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Opening Extract from...

Match Me If You Can

Written by Michele Gorman

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There I was one afternoon, wandering down my road, mulling over the wonderful phone conversation my husband and I'd just had with Carolyn and Karl after Robin's birth. 'Isn't it funny,' I thought, 'That two people as fantastic as Carolyn and my husband wouldn't be right for each other, yet they're perfect for Karl and me.' Just as I thought that, my gaze fell upon a bank of recycling bins, and *Match Me If You Can,* about upcycling exes, was born.

So thank you, Carolyn, Karl and Robin, for being such lovely friends and the inspiration for this book.

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Chapter One

Catherine

'What did you say?' Catherine whispered as Richard calmly sipped the last of his wine. Even as her insides churned, she knew her face gave nothing away. Fifteen years of practice with him gave her the kind of composure that poker players dreamed of.

Only this didn't feel like a winning hand.

'I've asked Magda to marry me,' he repeated, this time at least having the decency to look contrite. He glanced around the busy Soho restaurant. 'Kate, you're not about to freak out, are you?'

'Don't call me Kate. And when have I ever *freaked out*?'

Catherine wasn't a freaker-outer, at least not in public. Richard would have known that when he planned his matrimonial ambush. She glared over his shoulder at an empty spot on the wall. Don't you dare cry, she warned herself. He'll only get the wrong idea and then everything will be really awkward. Besides, it was none of his business any more how she felt. She took a shaky breath. 'I'm . . .' She stopped when the word came out squeaky. 'I'm just surprised, that's all. I didn't know you were so serious after only a few months.'

A few months! She'd been with him for years before she'd even left her toothbrush at his place. And now he was getting *engaged* to a woman he hadn't even known for as long as his Waitrose delivery man.

'It was a year last weekend, actually. We went to the rooftop bar at SushiSamba to celebrate.'

'Oh, she's finally legal then?'

Catherine probably had bras that were older than Magda.

'You know,' said Richard, signalling the waiter for the bill. 'Cattiness isn't flattering on you.'

Maybe not but it was better than letting her real thoughts fly.

'Neither is dating someone who has to ask her dad to borrow the car keys.'

'You know very well that she's twenty-three. She's mature for her age.'

'And firm, I bet.'

A whisper of a smirk played around Richard's mouth, despite the fact that she was savaging his girlfriend.

Catherine didn't wish for her twenties back. Just some of their elasticity. Tall and slim, with thick dark hair that dried straight and swingy, her peaches-and-cream complexion and direct hazel eyes all helped her pull off the classically professional look she'd cultivated for so long. She knew she looked good for thirty-six. As long as she didn't stand beside her ex-husband's new fiancée.

He sighed. 'Let's not fight. I wanted you to be the first to know because you're my best friend. Magda has her heart set on a spring wedding.'

'Which spring?' It was early November already.

His closed-lip smile told her it wouldn't be a long engagement.

'That's only a few months away.'

'Please be happy for me,' he said.

His words shifted Catherine's anger off the boil. She could probably be happy for him in time, but just now she wanted to sulk. It was the contrast that stung. When *they'd* got engaged, he hadn't even officially asked her.

'Just don't expect me to be your best man, or woman, or whatever.'

He smiled. 'Magda might find it a bit too twenty-first century to have you handing out the rings on our wedding day.'

His words caved in her tummy again. 'Well, being from the twenty-first century herself . . .'

Richard shook his head. 'We'll work on your congratulations speech, shall we? I'd like us all to have dinner. Magda is dying to meet you.'

'I can hardly wait.'

Some people sought refuge in the arms of a lover. Others enjoyed the warm embrace of a spicy Pinot Noir.

Red wine just gave Catherine a headache and relationships were usually a pain in the other end. Her job was her sanctuary.

It was a short walk from the restaurant to her office in Covent Garden and her thoughts cleared a little with each step. By the time she reached her doorway on the busy little street and politely moved aside the drunk teen she found there, she knew that her reaction to Richard's news wasn't really about him, or them. It was about her.

She'd just assumed that she'd be first to find love again after their divorce. She was the one looking, not him. So how had someone who never made it out of first gear overtaken her on the road to romance? She'd stalled along the way and her roadside assistance membership was out of date.

