katy made it to her client in St. Albans. The large, sixteenth-century, terraced house was in the conservation area, not far from the towering cathedral, and the front door was opened by an attractive woman in her late thirties.

‘Katy? Please come in. Mind you head on the low beams. I do hope you’re all right with dogs.’

Before Katy had a chance to reply, a large German Pointer came bounding down the hallway towards her and sat smiling, his tongue lolling happily out of his mouth.

Without bidding he held up a paw for her to shake, which she solemnly took, and narrowly dodged a very wet kiss.

‘He’s adorable,’ she said, stroking his head.

‘Henry, she doesn’t know you well enough for a kiss,’ his mistress reprimanded him. ‘He farts a lot. I am sorry – I’ve tried everything from a different diet to a cork, but he’s just a windy dog.’

Henry demonstrated the point with a long, loud, breaking of wind. Katy smothered a guffaw of laughter and went through to the lounge to sit on the sofa. Henry sat on her foot.

‘Now then, Ms Blaze...’

‘Belle, please. God, it’s an awful name isn’t it – sounds like a porn star, but it’s for real.’

‘Belle...what can I do for you?’ asked Katy.

‘Everything. The whole house needs a re-vamp. I moved in a few weeks ago and had all sorts of aspirations about doing a lot of it myself. But now I just want a professional eye cast over it. It’s sixteenth century, so with all these lovely beams and low ceilings and doors, I really can’t bung a lot of IKEA stuff in here. I have absolutely no idea about colours. I want a cosy home – not a lot of glass and stainless steel, but maybe some nice antiques, restful colours and new carpets. It all looks a bit tired at the moment.’

‘I see – well of course I would love to give you some ideas and a quote for the whole house. Do you have a budget?’

‘Not really,’ Belle shrugged. ‘I will trust you to be honest, but money isn’t too much of a problem. I had a very generous divorce settlement you see, plus an aged aunt left me a bit – so I can indulge myself to a point.’

Another loud beep came out of Henry’s bottom and Katy was forced to cover her nose.

‘Henry, bugger off into the garden,’ Belle said crossly. She ushered him outside and came back. ‘He had beer last night. I went to the pub with some friends and the landlord gave him a pint.’

Biting her lip in case it would have been inappropriate to hoot with mirth, Katy busied herself by bringing in an array of samples of fabrics and colour charts from her car. Belle made some coffee and they sat poring over the materials on the dining table.

A couple of hours later, Katy felt she had a very good idea of what Belle wanted to achieve and promised to let her have an estimate of the cost in a few days.

‘Would you like some lunch?’ Belle asked, stretching deeply as she rose from the chair. ‘Making all those decisions has made me hungry. If you’re going to spend quite a lot of time here, I hope we can be friends and that you won’t be put off by old thunder guts out there.’

‘I’m starving too, so thank you. As for Henry – I think he should be on TV – he’s wonderful.’

‘If smelly. He was Ian’s – my ex. Ian cleared off to America after the divorce and the dog was part of the settlement.’

They took their tuna salad into the garden and sat at a wrought iron table in the sunshine.

‘This is so pretty. A real English cottage garden, and backing onto the River Ver. Look, there’s a Kingfisher sitting on a branch over the water,’ said Katy.

‘I enjoy it out here when I have time – but I need a little man to come and do it for me really. Cutting lawns isn’t my scene.’

‘What do you do?’

‘Design greetings cards and teach art to an adult class at the local college. It keeps me out of mischief and invigorates the little grey cells. You’d think I could design the inside of my own house, wouldn’t you – but I seem to lack the spatial skills to visualise it all in one piece.’

‘Horses for courses; I wish I could paint and draw, but I don’t have the gene.’

‘Do you have kids?’ asked Belle.

‘My daughter Jessie; she’s six and goes to the local church school.’

‘No man around? I’m so sorry; do tell me to mind my own business – I have a nose like an aardvark.’

‘Paul died in Iraq three years ago. What about you?’

Belle stared at her, colour flooding her face. ‘What can I say...?’

‘Please don’t be embarrassed. I can talk about it – well, most of the time. He was on reconnaissance with the Royal Signals and a sniper got him. I thought I might die too when it happened, but I had Jessie and I had to be strong for her. If I hadn’t got on with my life Paul would have come back to haunt me.’

‘I’m sure he’s very proud of you, wherever he is now,’ said Belle, laying a hand on Katy’s arm.

‘Thank you. Tell me about how you came to live here at Kitchener’s Folly. It’s a stunning house and I can’t wait to get started.’

