



The Mandy Project Preview (selected excerpt)

"Blond bombshell at ten o'clock."

Mindy McCrae subtly shifted her gaze from the Mates By Mindy shopfront across the street to spy the cute guy her assistant Jane had just spotted. He strolled with purpose through Hyde Park Square wearing flip-flops and baggy shorts, and looking...young. She cast Jane a sideways glance on the bench where they sat indulging in after-lunch ice cream cones. "He's about twelve years old, Jane," she exaggerated.

Jane's brown eyes chided her through thick glasses. "He's not a day under nineteen and who says you can't go for younger men?"

Mindy just wrinkled her nose in reply. She wasn't into cradle-robbing, and really not into guy-chasing at all, but Jane had made it her mission in life to find Mindy a man. Mindy might run the hottest matchmaking service in Cincinnati, but she'd never had as much luck fixing *herself* up with anyone as she had other people.

Fortunately, however, carving out a love life for Mindy was *Jane's* ambition, not her own. After all, she had plenty to be happy about already: friends and parents who loved her, a modest but quaint home, and a highly successful business that was the talk of the city. And since most of Jane's suggested men were preposterous anyway, Mindy was just thankful she didn't care very much about finding her *own* mate.

"Mmm, hot Latin lovah heading from three o'clock toward two."

Mindy glanced up, and the guy, who was indeed hot and Latin, caught her looking. And—yikes—so did the woman clutching his arm. Mindy jerked her head around to scowl at Jane. "He's with a girl."

Jane only shrugged, her dark shoulder-length hair bouncing slightly. "I'm sure you could change that if you wanted to."

Mindy rolled her eyes, reminding Jane, "I bring people together, not split them up."

"You're so darn noble," Jane complained, but Mindy knew she was only kidding. Jane had been happily wed to her husband Larry for eighteen years and was the mother of three boys, ages fifteen, twelve, and ten. She claimed she considered her hours at work her quiet time and openly admitted wanting to live vicariously through Mindy, a single woman whose life should theoretically be blooming with romance. She also admitted to being disappointed when Mindy didn't give her any adventures.

"Ooh la la, be still my heart." Jane's tone had reached a new level of lechery, drawing Mindy's eyes to the impeccably dressed man who'd just pulled his black Mercedes convertible into a parking space directly in front of them. "Tall, dark and steamy at high noon."

Mindy couldn't argue with Jane's assessment; in fact, she could only stare. He possessed classic good looks—dark, well-trimmed hair that brushed the edge of a crisp white shirt collar, a strong jawline, well-defined cheekbones, and eyes she thought were probably blue and piercing, even though she couldn't tell for sure from this distance. Turned out that upon exiting the car, he was tall and pleasantly broad-shouldered, and his black suit *had* to be custom-made from the way it fit him.

"Bond," Jane rasped lowly. "James Bond."

"Shhh," Mindy insisted. He was far too close to be whispering about him, and they were already gawking as it was.

"It's a bird, it's a plane, it's..."

“A customer!” Mindy gasped as Mr. Tall, Dark and Steamy crossed the street and approached the black awning dotted with fluffy red and pink hearts. She’d made the assumption he was headed to the jewelry store to the right of her shop or perhaps the art gallery on the left—because even though good-looking people used matchmaking services all the time, they weren’t usually people *this* good-looking. Nonetheless, he reached for the door handle, then spotted the *Be Back At* sign, its little blue cartoonish clock currently set at one. The hot, dreamy man instantly transformed into a client in her mind as she snatched up her purse and darted across the street. She reached him just as he turned back toward his car, an expression of annoyance gracing his—yes, they *were* blue—eyes.

“Wait, don’t go, I’m back.”

He blinked upon realizing she was talking to him. “I was looking for…” he motioned slightly over his shoulder to the Mates By Mindy logo emblazoned in red on the door, “…Mindy, I suppose.”