The office's security door latch closed with a satisfying thunk, cutting off all the noise from the road. As her eyes

swept over her reception area, taking in the colourful oil paintings and the richly patterned overstuffed sofa, the hungry little worm that was wriggling its way into her psyche paused for breath.

Work always did that.

In her office her desktop phone blinked with a message. Should she answer it?

She definitely shouldn't. It was after ten p.m. It could wait till morning.

But the light taunted her. What else are you doing tonight? it whispered. Going home to watch another rerun of *Don't Tell the Bride*? Come on, you know you want to.

She snatched the receiver and punched in the answerphone code.

'You have one new message. Message received at eight fifty-two p.m.'

'Catherine? This is Georgina. Did you mean to set me up with a *dairy drinker*?'

She made it sound like she'd been out with a mass murderer.

'I'm sorry but I can't see him again. The dairy thing is just too weird.'

Well actually, thought Catherine, it would have been weird if he'd shoved a wheel of Brie down his trousers. Pouring milk in his coffee was pretty normal.

But she wouldn't argue with Georgina, even though her client's list of technical requirements made a NASA space launch look simple. If she wanted a lactose-intolerant man who played piano and didn't chew gum, then Catherine would find him.

That was her job, for better or worse.

Matchmakers had it easier before the internet, when clients were just grateful to have a choice beyond their next-door neighbour and the second cousin with the squint.

Now everyone went online, picking out partners like they

did an expensive pair of shoes – they had to fit perfectly and be suitable for the occasion, and be the right height, eye-wateringly beautiful with no sign of wear and tear, coveted by friends and colleagues and impressive to mothers.

Clients like Georgina thought finding love was as easy as ordering from ASOS.

Catherine scrolled through some more options in her database. Georgina hadn't been on their books long but she'd already worked her way through most of their 'A' list. When she'd first signed Georgina as a client she'd seen the stunning, successful, secure thirty-one-year-old as a welcome addition. A woman for whom love was just around the corner. That corner was turning out to be in a maze the size of a football pitch. The dairy disaster was just the latest dead end.

But Catherine hadn't earned her reputation as London's Best Date Doctor (*Evening Standard*, 2014) by giving up. She was a peddler of hope, even when it was hanging by a dairy-free thread.

She could talk to Richard about including the client's world view on ice cream in their Love Match assessment form. But where would that lead? One minute you're measuring gelato love and the next you'd have to sort the toothpaste squeezers from the rollers.

And really, none of that mattered.

If only clients like Georgina would get that through their heads. A partner splurging for dinner or throwing his socks in the laundry didn't make up for jealousy or thoughtlessness or emotional distance. Good grooming was no compensation if your date bored the snot out of you and, at the end of the day, relationships didn't work without that spark anyway.

Despite the fact that she was definitely still mad at him, Catherine found herself thinking of Richard.

Sparks had never been their problem.

He'd made her laugh from the first time they met at uni. By the time classes broke up for the summer holidays he'd been making her laugh for months, as they progressed from shag buddies to something ever-so-slightly more serious. Her spare knickers found their way into his bottom drawer but she didn't stake any claim to his bathroom cabinet or stock her favourite tea in his kitchen. Theirs was a relationship built by stealth over years.

Magda the Marriage-Seeking Missile clearly had a different timetable.

As she chewed over his news in the calm of her office, Catherine knew she didn't mind Richard getting remarried per se. Or even that he'd proposed to someone who probably spoke in texty acronyms (she LOL'd at the very idea). After all, getting divorced was Catherine's fault. Besides, she wasn't in love with him.

It was just that he made it seem so easy with Magda. Where was all the hard work and second-guessing and foot-dragging she knew to be part and parcel of a relationship with Richard?

If it wasn't there, that must mean she'd been wrong. Those things weren't integral to Richard. They were integral to Richard when he'd been with *her*.

That smarted.

It was after midnight by the time she let herself into the quiet house. Eerie blue telly light bathed the front room, where Sarah lay curled on the sofa. She looked like a different person with her expression uncoiled in sleep.

As Catherine turned off the telly, Sarah snorted herself awake.

'I might have nodded off,' she said, wiping her chin with the back of her hand. 'I was watching a proper good documentary just now.'

