The Bride Hunter

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Chapter 1

First things first. I am *not* a pimp (whatever my mother says).

I know I'm not alone in having parents who don't understand me. Half of my uni friends get lectures from their fathers about 'finding a proper job' every time they go home for Christmas. And these are people who have *proper* jobs: web designers, lifestyle managers, recruitment consultants.

OK, I admit my work is harder to define. Let's just say it was a mistake even attempting to describe what it involved to Mum. The more I tried to justify myself, the seedier it sounded.

So, just for the record. Pimps generally don't live with their maiden aunts in the loft of a Richmond-upon-Thames townhouse while they pay off horrible debts and attempt to save for a deposit on a shoebox-sized London flat. Pimps don't watch old Hollywood weepies or read psychology tomes to increase their understanding of the mysteries of attraction. And pimps never, ever…

'So will you be watching from the sidelines all night? You'll no find yourself a man, if you act like a wallflower.'

'Um, then I'd better join in, I suppose.' I allow myself

to be dragged into the melee by an assertive Glaswegian grandmother.

Where was I? Oh yes. Pimps never, ever attend Scottish country-dancing classes in East London community halls on behalf of an American millionaire who insists that only a Caledonian girl will make his heart sing.

Dwight MacKenzie owes me. Actually, he's already paid me a £3,000 retainer, with even more to be delivered on *completion* of my mission: loose change to my average client, and to be fair, that kind of money is compensation enough for the humiliation about to be inflicted on me by octogenarians in kilts. Money can't buy you love, but if you're a multi-millionaire, it'll definitely buy you a helping hand.

The hall is as cold as a Scottish castle, though considerably less picturesque, and my fellow dancers fall into three categories: gnarled old men with bony knees and threadbare socks; stout matriarchs with polyester cable-knit cardigans and determined expressions; and younger girls who keep peering at the door, perhaps expecting Bonnie Prince Charlie to come bounding in to rescue them. The only man under fifty in the whole place is *terribly* light on his feet and looks to me like the guy who put the gay into the Gay Gordons.

My new dance partner is one of the matriarchs. Her complexion matches her crimson jumper and she's very round and very short, like Mrs Pepperpot. As she takes my hands, her wiry grey bun only reaches my nose – and I'm five foot five.

'Normally you'd be the man, eh, hen?' she says, then

smiles. 'But I think I'd better lead because you're new.'

'OK,' I say, as the music begins and she begins to propel me forwards. Did I mention that I have two left feet? Still, I can't stand in the way of true love.

'Don't tell me,' she says, 'you're after your very own *Braveheart*?'

'Um. Well, not quite.'

'Or maybe your own Renton?'

'Renton?'

'From *Trainspotting*? Now, maybe all the drugs and vomit were a wee bit strong, but Ewan McGregor has plenty going on under his sporran.'

'No, I'm not after him either.'

She pushes me away, gives me a hard stare, and then pulls me back towards her, in time to the music. 'All I'm saying is, English girls never come here unless they're searching for their very own Scotsman.'

I wonder what she'd say if I told her I was after a Scots*woman*? I decide on a little white lie. 'OK. I admit it. Though I'm really after my very own Sean Connery.'

She grins. 'Huh. If you find one, hands off. Been waiting for one of those all my life.'

I'm beginning to warm up nicely now, what with all this jigging and reeling. Well, more jiggling than anything, if I'm honest. Country dancing and C-cup boobs aren't a match made in heaven. 'So, I wouldn't be the first to come here looking for a male piece of skirt, then?'

'Oh no. But the English lassies rarely stay the course once they realise most of the men are older than Edinburgh Castle. The Scottish girls are made of stronger stuff.' She indicates the three youngest women in the

room, each one in the grip of a knobbly partner. 'Came for the men first of all, but stayed because the dancing's in the blood, see?'

I crane my neck to assess the women's Dwight-potential. Number one is pretty and willowy, with letter-box red Celtic curls, a fantastic smile, and good teeth. I'd guess – speculating wildly here, but what do you expect of a girl whose dream career would have been writing the quizzes in *Cosmopolitan*? – that she has a good heart to go with them. However, she fails to meet Dwight's needs in one crucial respect: he's definitely not the tallest American in London, so she'd tower over him.

