

THE MARRYING KIND

By Audrey Taylor



ILLUSTRATED BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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By Audrey Taylor

Having just left his parent's house after their customary weekly dinner, Edward Winters was staring out the bus window still feeling upset with his mother. It seemed all the two of them worried about was when he was getting married.

I'm only 28, he thought to himself, hardly ready to settle down yet. Was that so hard to understand? All they wanted to know was, "Have you met the lucky girl yet, son? Haven't you sown enough wild oats yet?"

He was constantly being compared to his two older sisters, "Look how your sisters have settled down, Susan with that lovely pediatrician from Rutland and Joan to that handsome vice president at Parsley Bank. They're already raising their families while you (you bum) just run around with all your wayward women throwing away every last dime you earn. You'll never find contentment that way."

Was it any wonder I was contemplating skipping a few dinners in the not to distant future. It was getting insufferable.

Maybe I will check out that women's story from the other night. She'd been hanging around the pub, looking for men interested in meeting a mate. I'd thought it strange at the time, remembering that she'd left something with the bartender. Maybe I'll check with Chuck later and see what he knows. No harm in finding out, is there?

Chapter 2 A Marriage Proposal

Later that evening while sipping my beer, I off-handily mentioned it to Chuck who almost instantly provided me with the name and number, hardly batting an eyelash, stunning me with his speed. "Let me know how you do," he asked, putting the card away again after I'd taken the information.

"How come you're so interested," I asked.

He smiled at me, "I'll earn a commission if anything comes of it. That's all. No big deal," shrugging it off. I ensured him I'd let him know the outcome, smiling to myself 'that'll be the day'.

Three days later hanging up from another nagging conversation with my mother, I found the number and called Ms. Marian Clark, who quickly arranged to meet me at a bar on Mulberry Street just opposite the duck pond.

Sitting drinking my beer I wondered if I'd recognize her from before, not having paid much attention at the time. Several moments later I watched as a capped lady entered the front door, removing her coat carefully before glancing discreetly around the bar. I

was startled by her attractive appearance, hardly recalling her yet realizing this must be her. Her tight sweater drew my attention as I walked over to greet her.

“You must be Ms. Clark,” reaching out my hand to her. “It's nice to meet you.”

“Ms. Marian Clark,” she announced without hesitation, “and you must be Mr. Edward Winters. It's so nice to make your acquaintance.” Looking up at her I was surprised by her height (must be her high heels) not that I was so big at 5'6". She had to be around forty with a full figure to go with her generous bosom.

She led the way back to my booth sitting in my seat as I took the one facing the wall. After she ordered a drink I asked “Would you mind explaining how this marriage thing works.”

“Before I do, I'd first like you to tell me a little about yourself so I can evaluate your qualifications for my program. There aren't too many people who fit the bill.” I watched her look me up and down already making decisions about my worthiness.

She sat back, drink frequently in her hand, concentrating on everything I had to say. I related how I'd been brought up with two older sisters, never hearing the end of it, especially when Mom would unexpectedly enter my room and throw a tantrum at the bloody mess that surrounded me. Talking about my clerk's position at Karny's department store for the past two years led to my hopes of promotion soon to department supervisor for purchasing all the millinery needs. Soon I was discussing my parents and their disappointment at my not being married. “I can't understand why they're so persistent. It's like they don't really care if I'm happy or not, just as long as I've got a wife. Somehow it would magically relieve some terrible burden from their shoulders.” I shrugged my shoulders conveying my utter frustration with the whole matter.

“Parents can be so narrow minded,” she sympathized with me. “So often they feel they haven't completed their parental obligation until they see all their children happily married and raising families of their own. They don't seem to realize there are other ways to find happiness.”

“Don't get me wrong,” I wanted to correct any misunderstanding immediately. “I have nothing against marriage, it's just that I haven't met the person I want to spend the rest of my life with, and besides, I'm not really ready yet.”

“That's perfectly understandable,” Ms. Clark was so consoling. “The person I'm searching for must be very special. It's really a very unusual match, in that you'll be marrying someone that is quite well off.” My ears perked up immediately. “You'll have to prepare vigorously for several months before you even meet them. And there's always the possibility even after all our preparation, that the two of you won't be suited for each other and it will all be for naught. In that case you would earn a handsome bonus for your time and be a whole lot better off than when you started, I can assure you.”