'You mean a cookery programme, don't you, Sarah Lee?'

Sarah grinned at the nickname that Catherine had given her after tasting her lemon sponge.

'No,' said Sarah, shaking her head. 'I mean a real documentary. There was this Greek man who moved to the US in the 1960s and started a pizza restaurant, but his business was stuffed because he wouldn't modernise. It was really sad. He almost lost his family and his livelihood, but he turned it around in the end. It was ace.'

She beamed at this happy ending.

'You're talking about *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*,' said Catherine.

Sarah giggled. 'It was really moving, though Gordon shouldn't shout and swear so much.'

As usual, thought Catherine, she's missing the point. 'It wouldn't get the same ratings if he was nice. Besides, Mary Berry has the market cornered on loveliness in the kitchen.'

Sarah got a faraway look just thinking about her idol. She swung her long legs off the sofa to let Catherine join her.

'You've been running?' Catherine said, noting her housemate's jogging bottoms and baggy wrinkled tee shirt.

'This morning.' She wrapped her arms around herself. 'I don't stink, do I?'

'No. But I'm surprised you don't get a rash from sitting around in sweaty clothes all day.' It drove her nuts that Sarah refused to make any effort whatsoever with her appearance. Granted, she had the kind of wide-eyed, fine-boned pleasant face that didn't need much make-up, but she wouldn't even use moisturiser. That was fine at twenty-eight, but she was asking for wrinkles by the time she was Catherine's age. And it was a crime to keep such pretty, long dark-blonde hair tied back day and night in a messy, occasionally greasy, ponytail. She needed an intervention, really. Maybe they should just drag her kicking and screaming to a salon appointment.

Catherine noticed that Rachel's bedroom light was on. 'Rachel's back from her date?' she asked.

'Not unless she came in quietly while I was asleep.'

They both laughed at the idea of Rachel doing anything quietly.

'It must be going well,' Catherine said, kicking off her suede heels so she could massage her aching feet.

'Maybe we should ring to make sure she's okay?'

Sarah wore her worry like a heavy winter coat, in all seasons.

'She probably won't appreciate the interruption.'

'But it's getting late,' Sarah continued, her green eyes widening even more than usual. 'Something might be wrong. What if her date's got her tied up in his car? Or his basement, or maybe he's taken her to a remote valley in Wales.'

Imaginative didn't even begin to describe Sarah's thought process sometimes. 'Text her if you want to,' said Catherine.

'But what if he's duct-taped her fingers together? He'd only need one piece for each hand, you know.' Sarah wrapped her own slender fingers with imaginary tape. 'Then she couldn't text back.'

'She couldn't answer your call either, could she? Or he might have thrown her phone in the Thames along with all the other evidence.'

Catherine immediately felt bad about teasing Sarah when she saw her expression.

'I'm positive that she's fine,' she conceded. 'If she's not back in an hour, we'll call her, okay?'

But they only needed to wait a few minutes before Rachel careened into the living room. Her deep auburn hair stood up in wild cowlicks and curls and her teal wool coat was misbuttoned. With pale green tights under her burgundy and yellow wasp-waisted dress, it was no wonder she described her style as 1950s Contrasting Colour Wheel.

She looked like she'd just escaped from Sarah's imagined

Welsh valley, but Catherine knew better. Rachel always looked like she'd been out in a gale.

She flung herself on the sofa, aiming for the space between her housemates but missing due to an abundance of bum cheek. She had all the curves that Catherine and Sarah wished they had. On a shelf together they'd be wooden bookends to her Ming vase.

Sarah drew her arms around her friend as she sat half in her lap. 'It was a good date, then?'

Rachel laughed. 'My bikini wax appointments are more fun. I ditched him after the first drink.'

'But you were out for a long time.'

'I met up with James.'

'You've been seeing a lot of each other lately,' Catherine said.

'Eight hours a day for the past five years. We do work together, remember?'

'And play together, apparently. Still just friends?' Catherine couldn't resist asking.

'Catherine, I wouldn't go back there for all the Prada in Selfridges.'

'It never hurts to ask.'

'It's after midnight,' Rachel said. 'Aren't you supposed to be off duty?'

'As if a matchmaker is ever off duty.'