Number two is shorter, but has porridgy caber-tosser's arms. Dwight might be a born romantic, but he's also a body fascist, buffed to perfection. He's already rejected two charming actresses I spotted in *Macbeth*, simply on account of their dimpling. I think it's part of my job to encourage my clients to broaden their horizons a little, see the potential for love in unexpected places, but these men are used to getting what they want, whether it's an Austin Martin Vantage in just the right shade of red, or a sirloin steak in just the right shade of blue (it's no coincidence that most of my go-getters like their meat borderline raw). And ultimately I do agree that true love should never involve compromise.

The third girl has the perfect body, but it's enclosed in a skin-tight yellow leotard, accompanied by matching kids-from-*Fame* legwarmers. Even her hair is a frightening shade of bottle-blonde. The overall effect is all the more alarming as everyone else is wrapped up warm, and though I admire her stoicism, I don't think Dwight

would appreciate her rigid nipples. He is very keen on *modesty* in a woman, not least because his Californian ex-wife left him for the aerobics teacher who taught the advanced pole-dancing class on Sunset Boulevard.

'Ouch!'

My dance partner yanks my arm so hard it nearly pops out of its socket, and I attempt to copy the others as they half-trot, half-skip towards the centre of the hall in time to the frantically cheerful music.

'Your mind seems to be wandering, hen,' she says. 'Very high-risk when you're new to this.'

And with that she flings me away, towards an old man in a purple kilt. As his rheumy eyes focus on me (specifically, on my cleavage), I sneak a look back and see Mrs Pepperpot winking mischievously.

'Well, hello, my dear,' he pants as he clamps long, wizened fingers around my waist. 'I'm always *so* pleased when we have new blood. My name's Sean, by the way. As in *Connery*.'

'I'm Rebecca,' I mumble, as his moist breath condenses on my neck, 'Or Becca to my friends.'

'Oh, I definitely want to be your friend,' he says, tightening his grip.

I have no qualms about fending off men my own age, but there's something unseemly about slapping down an octogenarian with octopus hands. And I'm convinced he knows it *and* plans to take full advantage.

The things I do for love...

After ten long minutes of poking, groping and general harassment by sleazy Sean, I am deeply relieved when the

dance teacher announces a short comfort break. I have to make a split-second decision: take tea and shortbread petticoat tails with the grannies, and pick their brains about eligible granddaughters, or follow the three girls into the ladies' loos.

I choose the latter. The toilets are freezing, but at least Sean can't follow me inside.

Caber-Tosser and Letterbox Hair are primping in front of the mirror, so Chickpea Nipples must be inside a cubicle. They look up as I enter the room.

'Hi.' I give a little wave.

They smile back. Caber-Tosser speaks first. 'I see you've survived trial by our very own Loch Ness Monster.'

I nod. 'Shouldn't that be a Lech-ness Monster?' Rule One of Matchmaking: use humour to create rapport with potential matches.

Letterbox frowns. 'Oi, that's my granddad you're talking about.'

Shit. So much for Rule One. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean…'

Chickpea emerges from her cubicle, dazzlingly yellow like a cartoon superhero. *Killer Nipple Girl*, maybe, or *Wonderbra Woman.* I begin to sweat slightly. These three are quite intimidating in a confined space.

But then she grins. 'Take no notice of Lorna. She's winding you up. We've all passed through the wandering hands of that old bastard. It's like an initiation test. You passed. So welcome to the club.' She holds out her own, impeccably manicured hand. 'I'm Carole, by the way.'

Caber-Tosser takes her cue. 'And I'm Tina.'

'Becca,' I say, as I mentally match their real names with the nicknames I have given them. When you meet thousands of potential date candidates every year, you need tricks to ensure total recall. 'So have you all been coming for ages?'

Chickpea Carole nods. She's clearly the leader of the pack. 'Uh-huh. Couple of years. I came because I loved dancing back home in Scotland. And these two came for the men.'

Letterbox ... no, what's her name again? Lorna, pulls a face. 'Yeah, and what a disappointment that was. But we keep coming because it's a laugh.'

Tina with the fat arms finishes applying her lip gloss. 'Did you know that Scottish country dancing is one of the best activities for promoting a sense of well-being?'

