

Well, that's a first.

And I'm not talking about the fact that I brought a date to a wedding I'm pretty sure didn't warrant me a plus-one. I'm talking about grabbing a wedding card that just so happened to say "Congrats, Mr. & Mr." on my way to celebrate the nuptials of the most iconic heterosexual couple since George and Amal. This—and a king-sized KitKat bar from the checkout lane—is what I get for rushing through the greeting card aisle in Target while my Uber driver waited in the loading zone with his f lashers on.

It's Monica and Danny's big day. She's my coworker, whose gorgeous face is constantly lining the glossy pages of *Luxe LA* magazine. Not only because she's one of the leading ladies at *Forbes*'s new favorite company, The Influencer Firm, but because this socialite-turned-CEO is now married to Daniel Jones—head coach of the LA Galaxy, Los Angeles's professional soccer team. If you're thinking he must look like a derivative of an American David Beckham, you're basically there. Let's just hope their sense of humor is as good as their looks when they see the card I accidentally picked out.

Before I place it on the gift table, I stuff the envelope with a crisp hundred-dollar bill fresh from the ATM. Side note: I think wedding registries are bullshit. Everybody wants an ice cream maker until you have one and never use it, which is why I spring for cold, hard cash instead. I grab a black Sharpie marker from the guest book table, pop the cap off, and attempt to squeeze in a nondescript *s* after the second "Mr.," hoping my makeshift, hand-drawn serif font letter doesn't stick out like a sore thumb. I blow on the fresh ink, then hold the pseudo Pinterest-fail an arm's length away. *That'll do*, I think to myself.

I lift a glass of red wine from a caterer's tray as if we choreographed the move and check the time on my Apple Watch, which arguably isn't the most fashionable accessory when dressing for a chic summer wedding. But aside from the fact that it doesn't quite match my strapless pale yellow cocktail dress, it serves a much greater purpose for me. It keeps my data front and center, right where I want it, not on my phone buried somewhere deep in my purse. Bonus: the band, smack-dab on the middle of my wrist, also covers a tattoo I've been meaning to have lasered off.

Other than telling me the time, 7:30 p.m., it also serves up my most recent Tinder notifications. I've gotten four new matches since this morning, which isn't bad for a) a Saturday, since most people do their Tindering while zoning out at work or bored in bed at night; and b) a pushing-thirty New York native whose most recent relationship was the love-hate one with a stubborn last ten pounds. That's me, by the way. Charlotte Rosen.

Though present and accounted for now, the battle of Tide pen vs. toothpaste stain went on for longer than I intended back at my apartment, causing me to arrive about half an hour late to the cocktail hour. Which means I for sure missed Monica and Dan's ceremony in its entirety. I,

of all people, know that's rude. I'm someone who is hypersensitive to people's arrival tendencies (well, to all measurable tendencies, to be honest; more on that later). But I'm sort of glad I missed the *I Dos*, as there is still something about witnessing the exchange of vows that makes me a little squeamish. I got married five years ago and, well, I'm not married anymore—let's put it that way.

The good news is that with time, I can feel it's definitely getting easier to come to things like this. To believe that the couple really will stay together through it all. To believe that there is such a thing as "the one"—even if it may actually be "the other" that I'm looking for this next go-round.

Late as I may be to the wedding party, there are some perks to my delayed arrival. Namely, the line at the bar has died down enough for me to trade up this mediocre red wine for a decent gin and tonic. Another perk? Several fresh platters of bacon-wrapped dates have just descended like UFOs onto the main floor of the venue, which happens to be a barn from the 1800s. Except this is Los Angeles, and there are no barns from the 1800s. So instead, every creaky floorboard, every corroded piece of siding, and every decrepit roof shingle has been sourced from deep in the countryside of southwest Iowa to create the sense that guests are surrounded by rolling fields, fragrant orchard blossoms, and fruiting trees. The reality being that just outside the wooden walls of the coveted, three-year-long-wait-list Oak Mill Barn stands honking, gridlocked traffic on the 405 and an accompanying smog alert.

As I continue to wait for my impromptu wedding date, Chad, to come back from the bathroom, I robotically swipe left on the first three guys who pop up on Bumble, another dating app I'm on, then finally decide to message a guy who looks like a bright-eyed Jason Bateman (you know, pre-*Ozark*) and is a stockbroker, according to his profile. We end up matching and he asks me for drinks. I vaguely accept. Welcome to dating in LA.

