

## ~ Decline to Continue ~

by KG MacGregor

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Mia Henriksen shuddered as a thin woman in dark slacks, heeled boots and a calf-length cashmere coat rounded the corner and scanned the park, stopping briefly to check what looked like a jeweled watch. "Please don't let that be her," she mumbled under her breath.

It wasn't that the woman was unattractive or even visibly peculiar. Quite the opposite, in fact. For all Mia knew, she had only moments ago stepped off the cover of some urban culture magazine, one that featured typical Upper East Side New Yorkers being oh-so-cosmopolitan. All that was missing was the Afghan hound and the three-thousand-dollar baby stroller.

The woman's face lit up as she recognized a man on the adjacent bench, and Mia breathed a sigh of relief. She had nothing to impress a woman like that, which would guarantee failure on this, the last of her five matches from the online dating network. She had held out hope to the bitter end that the five-hundred-dollar membership fee would yield a suitable romantic companion, or if that failed, at least a good friend. So far, she had found only anxiety and stress, with no small dose of humility from being dissected in much the same way she picked apart the women to whom she was matched.

Unfortunately, exaggerating one's traits on the profile page was standard practice. Mia already assumed the women she met would be a few pounds heavier, perhaps not as well read or traveled, and less enamored of things like foreign films, museums and art exhibits than their romanticized biographies implied. What she hadn't expected was to be paired first with the likes of Myra, who interrogated her for a solid hour as if she were applying for work at the CIA. Next was Bridget, the Valium addict; and third was Amy the Anarchist, who tried to enlist her help in stink-bombing the New York Stock Exchange. Her fourth match, however, had been the worst by far-Veronica, who dismissed her after only three minutes, making no secret of her snap view that Mia wasn't what she was looking for in a date.

Mia had never considered herself a stunner, but she wasn't unattractive. Average height, average build, with straight blond hair and blue eyes...a typical Swedish-American. Maybe that was the problem. She was ordinary in a world where only the glamorous got noticed.

She had been living in Manhattan for sixteen months, long enough to know her way around, but not to feel at home. Her neighborhood was nice, and only a few blocks from the United Nations Building where she worked as an interpreter. She had mastered public transit, and knew the layout of most of the city's museums by heart. If only she had someone to enjoy them with.

Was it too much to ask to find *just one* normal lesbian in Manhattan, someone reasonably intelligent who enjoyed ordinary fun and friendship? The thing Mia feared most was that she was every bit the misfit her matches had been. She had no way of knowing what those women ultimately thought of her, or if they had asked the service to arrange the next date. In accordance with the rules of the dating service, a "decline to continue" meant no further communication with those matches, even to learn if they had rejected her as well.

That was best, though. She didn't need to hear about her shortcomings from virtual strangers. And she especially liked the restrictions on sharing personal information, because if things didn't work out-which in her case they hadn't-there were no loose ends. First names only until at least the third date, no exchange of phone numbers or e-mail addresses, and no divulging home or workplace locations. Even their actual dates were scripted to be in public places during daylight hours. The first was a one-hour walk in Central Park on a weekend afternoon, and the second-if one got that far-was a museum tour or a matinee. Only on the third date were couples permitted to make their own arrangements.

Not that any of that mattered today. Her fifth date-a woman named Jill-was now twenty minutes late. How fitting to be stood up completely on her final match. It made logical sense, now that she thought about it. Her five matches had been scheduled in descending order of suitability, as determined by computer. That meant her best shot had been the first one, the paranoid interrogator who had mistaken her slight Swedish accent for Russian, and presumed her to be a spy. She hated to think what bizarre idiosyncrasy Jill might possess.

Enough was enough, she thought miserably as she stood and rolled up the red scarf she had been holding to identify herself to Jill. She still had time to get her money's worth on a stroll through the Guggenheim.

"Mia!"

She spun to see a slightly-built redhead in jeans and a leather jacket barreling toward her, a taller brunette on her heels.

