

## Matchmaker

“Are you sure this is the right place?”

Declan Roberts stamped his feet on the snow-covered path and exhaled deeply, eyeing his foggy breath with a critical air. Ahead of him, the wooden door of the house stood, a solid four-panelled structure neatly painted in fawn. On the single stone-grey step leading to the door, his colleague Helen Mackenzie, having rattled the knocker for the third time, glanced back at him. “This is the address Carol gave us,” she confirmed, and turned to knock again.

“Perhaps the old lady’s deaf.” Declan stood admiring the sheen of Helen’s honey-blond hair as it tumbled down the back of her Royal Blue faux woollen overcoat. “Or perhaps Carol was wrong,” he added wryly. Carol Sampson, their immediate line manager, although an experienced and competent social worker, was proving, in Declan’s opinion, to be almost as flaky as an administrator as the snow falling thickly around them. He turned to go. “Come on, Helen. There must have been a cock-up.”

“But this old lady’s been a client of Carol’s for ages,” Helen protested. “Surely she’d know where she lived?”

As if on cue, the door began to creak slowly open, causing Helen to jump almost back off the step. Declan made forward as if to steady her, but decided he couldn’t risk grabbing her for fear of potential embarrassment. Seconds later he wished he hadn’t been so reticent.

He’d have given anything to hold her, even for the merest second, and it might have been the perfect excuse.

While he stood there cursing his restraint, the door opened fully, revealing an elderly woman, tall, skinny and upright, wearing a long-sleeved white blouse, buttoned to the neck, a blue printed skirt and stout brown brogues of the type that would have been called ‘sensible’ by Declan’s legion of aunts and great-aunts back in Ireland. The woman smiled. “Yes, dears?” she said, in a soft, wondering voice.

Helen, as always, took the lead. “Miss Haverstock?”

“That’s right, dear.” Miss Haverstock’s answer was addressed to Helen but she was looking over Helen’s shoulder, directly at Declan, and he had the momentary uneasy feeling she was assessing him in some way.

Before he could define the feeling, Helen continued. “We’re from the County Council Social Services Department, Miss Haverstock.” She showed the woman her identification. “My name’s Helen, this is my colleague Declan. We understand you phoned about noon, asking for some assistance?”

“Oh, yes, dears,” the softness of the old woman’s voice was unnerving, Declan thought. Like an elderly caretaker in a mausoleum; which, looking past her at the narrow hallway framing her body, she might well be. The old woman turned to go inside. “Do come in, dears. Please forgive the mess. One finds it so difficult to tidy up, you know.”

The hallway was spotless. More sensible shoes were lined up neatly on a rack, a number of coats and jackets hung tidily on four evenly-spaced pegs screwed into the wall. Declan noted that the floral wallpaper, though of a design that must have been past its best by the eighties, and fading badly in patches, was clean enough, as was the rust-coloured carpet adorning the floor. He saw Helen glance back at him. Although neat, the place was freezing.

Miss Haverstock was disappearing into a doorway to the right, and Helen followed. Declan traipsed after her, hoping that the rest of the house would be warmer.

The living room they entered, although small, was, like the hallway, a model of tidiness. It was also similarly icy. "Do take a seat, dears," Miss Haverstock requested, not appearing to even notice the cold, and seated herself in a winged armchair that stood in one corner. The straightness of the chair-back served to emphasize her uprightiness. A three-seater sofa spread its length along the wall opposite, and Declan and Helen sat, Declan making sure to position himself at the other end to Helen, as far from her as possible. As he did so he thought he saw a smile of amusement play itself around the corner of Miss Haverstock's mouth. Before he could be certain, however, it was gone, and a benign expression had settled itself on the old lady's face.