Chapter Two

Rachel

'You are a really good architect,' Rachel told herself again. 'You are ready for this. You'll nail it.' She studied her reflection. 'But you're a wanker for talking to yourself in the mirror. And your outfit's all wrong.'

She sucked in her tummy and peered at her lilac dress. If she was a little less curvy she could have borrowed something from Catherine's form-fitting monochrome closet. Maybe something in confidence-inspiring beige. Their stuffy corporate clients would probably appreciate that more than her bright swingy frock and loudly contrasting tights.

Not that her clothes were totally to blame for the impression she made. Her hair also had a lot to answer for. Deep red and wavy, it rejected any attempt to look composed. She didn't exactly whisper sophistication so much as shout colour-blind cat lady. And while it was nice to be mistaken for one of the junior architects, today she wished she looked all of her thirty-one years.

She unclasped the chunky red fabric flower necklace and stuffed it into her bag. It clashed with her hair anyway, which was starting to frizz from the damp November day.

Stifling a yawn as she reached her desk, she was tempted

to lay her head down, just for a second. Instead she dialled her mum's office.

By the third ring she knew it would go through to voicemail.

'Hi Mum. I'm just getting ready for my presentation. It's this morning, remember? I just really wanted to . . . Well anyway, I'll let you know how it goes after.' She was about to hang up when she thought she heard a click. 'Hello Mum? Hello? Oh. I thought you picked up. If you get this message before ten thirty, call me, okay? I'll just be going through the presentation one more time.'

Hanging up, she clicked again through her slides. Midway through, the screen began to blur. Just a little rest was what she needed . . .

She opened one mascaraed eye when James set a steaming takeaway cup on her desk. The aroma made her nose twitch.

'I figured you could use this,' he said, handing her a pastry bag to go with her coffee. 'You weren't actually kipping, were you?'

Stretching, she glanced at the wall clock. 'Just a little one. Chocolate croissant?' she guessed. 'Ooh la la.'

'Oui madame, zis eez zee least I can do,' he said in a pathetic French accent. 'Seriously, I'm sorry I kept you out late.' Remorse was written all over his boyish face.

'Don't be,' she mumbled. 'I figured if I stayed up I might be tired enough to sleep. Stupid plan.'

She'd watched her bedside clock pass two a.m., then three, with her mind racing over the pitch this morning.

She sipped the hot sweet coffee. 'God that's good, thanks,' she said. 'You feel okay?'

He slurped the last of his drink. 'No thanks to you.'

'You didn't have to finish the bottle, you know.'

'Oh but I did, Rach. You wouldn't help me.'

Like she'd risk a hangover on the most important

morning of her career. She had the tolerance of a toddler on antibiotics anyway. 'I meant you could have left it unfinished.'

He stared at her like she was insane.

'Sorry. Forgot who I was talking to.' James put the extra pinch in penny-pincher. His guilt must have been overwhelming to splurge on a coffee *and* croissant.

'Better drink up,' he said. 'They'll be here soon. Are you nervous?' His direct blue-eyed gaze didn't leave her face.

She sipped, considering his question. Was she nervous? She used to dream about getting this chance. Now part of her wished she was just a trainee architect again. It wouldn't be so bad doing CAD drawings and photocopying floor plans for the next thirty-five years, right?

Yeah right. Like she'd give up this chance after working her arse off.

'Why should I be nervous? It's only our careers on the line,' she said as the takeaway cup shook slightly in her hand.

He noticed, and put his hand over hers. 'You absolutely definitely shouldn't be nervous. You're going to be great. We both are. We can go through the presentation again if you want?'

They both glanced at her screen. A skyscraper screen saver hid their slides. 'No need. I know it better than the national anthem.'

'You're a star.' James smiled as he strolled back to his office humming "God Save the Queen".

The second he rounded the corner she went back to the presentation. They might be friends but she wasn't about to let a chocolate croissant make her forget that they were also rivals.

* * *

She'd just about got her flipping tummy under control by the time he came back with his suit jacket on. 'Ready?' He pulled at his buttoned-up collar and straightened his tie.

She gurned at him. 'How're my teeth?' On account of the big gap between the two front ones, she always checked.

'Clear. Mine?'