"Sweetheart, I'm so sorry I'm late." The woman gave her a desperate look and daringly kissed her on the lips. "I got held up. This is Patricia. I explained to her that we had gotten back together."

If looks could have killed, Mia would have been pulverized on the spot. Yes, this was shaping up to be the disaster she had predicted. "Maybe we should do this another time." And with other people.

"No, seriously. Patricia is leaving." She stared down the other woman, who finally turned on her heel and stomped off. "Please tell me you won't turn into a stalker."

"I beg your pardon."

"Hi, I'm Jill Ramsey. And that loon was the Witch of Hoboken. Thanks for playing along."

Mia couldn't believe the brashness of this woman, who had stupidly blurted out her full name. "I didn't exactly play along, and I no longer think this is a good idea."

"Wait, wait, wait." Jill caught her arm as Mia started past her. "I can explain all this. I promise I'm not a sociopath. I'm as normal as they come. I run Ramsey's, the indie bookstore at Seventieth and Columbus. Little coffee shop...free wi-fi. Ring a bell?"

"Why are you telling me all of this? I'm not even supposed to know your last name."

Jill shrugged. "I don't know. You have a trusting face." She put her hands in the back pockets of her jeans and rocked back on the heels of her well-worn boots. "Tell you what. I'm going to walk back over there"-she gestured to the ivy-covered fence at the corner of the walkway-"and you go back and sit on the bench. I'll walk by and we'll start all over."

Mia stared at her in disbelief. What she wanted was to whip out her iPhone, log onto the dating site, and "decline to continue" Jill Ramsey. The woman was nuts.

"Go on." Jill waved her toward the bench and began to back away. "I'll be right there."

Against her better judgment, she returned to the bench to wait. What amazed her more than the fact she had drawn five losers in a row was that she had actually paid a substantial fee for the pleasure.

Jill turned the corner and smiled broadly as she sauntered toward the park bench. She was quite attractive, Mia realized, studying her for the first time. Not remarkable or flashy by any means, but certainly pretty enough to appreciate. Her hair was more auburn than red, and cut short in a delicate style that showed off just a hint of what looked like natural curl. She had wide brown eyes and prominent brows, finely plucked in slender arches that framed her face perfectly. Mid to late thirties was Mia's guess.

"You must be Mia. I'm so pleased to meet you. Jill Ra-er, Jill."

Mia warily took her outstretched hand, questioning her own sanity for playing along with this silly charade. "How do you do?"

"I'm better now, thanks. Seriously, I apologize for dragging you into that. I had no idea that woman was such a lunatic. I finally had to lie to her to get her to leave me alone."

"So you told her I was your ex-girlfriend?"

"Long story. I'm sure you don't want to hear the gory details."

Mia couldn't help but be intrigued. "You may as well elucidate. It's probably all we have in common."

Jill smirked. "A sense of humor. I like that."

Sarcasm and humor weren't the same thing, but debating that with someone she would never see again after today seemed pointless.

"My story...where to start?" She sighed and pulled out a cigarette.

"Now wait a minute! I specifically said no smokers."

"Chill. I wasn't going to light it." She pushed it back into the pack and tucked it inside her jacket. "I quit six months ago, but I can't stand not having something in my hand."

"You quit smoking but you still carry cigarettes?"

"I'd look pretty silly with a baby bottle. I'm telling you. I have to hold something."

Mia blew out a flustered breath. Jill was even more peculiar than she had originally thought.

"So here's what happened with Patricia. You know how they like to tell us at the dating service that all we have to do is fill out this little form if we want to accept or turn down the next date? Then we wait and try again the next week. Keep it light and simple. Right?"

She nodded silently.

"Well, they don't know Patricia. We met the first time for a walk in the park, just like you and I are doing today. I followed the rules and waited a day so I could think it over and decide if I wanted to see her again. I probably would have-which was rather remarkable, considering I've declined to continue all the others-but I never even got the chance to log on. She showed up at my bookstore the next morning, and then three days in a row. She was obsessed."

