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I was sitting at my desk when I first heard her approach. It started off as a faint little sound. Then I heard it again. And again. *Click Clack. Click Clack.* Each time it got louder; I roused a little more. By the time the door handle turned, I was sitting on the edge of my seat.

I wasn't disappointed with what I saw next.

The storm stepped through the door and strode confidently into the office. She was about 5' 6", early thirties, with long, straight black hair and green eyes. She had a very symmetrical oval face and was fair skinned, with a healthy tan. Decker with white pearls and red designer dress, along with matching stilettos, it was clear the mystery woman was well-off. The door clunked shut behind her as our eyes met.

"Hello, are you the private investigator?" she asked, with a measured tone.

"Yes ma'am," I said. "Michael Trulove at your service. Please, come in and have a seat." Crossing the short distance from the door, my guest offered her hand.

"Alicia Hamilton. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Trulove." The softness of her right hand was as impressive as the rock on her left.

I waited for Alicia to be seated before I did the same. She seemed impressed at the display of gentlemanly behavior. To be honest, it wasn't often that the upper crust came into the office. But I extended the courtesy to everyone who found their way to me.

Mrs. Hamilton sat with near-perfect posture. She seemed a little nervous, but there was also something else...underneath. Was she upset, or perhaps embarrassed?

“So what can I do for you, Mrs. Hamilton?”

Alicia stared deeply into my eyes. “Mr. Trulove, I need your help. My husband's been missing for six weeks. And I don't know where else to turn. It's not like him to just disappear.” I noticed despair in her eyes. It was something I had seen a thousand times from a thousand different faces.

“I'm sorry to hear that. Did you have a fight? Was your husband upset about something?” I asked, with the most sensitive tone I could muster. I'd seen husbands and wives just take off and leave more than a few times. And the end result was always devastating. Even when the person who got dumped saw it coming.

“We didn't have a fight. We hardly ever fight. We're very happy together.” Her tone was extremely convincing. It also held a slight tinge of puzzlement.

“Mrs. Hamilton, forgive me for asking this. But were either you or your husband having an affair?”

Her expression didn't change as she answered, “Absolutely not. Our marriage is happy. We're both very satisfied. Our love life is good, we have a nice home, we travel, and hardly ever fight. Gregory never expressed any unhappiness of that sort.”

Of that sort.

I nodded my head slowly and let her last sentence hang in the air. As the silence approached the point of being uncomfortable, I slowly swiveled my chair to the mini fridge behind my desk. “Would you like a soft drink, or some water, Mrs. Hamilton?” I asked.

“Some water would be nice, thank you.”

I swiveled left, back to the desk, and reached across to hand her the bottled water. She took the bottle and then placed her purse on the floor next to the chair. As Alicia twisted the plastic cap, she crossed her legs towards me. I decided to probe a little deeper.

“So what was your husband unhappy about?” I asked. It was the biggest softball question I could think of.

Alicia paused, let out an exasperated sigh, then answered, “Gregory mentioned that he was extremely stressed about his work. I first noticed it about four or five months ago. He kept saying that he didn't like the direction the firm was headed. He mentioned that they were making new investments that didn't make any sense. I can't remember ever seeing him so frustrated.”

“Did he ever talk to you about what those investments were?” I asked.

Alicia quickly shook her head no. “My husband and I had an agreement. We never discussed that part of his job. If he wanted to talk about work, we would. But it was up to him. I would never push him. Maybe I should have pushed him, though. Maybe I could have helped him through this...crisis...he seems to be going through.”

“And where does your husband work, Mrs. Hamilton?” I asked.

“He works at Baker Stephens. Gregory's been there for ten years,” Alicia replied, with more than a hint of pride. Baker Stephens was a well-known contractor for the federal government's overseas projects. Which most people call wars.

“So what did the police say?” I inquired, in a rather blunt tone.

Alicia looked as if bracing herself for impact, then said, “The Houston police say they don't see any evidence of foul play. They believe Gregory left town voluntarily. The detective said he withdrew \$90,000 from our account the day before he left. The police said there've been no records of his credit card use since then. And that the last ping from Gregory's cell phone was the last day he was here.”

"Did your husband happen to take his car when he departed?" Mrs. Hamilton shook her head. “So he just skipped town without a trace?” I asked, with a little too much incredulity. Alicia's eyes began welling up.

“That's what they say. But it makes no sense! This isn't like Gregory at all. He's never just left before.” As she began to visibly shake, I decided to take my foot off the gas.

“Mrs. Hamilton, I noticed you said you live in Houston. Why did you come all the way to Galveston to speak to an investigator?” It was a logical question. And something to take Alicia's mind off her husband abandoning her.

Her voice steadied as she answered, “A lot of people know my husband. They know me too. It's...unbearable to walk through the stores, to go shopping, to see their glances. To feel their judgments. I didn't want to add fuel to the fire by going to one of the local firms. So I came to the island to get away. And I figured I'd find a good detective down here while doing that.

“Rest assured that I'll compensate you at the same rate as the big agencies,” she continued. “If you'll take the case, that is.” Alicia then flashed an extremely vulnerable smile.

I smiled back and asked, “Before I agree to do this, Mrs. Hamilton, do you have anything else you need to tell me?” She reached down to her purse and pulled out a manila envelope, followed by a letter-sized white envelope, then handed both of them to me.

“The manila has all my husband's information as well as my card,” she stated. “The white one has your first week's pay.”

I opened the white envelope and counted five thousand dollars.

“Will that be sufficient, Mr. Trulove?” she asked.

“Certainly,” I said, without missing a beat. Five thousand per week was damned good money. And definitely more than my usual rate. Still, I felt obliged to let her know what she was getting herself into.

“Mrs. Hamilton, are you sure you want to go forward with this? These investigations can churn up information that some people...regret finding out about.”

“Absolutely,” she replied. “I've gone over the possibilities. Especially the awful ones. And I've come to the conclusion that not knowing is worse than knowing. I have to know where Gregory is. I have to know why he left. Mr. Trulove, I need to find my husband.”

I decided to kill the formalities. “Then could you do me a favor? Call me Michael. Mr. Trulove was my dad.” Mrs. Hamilton smiled, then stood up to shake my hand.

“Alright, Michael, I'll do that. As long as you agree to call me Alicia.” I grinned as I grasped her hand. It was warmer than before. I gazed into her eyes for a moment before we let go. “I'll be in touch,” she said, as she pulled one of my business cards from the holder on the desk. Then Alicia turned and made the short walk towards the door. She looked back at me for a moment before she walked out.

I didn't know it at the time, but that was the last normal night of my life.