'There's something brown in there.' Rachel pointed as he snapped his lips shut.

Panicked, he took a swig from the mineral water on her desk. 'Better now?'

'It looks like . . . no, must be something stuck in there from all the arse-kissing you've been doing.'

'Really, Rachel?' he said. 'You want to joke right now? My arse-kissing got us this meeting, and it's not over yet. Get ready to pucker up.'

She tried to smile as they walked into the conference room but her lips started quivering when she saw her boss making small talk with their most important clients.

Get a grip, Rachel. As far as they're concerned you're perfectly at ease. They don't know that you've aged in dog years or restarted your nail-biting habit over the presentation. They can't see the uncomfortable crotch hammock that your too-yellow tights are making under your dress.

She took a deep breath, resisting the urge to plunge her hand down the back of her tights to make adjustments.

'Ah, Rachel, James, hello.' Their boss stood up when he saw them. 'Gentlemen, allow me to introduce Rachel Lambert and James McCormack, two of our brightest young architects. I think you're going to love what they've come up with.'

His expression warned them not to prove him wrong.

After work, Sarah yanked open the front door before Rachel could get her key out of the lock. Then she nearly wrestled her to the sofa.

‘Ace, you’re home! Let me take that for you!’ She grabbed Rachel’s giant portfolio case.

‘What are you doing?’ Rachel protested as Sarah wrenched off one of her brogues. In her tiny hands the shoe looked huge and inelegant.

‘You’ve had a hard day, so you need to relax.’

‘And this mugging is supposed to relax me?’

Sarah looked surprised by the shoe in her hand. ‘I want you to put your feet up and I’ll cook for us.’

Rachel grinned at her sweet, impulsive housemate. ‘Thank you. Can I have my shoe back please?’

‘Catherine’s just changing. Dinner’s ready soon.’

Sarah retreated to the kitchen with the shoe still in her hand.

‘Do I have to stay here on the sofa?’ Rachel called. ‘Or am I allowed in the kitchen?’

Slowly she rolled her shoulders, feeling the satisfying tick tick tick of her vertebrae cracking away the tension of the past few weeks.

‘Have you been grounded or something?’ Catherine said as she came downstairs from her bedroom.

‘Sarah stole my shoe.’

Catherine didn’t look surprised. ‘How’d it go today?’

Rachel couldn’t wipe the smile off her face.

‘That good, eh?’

‘Remember the time I got that flight to Prague for twenty-nine pounds? And the hotel lost my reservation and gave me a suite for the price of a double? Today was better. Seriously, I rocked it! The clients loved our pitch. They made all the right noises about letting us present our ideas. I think they’re going to give us a chance.’

She didn’t need to tell Catherine that her design would be competing against James’s. It was all she’d rabbited on about lately.

‘Well done, I knew they’d love it!’ Catherine scooped her up in a hug. ‘You’ve told your mum?’

Rachel’s face felt like it might split in two. ‘She rang me back right after the meeting. She thinks I’m awesome.’

Catherine squeezed her again. ‘She’s always been the president of your fan club.’

‘I know.’ She sat back down, resting her head on the back of the sofa and listening to Sarah mangle pop songs at the top of her voice in the kitchen. As much as she loved going out, these rare nights home were bliss. Their rambling, derelict house was the anchor that held them all steady in London.

Or maybe it just seemed like that. She vaguely remembered the same feeling in Catherine’s old flat. Which meant it wasn’t really the house, but the housemates. They might not spend all their time together like they did in the early days, but she couldn’t imagine her life without them.

It was only because of Catherine’s extra mortgage that they’d met at all. She’d sunk so much money into the new matchmaking business that she’d needed flatmates to help pay back the loan. Rachel and Sarah had been the first two to answer her advert. Rachel was only a junior architect then, who still went home to her parents’ every week for dinner and clean laundry. And Sarah was fresh from uni. That was seven years ago.

And now they had the Clapton house. It had taken blood, sweat and tears to get the money together to buy it at auction. Rachel still cried sometimes, looking at her meagre savings account, but it was an excellent long-term financial decision. Assuming it didn’t actually fall down. As the resident architect, she was the one who had to make sure that didn’t happen.

‘Richard is getting married,’ Catherine said, pulling her from her reverie.