"Didn't they also tell you not to give any personal information? This is precisely the reason, so you won't leave yourself vulnerable to a stranger."

"Nah, that's just so they won't be criminally liable for hooking you up with a serial killer. All it takes for a psycho to get under your radar is to act normal for three dates. Only the really twisted can't hide it that long."

"True, but at least you get an inkling of what someone is like." And there was no way Jill Ramsey would get any personal information out of her.

"This computer dating business has been a bust as far as I'm concerned. Patricia was my ninth match."

"You've actually been through this circus twice?"

"Pathetic, huh?" She stood and tipped her head in the direction of the path. "Do you mind if we walk? I don't want Patricia getting any ideas about circling back."

Mindlessly, Mia complied, though she was more convinced than ever that Jill Ramsey was a loser with a capital L. She had probably been rejected by everyone but the crazy woman.

"If it makes you feel any better, I'm giving up after you," Jill said. "There's got to be a better way to meet women than this."

At least they agreed on that. "So if this was such a bad experience, why did you renew after the first five matches?"

"Just trying to be optimistic, I guess." Jill looked over her shoulder one last time, and then blew out a satisfied breath. "I think Patricia finally got the message. She was all right the first time we met. But then when she showed up in my bookstore, I got one of those weird vibes. You ever get one of those?"

In fact, Mia was getting that vibe with Jill. "Who doesn't?"

"I couldn't believe how it sneaked up on me, though. I usually pick up on psychos right away. There was this one woman-I think she was my third match-who grilled me for a solid hour about my background and all the people I knew. I don't think she believed a word I said."

That sounded exactly like Mia's first match. "Her name didn't happen to be Myra, did it?"

"Yes!" Jill's face lit up and she continued animatedly. "And she wouldn't make eye contact. She'd ask me questions and stare at my feet while I answered. It gave me the creeps, like she thought there was a camera in my boot."

"She did the same to me, only she thought I was a Russian spy. I kept telling her I was Swedish, but she didn't buy it."

"Can you believe someone so paranoid would sign up for a dating service?"

"She probably thought it was her patriotic duty to do reconnaissance."

Jill laughed, a melodic chuckle that made her seem almost normal. "So your accent is Swedish. I wondered. I thought all of you lived in Minnesota."

Mia had long dealt with the stereotype of the Midwestern farm girl in the big city. Nothing could have been further from the truth. "Apparently not."

"Sorry. Seems I touched a nerve."

"People make assumptions about things. Then they relegate you to a box and act astonished when you do something that diverges from their presuppositions."

"You use big words. I like that. I bet you read a lot."

"Not as much as I should. I try to get out and see things for myself. What I really enjoy is-" She caught herself and stopped. The less Jill Ramsey knew about her, the better.

"Don't tell me. You like museums and galleries. And foreign films."

"As a matter of fact..."

"Seriously? I thought people only put that in their profile to sound sophisticated. You honestly like that stuff?"

Under other circumstances her defenses might have gone up, but she had just been thinking the same thing. "It so happens I do. In fact, I was heading for the Guggenheim when I thought you weren't going to show."

"I get to the Guggenheim once or twice a year, but my favorite is the Frick. Just a few select paintings that make you feel good. You'll have to check it out."

"Mmm." Several of Mia's colleagues at the UN had raved about the small, eclectic collection at the Frick, and she had been meaning to see it for herself. She was mildly impressed that Jill had tastes that were similar to those of people she respected. But that didn't mean she wasn't peculiar. There was still the fact that she had shown up late and taken inappropriate liberties to kiss her right on the lips before she ever said hello. "I'm not going to renew this service either. I've had one disaster after another. I can't believe they don't screen people better."

"Who knows? We probably all have something that would keep us from getting through the gate. For what it's worth, I'm not getting any weird vibes from you, but I haven't let you talk much."

"I really don't have much to add. All the things in my profile happen to be true."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm an interpreter." She hadn't meant to divulge that. It just came out.

