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Looking for You

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This book is for Mike and Catriona Kennedy.

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CHAPTER ONE

Why we marry whom we marry

The lecture was due to begin at six in the evening and already, by five-thirty, the first few rows of the lecture theatre in George Square were filling up with two separate tribes: students—chattering, voluble—and members of the general public—quiet, with that certain sobriety that marked an Edinburgh audience. A few years earlier, Katie would have identified herself with the students; now, at the age of thirty, she accepted that she had become a member of the public, and that the decade or so that separated her from the students in the room was an increasingly significant gap.

Not that she minded too much. We all had to grow up, she reminded herself, and there were plenty of consolations that came with getting a bit older. Not having to share a flat, for instance, was something that only came in your late twenties, if then, and was something that she had particularly welcomed when she returned to Edinburgh. Throughout the years she had spent in London she had been in shared accommodation, often with people whom she might not have chosen as flatmates—had she been given the opportunity to pick and choose.

Helen, for example, with whom she had shared just before she came back to Scotland, had an irritating way of chewing her food to which Katie had never become reconciled. She did not exactly eat with her mouth open, but it was close enough, and Katie had found herself watching with reluctant fascination the mastication of the buttered toast that her flatmate so enjoyed eating. Then there was Julie, who had emerged from a crumbling manor house in an obscure English shire—Northamptonshire, Katie thought, or was it Rutland?—and who had a braying laugh with which Katie had never been able to come to terms. She was markedly vacuous, Katie decided, being principally interested in finding a man who would spirit her back to the countryside and install her in a house with a garden large enough to accommodate a duck pond. "I just love ducks," she had confessed to Katie. "They are such intelligent creatures. I just adore them."

Katie had expressed the view that ducks were not intelligent at all—at least in her experience—and that whilst they made good eating, they were less than stimulating company. This had brought a shocked reaction from Julie, who said that she pitied anybody who could not see the sheer character of ducks, and that eating them showed scant regard for the feelings of sensitive and sympathetic fellow creatures. Katie, in fact, although not formally vegetarian, generally ate little meat, and very rarely, if ever, had duck. Her reaction to Julie's enthusing over ducks was provoked out of impatience with the other young woman's gushing enthusiasm, and the conversation went no further. But she was relieved when a not-very-bright young man called Roland began to visit the flat. His intention was to lure Julie off to a hamlet in Gloucestershire, where he had a converted farmhouse with four acres of land, quite enough, Katie believed, for not one but several

duck ponds. Roland was employed in his father's estate agency and spoke in the language of that calling. Views were always *sought-after*, houses always had *character*, and neighbourhoods were always *up-and-coming*. He was a keen member of a clay-pigeon shooting club—clubs were always, in his view, *exclusive*—and was, Katie thought, an ideal partner for Julie. But then she felt guilty: she had been too dismissive, even to the point of lacking charity. Julie had her good points, and no doubt Roland had his too. She should not condescend to them just because she found them dull.

Sharing, though, came to an end when Katie left her job at the London gallery in which she had been employed, and returned to Edinburgh, where she had been born and brought up, to run the business of a relative who had taken an adult gap year in Canada. Her father's cousin, Ness, was a woman in her early fifties, a lively and entertaining devotee of Greek mythology and Jungian psychology, who had decided that time was passing rather quickly and that if she did not travel now, she never would. Her business was an unusual one—an introductions agency, or marriage bureau, as she sometimes described it, called the Perfect Passion Company.

"There are very few of us left," Ness explained to Katie. "There used to be rather a lot of marriage bureaus, but now we are *rarae aves*, as they say—rare birds for the non-Latinate. There are one or two still soldiering on in London, but we are the only one in Edinburgh, indeed all Scotland, I believe. In other words, Katie, we are *it*."

Katie was not sure that she wanted or was qualified to be *it*, but Ness had been sanguine. "You'll cope wonderfully," she assured her. "All you have to do is to introduce the right man to the right woman, and vice versa. Then let nature take its course. Simple."

Katie had absorbed this, but had still been concerned that she might not have the necessary skills to bring about a meeting between compatible and potential soul-mates. Once again, Ness had been breezily confident.

