

9. THE HUSBAND FARM

Cheryl has seen countless movies mocking dating services. It really isn't her style to waste her time with loser guys who figure that they can just buy the ideal wife. Besides, she feels that she is meeting enough men in her daily life. So what if none of them are quality. That only makes her feel superior to all the dating bull shit. But an appeal from Stevie has Cheryl reconsider her referral to a match-making service.

"This is different, Cheryl. A friend of mine from school is one of the owners. The clientele are very select. You won't be disappointed."

From the beginning, she believes Stevie. Samantha is the representative of the service. Rather than filling out a questionnaire, she conducts an interview with Cheryl. It's more like getting a job. And the atmosphere is completely casual. Cheryl actually thinks something productive might come from the session.

"I know the bad reputation that dating services have. Cheryl, let me assure you that we're completely different. It not as if we're simply trying to pawn off our candidates on unsuspecting clients. We actually do our best to find someone who is a real match for you. That's why I work to get to know our clients."

Cheryl is still hesitant, "This was never really my idea."

Samantha works to comfort her, "So many of our clients say that to me. It's so that they don't appear desperate. But this is not at all about desperation. It's more about intelligence."

Cheryl likes that approach right off.

"I'm willing to try it," she is trying to sound conciliatory.

"The purpose of the interview is so that we can get to know you as a friend. So it's like one friend offering advice to another."

Cheryl finds that Samantha is understanding.

"Stevie told me that you were in the business program at State. I was actually there for a couple of years before I transferred to UGA."

"Yeah. I really liked the program. It gave me the confidence to start my own business."

"We've got a thing in my family for UGA. I just had to go. While I was at State, I worked and saved some money. It made things easier for me when I got to Athens."

Samantha shares more of her story, "I thought about going away to college. I just didn't have enough money. Even with the Hope scholarship."

"How did you manage to get the business going?"

"I had help from friends. They thought that it was a great idea. So they helped me get a bank loan. It also helped that my partner is from a well-to-do family."

"So what made you decide on a match-making service?"

"I don't see it as match-making. It's more of personal networking. I looked around, and everyone seemed so frantic about meeting someone. I wanted to take the guess work out of the process."

Cheryl wants to stay positive about the process. She still has misgivings. "I'm just not sure!"

"Either am I. We never can be. We just have to work to eliminate the risks. That was my motivation. I work hard to screen our candidates. If someone isn't right, I don't take them

on. Some people need to work on themselves before they seek others for a relationship. It's like preparing for a job."

"I wish it was that easy."

Samantha passes Cheryl's number to Darren. She also faxes Cheryl some information on him. He seems like a real catch. A successful investment banker. He calls her and invites her to his favorite restaurant. She is impressed when he picks her up in a red Lexis sports car.

At dinner, Darren engages her in a discussion about the relative appeal of California versus French wines. He orders a Cabernet Sauvignon.

He passes the glass to Cheryl, "Here taste it."

She smells it. The bouquet is overwhelming. "It's so sweet."

"Yeah, it is lovely."

"Let me order one for you."

"Thanks, Darren."

She can feel the alcohol start to affect her. She is letting herself get a little carried away. Darren has a cute smile. She finds it irresistible. She takes a bite of her salad. The tang of the avocado strikes her. The dressing has a full body and enhances the flavor of the salad.

"This tastes great."

Darren informs her, "It's a special recipe. I love eating here."

"I guess it's your own secret."

He smiles, "I want to keep it that way."

She smiles back, "I won't tell anyone." She realizes that he is kidding.

The waiter brings her the entree. It is a delectable piece of salmon. The juices drip from her lips as she sinks her teeth into the tasty morsel.

"This is so moist. It tastes fantastic. Does this stop?"

"Hardly. I've got a great piece of chicken. What a sauce!"

"Do you cook yourself?" she wonders.

"I love to cook. I just don't get much time with work and all. Some evenings, I am able to get home a little early. When I'm not too tired, I don't mind making a little mess."

Her taste buds are already in heaven. He offers her dessert. She warms up to the mocha cake. It is a luscious treat with the flaky cake replete with the coffee and chocolate flavor. It almost makes her unconscious with its wave of flavor. She is in heaven.

They both sip after dinner liqueurs. She enjoys the almond flavor of hers. It is too much to take.