'No, really?' Actually, that's a lie. It was one of the main reasons for coming. After exhausting Scottish theme pubs and London branches of the Tartan Army in search of likely females, not to mention my disastrous encounters with the dimpled ladies of *Macbeth*, I read a piece in a psychology magazine about how country dancing is better than Prozac for positive mental attitudes. And Dwight is intimidatingly positive himself.

'Oh yes,' says Lorna. 'It's the concentration, you see. And the rhythm. You can forget yourself while you're doing it. We're addicted.'

'Mind you,' Carole says, as she straightens her bra so her chickpeas are perfectly aligned under her leotard, 'it may also have something to do with the fact that we end every dancing session with a few drinks in the pub. You can come along, if you like...'

Thank you, St Valentine! See, matchmaking is all about networks. 'You're on. So long as the Lecherous Monster isn't invited?'

Carole shudders. 'Now that is not funny. Not funny at all.'

By the time we get to the Ring o' Roses, a neighbourhood boozer about ten minutes' walk from the hall, the happiness effect is definitely rubbing off on me. I love this about my job: meeting new people, entering weird new worlds.

The only cloud in my jig-induced blue sky is the lack of bridal candidates. Dwight is not the most patient of men, and his response to my standard 'you can't hurry love' line was 'why the hell not?' Dwight is the ultimate in what I call a Marriage-Ready Man: solvent, motivated and horny. The moment I find a woman who ticks all his boxes, he'll be up the aisle in a flash.

Then I see her. She's sitting in the corner, waving over my three companions, and I follow them, my fingers crossed behind my back. As we approach, I think myself into character as Dwight, working my way through his checklist of essential requirements…

Petite – check. She's as tiny as Clare Grogan. I'd hazard a guess that her waist–hip ratio is spot on the 0.67 blueprint that's appealed to men since the Stone Age.

Cute – check. She has elfin features, and light brown hair curled into a sweet bob that frames her pointy face.

Young, but not too young – check. Couple of years younger than me, maybe. If I had to guess, I'd say twenty-five.

But then I panic. The fatal flaw in my assumptions here is a pretty fundamental one: why on earth would my three country dancers restrict themselves to Scottish friends? The chances are she's English or Polish or…

'And this is our new recruit.' Carole pushes me forward as she explains that I've come along for a restorative drink after my ordeal by groping. Pixie smiles – oh, Dwight would melt in the warmth of that smile – and holds out her childlike hand.

I shake it. 'I'm Becca Orchard.'

'Welcome to the gang, Becca. I'm Heather Campbell.'

Bingo! Love–thirty to the Bride Hunter.

Chapter 2

'...So her name is Heather, her accent is an American's fantasy of a girl from the lochs, she grew up surrounded by horses and dogs and, get this, she even works for an animal charity. She couldn't be more perfect!'

My aunt Georgia passes a cup of espresso through the sash window, and then limbos through the narrow gap on to the tiny balcony. It's twenty years since she wowed ballet critics with her debut as the Dying Swan, but she still has enviable poise. 'A completely flawless creature, eh? I wonder where she's hidden all the dead bodies?'

'Oh, come on. I might just have hit the jackpot this time, Georgie.'

She closes her eyes to savour the spring sunshine, before moving her chair into the warmest spot. 'True. Though it might be perverse of me, I can't help hoping she has at least one terrible habit or skeleton in the cupboard. Otherwise she'd be dull, dull, *dull.*'

'Your trouble is you've lived in London too long.'

'And yours,' she says, sprinkling precisely three *grains* of sugar into her coffee, 'is that you still have the innocence of a country bumpkin. And that will be your undoing, like Little Red Riding Hood in the wicked forest.'

'But my innocence is precisely what my gentlemen clients want, Georgie. They're so cynical themselves that they've lost all hope of finding a girl who doesn't want them for their money. If I got hard-nosed too, stopped believing I can find the ruby in the dust...well, I'd be no use to them. They'd be better off taking their chances among the she-devils and gold-diggers in nightclubs or on the Internet.'

She smiles indulgently. 'Oh, OK. Stay a born romantic if you like. See if I care. What does your silly old auntie know, after all?'