‘I was married to Ian for ten years and we had a very successful business together. It was a small chain of hotels which we bought as run down dumps, renovated, and sold on four years later. Unfortunately he got involved with the manageress of one of them and I was the one to catch them in flagrante. Embarrassing. But, I realised afterwards, a relief. We hadn’t been much more than business partners for a long time. So in the end it was a fairly amicable split and we both moved on. I bought this house six months ago with my share of the proceeds. Now I’d like to find a decent, farty-dog-loving man to share my life with.’

Katy spoke before she had time to consider whether it was prudent. 'I'm joining a dating agency. The woman who interviews everyone is coming to see me tomorrow.'

'Really? What a good idea. Let me know how you get on.'

'Yes, I will. I must go, thank you so much for lunch, and I'll contact you in a couple of days when I've had a chance to put some proposals together.'

'I'll look forward to it, Katy.'

'Me too.'

As Katy drove to collect Jessie from school she felt a bubble of excitement rise through her. This was going to be a lovely contract; one which she was sure would bring her even more work from recommendations if she got it right.

Belle closed the door and wandered back into the kitchen where Henry sat expectantly waiting for his dinner. She shook Woofles into his dish and watched as he gulped them down as if there might never be any more.

Belle had taken an instant liking to Katy and her heart ached for her. Losing her husband in a pointless war seemed such a waste. Her own divorce had been hard enough to handle, even without children. But now at least Katy had her little girl to live for and she was full of admiration for her strength and determination to move on. If only she and Ian had had children, she knew her own life would not feel so empty. But he had made

her put off having babies as they were both so busy working, and then he had left her for a woman she would not have expected him to even look at.

‘She’s passionate, inventive in bed and she loves me.’ He had tried to defend himself. ‘But I’ll finish it you’ll have me back.’

‘Not in this life,’ she had screamed at him.

The ultimate irony had been to discover, after the divorce had gone through, that the tart was pregnant.

Sadly Belle wondered if it was too late for her. At thirty eight she knew the biological clock was ticking, but her yearning for a baby was as strong as ever. She looked in the hall mirror and reflected that she still had her looks with a tall slim frame and dark auburn hair and a fair, flawless complexion. But the slate grey eyes gazing back at her were sorrowful. How would I ever find a man I could trust after being betrayed so badly by Ian, she asked herself?

A few relationships had come and gone, but none of them had aroused more than a flicker of interest and she wondered whether she was now too set in her ways and independent to allow anyone to share her life.

‘Well, Henry, old boy. It could be just you and me. Walkies?’ she said, covering her nose. He yowled with delight as she picked up his lead, and pranced about as she opened the door and headed for Verulam Park. It seemed that day that the only other walkers in the park were young mothers with their children.

‘Maybe I *should* try a dating agency,’ she murmured to Henry as she sat watching the ducks on the lake. He strained at the leash, eager to chase them, but she held him back. ‘Even the birds have young ones.’ Tears slid down her face and she brushed them away and rose to take Henry home.

The next morning Katy rushed around tidying the house before taking Jessie to school.

‘Who’s coming, Mummy?’ asked the little girl, pulling on her school shoes.

‘Just a friend, darling. Ready?’

‘Lunch money today...’

‘Lunch money. Right.’ Hastily she rummaged through her bag, wrote a cheque and put it in an envelope.

‘It’s gym today – where are my shorts?’

‘Shorts...um, tumble dryer – and your tee shirt.’ She pulled them out of the machine and gave them a shake, hoping no-one would comment on the creases. ‘Is that everything?’

‘You know I’m going to Laura’s party after school. Can you buy a card and present before you pick me up?’

‘Card and present...yes, I promise. Now are we finally ready?’

‘Can we have a puppy?’

‘A puppy...what?’

‘A puppy. Oh please, Mummy, I do so want a puppy.’

‘Not at the moment, Jess. They need a lot of attention and I don’t have the time to train it, walk it and clear up the garden.’

‘I’ll do it...please.’

‘No – it’s not up for discussion. Let’s go.’

Jessie managed to squeeze out a few pathetic tears as she climbed into the car and put on her seat belt. Katy hid a smile as she drove down the road, quite sure that one day Jessie would use that trick to beguile the love of her life; for now she was simply practising on her mother.

Returning to the house just as Brenda arrived, Katy decided she had a few moments to fix her makeup and change into something a bit smarter than jeans and shirt, but a car pulled up outside and an attractive, curly haired, power-suited woman of about her own age emerged. She watched as Sandra Vine pulled an attaché case from the passenger seat, looked up and down the road, presumably assessing the worth of the houses, and finally with a friendly smile, walked up the drive.

‘Katy? I’m sorry if I’m early. I always give myself a bit of extra time in case I get lost when I make these visits, but your directions were perfect.’

‘Come in,’ Katy bade her, ushering her into the lounge. ‘I was about to change into something a bit more elegant, but I’m afraid you’ve caught me dressed for the school run.’

