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Lost

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Extract

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Standing in the open door—I've been chewing my nails and watching the street for at least an hour—I give a wave of greeting as Mr. Shane unfolds himself from the driver's seat. He nods in my direction—right place, obviously—and pops the trunk lid with his key. Retrieves a bulky briefcase and a laptop, secures the trunk, and strides up the walkway, all business.

There's a lot of him. Very tall, six feet four or five. Wide

shoulders, long muscular arms, and a purposeful, no-nonsense way of walking. Not a walk exactly, certainly not a strut—more of a march. Fern's joke comes to mind—can't think of anyone who looks less like Johnny Depp. He could put Johnny Depp in his pocket and still have room for lint. No, there's nothing wistful or soft or feminine about Randall Shane. More the Liam Neeson type, if you have to pick an actor. He's all angles, with a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper goatee that gives him a long, slightly gaunt face. Deep-set, utterly serious sky-blue eyes that are already studying me. Age, somewhere in his forties. Surely not old enough to be retired, and obviously not the elderly gent I'd been expecting, even if he does drive a car associated with seniors.

His attire is less formal than I expected. Crisply pressed khaki trousers, a lime-green Polo shirt with a soft rolled collar, brown leather Top-Siders. On someone else it might be a preppy look. Not on Shane. On him it looks like something an NFL linebacker would wear on his day off.

"Mrs. Garner?" he asks, with a slight, wary smile. Nice, even teeth.

"Jane, please. Come in, come in. This is very kind of you."

"We'll see," he says, ducking slightly as he eases into the foyer. "No promises."

"Understood. I'll pay for your time, whatever happens."

He shrugs, as if indifferent to the notion of payment. Towering over me in the little foyer, smelling faintly of Ivory soap and something like cedar. Manly cedar, though, not the perfumed version.

"Show me to her room," he says.

"This way. Up the stairs and to the left."

"No calls?"

I shake my head. No calls, no contact. My frantic calls

are still going directly to voice mail, and my daughter is still in the wind.

The summer days are long, so there's plenty of light in the sky, but early evening has arrived, and as we traipse up the stairs, the host in me automatically offers this stranger something to eat.

"Not right now," he says, pushing open the door to Kelly's bedroom. A step inside and he stops, checking out the walls, furnishings. The place is girly-girl, teenage girly-girl, but very clean and organized because Kelly is a neat freak.

"Did you tidy up?" he wants to know.

"She keeps it this way."

He nods to himself, as if registering a fact to be filed away. Sets his briefcase on the floor, his laptop on her desk, and then turns to look at me. More of a quick study than a look.

"You didn't have supper," he says. A statement of fact.

"Not hungry."

"Okay." He nods to himself, registering another fact. "Do you drink tea?"

What's this about? I'm thinking, but admit that sometimes I do, in fact, drink tea.

"Good. Then I suggest you make yourself a mug of strong, hot tea. Put sugar in it, for energy. Eat two pieces of toast, you'll be able to hold that much down."

"What?" I say, thinking he's been here less than a minute, already he's telling me when and what to eat.

"You look like you're about to faint, Mrs. Garner. Time and efficiency are very important at this juncture, and I need you to be conscious and thinking coherently. In a crisis like this, many parents tend to fall apart. We don't have that

luxury. Tea, toast. Stay downstairs. I'll let you know if I need help, or have questions."

I'm halfway down the stairs before I realize he just ordered me out of my own daughter's bedroom.

He may be brusque and bossy, but Randall Shane is right about my needing to eat. The toast settles my stomach and the hot, sweet tea gives me energy. Hadn't realized how depleted I'd been, how close to passing out. Maybe even fainting, as he'd suggested. But "at this juncture"? Is the man a robot? Nobody says "at this juncture."

Cops do, I realize. They lapse into cop talk. And FBI agents are federal cops. They dress better but they have cop hearts. Not that I've ever met an FBI agent, retired or otherwise. All my thoughts on the subject of FBI agents come from TV shows, and muttered asides from my late father, so maybe I'm way off, reading too much into Shane's formal manner of speech.

Whatever, I'm not about to remain confined to the kitchen. With an extra mug of tea as my excuse, I slip upstairs, into Kelly's room, and find him at her computer. Making her prim little swivel chair look small indeed.

"You said tea, so I thought maybe you drank it, too."

Without looking up from the screen he says, "Thanks. Leave it on the desk."

"Any progress?"

"I'll know in twenty-six minutes," he says, grunting softly to himself as he hits a key. "Make it twenty-five."

There's a clock on screen, counting down.

Shane swivels in the chair, picks up the mug, takes a cautious sip. He studies me with a good internist's eyes. "You look better," he says, rendering judgment.

"I am, thank you."

"Proprietary software," he explains, nodding at the screen. "If Kelly left her password anywhere on the hard drive, we'll find it, and if need be the software will crack it. Preliminary search indicates numerous references to both Seth and S-Man, so once I get the files open, we should know a lot more."