He describes how he attended Wharton Business School. He has a total nonchalance about his character. He managed to land a job in investment banking in New York.

"I loved the fast-pace. It was everything that I dreamed of. But I still wanted something else. Maybe peace of mind. That's how I got the job down here."

"Do you like Atlanta?"

"I love the weather. But I'm still adjusting."

His casual air makes this a natural home for him. But maybe he is wilting a little in the summer humidity.

Darren seems like the perfect catch. What could be wrong? Cheryl can't figure it out. She is waiting for the invitation back to his place. She still doesn't feel ready for any of this. It

just seems too soon since Robert. Darren reminds her of Robert. She needs time to make sense of it. She doesn't have to make it all happen tonight. There's still time.

She begs off of going back with him.

"I'd love to. But I feel a little tired. All that food has made me sleepy."

Maybe the meal was too good. But it is a timely beginning for the both of them. When he drops her off, he reaches over to give her a kiss. She is so taken by the meal that the attraction is overwhelming. She settles back as his charm overtakes her. She can barely catch herself before surrendering completely.

As she closes the door of her building, she is determined not to look back at him. Once inside her apartment, she lets the excitement of the evening swirl around her. She wants to call Trish. But it is too late to disturb her. Cheryl's story will have to wait. Just thinking about it is enough to send her in fits. She can hardly sleep. She still doesn't want to believe that this is for real.

"You didn't invite him up for a cuddle?" Trish asks.

First thing in the morning she is telling Trish the story.

Cheryl defends herself, "I needed to be safe, not sorry."

"There are ways to deal with that kind of thing."

Cheryl is more circumspect, "It's not that easy to patch a broken heart."

"Come on, girl, you're a little more wily than that."

"Let's just say that I was under the influence."

Trish has a suggestion, "We'll talk about this at lunch."

Trish wants a burger. Cheryl's not a big meat eater. She's downing another salad.

"Thanks for meeting me for lunch. I want to hear all the details."

"I'm still trying to catch my breath."

"Another one of those."

"A little bit of a superman."

"You didn't let the man of steel get that close," Trish challenges her.

"I just want to be sure."

Trish takes a big bite out of her burger. She isn't holding back.

"I'm going to have to sink my teeth into him if you don't take care of it."

"A little envy at my success."

Trish challenges her, "Just trying to light a fire under you."

Cheryl is a little shaken up. "Now I feel all this pressure to make something happen."

"You should have just let things happen. Now you're going to have to force it."

Cheryl is cautious, "That's what I'm afraid of. But he's such a natural. I really have nothing to worry about."

That is just the problem. There is really nothing that she can do to resist him.

Cheryl confesses, "I think that I'm under the spell."

Trish has her own remedy, "There could be worse things. You have to learn to enjoy life. You have too much of conscience. It's going to come back to haunt you."

"I'm just trying to be myself. Although I suppose that's too late." Cheryl realizes that it's still her game. She has to use it to her advantage. She still hasn't given in to Darren.

He's planned dinner for her tonight. In a sense it feels like a terrible deadline. How has

she reached this point. It's supposed to be fun for her.

She can barely concentrate at work that afternoon. The pressure is growing on her. She only has to relax. But she hates to admit the expectations that he has imposed.

When she meets him, she wonders if she has let her own fears get the best of her.

"My car had to go in the shop. I hope that you don't mind if you pick me up."

"No problem at all Darren."

She meets him at the dealer.

He informs her, "It's a new car. There was something weird about the steering. I felt that I should get it looked at."

"I'm glad that I could help. Where to?"

Darren complements her, "That dress looks great."

"I was worried that I wouldn't have time to change."

"I'm glad that you did. Thanks again for picking me up."

"No problem."

Without his car, Darren seems a lot less formidable. All Cheryl's worry now seems silly. She can't reason why, but something about his magic is also gone. He's still the same attractive guy. All his attributes are still there. He just doesn't have that charisma that impressed her the other night.

They go to a restaurant of Cheryl's choosing. Suddenly, he seems to be just a fussy eater.

"I didn't know that they had a restaurant in the mall."

"It's a great place, Darren."

He tries to hide his resentment. This time it's not his choice. He scans the menu and then makes a funny face. Cheryl tries to cheer things up.

"It really is good."