"There's nothing to it, Katie," she said. "You interview the clients. You make notes on their files, recording their preferences and so on. *Can't eat asparagus*, or *Wants somebody musical, but no jazz*, that sort of thing. Then you bring them together—if they seem suited to one another—light the blue touchpaper, and step back. Nature, sooner or later, takes its course either way."

"Either way?" asked Katie.

Ness explained. "Sometimes it works—sometimes it doesn't. You'll get used to assessing the chances. You'll learn that it's not just a question of bringing like together with like: in some cases—not in all, but certainly in some—it's a matter of bringing together people who appear in some ways to be different in their interests. You'll have heard of Jack Spratt and his wife? Jack could eat no fat and his wife could eat no lean. Terribly mismatched, poor dears. But they got on famously. Nursery rhymes may embody very important psychological insights, you know. You have to read their second-degree meaning. Have you heard of second-degree meaning? No?"

Katie shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

Ness could be didactic. "Gérard Genette," she began, "talked about literature in the second degree. He was a French literary critic—frightfully Gallic in all respects. They love their theory, the French." She rolled her eyes. "They adore people like Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida. They consider us Anglo-Saxons—and I suppose many Scots are a sort of Anglo-Saxon, although they'd hate to admit it—they think

of us as being extremely literal—hardly worth deconstructing. We don't see the meaning behind the meaning, they'd say. Everything can be read in the second degree—including the weather forecast, I suppose."

Katie laughed. "Hardly."

"Perhaps I exaggerate."

You do, thought Katie, because you are unashamedly flamboyant. You love to exaggerate, but perhaps your exaggerations should be read in the second degree, which makes them not exaggerations at all, but understatements.

"But to return to the point," said Ness. "I have complete confidence in you, Katie. The Perfect Passion Company will go from strength to strength under you *senza ombra di dubbio*. There's no doubt at all about that."

Now, sitting in the lecture theatre, Katie remembered snatches of that conversation with Ness as she waited for the rest of the audience to arrive. It looked as if there would be a good turnout, which was not always the case at inaugural lectures. She had been to two of these after she returned to Edinburgh: one had been on the philosophy of economic redistribution, and had gone on for almost two hours, against all the conventions applicable to such events. The other had been on the fashion in the Persian court in the fifteenth century, which had been considerably more entertaining. Having applied for tickets for these lectures, she was now on a list somewhere within the university, and she found herself receiving invitations to every such occasion, which was part of the explanation why she was there that evening. But only part of the explanation: the title of the chair being inaugurated had caught her eye, and she would have come if only for that. This was the inauguration of a personal chair, recently created

by the university for a distinguished member of its staff, the title of which was the Chair in Human Matching. For one who ran an introductions bureau, such a title was difficult to ignore.

The newly appointed professor was one Deborah Wilson, a psychologist and author of a book titled *Why We Marry Whom We Marry*. To that was added a subtitle, *And Why We May Come to Regret It*. Professor Wilson, it was explained in the leaflet handed out to those attending, was the author of numerous scientific papers on what was described as *assortative matching*. Katie was not sure what that was, but hoped that the lecture would throw light on that question.

She looked about her. There were a couple of comfortable-looking middle-aged women sitting not far from her—they struck her as being the types, she thought, who went to every inaugural lecture at the university, irrespective of subject. Beyond them was a thin young man wearing round spectacles, who was paging through a photocopied article, annotating it with a propelling pencil. He was a research fellow, Katie decided, one of those wandering scholars who move from post-doc position to post-doc position, until they faded away into the obscurity of low-level academia. She had known one or two such people in London, and she did not envy them their uncertain life-style, surviving on timed research grants, and never being given the tenure for which they yearned above all else.

And then, immediately to her left, was a woman who had slipped in without Katie noticing her. She was attractive, somewhere in her early forties, thought Katie, and was wearing a smart blue pinstripe jacket. Had this been anywhere else, Katie would have put her down as a lawyer, or an accountant

perhaps, accustomed to dressing smartly for the office, but opting for a casual smartness that would enable her to move in academic circles without being conspicuous.