"Like at the UN or something?"

"I don't want to get into specifics."

"Oh, right. The rules. I might be a stalker too." They walked along silently for several steps. "At the risk of sounding like Myra, how long have been in New York?"

"A little over a year. And before you ask, I moved here from Washington, DC, not Minnesota."

"But Myra's right. You sing a little song when you talk. It's nice."

She had never heard her accent described that way, and she had to admit to being charmed by the metaphor. Most people only mocked her. "I was born in Sweden, but I came to the US when I was eleven. My mother was an American diplomat." Again, she had given more information than she intended.

"No wonder Myra found you so threatening. Too bad you didn't meet Amy. She might have tried to talk you into taking out the State Department."

Mia stopped abruptly, her mouth agape. "I did meet Amy. She was my third match. She told me all about some bizarre plot to drop ammonium sulfide on the floor at the New York Stock Exchange."

"Yep, that's her. I reported her to the police. I can't believe she's out of jail already."

"It figures she'd still be in the database. Doesn't it make you wonder who else is in there?"

"No kidding. I'm going to have to go back to my fallback plan and let my friends fix me up. I hate that."

"It's miserable. When things don't work out among friends, it's awkward for everyone."

"Exactly. That's why I decided to use the dating service. I'm already walking on eggshells around most of my friends."

That had a familiar ring, like her own experience when she had split up with Kathleen before leaving DC. "Have you had one of those breakups when your ex got to keep all the friends?"

"Nothing like that. My partner, Sally...we were together for eleven years. She died of ovarian cancer almost three years ago." Her voice cracked ever-so-slightly, her earlier bravado nowhere in sight. "Of the two of us, she was always the one who socialized, who rushed over to help when someone needed something. If not for her, I probably wouldn't have had any friends at all, because I mostly kept to myself. I've tried to do this on my own, but as you can see, it isn't working out very well."

Mia found her eyes brimming with tears. Even though she didn't know Jill at all-and only moments ago had thought her part of the lunatic fringe-she was saddened to hear of her heartbreak. How did people find the courage to reach out again after a loss of such magnitude?

"Sorry, I'm a party killer. That's one of my problems."

"No, it's okay."

Jill stopped and ran a hand through her hair nervously. "Look, Mia. I can tell I've ruined your whole afternoon. I'm really sorry about everything...being late, Patricia. I think I should just head out and give you back your Sunday. For what it's worth, you were by far the nicest person I met."

This time it was Mia who caught her arm. "Take care of yourself, and good luck."

A gentle smile was her only response, and she watched as Jill turned the corner to exit the park. She was overcome with sadness, not only at the remnants of Jill's story, but at realizing how her sour attitude had sabotaged her best chance at making a friend. Had Jill been the first match instead of the fifth, the other disasters might never have happened.

No longer in the mood for an art exhibit, she wound slowly through the park, finally exiting at Seventy-Second Street, where she hopped on the 2 Bus toward Midtown.

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Mia finished her chopped salad and set the empty bowl in the bus pan by the door. Her favorite deli was a bustling place at lunchtime, and she hated to sit idly perusing her e-mail while others waited for a seat. As she walked outside, she scanned the messages on her iPhone. One from her mother...one from her college friend in Amsterdam...and an automated message from the online dating service reminding her that her decision was due today for Match #5.

Though she had thought several times about Jill, it had slipped her mind to finalize their date with her official decision. She had simply assumed Jill would decline to continue, given where they had left things in the park, and that would be that. It made no practical difference for her to check in. Still, until she marked her answer, the dating service would continue to send her automated e-mails.

The note showed two choices- "Decline to continue" or "Please arrange our next date." It made no difference, she told herself again as her finger hovered over the embedded links. With a deep breath, she tapped her nail on the small screen, and in seconds, received an automated reply, already scheduled for delivery the moment she checked in.

*1 p.m. Sunday, the Frick  
~ Jill.*

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