My silly old auntie knows: how to score a table at The Ivy (or Hakkasan or Claridges or whichever is the hottest hangout this week); how to get to the head of the waiting list for the new season's Balenciaga bag (though she finds being on any waiting list 'distinctly degrading, Becky, like those women who had to queue for stale bread in Moscow in the days before they came and bought up half of Chelsea'); how to tell if a man is a mere Platinum card-holder or an Amex Centurion owner *just from his socks*; how to buy contemporary art; how to get upgrades *everywhere*; how to dance *en pointe* and how to shift a stone in a single week.

Not that she ever carries so much as an excess ounce of weight. At forty-five, she still fits into the clothes she wore at seventeen. What's more, she can get away with them, because she's always dressed with what magazines call *timeless elegance*: fluid fabrics in cream and white and black, cut to accentuate her slender body, but still draping to suggest sensuality, despite her boyish physique. She saves the drama for her make-up: indelible scarlet

lipstick bought from a Parisian pharmacy, and cat's-eye kohl in whichever colour is most fashionable this year (currently turquoise). She made me up once, but I looked like a circus clown. I inherited her thick chestnut hair and her good ankles, but everything in between takes after my mum: the practical, slightly curvy shape of a farmer's wife. If I didn't love Georgie to pieces, I'd be insanely jealous.

I could never have started my business without her. In fact, without her, I'd probably still be in Gloucestershire, married off to the monosyllabic son of a travelling animal-feed salesman, breeding merrily like my big brother. Not that there's anything wrong with that life, but I'd rather be sitting on a balcony overlooking the Thames and the beautiful people, than sitting in a barn overlooking dozens of moody cows tethered to shiny metal machines by their horrid grey-pink udders.

When I was a little girl, Georgie was a messenger from another world, opening my eyes to a life beyond the milking parlour. On her rare visits to the farm, it was as if a giraffe had suddenly popped up in the barn, a creature with the same number of limbs and eyes and ears as the rest of us, but one thousand times more exotic. She moved like leaves in the breeze and smelled of Chanel 19. At the age of eleven, my mum's baby sister had been transplanted from an unheated cottage in the grounds of the smelliest pig farm in the county, to the eighteenth-century splendour of the Royal Ballet School's White Lodge in the heart of Richmond Park. The first time she saw it, she says, she felt like a character from a Jane Austen novel. Funnily enough, there was no going back.

'You've taught me all I know, auntie, that's for sure.'

'Ah, dear Becky, if only if were true. But thank you for saying so.' She pokes her walnut-brown legs through the ornate bars of the balcony, her feet shrouded in lilac Chinese slippers, as always.

For years, she refused to let me see her below the ankles: 'Precious niece, there is nothing, but nothing, as ugly and disenchanting as a dancer's feet.' She only agreed when I threatened to take up ballet myself, unveiling the damage as a warning. They weren't *ugly* as such – nothing about Georgie could be described as ugly – but they were shocking all the same; misshapen and mangled as a labourer's hands, and so incongruous on the extremities of the nearest person to a goddess I'd ever known.

I drain my coffee, then stand up. 'I have to go and get monochrome.'

'Oh Lord, the City is so tiresome at this time of year. It's as if they're terrified of being sacked if they so much as don a pastel tie. So who are you fixing up today?'

'It's my *secret* one, remember? First face-to-face meeting.'

'Ah. Hence the dullsville clothes, eh? Well, *bonne chance*, Agent Cupid. Don't blow your cover.'

As the Tube train begins its descent, I feel my identity disappear, along with the daylight. I used to make this journey twice a day, and I don't quite know how I managed it without going crazy. To live in London had been my greatest ambition, but when I first got here, the thing that shocked me most about the place was how little

sunshine I saw, and how soon I became ghostly, and indistinguishable from the rest of the commuters.

Today at least my anonymity is tactical: the more I look like everyone else, the more likely I am to pull off this undercover mission. With most of my clients, I allow myself a little leeway in my dress and behaviour. I wouldn't dare do full-on Barbara Cartland, but a pink blouse (it makes my eyes look greener) and maybe my favourite Victorian butterfly brooch (never, *ever* a sickly heart) are enough to suggest my softer side. My clients are the kind of men who surround themselves with the sharp-edged, platinum-and-mahogany trappings of mega-wealth, so a little frill goes a long way.

But in the case of Edward Lincoln, head honcho of the Overseas Opportunities Fund of Anemone International, I must be as colourless as every other city wannabe. Because Edward has no idea that he's being match-made. And I still have no idea whether I'm even willing to take the assignment on.

