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# By a Spider's Thread

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Extract

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# CHAPTER 1

Tess Monaghan had been a high school senior when her father had bestowed his single life lesson, the one piece of advice that was supposed to open all doors and allow his only child to hurdle every obstacle: He showed her how to shake a man's hand.

He demonstrated by making firm, confident contact at the V between her thumb and index finger, then gave her arm one adamant shake. 'Don't wag it like a garden hose,' Patrick Monaghan had said, and that was that. His daughter was ready to go forth into the world, or at least the world her father knew, where a handshake still counted for something.

Patrick Monaghan had neglected, however, to tell his daughter what to do when the intended recipient of her firm, manly handshake looked at her palm as if it were contaminated.

'I'm so sorry,' she said, remembering a beat too late. 'But I thought –'

'Your uncle told me your mother's family was Conservative,' her prospective client said, hands clasped behind his back, just in case she made another lunge for his digits.

'Well, I think what my grandfather always said was "The temple my family does *not* attend must be Conservative." The Weinsteins are not a particularly observant bunch.'

Mark Rubin didn't laugh at the old family joke. Several inches taller than Tess, which put him well over six feet, he was stocky in a robust, attractive way, and he wore a beautifully tailored suit that emphasized his broad chest and shoulders. He had black-brown eyes, a trim black beard, and the kind of blue-black hair that teenage girls tried to emulate when they went through a Goth phase, only with a shine that marked it as natural. The overall effect reminded Tess of a stuffed-sealskin otter she had been given as a child, back when such a gift would not have been regarded as a gauche act of political incorrectness.

Or perhaps she had that old toy on her brain because she knew this man sold furs for a living, and the otter had been fashioned from the leftovers of an aunt's jacket. She wondered if Rubin wore a fur coat himself, when winter came. This September day was almost too warm for his lightweight wool suit.

'Your uncle,' he said, his voice stiff as his collar, 'is quite active in Jewish causes. That's how we met and how he came to recommend you when he found out I needed the services of someone in your line of work.'

'My Uncle Donald is active in Jewish causes? Was it court-ordered?'

Rubin frowned, although this wasn't an attempt at humor on Tess's part. Her Uncle Donald had had a short-lived association with a sleazy state senator that haunted him to this day.

'I'm not sure when he started volunteering, but I met him over ten years ago, so it's been quite some time. He's a very good man, your uncle.'

'Oh,' she said, annoyed and flustered by the hint of reproof in his voice, the implication that her uncle had not prepared her well for this meeting. Uncle Donald had, in fact, briefed her thoroughly. He had told her he had an acquaintance, that the acquaintance was a wealthy furrier, an Orthodox Jew in need of a discreet private detective. Modern Orthodox, Uncle Donald had clarified, not Hasidic, which was why Tess had thought herself on safe ground offering Rubin her hand.

Really, the only thing that Uncle Donald had neglected to mention was the large pole permanently inserted in Mark Rubin's sphincter.

'Would you like a seat? Something to drink? I keep Coca-Cola and bottled water in my fridge, and . . . well, that's kosher, right? If it's done under supervision. We could check the label for . . . what? A little *k* in a circle . . . ?'

'I'm fine,' Mark Rubin said, taking the wooden chair opposite her desk. His dark eyes scanned the room, absorbing his surroundings without comment. Tess had decorated the one-room office with whimsical artifacts to provide conversational fodder for the ill at ease, but these photographs and strange objets d'art didn't seem to be having much effect on Rubin. He

didn't even raise his eyes to the 'Time for a Haircut' clock, a barbershop find of which Tess was particularly proud.

Although it smarted a little now, sitting beneath that glowing clock, given the untimely circumstances of Tess's most recent haircut. Self-consciously, she reached for her hair, a stubby ponytail where a long braid had once hung. Her friend Whitney said the style made Tess look like one of the original signers of the Declaration of Independence. It was, like most of Whitney's tactless assessments, all too true, but Tess didn't care. She wanted her braid back, and she was prepared to live through all the growing-out stages.