He pretends to make the best of things, "I'm sure that it is."

"I don't really eat out all that much. This place is always worth the trip."

"I guess I'm a little bit of a snob when it comes to putting things in my body."

"All the ingredients are fresh."

He pretends that she has taken him to a chain.

She continues, "They've even found a quaint part of the mall for their location."

"Indeed they have."

She tells him, "You'll feel great after you've ordered and had a drink."

"I'm sure that I will." He is already acting as if he is poisoned.

Cheryl orders shrimp with rice. Her meal is remarkable. Darren is playing with his food.

"My beef is full of gristle. I'm having trouble chewing it."

"I usually don't order the beef. But Stevie loves it. She's the one who told me about this place.

She is gritting her teeth just trying to make it through the meal. He is making it nearly impossible. She wants to berate him for his behavior. That would only make him more irritable. She tries to ignore his discomfort.

"I hate it when you go out with someone, and they don't understand what you're going through."

She works to agree even though it is obvious that he is criticizing her, "You're so right."

“It helps to be up front with your friends.”

“Friendship is the most important thing in your life.”

“I can’t agree more,” she wonders if her happy face is saving the evening. She hardly feels the same that she did the night before. She wonders if she may have rushed things by going out with him right away.

She starts to believe if she drinks a little more that it will make it easier to get through the meal. She decides to get as tanked as possible. Then she realizes that she’s driving. Fortunately she is eating.

“I need some water,” Cheryl blurts out.

She has her glass filled after she has already drained it. The wine is still staring at her.

“I think that I may have had too much wine,” she tells him.

“You seem fine.”

Cheryl asserts, “I am driving.”

He thinks that she’s a little saucy. He finds her appealing. This contrasts with her misgivings. His behavior is only making it worse.

He confesses his thoughts on life to her, “A man has only so much good sex time if you know what I mean. After those years, he’s nothing. I just don’t want any of it to go to waste.”

She can’t make sense of what he just said. He’s really giving her the creeps.

Later he suggests, “I know a great place to go dancing.”

“I don’t think that I’m going to manage. I got a little upset while I ate. Just too much to drink on an empty stomach. It went to my head.”

He is trying to make up for his earlier boorishness, “I bet you look great hen you’re dancing. That dress really makes you look sexy.”

“Thanks, Darren. I’m just not in the mood.”

He starts to seem a touch belligerent.

“It’s just too early to go home.”

“I can drop you off somewhere if you want.”

“No. I just don’t want to end this now.”

“We’ll do it another time when I’m in the mood.” In fact, she can’t wait to get home. This has been an unmitigated disaster. The confines of her apartment are going to seem welcome when she closes the door.

He is sulking. She wants to punish him like a little child. It’s a feat just to get him back to his place.

“I’d like you to come up. I can make you a drink. We can watch a movie and get to know each other.”

Cheryl has already got to know him too well already. She doesn’t want to give him another chance to embarrass her.

“You look really hot tonight. Come up and relax.”

“I’m already a little tipsy. And I’ve got to drive back to my place.”

He is insistent, “If you can’t drive back, I can let you crash on my couch. No strings.”

He is desperate. She just wants to get away, “I’ve got to wake up early for work. I’ll call you later on.” She has not intention of calling him. But she just wants to shut him up. She gives him a hug. He tries to kiss her. She won’t let him.

She protests, "I've got to go." He reluctantly gets out. As soon as he is out of the car, she speeds away. She doesn't waste a second checking to see if he had his key. She just wants to rush home. The drive seems endless. She feels that she is wasting her life away driving. All those commutes down 400 in the morning. It is hopeless.

When Cheryl opens the door to her apartment, she can think about nothing but a long shower. She tosses her clothes on her bed. She lets the water run hot. It is so numbing. She lets go under the constant stream. She believes herself lucky to have escaped with her life. It gives her the creeps to think about him crawling all over her. She pretends that she never met him. In fact, it was just a few short days ago, and he had nothing to do with her life. Now, she prefers to back up and head down the other path of her life.

Cheryl breathes a sigh of relief that she finally got away. It would have been sheer torture to have another meal with him. In bed, he would be a horror. He keeps telling her how she should move, where she should place her hands, and how she could satisfy someone who had little conception of satisfaction.