Now came the time that Declan considered the most frustrating part of his job. Up to him, he'd be down to the details of the case straight away, eliciting by direct questions exactly what it was that the old lady wanted. However, it was never that simple – information had to be

teased out of the 'client', which involved lots of small-talk and getting to know them. Helen was extremely good at this, and he sat on his end of the sofa and admired her gentle, friendly conversing, to which Miss Haverstock responded with a typical elderly-woman's opening-up. Soon they'd learned about her childhood home in Warsaw, her rabbi father and orthodox Jewish mother, her early youth as a refugee from Nazi oppression, all in the same low, soft voice. "Of course, dear," she said in response to a question from Helen, "my parents changed their name as soon as they fled Poland – they felt it much safer to adopt an English name than to draw attention to their foreign origins." Assorted ancient photographs hanging around the walls and placed methodically on the few items of furniture the room contained were referred to throughout – Declan found himself drawn into the old lady's story despite his impatience.

"What about these?" Helen asked, pointing to a section of photographs not yet alluded to. They were all wedding shots, and though some, like the pictures from her youth, were in black and white, the majority were colour.

"Oh those, dear." Miss Haverstock's eyes took on a dreamy quality. "Those are my weddings."

"Oh?" Declan interjected, suddenly confused. It was his first contribution to the discussion, and Miss Haverstock looked at him with, he thought, the same amused smile playing over her lips. "I – I thought," he went on. "I mean – you are *Miss Haverstock*?"

She smiled fully. “Yes, dear. You misunderstand me. Not my own personal marriages – my arranged ones.” She raised an eyebrow as if waiting for the next question or comment.

When it became evident they were waiting, she continued: “You see, dears, I was a professional *Sadchan* – a matchmaker. For many years, my job was to arrange marriages between young women and eligible young men – sometimes, not so young. These are some of the marriages I arranged, all of which, I am very pleased to say, are still flourishing.”

“When did you stop?” Helen asked curiously.

“Only ten years ago, dear, in my seventy-ninth year. Time to hand over to younger blood, don’t you think?”

Declan heard Helen gasp. “You mean that marriages were still being arranged for people in the 2000s?”

The old lady gazed at her with considerable amusement. “Of course, dear,” she said matter-of-factly. “They still are being so.”

“But surely even orthodox families must now see that young people should have the freedom to choose for themselves when it comes to love and marriage?” Helen asked.

“Isn’t it all a bit medieval?” Declan chipped in, aware his comment could be taken as rude, but unable to contain himself.

The old lady laughed, the first time they’d heard her do so. It was a rich, fruity laugh, and contrasted oddly with her soft, gentle voice. “Oh, my dears,” she said, “I do believe that you are correct. Most families do,

of course, now hold a more modern view of romance, especially in a country as enlightened as this.

“However,” she went on, and her gaze was directed keenly at Declan, much to his discomfort, “you might be surprised at the number of young men who need the *Sadchan’s* help when it comes to choosing a life partner. They may,” she seemed to be speaking to him alone, “have someone in mind all along, but not have the confidence to press their suit. Then it is the matchmaker’s job to give them – shall we say, a firm push? – in the right direction.”

“And you retired ten years ago?”

“Well, yes. But sometimes, one sees a need, and one cannot help but—”

Abruptly breaking off she rose, and Declan stood also, confused and trying to hide his considerable embarrassment. “But where are my manners, my dears? I haven’t asked you if you’d like some tea. Shall I make a pot?”

Without even waiting for a reply she crossed the room and exited through the doorway. “Do make yourselves comfortable while I’m gone,” she remarked as she disappeared. Declan sat down heavily.

“Do you think we should get round to what she phoned up about?” he asked, agitated. “You know – what help she’s in need of?” He glanced around. “A few working radiators or a fire wouldn’t go amiss for a start.”

“Well, I suppose we should,” Helen replied. “But hers is a fascinating story, don’t you think?”

Declan did, but was still trying to control an urge to blush. He turned his face away, pretending to make a further study of the photos on the wall. “I wonder how she knows they’re all still going strong?” he murmured. “Could she still be in touch with them all, do you think?”

They talked lightly on the practicalities of communicating with so many probably far-flung couples, joking quietly about the possibility of Miss Haverstock having email, Facebook and Twitter. After some time Helen glanced at her watch. “Where could she be?” she wondered, glancing at the open lounge door. “She’s been gone ages. The kettle can’t take that long to boil.”

A frisson of alarm crept into Declan’s mind. “I think we ought to go and check,” he decided. “You never know with elderly people.”