The furrier did take notice of the greyhound and the Doberman vying for control of the sofa. The greyhound, Esskay, was winning, but only because she fought dirty, rabbiting her legs so her untrimmed toenails scraped the tender-skinned Miata, who whimpered piteously. Esskay always triumphed over Miata, the world's most docile Doberman.

'Are the dogs for protection?'

'More for companionship. The neighborhood's not that bad.'

'Times change. My grandfather couldn't wait to get out of East Baltimore. Of course, we lived closer to Lombard Street, just off Central.'

'Near the old synagogue.'

'There were several synagogues in the neighborhood then.'

He had a funny way of holding his neck, as if that pole in his butt ran all the way up his backbone, and Tess wondered if his rigid posture came from years of balancing a yarmulke on the crown. There was no sign

of a bobby pin or a clip. Did Mark Rubin consider bobby pins cheating? Were bobby pins unorthodox? Up to five minutes ago, Theresa Esther Weinstein Monaghan had considered herself well versed in the religion practiced by her mother's side of the family. She knew a little Yiddish, could fake her way through a seder as long as the Haggadah included an English translation. But now she felt 100 percent goyish. To her visitor she probably looked like some field-hockey player from Notre Dame Prep.

'Did Donald tell you anything of my situation?'

'Only that it was a missing-person case, an unusual one that the police won't handle. He said you would prefer to fill me in on the details.'

'Persons,' he said. 'Missing persons. Four, in fact. My entire family.'

'Divorce?' She suppressed a sigh. Until recently Tess had disdained divorce work, picking and choosing her jobs. But she had lost several weeks of work this summer and could no longer afford to be fussy.

'No, nothing like that. I came home one day and they were gone.'

'Voluntarily?'

'Excuse me?'

'I assume your wife's flight was legal and not suspicious, or this would be a police case.'

'The police agree it's not their case,' he said, his voice so low as to be almost inaudible, and Tess realized that what she had taken for coolness was an attempt to keep strong emotions in check. 'Me, I'm not so sure. I went to work, I had a family. I came home, I didn't. I certainly feel as if something has been stolen from me.'

'Was there talk of a separation? Had you been quarreling? It's just hard to imagine such a thing happening out of the blue.'

'But that's *exactly* what did happen. My wife left with my children, with no warning, no explanation. She simply disappeared the Friday before Labor Day, right before school started and just as my business was picking up.'

'Early September is your busy season?'

'No, but many of my customers get their furs out of storage in the month before the high holidays, just in case.'

'Would the Orthodox wear fur to shul on Yom Kippur?' Tess had no idea where her mind had dredged up this odd fact, but she felt as if she had just pulled off a sophisticated thought in a foreign language. Score one for her.

'Not all my customers are Orthodox. They're not even all Jewish.'

Point lost. Tess had envisioned a sea of glossy hats in a synagogue, but maybe she was thinking of some long-ago church service her grandfather had dragged her to. Or perhaps she wasn't having a memory so much as she was replaying a movie version of someone else's memories. Probably Barry Levinson's. A lot of people in Baltimore had Barry Levinson's life lodged in their heads and had begun to mistake it for their own.

'It's never cool enough to wear a fur in September, not in Baltimore.'

'Yes, but hope springs eternal.' He offered Tess a crooked smile. 'I guess that's why I'm here.'

She bent her head over her desk, focusing on the lines of the legal pad in front of her, counting on Rubin

to get his emotions under control if she didn't look straight at him. Tess was sure he didn't want her to see him cry. She was even surer that *she* didn't want to see him cry. Men crying creeped her out.

'If your wife took your children without your permission, isn't that a kidnapping? Can't the police go at it from that angle? Don't get me wrong, I'd love to have the work, but the police have far more resources than I do.'

'I know, and that's why I started with them. But . . . it's amazing. If you're married and your spouse leaves you, taking your children, you have no real rights. I've been told that I have to get divorced in absentia and petition for custody. Only then will I have any rights to assert. And that could take up to a year.'

