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The Perfect Passion Company

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PART I

Cook for Me

CHAPTER ONE

No. 24 Mouse Lane

They were two young women, lingering over a cup of coffee in a slightly shabby Edinburgh bistro. Both were thirty, or thereabouts; both were dressed, unintentionally, in matching outfits: well-cut jeans and white linen blouses.

There were differences, though: Katie had dark hair, with that combination of green eyes and almost translucent skin that sometimes goes with Celtic ancestry; Ell was a blonde, or almost; Katie had a red scarf thrown casually around her shoulders; Ell wore pearl earrings – each a large, single pearl at the end of a delicate gold chain. Both had that particular confidence that suggests that somebody has a right to be there.

"You said, three husbands? *Three?*" That was Ell, who was busy wiping a thin line of latte foam from her lips.

A woman at a nearby table overheard this. A delicious snippet, she thought. Three husbands? She would tell her friends.

Katie nodded. "She's my cousin – or second cousin, shall I say – and she's had three husbands." She raised three fingers. "Three. Seriatim, of course."

Ell smiled. "Seriatim." She rolled the word around her tongue.

"My father always called her his colourful cousin – mostly because of the men, you know. She's fond of them."

"Oh well," said Ell. "It can happen to anyone, I suppose. Mind you, to have had three husbands sounds a bit greedy. Especially to those of us who've had none . . ."

Katie smiled. "You'll find him. You've got plenty of time."

"Not that I'm looking," said Ell, adding, "this week."

"Ness is now just into her fifties," Katie went on. "She's my father's first cousin. She acquired the first husband when she was twenty-one. Barely out of school. And he was only twenty. A mere boy."

"Ness," mused Ell. "I like that name."

"It's short for Inverness," Katie explained. "Her father – my grandfather – came from the north of Scotland. He called her Inverness, and his son was called Aberdeen. Inverness Macpherson. Quite a name, don't you think?"

Ell agreed.

"Of course, from the start her first marriage had no future," Katie went on. "They were far too young."

"Young lovers," said Ell. "There are plenty of precedents. Tristan and Isolde."

"Oh, yes."

"And Pyramus and Thisbe. That's even before we get to Romeo and Juliet."

"Yes," agreed Katie. "But who gets married at twenty these days? He hardly needed to shave."

"And Daphnis and Chloe," Ell added. "Two innocents who were brought up together and who fell in love."

"I've heard of them vaguely," said Katie. "Very vaguely."

"I actually read the book," said Ell. "I was on holiday in Cyprus, and I found it beside my bedside. They were young lovers, but eventually were able to marry. I thought it a touch-

ing story, in spite of everything that happened to Daphnis. Much of it somewhat unlikely."

"Oh?"

"He was abducted by pirates – standard stuff for the times, perhaps. But do you know a single person who has been abducted by pirates? I don't. Not one."

Katie laughed. "That first husband lasted a few years and then said that he wanted his freedom. Ness told my mother all about it."

"He left?" asked Ell.

"Yes. He went to Dublin, and was never heard of again. Did he find what he was looking for, I wonder? Possibly."

"Oh well."

"Ness was resilient. She's never been put off by minor setbacks, such as discovering one's husband has gone off to Dublin. *Worse things have happened* is what she says in such circumstances. And I suppose she's right. There's always something worse happening elsewhere. It's worth reminding ourselves of that, I suppose."

"Possibly."

"And then, in her mid-twenties, with her first divorce out of the way, she met Max."

"Husband number two?"

"Yes. He was stunningly good-looking, and that, it turned out, was a problem. He was a complete narcissist."

Ell rolled her eyes. "We've all met him, haven't we?"

"He was a model for men's clothing catalogues. You'd recognise him: purposeful chin, eyes focused somewhere in the middle distance. Very discreet designer stubble. He went off with a photographer called Mae, eventually."

"Oh well. These things happen. As long as they found what they wanted. Narcissists like photographers."

"Yes. And photographers like narcissists. It worked for everybody, I think." Katie took a sip of her coffee. "Mae published a book – *Max in Sepia*. You know those old-fashioned photographs. Ness showed me a copy. She was actually quite proud of it. She was pleased that Max was happy. She said: 'Max used to be mine, you know. Isn't he beautiful?' And he was – particularly in sepia."

Katie took a sip of her coffee. "Ness's story gets better. There were plenty of boyfriends, and then eventually she ended up with husband number three. He was a parachutist called Sidney. If I were called Sidney, I'd jump out of a plane, I suppose. Anyway, he did free fall jumps. I actually met that one when I was a student. I rather liked him."

Ell's eyes widened. "But I don't think I'm going to like the ending."

"No, it was one of those worse things she talked about, I'm afraid. He was doing a charity jump – a fundraising event. He did the jump wearing his kilt. His sponsors loved the idea, but unfortunately, the kilt blew up over his head the moment he entered the slipstream, and he couldn't see what he was doing. He couldn't find the ripcord. Or that's what they think happened. It was very sad." Katie sighed. The lives of others often seemed so susceptible to derailment. "And so, Ness found herself a widowed double-divorcée in her early forties, with nothing much to do. Sid had been heavily insured – a wise move for a parachutist – and, as the icing on the cake, he had owned a dry-cleaning business. He left her the lot. So, that's how she started her business."

"Which was?"

"The Perfect Passion Company. A sort of dating agency, or introduction bureau, as Ness likes to call it. I suppose she wanted to make the most of her experience with men."

"You should play to your strengths." Ell frowned. "But isn't an introduction bureau a bit old-fashioned these days? Anyone can go to one of those apps . . ."

Katie interrupted her friend. "No, not everybody wants to meet online. There are people who prefer to be match-made, so to speak. They like the personal approach. They want a bespoke service."

"And that's what she's giving to you?"

Katie hesitated. "Not exactly giving outright. She's been running it for ten years now, and she wants a break. She's keen to take a grown-up gap year. She's off to Canada."

"And asked you to be in charge?"

"Temporary owner was how she put it. She said that I can have the business on a trial basis. If I like it, she'll pass it on to me. She says I need to see if I like bringing people together."

Ell shuddered. "Matchmaking? Some of these people will be . . ." She searched for the word as a series of images of defeated-looking people came to mind – a shuffling line of the unsuccessful in love. The word came to her. "Tragic?"

"Aren't we all?" asked Katie. "In our way? Aren't we all a bit tragic? But . . ." She thought for a moment. She had already accepted, and it was now too late. She was due to meet her cousin in town the following day to pick up the keys and get her instructions about running the business. It was too late for doubts.

"Actually," she said, "I'm looking forward to it. This is charitable work, Ell. It's like working for some sort of relief agency. It's a *calling*."

Ell stared at her friend. She had always known that Katie was an idealist, but there were limits. This, she thought, is not a good idea, whichever way one looked at it. "Be careful," she said. "Dates don't always work out."

Katie nodded. "Of course. But some do."

"I'll worry about you," said Ell. "Taking over a business you . . . well, to be frank, a business that you know nothing about."

Katie reassured her. "No need for you to worry," she said. "What can possibly go wrong?"

"Everything," said Ell.

"Defeatist," said Katie.

Ell laughed. "We'll see."

The woman at the nearby table finished her coffee and rose to leave. She shot a glance at Katie and Ell, and then looked away. She had managed to hear most of it, and she disapproved.

"That's what I like about this city," whispered Ell. "It can still actually look disapproving. Where else does anybody actually bother?"