As Katie glanced at her, the other woman met her eye and smiled. "It's filling up," she said, looking over her shoulder at the rows of seats behind them.

"Yes," said Katie. "There was an article about her—Professor Wilson—in the paper the other day. Did you see it?"

The woman nodded. "I did. It was rather interesting. They said she was likely to ginger up the Department of Psychology, as I recall. I think it said that."

"It did," agreed Katie. "It described her as being somebody who was capable of making psychology relevant to ordinary people." She paused. "And I suppose that's what she intends to do today. This is going to be about choosing partners. Who isn't interested in that?"

The woman laughed. "I'm Clea," she said. "And yes, I'm fascinated by that sort of thing."

Katie gave her name. She did not reveal what she did for a living—and Clea did not ask, although she did enquire as to whether Katie knew much about psychology.

"I don't," Katie answered. "But sometimes I think I do."

"No harm in that," said Clea, with a smile. "Everybody's an amateur psychologist these days."

Katie asked about assortative matching. What precisely was that?

Clea had looked it up. "It's all about why people choose the partners they choose. The idea is that there are reasons why we choose our partners."

"Of course, there are," said Katie. "Isn't it because we like them? Isn't that the main reason?"

Clea was interested in *why* we liked others. "That's not always obvious," she said. "We may be looking for things that we don't know we're looking for. Such as for somebody who looks like our mother or father. That's very common, I believe."

"Really?"

"Yes," said Clea. "I had a girlfriend who turned down numerous eligible men until she found the one man she wanted to marry. And you know what? He was as dull as ditch-water—seriously dull—but, surprise, surprise, he looked exactly like her father, to whom she had always been very close. Her father was a professor of physics, and this man who looked like him taught physics. Just what she had been looking for."

"She wanted to marry her father?"

"So it would seem."

Katie asked whether the marriage had worked.

"It was brilliant," said Clea. "They're both very happy. And you know what I discovered? I happened to see a photograph of his mother, and she was the image of my friend. Not a coincidence, I think."

Clea now gave Katie a sideways look. "What did you say you do?" she asked.

"I didn't," Katie replied.

"Ah." There was another inquisitive look. "I thought you did."

Katie hesitated. "Actually, I might as well confess. I run an introduction agency. Here in Edinburgh—something called the Perfect Passion Company."

Clea looked at her in astonishment. Then she laughed.

"No, seriously."

"I am being serious," said Katie.

Clea looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . ."

She did not finish. A door at the back of the stage had

opened, and Professor Deborah Wilson emerged, along with two university officials in academic gowns.

"She's very tall," whispered Clea.

"So I see," Katie whispered back.

"People ask me," said Professor Deborah Wilson, "what is the single most important factor in the choice of a partner. They make it clear that they want me to identify one quality, rather than give them a confusing list. And I can understand that: Who amongst us, when it comes down to it, doesn't want a simple explanation for why things are? Hence our desire for a simple cosmology. If you read the Book of Genesis as literal truth—and there are people who do just that—then everything is clear enough. But for most of us, well, that is perhaps a rather tall order, and we reconcile ourselves to the more complex picture. And the point about complex pictures is that the explanation for anything tends to be multifactorial. My students, by the way, love that expression. 'It's multifactorial,' they say, whenever they can't quite remember the reason for whatever it is they are considering."

This brought laughter. Katie thought: Yes, it *is* multifactorial. She glanced along the row of seats and saw that the thin young man with glasses had written something on a notepad. Multifactorial, she imagined. Her gaze rested on him for a few moments longer. He was unhappy; she could tell that, even without ever having spoken to him. He lived alone in an ill-heated room, perhaps behind the old veterinary school. He had the use of a kitchenette, shared, and there would be a noisy, small fridge in which he kept his bottle of milk, and a wedge of cheese from the Victor Hugo delicatessen. His unhappiness

was multifactorial, she decided. He would have had a girlfriend, who played the piano, she thought, but who went off with somebody else to live down in England somewhere.