Her expression was quite serious, “You see we never allow a match to culminate, unless both parties are completely satisfied. Only one time did we fail to complete a match, quite a low percentage for all the years we've been performing this service. Fortunately we were able to make suitable alternative arrangements in her case. It's

important you understand the possibilities so you're not surprised by any later developments. Have you any questions, before I continue?"

"You're trying to tell me that there's no guarantee that everything will work out in the end, is that it?"

"Exactly," she confirmed.

"I was wondering why all this rigmarole was necessary. It seems such an unusual way to go about finding a marriage partner."

"That's what everyone wonders about," causing me to think about the others she had managed. "Let me put you at ease. You see some people are in unusually vulnerable positions, often requiring delicate handling of all their personal affairs. It's extremely important that no gossip or slander be associated with them. Yet they crave like the average layman to participate fully in a loving relationship without having ulterior motives clouding the picture. That's why they come to me, asking me to locate individuals that are seeking a loving relationship without any complications. I assure you, nobody wanting to take advantage of my patrons, ever survives my careful screening process and detailed evaluation." I watched her take a sip of her drink noting her long blonde hair reaching to her shoulders and the glittering diamond earrings reflecting the harsh light of the smoky atmosphere.

"If we decide you're right for one of our current situations then we'll require a signed commitment letter prior to your starting our training program. Even though you must disavow any claim against your future mate's estate, we have found patrons will quite naturally provide for their new mate's welfare without exception."

I sat there fascinated by her story hardly touching my drink until I realized she was finished and waiting for a response from me. I took a deep gulp from my glass, "That's really something. They actually provide for us voluntarily." I was actually picturing myself as a marriage partner. "I'm truly amazed by your service."

"You don't know the half of it," she said. "If I told you some of the crazy criteria that some of my patrons require you would probably die of laughter. One actually requested someone with feet no larger than a size five. Can you imagine? Do you have any idea how difficult it was to find such an individual? But we finally did locate him and easily contracted for his services. That's what I'm paid for. Making sure the customer gets what they want." That sounded so inhuman, I felt a slight shudder pass through me.

"If you're interested I have a detailed application for you to complete. It's important you leave nothing blank. Give it your best effort regardless of how silly the questions may seem. Mail it to me as soon as it's done, so I can check you against my current openings."

I said, "Fine," feeling it was only a silly form. It still gave me plenty of time to consider my options. She reached into her briefcase and handed me a large envelope containing the application. I noticed it was pre-addressed to a post office box at the main post office.

She smiled down at me as she rose to leave, "It was nice meeting you, Mr. Winters. Rest assured that whatever you decide will be fine. I'm only seeking individuals who

truly want to find happiness in a one on one relationship.” Her face grew more serious, “Please take your time and consider all your options. It's important that once you make the commitment you're prepared to see it through. I really don't care to waste my time and energy, to find you've changed your mind at a later date.” She pulled her cape over her shoulders, “And you should know that if you did drop out during the program, you'd leave in whatever shape you're in. We would have no further obligation.” That sounded so ominous.

She buttoned her cape, “Good evening, Mr. Winters” and turned on her heel, leaving me to stare after her listening to the clicking of her heels while wondering what all that meant.

'They must truly be ugly, overweight and ancient,' I thought to myself, considering the kind of woman who would utilize Ms. Clark's services. And also filthy rich. She must charge a pretty penny for her services.

So that's how these ugly old women found mates. Just gave a friendly call to Ms. Clark, with a list of their preferences and a large check in hand. Why would someone want a size five foot? A truly strange request.

When I entered my apartment, I put the envelope on the table leaving it for the morning. In the shower I imagined myself riding in a limousine on the way to the theater, dressed to the hilt with my lovely lady sitting at my side. It's amazing what they can do with makeup nowadays. I could see us walking down the center aisle to our seats three rows from the stage as other people marveled at our presence. Later we'd be shown to a window seat at Martin's, where we would enjoy the romantic view of the river while we dined in bliss.

Maybe she wouldn't be so ugly, I thought before turning out the light and falling into a wondrous night of dreams.

Chapter 3: Is Marriage Really So Bad?

The application had proven troublesome. So many of the questions were asked from a feminine perspective, making them tricky to answer. Like 'When out on a first date would you agree to return to the man's apartment for a nightcap?' I searched carefully for answers hoping to provide the correct one. Ms. Clark must have many male patrons seeking female companions and probably utilized this same application for all situations. She'd been so adamant about leaving no blanks that I found myself continually imagining myself in a woman's role to answer them properly.