She makes herself a cup of tea. She is a little afraid that it might keep her up longer. But she has already felt such fatigue that little can disturb her sleep. When she shuts her light and heads off to sweet dreams, she thanks her stars that he hasn't entered her inner world. She pulls the covers over her head. The world is just perfect for Cheryl.

When she awakens the next day, she is hardly thinking about the night before. She has an important client at work. She has to think about her presentation. Numbers, number, numbers. That's all that matters. She loves her work because it gives her the chance to put her private life away. She can live solely on her own accomplishments. That makes her sail through the day.

She is able to leave work early. She wants to stop by the store and see Stevie.

"Stevie, I tried to make it work. The first night was just so. I don't know how to describe. But then it all turned sour. I felt as if I was drinking spoiled milk. Just trying to make it go down."

"I called Samantha after you saw her. She really worked hard to get you a good match."

"That's the problem. He looked perfect on paper. But he was just this cardboard cutout. When I got him up close, I found out that there was nothing behind that perfect image."

"Are you sure that it wasn't a bad date. Trish told me about how you were raving about him."

"I was. But I'm glad that I didn't give in to that feeling. I really would have been screwed."

Cheryl is sitting on a chair and looking at the neatly arranged store. It speaks volumes about Stevie's life. She wishes that she could walk into a perfect world. Everything on the shelves. But it isn't working out of her. Not yet.

"When Sara challenged us, I think that I took it as a wake up call. I've already dumped Robert. And I'm not having very good luck."

"You're being impatient. I think the challenge is doing that to you. You have loads of time. You don't want to waste your time with a guy who's not right for you."

"How did you luck out with Josh."

"I have no idea. When I first met him, I hated him. That's why I'd think about giving Darren another chance."

Cheryl is slumped over her chair.

“In another life maybe. I learned my lesson. He was at dinner, and he was sulking. Think what he’d be like in a real crisis.”

“He has a great job. He knows how to be charming..”

Cheryl tells her, “He also knows how to be a dick. That’s all that I saw yesterday.”

“We all have our bad days. Look at you today—you seem all tired out. One little push and you’re in the cranky zone.”

“Thanks, Stevie!”

“I didn’t mean it that way. I’m trying to cheer you up.”

“I don’t think that I need cheer.”

“How about a drink. We’ll stop by the Anchor.”

“I need to hibernate for a few days. Just think about what happened.”

“Samantha said that she’d have other guys for you if it didn’t work out with Darren.

“What’s going on with her? Is she giving you a cut or something?”

Stevie smiles, “You’re going to have to go through a lot of frogs before you kiss a prince.”

“I’m allergic to frogs, thank you! And if that’s what I have to do to meet a guy, then hello single life!”

“Don’t you get to meet guys at work.”

Cheryl has her own answer, “When I close the door on my office, I don’t want to look back. What happens at work stays at work. I don’t want to bring my problems home.”

“Maybe you need a puppy.”

“I think that I need a good night’s sleep. I am going to turn in early. Just a movie and then sleep.”

She had left her phone in her car when she went in to see Stevie. The last thing that she wanted was to have to answer the phone while they were talking. She gets back and notices that she has missed 3 calls. Trish has called and Darren has called twice.

She checks her messages. Trish wants her to come out and drown her sorrows.

She listens to the message, “Hey lover, I got you message. That date turned into a real clinker for you. Too bad. What are you doing tonight? Let’s go get some drinks.”

Darren’s invitation seems more insistent, “I’m going rollerblading after work. There’s still some good light. Meet me at Piedmont.”

He also has left another message, “ I don’t know whether you got my first voicemail. I’m going down to the park—Piedmont. I know how much you like to rollerblade. Get your skates and meet me down here.”

She wants to call him back before he makes it down there.

“Hey, Darren.”

“”Cheryl, great to hear from you. I had a great time last night.” She feels tortured just listening to him. She feels that she is drowning in his obsequious tone.

“I’m all tuckered out. A long day at work.”

“Come meet me. I’m already here.”

“I wanted to get you before you drove down there.”

“The dealer was so close to the park. And I thought that I’d just head down Ponce. My

skates were in the back.”

“I can’t make it.”

“You’ll have a great time.”

“Another time. I’ll call you. Maybe tomorrow.”

She needs to get off the line before she makes any more promises. What the hell is he thinking?