"However," the professor continued, "I can produce, if pressed to do so, a list of three or four factors that are of particular significance in assortative matching. These, I believe, are the weightier factors operating in many instances, and any one of them may be *the* factor which tips the scales on the process of choice. Mind you, it is very important to understand that choice in these matters is likely to be a subconscious process. Few of us say to ourselves: I am going to choose Susan because of her dimples, or Jim because of his healthy bank balance, or, as I hasten to point out, Susan because of *her* bank balance and Jim because of *his* dimples. Those may be exactly the factors that predispose us to the identification and acceptance of a partner, but in many, if not the majority, of cases we are unaware of the reasons that lie behind our choice. But that, I suspect, is the way that most of us lead our lives, most of the time: we are unaware of the reasons why we do the things we do; unaware of the extent to which our lives are mapped out by events that may have happened even before we were born; unaware of the way in which the habits and preferences of our parents dictate the way we behave. We inherit so much from those who precede us—their sorrows and their defeats may cast a shadow that conceals from us the sun, although we may never work out for ourselves why it seems so dark."

There was almost complete silence in the lecture theatre. The students, normally a restless audience, sat quite still; somebody cleared his throat, suppressing a cough; a paper rustled almost inaudibly.

"Now," said Professor Wilson, "you might be wondering what factors might be on that short list of mine."

The tension eased. One or two heads nodded. A young woman, a student, seated immediately in front of Katie whispered to her friend, "Green eyes." The friend giggled, and responded, "Pecs."

Katie felt a surge of irritation. You silly girl, she thought. Of what possible importance were firm pectoral muscles, or green eyes, for that matter? Of course, eyes could say something about character, about soul, and that was obviously important, but muscles—what did they say? Nothing. But then she reminded herself that these students were barely nineteen and that was . . . eleven years ago. Eleven years would be time enough for them to learn that there were far more important things than physical characteristics. Suddenly she felt her age. If this was what thirty was like, then what would it be like to be forty? Would she then be thinking about the fecklessness of thirty-year-olds?

"Geography," said Professor Wilson. "That, in a sense, is at the top of the list. Yes, geography. Those of you in this audience who are currently single but who imagine that in the future at some time you will have a partner . . ." She looked out into the audience. There was an outbreak of slightly nervous laughter. "That destiny, of course, is increasingly less compulsory in a world of individual self-determination; but for those of you who are in that position, you have no doubt an idea of whom you might like to find. A sympathetic mate? Somebody who makes you feel good? Somebody who shares your interests? Yes, to all of those, but that is likely to happen only—and this is an important qualification—only if such a person turns up in your immediate vicinity. In other words, the fact that such people exist *somewhere*, does not mean that they will occur in *your* life. You, I have to tell you, are likely to marry somebody who lives very close to you. So if you fancy the person a couple

of seats away from where you are now sitting—or in the row behind you—then my message to you is this: you're in with a good chance."

Necks were craned. In the front row, a group of students chuckled. Somebody seated directly behind Katie said, "Oh no."

"Let me explain," the professor went on, "*homogamy* is the practice of marrying, or entering into a union with, a partner who is similar to oneself. This means that in a homogamous relationship, the partners share something important, whether it is a cultural outlook, a religious viewpoint, socio-economic status, or a moral position."

Katie listened. She allowed herself to think that she knew all this; academics could spend a lot of time dressing up the most elementary truths in complicated language. Sometimes their conclusions were no different from those we all might reach, if we used our common sense. She remembered the tedious lecture on the philosophy of redistribution and the lecturer's conclusion at the end, after the recital of swathes of data and theoretical verbiage, that people did not like giving up what they had, but had to be made to do so.

"Sharing interests and attributes," continued Professor Deborah Wilson, "appears to be important not only in making the decision to embark upon a union in the first place, but also in terms of the stability and duration of the marriage or partnership. The folk wisdom expresses this in the old adage *Like marries like*. Like many of the things our mothers said, even if we may have been tempted to dismiss them in the past, research keeps finding a scientifically sound underpinning for this. 'You were right after all, Mother,' we say—or think of saying."