'Oh, there has to be some way to expedite a divorce in this case. I can't imagine the state would hold to the one-year rule in such a case.' Maryland did have odd marital laws, Tess knew. It was all too easy to get married here – it was one of the few states that didn't require a blood test, which years ago had made Elkton a destination for impatient New Yorkers – but relatively difficult to get divorced. A legacy, she had always assumed, from its Catholic founders. Marry in haste, live in purgatory.

'You don't understand. Even if I divorced my wife under Maryland law, it wouldn't count, not to me.'

'Why not?'

'I would need a *get* from a rabbinic court as well. Divorce may be granted easily in the world at large, but my faith insists that a couple make every attempt at mediation and reconciliation before giving up on a marriage.'

'But I assume your wife's actions would satisfy even a – what did you call it? – rabbinic court.' Tess had an image of an appeals court, only in slightly different robes and with the bushy beards, side curls, and large-brimmed hats of the Hasidim.

'Perhaps, but it would not satisfy *me*. How can I give up on my marriage when I don't know what went wrong? You have to understand she gave no sign, absolutely no sign, that she was unhappy in any way. How could she be on the verge of something so drastic and provide no clue?'

*She probably gave you a million clues,* Tess thought, but kept the observation to herself. In her experience, men were capable of going to great lengths to ignore the evidence of women's unhappiness. It was how men survived, by not inquiring too closely about the melancholy some women carried with them. If they ignored it, maybe it would go away.

Sometimes it was the woman who went away instead.

'Mr. Rubin . . .' She paused, but he did not invite her to call him Mark, so she forged ahead. 'The very nature of my work requires me to ask rude, intrusive questions, not unlike the kind that doctors and lawyers ask, so I'll beg your forgiveness in advance. Did you have a good marriage?'

'We had a *wonderful* marriage.'

'No disagreements, no tensions?'

'Nothing out of the ordinary. There was a slight age difference. . . .'

So that's where the dog was buried, as her Grandma Weinstein might say. 'How much?'

'Twelve years. I married relatively late, at thirty-one.'

Funny, Tess was thirty-three, and she considered that a damn early age for matrimony.

'You're . . . what?' She checked her notes. 'Forty-one. So she was only nineteen when you married?'

A slight defensiveness crept into his tone. 'Yes, but Natalie was an unusual woman, more mature at nineteen than most women are in their thirties.' Was it Tess's imagination, or did he glance at her neon HUMAN HAIR sign just then? A gift from her boyfriend two Christmases ago, it complemented the 'Time for a Haircut' clock nicely.

'How old are the children?'

'Isaac is nine, the twins are going on five. We wanted more, but it was not to be. I had hoped to have a houseful of children.'

'And your wife?'

'Of course I want my wife in my house. That's why I'm here.'

'No, I meant . . . did your wife want a lot of children, too?'

'Absolutely. It's our way. It's what God wants.'

Mark Rubin's very certitude seemed a bad sign to Tess. It was bad enough to claim you knew your wife's mind, another to assume you knew God's as well.

'She had absolutely no reason to leave?'

*'None.'* The reply was too firm, too automatic. He wasn't allowing anyone to question this fact, beginning with himself.

'What about addictions? I'm not talking just about drugs or alcohol, but gambling or other compulsive behaviors, such as eating disorders. Even shopping.'

'No, nothing like that.'

'Does she spend a lot of time on the Internet?' A

new wrinkle in divorce cases, stealth adultery, which didn't reveal itself until the person ran off to be with his or her virtual love. Installing spyware was one of Tess's first steps in any case where a spouse suspected another spouse of fooling around.

'She barely knows how to use a computer. Our oldest son had to set up her e-mail account.'

'And there was no' – she took a breath and plunged ahead – 'no violence in the household?'

*'No.'* Here, at least, he was utterly convincing.