Cheryl rings up Trish. She is glad to hear a friendly voice.

“I got your message, Cheryl. I guess hearts are made to be broken.”

“I don’t think that it really went that far.”

“How far did it go?”

“A little too far for me. I wish that I had never made that second date.”

Stevie tells her, “You had no way of knowing.”

“Actually, that’s the thing that frightens me the most. I’ve got to turn on my radar to detect creeps.”

“But you told me what a wonderful guy that he was.”

“I know, I know. I have to work on that. I already make plans to marry a guy before I realize that he is the stalker from hell.”

“Oh well, at least you got out of that one easy.”

“I just talked to him about going roller-blading. Hold on a second. He’s calling back.”

Cheryl switches over to Darren. “Hey, Darren.”

“Last chance to get over to the park.”

It’s hardly urgent for her. She can go to Piedmont on her own.

“Thanks, Darren. Not tonight. I’ll be in touch. I’ve got to run. I have Trish on the other line.”

She switches back, “Trish, that was him. He wanted me to meet him now. I told him no way.”

“You want to go have a drink at the Anchor?”

Cheryl sats, “I need a long bath. And to curl up on my couch and watch a movie.”

“You know where I am if you need a sympathetic ear.”

When Cheryl gets home, she shuts the world out. She turns off her phone. The evening will be just her time.

The next day she turns on the world again. She checks her messages. Her friends are checking up on her. And Darren has left two messages.

The first seems innocuous, “I had a great time at the park. It was such a mild day. I wish that you had made it down here. Next time.”

The next bothered her a little.

“I tried to call you. But I missed you. It’s really late. And you’re not answering. Is something wrong? I’m afraid that you might have been hurt. Or worse. I wish that you wouldn’t do this to me. You should have called if you were in trouble.”

She decides to ignore him. She’ll get to her friends at lunch time. She turns off her phone when she’s in the office. It’s all business today.

That evening she notices two more messages from Darren.

“I called you during the day. I guess you might be at work. Call me if you get a chance.

I just want to make sure that you're OK. I was worried after last night."

What is he talking about?

She plays the second message, "I know that I must have sounded weird in the other messages. I'm sorry. It's been a tough couple of days at work. I know how well that we hit it off. I know that you want to see me again. It's probably just a bad time for you. Give me a call, and maybe we can get together tonight."

Cheryl talks to her friends on the phone. Tonight is another night to stay in. She is slowly back to her cheerful self. She decides to go to the gym. After working out, she cools down in the pool. She also has a massage. By the time that she gets home, she is ready for a light dinner and bed. She'll let loose on the weekend.

Before going to bed, she checks her messages. Darren has really gone to town. There are five long messages.

"Hi, this is Darren. I got off work early today. I hope that we might play tennis. Or do something together. You were a little distracted last time we got together. You seemed a little scattered yesterday when we talked. I really wanted you to meet me in the park. I thought about you when I was skating around. I often do that when I meet a girl that I really like. I really do like you a lot. I can tell that you feel the same way. I know how it is with women. They are afraid to express themselves when they first meet a guy. I'm not like that. I'm always very honest. I know that I told you that I like you. But call me."

His next message is a little more frantic, "I hope that you got my last message. I don't want you to be mad at me. I might seem a little too anxious. It's my job. It's a great day today. Two in a row. I feel so poetic when I'm out here. I don't want to put any pressure on you. I'd just love it if we'd get together. I need you to call me before it is too late, and we have no time to do anything else."

She's seen this kind of thing in movies. That guy in *Swingers*. It was so embarrassing that she had to cover her ears. Guys who seem to be answering themselves in conversation. Who don't get it. She doesn't want anything to do with him. Not after this.

She plays the next message, "I'm sorry if I'm coming over as desperate. I'm not. Girls really dig me. My last lover really got along well with me. You could call her if you like. I mean we broke up a few months ago. And I've been seeing a lot of woman since then. I hope that doesn't bother you. But I'd really love to hang out with you. You're the most intelligent girl that I've met in a while."

Cheryl tells herself that she's intelligent enough to stay away from Darren.