‘Please relax – you look lovely.’

‘Tea...coffee?’ Katy asked, aware her hands were shaking.

‘Coffee, thanks. I’ll follow you into the kitchen then we can chat.’

Clever, thought Katy, she gets to check for cockroaches.

‘Lovely house,’ continued Sandra. ‘Have you been here long?’

‘Ten years – from the time I got married. Look, Miss Vine...I don’t think...’

‘Sandra, please. I can tell how worried you are about all this, Katy, and it’s obvious you are wishing you’d never invited me. But let’s just have a cup of coffee, I’ll tell you everything you need to know and then I’ll leave. No need to decide today.’

‘Okay.’

They retired back to the lounge and Sandra removed a brochure from her bag.

‘Now – as I told you, we visit all our clients at home and it’s important we want to work together. If I don’t believe I can help someone, I will say so – otherwise I give myself a problem a little way down the road. So tell me, what do you hope to achieve by joining Meet Your Match?’

‘Achieve?’

‘Marriage, a partner, a social life?’

‘Someone,’ Katy said thoughtfully, ‘I can trust, who will like Jessie. That is the most important thing because she comes first in everything.’

‘Do you have any preferences about meeting a divorcee, a widower...for example?’

‘No. Just someone kind and caring. I had a wonderful husband and I’m sure I can never find anyone like him – but life is lonely. My business and Jessie make it hard to meet anyone in social circumstances. Most of my friends are married or attached...’

‘I understand.’

Over the next half hour, as Katy began to relax, Sandra filled in a form, skilfully extracting the information she needed.

‘I expect you know the fee for the agency.’

‘Yes. Will you take a cheque?’

‘That sounds positive – you’ve made up your mind to give it a try then?’

‘Nothing changes unless you make it, does it?’ she smiled.

‘All I need to do now is take a photograph. As I explained this is strictly for use within the agency. We will send it to other local branches with whom we interact so they have a better idea of you – but prospective introductions never get to see it.’

‘Why is that? I mean I might prefer to check out a photo of someone you want me to meet.’

‘But if the picture doesn’t do him justice you might turn him down. Or, say a man has asked only to meet blue-eyed blondes, but we know perfectly well that someone on our books is a perfect match except for her colouring – he could miss out on the love of his life.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Good. I’ll just get my camera out of the car.’

Katy glanced in the living room mirror and gasped. ‘Oh! What a wreck, can I go and put on some makeup?’

Privately, Sandra thought Katy looked delightful as she was. Her skin was perfect, her dark hair shone and the jeans and shirt were divinely sexy.

‘Not too much slap, please. We want to see the real you.’

‘All right.’

Katy shot upstairs and Sandra fetched her camera, returning to the house in time to bump into Brenda emerging from the kitchen.

‘Hello, you must be the dating agency lady?’ She surveyed Sandra with a critical eye, before giving a nod of approval.

‘We call ourselves an introduction service,’ Sandra grinned, feeling she had passed some sort of vetting process herself. ‘But yes.’

‘She’s joining? I’m Brenda, by the way. I work for her.’

They shook hands. ‘Well...yes, she seems keen.’

‘Look after her. She’s had a tough time. Her daughter is a sweetie too. I must tell you I feel very protective of them both.’

‘Then they are lucky to have such a caring friend. I promise we’ll do our best for Katy.’

With a nod, Brenda retreated to her work room and Katy came downstairs having looped her hair into a spiky bun and applied some lipstick and mascara.

‘Let your hair down, Katy. It’s softer.’

‘If you want...but I don’t want to look too blatantly sexy, if you see what I mean.’

‘All right – I understand.’

Sandra took several photos of Katy on the sofa, by the window with the light shining on her face, and finally a close up which later convinced Sandra her new client could have been a model. Clearly she would look sexy dressed in a bin bag.

Returning to the office, Sandra was relieved to find Malcolm in a better mood than the previous day. He beamed at her as she entered the office, made her a cup of tea and preened in front of the mirror.

‘Okay – tell me why you’re happy,’ she asked, sinking into her chair and clicking onto her emails

‘I’m going to be on TV,’ he told her. ‘It’s a programme about the danger of internet dating and I’ll be there to explain why it’s much safer to use a proper agency – like ours.’

‘Ooooh, lucky you. When is the show?’

‘I have to be at the BBC on Friday morning.’

‘Well, well – Malcolm D’Arcy, TV star. I signed up Katy Grainger, by the way.’

‘Well done,’ he replied vaguely. ‘What do you think I should wear – I’d better get a hair cut I suppose?’

‘Yes, I suppose you had – and top up the tan.’

Missing the irony, he picked up the phone to book an appointment at the tanning salon.

Sandra shook her head in despair.