'It's just that it's very unusual for a woman to up and leave, taking her three children. Does she have a job?'

'No matter my circumstances, I would never allow – I mean, I would never expect my wife to work outside the home.'

'Then how would she support them? Does she have her own money? Family?'

A slight hesitation here. 'Not one that she can rely on. Her mother is still here in Baltimore, but she and Natalie have been estranged since her parents' divorce, back when she was a young teenager. Her father's completely out of the picture now, has no contact with her at all.'

Tess wondered if Rubin's marriage had been an arranged one, then wondered if the Orthodox still used arranged marriages. Her upbringing had been bicultural primarily in the culinary details. The Weinsteins went out for Chinese and held backyard crab feasts, rationalizing that anything eaten outside wasn't really *treyf*. The Monaghans had lesser palates, but they loved the Sour Beef dinner put on by the ladies of Good Counsel every autumn. On St. Patrick's Day,

they drove for lean corned beef to what Tess's paternal grandfather called Jewtown. Pop-Pop Monaghan had called the neighborhood that to the day he died, literally. In his bed in the old house on Wilkens Avenue, he had reached for Tess's hand, mistaking her for his only daughter, Kitty, the youngest and best loved of his seven children.

'Well,' he had said, 'Patrick married a Jew. What do you know about that, Kitty? A Jewess from Jewtown.'

There was no meanness in his tone, no censure. He was just calling a spade a spade, a Jew a Jewess. As for Jewtown – well, that designation had appeared on some local maps well into the 1930s, and Pop-Pop Monaghan's worldview had pretty much jelled by then.

'I know,' Tess had replied, trying to find something that would be neither rebuke nor agreement, 'that he loves her.'

'Love,' her grandfather scoffed.

Some men might have been smart enough to exit on a line like that, but Brian Monaghan, a belligerent Irishman to the end, wore out his welcome, coming back from death several times in that last day. Finally life seemed to tire of *him* and shuttered itself against his return, like a tavern giving someone the bum's rush.

But her Monaghan side was of no use here. Today Tess needed to rely on her Weinstein genes if she was going to find any affinity with this prickly man who clearly had the wherewithal to help her out of her financial slump.

'Do you have any leads at all? A vehicle, a name she might use, a place, a friend she might reach out to,

a list of long-distance phone calls from before she left?'

'All our cars are in our garage, untouched. My guess is she'd revert to her maiden name, or some form of it. Natalie Peters.' Tess idly wondered what the surname was before it was changed. Her grandfather had been too stubborn to consider such a thing, and he was proud of having the Weinstein name on his stores until the day they sank into bankruptcy. 'As for family or friends, it's only her mother, and, as I said, they have no relationship. I think she lives up on Labyrinth Road. Vera Peters.'

'Still, it's a place to start. Now, has Natalie drawn on any accounts – checking or savings – since she's been gone? Used a credit card?'

'No, nothing like that.'

'And the police didn't find that suspicious? That's usually a sign of . . . well, it's certainly something they look at.'

She had not wanted to say, *It's usually a sign that a person is dead.*

'They know what you know, and they still don't think this is a matter for them. They have these, too.'

He took a folder from his briefcase and brought out three photographs. The first could have been a miniature Mark Rubin, a boy with the same dark eyes and hair, although not the somber expression. He beamed at the camera, a little self-conscious, but clearly happy at whatever moment he had been captured. He was holding a plaque, so perhaps it was an awards ceremony.

'Isaac, my oldest.'

The next photo showed a boy and girl of the same height. Their hair was several shades lighter than the

older boy's and their features sharper – narrow eyes with a hint of a tilt, prominent cheekbones that gave them a foxy look. They must favor their mother.

'The twins, Penina and Efraim.'