Katie perked up. That was her mother. That was her—not that she had admitted it, to her mother, or to herself.

"There are many factors that have been identified as important through the psychological scrutiny of matching. Level of education is one that consistently appears at or near the top of the list. If you are educated to degree level, then you are very likely to marry somebody who has the same level of educational achievement; you are very unlikely to marry somebody who has only a basic high school education. Such a person may be as intelligent as you are, of course, even more so, but statistically you are unlikely to end up together."

"Then there are shared values."

Round the room, a few heads nodded. Katie noticed that a woman sitting a few places to her left briefly closed her eyes, as if what had just been said caused her a momentary pain. She imagined what lay behind that reaction: an ill-starred marriage of a couple who had no common interests. If you read different things, liked different music, enjoyed the company of different types of people, what hope was there of a shared life? Her gaze remained on the woman, who suddenly turned towards her. Their eyes met, and an unspoken message of understanding and sympathy passed between them. *She knows that I know*, thought Katie, and she reflected on how often that realisation came to people who happened to connect with one another unexpectedly, as strangers.

"Without shared values," the professor said, "a union has a higher chance of being unstable. There will be room for disagreements, sometimes quite serious ones, if partners take a fundamentally different view of politics, for instance. How many couples do you know, may I ask, who are on opposite sides of the political spectrum? A few, perhaps, but not many. Well, there is hard evidence in the literature that on really core issues, such as which party they would choose to be in government, couples tend to agree.

"But quite apart from these issues of shared interests, pure physical propinquity emerges as a major consideration in its own right." She paused before continuing, "There are various studies that have reached this conclusion. Haandrikman and van Wissen, for instance, published an important paper on this precise issue in the *European Journal of Population* in 2012. Their title is quite striking: 'Explaining the Flight of Cupid's Arrow: A Spatial Random Utility Model of Partner Choice.' At the beginning of their paper, they quote a general law of geography, proposed back in 1970, to the effect that everything is related to everything else, but things that are close to one another are more related than things that are far apart." She looked out over the audience, and smiled. "In other words, girls—many of you are going to marry the boy next door."

A female voice shouted out, "No, anything but that!" There was laughter, shared by Professor Wilson, who, when the hubbub of reaction died down, looked at the audience and said, "I did."

"Do you think he was tall?" Clea whispered to Katie.

"Boys next door are *always* average height," Katie replied. And she thought: *But not always interesting:* boys next door were almost always *safe*.

"True," said Clea.

Katie was thinking. She wondered whether shared political views emerged before or after marriage. She thought it possible that people of differing views might marry and then, as they spent more time with one another, might find a natural process of convergence taking place. This suggested that there was another factor that was important for the stability of a union: willingness to moderate views to take account of how a partner felt. Rigidity was anathema in any relationship; flexibility and compromise were vital.

"I did just that. I married the boy next door, and I'm extremely happy," announced the professor. "And he tells me he is too."

There was a cheer from the front row. The dean, seated on the platform in her academic robes, looked at her watch—pointedly, thought Katie—which was a pity, as she thought that the audience was having a good time, which had not been the case during the lecture on the philosophy of taxation. Several members of the audience had left that lecture early, sneaking out bent-double to avoid creating a disturbance, although in one case a woman in high heels had suffered heel failure in one shoe, and had stumbled noisily as a result.

At the end of the lecture, Clea, the woman next to Katie, turned to her and said, "Interesting."

"Yes," said Katie, rising to her feet.

Clea seemed to be about to say something, and Katie waited.

"I hope that we meet again," said Clea.

Katie nodded. "Perhaps at one of these lectures. I seem to come to quite a few of them."

"I do so too," Clea said.

They said goodbye, and Katie made her way towards the exit, where a group of students was milling around. Some of them were laughing; one young woman was hugging a young man, who seemed embarrassed; another had dropped a folder of lecture notes on the floor and was being helped by friends to pick them up. Katie glanced back over her shoulder to where she had been sitting. Clea was still in her seat, but was looking across the room, directly at her. Katie thought that she raised her hand slightly, in a gesture of farewell, but could not be sure. She waved anyway.