One thing about me, whenever I do anything I always strive to do my best. As was the case now, I wanted to be as honest as possible hoping to fit one of her openings. If I didn't, well, that would just be the end of it. And if something did click, I'd worry about that decision when the time came.

It took well over two hours to complete it. I stuck it in the envelope and went to mail it. Walking back to the apartment it dawned on me how I'd actually taken another step towards finding a mate. Perhaps I was more ready than I thought.

I continued to wonder about the woman I'd be marrying. While I was eating lunch on Monday I was daydreaming about spending the day together at her luxurious home instead of slaving away at my dreary job. With all her money we'd probably take frequent trips wherever we cared to go. Returning to my office it became even more appealing when I sat down at my desk to enter a backlog of orders that had been accumulating in my absence.

That evening as I walked to my parents house for dinner, I wondered what Ms. Clark had thought of my application. I imagined my parents surprise at my anticipated news, having no inkling at the time of the monumental shock they would receive several months hence when I ultimately announced my marriage plans.

I was able to handle their comments a whole lot easier this evening, feeling somewhat reassured that I was exploring a direction that would please them. Even if this thing with Ms. Clark didn't materialize, I was definitely growing comfortable with the idea of settling down, so it probably wouldn't be too hard to find someone who suited me. Getting ready to leave, I kissed Mom on the cheek, assuring her I would be settling down soon, hoping to relieve her worry so she could transfer more attention to her grandchildren.

Chapter 4: The Full Proposal

Several days later an invitation from Ms. Marian Clark came in the mail, inviting me to join her at a posh dinner club across town. I guess I must fit one of her situations, I was thinking as I called to confirm that I would be there.

“My driver can stop by your apartment and pick you up at seven,” she suggested. “It won't be any bother. Do be sure to dress properly as we don't want to be embarrassed at the door,” she coyly suggested and I imagined a smirk on her face.

It was raining precipitously when I ran for the limo waiting by the sidewalk, folding the dripping umbrella carefully to avoid getting Ms. Clark wet.

“I certainly picked a damp evening for our dinner,” she offered consolingly. “We do have many details to go over this evening. I hope we don't run into any snags.” She looked at my appearance with some displeasure, noting my frayed shirt and bedraggled suit which wasn't helped by the puddles I'd splashed through on the way to the car. My tie was neatly clipped but I knew it was too thin for current fashion. What did she expect on a clerk's salary? I couldn't see what she wearing since it was hidden by her raincoat.

“I should be able to straighten out when we get to the restaurant,” I apologized not really understanding how I'd already assumed a defensive position to start with. I was determined to find out about the bonus she'd mentioned previously. She couldn't expect my willing participation without some compensation.

The restaurant proved to be elegant. I felt almost impoverished as we entered the main dining room and I saw the many exquisite ladies and gentlemen enjoying dinner. We were seated in a far off corner, with me tucked away in the inside seat, most likely to remove me from as many eyes as possible. We received our drinks while I was deeply absorbed with Ms. Clark's appearance, her immense bosom making it so difficult not to stare, while appearing to study the menu. She was most attractive, for an older woman.

“You look beautiful,” I couldn't resist my compliment as I lifted my glass of wine in a toast.

She smiled her appreciation, joining me with her glass, “Thank you. In time you'll come to appreciate all that goes into earning that particular compliment.” She was so perplexing and I chose not to pursue it. It just didn't seem important.

After we finished our salads, she removed an envelope from her purse and handed it to me. “Put this away for later,” it went in my inside breast pocket as I listened carefully. “As you've probably guessed, your profile happens to fit well with one particular search I've recently undertaken, so I've prepared our standard contract for you to review and sign, at your leisure. Please be aware that there are rules which must be adhered to,” she looked so stern. “Remember the discretion required by my clientele. Once you've read it, if you have questions you may call me.”

She lifted her glass sipping at her wine and I followed suit, before she continued, “Between us we can discuss whatever troubles you, but I must insist that our arrangement remain confidential from here on out. Absolutely no one must know of our con-

tract at this time. I stress 'at this time' since there'll be ample opportunity once your training is completed to announce your wedding plans to the world. But until then, total secrecy is required." The waitress came over and placed our steaming entrees in front of us as my mind tried to grasp the full import of her words. She certainly went out of her way to protect the privacy of her patrons.

The food was delicious and I wasn't quite finished when she began talking again, "I want to make myself perfectly clear about the confidentiality aspects." That again. "Any word leaking out about our arrangement will automatically cancel our arrangement. I'm quite serious about bringing all your questions to me." I'll say.