“At your service.” She smiled and peered up at him; he stood several inches taller than her. Then she reached instinctively to shake his hand, only to accidentally shove a mint chocolate chip ice cream cone at him. “Oops,” she said, thrusting it into her left hand, which also clutched her purse, then watched as the entire minty green scoop plopped on the sidewalk directly between his expensive-looking black business shoes.

She cringed before tentatively lifting her gaze to his. “I’m really *not* this clumsy.”

Unfortunately, the dream man appeared unamused. “Okay,” he finally said, although he sounded far from convinced.

But it’s no biggie, she told herself as she managed to dig out her keys, get the door unlocked, and let them both inside. *I’m great with people, even those who are a little more strait-laced than others*. Some clients just required a slightly different approach. It wasn’t too late to get this encounter back on track.

She showed him to the chair across from her desk, then dropped her beheaded sugar cone in the waste basket as she sat down on the other side, somewhat relieved to be at eye-level with the intimidating man. “How can I help you?” she asked, glad to have her game face back on.

“I need a wife.”

He’d said it as simply as if he were ordering a burger and fries at the drive-thru, and her first impulse was to say, *That’ll be six fifty at the first window*. Instead, however, she held her tongue and struggled to keep her expression blank as she took a deep breath, lifted her elbows to the desk and steepled her fingers.

“As you can see by the pictures behind me,” she began pleasantly, motioning over her shoulder to the numerous framed photos of happy couples arranged on the long, pink wall, “we here at Mates By Mindy have an astonishing success rate—”

“Yes, I know,” he interrupted dryly. “Ninety-five percent. I’ve read your literature. That’s why I’m here.”

She lowered her gaze, not sure if it was because his eyes were indeed so piercing or because he was starting to annoy her. She got the distinct impression he thought she was wasting his time. “Yes, well, as I was starting to say, despite the number of our matches that have gone on to marry, we don’t emphasize or promise marriage. We’re interested in helping you find that special someone with whom you can build a meaningful long-term relationship. We believe—”

“I have a meeting in half an hour,” he said, checking his watch. “How can we expedite this? Do I need to fill out a questionnaire, make a video?”

She took a deep breath. He didn’t sound rude exactly, but like a man intent on getting things done. Even things that shouldn’t be rushed—*like finding a life mate, for instance*. “No.” She spoke very slowly, clearly, hoping to calm things to a more relaxed pace. “At Mates By Mindy, matches aren’t made through the modern selection process. We take a more old-fashioned approach. I make all the matches myself, and I do so by interviewing each client extensively in a comfortable setting that allows me to get to know them, their likes and dislikes, their personality, their day to day life, their future plans.” She reached for her appointment book and flipped through the coming days. “Let’s see, I’m busy with another client tomorrow, but I could meet you for a long lunch on Friday. Across the street at Teller’s? And we’ll need to meet for two to three hours, so if that’s not a good day for you, perhaps we can look at next week.”

When she lifted her gaze back to the dream man, who was, frankly, seeming a little less dreamy with each passing minute, she found him scowling. “I’m far too busy to block out that kind of time during the work day, but it’s not necessary, anyway. I’ve written down everything you need to know.” With that, he reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and produced a slip of paper folded in half. Placing it on her desk, he slid it toward her as if he were making a bid on something—in this case, she supposed, a wife.

She plucked up the paper and opened it to discover, in neat block lettering, a list: *blonde, shapely, classy, petite, intelligent when necessary, knows how to entertain*, and her favorite, *knows when to defer to my judgment*.

Still struggling to maintain a pleasant expression, or at least not to snarl, she gently lowered the paper to her desk, shoved a lock of short, auburn hair behind one ear, and resumed her finger-

steeping in an effort to stay calm and polite. “Clearly, you have some very, shall we say, *concrete* ideas about what you’re looking for in a woman. But I’ll still need to interview you.”

“Fine,” he said shortly. “Let’s do it now.” He checked his watch again. “I have ten minutes.”

“Well, ten minutes isn’t much, so...why don’t we start like this. Just tell me about yourself, things you think a prospective match might like to know.”