I get off at Temple, the business end of the Thames, a world away from the beer-and-rowing stretch at Richmond. I walk up Fleet Street, into the heart of the City. The pavements are deserted: at eleven o'clock, anyone who matters has been at their desk for at least three hours, probably four. I don't miss the presenteeism any more than I miss the commuting.

OK, so maybe I'll admit to missing the adrenaline, the borderline psychotic sense of purpose that fizzed around the offices of Benson Associates. OK, so any sense of *common* purpose was an illusion: we'd have fought each other for the last biscuit in the communal kitchen, never

mind a lead that could have helped us increase our commission. But we *felt* like we were in it together, doomed soldiers in a fox-hole, and that's one feeling I can't reproduce on my own in my office-cum-bedroom in Georgie's loft.

Get a grip, Becca. You hated it! I shake my head at my own weakness, and a street cleaner gives me a strange look. No use indulging in misplaced nostalgia. It's not as though I had a choice about leaving my job, and there's no way I'd go back to it. Not even if Marcus Benson got down on his knees and begged me...

The image is so implausible – Marcus, begging anyone for *anything*. Marcus, risking damage to his Armani trousers – that it makes me giggle. I have to count to a hundred before I'm calm enough to enter the icy reception of Anemone International.

I take the lift to the fourth floor: Edward's floor. My latest husband-to-be is one of the smartest guys in his field, with a Tomahawk missile's ability to hone in on an undervalued company, but apparently no track record whatsoever with the female of the species.

'Hi, I'm Rebecca Orchard, from Orchard Occupational Psychology. To see Edward Lincoln?' I always use my full name for work, to seem a bit more heavyweight. I hand my card – cobbled together over the weekend on my laptop – over to the receptionist. Nine times out of ten, the girl on the front desk tells you all you need to know about a potential client's taste in women...but if this one's anything to go by, he likes middle-aged matriarchs with Peter Pan collars and hairy moles. Makes a pleasant change.

I think I might quite like Edward Lincoln.

But his situation does present me with something of a moral dilemma. After two years as a head-hunter, when my morals were tested on a daily basis, I swore when I started up on my own that only the whitest of white lies were permissible to assist the course of true love. That's why I don't mind fibbing to the country dancing brigade. It's harmless and plausible: after all, if I hadn't taken a lifelong vow of singledom after the Benson affair, there's no reason why I wouldn't have been looking for Mr Right in a Skirt.

And compared to the whoppers we told in my head-hunting days, it's nothing. My colleagues would happily pretend to be an A&E doctor calling about a target's child, or a clap-clinic nurse calling with test results, all to evade overzealous secretaries. Another reason why I wasn't sorry to leave that behind...

Edward's case, however, is borderline in the morality stakes. I wouldn't have considered it at all if I hadn't already matchmade Perry Todd, his posh, plump and follicly challenged boss, with Idoia, an adorable Spanish mosaic artist, in one of my first bride-hunting expeditions. Last week he asked me for a 'fun, informal coffee' (as if there's any such thing in the City) and revealed his dastardly plan.

'Thing is, Rebecca,' Perry told me, punctuating each sentence with a bite of Danish pastry, 'Got this chap. Good chap. Going places. Brainy as fuck. One problem. No woman. No sign of a woman. No sign even of interest in a woman.'

'Might he not be gay, Perry?'

Perry shook his head. 'Considered that. No. Comes along to lap-dancing at Christmas and special occasions. Responds in the – ahem – appropriate manner. Sorry. Truth is, he's a numbers chap. Not much conversation.'

I decided not to press the gay point. 'Well, I'd be happy enough to meet him, discuss whether he's interested.'

Now Perry looked shifty. He even put down what remained of his Danish for a second. 'No. No, you see – how do I put this...? Delicate one. Not sure he quite realises the importance of a wife. To his career. Done OK so far but a man can only go so far with odd socks and egg down his tie.'

I nodded. I'd seen Perry's attitude a million times before: senior partners who were happy to conduct one-night stands with half the girls in the office, but would block the promotion of anyone who hadn't got hitched, on the grounds that only a wife could guarantee *stability* and *family values*. 'So?'

