

JULES HAS SENT YOU A MESSAGE
 'Hiya, you seem like an adventurous, fun-loving girl... perhaps you'd be interested earning some extra cash...'

'An escort agency recruited me on MySpace'

Escort agencies are now using social networking sites to recruit young women. And, worryingly, their friendly messages and promises of a luxury lifestyle seem to be working. *Company* investigates the online pimps...

Logging on to her MySpace profile, Kate* saw a message from a woman she didn't recognise pop up in her inbox. 'Hiya, you seem like an adventurous, fun-loving girl... perhaps you'd be interested in earning some extra cash...'

'The message was from a woman called Jules,' explains Kate. 'She said she'd seen my pictures and thought I looked like a nice, fun girl.'

Kate was confused at first, but as she scrolled to the end it became clear that it was not just a random email. It was someone from an escort agency targeting young women to become new recruits.

The friendly and casual message said Kate could earn up to £100 an hour having fun and working as little or as

much as she wanted. It also promised security checks on potential clients.

While Kate decided not to email back for more information, other young women have been tempted. Many industries are cutting back on recruitment in the credit crunch, but escort agencies have been booming. And now, using networking sites, they've got a new way to find the kind of girls their clients are looking for.

'I'd never have considered working as an escort,' says Kate. 'But a lot of my friends have been made redundant recently and jobs are hard to come by, so I can see how girls might be tempted.'

You only have to type 'female escort' into Google's UK pages and you get over 760,000 hits. Most of them are

actively recruiting girls, using all sorts of enticing phrases. One London-based agency boasts 'flexibility, freedom from the drudgery of office life and unrivalled potential perks and payment'. Another asks, 'Why not start a fun-packed job and earn £500 to £800 per night?'

Until recently, escort agencies would rely on people coming to them for work, but, with the increasing popularity of online networking sites, they're now employing more aggressive recruitment tactics. It's something Sarah Walker from The English Collective of Prostitutes is worried about. 'It suggests that they're being unscrupulous in persuading girls to do something they wouldn't usually consider,' she says. So what's the reality behind the promises? What would have happened if Kate did email back? *Company's* Helen Graydon finds out...

GOING UNDERCOVER...

'Posing as a new recruit, I contacted Jules claiming she'd messaged me on MySpace and I was interested in finding out more. The fact that she never questioned who I was made me realise she must send hundreds of messages.'

Jules was keen to meet as soon as possible and asked me to bring some sexy dresses and underwear so she could take pictures of me. I was surprised that she hadn't even interviewed me.

We arranged to meet outside a London tube station and I told her I needed more information about being an escort before I agreed to be photographed. As we sat down in a coffee shop, she said, 'You b

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 people without permission
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don't need an interview. You've got the job. If we like your look, you can start.'

She didn't ask any questions about my background, my age, my job or whether I had any experience working in the sex industry. She pointed a picture of a glamorous life, boasting about expensive hotels, gifts from clients and interesting people she'd met. I smelt alcohol on her breath and she told me she'd come from entertaining a client and had been drinking champagne. She ran the agency, but obviously worked as an escort, too.

Although, at first, Jules was reluctant to tell me what actually happens on a 'date', I eventually discovered that the reality was much less glamorous. Working as an escort would involve visiting men of all ages in their own homes and at all hours. I would be expected to dress seductively, wearing heels and stockings at all times.

The money wasn't as good as it first appeared, either. The starting rate for new recruits is £100 an hour. Out of that,

'Working as an escort would mean visiting men of all ages at all hours'

Jules takes £25 commission per booking, then £10 an hour. For new escorts there's an additional £10 deduction because of the extra time it takes to promote their profiles. That leaves a new recruit earning £55 for a one-hour meeting – not including transport. Not quite the money-spinner I'd been led to believe.

Despite Jules' email claiming the agency carries out full security checks on clients, she couldn't tell me how they do it. 'Jonathan does all the security, I don't know how, but he does,' she said. But I never found out who Jonathan was.

Our coffees finished, Jules suggested we go to a nearby hotel to do paperwork so we could begin the 'photo shoot'. There were three forms. The first was for personal details and measurements. 'As well as your working name, we'll also need your real name. It's a safety thing, so we'd know who you were if anything happened,' Jules assured me. Of course, I gave a false name but she never checked it, which also worried me.