They made their way out into the hallway and then through another door into what was evidently a dining room. As with the lounge and the hallway, much neatness was in evidence, and another set of photographs, which Declan bent to examine. “I’ll check the kitchen,” Helen said, spotting another doorway leading into the back of the house.

“Hang on,” Declan began, but she’d gone.

Seconds later a shrill cry made his heart leap. “*Declan!*”

He raced through, and the sight that met his eyes caused his stomach to lurch. In the middle of the stone kitchen floor, face-up and with her

long grey hair strewn messily to either side, the old woman lay, and it was evident even without examining her that she was quite dead. The second thing that he noticed was that Helen was shaking violently, and for the first time ever in their acquaintanceship he drew her to him and held her tightly.

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The police were there, and Declan and Helen were outside the house sitting in the back of a patrol car. Helen’s hand was in Declan’s, and she didn’t seem likely to withdraw it at any moment. He’d suggested a drink after it was all over, and she’d agreed, willingly and with a smile – a little wan, given the circumstances, but with something that appeared to be happiness written over it. He felt her caress his fingers occasionally, and the sensation sent electric thrills running through him.

A pair of detectives had been called for, and a forensic pathologist, and Declan saw them now, through the patrol car’s window, speaking urgently at the door of the house. One of the detectives glanced over at them, and he saw the other take out his mobile and speak into it. After he’d finished, he conveyed something to the first plain-clothesman, and both strode towards the car in which Declan and Helen sat. Taking either side, they opened the front doors and jumped in. Both turning towards them, the senior man said, “Mr Roberts, Miss Mackenzie, my name’s DI Harvey – this is DS Walker.” The other detective nodded at them, smiling in a friendly yet professional manner.

Helen's grip became firmer, and Declan covered their clasped hands with his free one to reassure her. "Hi," he said. "I'm sorry if we appear nervous – it's just, you know, finding a dead body and all—"

Both detectives nodded sympathetically. "Quite understand," DI Harvey assured him. "Sorry to keep you here, can't be the most comfortable place for you to be.

"However," he continued, "afraid we'd like you to go over your statement you made to our uniformed officers. About how you came to be here and all."

Declan frowned. "Well, like we said..." Between them he and Helen went back over the details of their visit, from the time they'd drawn up in Helen's Kia Cee'd, still parked across the road under an inch or so of freshly-fallen snow, until the moment of discovery in the kitchen. The DS was checking in a small notebook as they spoke, nodding as if in confirmation of what they were saying.

At the end, the DI nodded also, a puzzled frown on his face. "And this appointment was arranged...?"

"Around about noon," Helen said. "Miss Haverstock phoned and spoke to our line manager—"

"Mrs Sampson," DS Walker interjected.

"That's right," Declan confirmed. Then, risking boldness, he added, "Look, is there a problem? We did tell all this to the constables, and they saw Miss Haverstock for themselves, so..."

There was an uncomfortable silence, until DI Harvey broke it with, "Well, I suppose it is a problem really. That's why Uniform called us in, and why we had the pathologist out." He paused, pursing his lips as if troubled. "You see, they immediately noticed a discrepancy, something to do with the attitude of the body. Something not quite right between what you say and what the scene suggests."

Declan started. "What—?" he began.

"Oh, don't worry," the detective hastened to reassure him, "you aren't under suspicion or anything. Miss Sampson's confirmed the phone call to your office – there's even a recording of it, for training purposes and whatnot. With luck we can get someone to identify the voice."

He paused again, and his next words had Declan's heart leaping into his mouth and caused Helen to grab his arm and cling on as if she'd never let go again. "The trouble is, what the uniformed officers noticed, and what the pathologist confirms, is that even allowing for the extreme coldness of the house – which is another curious thing, by the way, the heating is fully on and the radiator behind the sofa you were sitting on is boiling hot – rigor was too far advanced to fit the scenario you've painted. Our pathologist estimates that death must have occurred somewhere between twelve and fifteen hours ago. That's sometime this morning – apparently well before she rang up your office and made her appointment to see you!"