'So. My suggestion. Um. Look, Rebecca. I really want this chap as my number two. But the board won't even consider a bachelor. So I wanted to hire you. For him.'

'Very generous, I'm sure, Perry. But he does need to agree.'

Sulky frown lines appeared in the florid skin of his forehead. 'Oh, does he *have* to? I mean, straight away? Sure, it's the tiniest bit unorthodox. But it's for his own good.' His face took on a moony look. 'Idoia's transformed my life, you know that. Is it really so wrong? To want to do the same for Eddy the Plank?'

I stifled a smile at the nickname. 'Poor bloke. But I don't think...'

'Go on. For me? Only talking about leading the horse to water. Up to him whether he decides to take a sip at the fountain of womanhood. Oops. Sounds a bit rude!'

'He may just be happy single, Perry. Have you thought of that?'

Now he looked baffled. 'No one's happy single, Rebecca. All a pretence. Meant to go two-by-two, like the ark. Speaking of which, how's *your* love life?'

I shouldn't have said yes. In fact, I'm not actually sure I did *say* yes, but once he hit my Achilles heel, I had to change the subject somehow and before I knew it...

'Miss Orchard? I'm Edward Lincoln.'

Eddy the Plank stands before me in full, awkward glory. I'd rather assumed he'd be a stout toff like Perry, but instead he's tall and slim. Forty-ish. Fair hair, pouty lips, flushed cheeks. You wouldn't look twice at him in the street (unlike his boss, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Toad from *Wind in the Willows*).

But it's immediately obvious that Edward Lincoln lacks the love and attention of a good woman. The hair's too long, an undisciplined fringe hiding his eyes: from the few glimpses I get, they're a striking blue. His trousers are too short (though at least his Betty Boop socks do match), and his shirt has that 'fresh from the packet' look.

Despite standing at least six foot, he reminds me of a labelled-up WW2 evacuee still waiting to be billeted, after all the cuter, rosy-cheeked children have been snapped up.

'Call me Rebecca. Thank you for making the time to see me,' I say, smiling briskly and offering my hand. He shakes it, hard, and leads the way to a characterless office overlooking a grimy yard.

'Not as though I had much of a choice, is it? Perry never takes no for an answer,' he says. He has a soft Northern accent. Yorkshire, I think: I recognise it from the trips to the County Shows I used to go on with Dad when he was trying to make a name for our Double Orchard Farmhouse cheese.

'Well, I'll try to be as brief as I can.'

He scowls, but it doesn't seem to be directed at me. 'No. Sorry. That was rude. You're only earning your living. Not your fault that bloody Perry's got this daft idea in his head about workplace culture. He reads too many management magazines.'

I cough. 'It's only an initial report. To see what we could do for you...all of you, that is. Not you in particular.'

He makes an effort to smile. 'So what do you want to know?'

'Um...' This shouldn't be too difficult. In a previous life, before I met Marcus Benson at a student party and allowed myself to be whisked away to a life of head-hunting and corporate expense accounts, I was planning on becoming an occupational psychologist. Unlike the rest of my family, I had no interest in livestock but the human animal has always fascinated me. 'Well, my role is to find out how Anemone works, really. Not how the systems work – your profits suggest the systems are working pretty well. So I'll be taking the temperature of the place, if you like.'

'And where are you sticking your thermometer?' he says, deadpan.

'Well, down on the farm, where I come from, we tend

to use the business end,' I say, taking a risk that he has a sense of humour, beneath all that hair. 'But here in the City, you know, people tend to be more genteel.'

He chuckles, and it transforms his shy, stern face, just for second, before the defences come back up and the crosspatch expression returns. 'Put it this way, Miss Orchard, um...Rebecca, I'm happy with the business end if it gets the job done more quickly.'

In that second, I decide I *do* like Edward Lincoln. What's more, I know I can help him. With a bit less scowling and a bit more chuckling (and a fringe-trim), I could find him a hockey team of gorgeous girls who'd love the chance to choose his socks. But I have to believe that he wants that as much as his boss does. 'Righto, Mr Lincoln. To the point then. As a senior manager here, you must realise that your own attitudes and interests set the tone, the *culture* of the workplace. So I'd like to ask you a series of questions. Try to respond without thinking too much, there are no wrong answers. First of all, what do the words "work–life balance" mean to you?'