I've conducted some research that has shown that after the age of thirty, it becomes exponentially harder to find your future husband. What number constitutes *exponentially*? I'm not sure yet, but I'm working on narrowing in on that because generalities don't really cut it for me. Thinking through things logically like this centers me, calms me, and resets me—no matter what life throws my way. All that's to say, I'm officially in my last good year of dating (and my last year of not having to include a night serum in my skin care regimen), and I'm determined not to wind up with my dog, my roommate, and a few low-maintenance houseplants as my sole life partners.

"Sorry that took so long," says Chad, returning from the men's room twenty minutes after leaving. "Did you know the bathroom at this place is an actual outhouse? Thank god it was leg day at the gym—I had to squat over the pot. My quads are burning nice now."

Confession. I didn't just bring a date to the wedding, I brought a *blind* date.

No worries, though. Monica knows how serious I am about the path to Mr. Right and supports the fact that I go on my fair share of dates to get me there quicker. Plus, he isn't a total stranger; she knows him—or, she *met* him, rather. He attended her work event last week

at the LA County Museum of Art and is supposedly this cute, single real estate something or other. Of course he tried to hit on her and, unlike most beautiful people in Los Angeles, Monica actually copped to being in a committed relationship with Danny. (Who doesn't like to brag they're marrying Mr. Galaxy himself?) So she did the next best thing and gave him her single coworker's Instagram handle and told him to slide into my DMs. It's a bold move on her part, but I appreciate her quick thinking and commitment to my cause, Operation: Reclassify My Marital Status.

Since Chad first messaged me a week ago, I've done my homework on him. And I'm not talking about just your basic cyber stalking. I'm talking about procuring and sifting through real, bona fide data. It's essentially a version of what I'm paid to do for a living—track down all the “influencers,” people with a lot of fans and followers on the internet, and match them to events we plan for our clients so they can post on social media and boost our clients' profiles.

Some may think my side-project software, the one that computes how much of a match I am with someone, is a bit...*much*, but I don't see it that way at all. I'm on the hunt for a man who is a true match for me—one who won't just up and leave in the blink of an eye. I left things up to fate once and look how that turned out. I'll be damned if I do it that way again.

While I studied up on Chad, I conducted a hefty “image search,” yielding about a hundred photos of him that have been uploaded across a variety of social platforms over the years. In real life, I'm pleased to say he checks out. Chad is over six feet tall, tanned, and toned, with coiffed Zac Efron hair that's on the verge of being described as “a bit extra.” From the shoulders up, he's an emoji. A walking, talking emoji. But as I step back and admire him in his expertly tailored suit, he looks like a contestant on *The Bachelor*. In retrospect, Chad is just the right amount of good-looking to complement my physical appearance, which can be described as a made-for-TV version of an otherwise good-looking actress.

“Something to drink, sir?” one of the caterers asks Chad.

“Yes. A spicy margarita. Unless... Wait. Do you make the margarita mix yourselves? Or is it, like, that sugary store-bought crap?”

Eek. I had forgotten my discovery that Chad is a bit of a...wellness guru. I guess so is everyone in LA, but I can't help but be taken aback when I hear that there are people who actually care about the scientific makeup of margarita mix.

“Fuck it. Too many calories either way,” Chad announces before giving the waitress a chance to answer his question. “I'll just take a whiskey.”

“Splash of Coke?”

“God, no. So many empty calories.”

With his drink order in, Chad rolls his neck around and pops bones I never knew existed. Then, one by one, the joints in his fingers. The sound makes me a bit queasy but I'm trying to focus on the positive, like his beautiful hazel eyes and the fact that cherry tomatoes and mini mozzarella balls with an injection of balsamic vinegar are the latest and greatest munchie to hit the floor.

Chad turns to me with a smile, his palm connecting with the small of my back. "Should we find our seats? What table are we at?"

*Good question*, I think to myself. *I'm* at table six. Chad is...on a fold-up chair we will have to ask a caterer to squeeze between me and Monica's great-aunt Sally? I kind of forgot to mention to him that I didn't really get an official okay to bring him tonight.

"Table six," I say pleasantly with a smile.

"Six is my lucky number. Well, that, and *nine*, if you know what I mean," Chad says with a wink accompanied by an actual thumbs-up.