The second form was for me to specify my preferred type of client according to age, build and race. The third was more explicit – a list of sexual acts I might be asked to perform. I had to rate them between one and three on how comfortable I was with each. The sheet was colour-coded – white for what is considered normal, yellow for what

STAY SAFE ONLINE

- Set your profile to private. You never know who's browsing through Facebook. 'Most women are unaware of how exposed they are on social networking sites,' says Stephen Balkham from the Family Online Safety Institute.
- If a potential employer contacts you online, check them out. The Employment Standards Agency (http://www.direct.gov.uk/jm/employers/understanding-your-workstatus/Agencyworkersandemploy-mentagencies/OG_375262) has a list of what to look out for, such as what you're paying any registration fees for.
- If you do receive an unwelcome email on a social networking site, report it. 'Unless we're able to smash that violate our terms and conditions, we can't investigate,' says a spokesperson from MySpace.

I could reasonably refuse, and blue for services charged at a higher rate. But I was shocked to see 'normal' acts included role play, running, spanking and fisting. The extras list included unprotected sex and anal sex.

My sexual health didn't seem to be of concern to Jules at all. Not once did she say I should use protection or ask if I'd had any sexual health checks recently.

As I finish the forms, another girl, Jane*, joins us. She'd been recruited by Jules through MySpace the previous day and had just arrived for her photo shoot.

Jane looked anxious, and when Jules went outside for a cigarette, she confessed she'd never considered doing this sort of work before, but because Jules had seemed friendly and it sounded glamorous, she'd decided to give it a go. 'So many things are bad in my life right now. I split up with my boyfriend, then I lost my job,' she explained. I've spoken to Jane twice since our meeting and she says she had her photos taken by Jules that night but hasn't seen the images, nor has she had any bookings – yet.

Even though girls can ignore the messages, Jane is proof that they do lure people in. And surely the agencies have a responsibility to spell out the reality of the job and to protect their workers' safety as best they can?

Chris Stodent, from the International Union of Sex Workers, has a word of warning. 'The fact that there's no regulation of escort agencies makes the business more dangerous,' he says. 'Anyone can set up an agency – even a person acting alone – and make claims about security checks, when the likelihood is there are none in place.'

Cathy*, 28, a promotions girl from London, was lured into the sex industry via a modelling networking site. 'I'd

never thought about escorting before,' she explains. 'But I got a message from a guy asking if I wanted to earn £200 an hour by going to dinner with his male clients. My modelling and promotions work had dried up, so I was curious.'

Cathy agreed to meet Jacob, who promised that meetings would only involve dinner and that she'd get £400 for every job. I needed the money and it sounded harmless, so I decided to give it a go,' she says. 'The first time I did a job, I was anxious, but assumed it wouldn't involve sex. But I quickly learnt that the client wanted a lot more than just dinner. In the end, I went along with it because I got carried away, felt safe and was tempted by the money. Plus, he wasn't bad-looking. I told myself to just switch off and think about paying the bills.'

Cathy continued working as an escort for six months, until she met her boyfriend. 'When I look back, I can't believe I did it. I pushed it to the back of my mind. It was as if I was numb.'

Although running an escort agency is not an offence, there are no regulations in place to monitor how agencies look after their workers. In November last year, the Government set out plans to tighten prostitution laws and reduce the demand for paying for sex. However, proposed changes are aimed at reducing the number of trafficked women in the sex industry. There's no clear-cut legislation surrounding the recruitment of escorts. Not all escort agencies are a front for prostitution, but it's a very grey area.

Neither the Home Office or the police were able to say whether scouting for

'There was a list of sexual acts I might be asked to perform'

escorts on networking sites is potentially a crime. Both say it depends on how the agency is run and not how they go about recruiting. Home Office legislation doesn't make any specific reference to methods of recruitment. So, at the moment, it seems there is little in place to stop dubious online scouts luring young women into the seedy world of escorting.

With many young women feeling the credit-crunch pinch, £100 an hour can seem like a tempting offer. But, as Cathy discovered, the reality of escort work is a far cry from the fun, friendly Facebook messages that scouts are sending to lure in young women like you. ■