He was shy about sliding the last photograph to Tess, or perhaps just reluctant to surrender it. The woman in the picture was gorgeous, an absolute knockout, with the lush lips and heavy-lidded eyes of a movie star. Not just any movie star but a specific one, although Tess couldn't pull up the memory. Ava Gardner? Elizabeth Taylor? One of those smoldering brunettes from the studio days. The dark hair was perfect, cut and shaped into curls that looked too natural to be anything but labor-intensive, and the makeup had the same deceptively simple aspect. She had taken less care with her clothing, content with a simple cardigan that was buttoned to the top, the wings of a white collar visible above the dark wool.

She also was the unhappiest-looking woman Tess had ever seen, a woman whose very expression – the dark eyes, the set mouth, which really was the shape of a Cupid's bow – bespoke a secret burden. But Mark Rubin looked at the photo as if all he could see was the beauty.

'Your wife – did she have a history of psychiatric problems?'

'Of course not.'

'Why "of course not"? There's no shame in having emotional problems.' Tess didn't bother to tell Rubin that she had just finished her own course of court-ordered therapy. It was simply too long a story. 'It's all chemicals, just another organ in your body having problems.'

'I know *that*.' Still too sharp, too defensive. 'But chemicals are not the issue here.'

'What about organs?'

'Excuse me?'

But that was as close as Tess would get to asking Mark Rubin if he and his wife had a fulfilling sex life.

'So there were no problems, and you don't have a clue why your wife left, and you're not even sure she wanted to leave, yet you don't think there's foul play involved?'

'Sometimes – I mean, I have no evidence of this – but sometimes I think maybe she left to protect me from something.'

'Such as?'

'Nothing that I know of. But I can think of no other reason she would leave. Whatever she does, she always puts her family first.'

'Is there anything to support this, um, idea?'

'No, not really.' His shoulders, which he had been holding so straight and square, sagged. 'I honestly don't know what is going on.'

Tess looked at the photos in front of her. If there had been only one, and it had been the wife, she would have advised him to save his money and go home. She might have even recited the dorm-wall-poster wisdom of letting something go if you really loved it. But there were the children to consider. They were entitled to their father. He was right, even admirable, in his desire not to let them go.

'I'm going to scan these pictures into my computer, so you don't have to leave them with me. Besides, then I can print them out as necessary, show them to people, create flyers.'

'And then?' he asked.

'I never promise results in any case, and I'm not starting with a lot of leads. But I have some ideas about how to proceed. Meanwhile, I'll need you to sign a letter of agreement and pay the equivalent of . . . eighty hours up front, as my retainer.'

Tess had an unofficial sliding scale for her work. She didn't gouge anyone, but a man like Rubin could subsidize some of the less prosperous clients who found their way to the detective agency officially known as Keyes Investigations. She had been having a run of such clients lately, down-on-their-luck types and flat-out deadbeats. After making a quick calculation, she tossed off a figure that seemed fair to her, only to watch in amazement as Rubin pulled out a wallet and paid in cash.

'Maybe I'll remember more, or come up with some other leads for you,' he said, counting off the ATM-crisp bills. 'I'm still a little . . . numb. My only comfort is knowing that Natalie is a good mother. She's a good wife, too. I don't know why she decided to stop being one. If I failed her – if I worked too hard or was too inflexible in my ways – I'm willing to change. But I have to find them first, right? Without my family I'm nothing, just a man who sells coats.'

Tess didn't have the heart to tell him that the best she could do was find his family. In a case like this, Tess was all the king's horses and all the king's men, picking up the broken pieces at the foot of the castle wall.

Mark Rubin stood, then reached for Tess almost as if to tuck a loose strand of hair behind one ear. She recoiled instinctively, nervous about allowing any

strange man too close to her, confused at how Rubin could attempt this kind of contact when he had made such a point about refusing her hand. But his hand quickly retreated, holding a quarter he had pretended to pluck from behind her ear.

'I used to do this for my oldest son,' he said. 'You see, I'm actually a funny guy. I make people laugh. I was a joyous man – it's one of the tenets of Hasidism I happen to embrace as a Modern Orthodox, the idea that one honors God by being full of joy. But you'll just have to take my word for that for now.'