The waitress comes back with his whiskey neat, and he proposes we clink our glasses in a toast to meeting up as we make our way to the table. Still not over the lingering effects of his immature, pervy *sixty-nine* joke, I reluctantly concede to do the cheers with the perpetual high-schooler.

"So, what did you think of Monica's event?" I say to break the ice as we take our seats at the luckily empty round table.

"Well, I don't really know what she does for a living, but she *is* fine as hell. I mean, that's why I hit on her last week at the LACMA. Sure, I saw the ring on her finger, but couldn't resist saying hi to a goddess like her. My god, that woman is something else."

I nod in agreement. Partly because, yes, Monica Hoang needs her own beauty column in *Marie Claire*, stat. And partly because I'm too shocked by his crass demeanor to really do or say anything else. Did I say Chad reminded me of a contestant on *The Bachelor*? I think I meant he reminds me of a guy who gets sent home on night one of *The Bachelor*.

"She said you're a real estate...attorney, was it?" I awkwardly segue. "What's your favorite neighborhood in Los Angeles?"

It sounds like I'm interviewing him for a job, which in a way, I am. But had I known the conversation was going to be like forcefully wringing out a damp rag, just hoping to squeeze out something semidecent, I would have never invited him to join me at the wedding. In fact, I likely wouldn't have gone through with a date, of any kind, at all. Conversation skills rank high on my list of preferred qualities in a mate. Looks like he's the exception to the rule that attorneys are good linguists, because my app sure as shit didn't predict this fail.

So how does my software work, then? Well, it's all about compatibility. My algorithm is programmed to know what I like and what I'm looking for in the long term. So to see if a guy is a match, I comb through his online profiles, enter the facts I find out about him, and generate a

report that indicates how likely he is to be my future husband or how likely we would be to get a divorce, for example. One of the most helpful stats is how likely we are to go on a second date. I've determined that anyone scoring above 70 percent means that chances are good we'd go out again. And, well, a second date is the first step to marriage. You get the point. Anyone below a 70, I ignore and move on. Chad pulled a 74, which is a solid C if you're using a high school grading system. Not stellar, but certainly passable with room for improvement.

As it's turning out, there's a lot of room for improvement.

"Huh? I'm not in real estate," he says with a confused look on his face.

"Oh, Monica said you were an attorney at Laird & Hutchinson?"

"Well, yes, that's the name of our firm. The Laird side is real estate. But they acquired Hutchinson a couple years ago, and that's the side of the practice I work on."

"What kind of law is Hutchinson?"

"We're the 'Life's too short, get a divorce!' guys. You've probably seen a few of our company's billboards."

Chad slides his business card my way, and as soon as I see the logo, I picture those billboards slathered all over the bus stop benches down Laurel Canyon Drive and feel physically ill. Not only because he's in the business of making divorce seem cheeky, but also because I'm wondering what other things I might have missed or gotten wrong about Chad.

"Wait. So have *you* ever been divorced?" The question pops off my tongue involuntarily. As soon as the words come out, I remember he reserves the right to ask me the same question in return and immediately regret posing it. I'm not ready to explain the demise of my first marriage.

"Me? Nah. Never married."

Luckily, a server reappears to take our dinner order. But let it be known that if Chad had asked, I would have explained that I didn't give up on my life partner because I was frustrated he failed to load a dishwasher in any sort of methodical way. I didn't just get bored and say "screw it," chalking the whole thing up as just a starter marriage (google it, this is a thing now). In fact, if anyone abruptly left anyone, *he* abandoned *me* out of nowhere.

"Would you like the chicken and veggies or the short rib and scalloped potatoes?" the caterer asks me.

"Short rib and potatoes," I say, a game-time decision made entirely by my growling stomach.

At that, Chad looks at me like I rolled into the Vatican wearing a tube top. "You sure about that, Char? There are so many hidden carbs in potatoes," he whispers with a hint of disgust.

First off, *Char* is reserved for people with a little more tenure in my life, thankyouverymuch. And secondly—

“Yes, I’m sure. An extra scoop of potatoes if possible,” I say, loud enough for our waitress, who jots down the special instruction.

“Chicken for me. Extra veggies,” my 74 percent match requests.

There it is. His wellness obsession flaring up again. I’m racking my brain for what to say next to a guy who screams “dead end” to me.

Excerpted from *Husband Material* by Emily Belden, Copyright © 2019 by Emily Belden. Published by Graydon House Books.