"You found his last name?" I say. "That's great. I'll call the county cops. I mean police."

"Cops will do," he says with a slight grin. "No, not his last name. Not yet. Just a search engine tracer showing there are references buried within the files. E-mail folders, HTML folders, chat room folders."

"I don't understand."

"You don't need to. It's just the way computers organize themselves. Each folder has a name and a location. I was able to list the folders by title, but can't open them without the password. If this particular software doesn't get us there, I have other ways." Making it sound almost ominous. Like no mere microchip would dare defy him.

"So you're, um, a computer expert?"

"In a limited way, yes. As you say, I'm something of a geek." He smiles, letting me know that geekness doesn't offend him. "Actually, for the last several years before I left the bureau, that was my primary role, overseeing the development of software applications."

"You don't look old enough to be retired," I point out.

"I resigned under special circumstances," he responds, in a way that shuts down that particular line of inquiry.

Retired or fired, gunslinger or geek, it doesn't matter. If the big man manages to get a line on the mysterious Seth,

and Kelly's location, I don't care what his specialty is or was, or why he left the FBI.

"Have a seat," he suggests. "I need to get some background."

There's only one chair in Kelly's room, so I perch on her bed. Amazingly enough, this stranger is offering me a seat in my own house. Not that he's trying to be offensive—far from it. He's focused on a task, on helping me, and for that I'm grateful. Still, I can't think of the last time a single man has been in my home, let alone one of the bedrooms.

No ring. I noticed. Not that I'm even slightly interested—every fiber of my being is focused on getting what I need to find Kelly.

Shane glances at the clock on the screen, seems satisfied with the progress, then takes a small notebook from his briefcase. "First things first," he begins. "Where is Kelly's father in all this?"

"Nowhere," I respond, a little too fast.

"I take it you're no longer married?"

"I'm a single mom."

He nods. Not a judgmental nod, just noting another fact. "Has the father been informed that she's missing?"

"There is no father," I tell him, a flush rising into my cheeks. "Can we leave it at that?"

"For now," he says, conceding nothing. "So. How do you make your living?"

"Weddings," I tell him. "I design and make wedding gowns, bridal gowns, bridesmaids gowns. Or anyhow, that's how I got into the business. I still do custom gowns when requested, but mostly we work with a couple of different gown manufacturers. Small specialized factories. We do the fittings, they do the sewing."

He makes a note. "So you're in sales."

I shrug. “Bridal design, we like to say.”

“Dissatisfied customers?”

“It happens. But no one has been upset enough to take it out on my daughter.”

Duly noted.

“You’re sure about that?” he asks without looking up from his notebook.

“Last time it happened I refunded their deposit, simple. That was more than a year ago.”

Mrs. Hampton-Barlow of the Sag Harbor Hampton-Barlows. The bridal gown arrived on time, but the bridesmaid gowns were lost in transit, and no time to make them again. We arranged for perfectly good store-bought versions. No fault of mine, but I couldn’t really blame her for being upset. We parted with a formal apology on my part, and a promise to return her deposit, which I did. The Hampton-Barlows had their wedding and moved on. Me, too.

“Okay,” he says, ticking that off. “Ever been involved in a lawsuit?”

“Small-claims court, does that count?”

“Depends on the circumstance.”

“Collecting an unpaid bill. The marriage was annulled and the couple walked away from their debt.”

“You never collected?”

“There was nothing left to collect. That’s what they told me.”

“And this was when?”

“Three or four years ago. Cost of doing business. Happens every now and then. You try to cover your outlay with the initial deposit. In that case, I got stuck on the wrong side of the estimate. My own fault, you might say.

They upgraded an order, I failed to upgrade the deposit. Live and learn."

"Uh-huh." Scribble, scribble. "Personal animosities?"

"Excuse me?"

"Does anybody hate you, Mrs. Garner? Hate you enough to hurt your daughter?"

What a question. And yet it has occurred to me, of course. Is there someone out there in the world who is angry enough at me to lure Kelly away? After a moment, I say, "No one I can think of."

"No personal vendettas? How about angry boyfriends? Stalkers?"

That's easy. "No boyfriends, period. No stalkers that I know of."

Shane's eyebrows lift. Men always seem to think that any reasonably attractive single woman under the age of forty is being hounded by suitors. Guys with flowers constantly ringing the doorbell, begging to sweep you off your feet. If only.

"Has Kelly complained of unwanted attention?" he wants to know. "Mentioned someone following her or watching her, or exhibiting menace?"

"No," I say with a quick head shake. "But to be honest, over the last few hours I've been thinking about that a lot. And I'm not sure she'd tell me. Yesterday I'd have sworn on a Bible that Kel would share the important stuff, but today I'm not so sure."

At that moment her computer chimes.

Shane's eyes snap to the screen. Beneath his trim, neatly cropped beard his lips turn up in a slight smile.

"Bingo," he says.

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