Over dessert she informed me of her tight schedule wanting me to decide no later than Friday, only two days from now. My signature would have to be notarized and she had to arrange a complete physical prior to the start of my training regime. "Please realize," she was nodding her head, "that if any problems are discovered during your medical exam, it'll automatically end our arrangement. I'm sure you can appreciate my clients wanting prospective partners in only the best of health." She looked intently at me, "There's nothing wrong with you, is there?"

I gave her a sickly smile, feeling somewhat on the spot, "Not that I know of. Only the usual childhood illnesses, you know like chicken pox and the measles. I did have the flu about a month ago, but otherwise I'm in reasonably good shape."

"Good. It should go smoothly," she dug her fork into the apple pie relieved at bypassing another hurdle. I'd already finished my ice cream.

On the ride back to my apartment, we set a tentative meeting for late Friday afternoon so we could execute the agreement and discuss the final arrangements, if all went well. I was starting to feel some anxiety realizing I was actually getting close to signing up. I took a deep sigh, telling myself nothing was consummated yet. But there was a nagging feeling of obligation to Ms. Clark for the time spent with me, wanting not to appear inconsiderate.

Riding up in the elevator I suddenly realized I hadn't found out about the bonus and immediately wrote down the question when I got inside. I was too tired to read the contract, deciding it could wait for tomorrow.

Chapter 5: Decision Day

Going to my meeting with Ms. Clark on Friday, I could feel the butterflies in the pit of my stomach knowing I was fast approaching the point of no return. I'd called her yesterday and we discussed all my immediate concerns and I had been almost overwhelmed about learning of a \$25,000 bonus when I completed my training period. If the matrimonial situation didn't work out, I could keep the money and be none the worse for wear and tear. That sounded quite fair to me.

I carefully studied all the rules laid out in the contract, not really surprised by them, certainly nothing unexpected. That I was obligated to obey Ms. Clark's decisions about my dress and behavior at all times seemed only fair, since they were faced with having to make me into an acceptable gentleman for my future wife. They would make all diet decisions as well as selecting the proper classes I was to attend during 'the makeover'. That's what it was called repeatedly throughout the many pages; 'the makeover'. It sounded like I wouldn't recognize myself by the time they were finished with me. I had no idea how true that would be.

I was dazzled by the bonus I'd be earning and thoughts of never having to work again at my dumpy clerk's job. I assumed I could easily complete 'the makeover' without a hitch. Whether the marriage took place on schedule didn't really concern me that much. They couldn't force me to accept someone I didn't want to, could they?

I signed the contract in front of a bank notary, a Miss Godfrey who was an associate of Ms. Clark. It took all of five minutes and then I shook hands with Miss Godfrey before Ms. Clark took my arm directing me out the door and into the waiting limo.

She had carefully put the contract away in her purse and I'd never even thought to ask for a copy. Well she was the one who had required it. I trusted her, feeling I'd receive my bonus without a hitch, once I completed the 'makeover'.

We got out in front of a brick house, enclosed securely within a steel fence and walked through the gate up the marble steps to a large oak door, waiting several moments for someone to answer the knocker. A stern looking woman who turned out to be Mrs. Kelly answered the door and beckoned us to enter. Ms. Clark walked directly across a wide hallway into what appeared to be the library. I gaped in awe at the extensive collection of leather bound books surrounding us. It was quite impressive.

I watched her put my contract in her desk and lock it before looking at me again and smiling, "Edward, you've made what I would consider probably the most important decision of your life, and I want to congratulate you and wish you much happiness with the balance of your life. I'm sure you'll find that if you put the effort in, the program will go quickly and be quite enjoyable. If you struggle with it or don't try your best, it will only take longer and probably be a whole lot more difficult for all concerned. I hope you'll remember that."

"Here's a list of things you must take care of before your training begins. Three days should allow you sufficient time to accomplish everything," she was looking at the calendar by her desk, "so we'll plan to start next Tuesday, the 24th, if that's agreeable with you?"

I hadn't even glanced at the sheet of instructions but readily nodded my head figuring she knew her business. I was still too overwhelmed by my decision to be thinking very clearly. Only later at home when I read the instruction sheet did I realize how hard pressed I'd be to finish it all by Tuesday morning. As I fell asleep in a mixed mood of euphoria and trepidation I recalled how the maid had brought us tea and curtsied so properly afterward like they must have done in the old days. She'd been very attractive and I wondered if I'd be seeing more of her during my training period.