She is a little entertained now that he has no chance, "Cheryl, I feel that we're meant to be together. That's what the dating service told me. That we could even be great marital partners. I'm not proposing just yet. I had that same problem with Janine. That's who I used to go out with. But you and I seemed to really hit it off. I know that may be mad at me. That's why you're not calling me back. But I'm not mad at you. I forgive you for anything that you may have done. I feel that I know you. And down deep you really like me. You just don't realize how much. Call me."

She wonders if he can get any worse. At least, he hasn't threatened her.

She listens to the last message, "This is the last message that I'm going to leave. I know that you're ignoring me. I don't know what I've done. It may be you. Something that you've

said. I can forgive you. I'm that sort of guy. I'm not mad at you about it. Just call me. I can explain it all away over a drink. We can have a great time. You can come over to my place and see what a normal guy I am. Please call me back. Remember that this is the last time that I'm going to call you!"

"Thank God," Cheryl says to herself.

She calls up Trish during lunch. "That guy just went psycho on the phone. Sometimes I think it's a danger to have voice mail. It gives crazy people a chance to think that they're getting through to you."

"He doesn't have your email."

Cheryl breathes a sigh of relief, "Thank goodness. I hope that I've heard the last from him."

"He really believed that the dating service was ordained by God."

"The man is off a few degrees, Trish."

Trish is much less accepting, "I'd say quite a few degrees off. You need a new scale for a guy like that."

"I think that he's already trying to smother me with his love."

"Killing you softly."

After work, Cheryl heads over to see Stevie.

"Samantha dropped Darren from her client list after she heard what happened. He wanted his money back. But she convinced him otherwise. She said that it was lucky that you didn't get a restraining order on him. That shut him up."

"I really thinks that he's harmless. Just a little misguided."

Stevie is more cautious, "I'm glad that you can feel so safe. If it was me, I certainly would be a little frightened. He knows where you live."

"He's also a respected business person. He's not going to risk his reputation over something like this."

"He wouldn't be the first."

"I think his run in with Samantha will make him realize that he's got out of hand. Then he'll just let it go."

Stevie tells Cheryl, "Samantha says that she has some other guys for you."

"I really think that Samantha is a great girl. I know that her service is perfect for some women. It's just not right for me."

Cheryl stays in another night. She's planning to meet all her friends tomorrow night. On Friday, Cheryl doesn't hear a word from Darren. She's convinced that his calls are over. He's gone back to his cave wherever that may be.

"I didn't think that he was going to be that off his rocker," Cheryl offers the final verdict to her friends. Diane is coming back to the table with shots for all of them.

Diane has the blessing to offer, "Sara heard about your problem. She made a special drink for all of us. It makes you forget whatever's bothering you."

"It's one thing to forget Darren. It's quite another trying to forget why I went to the husband farm in the first place."

Stevie is quick to defend herself, "Sam is a friend of mine. She helps women who need it. There's a lot of jerks out there."

Cheryl has her own take, "I know that Samantha has a good heart. I'm talking more about myself. I'm pretty vulnerable to that sort of thing."

Diane joins in, "I think we all are. It's just hard to get the right kind of hybrid."

Trish admits, "I was never that good at biology."

"I'm just afraid of these freaks of nature," Cheryl is more to the point.

"Stevie, how did you manage before we had a husband farm?"

"Trish, I just picked out a guy from the pumpkin patch. You know the old-fashioned way."

They all laugh.

"That's why it always ends up like Halloween."

"Diane, you're more cruel than I am," Trish acknowledges.

"I think that you have to wear a mask just to protect yourself. It's a weakness to tell a guy who you really are." Cheryl has become more cynical.

"We're not that spiteful, are we?"

"Stevie, we can't all be like you."

"Or like you Diane. I don't know if any guy can ever fight the heart inside the tin woman," Trish fires back. In fact, Trish wishes that she could be like Diane. She really tries.

Stevie is a little more down to earth. "Trish, I know how hard it is when you wear your heart on your sleeve. Especially with so many guys tugging on that sleeve."

Diane has a natural knack of letting it all slide off her. But Trish seems to take it all to heart. She feels that this resentment is only setting up a showdown between the two of them. Cheryl's ordeal has been the perfect distraction. But it has only made all the girls more competitive.

Stevie has tried to play the peacemaker. She's just too far out of the action. In some ways, her influence may be making it worse. She is only reminding the three of them what they are missing. That only makes it harder as they feel that they have to push themselves just to catch up.