“All right.” The ex-dream man gave a short nod. “My name is Benton Maxwell the third.”

Oh, so he was a third. That figured.

“I’m the CEO of a well-established investment advisory firm with ninety employees, and I have an income in the high six figures.”

Okay, that one caught her a little off-guard.

“I live not far from here in a large, refurbished home with an English garden and a pool, and I own two condos—one in the Caymans and another in Telluride for the ski season. I can basically offer my wife-to-be any amenity she may desire, although”—he raised one finger— “I don’t like cats and I do work long hours. She should not plan on working, as I travel extensively and may want her to travel with me, but she may feel free to do volunteer work or involve herself in other community activities that won’t interfere with my schedule. She may redecorate the house as she wishes, so long as it looks dignified.”

When he finished, it was Mindy who let out the long breath. Sheesh. “I was actually interested,” she began, again slowing the pace of the conversation, “in finding out more about you. More personal things. For instance, what do you do in your spare time? If you’re going out to a movie, do you prefer a comedy or a drama? Where did you grow up, and what was your family like? That sort of thing.”

Benton Maxwell III grimaced again, looking distraught by the questions, then finally formed a reply. “I spend most of my time working, if not at the office, then at home. As for my family, they’re a lot like me. My father founded our business before I was born and also worked long hours. My brother is a teambuilding consultant currently residing in Tokyo, and my sister is an attorney in New York City. My parents have retired to Boca now, but as you can tell, my father instilled a strong work ethic in all of us. Speaking of which, I *do* have a meeting to attend. Are we done here?”

Mindy pursed her lips and could no longer resist giving her head a caustic tilt. “Do you think, Mr. Maxwell, that you’ll have time to go on a few dates, or did you want to forego that, too, and have me arrange a meeting right at the altar?”

He lowered his eyelids, flashing a derisive look that also somehow managed to be disarmingly sexy. “No need for sarcasm. I’ll work the dates into my schedule, Miss...?”

“Ms. McCrae.” Mindy met his gaze again, finding that more difficult the longer this conversation went on. Because, she concluded, that all sexiness aside, he had annoyed her so completely. But she had one more pointed question for the man who sat so stiffly across from her. “Tell me, Mr. Maxwell, why exactly do you wish to get married?”

Benton Maxwell stared at her long and hard, his eyes mellowing to a deeper color than they’d appeared out in the sun, and becoming rather...consuming. They were the kind of eyes you could get lost in—if they weren’t planted in the middle of a face belonging to such an opinionated, chauvinistic jerk. She began to wonder if the question had stumped him or if he was just refusing to answer, when finally he said, “I need a wife, Miss McCrae. Can you assist me or should I go elsewhere?”

She held his gaze in order to let him know she was sizing him up, seeing him for what he was—a man making a mockery of love, looking to marry a piece of arm candy. He wanted a trophy wife, the perfect accessory for his champagne and caviar life. She’d never met anyone who managed to be so domineering and such an all business stick-in-the-mud at the same time—and if he wasn’t rich and devastatingly handsome, he’d have nothing going for him at all.

Frankly, she didn’t want to accept his application.

So in keeping with Benton Maxwell’s style, she grabbed a square of paper from the plastic cube next to her phone and scribbled an exorbitant dollar amount, then folded it in half before sliding it across the desk to him. “This is the fee, payable up front, for our deluxe dating package, which includes up to three handpicked candidates, dating suggestions, pre-date counseling and a debriefing session, if desired.” She removed her fingers from the paper knowing full well that no one in their right mind would pay the amount she’d just proposed. Let Benton Maxwell darken the door of some other unsuspecting matchmaker.

Of course, that was her first mistake—thinking the man was in his right mind. After taking but a brief glance at the number, he whipped out a credit card and thrust it toward her. “I won’t need the suggestions,” he said pointedly, “or the counseling. Just the women.”

Mindy’s jaw dropped. *Oh crap—what have I gotten myself into?*

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